You've Convinced Me, Now Go Out and Make Me Do It

*Barack Obama and the Top-Down Promotion of an Empowered Grassroots*

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Introduction

During the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was once confronted by a group of radical activists with specific policy demands. As the story goes, Roosevelt listened, then told them: “All right, you’ve convinced me. Now go out and make me do it.” As he set about passing the New Deal, the sense of urgency the protests created — and their assurance of labor’s support for the President — allowed FDR to “appear statesmanlike and moderate” as he confidently passed sweeping new social protections.¹ In this essay, I will explain how Barack Obama would be wise to draw upon these words as he attempts to create a similarly broad slate of federal-level progressive reforms. Although his desire to create an empowered grassroots is admirable, the approach used by his administration — a top-down wing of the Democratic Party named Organizing for America (OFA) — is misguided, and is costing him precious time, activism, and engagement. Instead of attempting to manipulate his supporters into aligning precisely with an agenda determined by the White House, Obama should set them loose to do exactly what FDR’s radicals did, which will allow him to do what he does best: compromise.

First, this paper analyzes why grassroots engagement is important for American society: it creates social capital, which benefits civil society in countless ways. Section I examines the social implications of a large-scale political movement crossing class and race lines — specifically, Barack Obama’s election — by means of a close reading of Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations about the nature of associational life in the United States. Tocqueville’s description of the relationship between social networks and political activity has proved generative to legions of political theorists; I focus on Robert Putnam’s clear articulation of the twin phenomena of declining social capital and decreased political participation over the past few decades as a key explanation for the importance of promoting the type of bridging community-
building that took place in Obama’s campaign. Other writers – such as Theda Skocpol, Nicholos Lemann, and Adalbert Evers – present compelling evidence that the causal relationship between social capital and participatory government is the reverse of what Putnam proposes: instead of a lack of participation being a symptom of a poor civic life, the government itself is responsible for encouraging its citizens to engage in discourse by proving receptive to their demands. I chose the scholars reviewed in this section for their timely, cogent, and often prescient analysis of Putnam’s work; although they proposed their theories well in advance of Obama’s rise to prominence, their writings provide an elegant framework for explaining the phenomena of the campaign and its aftermath.

Sections II and III elaborate on the distinction between the nature of the institutional and the grassroots – specifically, organizing to elect a candidate versus organizing for social change – in order to pinpoint the reasons for OFA’s ineffectiveness. It draws extensively on the writings of Saul Alinsky, widely considered the progenitor of community organizing, since the theory of his work has been so thoroughly absorbed into the practice of grassroots action today. Even nearly forty years after his death, his seminal work, Rules for Radicals, is considered such an effective primer for starting bottom-up political change that it is now a must-read for members of the Tea Party, garnering praise from spokesman Dick Armey. Although modern-day organizers do not follow Alinsky’s teachings to the letter, his philosophies – including bottom-up agenda formation, empowerment of the disenfranchised, and direct action tactics – are essential to understanding the objectives of community organizing. For this reason, I most commonly use his voice to explain the interests of the grassroots, while drawing on the writings of other well-known community organizers to supplement his advice.
In order to discern the attitudes of Obama supporters with regard to the goals and practice of OFA, I have included material from eight interviews with voters from diverse backgrounds of race and age who have had varying levels of engagement with both the Obama campaign and OFA. These sources, along with an interview with former Obama campaign field director Jon Carson, are used qualitatively to assess the reasons for these citizens' engagement and disengagement with certain processes of politics. All of these interviews but one were conducted in early 2010; since I have established the end of 2009 as my limit for the use of material, such as e-mails, from the organization’s campaigns, it is my hope that these interviews directly reflect the results of OFA’s policies over the course of 2009. Another important source of information for this analysis is various types of new media, especially blog posts, and opinion-based news pieces. Similarly, I use these primarily as a barometer of public opinion. I conclude by offering solutions, suggested by my research, for solving the problem of public disengagement from national grassroots action.
Part I. Social Capital, Political Engagement, and Empowerment

Linking Social Capital with Political Engagement

In some ways, Alexis de Tocqueville’s impression of United States civic engagement in the 1830s seems quaintly unrecognizable to the modern-day American. His analysis of the continent’s “three races” is of utility now for purposes of history, not politics, and his claim that “the American woman never leaves her domestic sphere” for “nowhere does she enjoy a higher station” has poorly withstood its one hundred and eighty years. However, a closer examination of Tocqueville’s writings reveals a foundation that still provides a stunningly clear and astute explanation of how, when, and why Americans choose to engage with civil society.

Tocqueville’s opinion of America’s representative government is so breathlessly optimistic that, at times, he neglects to draw a distinction between the will of the majority and the will of the legislative body. The American people, he writes, cannot help but exercise their own power by dint of their participation in electing representatives; accountability is bound up in this system in such a way that each man who votes is, in many ways, more political than the lawmaker himself.

The people take part in the making of the laws by choosing the lawgivers, and they share in their application by electing the agents of the executive power; one might say that they govern themselves, so feeble and restricted is the part left to the administration, so vividly is that administration aware of its popular origin, and so obedient is it to the fount of power. The people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe. It is the cause and the end of all things; everything rises out of it and is absorbed back into it. Yet, Tocqueville does not see this system as a necessarily permanent fixture. His greatest concerns lie not with the function of the representative system, but with the mindset that a culture of equality and shared power could engender. “Individualism is of democratic origin and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal,” he warns, since “equality puts men side by side
without a common link to hold them firm." According to Tocqueville, democratic societies, in contrast to aristocratic ones, discourage their members from seeing themselves as part of the continuum from past to future, since class mobility is much more fluid. This attitude could have the problematic effect of isolating man from his contemporaries, as he is "forever thrown back on himself alone... shut up in the solitude of his own heart." The resulting "calm and considered" individualistic sense, which causes men to close themselves off within a small group of like companions, makes them content to "gladly [leave] the greater society to look after itself." In this way, the political realm and the social realm are inextricably linked: a citizen's role as a member of a democracy is powerfully influenced by the nature of his or her social interactions with the community. One with a broad circle is constantly reminded of communal obligations, reducing the influence of egoism and increasing civic-mindedness; in return, the political system "forges permanent links between a great number of citizens who might otherwise have remained forever strangers to one another," since people must act collectively to have political influence. These links take the form of voluntary associations — the feature of American political life that Tocqueville credits with saving the society from the danger of excessive individualism. And from this experience with necessary collective action, he wrote, Americans develop a sense of "self-interest rightly understood": how acting for the good of the group will yield benefits for the individual that surpass what would be obtained acting alone.

Communal health and political health were one and the same in Tocqueville's eyes, and evidence suggests that this assumption holds true today in societies around the world. Robert Putnam cites several examples of the linkage between communalism, civic engagement, and quality of public life. His seminal work, a study of regional government in Italy, found a
significant correlation between associational life — which included decidedly non-governmental activities, such as membership in choruses and sports clubs, as well as newspaper readership and voter turnout — and the effective function of government. States in the north, whose historically autonomous origins promoted “horizontal” associations between citizens, had a sense of mutual trust and cooperation that was unrivaled in the “vertical” power relationships in southern Italian states, whose roots were in a feudal, autocratic regime established by Normans in the 1100s. As a result, in states with less civic engagement, “laws, almost everyone agrees, are made to be broken, but fearing others’ lawlessness, everyone demands sterner discipline. Trapped in these interlocking vicious circles, nearly everyone feels powerless, exploited, and unhappy.” Meanwhile, regions with more social accountability “value solidarity, civic participation, and integrity,” wrote Putnam. “And here democracy works.”

Putnam’s theory mines a rich body of literature concerning the importance of social capital — the rewards that people reap from relationships within formal and informal networks. Sociologist James S. Coleman coined the term in a pioneering 1988 article that linked families’ and communities’ social capital with the likelihood that children within them would graduate from high school, thereby proving that social capital translates to economic success. But research shows that one specific type of it is particularly important. Putnam attributes the original discovery of this most potent kind of social capital to Jane Jacobs, a community organizer and public intellectual whose research sought to distill the elements of a thriving neighborhood. Jacobs noticed that areas in New York City that had developed extensive social networks over time had the most success with self-government, gaining real “capital” as a result: greater communication meant neighborhood safety and bargaining power with politicians. Building upon this foundation, Jacobs made a key observation that would prove catalytic to
innumerable contemporary theorists. While it would be natural to assume that the strongest, most fruitful networks were found in ethnically or socio-economically homogeneous neighborhoods, she wrote, the opposite was true. The best-functioning streets in the Lower East Side, by her count, were a mélange of more than forty different ethnic groups, "utterly undefinable except as Americans." Similarly, Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood, famous as the place where Saul Alinsky got his start as a community organizer, paradoxically grew politically stronger as its residents diversified their careers away from the union-based jobs at the slaughterhouses. As the former meatpackers proliferated their social connections in many different circles, rather than within a single union, they brought a greater diversity of experience and resources back to their neighborhood. For “the crucial stage in the formation of an effective district” to take place, Jacobs found,

An interweaving, but different, set of relationships must grow up; these are working relationships among people, usually leaders, who enlarge their local public life beyond the neighborhoods of streets and specific organizations or institutions and form relationships with people whose roots and backgrounds are in entirely different constituencies, so to speak.

With the discovery of the power of these “hop-and-skip relationships,” as she termed them, Jacobs cemented Tocqueville’s bond between the social and the political into modern relevance. A healthy community life, with plenty of informal interaction between members who may seem to have little in common but location, translated directly to increased interest in communal wellbeing – and, therefore, an increased stake in politics. Three decades later, Putnam gave a name to Jacobs’s discovery, calling it “bridging social capital.” Its counterpart, termed “bonding social capital,” consists of naturally existing connections that reinforce an inward-looking social group such as a church or ethnic enclave, and is useful for “getting by”; however, bridging social capital, made up of linkages that cross social divides, is necessary for
“getting ahead,” improving both individual and community prospects beyond what had previously existed. Just as bridging social capital has its personal rewards — someone is more likely to find a job or create a successful political alliance by using a connection with someone in a more distant circle, for example — it also has immeasurable benefits for civil society in that it banishes a narrow, in-group mindset and “enhance[s] the participants’ ‘taste’ for collective benefits.”

The concept of bridging social capital is the underlying foundation for both Tocqueville’s concept of “self-interest rightly understood” and Putnam’s observations about “vertical” and “horizontal” relationships in Italian city-states. As Tocqueville observed, societies with aristocratic tendencies do not require collective action in order to enact political change in the same way democratic societies do; instead of expending time and effort to assemble an association, citizens in a vertically aligned system are better off seeking to influence the sources of power directly, working upwards until channels of influence are accessed. Horizontal societies, in which each individual theoretically has the same amount of power, make the formation of associations the most rational step towards seeking influence over affairs — thus encouraging the development of bridging social capital between people who have joined together out of political necessity.

Putnam argues, as the premise of his book, that these sorts of connections are no longer made in the United States on the same scale as they were before the 1960s. He uses data from a variety of sources to link the decline in voluntary associations in the United States with decreases in forms of civic and political participation. For instance, the number of Americans who said they distrust government jumped from 30 percent in 1966 to 75 percent in 1992, and voting rates in 1996 were the lowest in the century. Simultaneously, churchgoing, union membership, and
volunteerism all declined.\textsuperscript{23} The title of Putnam's book is drawn from the "most whimsical yet discomfiting" trend he noticed: through the number of American bowlers was increasing, the amount of league bowling dropped by 40 percent between 1980 and 1993.\textsuperscript{24} Putnam mourns that the Tocquevillean snapshot of an American people that is "forever forming associations" now rings false, as the creation of new organizations in the U.S. has been far outstripped by grassroots disengagement from them.\textsuperscript{25} Particularly troublesome, to Putnam, is the drop in membership of groups like parent-teacher associations, since goal-oriented work like improving a school is an ideal source of social capital – which "makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy."\textsuperscript{26} Since he sees political activity to be dependent upon social engagement for its wellbeing, he worries that a decrease in the latter is having a pernicious effect on the nature of politics, in which Americans are now seen as consumers, rather than participants. "The bottom line in the political industry is this," he writes: "Financial capital – the wherewithal for mass marketing – has steadily replaced social capital – that is, grassroots citizen networks – as the coin of the realm."\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{The Causal Relationship between Social Capital and Political Engagement}

For the past few decades, many social scientists have echoed Putnam's fear that the individualistic undercurrents of American democracy Tocqueville warned of are progressively growing stronger, just as systemic incentives for grassroots associations are eroding. The working-class social protections of the Great Society era began to weaken during Reagan's presidency, writes economist James K. Galbraith, as policies shifted from general macroeconomic support to corporate benefit and an increasingly regressive tax structure, widening the gap between the rich and the poor.\textsuperscript{28} Since the most economically disadvantaged
groups in modern industrial democracies are also the ones with the least bridging social capital, having been driven into what sociologist Adalbert Evers calls a "defensive privatism," low socioeconomic status should theoretically correlate to a lower rate of political activity. Indeed, a comprehensive investigation into the causes of political participation found that social class—as determined by education and income—was the most predictive factor of political involvement. The authors concluded that "those who enter the world with socioeconomic advantages are in a position to acquire resources that foster political participation"—specifically, resources of social capital, such as the exposure to political mobilization engendered by institutions of higher education.\(^{30}\)

While scholars who have published critiques of *Bowling Alone* do not dispute the connection that Putnam, Jacobs, and Coleman observed between bridging social capital and a healthy civil society, they postulate that Putnam did not gird this observation with enough significance and political meaning, focusing instead on sociological explanations for mere symptoms of a structural phenomenon. Whereas Putnam represents the relationship between social capital and government as a bottom-up effect dependent on the communitarian whims of the grassroots, these theorists assert that outside forces play a much more significant role in promoting the formation of such bonds within communities. Evers argues that a two-way relationship exists between social capital and the function of democracy, cautioning that the "enormous impact of central action that prepares the grounds for what is possible locally and at the grassroots" should not be discounted. Additionally, he cites research demonstrating that the observable decrease in American social capital may be not an overall corrosion of values, but rather a manifestation of its decline within certain class groups, inferring that their disenfranchisement due to growing inequalities is to blame; Putnam, he writes, "[underrates] the
presence of politics in social change.\textsuperscript{31} Nicholas Lemann rejects Putnam’s claim that the decline in American associational life over the past four decades was due to an unprecedented generational change in attitude, pointing out that Putnam’s foundational work on Italian states relied on the assumption that civic virtue is “incredibly durable over the centuries” – and that Putnam had been pessimistic that a strong associational life could be established in places it was not already present, like in the former Soviet bloc.\textsuperscript{32} If, as Putnam claims, Americans had been endowed from the beginning with a cultural associational predilection like the one Tocqueville observed, it would not be plausible to blame its spontaneous evaporation on trends such as TV watching, as Putnam does.

Something larger must be at work – and Theda Skocpol offers a compelling theory as to what that might be. Dismissing the romantic Tocquevillean notion that American associations came into being spontaneously as citizens banded together to accomplish an agenda away from the political sphere, Skocpol asserts that they were “grounded in the very institutional core of the early U.S. state.” Tocqueville, she argues, was naïve to suggest that the federal government had no hand in the success of associations. After all, its receptiveness to citizen input in the first place, as well as its support for literacy through public schooling and communication through post offices, were the engine behind rapid proliferation of associations, as well as newspapers and other elements of civil society that supported them.\textsuperscript{33} Skocpol shows that a similar explosion happened in the 1960s in response to a renewal in government activism. As had happened during the formative years of the nation, these new organizations evolved to best access the channels of influence offered to them by the government; this time, in order to take advantage of new federal agencies charged with implementing the Civil Rights Act, interest groups hired professional staff to assist with direct lobbying and litigation, setting the tone for the evolution of centralized
advocacy in years to come. If top-down phenomena could have such a profound effect on associational life, the place to look for the instigator of a social change as broad-based as the one Putnam described might not be the grassroots. Noting that Putnam’s vaunted PTAs and American Legions originated as a place for the wealthy and politically connected to mingle, Skocpol suggests that “maybe what has changed recently has less to do with TV watching than with shifting elite alliances.” She wonders how the withdrawal of elite women from traditionally local, class-bridging organizations like PTAs in favor of more homogeneous networks, such as those formed in workplaces or suburban homeowners’ associations, could erode these groups’ influence at the national level:

How ironic would it be if, after pulling out of locally rooted associations, the very business and professional elites who blazed the path toward local civic disengagement were now to turn around and successfully argue that the less privileged Americans they left behind are the ones who must repair the nation’s social connectedness, by pulling themselves together from below without much help from government or their privileged fellow citizens.

A New Venue for Associational Life

Though Putnam’s research proved the existence of a decline in the traditional idea of associational life, using what Evers termed the “community lost” argument, it did not account for the possibility that the American desire for associational life had not been lost, but had simply changed in nature. A new generation of political operatives – whether frustrated with a disempowering system, or simply desperate to draw new voters to the polls – was adding its voice to the scholarly call for increased systemic promotion of the grassroots. And, it seemed, the American people was ready too. The first candidate to tap into the political hunger of this dormant grassroots through its new network – the Internet – was rewarded by a magnitude unexpected even to his own campaign. In 2003, an unorthodox Democratic primary campaign
took the political establishment by surprise, drawing 600,000 supporters to donate more than $50 million to the relatively little-known governor of Vermont, Howard Dean. Its most obvious breakthrough was its message, which branded a campaign of a mainstream party as a "grassroots, reform candidacy breaking all the old rules and making people believe in politics," as campaign manager Joe Trippi summarized it. But, even more importantly, Dean's campaign stumbled across its own powerful ability to create bridging social capital. The runaway success of Howard Dean's Internet operation, which organized local political gatherings through a site called MeetUp, seemed to awaken a dormant connection between community-building and politics.

Though Dean's campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, it left in its wake a mobilized progressive presence online – an even wider void for a Democratic candidate to fill.

"Technology has unlocked the doors and facilitated a genuine democratization of our culture," wrote Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, creator of the political blog The Daily Kos. "No longer content to sit on the sidelines, a new generation of participants is taking an active role in our culture and our democracy" – namely, struggling against elite control to build grassroots power. Moulitsas Zuniga had started his blog in 2002 as a rejection of the uninspiring status quo of democratic engagement, which to him consisted of "licking stamps in a dingy campaign office," consuming mass media such as television advertisements, and voting – activities that reinforced patterns of top-down message control and a passive role for the citizenry. The blog's surprise success – it quickly became one of the most-read in the world – demonstrated a hunger for alternative sources of information that were not mediated by elite "gatekeepers."

The Democratic Party had a significant interest in investing in efforts like these to strengthen support and political participation in its popular base. In 1997, Skocpol and Stanley B. Greenberg, presciently anticipating a crisis of working- and middle-class support for
Democrats, wrote that the party “will be able to rebuild its moral authority and electoral clout only if its thinkers and activists devise a new popular progressive project... We see no future for a party competing more and more narrowly for the votes of upscale suburbanites, while grasping at the monied contributions of the well-to-do.” Despite scholars’ visions of a party reinvigorated by the grassroots, there was little to no successful collaboration between such independent efforts and the national political establishment to enact the agenda groups such as MoveOn envisioned until Barack Obama’s campaign. Before then, instances of progressive mobilization served to highlight the presence of an agitated grassroots, but, in of themselves, failed to address the systematic inequalities facing the very groups of Americans that had become most alienated from the political process. Obama’s campaign was the first successful integration of grassroots mobilization methods into a major-party national political campaign – bridging the working-class to the elite, and providing an opening for Tocqueville’s vision of cohesive community involvement in politics for the common interest to reemerge. It succeeded where George McGovern, Robert F. Kennedy, and Jesse Jackson had fallen short; though these politicians had issued a similarly compelling call to awaken “conscientious and well-motivated citizen armies,” in McGovern’s words, they lacked the timing and resources to achieve the scale that Obama’s campaign did.

A Political Use for Bridging Social Capital

As Evers noted, the most disempowered members of society also tend to have the smallest social networks, thus minimizing their concerns within greater societal discourse and perpetuating inequalities. A presidential candidate who could create unprecedented linkages across class and race lines – bridging social capital – would possess, beyond an incredibly
effective method for expanding the electorate, the first step toward reversing some of America’s most long-standing power imbalances. "A multiracial political coalition could generate an earnest national debate on Congress’s current approach to domestic policies and prompt public officials to consider seriously the effects of their action or inaction on a broad range of issues that impact ordinary families," wrote William Julius Wilson in his book *Bridging the Racial Divide*. If supported by grassroots associations, such a coalition on an institutional level would provide an opening to channels of power for previously disenfranchised citizens.

Aside from the considerable benefits of immediate policy reforms for working families, the creation of bridging social capital inherent in the formation of a coalition like this would have a lasting effect on the fabric of American civil society. Ernesto Cortes, a leader in the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), described the effect he witnessed among the diverse coalitions he helped organize: "When people learn through politics to work with each other, support one another’s projects, a trust emerges that goes beyond the barriers of race, ethnicity, income, and geography; we have found that we can rebuild community by reconstructing society." This phenomenon returns to Tocquevillean roots, proving that the social benefits of association themselves are just as important as their overt political purpose. To accomplish this objective, Evers calls for "opinion building, projects and active citizenship that crosscut the imaginaries of the single ethnic or social communities," arguing that "it takes politics which advocate the ability to take account of the interests of co-citizens and it takes organizations which work at the local level." And, to set the process of bridging in motion, Wilson cites a need for "visionary group leaders, especially those who head strong community organizations," with the sense of purpose necessary for "articulating and communicating this vision."
It was from this atmosphere of potential that Barack Obama emerged. A candidate who made no secret of his community-organizing roots, Obama took great pride in uniting voters across boundaries of class, race, and age. From his days as an organizer in Chicago, Obama had been particularly struck by Harold Washington – Chicago’s first black mayor, elected by an unprecedented diverse coalition that included thousands of first-time voters – as a symbol with tremendous power to remind people of how they had been able to come together to accomplish something. Once, as he struggled to find something that two dissimilar neighbors shared, he realized that both had a picture of Harold Washington in their kitchen. “The election had given both of these people a new idea of themselves,” he wrote. “Or maybe it was an old idea, born of a simpler time. Harold was something they still held in common: Like my idea of organizing, he held out an offer of collective redemption.”

Perhaps it was no accident that when it came time to design a logo, Obama’s campaign drew its inspiration from an old pin from Washington’s election.

As are all place-based organizers, Obama was steeped in a tradition of overcoming structural constraints, like long-standing poverty and industrial divestment from cities, to increase a community’s power – whether by winning small, localized victories, like fair pay from local employers, or a seat at the mayor’s bargaining table. Doing so necessitates formidable acts of bridging – showing people with nothing in common but their location that they share more interests than they might think. “Acknowledging differences is essential to collaborating around common interest... It is important not to pretend that we are all the same,” writes veteran community organizer and professor of government Marshall Ganz; differences, he observes, “become resources rather than liabilities if we come up with ways to [build] on our commonalities.” It was this characteristic that Obama’s presidential campaign turned into its
signature: simultaneously underscoring the appeal of his economic policy to rural whites laid off from a factory job and black transit union members, for instance. By the time of Obama’s victory in the general election, the language of the campaign placed strong emphasis on not only the implications of a new Democratic regime, but the sociological effect the campaign itself had had on the country. "It was so exciting not just to win an election, but the way we did it, which was all of us banding together, the way politics ought to be, and being involved in our country and our democracy," said campaign manager David Plouffe in a typical laudatory message to Obama supporters.50

Over a year later, this bridging aspect of participation in Obama’s campaign is what many of his volunteers remember as the most rewarding aspect of their work. Nearly all of those interviewed associated the experience with a transcendence of social barriers, which was invariably seen a positive, affirmative experience. As one observed, "It was good for me, as a tiny white woman, to be out in black communities... It was unifying and sent a good message. It was an intergenerational, interracial campaign."51 These volunteers seem to have realized one of Tocqueville’s most enduring theses: that “the promise of democratic politics is in people’s ability to enter into relationships with one another to articulate common purposes and act on them.”52 This tremendous wave of involvement, and its promise of the strengthening of societal bonds, was one of the things that excited those involved in the campaign most about the possibility of Obama’s election – and it was the reason, too, why Obama’s staff decided to turn the campaign into Organizing for America.
Part II. The Premise of Organizing for America

National Grassroots Community Organizing

Organizing for America is an unprecedented experiment. Never before has a sitting president – or, for that matter, a major American political party – attempted to make the concept of community organizing work on a national level. For that matter, organizers themselves have long struggled with the identity crisis that national organizing presents to them – and the systemic constraints that it engenders. Saul Alinsky himself devoted his life’s work to determining whether the neighborhood groups he had pioneered could somehow work together to overcome the structural forces that made poverty and inequality endemic in American society, but he never found an answer. One year before his death in 1972, Alinsky, having witnessed his movement struggle to reconcile financial solvency with autonomy and indigenous empowerment with organizers who were majority white and male, was pessimistic.

We are belatedly beginning to understand this, to know that even if all the low-income parts of our population were organized – all the blacks, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachian poor whites – if through some genius of organization they were all united in a coalition, it would not be powerful enough to get significant, basic, needed changes. ... The pragmatics of power will not allow any alternative.

The poor, even if tightly organized, had such little access to the elite-dominated sphere of national politics that the odds of their being able to force nationwide change the way they had locally seemed impossible. Two years later, Alinsky’s colleague George Wiley, the leader of the National Welfare Rights Organization, had also nearly given up. After years of trying to create bottom-up pressure for welfare reform by organizing sit-ins at local offices, Wiley had no choice but to agree with Alinsky, writing that “only a broad-based movement aimed at the economic
interests of a majority of Americans will ever succeed in bringing about the changes we desire.”

And, for decades, most American political scientists agreed with them. They doubted that community organizing, in its traditional practice, could ever rediscover what little national clout it had once had, which had appeared to be on a steady decline since the civil rights movement as corporate consolidation took hold during the 1970s. One important factor that prevented grassroots organizations from achieving large-scale national change was the difficulty groups faced in obtaining sufficient financial resources. Since organizations must limit lobbying and partisan politics to be eligible for tax-exempt status – a move that Karen Paget argues is “tantamount to tying at least one arm, if not two, behind one’s back” for groups interested in structural change – they must rely on direct-mail solicitations and canvassing, not large-scale support from foundations, if they are to tackle politically charged issues directly. This forces groups to narrow their scope to provocative, urgent hot-button issues to target a “market niche” of individual and foundation donors. Magnifying this effect, foundations award grants to organizations that can demonstrate their individual accomplishments on specific issues; this also encourages competition, rather than collaboration, between community groups that otherwise have much in common. Compounded with the localization of grassroots organizing to specific geographic areas – or issues relevant primarily to the disenfranchised – these factors meant that these groups could never reach the critical mass needed to be anything but fringe interests.

In philosophy, too, community organizers themselves had little interest in moving beyond these niches. They saw their work as tied to the local level, where it had been originated, tested, and proven effective. The Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), one of the largest networks of community organizations, is a typical case study in the challenges that place-based
grassroots groups face in mobilizing to change federal policies. In the early 1980s, the Texas branch of the IAF, seeing how its El Paso organization was able to successfully bolster its local legitimacy by mobilizing support for a successful gubernatorial candidate, began to devote more of its resources to strengthening the network between its subsidiaries across the state. Despite recognizable benefits, like consistent organizer training and some successful statewide campaigns, this shift of emphasis from local to state also created tensions among leaders of local IAF chapters, who expressed concern that “the allure of being a powerful player in state politics” absorbed resources that should have been devoted to engaging the grassroots. Although the Texas IAF did continue some of its statewide operation, it subsequently rededicated itself to allowing its subsidiaries to determine the agenda. The IAF’s local chapters are left to their own devices in fundraising, hiring staff, conducting research, and designing campaigns, while its national apparatus does little besides providing training. This typical scenario prompted organizing scholar Peter Dreier to write in 2009 that community groups have little effect on national or even state agendas, meaning they can “only marginally improve conditions in urban neighborhoods.” The one exception to the rule is the Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN), which has had some success in creating a unified front for its subsidiaries to work on predatory lending, welfare reform, and other campaigns. But, for groups such as the IAF, Citizen Action, and even ACORN, the national network is used primarily as a means for communicating strategies and common goals, but not as a source of political pressure for national players, as can be done locally.

At the time of its inception, then, Organizing for America was seen as a turning point for community organizing. Born of Barack Obama’s campaign apparatus, it seemed to have a powerful mandate – Obama’s victory – that spanned the class and racial barriers Alinsky had
struggled to break. By virtue of its bankroll and its pluralistic, engaged membership of 13 million Americans, OFA had already overcome the most significant constraints to national organizing. “This would be the greatest political organization ever put together, if it works,” said Ed Rollins, campaign manager to Ronald Reagan, citing OFA’s tremendous resources.  

Peter Dreier, professor of politics at Occidental College, wrote that “President Obama’s election has changed the political landscape,” finally creating an opening for community organizing to change power dynamics on a national level. Both the means and the motivation were there; the true challenge for OFA would be to design an effective model for an entirely new approach to social change.

**OFA’s Failure to Deliver**

One year later, the verdict is beginning to come in on the effectiveness of OFA’s work. Staffers of the organization and members of the Obama administration insist that the organization has had unprecedented success; former Obama field director Carson cited high OFA turnout at Tea Party counter-protests as a measure of supporter enthusiasm, and deputy director Jeremy Bird claimed that OFA’s growing following on Twitter and Facebook was proof of a “strong, volunteer-based infrastructure.” In a year-end e-mail summarizing the group’s top accomplishments for 2009, Mitch Stewart, OFA’s director, wrote that members “provided a huge boost” for a number of initiatives, ranging from the passage of the Recovery Act to the confirmation of Justice Sonia Sotomayor; using a celebratory tone that in retrospect was premature, he also added, “Of course, you were instrumental in passing comprehensive health reform through both houses of Congress,” before concluding the e-mail with a request for donations.
But other, more easily demonstrable measurements show far less certainty about OFA’s effectiveness, both as an empowering grassroots organization and a political force. Most former Obama volunteers interviewed, some of whom traveled cross-country to canvass and racked up hundreds of tireless hours in support of the candidate, reported that they had disengaged; as one said, “I was so involved in the election, but now I barely read the e-mails.” And journalist Ari Melber’s report – the farthest-reaching investigation yet, based on interviews with dozens of congressional staff members and political operatives – found that the organization has had a disappointingly minimal impact in Congress. For Republican congressional offices, “OFA established a brand and presence in its first year, but did not have sustained grassroots contact or impact,” according to Melber; one staffer said he saw OFA’s name so rarely that “they don’t really register.” Democrats were thankful for constituents’ expressions of support for health care reform, but most were in favor of the bill anyway; those who opposed it did not receive significant enough contact from OFA to sway them. Neither group thought that OFA was a “major or powerful force on Capitol Hill.”

Some critics have fixated upon the months-long delay in OFA’s inception – indicative, perhaps, of a lack of priority in the administration, and certainly a cause for lost momentum – as the source of the organization’s problems. Others have derided OFA for not responding quickly enough to hot-button issues, causing it to miss chances to turn the tide in the recent Massachusetts senatorial race or mount a forceful response to Tea Party critics of health care reform in town-hall meetings. However, management gaffes like these alone cannot explain the general malaise that many former Obama campaign volunteers report. In interviews with several strong Obama supporters who had spent significant time volunteering for the campaign, none cited reasons like these to explain their reluctance to commit time and effort to OFA. Instead,
they listed the lack of a sense of urgency, an absence of specific or achievable goals, or a loss of faith in Obama himself as primary causes of their disengagement from OFA, suggesting that the organization has not been as successful as it had hoped at empowering its members — making them feel influential in the political process.

Fixating on top-down mistakes obscures OFA’s most serious problem: a lack of bottom-up engagement. For instance, although waiting until ten days before the Massachusetts senatorial election to issue a call for help may be evidence of ideological dissonances within the upper levels of OFA, the real metric to watch is the number of volunteers who responded to this urgent plea to keep the Democrats’ supermajority in the Senate — less than one-third of one percent of those contacted. Furthermore, 850,000 Obama supporters failed to turn out to vote in Massachusetts that day — a number nearly 8 times the margin of Republican Scott Brown’s victory. Even events specially designed to reawaken the same excitement Obama supporters experienced during the general election have trouble attracting turnout. During the first week of November 2009, Jeremy Bird invited OFA members to attend special “Obama ‘08 Reunion Events,” to be held on the anniversary of the presidential election. “We’re planning to gather together to reconnect, celebrate, and remember that moment, last year, when we won a historic victory,” he wrote. “We did a special thing together, and sometimes it’s important to stop and reflect on that.” However, the “reunion event” for the Philadelphia suburbs, held in Swarthmore, had not been set up to expect a crowd; it was held in a tiny office, and supplied a small cake as the sole recognition of the night’s significance. The four supporters in attendance spent the two hours of the “celebration” using their own cell phones to call lists of other OFA supporters with a vague reminder to encourage their representatives to support health care reform.
Meanwhile, Americans are searching for other ways to fill the void that OFA should occupy. In February 2010, documentary filmmaker Annabel Park, frustrated by the Tea Party movement’s polarization of the health care debate, founded an organization she called the Coffee Party as a way for citizens to connect with each other, reaffirm their faith in the federal government as “the expression of our collective will,” and participate in the democratic process. The most important feature of Park’s organization is that its members decide upon its agenda in a bottom-up process; in small-group meetings very similar in format to those that OFA employs, they choose which policy issues to pursue and which candidates to support. “We are 100% grassroots,” declares the group’s website. “We are a spontaneous and collective expression of our desire to forge a culture of civic engagement that is solution-oriented, not blame-oriented. We demand a government that responds to the needs of the majority of its citizens as expressed by our votes and by our voices.”

The Coffee Party provides an interesting juxtaposition to OFA in that their objectives, in nearly all ways, seem to be identical. The organizations share everything from their favored “house party” meeting format to their targeted antagonism of “special interests” – a conveniently nebulous entity vilified in 26 different OFA e-mails in 2009, and described by Park as having influence akin to an “illness” – as the primary enemy of the popular voice in government. The only distinguishable differences between the two groups are the Coffee Party’s strict bottom-up philosophy and avoidance of ideology; Park insists that it is not a progressive group, since its agenda is simply a reflection of anyone who chooses to join. With a set of values and messages constructed entirely by its decentralized chapters, it cedes what OFA would likely consider to be a frightening amount of control to its members.
So far, Park’s approach has proved wildly popular: in its first two weeks of existence, the Coffee Party’s membership skyrocketed to more than 100,000. Its chapter founders include the likes of Eileen Cabiling, a former Obama volunteer who had “withdrawn in campaign fatigue” from OFA until the Coffee Party’s call to own democracy reawakened her interest in politics. The resurgence of this strain of democratic participation suggests that the most crucial mistake OFA has made is its entanglement in the Democratic Party, which has removed the grassroots, bottom-up feeling of the campaign that made supporters feel influential in the political process. “No amount of rationalizing and sugarcoating can change the fact that the spark has not been preserved. And that we are a less strong country for it,” wrote political blogger Arianna Huffington. OFA has shown that campaign organizing and community organizing are profoundly different in philosophy and practice. In order to identify the root causes of OFA’s failure to excite its base, it is essential to examine how the group approached the idea of grassroots organizing in the first place.

How the Obama Campaign Decided on an Organizing Philosophy

As Jeffrey A. Smith notes, voters choose to participate in the political system rationally: they do so because they anticipate receiving a return for their involvement. This dividend is primarily paid on a personal level, and it manifests itself as a sense of satisfaction in fulfilling a civic duty or affirming an identity through partisan choice – a positive return that depends on voters placing a high value upon civic engagement and seeing their own participation as an essential component of democracy. Additionally, voters who believe the political system to be unresponsive to their input will see no reason to participate. Studies show that faith in government and public officials is closely correlated with civic participation: voters were 24%
more likely than non-voters to say that having elections makes the government pay "a good deal" of attention to what people think, and 38% more non-voters than voters believed that "people like me don't have any say about what the government does." Therefore, a political campaign that wishes to increase voter turnout has a very real interest in instilling a sense of both candidate responsiveness and the value of democracy in as many supportive citizens as possible.

The Obama campaign, by all accounts, did not launch its massive field operation with this calculated objective of increasing the value Americans placed on democratic engagement, though it did become clear in retrospect that, consistent with Smith’s theory, voters’ belief in the populist message of the campaign was a driving force behind turnout: 71 percent of newly registered voters chose Obama. Instead, to the campaign operatives, running a volunteer-dependent strategy seemed like a natural choice, given the candidate’s experience with community organizing and his desire for popular input into his policy proposals. But the reasons that cemented it into the modus operandi of the campaign were just as strategic as they were idealistic: a “grassroots” campaign, at the outset, seemed like the only way to accomplish the three objectives of meeting fundraising goals, turning enough voters out, and delivering the campaign’s message. “Obama’s desire to mount a grassroots effort answered neatly the looming question of how to run against the strongest establishment front-runner in our party’s history [Hillary Clinton]; we would build a ragtag militia to compete against her regular army,” wrote David Plouffe, Obama’s campaign manager, in his book *The Audacity to Win.*

The campaign discovered a number of other benefits of grassroots support along the way. The call for Obama to run for president had come from the people long before he announced his intention to do so; he already had tens of thousands of supporters before he formed his exploratory committee, as his book tour for *The Audacity of Hope* had “unexpectedly turned into
These supporters organized themselves into groups and, throughout the primary campaign, set up shop in new states and begin work long before the campaign sent any of its staff members there. The volunteers kept Obama motivated; they also, according to Plouffe, had a “deep effect” on the superdelegates, who were impressed by popular excitement for the candidate. Obama would not have been able to win his unlikely campaign without expanding the electorate first, and a grassroots campaign proved to have the most strategic potential for doing so – if it could be harnessed correctly. In an August 2007 internal campaign memo, national field director Temo Figueroa was appreciative of the grassroots enthusiasm that supporters showed for Obama, but he knew it would take additional effort from the top “to channel this enthusiasm into an organization capable of delivering victories.” He cautioned against allowing supporters to proceed without proper training from the campaign, worried that they would be unable to transform their passion into effective action.

Democrats have seen this before, an overwhelming surge of support from young people and candidates who can bring new people into the process, but this campaign is not just about a new kind of candidate, it is about a new campaign focused on exploiting the “enthusiasm gap” we enjoy over the other candidates by marrying traditional field organizing training with the community organizing tactics Obama learned as a young man on the south side of Chicago.

Despite its cultivated image of pure grassroots power, the Obama campaign was still just that – a political campaign mounted by the Democratic Party. Richard Wolfe, a journalist who closely followed the campaign, described it as “a hybrid of corporate management and community organizing, drawing half its drive from an executive boardroom and half from the street politics of its young staff.” The campaign’s genuine interest in cultivating grassroots leadership must be understood in this context: it was a source of tremendous payoff for the campaign, and its idealism was coupled with a distinctly strategic bent. For instance, Plouffe, who by all accounts sincerely liked the populist significance that a grassroots campaign had for
Obama, still was an operative with a “tendency to lapse into boilerplate campaign-speak” even as he discussed organizing strategies.\textsuperscript{86} He wrote that a primary reason for Obama’s numerous appearances at free rallies, as opposed to fundraising events, was “to maintain the perception of the campaign as grassroots-driven,” knowing that such an impression would fuel volunteer signups and individual donations.\textsuperscript{87}

The rhetoric of popular ownership was one of the campaign’s most attractive elements for the thousands of volunteers whose efforts won the election; for this reason, the Obama campaign’s executives see this particular quality of grassroots engagement as a means to an end in their strategic plans. Obama for America field director Carson, who oversaw all volunteer activity for the campaign, defined a “highly organized” campaign as one in which volunteers, not paid staff, recruit and coordinate other volunteers.\textsuperscript{88} It hoped to instill a similar sense of ownership by spreading out its fundraising over large numbers of small donors; donation asks frequently emphasized that it was appropriate to give as little as $25, in order to make the concept of campaign donation accessible to a greater number of people. The Obama campaign conducted several promotional T-shirt giveaways for donors, too, cementing the link between financial support and publicly identifiable movement membership. Even though Obama may have sincerely “wanted America to feel like they were a part of his candidacy and his presidency,”\textsuperscript{89} the leaders of the campaign saw this empowerment as a matter of strategy – one that surely saved millions of dollars.

The Campaign’s Transformation into OFA

In the wake of Obama’s victory on a tide of popular support, the question of where to throw the campaign’s tremendous momentum remained. In the months afterwards, half a million
Obama supporters completed a survey sent out by the campaign that gauged their willingness to stay involved and asked for their ideas as to how to do so.90 “Your hard work built this movement. Now it’s up to you to decide how we move forward,” wrote Plouffe.91 However, starting on the night of the election – long before popular input could be reviewed – Obama’s advisors had already begun to formulate their own plans for the future of the campaign mechanism. That it would continue to operate in some capacity to support of the new President was a given; the fledgling administration was unclear, though, on whether the impetus for action would come from the voters or Obama himself. In his book, David Plouffe conveyed a simultaneous desire for both popular ownership and the maintenance of top-down agenda control:

[Obama]’s desire for a continued dialogue with the more than thirteen million people who signed up for the campaign led to the formation of a new group called Organizing for America. … OFA ensures that the president can stay in touch with his millions of volunteers and supporters, communicating directly through the Internet and encouraging them to rally support and educate people in their local communities on what he is trying to accomplish on the economy, health care, energy, and other issues.92

It would be more than two and a half months until supporters were told of the outcome of the campaign’s internal strategizing. Meanwhile, Marilee Taussig, an Obama volunteer from Delaware County, witnessed local campaign leaders “getting bombarded by calls” from other volunteers, who were “all fired up now, and twiddling our thumbs!”93 Finally, on January 23, 2009, Plouffe – still signing off as “Campaign Manager” – sent OFA’s first communiqué to the list of 13 million e-mail addresses of Obama campaign supporters. “Now we have a different purpose – not to win an election, but to change this country,” he told the hundreds of thousands who watched his video address.
The power of direct communication with this slice of the American public was not lost on him; neither, clearly, were the circumstances under which the campaign had amassed the list. These were people who had participated in some way in the campaign – they had attended rallies, voted, donated, phone banked, and knocked on doors. The Obama campaign perceived them, in the terminology of grassroots organizing, as its “base”: the group of people who were invested in the outcome of the organization’s activities. Plouffe was even more ambitious: he instructed supporters receiving the e-mail to invite their friends, and proclaimed that OFA’s base reached beyond those who voted for Obama. “We want those who helped us in the campaign and we even want those who didn’t help us in the campaign. You might not have even voted for Barack,” he said. OFA was actually attempting to organize the entire nation, and its messaging was carefully channeled into an ambiguous space between partisan camps. “We want to make sure that Republican and independent supporters feel very comfortable with OFA,” said Stewart in November 2009 to explain the organization’s difference in tone from typical DNC communications.94

OFA sent 105 e-mails over the course of 2009. In his first video address to the OFA list, David Plouffe carefully constructed a theme of grassroots ownership: this organization owed thanks for its existence to the hard work of millions, he noted, and OFA would be a continuation of “the grassroots movement that you built” – the first of its type in American political history, he claimed, to emerge victorious. “People like you decid[ed] they wanted change and, rather than just wanting it, they worked for it and demanded it,” he said, before introducing OFA’s new director, Mitch Stewart: “He’s gonna be your partner. He’s going to listen to you.” The fledgling organization did not have much of a strategic plan to offer besides “having friends talk to friends and neighbors talk to neighbors,” but it emphasized that its projects would center
around passing legislation in three main policy areas — health care reform, energy, and the economy.\textsuperscript{95}

As the year progressed, OFA’s objectives evolved into a dual approach, which Ari Melber characterized as “direct organizing” and “indirect organizing.”\textsuperscript{96} The first method resembles lobbying, and would appear familiar to anyone who has worked to pass federal legislation before: constituents are encouraged to contact their representatives directly and make their support of an issue known. The second is intended to build the president’s mandate by increasing popular support and enthusiasm; for instance, OFA might invite members to attend town-hall meetings in a highly visible show of support for Obama’s agenda, write letters to local newspapers, or conduct conversations with friends and neighbors to encourage their support.

The format and narrative of OFA’s e-mails is remarkably consistent — to a point that it seems contrived, according to several recipients interviewed. Each message begins with a political update (“President Obama is delivering a major address on health insurance reform”), describes OFA’s response to it (“We’ve organized watch parties for Organizing for America’s supporters”), and provides a text link for the respondent to follow to take action, often followed by a clickable image with the same message (“Attend a Watch Party for the President’s Address on Health Reform”). This is followed by another short paragraph emphasizing the importance of participation (“This is a great opportunity to interact with other supporters who share your passion for reform at this critical moment”), and ends with a third iteration of the same link to participate.\textsuperscript{97} “I couldn’t pick out of a lineup of five of them which one came when,” said Yahel Carmon, whose job in political messaging “made it easy to spot a canned e-mail.” Obama was the first candidate to motivate Carmon to do extensive work on a campaign, including entire weekends spent going door-to-door, but the 22-year-old tuned out after receiving “donation ask
after donation ask, sometimes with conference call invites thrown in. It all feels very
inauthentic, like it’s coming straight from an office in the DNC.”98 Will Harrison, a college
senior who traveled to Iowa to volunteer for Obama during the primary election, also found
himself “getting cynical” about OFA’s communications with supporters. “I get tired of the
streamlined ‘get this done, stay on message’ feeling,” he said.99

Despite the careful messaging that supporters receive in direct communication, Stewart
and other OFA staff were surprisingly inconsistent with this tone in contact with the press. For
instance, a November 11 interview on the progressive blog Talking Points Memo caught Stewart
and deputy director Jeremy Bird downplaying the role of OFA volunteers, insisting that even
good field organization – the same method that they claimed elsewhere was the force that
allowed Obama’s come-from-behind presidential victories – could not have possibly stopped the
Democrats’ loss of the Virginia governorship. Keeping Democrats in power by using direct
methods, said Stewart, was not something OFA volunteers should focus on accomplishing;
instead, they needed to spend their energy learning more about federal legislation. “We view our
role here as trying to provide our volunteers and supporters information ... We would have liked
to win both those states, but our main mission is to support the president’s agenda,” he said, later
clarifying that OFA volunteers “certainly understand that’s the most critical thing we can do at
this juncture.”100 Several commenters lashed out at Stewart’s characterization of OFA’s
members. “This is a volunteer PR firm, which is okay as long as the volunteers like the message
OFA hands down,” wrote one. “This isn’t real community organizing. I’ve read the plan:
legions of people prepared to dial other people and ask them to call their legislators... to say
what? Whatever you are told.”101
In the midst of what should have been some of its most important campaigns, OFA has been crippled by this unswerving focus on Obama’s agenda as the sole uniter for its base. For instance, during the crucial final month before the 2010 Massachusetts senatorial election, OFA had its volunteers in Massachusetts make generic calls to supporters in other states to “recruit volunteers in support of the president’s agenda,” according to Plouffe, rather than re-engaging the vaunted turnout machine that had worked so well for Obama — and that could have saved the Democratic supermajority in the Senate. As former field director Figueroa wondered after the loss, “How in the hell did the White House not get Organizing for America seriously engaged in this until there was a week and a half to go?”

The answer can be found in OFA’s primary goal of disseminating information to encourage support of White House undertakings in the other branches of government — ironically, an approach that Bird himself disparaged two years earlier, writing that “classic DC consultant politics” framed citizens as “passive recipients of the campaign’s message.” However, despite OFA’s depiction of itself as a grassroots movement, its institutional ties make direct action beyond this level nearly politically impossible.
Part III. The Root of the Problem: How Does an Institutionalized Vision of Community Organizing Differ from Traditional Organizing?

The role of empowerment

The concept of popular empowerment is intertwined with grassroots organizing. In this context, empowerment has psychological importance – as individuals gain a sense of their own effectiveness and importance – and a political one, as disadvantaged groups open channels of influence that were previously inaccessible to them. Veteran organizer Lee Staples defines grassroots community organizing as “collective action by community members drawing on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change.” Even more importantly, organizing is “a bottom-up philosophical approach to social change, not simply a method to achieve it.” 104

Community organizers since Alinsky’s time have always closely linked grassroots agenda formation and empowerment, believing that people who sense that they can control their circumstances will assert themselves politically. One organizer related how, when planning a meeting of community members, she would find a small task for everyone to do – one attendee would bring the coffee, but a different one would bring the sugar, another the cups, and so on. Even though this may not have been the easiest or most rational way to address the problem of refreshments at a meeting, the extra work ensured that each person had a stake in the outcome and approached the topics addressed in the meeting with a greater sense of self-importance. 105

This painstakingly localized aspect of Alinsky’s rulebook is also the one that present-day organizers most often ignore in favor of tactics that are more well-suited to current political conditions. One of the most important weaknesses in Alinsky’s work was that it sought to de-
emphasize socioeconomic class in favor of a more unifying narrative – often a religious one – that painted each constituent as having an equal investment in social change. This disregard for large structural problems, combined with a microscopic focus on the small set of common local issues this approach produced, is often blamed for the high rate of burnout that Alinskyite organizations experienced. Modern community organizers, very cognizant of these early failures, are in a state of expansion toward larger-scale campaigns that aim at larger structural roots of inequality. Despite this radical shift in the organizing world, Alinsky’s original concept of the link between popular empowerment and agenda creation is rarely questioned.106

The Obama campaign, whose field trainers included the likes of veteran organizers Marshall Ganz and Peter Dreier, was no stranger to the vocabulary of Alinsky. Its field staff’s philosophy consisted of three words: “Respect. Empower. Include.” From the beginning, they saw the relational emphasis of traditional community organizing as a way to entrench the campaign. In order to kick their vote-getting apparatus into high gear, wrote Plouffe, then-Iowa caucus director Mitch Stewart “thought it imperative that our organizers become embedded in the local community as soon as possible, to build up relationships and trust”; a community that already understood the meaning of collective action would be ready to work as soon as it was called upon.107 In an echo of the organizer’s coffee strategy, OFA conducted a January 2010 campaign asking members to send in names of their local talk radio stations to create a master list.108 Although an OFA staffer could have compiled such a list much more quickly and easily, the organization instead chose to make this task a collective effort of its supporters. Speaking to OFA members like Diane Drott, a 67-year-old volunteer from Media, Pennsylvania, reveals how much OFA benefits from painting itself as this type of community organization. Drott, who defines “grassroots” as “getting involved in local and national issues enough to want to see a
change,” was filled with pride that she could take part in such a movement; she dismissed the Tea Party as an inauthentic grassroots movement, but considered OFA to be a grassroots phenomenon since its members had free choice over whether or not to respond to calls to action. This image of OFA was one that fit with her perception of herself as an autonomous political being.

Despite the Obama campaign’s rigorous use of this type of rhetoric in its messaging, the end goal of the action is one insurmountable difference between campaign organizing and community organizing. As Zephyr Teachout, director of Internet organizing for Howard Dean’s campaign, has noted, distributed work, which Jon Carson characterized as the hallmark of a grassroots campaign, must not be confused with decentralized power: “Power is when you get to decide the rules of the game, not when you get to play it.” Organizers for a candidate have a singular, specific, and immutable goal: electing one person to a position of authority. They also have a known point at which their operation will disassemble: Election Day. In his internal memo underscoring the importance of a “grassroots” campaign for Obama, Temo Figueroa listed benefits of this method that were purely strategic means to an end: to “build our support, chase absentee ballots, conduct early vote programs and turn out Obama supporters in any state we need to.” Community organizers, in distinct opposition, see their primary goal as empowerment of the grassroots, which is an ongoing process. The Center for Community Change, a nationwide hub of community organizations, teaches its organizers-in-training to view power as a positive concept – and as a zero-sum resource that must be won by the grassroots at the expense of elites. A typical exercise used by organizers in the initial stages of planning a campaign is a “power analysis”: a diagram that clarifies hierarchies of decision-making, allowing the organizer to identify ways to exert pressure on individuals or institutions that wield a
disproportionate amount of power. Photographs exist of Barack Obama creating power analyses himself during his days as an organizer in Chicago.\textsuperscript{114}

In keeping with this philosophy, community organizers also believe the agenda should be constructed at the discretion of their base, the better to set the stage for community members acquiring a sense of mastery of the forces in their lives – which will lead to real power, as the grassroots unites to wrest it from the top. Alinsky, whose 1971 \textit{Rules for Radicals} is still regarded as the foundational text of community organizing, emphasizes again and again that organizers should be fastidious about not telling their base what to do, as tempting as this may be for a “professional” with expertise in advocacy. “We learn, when we respect the dignity of the people, that they cannot be denied the elementary right to participate fully in the solutions to their own problems. Self-respect arises only out of people who play an active role in solving their own crises,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{115} In order to avoid the slightest pretense of influence over the community’s will, Alinsky taught that an organizer “will want to suggest, maneuver, and persuade” a group by using the Socratic method, with indigenous leadership selecting the final course of action from among those suggested.\textsuperscript{116} Today’s organizers often cite the “Iron Rule” that was born from this philosophy: “Never do anything for anybody that they can do for themselves.”\textsuperscript{117}

Most campaigns mounted by grassroots community organizations will follow a consistent set of steps: After soliciting information from the constituency, the organizer identifies a common interest between them, chooses leaders from among the community, and provides behind-the-scenes guidance to them as they progress through the action plan they developed together. To an outside observer, any of the organization’s endeavors would appear to spring directly from the grassroots, with influential community members stirring their neighbors or
fellow churchgoers, for instance, to get involved. The organizers themselves carefully avoid taking any credit for victories; to do so would undermine the hard-won sense of power and momentum for the base. “Organizing isn’t a process whereby small groups of enlightened elites are brought together to formulate the “right” policies,” writes Staples; it necessitates an unequivocal trust in the will of the people. In contrast, one former OFA staffer described the White House’s fear of unbridled popular action: “[They say] ‘unleashing a massive grassroots army is only going to backfire on us.’”

Even if a candidate is genuinely well-intentioned, political campaigns for major candidates — being, by necessity, firmly rooted in the party establishment — are far from this world. Although it can be argued that a campaign has an interest in maintaining some of its apparatus in preparation for reelection — finding permanent positions for some of the campaign’s standout staff, say, or reinstating a particularly successful message — until now, the idea of keeping the electoral base itself permanently mobilized from the top down has never been pursued on a large scale. One reason politicians shy away from doing so is the lack of control that an organized group engenders. Supporters who are in frequent direct communication with each other can easily pressure an elected official to follow through on promises — with an added threat of turning over en masse to a competitor in the next election if they aren’t satisfied. Political operatives prefer a situation in which they have full rein of “all aspects of the campaign,” as David Plouffe reflected after the general election: “We wanted control of our advertising, and, most important, we wanted control of our field operation.” Alinsky contrasts the different ways that politicians and organizers regard the use of power: “The leader goes on to build power to fulfill his desires, to hold and wield the power for purposes both social and
personal. He wants power himself. The Organizer finds his goal in creation of power for others to use.”

Grassroots power is diffuse; the power of an elected official is concentrated.

The objectives and strategic choice of action

Supporting a candidate’s campaign may be one action that a grassroots community organization pursues, but for purely strategic reasons. Alinsky actually discouraged this practice due to his belief that grassroots organizations should remain strictly autonomous from the political establishment, but modern-day organizers will sometimes use this tactic as part of a larger strategy. Often, in search of coalitional support, a candidate will indicate a willingness to accede to the demands of a particular base. If a mobilized group has enough power, the eventuality of its throwing support to one candidate can be enough to persuade those in office to appease its needs — and challengers to make attractive promises of which they can be reminded later. Although an organization may employ subjectively positive language like “cares most for the community” or “more highly qualified” to exhort its base to vote for a candidate, it does so with calculating objectivity: a candidate elected due to this type of coalition support must rely on a similar strategy for re-election, and has a strong interest in keeping voters satisfied. As one community organizer in North Philadelphia put it, “There are no good or bad politicians: only those who are more or less vulnerable to pressure we exert in support of our interests.”

Organizers realize that single-issue mobilization — an ad-hoc group formed with one goal in mind, such as electing someone to office or preventing one company from polluting an area watershed — does not necessarily equal empowerment. Although it can be the seed from which a permanent state of organization can grow to advocate for a community’s changing needs, a single-issue mobilization does not, by itself, create a power base. Staples writes,
There is no final issue. There is no ultimate campaign. So, the goal is not simply resolving particular problems and making specific improvements (although that's essential), but it is also developing an organizational structure through which community members consistently can act to challenge and change power disparities ... Thus, a grassroots community organization can be a vehicle of collective empowerment as distinct needs and opportunities arise.\textsuperscript{124}

In effect, Organizing for America tried to harness the momentum of a single-issue mobilization – Obama's presidential campaign – to create a permanent, institutionalized organizational structure. As with any fledgling community organization moving beyond the single-issue stage, its immediate challenge was to stay relevant and retain an impression of urgency to its base: "It is critical that [grassroots community organizations] constantly engage in the recruitment of new activists around immediate, specific, and winnable issues with a compelling self-interest draw," writes Staples.\textsuperscript{125}

Beginning with its long period of post-election silence, and continuing with its bumpy period of strategy indecision, OFA lost the crucial momentum it would need to overcome its largest challenge – one, ironically, the campaign had carefully built for itself. To his millions of supporters, Obama was a cultural icon, a change agent, and a singular fixation as political redeemer. By almost all accounts, his volunteers turned out to help not because they sought to improve their personal channels of influence in the federal government, but rather because they wished to place someone in power who would act according to their beliefs to implement this change for them. "People wanted to get [Obama] into office, and they assumed that would solve everything," said Harrison. "It's much easier to understand an election than to understand how things like getting a bill passed work."\textsuperscript{126} However, these supporters – many of whom had little prior political participation – became conditioned to think that electing one representative to perform their will by proxy would, in of itself, effect the change they wanted.
On January 27, 2010, OFA had its volunteer organizers host “watch parties” for Obama’s State of the Union address. OFA relies heavily on events like these because, in theory, they are a chance for supporters to meet each other, network, and discuss important policy issues like health care reform, strengthening their sense of purpose and commitment to OFA. However, Mitch Stewart might have been taken aback to hear the tenor of the conversation taking place at the watch party in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. Although the room was full of the “Obama base” – members of OFA, and ones who were among the elite minority to actually turn out to an event that year, at that – they were open-minded, well-informed, and by no means shy about criticizing the President. The host of the party envisioned it to be a spin-free zone; at one point, misunderstanding an attendee to be an OFA organizer, he sharply requested that “this not be an OFA thing – let’s just watch and see what we think.”

Although the crowd was decidedly liberal, this facilitated a turn in discussion after the speech to Obama’s ineffectiveness in securing certain policies, such as the public option, and how they thought he should proceed. “Obama represented change, so we worked hard to get him in office, but I guess we didn’t think ahead of that,” said Naomi Pomerantz, a college freshman who attended the watch party. Magdalena Newhouse, who had been heavily involved in volunteering for the Pennsylvania general election campaign, added, “I think the momentum for OFA has fizzled because Obama hasn’t accomplished much, but people need to be patient. It’s about attitude, believing in Obama, and getting people into the Senate and the House who support the policies we believe in.” These OFA members perceived that the primary role for a politically involved American was to be a voter: they made no mention of the influence that they, in aggregate, could have through advocacy on a national level in between elections. Because Obama had performed disappointingly, they thought, his support – as expressed through member
activity in OFA — was waning; if he could demonstrate political potency, his supporters would, accordingly, reengage.

Neither Pomerantz nor Newhouse suggested that OFA members like themselves had any political power vis-à-vis current policy issues, but Newhouse added that the one OFA campaign she could remember that excited her was the call for help with Martha Coakley’s senatorial campaign in Massachusetts. “The request from OFA was very immediate and specific, with an objective goal and a clear way to accomplish it. I felt like I could do something to help. If there were more specific things like that, maybe people would feel like they were making a measurable difference,” she said. Several other volunteers echoed Newhouse’s desire for “specific” electoral work. Claudia Munoz, who volunteered for the Obama campaign while completing her master’s degree in public policy, said she did so because “the biggest thing was getting him elected”; now, even though she strongly believes in health care reform and would like to be more involved, she said responsibilities like her job and family have taken priority over involvement with OFA. However, Munoz later suggested that she would consider getting involved again because of congressional and midterm elections on the horizon. Supporters like these cited a desire for concrete outcomes that could be tangibly attributed to grassroots work. As Harrison said, “Even if you can change someone’s mind about health care, they’re not the one who’s going to go vote on it.”

These volunteers’ experiences demonstrate a lack of ownership of the very politics OFA is working to engage them with. Although they have seen through their own experiences with campaigns that people like them can make a difference in terms of turnout and votes, the only evidence they have of their political influence as national-level advocates is the word of OFA and occasionally Obama himself — and these have proven none too convincing, especially as
Americans are surrounded by media attributing breakthroughs to individual political actors, such as Rahm Emanuel and Nancy Pelosi. Since metrics demonstrating direct impact are hard to come by, OFA typically assigns credit to its members for all successes involving Obama’s agenda, often in an implausible way. For instance, in a February 2010 OFA web address to Democratic supporters, Obama ran through a laundry list of accomplishments— including lifting a ban on stem cell research, passing a veterans’ budget, guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, and encouraging the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell— even though OFA had never asked its members for support of any of these issues, which were likely considered too politically explosive to address. Nevertheless, Obama stated that these victories were “because of you,” eventually even thanking supporters for “[breaking] the back of the recession.” Meanwhile, many supporters reported being unsure of their quantifiable impact, including one 53-year-old volunteer who said OFA had not “made the transition to articulating how their volunteers can influence legislative process.” Making sweeping, overambitious paeans to OFA’s members on their accomplishments seems to have reduced the organization’s credibility.

In order to set the stage for future large-scale successes, OFA should have first concentrated on building, and then publicly demonstrating, the power of its base. Although it began with a group of people who were very much aware of their power to elect someone to represent their interests, OFA did not prepare its members to make the transition into direct national advocacy by demonstrating their ability to make change on this new level. This bears an interesting parallel to a tactic used by new grassroots community organizations when working with a group inexperienced in a certain type of political action: they typically start small, since winning a few minor victories electrifies the base much more effectively than taking up a long, difficult battle with no clear end in sight. For example, Alinsky tells of a story of a “cinch fight”
he set up early on to inspire a demoralized base. He helped residents organize a pressure campaign on a nonprofit health center for it to bring its services to their neighborhood, even though he knew from his private research that the health center would do so with no objections. "While they may accept the idea that organization means power, they have to experience this idea in action," wrote Alinsky; each victory builds confidence and optimism for future campaigns. Furthermore, in choosing an issue, writes Staples, an organizer must consider "not only whether it can be won but also how the campaign will develop the group." He cautions:

It may be tempting simply to discuss a possible issue among the top leadership, but this common mistake overlooks one key factor. The highest leaders may be so committed to the grassroots community organization that their notion of self-interest has broadened to the point where they are no longer typical of rank-and-file members. ... Within the organization, issues should be tested and selected with as much bottom-up participation as possible. To do so otherwise is to risk a campaign without a large base of committed people.

OFA did, to its credit, pick a relatively low-risk first battle: mustering public support for the President's budget. This project was intended to be a "trial run" while the organization collected its strength for its major undertakings for the coming year; however, there is little evidence from interviews of OFA supporters that any remember this campaign at all, much less view it as having contributed to any sense of empowerment. The passage of the budget was an easily winnable battle, since its success was all but assured, but the public was well aware of this; journalist Tim Dickinson characterized participation in efforts such as this as "make-work."

On May 22, the first e-mail launching the campaign for health care reform went out. Aside from small, brief projects like encouraging members to push though the confirmation of Justice Sonia Sotomayor, health care reform dominated OFA's communication for the rest of the year, coming in at 44% of the total e-mail volume for 2009; Stewart said in November 2009
that OFA was “95 percent” focused on health care.\(^{139}\) Perhaps in search of the sense of accomplishment that is the reason organizers inspire their base with small victories, OFA made an effort to set easily achievable goals for numbers of doors knocked on, letters written, and calls made; this prompted one journalist to write a story about OFA doubling its expected number of calls to Congress with the title “Organizing for America About to Win Low Expectations Game.”\(^{140}\) Despite this strenuous effort, less than 18 percent of OFA’s mailing list responded to even a single call to advocate for health care reform – including actions like simply signing an online petition in support of it.\(^{141}\)

Examples like these illustrate the reason why, historically, grassroots organizations have fiercely defended themselves from institutional allegiances. OFA had started its work with an army of volunteers, but had failed to turn them into empowered citizens. “You can’t order volunteers to do anything – you have to motivate them, and Obama’s compromises... are tremendously de-motivating,” wrote Micah Sifry, co-founder of the Personal Democracy Forum.\(^{142}\) Without ownership of the agenda, OFA members saw Obama as the instigator of action, and were told to enable him to make the change. When he failed to deliver, they disengaged.

**Targets of action**

When push comes to shove, OFA finds itself caught in a difficult position, precisely because of its ambiguous institutionalized-yet-grassroots identity. Its issue campaign strategies have evolved rapidly – reflecting, over time, a sometimes bizarre combination of to-the-letter community organizing messaging and ineffective, softball tactics that Alinsky would scorn. If the veteran organizer were alive today, his analysis of OFA’s most characteristic flaw would
likely echo his 1971 criticism of well-intentioned people who had studied to be community organizers by taking courses in schools of social work: “Basically the difference between their goals and ours is that they organize to get rid of four-legged rats and stop there; we organize to get rid of four-legged rats so we can get on to removing two-legged rats.”

Alinsky taught his students to avoid forming connections with institutions because doing so could making them susceptible to interests other than those of their constituents, weakening their autonomy and effectiveness. To him, even receiving small grants from the government was unacceptable. Organizers today are still keenly aware of the origins of self-interest; they are especially wary of politicians, who “frequently attempt to latch onto community groups in order to further their own political agendas.” Since the goal of organizing was to overcome oppression by appropriating power away from the centralized sources that clung to it, Alinsky wrote that this work would reveal society to be inherently conflictual. “Grass-roots mobilization raises the stakes, identifies the obstacles to reform and puts the opposition on the defensive,” writes Marshall Ganz. Highly visible, confrontational tactics, therefore, were the most natural and effective way for communities to wrest a seat at the table, and the ability to do so could only spring from a well-organized, empowered group. “Remember: once you organize people around something as commonly agreed upon as pollution, then an organized people is on the move. From there it’s a short and natural step to political pollution, to Pentagon pollution,” he wrote.

Given Alinsky’s stark portrayal of the chasm between the grassroots and the institution, it is unsurprising to hear Mitch Stewart explain OFA’s decision to make itself part of the DNC in the following way: “OFA is always going to match the tone and tenor of the president, and we’ve never been a loud and screaming organization.” By most accounts, though, the decision to
make OFA part of the Democratic Party's apparatus was made hastily. David Plouffe, eager to leave the campaign after two nonstop years, welcomed the existing infrastructure of the DNC as an easy repository for the organization. Deputy campaign manager Steve Hildebrand later said he tried to persuade Plouffe to make it an independent organization, due to his concern that not doing so would limit OFA's ability to use aggressive strategies. But concerns about financial solvency — place-based organizers' old nemesis — emerged as the most compelling reason to incorporate the upstart candidate's grassroots movement into the Washington establishment.  

"It made about as much sense as moving Greenpeace into the headquarters of ExxonMobil," wrote journalist Tim Dickinson. Sifry turned one of the Obama administration's favorite catchphrases on its head, wondering why Plouffe "discount[ed] his own grassroots strategy in favor of the dusty old playbook used by White House insiders for decades." Although Stewart argues that there is no question that Obama, as a Democratic president, should have his field team in the Democratic Party, making the grassroots movement unquestionably partisan undercut the careful message of unity the organization was trying to disseminate, alienating the Republicans and independents that Stewart strenuously tried to include in Obama's base.

Institutionalizing OFA proved catastrophic to accomplishing strategic goals, since it left the organization unable to exert pressure where it was needed most. Whenever it proposed campaigns to get moderate Democrats to change their votes to support health care reform, it was met with instant opposition from party leaders. "It's a waste of money to have Democrats running ads against Democrats," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of OFA's July 2009 TV spots, which issued a call to action for volunteers in swing-vote Democrats' states without specifically mentioning senators' names. When Democratic Rep. Chet Edwards of Texas began receiving calls from OFA volunteers, he reiterated that his no vote on health care reform...
would not change, but added that it was now clear to him that OFA – and, by extension, the Democratic Party – “could care less about my political future.” And Rahm Emanuel personally interceded to block the distribution of call lists to liberal activists who wished to help OFA’s efforts by targeting Democrats. To avoid the all-too-present risk of being divisive, the organization was forced to take an unusually gentle approach with its advocacy efforts – one that blogger Markos Moulitsas described as “always reactive and half-hearted.”

Typical campaigns from 2009 included a “National Health Care Day of Service” in which OFA members were encouraged to volunteer at local clinics to “build awareness” of the need for reform; a call to send cards with a “holiday wish for health care reform” to senators; and a pledge to donate a dollar to the DNC each day until health care reform was passed.

One of Alinsky’s strongest tenets was that organizers must seek to polarize issues to create a sense of urgency and purpose. “Men will act when they are convinced their cause is 100 percent on the side of the angels and that the opposition is 100 percent on the side of the devil,” he wrote. “There can be no action until issues are polarized to this degree.” Nebulous “special interests” like insurance companies – and, occasionally, the Republican Party – were the most frequently blamed group for obstructing health care reform. Although “special interests” are an entity that can be easily vilified, the idea is not a concrete one that can be directly sought out and targeted; because of its position within the Democratic Party, OFA could not even put pressure on them by using the indirect means of challenging their source of power. “When special interests are represented by people like Joe Lieberman and Ben Nelson, you’ve got to go after those people.,” argues Moulitsas. “Instead, you had OFA railing against Republican obstructionists, when the Republicans were irrelevant to the debate.” Even if OFA wished to maintain a positive campaign in support of health care reform, rather than a negative one against
those who obstructed its passage, its subjectivity to political forces from the top also meant that it had difficulty taking a policy tack any more progressive than the Washington consensus, since it was obligated to support Obama’s wishes for bipartisan compromise; for instance, OFA was widely criticized by members for its inconsistency on its support of the public option. One former OFA staffer has noted that the White House pressures the organization according to its “shifting strategy and political concerns”; another observed that “pleasing the White House” and “pleasing this 13 million-person list” are “two warring things.” In this context, OFA was unable to target the key votes that mattered most to the passage of health-care reform – centrist Democratic senators.
Part IV. The Challenges of Stimulating National Grassroots Action

OFA has come into its own as a grassroots organization that mobilizes people to carry out one man’s will. It asks its members to fill out surveys to gauge their opinions, but it limits their input to small details while relying upon its messaging to convey a poorly constructed sense of ownership — for example, asking its members to “co-sign” health care reform.\textsuperscript{163} As an arm of the DNC, its ideology has become entrenched, and its use of Obama’s campaign mailing list relies on the assumption that a vote for one candidate entails an unwavering commitment to his party’s agenda. It still sees its members as foot soldiers in what Plouffe termed the “ragtag army” — volunteers to be called upon in a time of need, not constituents with complete control of the OFA’s content and mission. This leaves the organization stuck in an uncomfortable spot somewhere between the electoral apparatus it once was and a true grassroots organization — and I argue that it is this identity crisis that has resulted in a hemorrhage of supporters and dwindling interest, leaving the organization, as it is, unlikely to achieve any remarkable political change by itself.

However, it is impossible to ignore the tremendous potential represented by OFA’s members. Through their campaign volunteerism, they proved that they are capable of accomplishing transformative work in support of a policy agenda that crosses demographic lines previously considered insurmountable. During the brief span of the presidential campaign, they took part in a process of unprecedented political discussion within their communities, giving life to Tocqueville’s romantic notion of a deeply associational American civic fabric: as Coleman proved in his groundbreaking 1988 study, once these bonds of social capital are created, they continue to benefit people in a multitude of ways that enrich their quality of life for years to
And, together, their sheer numbers represent incredible possibility to an organizer who wishes to enact sweeping structural change on the national level. "Local governments have less money and influence today than in the past, making it more difficult for city politicians to respond to community demands," writes Peter Dreier. Though community organizers remain committed to local-level, place-based work, they are increasingly helping their constituents incorporate national policy campaigns into their agendas, since these represent the most real hope for tackling the roots of lasting inequalities in the United States. A coherent, unifying call to action could awaken the incredible potential of a base that is an order of magnitude larger than anything that has ever been seen before in Washington.

Though there is no easy solution to the problems OFA faces, this paper highlights several important points that the organization itself, in considering its future evolution, could address to transform itself into a much more effective force for change. Most importantly, a group emulating the form of a grassroots community organization cannot exist within a political party, as this is an essential conflict of interest that violates nearly every one of Alinsky’s tactics. The idea of spinning OFA off into a true grassroots organization would be more than unpalatable to the DNC, due to the conflict it would engender. According to Mike Miller, director of San Francisco’s Organize Training Center, such a group would have a natural target: "It appears to me it is Alinsky-tradition community organizing that is the best shot we’ve got these days for keeping President Obama from further drifting to the center-right and for getting a handle on now-uncontrolled corporate wealth and power,” he writes. However, when faced with a choice between an ineffective drain on grassroots enthusiasm and a progressive gadfly, the choice that is most beneficial to the Democratic party is clear – for the same reason that was best articulated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt as he worked to construct the New Deal. Like a few
other lucky politicians, Roosevelt had discovered the secret to harnessing grassroots activism, and it wasn’t building his own organization to support his own agenda. Instead of withering under the pressure these groups placed on him, he realized he could use it to his advantage. If a radical contingent attracted sufficient attention and visible support, creating a sense of urgency, he could step in near the end of the debate in the role of the mediator, working out what appeared to be a compromise in the center of two opposing sides. In reality, of course, Roosevelt had been able to procure exactly the policy he wanted in the first place, thanks to grassroots ownership of the issue.

The strength of the grassroots is precisely in its separation from government. It keeps elected officials accountable, and it empowers citizens to distinguish their own role in representative democracy — one that is more affirming and active than simply electing lawmakers. It should not be the role of government to build the grassroots base; having bottom-up control of the agenda and message, after all, is one of the defining characteristics of this form of engagement. Instead, government should promote the role of the grassroots in the same way that Tocqueville and Skocpol have suggested: proving its receptiveness to organized popular input. Until recently, writes Skocpol, associations “were fostered by the institutional patterns of U.S. federalism, legislatures, competitive elections, and locally rooted political parties”; it is the decline of this type of government, therefore, that has removed incentives for grassroots engagement from American political life.167

In this light, Obama would be wise to cut his former campaign organization loose, reincorporating it into a more localized form that could allow constituents to steer its agenda on their own. Rather than simply filling out surveys about their past experiences, members could design innovative campaigns that tie in closely to work being done at both the state and local
levels, promoting social capital among those who share bonds of place. By framing Obama as an ally rather than a source of ideology, a nationwide organization that sees place-based empowerment as its primary goal can be far more explicit in its demands for social change. And Obama can take full advantage of the fact that his campaign overcame one of the biggest hurdles of associational life in America: bridging the divide of class and race, even on the level of individual neighbors. This potential is too valuable to be lost – and Obama must encourage the growth of grassroots organizations such as this one by proving repeatedly that his government will respond to their efforts. If he does well, he will be able to easily re-assimilate these supporters into his necessarily institutional re-election campaign structure when the time comes. After all, as Joel Rogers notes, “The state can either constrain or encourage secondary associations, and without affirmative state action, it is nearly impossible to redress background inequalities in wealth and power”; a symbiotic relationship between association and state is essential to maintaining the strength of either.

To be certain, Obama will still have an important role as a symbol for the movement he started. “Having a president who inspires people to act collectively on their own behalf can make a difference. It gives people hope and courage to defy obstacles,” writes Skocpol. But instead of co-signing Obama’s finished agenda, his supporters should create their own – and convince Obama to follow it.
Notes

3. Tocqueville, tr. Lawrence, p. 603.
4. Ibid, p. 60.
5. Ibid, p. 506.
6. Ibid., p. 510.
7. Ibid., p. 508.
8. Ibid., p. 506.
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13. Ibid., 345.
16. Ibid., 139.
17. Ibid., 133.
18. Ibid., 134.
22. Tocqueville 507.
24. Ibid.,
26. Ibid., 290.
27. Ibid., 39-40.
30. Brady, Lehman Schlozman, and Verba 460.
32. Lemann 1996.
33. Skocpol 1996.
34. Skocpol 2004.
35. Skocpol 1996.
36. Evers 18.
37. Trippi xiii.
38. Moultisas 1-2.
39. Ibid., 5.
40. Greenberg and Skocpol 9-10, 15.
42. Evers 16.
43. Wilson 348.
44 Wilson 351.
45 Evers 17-18.
46 Wilson 348.
47 Obama 2004, 158.
48 Wolffe 75.
49 Wilson 348.
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51 Eisen 2010.
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54 Alinsky 184.
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59 "One Year Ago." E-mail to OFA list; 11/1/2009.
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98 Carmon 2010.
99 Harrison 2010.
100 Bellantoni 2009 (2).
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102 Dickinson 2010.
103 Comment by Jeremy Bird on Ganz 2007.
104 Staples 1-2.
106 Coles 2006, 549-553.
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109 Drott 2009.
110 Carson 2010.
111 Teachout 2007.
112 Figueroa 2007.
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115 Alinsky 123.
116 Ibid., 91
117 Warren 40.
118 Staples 2.
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120 Jamieson 37-38.
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