

The Year of the Organizer

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The Obama campaign's commitment to the principles of community organizing has proved decisive to their victories so far. It has also brought new voters to the political process who could swing the general election.

The two remaining Democrats in the race for the presidency both have roots in the community-organizing world. Hillary Clinton wrote her senior thesis at Wellesley College on legendary organizer Saul Alinsky. Barack Obama spent three years as a community organizer in Chicago. But it is Obama's campaign that most clearly embodies many of the characteristics of a social movement -- a redemptive calling for a better society, coupling individual and social transformation. This shouldn't be surprising. Obama has enlisted hundreds of seasoned organizers -- including unions, community groups, churches, and environmental groups -- into his campaign. They, in turn, have mobilized thousands of volunteers -- many of them neophytes in electoral politics -- into tightly knit, highly motivated, and efficient teams. This organizing effort has turned out a new group of voters, many of them young people and first-time voters.

Obama's landslide victory in South Carolina was due in large measure to this grassroots organizing approach, which dramatically expanded voter turnout. Obama's campaign had organizers in each of South Carolina's 46 counties, 32 Get Out the Vote offices throughout the state, and 154 "staging" areas where volunteers picked up precinct lists and campaign materials. The South Carolina campaign was so well organized they conducted two GOTV "dry runs" on the two previous Saturdays before the primary, practicing every step of the Election Day operation to make sure that all staff and volunteers understood their responsibilities.

On Election Day, the campaign had 15,000 volunteers in South Carolina, according to Jeremy Bird, the Obama campaign field director. In another departure from past campaigns, Bird targeted people who had never participated in politics before. Turnout increased to 532,000 this year from 293,000 in 2004. Twenty-seven percent of those who cast a ballot were first-time voters. Moreover, turnout in the Democratic primary exceeded Republican turnout a week earlier by 97,000 voters. As a result, Bird says, "South Carolina is in play in November if Barack is the nominee," challenging the conventional wisdom that a Democrat can't win in the state.

According to Bird, the Obama campaign made a decision early last year that they would not approach states with large African American populations in a traditional way.

"Most campaigns come into South Carolina with the belief that only blacks can talk to blacks and only whites can talk to whites," explained Bird, a former seminarian who studied with organizing guru Marshall Ganz at Harvard. "Barack Obama ran a campaign of unity. If we would have segregated ourselves like other campaigns have done it would have been disingenuous." Obama received 81 percent of the black vote and did particularly well among black voters aged 30 to 44.

The Clinton campaign, Bird said, ran "an old-school traditional campaign -- a top-down campaign based on political endorsements, not a campaign based on empowering and investing in people."

The Obama campaign also hopes to leave behind a network of trained activists in South Carolina and other states.

"We have been digging in here since last April, which is unprecedented in a presidential campaign," Bird commented. "South Carolina does not have a tradition of grassroots organizing, but what we will leave behind are hundreds of trained organizers and volunteers who will now run for school board, city council, the state legislature," Bird predicted. "They will transform this state."

A History of Organizing

As a community organizer for three years in Chicago in the late 1980s, Obama learned the skills of motivating and mobilizing people who had little faith in their ability to make politicians, corporations, and other powerful institutions accountable. Working with churches and neighborhood groups, Obama taught low-income people how to analyze power relations, gain confidence in their own leadership abilities, and work together to improve their housing, schools, and other basic services.

"What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer," he asked a local newspaper at the time, "as part teacher and part advocate, one who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real choices before them?"

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 are now central to his campaign for the White House.

Last year, Obama enlisted Marshall Ganz, one of the country's leading organizing theorists, to help train organizers and volunteers as a key component of his presidential campaign. In the early 1960s, Ganz dropped out of Harvard to work in the South with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the student wing of the civil-rights movement. He then returned to his home state of California to join Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, becoming a key architect of the union's early successes. The UFW combined a clear-eyed drive for more workers' power in the California fields and orchards with a deep spiritual yearning for personal and social change.

Ganz now teaches the history and practice of organizing at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "Organizing," he says, "combines the language of the heart as well as the head."

According to Ganz, "it is values, not just interests" that inspire people to participate in social movements. This approach is well-suited to Obama's own style of translating values into action by telling his own story in public.

ADVERTISEMENT A key tenet of community organizing is developing face to face contact with people so that they forge commitments to work together around shared values. Organizers are not social workers. Their orientation is not to "service" people as if they were clients, but to encourage people to develop their own abilities to mobilize others. They help people turn their "hot" anger into disciplined action. Community organizers also distinguish themselves from traditional political campaign operatives who approach voters as customers through direct mail, telemarketing, and canvassing urging them to support their candidate as if they were selling soap.

This approach is reflected in how Obama's campaign has integrated itself into local communities. In Iowa, for example, campaign organizers, both paid staff and volunteers, were required to help in community recycling projects, tree planting and garbage pick-up -- making themselves available for the day-to-day tasks required to enhance the neighborhoods they were in.

Mitch Stewart, the Iowa field director, explained that "the Obama campaign merged the professional political operation and the movement operation."

The campaign recruited coordinators and volunteer teams in each of Iowa's 1,781 precincts, developed chapters at over 200 Iowa high schools (called "Barack Stars"), and built campaign operations on almost every college campus in the state. On caucus day, the campaign enlisted 3,000 volunteers.

The dramatic increase in Iowa's caucus turnout -- twice the number from four years earlier -- is due in large measure to these organizing efforts.

Political observers credit the Internet and the blogosphere for changing many aspects of election campaigns. Many volunteers made their first contact with the Obama campaign online but, according to Stewart, who had worked on Edwards' 2004 campaign and for an environmental group, "you can't let the Internet be the sole experience for someone to participate in a campaign." Campaign organizers quickly reached through the ether to enlist these volunteers in one-on-one meetings and precinct teams. The Internet is fine for collecting data and raising money, Ganz points out, but "you should not mistake the carpenter with the tools."

A key part of every organizer's lexicon is "hope." For an organizer, hope is not merely a fuzzy political platitude but a fundamental part of what it means to be human. In the UFW, the phrase "si se puede" -- it can be done -- embodied this outlook. Obama has made "hope" an essential element of his political persona. After his overwhelming victory in South Carolina, Obama's victory stirring images of "healing the nation" and "overcoming the racial divide," were a key example of how he uses progressive-values language to surface deeper emotions.

Temo Figueroa, the son and nephew of UFW activists, and a UCLA graduate, worked as a union organizer before joining the Obama campaign as its national field director. According to Figueroa, 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. The campaign's recent successes are the result of extensive training sessions that took place last year throughout the country.

The Obama campaign, he says, is different. Before it sent its volunteers into the fields, he explained, the campaign required them to go through several days of intense four-day training sessions called "Camp Obama." The sessions were led by Ganz and other experienced organizers, including Mike Kruglik, one of Obama's organizing mentors in Chicago. 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.

Reflecting upon his civil-rights and UFW experiences, Ganz told the Obama staffers and volunteers that "there was a celebration and joy to those movements. It was hard not to get involved."

Super Tuesday

Twenty-two states will hold elections on Feb. 5. Five of those states use a caucus system for voting similar to Iowa. In California and other populous states -- where most political pundits believe elections are won and lost by the size of a campaign's media budget, not its on-the-ground field operation -- the Obama campaign is wagering that its community-organizing approach will pay off. Obama and Clinton are contesting for the support of traditional Democratic voters, including women, seniors, union members, African Americans, and Latinos. As he did in Iowa and South Carolina, Obama is depending on his field operation to identify, register, and turn out new voters and young voters who are attracted by his idealism.

Obama's California field operation has been building since last July, when a number of initial training sessions were conducted. Heading into February, the Obama campaign has over 3,000 volunteers, according to Buffy Wicks, the 30-year-old California field director who had previously worked for Howard Dean in 2004, as an aide to Congressman Bob Filner of California, in the anti-war movement, and with the union-backed Wake-Up Wal-Mart campaign.

In California -- a huge state where political field organizers are a dying breed and media svengalis rule -- the Obama campaign is again bucking tradition. Wicks estimates the campaign is making around 18,000 calls a day, all with volunteer help. And in an Internet twist on the usual boiler-room phone-bank operations, phoners for Obama can obtain phone lists and scripts through their computers at home, obviating the need to gather in a single location -- a technology pioneered by MoveOn.Org. The campaign can track in real time the number of calls made, who is phoning, and the results of the calls.

Like Bird in South Carolina, Wicks is looking past the February primary to potential long-term impacts of the campaign. "We're training a new kind of political campaign organizer that speaks to who Barack is," she observes two weeks before the election. "We're trying to create community organizers out of our activists. There's so much energy and enthusiasm. It's just a matter of providing the infrastructure, the technology, the training, and the tools, and they feel part of a larger movement."

If Obama secures the Democratic nomination and wins the White House, Ganz and other organizers will look for opportunities to encourage his organizing instincts to shape how he governs the nation, whom he appoints to key positions, and how he seeks to translate his campaign promises, such as reforming health care and tackling global warming, into public policy. Obama knows that he will have to find balance between working inside the Beltway and encouraging Americans to organize and mobilize to battle powerful corporate interests and congressional in-fighting. But if Obama wants to be a champion of change, he'll need to redefine the role of president as organizer-in-chief.

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