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Community Organizing, ACORN, and Progressive Politics in America

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During the 2008 presidential campaign, for the first time in memory, America had a national conversation about community organizing. That's because, at its September national convention in St. Paul, the Republican Party attacked the community organizing experience of Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate, who spent three years in the early 1980s working for a church-based group in Chicago. Former New York governor George Pataki sneered, "[Obama] was a community organizer. What in God's name is a community organizer? I don't even know if that's a job." Then former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani snickered, "He worked as a community organizer. What? Maybe this is the first problem on the résumé." A few minutes later, in her acceptance speech for the GOP vice-presidential nomination, Gov. Sarah Palin declared, "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities." Within hours, Obama released a statement challenging the Republicans who "mocked, dismissed, and actually laughed out loud at Americans who engage in community service and organizing." His campaign manager David Plouffe sent an e-mail saying, "Let's clarify something for them right now. Community organizing is how ordinary people respond to out-of-touch politicians and their failed policies."

These comments triggered a blizzard of newspaper articles and editorials, radio talk show discussions, e-mails, and blogosphere commentary. Stories about and columns by community organizers multiplied—describing, explaining, defending, and criticizing what organizers do and the role of community organizing in American life. (See, for example, Barone 2008; Bhargava 2008; Boyte 2008; Dickens 2008; Dreier 2008b; Dreier and Atlas 2008; Finfer 2008; Garnick 2008; Geoghegan 2008; Hubbke 2008; Kellman 2008; Kelly and Lee 2008; Kwon 2008; Lawrence 2008;

McKittrick 2008; Sege 2008; and Simpson 2008.) In addition to attacking Obama's own organizing experience, the increasingly desperate Republicans mounted an attack on ACORN. John McCain's campaign ran a one-and-a-half-minute video that claimed that Obama once worked for ACORN, alleged that ACORN was responsible for widespread voter registration fraud, and accused ACORN of "bullying banks, intimidation tactics, and disruption of business." The ad claimed that ACORN "forced banks to issue risky home loans—the same types of loans that caused the financial crisis we're in today." The McCain campaign was simply echoing what right-wing bloggers, columnists, editorial writers, and TV and radio talk-show hosts, led by the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, and Fox News, had been saying about ACORN for months (Atlas and Dreier 2008; Kurtz 2008; Malkin 2008; Moran 2008).

The Republicans had expected that their attack on Obama's organizing efforts as well as on ACORN would, in Americans' minds, link the Democratic candidate with inner cities, the poor, racial minorities, troublemakers, radicals, and "socialism." But, unwittingly, the Republicans' attacks helped introduce Americans to the relatively invisible work of the organizers who get paid to help millions of people improve their families and communities through grassroots activism.

Some of the comments linked the work of community organizers to the American tradition of collective self-help that goes back to the Boston Tea Party. After visiting the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* how impressed he was by the outpouring of local voluntary organizations that brought Americans together to solve problems, provide a sense of community and public purpose, and tame the hyperindividualism that Tocqueville considered a threat to democracy. The Republicans' nasty attacks on grassroots organizing reflect another longstanding tradition in American politics—the conservative elite's fear of "the people." Some of the founding fathers worried that ordinary people—people without property, indentured servants, slaves, women, and others—might challenge the economic and political status quo. In *The Federalist Papers* and other documents, they debated how to restrain the masses from gaining too much influence. To maintain their privilege, the elite has denied them the vote, limited their ability to protest, censored their publications, thrown them in jail, and ridiculed their ideas about how to expand democracy. Both the self-help and the elite traditions were on display during the 2008 campaign, catalyzed by the possibility that America might elect its first president who had once been a community organizer.

This chapter takes a broad look at the nation's largest community organizing group, ACORN, not only in terms of its role within the community organizing world but also in terms of America's progressive movement, the contemporary political landscape, and, as the Obama campaign observed, the capacity of ordinary people, if organized, to gain political power. ACORN's longevity is quite remarkable. Founded in the 1970s, it has grown almost steadily, especially since the early 1980s. Many community groups, despite the best intentions, are unable to sustain their work amid victories and defeats. They can't juggle the myriad aspects of effective community organizing. ACORN has been successful not only as a community organizing group but also as a political vehicle; its approach has been similar to those taken by the Populist movement in the late 1800s and by the labor movement since at least the 1930s. ACORN's impact should be evaluated in this broader context, given its strategic innovations and the "ripple effects" of its work beyond its own organizational activities.

Grassroots Organizing and Progressive Politics

Every crusade for reform draws on America's self-help tradition—the abolitionists who helped end slavery; the progressive housing and health reformers who fought slums, sweatshops, and epidemic diseases in the early 1900s; the suffragists who battled to give women the vote; the labor unionists who fought for the eight-hour workday, better working conditions, and living wages; the civil rights pioneers who helped dismantle Jim Crow; and the activists who since the 1960s have won hard-fought victories for environmental protection, women's equality, decent conditions for farmworkers, and gay rights. The purpose of progressive politics and movements is to reduce the level of class, racial, and gender inequality in the nation, shrink the number of people living in poverty, promote sustainable growth, and promote peace and human rights at home and overseas. Despite America's vast wealth, no other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution that exists in the United States. Americans accept as "normal" levels of poverty, hunger, crime, and homelessness that would cause national alarm in Canada, Western Europe, or Australia.

All movements for social justice face enormous challenges to success. Disparities in financial resources give big business and its allies disproportionate influence in getting their voices heard and gaining access to politi-

cal decision makers. This influence does not guarantee that they will get everything they seek, but it does mean that they have an advantage. To be effective, progressive forces must be well organized, strategic, clever, and willing to do battle for the long haul. Too often, however, the Left has suffered from self-inflicted wounds of fragmentation. Since the 1960s, the Left has been a mosaic of organizations that focus on separate issues and separate constituencies, which has undermined its effectiveness. The thousands of local community organizing groups, and the major community organizing networks, comprise a small part of the progressive Left. The largest component of the Left is the labor movement (the AFL-CIO, the new Change to Win union coalition, and the national unions) in terms of the number of members and staff and the size of the budget. It also includes environmental groups like the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, and Greenpeace; national women's groups like NOW and NARAL; civil rights and immigrants rights organizations; gay rights groups; the network of "public interest" groups like Common Cause, Public Campaign, the Center for Responsive Politics, OMB Watch, and Congress Watch; and civil liberties groups like People for the American Way and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

The progressive movement also includes national policy groups and think tanks like the Economic Policy Institute, the Center for American Progress, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Citizens for Tax Justice, the Campaign for America's Future, the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Policy Link, Demos, Good Jobs First, Families USA, the Fiscal Policy Institute, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), and many others, as well as some local counterparts like the Center on Wisconsin Strategy and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. Throw into the mix the various progressive media outlets—*Mother Jones*, the *Nation*, the *Progressive*, *American Prospect*, *Sojourners*, *Ms.*, *Dollars and Sense*, the handful of liberal radio talk shows, websites like AlterNet, TomPaine.com, and Common Dreams, and many others. Include the various progressive nonprofit public interest legal groups like the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Fund, Lambda Legal Defense Fund, Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Women's Law Center, and others. Add the various national and regional organizer-training programs. Consider also the various political action committees (PACs) (the union PACs, Emily's List, and others), the liberal churches and Jewish groups, the AARP,

MoveOn.org, and the many peace, human rights, and international “solidarity” groups.

All of these organizations do good work, but there is little coordination or strategizing among them and no mechanism for a discussion of how to best utilize their substantial resources in the most effective way. If they were to pool their resources and sit around a large table, they might discuss the following issues: How many organizers, researchers, lawyers, public relations and communications staffers should there be? What kind of organizations—single issue and multi-issue, online groups, and training centers for organizers, volunteers, and candidates? How much should be allocated to unions, community organizing, environmental groups, women’s rights groups, civil rights organizations, and gay rights groups? In what parts of the country—which cities, states, congressional districts—should they focus organizing work? How many staff would be based in Washington, DC? How many in “the field”? What issues should they focus on? What policy agenda?

But, of course, the Left has no coordinating committee to assemble all these resources and make a rational allocation of money based on agreed-upon criteria. It is not really a coherent “movement” but rather a mosaic of organizations and interests that share a broad notion of social justice and a general belief in the positive potential of activist government, and that occasionally collaborate on election and issue campaigns.

Although these groups share a broad consensus about policy issues (for example, progressive taxation, reducing the arms race, and supporting reproductive rights, stronger environmental laws, and expanded anti-poverty programs), they rarely join forces to mount sustained organizing campaigns to get policies adopted at the local, state, or federal levels. The one time these groups break out of their separate “issue silos” and work together is at election time, typically by supporting liberal Democrats through endorsements, voter drives, campaign contributions, policy work, publicity, and other means. (Occasionally, they get their own leaders to run for office, but more typically they work for candidates who have no preexisting organic connection to their organizations.) These fragile electoral coalitions are typically forged by the candidates, or the Democratic Party, or some loose and temporary alliance, and are soon dismantled after each election is over, such as the Americans Coming Together collaboration in 2004 (Bai 2004, 2007).

In some ways, the Obama campaign learned from the mistakes of the past. It hired hundreds of organizers from labor unions, community

and environmental organizations, and religious groups. They, in turn, recruited tens of thousands of volunteers and trained them in the skills of community organizing. They used door knocking, small house meetings, cell phones, and the Internet to motivate and energize supporters. They used the Internet and social networks to raise funds, in small and large amounts, from the largest-ever donor base. They opened more local offices than any other presidential campaign, including outposts in small towns and suburbs in traditionally Republican areas.

Many organizations and constituencies, outside the official campaign, had a hand in Obama's win. Groups as diverse as MoveOn.org, labor unions, community groups like ACORN, environmental and consumer organizations like the Sierra Club and U.S. Action, civil rights and women's groups, student activist groups, and many others who educated and mobilized voters legitimately claimed a part not only in Obama's triumph but also the dramatic increase in Democratic victories in the House and Senate. These organizing efforts account for the unprecedented increase in voter registration and voter turnout, especially among first-time voters, young people, African Americans, Hispanics, and union members, in the 2008 elections.

But can Obama's supporters—inside and outside the official campaign—transform that electoral energy into a grassroots movement for change? Political campaigns frequently promise to sustain the momentum after election day, but they rarely do. E-mail addresses, donor lists, and other key ingredients get lost or put on the shelf until the next election, when the campaign almost starts from scratch. In a handful of cities and states, the various segments of the progressive movement have built ongoing coalitions to work together around a common policy agenda during and in between election cycles, but these are still rare and remain fragile (Clarkson 2003; Dreier et al. 2006; Fine 1996; Reynolds 2004; Simmons 1994, 2000; Weir and Ganz 1997). The 2008 election created new opportunities and new challenges. Can the progressive Left build the organizational infrastructure needed to build, sustain, and expand a broad movement and to maintain a presence in between elections to mobilize people around issues?

The Fragmented Mosaic of Community Organizing

The world of community organizing reflects the progressive Left's strengths and weaknesses. Historians trace modern community organiz-

ing to Jane Addams, who founded Hull House in Chicago in the late 1800s and inspired the settlement house movement. These activists—upper-class philanthropists, middle-class reformers, and working-class radicals—organized immigrants to clean up sweatshops and tenement slums, improve sanitation and public health, and battle against child labor and crime. In the 1930s, another Chicagoan, Saul Alinsky, took community organizing to the next level. He sought to create community-based “people’s organizations” to organize residents the way unions organized workers. He drew on existing groups—particularly churches, block clubs, sports leagues, and unions—to form the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in an effort to get the city to improve services to a working-class neighborhood adjacent to meatpacking factories.

The past several decades have seen an explosion of community organizing in every American city. With funding from private foundations, some unions, the federal government, and members’ dues, thousands of community groups have emerged that work on a variety of issues, using a variety of organizing strategies, with uneven effectiveness. Almost every U.S. city (and a few suburbs) now has at least one—and in many cases dozens of—community organizing groups.

For years, critics viewed community organizing as too fragmented and isolated, unable to translate local victories into a wider movement for social justice. During the past decade, however, community organizing groups have forged links with labor unions, environmental organizations, immigrant rights groups, women’s groups, and others to build a stronger multi-issue progressive movement. For example, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) has created a powerful coalition of unions, environmental groups, community organizers, clergy, and immigrant rights groups to change business and development practices in the nation’s second-largest city. At the national level, the Apollo Alliance—a coalition of unions, community groups, and environmental groups like the Sierra Club—is pushing for a major federal investment in “green” jobs and energy-efficient technologies.

Although most community organizing groups are rooted in local neighborhoods, often drawing on religious congregations and block clubs, there are now several national organizing networks with local affiliates, enabling groups to address problems at the local, state, and national levels, sometimes even simultaneously. These groups include ACORN, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), People in Communities Organized (PICO), the Center for Community Change, National People’s Action, Direct Action Research and Training (DART), and the Gamaliel Foun-

dation (the network affiliated with the Developing Communities Project that hired Obama). These networks, as well as a growing number of training centers for community organizers—such as the Midwest Academy in Chicago, the Highlander Center in Tennessee, and a few dozen universities that offer courses in community and labor organizing—have helped recruit and train thousands of people into the organizing world and strengthened the community organizing movement’s political power.

Even so, fragmentation within the community organizing world undermines its total impact. This is due, in part, to “turf” competition between groups for funding, membership, and media attention. With some notable exceptions, the various community organizing networks and groups rarely work together, they don’t forge a sense of common purpose, and they don’t engage in collaborative campaigns. For example, ACORN and IAF have chapters in some of the same cities and often work on similar issues (schools, housing, and public services), but they never work together. Foundations contribute to this turf competition in the way they evaluate organizing groups, requiring each group to distinguish its accomplishments from those of other groups within a broader movement. To please funders, community organizing groups have to be able to claim credit for specific accomplishments, effectively thwarting cooperation among groups.

This fragmentation is not inevitable. There were many divisions within the civil rights movement, but there was also some coordination and a sense of common history and purpose. The labor movement is split into dozens of separate unions and two separate umbrella groups (the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win coalition), but it has some capacity to work politically as a unified movement. The environmental movement is composed of dozens of national organizations, but they coordinate their political work through an umbrella group. There is no similar coordination among community organizing groups.

Without being part of a broader movement, there is no way for organizing groups to decide how to allocate progressive resources, to prioritize where and how to organize, or to figure out which campaigns would be most effective in recruiting and mobilizing people. Moreover, as a strategy for broad political and policy change—especially at the state and federal levels—simply organizing the poor is inadequate. The poor alone don’t constitute a majority in any city, state, or congressional district, or nationwide.

When people read about or see large-scale protest demonstrations in the media, they rarely think about the organizational resources required

to make it happen. Mobilizing protests is only one aspect of effective organizing. Few people recognize how hard it is to build membership-based community organizations among the poor. It is extremely labor intensive, requiring constant attention to identifying and developing leaders, fundraising, engaging in traditional lobbying and occasional direct action, conducting research and policy analysis, as well as media savvy and other skills.

The discussion about community organizing triggered by the Republicans' comments during the 2008 presidential campaign was unusual because the news media rarely pay attention to the small miracles that happen when ordinary people join together to channel their frustration and anger into solid organizations that win improvements in workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. The media are generally more interested in political theater and confrontation—when workers strike, when community activists protest, or when hopeless people resort to rioting. As a result, with some exceptions, much of the best organizing work during the past decade has been unheralded in the mainstream press (Eckholm 2006).

Many (perhaps most) of the community organizing groups that have emerged in the past four decades eventually fell apart or remained small and marginal, unable to sustain themselves financially, economically, and politically. A few grew and gained in strength, in part by becoming part of broader networks at the city, regional, or national levels. Most local community groups are not linked to any regional or national organizing or training networks. Local groups that are tied to such networks have been helped to improve their capacity to develop leaders, mobilize campaigns, and win local victories as well as participate in citywide, state, and national campaigns beyond their local bases.

No one really knows how many community organizations exist, the total size of their budgets, the number of staff people who work for them, how long they've been in business, how many are linked to larger networks, or how effective they are. What seems clear, however, is that most community organizations engage in relatively modest efforts. These include, for example, pressuring the police to close down a local crack house, getting city hall to fix potholes, or getting the parks department to clean up a local playground. Some groups are more ambitious. Their community organizing has included enacting living wage laws, forming tenant unions, building community development corporations, combating redlining, challenging police abuses, fighting against environmental and health problems, mobilizing against plant closings and layoffs, re-

forming public education, setting up housing trust funds, encouraging inclusionary zoning laws, expanding funding for health services and public schools, and even setting up charter schools.

Despite the thousands of grassroots community organizations that have emerged in America's urban neighborhoods, and the existence of citywide coalitions, state-level activism, and national networks of community organizing groups, however, the whole is smaller than the sum of its parts. Karen Paget (1990) described this reality almost two decades ago, and it remains true today. With some important exceptions, community groups that do win important local victories are not always capable of building on their success and moving on to other issues and larger problems. For the most part, community organizing has been unable to affect the national agenda—or, in most cases, even state agendas. As a result, they often only marginally improve conditions in urban neighborhoods.

ACORN's Balancing Act: A Federated Structure

Observers and practitioners of community organizing sometimes examine the differences between various "schools" of organizing. There are certainly differences between various organizing networks and training centers in terms of the class and racial/ethnic base of their constituencies, how or whether they deal with religious congregations, how they train leaders, how they raise money, and other matters. But those engaged in the organizing itself typically exaggerate the distinctions—what Freud called the "the narcissism of small differences." On a larger level, though, because many community groups don't ask their "members" to pay dues, it is difficult to know with any certainty the overall magnitude of community organizing efforts. What's clear is that compared with groups like organized labor (with 13 million members) or even AARP (with 35 million members), the world of community organizing is not very large or powerful at the national level.

Within the world of community organizing, no other group or network has been able to achieve what ACORN has accomplished: a national organization with local chapters and the ability to simultaneously wage organizing campaigns at the neighborhood, city, state, and federal levels. ACORN—which claims to have 220,000 dues-paying families organized into 850 neighborhoods spread across more than one hundred American cities—is the largest of the community organizing networks. The ACORN family of organizations includes two public-employee unions,

two southern-based radio stations (KNON and KABF), several publications (including the magazine *Social Policy*), a housing development corporation (ACORN Housing), a law office, and a variety of other vehicles that support its direct organizing and issue campaigns, such as Project Vote and the Living Wage Resource Center.

A major obstacle for community organizing groups is the reality that the sources of urban decline and its symptoms—poverty, unemployment, homelessness, violent crime, racial segregation, high infant mortality rates—have their roots in large-scale economic forces and federal government policy outside the boundaries of local neighborhoods. What influence, then, can neighborhood organizing groups be expected to have on policies made in city halls, state capitals, Washington, and corporate board rooms? Perhaps ACORN's most impressive attribute is its ability to work *simultaneously* at the neighborhood, local, state, and federal levels, so that its chapter members are always "in motion" on a variety of issues, and so that its local chapters can link up with their counterparts around the country to change national policy on key issues that can't be solved at the neighborhood, municipal, regional, or state levels.

In *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civil Life*, Theda Skocpol (2003) laments that since the early 1900s mass membership grassroots and mixed-income organizations have declined and been replaced by advocacy/lobbying groups run by professional staff with little capacity to mobilize large numbers of people. One of ACORN's most important attributes is that it is a *federated* organization with local bases but with a national infrastructure and the capacity to wage campaigns simultaneously at the local, state, and national levels. Its staff works to build strong local organizations and leaders that can influence municipal and county governments as well as major corporations (such as banks) to address the needs of the poor and their neighborhoods. Local organizing defines ACORN's core issues, but when national leaders and staff recognize problems that are energizing members in several cities, they can consider whether changes in state or federal policy would more effectively address the issue. ACORN employs a staff of researchers and lobbyists in its national offices in Brooklyn, New York, and Washington, DC, to serve the needs of local chapters. Issues such as welfare reform, redlining, predatory lending, school reform, and low wages provide ACORN with organizing "handles" at the local, state, and national levels. Recent work in mobilizing the residents of New Orleans forced to evacuate by Hurricane Katrina benefited from ACORN's capacity to work simultaneously to put pressure on politicians and policymakers in several

cities, in at least two states, and at the national level (Dreier and Atlas 2007).

ACORN's federated structure is perhaps its most important difference from the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the oldest organizing network (founded by Saul Alinsky in the late 1940s) and, in terms of chapters and members, the second largest. Many of the key strategic concepts of community organizing come from Alinsky's writings. The IAF now has fifty-four affiliated chapters in twenty-one states, organized into regional clusters, and it has evolved significantly since Alinsky died in 1972. The national office, however, has a limited role. It is primarily responsible for training staff members and leaders, but it does not seek to coordinate organizing campaigns, raise money, or conduct research for its affiliates, nor does it encourage chapter leaders to strongly identify with the IAF as a national organization. The IAF has built strong local multi-issue organizations among the poor and the nearly poor in many cities, but it has not sought to build the kind of federated organization that can wage policy campaigns at the national level.

The IAF is, instead, a network of local and regional organizations that have little contact with each other, except at occasional meetings among the lead organizers in each region. Each local or regional group is essentially on its own in terms of designing campaigns, hiring staff, and raising money. As a result, it lacks the capacity to coordinate the organizing work of its chapters in different cities to build a national campaign. That is why, ironically, the IAF—whose Baltimore affiliate (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, or BUILD) mobilized the first successful “living wage” campaign in 1994—was not able to translate that pioneering local victory into a broader movement. ACORN, meanwhile, has used its federated structure to help sustain a national “living wage” movement, with victories in dozens of cities.

ACORN tends to recruit its members through door knocking in poor neighborhoods. This work is extremely labor intensive. In contrast, the IAF, PICO, and Gamaliel networks organize through already-established organizations, mostly churches. In these three networks, organizations, not individuals, pay dues. As a result, the IAF's local chapters typically have more members than ACORN's because the IAF counts all the members of its affiliated congregations and unions, whereas ACORN counts only individual dues payers as members. The IAF tends to recruit its leaders primarily from among people who have already demonstrated some leadership potential in religious congregations and other affiliated orga-

nizations. ACORN, in contrast, recruits its leaders from neighborhoods, and its members are generally poorer, and less involved in organizational and civic life, than their IAF counterparts. As a result, ACORN is probably more staff driven than it claims to be, although many of its local grassroots leaders are very effective.

ACORN's organizing model of intensive door knocking to recruit members, collect dues, and identify potential leaders is difficult for many novice organizers. As a result, there is considerable turnover and burnout among novice staff. This situation is not unique to ACORN, but because it has grown so quickly and required additional organizers to staff its new and growing chapters, ACORN has often hired young activists who were not ready for the stresses of grassroots organizing. The shortage of experienced organizers also means that ACORN puts some young staff in positions of responsibility—including managing local offices and even supervising young staff—before they may be ready. Those who remain with ACORN for more than about five years fare considerably better, financially, emotionally, and politically. Because ACORN is a large federated organization, with chapters around the country and many different kinds of jobs, it is able to provide upward mobility and new challenges. So, despite the revolving door of young organizers, ACORN has been reasonably successful in holding onto its most promising and effective staff. ACORN can also take credit for training hundreds of organizers over the years who have gone on to start or work for other groups. Like the United Farm Workers in the past, ACORN has become (perhaps unwittingly) a school for organizers for the wider progressive movement.

Community Reinvestment and Living Wage Movements

ACORN's involvement in the community reinvestment and living wage movements illustrates the strengths of its federated approach to organizing. The community reinvestment movement is primarily a place-based movement that has linked together local groups to change federal policy and negotiate with national and local lenders. ACORN was involved in early efforts to address the reality of declining urban neighborhoods and persistent racial discrimination in housing and lending. In the 1970s some neighborhood groups, including ACORN's St. Louis chapter, achieved small victories, including getting banks to provide loans or maintain branches in their neighborhoods. Eventually, activists across the country

working on similar issues discovered one another and recognized their common agendas. From such localized efforts grew a national "community reinvestment" movement to address the problem of bank redlining.

Local community groups came together to focus attention on the role lenders played in exacerbating urban neighborhood decline and racial segregation. Its first major victory, the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA), was passed by Congress in 1975, followed by the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) in 1977 (Sidney 2003). These laws had minimal impact at first but gained momentum in the 1980s as a result of grassroots organizing (despite resistance from the Reagan and Bush administrations and their appointed federal bank regulators). By the mid-1980s, local groups coalesced into a significant national presence, thanks to the work of several national community organizing networks. The national effort around community reinvestment issues was carried out by loose networks of local groups coordinated by national organizations that primarily provided technical assistance. These included National Peoples Action (NPA), the Center for Community Change (CCC) and the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC), the Woodstock Institute, and the Inner City Press.

ACORN, in contrast, viewed the community reinvestment issue as a tool for building its national organization and its local chapters. It waged anti-redlining campaigns in many different cities in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing on its national staff to conduct research, issue reports on lending disparities, provide legal assistance for mounting CRA challenges against lenders, and offer strategic lessons. ACORN organizers who led successful community reinvestment campaigns helped train their counterparts in other cities. ACORN used these local campaigns to develop national campaigns around federal banking and housing legislation. At any given time, chapters would be engaged in local and national campaigns. These efforts paid off in helping enact federal legislation during the early 1990s savings and loan bailout scandal and in subsequent battles to reform CRA and HMDA, for which ACORN deserves considerable credit. In the following decade, ACORN took a leading role in injecting the issue of predatory lending into local and national political agendas.

ACORN has used its community reinvestment campaigns to build its organization. It targeted several major national banks and mortgage companies, waged campaigns against them, brought them to the bargaining table, and got them to change their lending practices. Equally important, ACORN got major national lenders to provide philanthropic support to pay for ACORN's homeownership counseling and homebuilding pro-

grams and to work with ACORN to provide its members with mortgage loans. Other groups working on community reinvestment issues have accomplished some of these same goals, but only ACORN has used its federal structure to bundle these accomplishments to build its political clout, organizational funding, and constituency base. ACORN has received considerable media attention for its community reinvestment work representing the voice of consumers in stories about redlining and predatory lending. In addition, ACORN has used its local and national campaigns around banking issues to strengthen its relationships with elected officials at the local, state, and national levels—forming political ties that ACORN could draw on for help with other issues and for help in obtaining funding from the Democratic Party and some of its key funders to wage voter education and get-out-the-vote drives.

The living wage movement, in which ACORN has played a major role, has helped change the public's view of the poor and the social contract. Two decades ago, the concept of a living wage was a radical idea. Today, it is part of the mainstream public debate. The movement was spurred by Congress's failure to raise the national minimum wage for almost ten years (after raising it to \$5.15 an hour in 1997). The momentum for change was also catalyzed by the proliferation of low-wage jobs, and by city governments' efforts to contract public services to private firms paying lower wages and benefits than prevail in the public sector. Most Americans now agree that people working full-time should not be trapped in poverty. There is now widespread popular support, among most Democrats and many Republicans, for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides income assistance to the working poor. The popularity of Barbara Ehrenreich's best-selling book, *Nickel and Dimed*, about America's working poor, and the growing protests against Wal-Mart's low pay, indicate that concerns about inequality and poverty are moving from the margin to the mainstream of American politics.

Baltimore passed the first living wage law in 1994, following a grassroots campaign organized by BUILD (an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation) and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (whose members work for local governments). By 2008, community, labor, and religious coalitions had won living wage ordinances in over 150 cities and counties as well as the state of Maryland. The movement's effectiveness is due in large measure to the existence of two national networks and federated structures—the labor movement and ACORN—that have separately and together spearheaded local living wage campaigns and spread their strategic and tactical experience to new

cities (Martin 2006). In some cities, unions or union-sponsored organizations (such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy) initiated the living wage campaigns, and then brought community, religious, and other groups into the coalition. Elsewhere, ACORN took the lead and (in most cities) recruited labor unions, religious groups, and other community groups into the organizing effort. The national unions and ACORN's national office provided training, research, fundraising, strategizing, and coordination. ACORN sponsors a Living Wage Resource Center that provides model ordinances, arguments to rebut opponents, and tactical and strategic advice.

ACORN's federated structure made it possible to juggle several local living wage campaigns at the same time. Moreover, the group's close ties to the labor movement—particularly SEIU, the nation's largest union, which it has been working with for two decades—provide resources for national and local living wage efforts that a locally based organization would not have. ACORN has used local living wage battles to build its local chapters and national organization, and to test organizing strategies that can be utilized in broader campaigns with more significant consequences. In 2002, for example, ACORN mounted a successful grassroots campaign in New Orleans to enact a citywide minimum wage pegged at a dollar above the federal wage level. After the surprise victory, the city's business leaders sued, and the state's right-wing Supreme Court overturned the wage law. But ACORN had made a name for itself as a grassroots David willing to take on powerful Goliaths.

ACORN has also brought the minimum wage issue into state ballot measures. In 2004, ACORN and its union and faith-based allies organized a statewide ballot initiative in Florida to raise the state minimum wage, registered thousands of residents (mostly in low-income, minority urban neighborhoods) to increase turnout on election day, and won a decisive victory in November. In November 2006, ACORN led ballot measures to raise the minimum wage in four other states (Missouri, Ohio, Colorado, and Arizona), while unions led similar successful campaigns in Montana and Nevada. In each state, they forged broad coalitions between community groups, clergy and churches, unions, and other constituencies. They mobilized effective voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns. All six measures prevailed, most by wide margins, and included provisions for annual increases based on the cost of living. Importantly, these grassroots minimum-wage campaigns increased voter turnout enough to help Democrats Claire McCaskill in Missouri, John Tester in Montana, and Sherrod Brown in Ohio defeat incumbent Republicans and cement the

Democrats' majority in the U.S. Senate (Atlas and Dreier 2006). This state-by-state strategy also laid the groundwork for raising the federal minimum wage. After the Democrats regained their majority in Congress in November 2006, both the House (by a 280 to 142 margin) and Senate (eighty to fourteen) voted to increase the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour over three years. President Bush reluctantly signed the bill in May 2007, giving almost 6 million minimum wage workers a pay raise.

ACORN and the Organizing Tradition

Alinsky viewed community organizing as part of the broader movement for redistributing economic and political power. However, for pragmatic reasons—especially to cement ties to the Catholic Church and most labor unions—he warned community groups to avoid becoming too “ideological,” which in the context of the 1930s meant resisting being identified with or influenced by the Communist Party. That legacy continues today. Most community organizing groups, despite their efforts to gain political influence for poor and working class people, identify their campaigns in terms of promoting “democracy” or “fairness” rather than a broader ideology.

ACORN has always explicitly identified itself with America's Populist and Progressive traditions in its publications, its training for organizers and leaders, and its public rhetoric. It incorporates into its training curriculum a history of the Populist and Progressive movements, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement. It is willing to challenge specific businesses (such as banks and insurance companies) as well as to attack corporations for being socially irresponsible, for preying on consumers, workers, and ordinary people, and for having too much political influence.

One of ACORN's strengths is its combination of “inside” and “outside” tactics and strategies. Like most community organizing groups, ACORN is not shy about using confrontational protest tactics. Indeed, regular public protest is a key part of ACORN's organizational culture. ACORN is unapologetic about its tactics, in part because they not only help draw public attention to neglected issues but also help build membership. Equally important, these tactics typically get results. Public officials and private businesses that decry ACORN's tactics often wind up agreeing with its agenda—or at least negotiating with its leaders to forge compromises.

At the same time, ACORN acknowledges the limits of protest as a tactic as well as the limits of community organizing as a strategy for influencing public policy. It recognizes the fundamental paradox that even the most effective community organizing groups mobilize a relatively small number of people. Unlike most labor organizing campaigns—which require gaining the support of a *majority* of members in a given workplace in order to win a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election—community organizing only requires that there are enough people mobilized to disrupt business as usual, to get an issue into the media, or to catalyze allies who have influence over public officials or corporate leaders. Most successful community organizing involves using a group’s very limited resources in strategic ways. This approach makes it possible to win many “issue” campaigns, but it is limited when it comes to electoral politics—where you need to win a plurality of voters to achieve a victory.

Indeed, ACORN differs from many of its community organizing counterparts in terms of its strategic leap into the arena of electoral politics, not only doing voter registration and get-out-the-vote work (much of it outside its own membership base) but also supporting candidates for public office. From its early days in Arkansas, ACORN rejected the view—strongly held by many community organizing groups in the Alinsky mold—that electoral politics was off-limits. It ran its own members for office, and it endorsed candidates who had worked with ACORN on issue campaigns. ACORN has also been willing, and sometimes eager, to forge close relationships with elected officials, mostly liberal Democrats; to mobilize its members in election campaigns; and even to encourage its members to run for office. Also, because it is a national (and federated) organization, ACORN has the capacity to target resources—particularly its organizing staff—to different parts of the country when they can be helpful in key electoral races. ACORN’s significant role in the 2004 and 2008 national elections (including with national coalitions), and its work on ballot referenda in key swing states, is due in large measure to its ability to coordinate its activities at the national level.

ACORN is also one of the few community groups that have successfully figured out how to combine organizing with development and “services,” and to minimize the inevitable tensions that occur when the same organization engages in both. It runs a housing development nonprofit, sponsors several public charter schools, and provides mortgage and tax preparation counseling services. The IAF affiliates in New York have also combined community organizing with housing development through their sponsorship of several large-scale projects called Nehemiah.

One of the great paradoxes of contemporary community organizing is its separation from the labor movement. Based on his ties to John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers union and founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Alinsky originally viewed community organizing as a partnership with labor unions. In the 1930s, the people who worked in Chicago's slaughterhouses lived together in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, went to the same churches, participated in the same sports leagues, and were members of the same unions. The people who lived in that neighborhood were "citizens" and "community residents" as well as "workers." The problems they faced—such as slum housing, poverty, low wages, unemployment, dangerous jobs, and crime—were interconnected (Horwitt 1992; Slayton 1986; Fisher 1994). As a result, Alinsky viewed labor and community organizing as dual strategies for addressing the problems facing working class people in urban industrial areas. Unions helped community groups win victories concerning municipal services and jobs; community groups helped unions win victories against the meatpacking companies and other employers.

Alinsky had a tremendous influence on the next generation of community organizers. He inspired many civil rights, student, and antiwar activists and influenced organizers in the early years of the environmental movement, feminism, and consumer activism. But one of Alinsky's key strategic impulses—the connection between community and labor organizing—was noticeably absent from the upsurge of community organizing in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. There were exceptions—including the work of the United Farm Workers union, the involvement of some unions in the civil rights movement, and several unions' sponsorship of community development corporations and affordable housing—but for most of this period, community organizing groups had little day-to-day contact with the labor movement.

ACORN emerged in the 1970s out of the civil rights and welfare reform movements. Initially, like the rest of the burgeoning community organizing crusades, ACORN was not closely linked with organized labor. But ACORN's leaders soon realized that a strategic alliance with unions would help improve the conditions of its low-wage members and strengthen its political influence. Accordingly, ACORN has forged strong alliances with organized labor, particularly the Service Employees International Union. These relationships have brought ACORN closer than other community organizing groups and networks to labor. (Some local IAF groups also had close ties to unions). ACORN's effectiveness in waging local and state living wage and minimum wage campaigns, and its suc-

cess in the political arena in electoral campaigns, is due, to a considerable degree, to its participation in coalitions with unions. ACORN's federated structure and its close ties with organized labor make it unique in the world of community organizing.

The Changing Playing Field for Organizing

To be effective, progressives—including community organizers—must adjust their strategies to complement the broad changes in the economic, demographic, and political landscape. In recent decades, major changes have occurred in the following areas.

Militarism, Globalization, and Corporate Consolidation

We will never solve our domestic problems, or help alleviate the widespread misery in the poor nations around the world, as long as we continue to spend such a large part of our federal budget on national defense and engage in military adventures. Today, two decades after the end of the Cold War and all the talk about a “peace dividend,” the United States has not significantly reduced its reliance on military spending. Indeed, the “war on terrorism” has increased federal funding for war and “homeland security.”

Globalization has paralleled the deindustrialization of cities and the decline of unionized workplaces, especially in the industrial sectors. This has led to an increasing polarization of incomes and an increase in low-wage jobs (“Wal-Martization”). As a result of corporate consolidation, many decisions are made in boardrooms far removed from the affected local communities. With the decline of local corporate power structures, community groups cannot easily target local business leaders as part of grassroots organizing campaigns. For example, because of the dramatic increase in bank mergers, groups working against bank redlining no longer can confront local bank directors on their own turf. Because ACORN is federated, it can negotiate with national banks about their practices in local markets. Local unions, community groups, and environmental groups working to restrain Wal-Mart can find local organizing “handles” but must find ways to work together across the country to influence decisions made in Bentonville, Arkansas. Without some kind of national network or movement, local groups are limited in their ability to bargain with large corporations and influence federal policy.

Suburbanization and the Urban Fiscal Crisis

More than half of the U.S. population—more than half of all voters, and almost half of the poor—now live in suburbs. Suburban districts dominate Congress and many state legislatures (Swanstrom, Casey, Flack, and Dreier 2004; Berube and Kneebone 2006). However, most community organizing groups, including ACORN, are rooted in big and middle-size cities, and mostly in the low-income neighborhoods. These are areas typically represented by liberal Democrats who occupy reasonably “safe” seats in state legislatures and Congress. ACORN has almost no presence in suburban America. The progressive Left—the labor movement, community groups, women’s groups, and others—needs a strategy for building a stronger base in the “swing” state legislative and congressional districts that are primarily outside cities (Egan 2006; Judis and Teixeira 2004). Moreover, deindustrialization, the exodus of high-wage jobs, and the suburbanization of middle-class residents have created a chronic fiscal crisis for cities. Most of the nation’s most serious problems are concentrated in cities and older suburbs, but local governments lack the resources needed to seriously address these problems. This makes it more difficult for local governments to respond to demands by community groups for more funding for housing, police and fire protection, hospitals, schools, parks and playgrounds, and other municipal services (Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2005).

Capital Mobility and the Business Climate

Whenever community organizing groups, unions, and environmental activists propose policies to make business act more responsibly—for example, living wage laws, business taxes, clean air laws, “linkage” fees on new commercial buildings that target the funds for affordable housing, and inclusionary zoning laws that require housing developers to incorporate units for low-income families—business opponents claim that those policies will scare away businesses and lead to job losses. Because our federal system allows states and localities to set many business conditions, footloose corporations can look for the best “business climate”—low wages, low benefits, low taxes, lax environmental regulations, and a “union free” atmosphere. Many state and local government officials feel that in order to attract or maintain jobs, they have to participate in “bidding wars.”

Most local politicians believe that they are trapped in what they perceive to be a fiscal straitjacket. If public officials move too aggressively to

tax or regulate the private sector, business can threaten to pull up stakes and take their jobs and tax base with them. They can also mobilize a sustained political assault (often with the aid of the local media) against incumbent politicians for being unfair to business. Few politicians want the reputation that because they lost the “confidence” of the business community, they drove away jobs and undermined the tax base. Corporations may be bluffing when they threaten to leave if cities enact such laws, but it is hard for local officials, unions, and community groups to know for certain. Business warnings are not always empty threats. As a result, most officials accommodate themselves to businesses’ priorities, accept the “Chicken Little” scenarios, and err in favor of business. City officials have responded to their fiscal crises by becoming more “entrepreneurial”—by encouraging private investment and promoting public-private partnerships. What this means, in practice, is that cities subsidize private development, typically on terms dictated by the private sector.

Community organizations and other progressive groups have responded in several ways. They have produced studies challenging businesses’ arguments and warnings that living wage laws and other regulations have serious negative consequences. For example, these studies demonstrate that strong unions are good for the economy because they increase effective demand and job creation (Flaming 2007). Studies point out that although some businesses are mobile, many are relatively “sticky” or immobile because they are tied to the local economy (Dreier 2005a, 2005b). Progressive city officials and activists need a clear sense of when business threats are real and when they are not. What characterizes progressive local governmental regimes (such as those of Mayor Harold Washington in Chicago, Mayor Ray Flynn in Boston, and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in Los Angeles) is their willingness to test whether businesses are bluffing and to redefine the concept of a “healthy business climate” as one that includes good jobs, affordable housing, and a clean environment.

Community organizing groups also have demanded that if local governments provide public subsidies to private companies, they should include a quid pro quo of community benefit agreements—including jobs, housing, parks—on terms dictated by community groups and (in some cases) unions. A new emphasis on accountable development—promoted by local groups like the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and national advocacy groups like Good Jobs First—turns the entrepreneurial city on its head, pushing cities to use their leverage over land use and allocation of subsidies to require businesses to be more so-

cially responsible. Local inclusionary zoning, linkage, linked deposit, and living wage laws illustrate this approach. The idea is somewhat modeled on the community investment agreements that community groups have negotiated with banks to resolve anti-redlining protests. One of the largest is ACORN's agreement with the developer of the Atlantic Yards megacomplex in Brooklyn, which requires the Ratner Development Company to provide jobs and affordable housing for local residents (Atlas 2005).

Immigration and Racial/Ethnic Diversity

America's neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas are strongly segregated by race, but the demographic trajectories of our major metropolitan areas are more complex and diverse than ever before. The massive wave of immigration over the last four decades, and the increased suburbanization of black, Latino, and Asian populations, have changed metropolitan demographics. In its early years, starting in Arkansas, ACORN sought to build a movement that would unite the poor—black and white—around economic justice issues. As ACORN expanded into big cities, its members were comprised primarily of African Americans. In the past decade, its membership has become more diverse, with a growing number of Latinos and Afro-Caribbeans. ACORN works primarily in high-poverty neighborhoods where poor blacks and Latinos, but not poor whites, are concentrated. The urban fiscal crisis can pit black, Latino, Asian, and white communities against each other as they fight for scarce municipal resources, such as playgrounds, schools, and housing. The changing demographics of metropolitan areas challenge unions and community groups to address the reality of increasing racial diversity while seeking ways to build bridges across races and neighborhoods.

Rebuilding a Progressive Movement

Ultimately, ACORN must be evaluated in terms of its role in helping shape and build a broad progressive movement that can influence public policy. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Progressive movement sought to change how Americans thought about what we now call the social contract—the rights of citizens, the role of government, and the responsibilities of business to the larger society. Progressive reformers—immigrants and union activists, middle-class reformers (for example, journalists, clergy, and social workers), and upper-class philanthropists—ushered in the first wave of consumer, worker, and environmental protections.

From the 1930s through the early 1970s, the American social contract was based on the premises of the New Deal—a coalition led by the labor movement. The labor movement's strength was focused in cities, and its core constituents were immigrants and their children, African Americans, and, to a lesser extent, white southern small farmers, with allies among middle-class reformers (for example, planners, intellectuals, journalists, and social workers) and some liberals within the business community. During this postwar era, the United States experienced a dramatic increase in per capita income and a decline in the gap between the rich and the poor. The incomes of the bottom half of the class structure rose faster than those at the top.

In the 1960s, progressives hoped to build on this foundation. Representing the left wing of the Democratic Party, United Automobile Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther had been making proposals since World War II to renew and expand the New Deal and to engage in national-economic planning. He advised Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to champion a bold federal program for full employment that would include government-funded public works and the conversion of the nation's defense industry to production for civilian needs. This program, he argued, would dramatically address the nation's poverty population, create job opportunities for African Americans, and rebuild the nation's troubled cities without being as politically divisive as a federal program identified primarily as serving poor blacks.

Both presidents rejected Reuther's advice. (They were worried about alienating Southern Democrats and sectors of business that opposed Keynesian-style economic planning.) Johnson's announcement of an "unconditional war on poverty" in his 1964 State of the Union address pleased Reuther, but the details of the plan revealed its limitations. The War on Poverty was a patchwork of small initiatives that did not address the nation's basic inequalities. Testifying before Congress in 1964, Reuther said that, "while [the proposals] are good, [they] are not adequate, nor will they be successful in achieving their purposes, except as we begin to look at the broader problems [of the American economy]." He added, "Poverty is a reflection of our failure to achieve a more rational, more responsible, more equitable distribution of the abundance that is within our grasp" (Boyle 1998). Although Reuther threw the UAW's political weight behind Johnson's programs, his critique was correct. Since the 1960s, federal efforts to address poverty have consistently suffered from a failure to address the fundamental underlying issues. Most progressives

have understood that the civil rights victories, such as the Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), and Fair Housing Act (1968), were necessary but not sufficient alone to reduce poverty and inequality.

In the 1970s, the New Deal and Great Society gains were supplemented by other victories that emerged out of civil rights, women's rights, environmental and consumer activism; these victories were fueled by the growth of the Naderite network, feminism, environmental and consumer groups, and community organizing. Some 1970s victories include affirmative action, the Clean Air Act and other environmental laws, strong regulations on business regarding consumer products and workplace safety (such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act), and significant improvements in the legal and social rights of women, including reproductive freedoms. The major victories that emerged from community organizing (linked to civil rights) were the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (1975) and the Community Reinvestment Act (1977), which resulted from the ability of groups to link local and national campaigns against bank redlining.

Many community organizations, including ACORN, were born in the 1970s in the aftermath of the civil rights and antiwar movements. They emerged at a time when the post-World War II prosperity—fueled by the rise of the United States as a global superpower, steady economic growth, and a narrowing gap between rich and poor—was coming to an end. Major U.S. corporations began an assault on the labor movement and the living standards of the poor and working classes. *Business Week* best expressed this view in its October 12, 1974, issue: “It will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow—the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more. . . . Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares with the selling job that must be done to make people accept this reality.”

The late 1970s saw the beginning of several trends: the rise of neo-conservatism as a political and intellectual force, the dismantling of the social safety net, a dramatic decline in union membership, the chronic fiscal crisis of major cities, and the increase in the political power of big business and its political and intellectual allies. Since then, liberals, progressives, and Democrats have generally been on the defensive, seeking to protect the key components of the New Deal, the Great Society, and subsequent victories from being dismantled by the increasingly powerful right wing—led by the uneasy alliance between big business, the religious Right, and the mainstream of the Republican Party.

During the past decade, a number of separate, and sometimes overlapping, issues have catalyzed local and national organizing groups. These include campaigns for environmental justice, living wages and community benefit agreements, immigrant rights, fair trade and opposition to sweatshops, and opposition to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. All of these campaigns seek to redistribute wealth and power. They seek to restrain the influence of big business and force corporations to be more socially responsible. They challenge conservative ideas about the role of government.

Other campaigns—such as those for gay rights, reproductive freedom, gun control, and civil liberties (for example, opposition to the Patriotic Act)—have an uneasy alliance with movements that focus more directly on economic justice. Conservatives have been able to use these “wedge” issues to win electoral victories, but the political trajectory has not entirely been toward the Right, as the results of the November 2006 and the November 2008 elections suggest. Growing economic insecurity—what Jacob Hacker calls a major “risk shift”—has the potential for building political bridges between the poor and the middle class, between residents of cities and suburbs, and between people who may otherwise disagree about “wedge” issues.

The labor movement is clearly the backbone of any effective progressive movement. Despite steady declines in the proportion of the labor force in unions, there is real excitement about the successes over a number of major unions and a sense that a revitalization of organized labor is possible. Some of the bigger unions have laid the foundations for future growth, as recent gains in Los Angeles, Houston, and elsewhere indicate. The labor movement has been most successful where it has focused organizing efforts among workers in low-wage industries, primarily among women, immigrants, and people of color. Unions that have made the most headway in recent years have forged alliances with community and church groups and emphasized mobilization and leadership among rank-and-file workers.

The exit polls of the November 2004 and November 2008 elections revealed that when voters’ loyalties were divided between their economic interests and so-called moral values concerns, union membership was a crucial determinant of their votes. In November 2008, for example, 57 percent of white men favored McCain, but 57 percent of white male union members favored Obama. White gun owners cast 68 percent of their votes for McCain, but 54 percent of white gun owners who are

also union members preferred Obama. Among white weekly churchgoers, McCain scored a landslide, receiving 70 percent of their votes. But Obama had a slight edge (49 percent to 48 percent) among white weekly churchgoers who were union members. Similarly, 58 percent of white non-college graduates voted for McCain, but 60 percent of white union members who didn't graduate from college tilted to Obama. Overall, 53 percent of white women cast ballots for McCain, but a whopping 72 percent of white women union members favored Obama. These numbers show the tremendous power of grassroots organizing. Nationwide, according to Guy Molyneux (in an e-mail to the author), 67 percent of union members of all races—and 69 percent in swing states—supported Obama. They voted for him because of the unions' effectiveness at educating and mobilizing members. They spent millions of dollars and built an army of volunteers who went door to door, reaching out to other members about key economic issues. Members in "safe" Democratic states staffed phone banks and made tens of thousands of calls to unionists in key swing states. But unions today represent only 12.1 percent of all American employees. Membership has dramatically declined from the numbers a generation ago (about 35 percent of workers in the 1950s and 25 percent in the 1970s were union members) and is significantly smaller than in other affluent countries. If unions represented even 20 percent of the work force, Obama would have won by a landslide. Democrats who narrowly lost their races for Congress would have prevailed.

As the results of the 2006 and 2008 elections also suggest, the alleged shift to the Right does not adequately reflect public opinion. The proportion of Americans who define themselves as liberals has been declining for several decades. But this does not mean that Americans do not share most liberal values. For example, fewer women call themselves feminists now than did twenty years ago, but more women agree with once-controversial feminist ideas like equal pay for equal work or women's right to choose abortion. Likewise, more Americans today than twenty years ago believe that government should protect the environment, consumers, and workers from unhealthy workplaces and other dangers. Most Americans believe the federal government should help guarantee health insurance for everyone. A majority of workers support unions, and most Americans are pro-choice, want stronger environmental and gun control laws, and believe that the minimum wage should be raised and that the nation should do more to combat poverty.

Conclusion

ACORN's policy agenda is in the Progressive and New Deal tradition of regulating capitalism to prevent excessive greed by pushing for tenement housing reforms, workplace safety laws, the minimum wage, aid to mothers and children, Social Security, the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively for better wages and working conditions, subsidies to house the poor, and policies that encourage banks to make mortgage loans to boost homeownership. There were clear indicators in 2006, confirmed during the 2008 election, that the nation's political mood was shifting. Voters showed that they were frustrated by the war in Iraq, by widening inequality and declining economy security, and by the Bush administration's crony capitalism. But it was still unclear whether progressives could find a coherent twenty-first century agenda to replace the New Deal and the Great Society, to counter the right-wing's "anti-government" message, and to find a way to protect and expand social democracy at home in the midst of globalization (Bai 2007).

Those who think a progressive revival is politically unrealistic should recall how depressed conservatives and Republicans grouped after 1964 when President Lyndon Johnson beat Goldwater in a huge landslide and the Democrats won huge majorities in Congress. At the time, almost every pundit in the country wrote the conservative movement's obituary. Goldwater's right-wing supporters were viewed as fanatics, out of touch with mainstream America. With the help of conservative millionaires, corporations, and foundations, they created new organizations, think tanks, and endowed professorships at universities to help shape the intellectual climate and policy agenda (Perlstein 2001). They created a network of right-wing publications and talk radio stations. They recruited new generations of college students, funded their campus organizations, and got them internships and jobs within conservative organizations and with conservative government officials and agencies. They identified, cultivated, and trained potential political candidates. They brought together the two major wings of the conservative movement—the business conservatives and the social/religious conservatives—in an uneasy but relatively stable coalition to elect conservative Republicans. Then they took over the GOP's atrophied apparatus. They helped change the political agenda. In 1980, they elected Ronald Reagan. In 2000, they helped Bush steal the election. In 2004, they helped Bush win a second term, almost fair and square. They helped conservative Republicans gain control of Con-

gress and changed the ideological completion of the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary.

The movement built itself up from scratch, utilizing the network of conservative pastors and churches, and providing sermons, voter guides, get-out-the-vote training, and other resources to create a powerful organizational infrastructure. Separate, but overlapping with the religious Right, the National Rifle Association and the gun lobby also used its huge war chest and organizational resources to mobilize its members and their families. Moreover, the religious Right and the gun lobby are not just part of an election-day operation. They are part of an ongoing movement that provides people with social, psychological, and political sustenance on a regular basis. The rise of suburban megachurches is one example of this phenomenon.

Political victories are about more than election-day turnout. Successes on Election Day are a byproduct of, not a substitute for, effective grassroots organizing in between elections. The history of the past century shows that progress is made when people join together to struggle for change, make stepping-stone reforms, and persist so that each victory builds on the next. This kind of work is slow and gradual because it involves organizing people to learn the patient skills of leadership and organization building. It requires forging coalitions that can win elections and then promote politics that keep the coalition alive.

Over the past century, the key turning points for improving American society involved large-scale mobilizations around a broad egalitarian and morally uplifting vision of America, a progressive patriotism animated by "liberty and justice for all." These movements drew on traditions of justice and morality. They redefined the rights and responsibilities of citizens, government, and business. In the Gilded Age, it was agrarian Populism and urban Progressivism. During the Depression, it was the upsurge of industrial unionism linked to Roosevelt's New Deal. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was the civil rights, women's rights, and environmental movements, promoting a vision of how the nation's prosperity should be shared by all but not squandered for future generations.

The progressive Left has yet to figure out how to frame issues and mobilize constituencies in the early twenty-first century that can achieve sustained political and economic power. Each time there has been a political realignment, it has occurred in ways that even its strongest proponents could not have anticipated. America today is holding its breath, trying to decide what kind of society it wants to be. Liberal and progressive forces are gaining momentum, but they still lack the organizational

infrastructure needed to effectively challenge the conservative message and movement. They have begun to invest in building that infrastructure—think tanks, grassroots coalitions, technology, recruitment of staff, and identification and training of candidates (Bai 2007). Some of that investment bore fruit in November 2004 (including the impressive work of the Americans Coming Together project) and in November 2006, when unions, community organizing groups, and other progressives helped elect a Democratic majority in Congress. But there is much more to be done.

Americans are used to voting for presidential candidates with backgrounds as lawyers, military officers, farmers, businessmen, and career politicians. The 2008 election was the first time they were asked to vote for someone who has been a community organizer. Of course, Barack Obama has also been a lawyer, a law professor, and an elected official, but throughout his presidential campaign, he frequently referred to the three years he spent as a community organizer in Chicago in the mid-1980s as “the best education I ever had” and as a formative period in his life. In 1985, at age twenty-three, Obama was hired by the Developing Communities Project, a coalition of churches on Chicago’s South Side (affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation network). His job was to help empower residents to win improved playgrounds, after-school programs, job training, and housing, and to address other concerns affecting a neighborhood hurt by large-scale layoffs from the nearby steel mills and neglect by banks, retail stores, and the local government. He knocked on doors and talked to people in their kitchens, living rooms, and churches about the problems they faced and why they needed to get involved to change things. For example, he organized tenants in the troubled Altgeld Gardens public housing project to push the city to remove dangerous asbestos in their apartments, a campaign that he acknowledges resulted in only a partial victory. After Obama helped organize a large mass meeting of angry tenants, the city government started to test and seal asbestos in some apartments but ran out of money to complete the task.

Through his references to his own experience and his persistent praise for organizers at every campaign stop, Obama may have helped recruit a new wave of idealistic young Americans who want to bring about change. According to all surveys and exit polls, interest in politics and voter turnout among the Millennial generation (born after 1978) increased dramatically in 2008, a direct result of the Obama phenomenon. In addition, professors reported that the number of college students taking courses in community organizing and courses about movements and activism has

increased. Community organizing groups like ACORN, as well as unions and environmental groups, report that the number of young people seeking jobs as organizers spiked in the wake of Obama's candidacy. Through his own example, as well as by the vitriol unleashed by the Republicans and the right-wing attack machine, Obama increased the visibility of grassroots organizing as a career path, a means of bringing about social change, and a way to give ordinary people a sense of their own collective power to improve their lives.

During his presidential campaign, Obama often referred to the valuable lessons he learned working "in the streets" of Chicago. "I've won some good fights and I've also lost some fights," he said in a speech in Milwaukee during the primary season, "because good intentions are not enough, when not fortified with political will and political power." Although he didn't make community organizing a lifetime career—he left Chicago to attend law school at Harvard—Obama often says that his organizing experience shapes his approach to politics. After graduating from law school, Obama returned to Chicago to practice and teach law but in the mid-1990s began contemplating running for office, thinking he could use many of the same skills he learned on the streets. In 1995 he told a Chicago newspaper, "What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer—as part teacher and part advocate, one who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real choices before them?" (De Zutter 1995). Since embarking on a political career, Obama hasn't forgotten the philosophical and practical lessons that he learned on the streets of Chicago and that became central to his campaign for the White House.

For example, community organizers distinguish themselves from traditional political campaign operatives who approach voters as customers through direct mail, telemarketing, and canvassing. According to Temo Figueroa, the Obama campaign's national field director, most presidential campaigns take volunteers off the street and put them to work immediately on the "grunt" work of the campaign—making phone calls, handing out leaflets, or walking door to door. Figueroa—the son and nephew of United Farm Worker union activists, and a UCLA graduate who worked as a union organizer for many years—says the Obama campaign has been different. Obama enlisted Marshall Ganz, one of the country's leading organizing theorists and practitioners, who teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, to help train organizers and volunteers. Ganz and other experienced organizers, including Mike Kruglik, one of Obama's mentors in Chicago, led campaign volunteers through several days of in-

tense training sessions called “Camp Obama.” Potential field organizers were given an overview of the history of grassroots organizing techniques and the key lessons of campaigns that have succeeded and failed. The Obama campaign enlisted hundreds of seasoned organizers, including veterans from unions, community groups, churches, and environmental groups. They, in turn, mobilized thousands of volunteers—many of them neophytes in electoral politics—into tightly knit, highly motivated, and efficient teams. This organizing effort mobilized many first-time voters, including an unprecedented number of young people and African Americans. Many of the campaign’s successes were due to this grassroots organizing approach.

The influence of Obama’s organizing experience was also evident in his speeches, his continued use of the UFW slogan “Yes, we can / Si se puede,” and his emphasis on “hope” and “change.” His stump speeches typically included references to America’s organizing tradition. “Nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except when somebody somewhere was willing to hope,” Obama said in a speech in February 2008. “That is how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. That’s how women won the right to vote. That’s how young people traveled south to march and to sit in and to be beaten, and some went to jail and some died for freedom’s cause.” Change comes about, Obama said, by “imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before.” “Real change,” he frequently noted, only comes about from the “bottom up,” but as president, he could give voice to those organizing in their workplaces, communities, and congregations around a positive vision for change. “That’s leadership,” he said.

It is unclear how Obama’s organizing background will shape his approach to governing. He will have to find a balance between working inside the Beltway and encouraging Americans to organize and mobilize. During the campaign, he signaled his understanding that his ability to reform health care, tackle global warming, and restore job security and decent wages will depend, in large measure, on whether he can use his bully pulpit to mobilize public opinion and encourage Americans to battle powerful corporate interests and members of Congress who resist change. For example, in a speech in Milwaukee during the primary season, Obama talked about the need to forge a new energy policy. He explained, “I know how hard it will be to bring about change. Exxon Mobil made \$11 billion this past quarter. They don’t want to give up their profits easily.” Another major test will be whether he will spend his political capital to

help push the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA)—a significant reform of America's outdated and business-oriented labor laws—through Congress against almost unified business opposition. If passed, EFCA will help trigger a new wave of organizing that will require enlisting thousands of young organizers into the labor movement.

Progressives within Obama's inner circle will look for opportunities to encourage his organizing instincts to shape how he governs the nation, whom he appoints to key positions, and which policies to prioritize. Meanwhile, a new generation of volunteer activists and paid organizers—inspired in part by Obama's own example—will be looking to join his crusade or to push him to translate his campaign promises into public policy. As an organization with its own membership, as part of a broader progressive coalition, and as a model of how to effectively use organizational resources, and work both inside and outside electoral politics, ACORN has an important role to play in building a movement for social and economic justice.

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