

New Labor Forum

<http://nlf.sagepub.com/>

Lessons from the Right's Attacks on Acorn and Planned Parenthood

Peter Dreier and John Atlas
New Labor Forum 2012 21: 88
DOI: 10.4179/NLF.213.0000013

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://nlf.sagepub.com/content/21/3/88.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Murphy Institute, CUNY

Additional services and information for *New Labor Forum* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://nlf.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://nlf.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Oct 1, 2012

[What is This?](#)



A GUIDE TO INSURGENCIES
FROM COAST TO COAST

By Peter Dreier and John Atlas

LESSONS FROM THE RIGHT'S ATTACKS ON ACORN AND PLANNED PARENTHOOD

IN RECENT YEARS, ACORN AND PLANNED PARENTHOOD FACED RELENTLESS attacks by Republicans, Tea Partiers, and the Religious Right. ACORN disappeared. Planned Parenthood came out stronger. What happened? And what lessons can progressives learn about dealing with right-wing political assaults?

The conservative offensive against these two groups was no accident. In 2001, Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform, penned an *American Spectator* magazine article that outlined a strategy to undermine the Democratic Party and block progressive taxes and regulations on businesses that upset his corporate clients. It called for destroying the “five pillars” of the Democratic Party—unions, trial lawyers, big city mayors, voter registration groups, and progressive groups that receive foundation and federal funding.

Both ACORN and Planned Parenthood fall into the latter two categories. Both organizations

threatened the conservative movement’s political influence. They have served poor and working-class Americans—black, white, and Hispanic—although Planned Parenthood also had a sizable middle-class constituency. Unlike charities, both groups combined their service work with a grassroots organizing strategy that emphasized the exercise of political power.

Both groups engaged in educational and electoral activity, including legislative advocacy. By establishing organizations not subject to the tax-exempt prohibitions against political activities, they both mobilized members to engage in elections and endorse candidates.

The three 2008 Democratic Party candidates seeking the presidential nomination sought their support.

Both groups were disparaged by Republicans, right-wing talk shows, columnists, and Tea Party activists, and targeted by the same conservative video-sting operations. These manufactured controversies and attacks subjected both groups to a torrent of media stories that required them to divert their staffs from their core work and spend considerable time and money defending themselves and rallying supporters. Each group's opponents sought to scare foundations and the government into cutting off funding.

For many of the three million people who visit its clinics each year, Planned Parenthood is the only place they can get testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and other health care matters. Some of its patients participate in Planned Parenthood's ongoing advocacy for greater access to health care, better family planning, and women's reproductive freedom. In November 2011, for example, Planned Parenthood led the campaign to defeat an anti-abortion referendum in Mississippi and has been on the front lines of that battle in other states.

For forty years ACORN was a strong and effective voice for low-income Americans, registering millions to vote, assisting the working poor with buying and keeping their homes, and fighting for fair treatment by employers, landlords, banks, mortgage companies and payday lenders. It played a leading role in organizing the victims of Hurricane Katrina to gain a voice in the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast.

By 2008, ACORN's family of organizations had an annual budget of \$100 million, more than five hundred employees and four hundred thousand members, and chapters in thirty-eight states. Its affiliates conducted research, policy analysis, and leadership training. It had two labor locals, radio stations, and several publications;

built affordable housing; and staffed support centers for its national campaigns to increase the minimum wage and end predatory lending.

ACORN spearheaded the living wage movement in more than one hundred cities and helped make the federal Earned Income Tax Credit an effective anti-poverty program. An independent study estimated that from 1994 to 2004, ACORN had redirected \$15 billion in government benefits and corporate investments to improve the lives and neighborhoods of low-income families.

ACORN and Planned Parenthood had overlapping, but also different, allies and enemies. Unlike Planned Parenthood, ACORN was constantly attacked by business groups and their free market ideological soulmates, and then the object of a relentless assault by the Republican Party. These business groups spent millions attacking ACORN, alleging that it engaged in voter fraud, misused federal funds, and even caused the subprime crisis.

ACORN became a favorite target of right-wing ideologues. For example, a 2003 article in *City Journal*, published by the conservative Manhattan Institute, argued that ACORN promotes "a 1960s-bred agenda of anti-capitalism, central planning, victimology, and government handouts to the poor." Frequent articles by conservative writers lambasted ACORN as the latest incarnation of Saul Alinsky's alleged strategy for turning America into a socialist society.

GOP officials were worried about ACORN's successful voter registration drives, especially among low-income voters of color in swing states like Florida, New Mexico, and Ohio. As part of an effort to suppress the voting of people of color and the poor, Karl Rove (President George W. Bush's top political adviser) orchestrated an attack on ACORN by encouraging several U.S. attorneys to prosecute the group for voter fraud. When one of them—David Iglesias, the U.S. attorney in New Mexico—refused to

prosecute ACORN after finding no evidence of fraud, he was soon dismissed. Some local Republican officials nevertheless filed bogus lawsuits, accusing ACORN of voter fraud.

ACORN became fodder in a broad conservative effort to discredit Obama—first as a candidate, then as president—and to stigmatize the former community organizer as a radical. During the 2008 campaign, John McCain asked Obama to explain his ties to ACORN which, he claimed, “is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.”

These accusations were repeated endlessly by Fox News, right-wing radio talk show hosts, and conservative bloggers, then picked up by the mainstream media—including the *New York Times* and CNN—who reported the allegations without seeking to verify their accuracy.

After the 2008 election, the attacks on ACORN continued. Conservative California Republican Congressman Darrell Issa released a report calling ACORN a “corrupt” organization. Some right-wing bloggers, talk show hosts and GOP officials charged, wrongly, that Democrats had set aside billions of dollars in stimulus funding for ACORN.

Then came the conservative activist James O’Keefe, with his doctored and misleading hidden videos that were used by the right to make it appear that ACORN was helping prostitutes and engaged in other illegal activities. Republicans in Congress used the controversy to strip the group of federal funding, a mostly symbolic gesture since ACORN actually had very few federal funds, and most were for its housing counseling program. Only a handful of Democrats in Congress came to ACORN’s defense. The Obama administration remained silent. Months after ACORN’s demise, the group was exonerated from any wrongdoing by every official and independent investigation, including one by California’s attorney general and two

federal investigations. By then, of course, it was too late. ACORN no longer existed.

As the attacks against ACORN mounted, the group confronted a battle among its leaders over founder Wade Rathke’s attempt to conceal an embezzlement of almost one million dollars by his brother (the group’s financial director). Even after veteran organizer Bertha Lewis replaced Rathke, internal conflicts handicapped ACORN’s capacity to respond to the constant media attacks. ACORN leaders were also surprised by the failure of most other liberal organizations (including other community organizing groups), politicians, and foundation funders to come to its aid when it was under attack. Indeed, many foundations—cautious by nature—dropped ACORN like a hot potato.

Internal conflicts handicapped ACORN’s capacity to respond to the constant media attacks.

Unlike ACORN, Planned Parenthood was not seen as a threat to corporate America. Its major ideological opposition was the Religious Right to whom Planned Parenthood represented the success of feminism, sexual freedom, abortion rights, and family planning. But, politically, Republican leaders understood the group’s potential as a symbolic target and as a base of Democratic voters.

For years, Planned Parenthood’s socially conservative opponents fought to strip the group of federal and state funds that provided primary health care services for women. Anti-abortion groups used civil disobedience to try to shut down its clinics and intimidate its patients as well as its medical staff.

The attacks escalated when Planned Parenthood led the charge to protect women’s

access to abortion coverage in the private health insurance market as part of the 2010 health care reform law. After Republican federal and state election victories in November 2010, opposition to Planned Parenthood—including the restriction of federal and state funds for any of its health care services, including contraception—became part of the GOP mantra.

Like ACORN, Planned Parenthood was the victim of O’Keefe’s undercover “gotcha” videos. As early as 2008, O’Keefe helped a young woman named Lila Rose go undercover at Planned Parenthood clinics, posing as an underage girl seeking an abortion. In 2011, Rose’s group (Live Action) posted more sting videos appearing to show an office manager offering birth control and abortions in violation of the law.

Just like the ACORN videos, these videos immediately went viral, aided by the right-wing echo chamber, including Fox News. None of the Fox broadcasts reported that Planned Parenthood had contacted the FBI to report the possibility that sex trafficking was occurring. By then, however, the mainstream media was somewhat skeptical of O’Keefe and his benefactor, blogger Andrew Breitbart. The sting videos against Planned Parenthood failed to get the same traction as the ACORN hoaxes.

In April 2011, the Republicans in Congress threatened to shut down the federal government by refusing to pass a budget unless it included the defunding of Planned Parenthood. But Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood, mobilized supporters to ensure its defeat in the Senate.

As the GOP’s 2012 presidential race got underway, attacks on Planned Parenthood became a familiar part of every candidate’s stump speech, a useful bogeyman to whip up the right-wing base in primaries. “Planned Parenthood, we’re going to get rid of that,” Mitt Romney told a reporter in March, referring to the group’s federal funds. When the Republican candidates assailed Obama as an opponent of

“religious freedom”—in response to a proposal that would require employers to provide health insurance coverage for contraceptives—Planned Parenthood jumped into the fray and mobilized its supporters, triggering more attacks from right-wingers. Upping the ante, Republicans in Congress harassed Planned Parenthood with investigations that came up empty-handed.

Many liberal activist groups sprang to the defense of Planned Parenthood. This was not the case with ACORN. Why?

Most Americans understand and support what Planned Parenthood does, which is to provide health services to women and educate them about sex and birth control. More than 95 percent of women who have ever had sex have used at least one birth control method in their lifetime. What makes Planned Parenthood controversial is its abortion counseling and services, but even here public opinion is generally positive. About half of the public consistently supports a woman’s right to have an abortion under some circumstances. Women are generally more pro-choice than men. And among liberals, more than three-quarters support reproductive freedom.

In contrast, few Americans have a clear understanding of “community organizing.” Americans generally support government efforts to lift people out of poverty, but even many liberals eschew protest and confrontation as strategies for change. So, despite forty years of effective grassroots organizing, few Americans understood what ACORN was, making it easier for the right to destroy its reputation.

Indeed, most Americans had never heard of ACORN until McCain and Sarah Palin began attacking the organization for “voter fraud” in 2008. By October, 60 percent of respondents in a national survey viewed the group unfavorably; 45 percent believed that ACORN was trying to register people to vote multiple times in violation of election laws. A November 2009 survey found that 52 percent of Republicans

believed that ACORN had stolen the election for Obama. Overall, 11 percent of Americans viewed ACORN favorably, while 53 percent had a negative opinion of the group. For many, ACORN symbolized the toxic combination of inner cities, the poor, African-Americans, radical redistribution of income, huge deficits, and the gains of the civil rights movement.

Similarly, most mainstream media editors and reporters understood Planned Parenthood and generally agreed with it, but didn't under-

Planned Parenthood's base is larger, more diverse, and much more politically potent than ACORN's ever was.

stand ACORN and were ambivalent about its redistributionist agenda and Alinskyite tactics. They considered O'Keefe's anti-ACORN videos as newsworthy, but treated the anti-Planned Parenthood videos with much greater skepticism.

Both groups developed allies among liberal politicians, but ACORN had many Democratic Party enemies, while Planned Parenthood's political support was deeper. Richards's mother was one-time Texas Governor Ann Richards, and she had been Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi's former assistant chief of staff. Before joining Planned Parenthood, Richards headed the America Votes coalition, which included more than thirty-five large membership-based groups who came together to increase voter registration and turnout.

At Planned Parenthood, she launched a plan to draft "patient escorts" to accompany women to their health care clinics and bring a million pro-choice voters to the polls through

phone banking, direct mail campaigns, and door-to-door canvassing using a progressive voter file to identify and mobilize pro-choice women. After his election, Obama promised to veto any budget bill that defunded Planned Parenthood.

Planned Parenthood's base is larger, more diverse, and much more politically potent than ACORN's ever was, even at its peak. It was particularly adept at using social media to mobilize its members. ACORN's members were mostly the working poor, who had less access to social media.

ACORN was also unprepared to deal with the relentless daily attacks on its credibility. With almost all its budget dedicated to organizing, research, and services, ACORN invested few resources in public relations. Most importantly, ACORN—a poor people's group—could not contribute millions of dollars to political candidates or hire powerful lobbyists.

Planned Parenthood's most effective counter-attack came after the Susan G. Komen Foundation threatened to stop funding Planned

Planned Parenthood was particularly adept at using social media to mobilize its members.

Parenthood's breast cancer screenings. Komen (whose founder and president is a long-time Republican) turned out to be a vulnerable target. Its abrupt decision to defund Planned Parenthood occurred soon after the Occupy Wall Street movement had energized many liberals and progressives to take action, and Richards used the event to mobilize her supporters.

ACORN—the nation's largest anti-poverty community organizing group—closed its doors

in April 2010. In a few cities, former ACORN staff and leaders have regrouped under different names, waging campaigns—along with unions and the Occupy movement—against the banking industry and the epidemic of foreclosures. In contrast, the attacks on Planned Parenthood

led to a liberal backlash, millions of dollars in new funding, and a resurgence of the pro-choice movement. It continues to be the leading provider of health care services for women, and the most visible and influential group on behalf of reproductive freedom.