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Will Obama Inspire a New Generation of Organizers?

By [Peter Dreier](#) - June 25, 2008

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Americans are used to voting for presidential candidates with backgrounds as lawyers, military officers, farmers, businessmen, and career politicians, but this is the first time we've been 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 this campaign he has 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."

This experience has influenced his presidential campaign. It may also tell us something about how, if elected, he'll govern. But, perhaps most important, there has not been a candidate since Bobby Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy who has inspired so many young people to become involved in public service and grassroots activism.

Through his constant references to his own organizing experience, and his persistent praise for organizers at every campaign stop, Obama is helping recruit a new wave of idealistic young Americans who want to bring about change. According to surveys and exit polls, interest in politics and voter turnout among the millennial generation (18-29) has increased dramatically this year. But Obama isn't just catalyzing young people to vote or volunteer for his campaign. Professors report that a growing number of college students are taking courses in community organizing and social activism. According to community organizing groups, unions and environmental groups, the number of young people seeking jobs as organizers has spiked in the past year in the wake of Obama's candidacy.

Whether or not he wins the race for the White House, Obama, through his own example, has already dramatically increased the visibility of grassroots organizing as a career path, as well as a way to give ordinary people a sense of their own collective power to improve their lives and bring about social change.

Obama's Organizing Experience

In 1985, at age 23, Obama was hired by the Developing Communities Project, a coalition of churches on Chicago's South Side, to help empower residents to win improved playgrounds, after-school programs, job training, housing, and 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.

As an organizer, 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. Obama taught low-income people how to analyze power relations, gain confidence in their own leadership abilities, and work together.

For example, he organized tenants in the troubled Altgelt Gardens public housing project to push the city to remove dangerous asbestos in their apartments, a campaign that he

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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.

Obama often refers 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 during the primary season, “because good intentions are not enough, when not fortified with political will and political power.” (Recently, right wing publications, radio talk shows, and bloggers, such as the *National Review* and the *American Thinker*, have sought to discredit Obama as a “radical” by linking him to ACORN and other community organizing groups.)

The American Organizing Tradition

The roots of community organizing go back to the nation’s founding, starting with the Sons of Liberty and the Boston Tea Party. Visiting the U.S. in the 1830s, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*, was impressed 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 hyper-individualism that Tocqueville considered a threat to democracy. Every fight for social reform since then – from the abolition movement to the labor movement’s fight against sweatshops in the early 1900s to the civil rights movement of the 1960s to the environment and feminist movements of the past 40 years – has reflected elements of the self-help spirit that Tocqueville observed.

Historians trace modern community organizing 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. Alinsky’s books, *Reveille for Radicals* (1945) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971), became the bible for several generations of activists, including the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and many other reformers.

There are currently at least 20,000 paid organizers in the United States, according to Walter Davis, executive director of the National Organizers Alliance. (Nobody knows for sure, since “organizer” is not an occupation listed by the Census Bureau). They work for unions, community groups, environmental organizations, women’s and civil rights groups, tenants organizations, and school reform efforts. Unlike traditional social workers, organizers’ orientation is not to “service” people as if they were clients, but to encourage people to develop their own abilities to mobilize others. They identify people with leadership potential, recruit and train them, and help them build grassroots organizations that can win victories that improve their communities and workplaces. According to organizer Ernesto Cortes, they help people turn their “hot” anger into “cold” anger – that is, disciplined and strategic action.

The past several decades has seen an explosion of community organizing in every American city. There are now thousands of local groups that mobilize people around a wide variety of problems. With the help of trained organizers, neighbors have come together to pressure local governments to install stop signs at dangerous intersections, force slumlords to fix up their properties, challenge banks to end mortgage discrimination (redlining) and predatory lending, improve conditions in local parks and playgrounds, increase funding for public

schools, clean up toxic sites, stop police harassment, and open community health clinics. A key tenet of community organizing is developing face to face contact so people forge commitments to work together around shared values. (The Internet has become a useful tool to connect people in cyberspace and then bring them together in person).

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 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 level, 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 Foundation (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.

The “living wage” movement is an example of both coalition-building and linking local and national organizing campaigns. In 1994, BUILD – a partnership of a community organization and a local union – got Baltimore to enact the first local law, requiring companies that have municipal contracts and subsidies to pay its employees a “living wage” (a few dollars above the federal minimum wage). Since then, more than 200 cities have adopted similar laws, helping lift many working families out of poverty. Most of their victories grew out of coalitions between community organizing groups, labor unions, and faith-based groups. These coalitions have gotten more than 20 states to raise their minimum wages above the federal level. These efforts helped build political momentum for Congress' vote last year to raise the federal minimum wage for the first time in a decade.

Organizing and the Obama Campaign

Although he didn't make community organizing a lifetime career – he left Chicago to attend Harvard Law School – Obama often says that his organizing experience has shaped his approach to politics. After law school, Obama returned to Chicago to practice and teach law. But in the mid-1990s, he also began contemplating running for office. 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?” Since embarking on a political career, Obama hasn't forgotten the lessons that he learned on the streets of Chicago.

This is reflected in his campaign for president. Community organizers distinguish themselves from traditional political campaign operatives who approach voters as customers through direct mail, telemarketing, and canvassing. Most political campaigns immediately put

volunteers to work on the “grunt” work of the campaign—making phone calls, handing out leaflets, or walking door to door. According to Temo Figueroa — Obama’s national field director and a long-time union organizer — the Obama campaign has been different. “When I came on board what attracted me was his history as an organizer,” says Figueroa, who was working as AFSCME’s assistant political director. “At the time I wasn’t sure I was joining the winning team. Most of us thought we were jumping on the little engine that could. We were believers. We wanted something bigger than ourselves. A movement.”

Obama enlisted Marshall Ganz, a Harvard professor who is one of the country’s leading organizing theorists and practitioners, to help train organizers and volunteers as a key component of his presidential campaign. Ganz was instrumental in shaping the volunteer training experience.

Many Obama campaign volunteers went through several days of intense 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.

“Organizing combines the language of the heart as well as the head,” Ganz says, reflecting on his experiences as an organizer with SNCC in the civil rights movement and as a key architect of the United Farmworkers’ early successes. Not surprisingly, compared with other political operations, Obama’s campaign has embodied many of the characteristics of a social movement—a redemptive calling for a better society, coupling individual and social transformation. This is due not only to Obama’s rhetorical style but also to his campaign’s enlistment of hundreds of seasoned organizers from unions, community groups, churches, peace, and environmental groups. They, in turn, have mobilized thousands of volunteers—many of them neophytes in electoral politics—into tightly knit, highly motivated and efficient teams. This summer, the campaign created an “Obama Organizing Fellows” program to recruit college students to become campaign staffers.

This organizing effort has mobilized many first-time voters, including an unprecedented number of young people and African Americans during the primary season. Now that Obama is the presumed Democratic nominee, he faces pressure to resort to more traditional electoral strategies, but so far Obama and top campaign officials have continued to emphasize grassroots organizing. It is evident in Obama’s speeches, his continued use of the UFW slogan, “Yes, we can/Si se puede,” his emphasis on “hope” and “change,” and the growing number of experienced organizers drawn into the campaign.

Obama’s stump speeches typically include references to America’s organizing tradition. “Nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except when somebody somewhere was willing to hope,” Obama explained. “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.”

In town forums and living-room meetings, Obama says that “real change” only comes about from the “bottom up,” but that as president, he can give voice to those organizing in their workplaces, communities, and congregations around a positive vision for change. “That’s leadership,” he says.

Organizer-in-Chief?

If elected president, will Obama’s organizing background shape his approach to governing?

Obama can certainly learn valuable lessons from President Franklin Roosevelt, who recognized that his ability to push New Deal legislation through Congress depended on the pressure generated by protestors and organizers. He once told a group of activists who sought his support for legislation, "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me do it."

As depression conditions worsened, and as grassroots worker and community protests escalated throughout the country, Roosevelt became more vocal, using his bully pulpit—in speeches and radio addresses—to promote New Deal ideas. Labor and community organizers felt confident in proclaiming, "FDR wants you to join the union." With Roosevelt setting the tone, and with allies in Congress like Senator Robert Wagner, grassroots activists won legislation guaranteeing workers' right to organize, the minimum wage, family assistance for mothers, and the 40-hour week.

After his election in 1960, President John Kennedy encouraged baby boomers to ask what they could do for their country. At the time, JFK meant joining the Peace Corps and the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program. He could not have anticipated the wave of protest and activism—around civil rights, Vietnam, and later feminism and the environment—that animated the sixties and seventies.

President Lyndon Johnson was initially no ally of the civil rights movement. However, the willingness of activists to put their bodies on the line against fists and fire hoses, along with their efforts to register voters against overwhelming opposition, pricked Americans' conscience. LBJ recognized that the nation's mood was changing. The civil rights activism transformed Johnson from a reluctant advocate to a powerful ally. LBJ's "Great Society" program—although criticized as too tame by United Auto Workers leader Walter Reuther and other progressives—provided some community organizing positions with anti-poverty agencies, job training groups, and legal services organizations in urban and rural areas. Many of today's veteran activists got their first taste of grassroots organizing in the anti-poverty, civil rights, and farmworker movements.

Now comes Obama, a one-time organizer, who consistently reminds Americans of the importance of grassroots organizing. If he's elected president, he knows that he will have to find a balance between working inside the Beltway and encouraging Americans to organize and mobilize. He understands 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, talking about the need to forge a new energy policy, Obama 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 can 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.

If Obama wins the White House, progressives within his 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 will be looking to join President Obama's progressive crusade to change America. But if it appears that is veering too far to the political center, they will—in part by Obama's own example, and perhaps with his covert support—mobilize to push him (and Congress) to live up to his progressive promise.

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program at Occidental College, where he teaches a course on community organizing. He is coauthor of *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City*, *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the 21st Century*, and several other books. Photo courtesy of Barack Obama (flickr).

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