CAN THE NEW COMMANDER IN CHIEF SUSTAIN HIS ALL-VOLUNTEER STANDING ARMY?

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Abstract

During his campaign, Barack Obama inspired record numbers of Americans to donate their time and money to his electoral efforts. Now that the campaign is over, can Obama sustain this civic engagement as he begins to govern? This paper examines the possibilities for sustaining Obama's electoral mobilization, introducing new data from fieldwork conducted from September 2008 to Election Day 2008 in Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; and Charlotte, North Carolina. The data include staff interviews and observations of canvassing, rallies, and other get-out-the-vote efforts of the local Obama and McCain campaigns, the local Democratic and Republican Parties, and various nonprofit groups in each city. Based on these data it is clear that each city was characterized by excitement and heightened activity; however, the number of activities and the strength of the grassroots organization varied across the cities according to national electoral imperatives in ways that should affect the potential for future mobilization. As such, sustaining the mobilization of Obama's supporters faces several hurdles: campaign staff and volunteers in many cities were drawn from outside the community, tensions arose between local grassroots organizations and the campaign over resources and issue focus, and the extremely large amounts of money needed to finance the mobilization were not distributed evenly across cities and states.

Keywords: GOTV, Voter Mobilization, Civic Engagement, Political Participation, Barack Obama, Campaigns and Elections

They've invested in a civic infrastructure on a scale that has never happened. . . . It's been an investment in the development of thousands of young people equipped with the skills and leadership ability to mobilize people and in the development of leadership at the local level. It's profound.

—Marshall Ganz, labor organizer, in *Washington Post* (MacGillis 2008)

With 3 million volunteers and as many as 15 million supporters in his e-mail database, the new president possesses both the largest American political organization ever built and a potentially powerful instrument of service and social change.

—Jonathan Alter, *Newsweek* (Alter 2009)

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With the historic election of Barack Obama as President of the United States comes the need to confront the many daunting challenges facing our nation and the world today. The question in the title of this paper evokes two meanings, both relevant and pressing as the new administration considers national service to help ameliorate some of the United States' problems. First, with the U.S. military stretched thin from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, will Obama need to reinstitute the draft? The second issue, and the one considered in this paper, concerns our increasing need for action domestically. The Obama campaign inspired millions of Americans to participate in politics, not only by voting but also by donating to the campaign and volunteering to contact their fellow citizens. Howard Fineman reports that the Obama campaign involved an unprecedented "3.1 million contributors, 5 million volunteers, 2.2 million supporters on his main Facebook page, 800,000 on his MySpace page and perhaps a million more names on Obama's own campaign Web site" (Fineman 2008). The hope is that this mass mobilization represents a resurgence of civic engagement after years of declining volunteerism and political interest (Putnam 2000). Can the campaign sustain its grassroots organization postelection, transferring the groundswell of support for Obama into a revitalized nonpartisan civic culture? In other words, can the Obama administration sustain mobilization of citizens that occurred during the campaign, channeling that energy to solve other pressing domestic problems?

This paper addresses that question by exploring the factors in favor of and working against continuing Obama's grassroots movement. The evidence for this argument comes from interviews and observations of local Obama and McCain campaign operations, Democratic and Republican Party county headquarters, and grassroots nonprofit organizations in three cities: Atlanta, Georgia; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Chicago, Illinois. The purpose of the fieldwork is to investigate the structure, document the strategies, and observe the activities of grassroots organizations that attempted direct contacts with citizens in order to register and turn out voters in the general election. The organizations in each city throughout the campaign were characterized by excitement and heightened activity; however, the number of activities and the strength of the grassroots organizations varied across the cities, according to national electoral imperatives, in ways that should affect the potential for future mobilization. As such, the Obama administration will confront several challenges to sustaining its campaign mobilization: campaign staff and volunteers in many cities were drawn from outside of the community, tensions arose between local grassroots organizations and the campaign over resources and issue focus, and the extremely large amount of money needed to finance the mobilization was not distributed evenly across cities and states. As a result, citizens in many areas were not fully mobilized, and some were even demobilized, as resources were shifted away from nonelectorally competitive states. The point of this article is not to suggest that high levels of civic engagement are impossible postelection, but rather to point out some considerations that might help to continue the mobilization into the future.

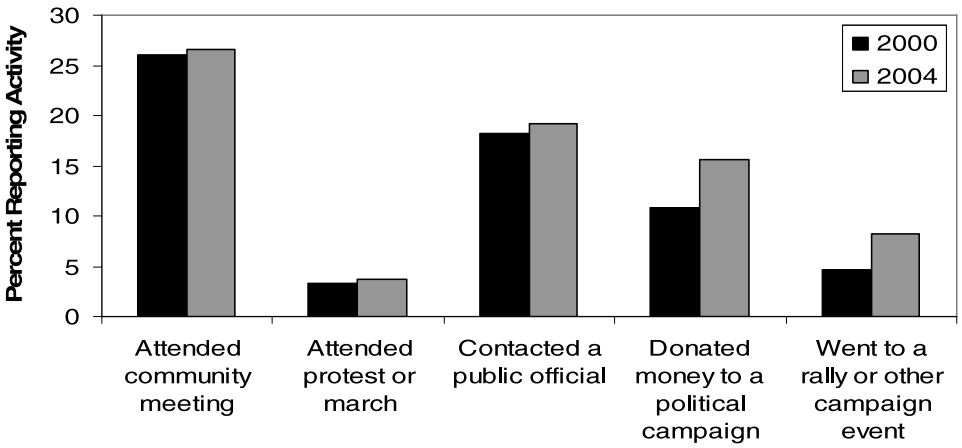
The paper proceeds as follows: the first section offers a brief synopsis of the literature on social movements and civic engagement in order to develop hypotheses about the factors that encourage or discourage civic engagement at the individual and institutional levels. Then, after developing an explicit hypothesis, the next section explains the data and methods for the fieldwork in greater detail. The next section, by way of analysis, presents the basic structure of the grassroots mobilization in each city, describing the Obama campaign's strategies for deploying field organizers and volunteers. This section draws on interviews to point out variation across

cities regarding campaign field organizers and volunteers, levels and sources of the financial resources used for the mobilization, and relationships between the campaign and other local organizations. The end of the paper is devoted to potential solutions for carrying forward the mobilization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Observers in the popular press and academia often have bemoaned the decline of civic engagement in the United States (Putnam 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). For example, as shown in Figure 1, less than one-third of respondents in the 2000 and 2004 American National Election Studies reported giving money to a political campaign, attending a campaign rally or community meeting, or contacting public officials to express their views. Although these numbers represent a resurgence from the nadir of participation in the 1990s, the extent to which Americans undertake political and nonpolitical activities other than voting still is quite low (McDonald and Popkin, 2001; Putnam 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Much of this decline is believed to be generational, as younger, less active citizens replace their more civic-minded parents and grandparents over time (Jennings and Stoker, 2004; Putnam 2000).

Understanding how the Obama *campaign* was so successful in overcoming this decline in civic engagement might provide the key to knowing which elements of the campaign mobilization must continue in the future for the Obama *administration* to maintain this groundswell of activity. The causes of declining civic engagement, and thus the keys to its reversal, are discussed in numerous studies in political science. In considering the likelihood of a rejuvenation of civic engagement in the aftermath of the general election, it is important to consider individual-level explanations as posited by the political behavior literature, institutional and contextual explanations found in the civic engagement literature, and, moreover, "irrational" factors such as charismatic leadership and psychological imperatives from the social movement literature.



Source: American National Election Studies, 2000 and 2004.

Fig. 1. Political Activity of Americans

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Individual-Level Explanations for Participation

Rational-choice models provide one way of thinking about the decision to engage in political activity. Simply put, rational-choice theory posits that individuals choose to participate in or abstain from politics based on whether they believe the benefits they receive from participation will outweigh the associated costs of activity (Downs 1957, p. 265). Most acts of participation are costly in that the tasks of acquiring political information, attending meetings, registering, or donating to campaigns require time and money (Downs 1957, pp. 265–266). Because the likelihood that one individual will make a difference is small, calculations based solely on this expected benefit mean that no one would ever participate (Downs 1957, p. 267). However, social, economic, emotional, and other institutional factors can also enter the calculus and make the decision to participate more or less rational for a given individual. Such factors tend to have the effect of increasing or decreasing the benefits and costs of political activity (Uhlaner 1995, pp. 70–71).

According to Sidney Verba et al. (1995), one of the primary factors affecting civic engagement is access to resources; people undertake civic activities because they have resources such as time, money, education, and civic skills. Because they decrease the costs of participating, such resources make political activity more likely. For instance, wealthy people have more disposable income to contribute to causes that concern them; they do not feel the burdens of campaign contributions as heavily as the poor do (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). People with higher levels of education know more about politics and other subjects and find it easier to acquire new information (Verba et al., 1995). Likewise, individuals with high-level civic skills may find it easier to navigate the bureaucratic barriers associated with voting and other forms of participation (Verba et al., 1995).

The Obama campaign successfully reduced the costs of political participation in terms of time, money, and civic skills in a number of ways. First, Obama maintained a strong online presence through the campaign's official Web site, as well as through social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and BlackPlanet.com. The Internet presence of the campaign particularly drew in younger voters, 31% of whom reported getting most of their news from the Internet and 25% of whom reported visiting social-networking sites, signing up for mailing lists, or volunteering on behalf of a presidential candidate (*New York Times*/CBS News/MTV 2007). By the end of the campaign, 21% of voters of all ages surveyed by the Pew Research Center reported visiting candidates' Web sites, and 25% reported reading blogs about politics and the campaign (Pew Center 2008). The campaign's strong presence throughout many battleground states also contributed to reducing the time and resources needed to participate in politics. For example, the campaign maintained seventy-eight local offices in Pennsylvania, fifty offices in Iowa, and a whopping eighty-two offices in Ohio, each with field organizers and resources to arrange and finance events (Obama Campaign for Change 2008b; Obama Campaign for Change 2008c; Obama Campaign for Change 2008d). Nationally, 11% of voters reported attending campaign events, and 28% of young voters in battleground states reported doing so (Pew Center 2008).

Another view posits that political participation largely reflects the extent to which political organizations mobilize potential supporters. This argument is articulated most clearly by Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen (1993), who contend that a key component of mobilization is asking people to vote, often for a particular candidate. When they are not asked to vote, people do not vote. Proponents of this argument point to decreased mobilization as the reason for declining voter turnout over the last quarter of the twentieth century (e.g., Avey 1989; Rosenstone

and Hansen, 1993; Kernell and Jacobson, 2000). Michael Avey argues that the major reason for low turnout today is lack of mobilization (1989, p. 13). Rosenstone and Hansen elaborate:

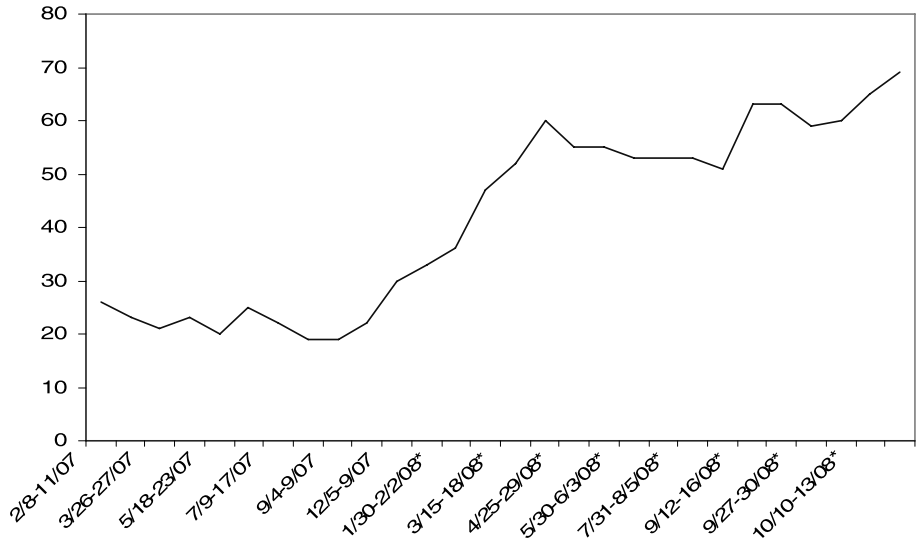
> Had candidates, parties, campaigns, interest groups, and social movements been as active in mobilizing voters in the 1980s as they were in the 1960s, even leaving the social structure and the condition of individual voters unchanged, reported voter participation would have fallen only 2.6%, rather than the 11.3% that it did (1993, p. 218).

However, Kenneth Goldstein and Travis Ridout (2002) contend that levels of mobilization have remained relatively stable from 1966 to 1998, that the effectiveness of mobilization has not changed over time, and that changing the targets of mobilization efforts has had no discernible impact on voter turnout (pp. 21–22).

The Obama campaign not only made resources available for those participating in politics, the campaign also actively solicited votes, time, and money from citizens. Much attention has been paid to the massive effort by the campaign to compile e-mail addresses and cellular telephone numbers of supporters and, most notably, that the campaign revealed Obama's choice of Joseph Biden for vice president via text message. By mid-October of 2008, 46% Pew Center respondents had received mail from a political campaign, 37% had received recorded telephone calls, 24% had been contacted by a live person, and 9% had been visited at their homes by the representatives of a campaign (Pew Center 2008). The Obama campaign outcontacted voters in nearly every age category except voters over age sixty-five (Keeter et al., 2008). The greatest disparity between the Obama and McCain campaigns in contacting voted occurred with younger voters, 25% of whom reported being contacted in person or over the phone about Obama (Keeter et al., 2008). These numbers increased to 54% and 61% of young voters in the battleground states of Pennsylvania and Nevada, respectively (Keeter et al., 2008).

A final factor influencing civic engagement is the desire to participate. According to Verba et al., (1995), people who have "little interest in politics or little concern with public issues, a belief that activity can make little or no difference, little or no knowledge about the political process, or other priorities" often do not undertake political activities (Verba et al., 1995, p. 16). This election, by all accounts, inspired heightened interest and engagement among ordinary citizens. Television ratings for election events set records as 38 million viewers watched then-Senator Obama accept his party's nomination at the Democratic National Convention, 37 million watched Governor Palin's Republican National Convention acceptance speech, 33 million watched Obama's paid advertisement, and 71.5 million watched Obama's acceptance speech on Election Night (Gold 2008; Huff 2008; Seelye 2008). As shown in Figure 2, by the end of October, high numbers of adults reported paying attention to the campaign (*New York Times*/CBS News 2008). The key catchwords of the Obama campaign were *hope* and *change*, both of which reflected Obama's efforts to counteract cynicism and apathy. For instance, in his speech accepting the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Obama noted that attempting to scare and distract voters

> feeds into the cynicism we all have about government. When Washington doesn't work, all its promises seem empty. If your hopes have been dashed again and again, then it's best to stop hoping, and settle for what you already know (Obama Campaign for Change 2008e).



Source: *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, October 19–22, 2008.

Fig. 2. Americans Who Report Paying "A Lot" of Attention to the 2008 General Election

Instead of cynicism, however, Obama went on to advocate the rebirth of hope:

> But I stand before you tonight because all across America something is stirring. What the naysayers don't understand is that this election has never been about me. It's been about you. For eighteen long months, you have stood up, one by one, and said enough to the politics of the past. You understand that in this election, the greatest risk we can take is to try the same old politics with the same old players and expect a different result. You have shown what history teaches us—that at defining moments like this one, the change we need doesn't come from Washington. Change comes to Washington. Change happens because the American people demand it—because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a new time (Obama Campaign for Change 2008e).

In noting how direct action by Americans can make change, and by attributing his success to the civic engagement of voters, Obama rendered voters efficacious. His record-setting crowds and fundraising based on small donations also helped to portray citizen action as an effective way to create political change.

Institutional-Level Considerations

The rational-choice view posits that institutions primarily encourage civic engagement by changing the calculus of individual civic participation, making civic engagement and volunteering easier and more beneficial (Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). In order to encourage participation, organizations provide selective benefits to members such as discounts or insurance (Hansen 1985; Olson 1965). Existing institutions also encourage participation by taking on the costs of organizing events and serving as repositories of information (Hansen 1985; Skocpol 1992).

The Obama campaign encouraged citizen participation by providing selective incentives for volunteering or giving. As exemplified by Figure 3, the campaign offered free T-shirts and other merchandise and backstage passes to election-night festivities for volunteers in exchange for campaign contributions, and the campaign continued to hold raffles for inauguration tickets and Obama merchandise to encourage donations (Plouffe 2009). Likewise, as mentioned above, the ubiquitous and well-staffed field offices of the campaign, along with other local organizations, provided numerous opportunities to participate during the campaign. This extensive organization encouraged participation in several ways. For instance, the field offices often provided volunteers with snacks or even full meals. Phone banks used personal cellular telephones to call voters in other states, but these calls were often placed during free nights and weekends to eliminate costs. The Democratic Party in Chicago provided busses to transport canvassers to nearby states (49th Ward Democrats 2008). The campaign also found ways to reduce the time and civic skills needed to volunteer. The campaign provided civic education through MyBarackObama.com, where interested citizens found online wizards for hosting their own campaign events, online scripts and neighborhood lists for canvassing and phone banking, and even instructional videos for contacting voters. However, even though the campaign spent massive amounts of money on its grassroots organization, many volunteers still drove their own cars and hosted private events to help elect Obama.

The extremely well-organized ground campaign also made volunteering enjoyable. Field organizers started early, traveling to battleground states to lay the groundwork for the campaign operation. Field offices in many cities and small towns were prepared with up-to-date walk lists, phone lists, campaign literature, food, and transportation for volunteers. The campaign hoped to make get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts even more efficient on Election Day through "Project Houdini" (Herbert 2008). The plan was for campaign workers in battleground states to call headquarters with the names of people who had already voted so that these people could be crossed off the campaign's phone banking and canvassing lists for the afternoon (Herbert 2008). Although Project Houdini encountered several problems during the day, according to reports in the *National Journal*, Project Houdini proved crucial in Indiana where the afternoon call list was whittled down to half, based on data from the field (Herbert 2008).

Source: Plouffe (2009)

Fig. 3. Image from an Obama E-mail Communication Offering Selective Incentives for Donations

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The Anatomy of Social Movements

The Obama phenomenon is described by many as a movement rather than as a campaign. As such, like any social movement, its success was predicated on many immeasurable factors. Two of those factors, the solidary benefits of joining the movement and Obama's charismatic leadership, are relevant when thinking about continuing the campaign mobilization (Hansen 1985; Olson 1965; Weber 1994).

Participating in movements bestows psychological and solidary benefits upon supporters. Wendy Rahn et al. (1999) note the potential for elections to build social capital by bringing diverse people together for partisan activities; as such, the Obama campaign became an important site for networking and social interaction (Rahn et al., 1999, p. 123). Obama supporters also got a sense of belonging and self-esteem from being part of the campaign (Cave 2008). Many believed they were "part of making history" just by attending events (Paulson 2008). Barack Obama was not only a serious politician but also a popular-culture icon, inspiring music videos, art, and poetry. It was "cool" to be an Obama supporter, and the campaign strove to make his supporters feel close to him via informal and personal e-mail messages, such as the one sent to supporters on election night (Beam 2008; Cave 2008). As described by the *New York Times*:

> Only a Fugees-loving, pick-up-basketball-playing, biracial president-elect would send supporters an e-mail message on election night that said: "I'm about to head to Grant Park to talk to everyone gathered there, but I wanted to write to you first." He signed it simply "Barack." After all, they were close. He and his biggest fans, the generation of young adults who voted for him in record numbers, together had slogged through 21 months of campaigning. And in his moment of victory, Barack Obama shared the glow of success (Cave 2008).

"Obamamania" swept the world, and millions of people were caught in its frenzy, buying Obama memorabilia, even getting Obama tattoos (Segal 2008).

Obama evoked Max Weber's (1994) conception of the charismatic leader, who leads by "the authority of the exceptional, personal 'gift of grace,' or charisma" (Weber 1994, p. 311). Charismatic leaders are "called to the task of leading men," they inspire and motivate their followers; they exemplify almost superhuman qualities as leaders (Morris 1984; Weber 1994, p. 312). In comparison, Aldon Morris described Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a charismatic leader:

> He was viewed as extraordinary by large numbers of people; he was competent at his tasks; many people identified with his visions of a "beloved community" devoid of racism; and King had the talent to articulate this view forcefully through powerful oratory (Morris 1984, p. 279).

Based on this standard, one could also describe Obama as a charismatic leader. Known for his powerful oratory, he drew crowds in the hundreds of thousands at his rallies, and a prominent journalist reported getting "a thrill up his leg" when Obama would speak (*Newsweek* 2008). Opponents sarcastically referred to him as "The One," evoking the notion of Obama's near divinity among his followers (Thomas 2008). Going forward, the challenge will be for Obama to continue engendering the same kind of support as he begins to govern. As Inauguration Day approaches, optimism for the new administration runs high even among some Republicans (Newport 2009). However, Obama already has disappointed many of his followers by

choosing Pastor Rick Warren to pray at the inauguration and by choosing ex-Clintonites for prominent cabinet posts (Dionne 2008).

HYPOTHESIS

The ability of Obama to sustain the mobilization of his supporters, and to extend this mobilization beyond his supporters, depends on the factors described above. First, the administration must continue to ask citizens to participate—that is, to mobilize citizens. Second, Obama must sustain the high levels of interest in politics and the sense that individual engagement will help make a difference. It is important for the administration to ask people to volunteer; actively encouraging people to volunteer was the key to generating high activity during the campaign. The administration might provide selective benefits for participation but must continue to provide *opportunities* to use civic engagement to solve local and national problems. The administration must not only subsidize the financial cost of participating but also help reduce the costs in terms of time and civic skills. Finally, to the extent that the campaign can be seen as a movement, sustaining the mobilization depends on Obama's popularity and charisma once he begins to govern.

DATA AND METHODS

To explore the possibility of each of these factors, this paper examines data collected during the presidential campaign from September 2008 to Election Day 2008. The data were drawn primarily from two sources: interviews with directors, staff, and volunteers in organizations that attempted to contact citizens directly with the intention of getting them to register and vote in the general election, and observations of the registration and GOTV activities of these same organizations. The field notes and impressions of the research team, along with field notes on day-to-day operations and conversations with organizational staff and volunteers were considered as well. The study was conducted in three sites: Charlotte, North Carolina; Chicago, Illinois; and Atlanta, Georgia. These three cities are particularly interesting because Charlotte, and to some extent Atlanta, were located in states that were electorally competitive. Meanwhile, Chicago, while not located in an electorally competitive state, still had the potential for high levels of interest and volunteering because it was Obama's home city. This variation in electoral competitiveness allowed for the observation of organizations operating in different electoral contexts.

The universe of organizations in each city included the local field offices of the two major presidential campaigns, the county or city offices of the two major parties, and any nonprofit group or service provider attempting to register or turn out citizens, particularly low-income citizens, in person, by phone, or by mail. The universe did not include national interest groups without local branches, groups not involved in registration and/or GOTV in any of the three cities, groups who contacted members or voters only for issue advocacy, or groups without offices in the city attempting registration or GOTV. Several sources were used to find organizations in each city that fit these criteria, including the Internet, newspaper searches, phone books, and word of mouth. Partnerships among local organizations were especially helpful for identifying study respondents.

Eighty potentially mobilizing organizations were contacted across the three cities. Thirty-two organizations could not be contacted after repeated attempts via phone,

Table 1. Participating Study Organizations, by City

Chicago	Charlotte	Atlanta
Target Area Development Corporation	Homeless Helping Homeless	People's Agenda
Southwest Organizing Project	Democracy North Carolina	National Action Network/SCLC
49th Ward Democrats	Campaign for Change	Georgia League of Women Voters
21st Ward Democrats	Larry Kissel for Congress	Fulton County Republican Party
42nd Ward Democrats	Mecklenburg County Republican Party/McCain Campaign	Fulton County Democratic Party
35th Ward Democrats	Working Families Win	Young Democrats of Georgia
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights	Charlotte League of Women Voters	Election Protection of Georgia
Illinois League of Women Voters	Democratic Party of Mecklenburg County	Campaign for Change
Chicago League of Women Voters	Charlotte H.E.L.P.	W.A.N.D.
Chicago Republican Party	Central Piedmont Community College	
Cook County Republican Party	University of North Carolina at Charlotte	
	Planned Parenthood	
	15th Street Church of God	

mail, and e-mail. The ACORN chapters in Charlotte and Chicago declined to participate after they became involved in a voter fraud scandal. An additional thirteen organizations stated they were not directly contacting voters in those cities; some suggested contacting state-level offices or other organizations that did host events. The final sample included thirty-three organizations: eleven from Chicago, nine from Atlanta and thirteen from Charlotte. These organizations are listed in Table 1.

Interviews

Interviews with the outreach directors of local campaigns, parties, and nonprofits were used to get a sense of the activities organizations undertake to reach voters, as well as the rationale behind these choices. These semistructured interviews were conducted at each site by graduate students attending local institutions. The instrument was composed of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The interviews covered past and future mobilization drives or canvassing events in an effort to discern the logic behind the locations of these efforts. The outreach directors were asked for schedules of various events and contacts in order to link changes in registration over time to specific activities by mobilizing organizations. The interviews also provided an opportunity to gather information about the organization, such as its relationship to state and national entities, its attempts to collaborate with other organizations, and the structure and resources available to the organization. Apart from the semistructured interviews, the research assistants also noted and recorded several unstructured, informal conversations with staff and volunteers.

Observational Data

As mentioned, the interviews with voter outreach directors provided information on the voter outreach activities planned by each organization. From mid-September to Election Day, graduate students in each city attended various outreach activities conducted by each organization. The students shadowed staff and/or volunteers as they conducted voter registration drives, door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, rallies, and other operations. The primary focus of the shadowing and observations was to document the coverage, preparedness, and strategies of each organization.

These observations gave a sense of the kinds of opportunities for participation that campaigns and other organizations offered to citizens.

Coverage refers to the types of citizens reached by the organizations' outreach activities. Coverage involved the location of activities, such as the addresses of events and the areas in which door-to-door canvasses took place. However, coverage might also refer to specific attempts by an organization to target a subset of citizens, such as registered voters, partisan identifiers, young voters, soccer moms, or Latinos. In line with this focus, students documented the locations of canvassing and other operations and took notes on the characteristics of potential voters encountered by the staff and volunteers at canvassing and other events.

Preparedness refers to the degree of professionalism by which the organization conducted outreach activities. The sense of an organization's preparedness is guided by the "best practices" outlined by Donald Green and Alan Gerber in their guide *Get Out the Vote* (Green and Gerber, 2004). Thus, *preparedness* refers not only to the organization's past history with GOTV activities but also to the resources it committed to reaching voters in an efficient, professional way. Thus, the experience, training, and appearance of staff and volunteers who encountered potential voters were of interest, as well as the quality of the materials and information presented to potential voters at each contact. Graduate students photographed staff and volunteers at each event, collected copies of materials distributed to voters, and took notes on the appearance, dress, background, and experience of the staff and volunteers they accompanied.

Strategy refers to efforts by organizations to achieve their goals efficiently. In general, organizations try to use their limited resources to contact and turn out as many eligible citizens as possible. In the case of parties and campaigns, this goal might be to contact and turn out as many *supporters* as possible. In this category fall decisions about the kinds of activities to pursue, as well as the particular considerations of how activities are carried out. The graduate students obtained schedules of all the types of outreach planned by each organization. Moreover, the graduate students observed the different scripts and event formats used by each organization. The observations were also concerned with measures of success. How many potential voters were reached successfully? What was the attendance at rallies and other events? How many people opened the door to canvassers? The students collected data on each of these questions.

Training Sessions

Yet another way to gather information about organizational routines is by observing the training of new recruits. Such training gives clues about the kind of issues organizations encounter often enough to incorporate into their standard operating procedures. For instance, were staff and volunteers trained to find citizens who were more difficult to contact? Did they receive special instructions for working with voters concerned with prior felony convictions? Were staff and volunteers equipped to speak with people who hold antigovernment attitudes or lack political efficacy? Were the scripts given to phone bank volunteers structured to deal with these problems? Observing the training sessions also provided evidence of organizations' efforts to increase the civic skills of its volunteers.

FINDINGS

This research confirms much of the popular perception of this election and the Obama campaign as inspiring a spirit of voluntarism and civic-mindedness among

many Americans. The research team directly observed staff and volunteers spending countless hours walking from house to house, making phone calls, and manning tables outside grocery stores to get their fellow citizens to vote. This election not only generated much enthusiasm among official Obama field organizers and supporters but also rejuvenated the activities of several nonprofits in each city.

However, despite Obama's stated intention to employ a "fifty-state strategy," the national Electoral College map still shaped the campaign's mobilization, determining how staff, volunteers, attention, and money were allocated geographically. As a result, among the cities in this study, the Obama campaign developed the strongest organization in Charlotte, at least in terms of using local leadership and local volunteers to mobilize local citizens. The campaign deployed fewer field organizers and resources in Atlanta as victory in Georgia seemed less likely. Finally, in Chicago, local volunteers were not used to build a grassroots organization in Chicago but were instead sent to Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa. Thus the incentives offered by the Electoral College will hinder the ability of the Obama administration and other groups to mobilize citizens in local communities, provide opportunities for participation, and reduce the costs of participating, all of which are necessary to maintain the levels of civic engagement reached during the campaign.

A Grassroots Campaign?

Merriam-Webster's defines *grassroots* as "the basic level of society or of an organization especially as viewed from higher or more centralized positions of power." Such a term connotes an indigenous organization run by community members themselves. In this sense, calling Obama's professionally run, top-down campaign a "grassroots movement" is something of a misnomer, especially since many field offices were headed by nonlocal organizers and many of the volunteers came from other states. Moreover, those field organizers and volunteers were assigned and reassigned to cities based on electoral considerations. As a result, the campaign often did not enhance the civic skills of local leaders who could continue to provide opportunities for participation after the election, or of local citizens who could later be mobilized as volunteers.

Lisa,[1] a community organizer at a Chicago nonprofit, stressed the importance of building leaders as resources for sustained community development. She and the other staff members worked "in hopes that leaders are gaining new skills and bringing these skills back to their institutions and training and developing new leaders and so creating a stronger web, their own machine." According to Tony, a grassroots organizer at that same nonprofit, the problem with parties and campaigns is their ignorance of existing local organizational resources. Rather than training local leaders as field organizers, campaigns and parties often bring in professionals and outsiders to run campaigns in battleground states, using local organizations and leaders "as bodies to put up signs and do pavement pounding." This strategy does not build a long-lasting cadre of leaders capable of wielding power in communities for the long term. We observed an example of this phenomenon in Charlotte, where some longtime volunteers resented the new field organizers sent by headquarters to run Charlotte's massive general election operation. That the existing volunteers were older, unpaid, and predominantly African American and the new field organizers were young, paid, and mostly White did not help the situation. Conversely, according to Tony, when states are no longer considered battlegrounds, parties and campaigns "will pull resources midelection," so that communities and their organizations are "left high and dry" because they do not live in places with contested elections.

The Atlanta site provides support for this claim because many of that office's field organizers were transferred to other offices once the Obama campaign decided that a victory in Georgia was unlikely.

Using outsiders as volunteers also poses problems for sustaining civic engagement beyond the election. When they go home, those volunteers often take with them the civic skills they have learned from their campaign work. The return of experienced volunteers is a boon for the home community, but the abandoned community is left with a vacuum of skilled, empowered citizens. For Tony, true grassroots organizing is about empowering local residents:

> Part of targeting precincts is being able to have a show of force in precincts that for whatever reason are important to local politicians. . . . That's not necessarily about winning an election. It's about increasing the power of the residents. . . . And so what happened in the precincts in the primary, what happens in the precincts in the general, where are we in the precincts in the previous election cycle, how does that compare. . . . That stuff's all really important, which is different from most parties who are focused on a precinct because again *that* election cycle that's the key precinct relating to the larger battle of control of the legislature. We work the same precincts because they're the precincts in which we live.

More concretely, many Chicago residents ventured to Iowa, Michigan, and Indiana to help register and to turn out local voters. Although local volunteers were a strong presence in each of those states, much of the heavy lifting was done by outsiders.

A research team member's experience canvassing in Iowa as a Chicago resident illustrates this point well. An Iowan, whom the researcher visited, asked what Obama thought of Iowa's "double taxing" of its residents. Although this issue seemed very important to the resident, and quite controversial generally, as an Illinois resident the researcher had no familiarity with the subject. Likewise, similar problems were reported in 2004 with the Howard Dean campaign, which also sent outsiders door-to-door in Iowa:

> The "perfect storm" strategy called for thousands of volunteers to blow into Iowa to turn out the 50,000 or so votes that had reportedly been pledged to Dean. But as the onetime front-runner began to stumble on his way to a third-place finish, those volunteers—distinguished by their glowstick-orange hats, stubborn fervor, and unfamiliarity with local concerns—seemed to represent all that was wrong with the campaign.
>
> "It was sort of an invasion," said Andy McGuire, a Dean activist and former lieutenant governor candidate now supporting Hillary Clinton. "Iowans shun that. They don't appreciate being told how to vote" (Issenberg 2007).

Fortunately, the Iowa resident did not view the team member as an invader.

National versus Local Strains

As the preceding personal anecdote suggests, using outside leaders and volunteers raises a further concern: the ignorance of local needs and issues. The need to win a national election, coupled with the use of field organizers and volunteers who are unfamiliar with the areas in which they work, mean that presidential campaigns rarely mobilize local communities to solve local problems. In fact, the evidence

presented below will show that the effort to elect Obama actively impeded the ability of local groups to mobilize voters. These findings suggest that much work remains to be done with respect to forging links between Obama's volunteers and the remaining local nonprofits and candidates.

For instance, in Chicago the campaign did very little to register or turn out local residents or to build movements around local issues. Because so many politically engaged Chicagoans volunteered out of state, local organizations found it difficult to recruit help. Mary, a staff person in an organization serving immigrants in the city, said:

> A lot of my adult volunteers were also, very, very pro-Obama and very politically engaged so it was a struggle just to keep them involved and not to lose them to the Obama campaign, to, like, lose them on the on the weekend to going to Indiana, and going to Michigan and Wisconsin, but keeping them here and kind of finding that balance.

To obtain the help she needed, Mary bargained with her volunteers, telling them, "You can be gone on the weekend, but give me one night this week." She also used high school students, who she admits were less effective canvassers.

Interestingly, this same phenomenon was felt in Charlotte, which was much more important electorally. Martin, a community organizer at a Charlotte nonprofit, worried that the presidential campaigns were "taking resources away from the local candidates." According to Martin, when he asked local candidates why he rarely encountered their volunteers, they responded, "Martin, it's so hard because I don't have any people. Obama and McCain have them all." Moreover, Martin also acknowledged a lack of public attention to races and issues specific to Charlotte:

> Everybody knows who they're going to vote for, for president. But they don't know who's running for anything else. There's a lot of things here going on in Charlotte that are important issues that people aren't paying attention to.

Martin's observations suggest that, to the extent that the campaign's mobilization was about supporting Obama rather than a true resurgence in grassroots democratic politics, it is not likely that high levels of participation will persist.

Finally, local organizations in Chicago had difficulty obtaining the funds to register and turn out local citizens and to establish the institutional capacity for long-term mobilization. In Charlotte, organizations such as "Project Vote" and "Blueprint North Carolina" provided financial support for the registration and GOTV efforts of the Central Piedmont Community College, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Democracy North Carolina, and other groups. Mary, the organizer from Chicago, told a different story. Here, she describes how the denial of funding to update Celltool, which is a database of voter information gathered from door-to-door canvassers, affected her GOTV operation:

> The national umbrella groups . . . We did get a little shafted because we weren't a battleground state. Celltool is run by CCC, the Center for Community Change, and they made the decision not to update Illinois' voter file. And so the people that we had registered in the field didn't get updated and so . . . we had to take extra steps and, like, take on a lot more work if we wanted to integrate them into our GOTV because Celltool didn't have them in it. And they decided that battleground states were more important to have that happen.

Maintaining important resources like Celltool would have benefitted the effort to mobilize Chicago citizens into the future.

Financial Considerations

The Celltool example leads to a final point. Political mobilization is expensive, and the Obama campaign spent more than half a billion dollars to generate its mass support (MacGillis and Cohen, 2008). The evidence suggests that continuing this high level of political engagement into the future would require a similarly large investment of resources, as illustrated by the contrasting experiences of Campaign for Change in Charlotte and Atlanta.

Obama's field offices operated under a highly sophisticated plan. Field organizers gave volunteers walk lists or call lists with which to contact potential voters. Each volunteer was to mark information about the voter and the results of the contact on the list. Those data, along with information from the local board of elections, were entered immediately into a database and used to generate new walk lists or contact lists for the next set of volunteers. The point of this project, like that of Project Houdini, was to increase the efficiency of voter contacts and maximize the success of each contact.

For this plan to work, however, each field office needed enough experienced staff and volunteers to keep up with the data-entry tasks and coordinate volunteers. In Charlotte, walk lists and phone lists were updated several times daily and volunteer assignments were clear. In fact, floor markings indicated how incoming volunteers could pick up new contact sheets, as shown in Figure 4. In the final days of the campaign, the Charlotte field office opened several branches around the city, each with its own field organizer, data-entry person, and volunteers in order to respond immediately to the GOTV needs of particular areas. Other volunteers, called "comfort leaders," were charged with keeping the field office and the satellite offices supplied with food and beverages, all paid for by the campaign.

In contrast, in Atlanta, because many of the city's staff had been sent to more electorally competitive areas, the field office lacked the capacity to keep up with the demands of data entry and coordinating volunteers. The research team noted that volunteers were standing around the field office socializing or waiting for assignments on several occasions. Moreover, door-to-door canvassing was not as successful in Atlanta because oftentimes the walk lists were not up-to-date. Many of the addresses assigned to the canvassers shadowed by the research team did not exist or did not have accurate information. Such a lack of success can be disheartening, or even demobilizing. As Mary, the Chicago organizer, noted:

> It's tough when a volunteer goes out with a list . . . and no one's home, these places don't exist, all those kinds of things. It's hard to keep morale up. . . . It's just a really disappointing canvass.

In this way, spending money to maximize the effectiveness of canvassing might also have sustained the mobilization of volunteers as well as voters.

DISCUSSION

Barack Obama inspired millions of Americans not only to vote for him but also to volunteer and to send money to his campaign. He now possesses a massive contact

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Fig. 4. Photographs of Directions for Volunteers at Campaign for Change Office, Charlotte, North Carolina

list of engaged and active citizens. Can Obama keep those supporters engaged, translating his movement into a broader rebirth of civic engagement? The evidence from the interviews and observations suggests that the challenge of sustaining the civic engagement of the 2008 campaign beyond an e-mail list is twofold: to encourage the activists the campaign has trained to turn their support into support for local causes and organizations and to recruit new local leaders and volunteers in the areas vacated by the campaign. Having such an institutional infrastructure makes volunteering more rewarding and less costly, because local organizations staffed with experienced leaders who provide materials, coordinate events, train participants, and recruit volunteers mobilize citizens and provide opportunities to participate.

As of this writing, the new president-elect has not yet indicated how he intends to deploy his personal army of volunteers. Since the election, the transition team has

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tried to maintain contact with supporters in several ways. The campaign Web site now links to a "supporter survey" designed to gather feedback on potential directions for the movement in the future (Obama Campaign for Change 2008f). Obama continues to solicit donations for various entities, including the Presidential Inaugural Committee and the Democratic National Committee, by offering selective incentives such as inauguration tickets, T-shirts, and holiday hats. For the weekend of December 12–14, 2008, "Change Is Coming House Meetings" were planned in many cities (Obama Campaign for Change 2008a). The campaign has also issued a national call to service on January 19, 2009, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, as "an important first step in our continuing commitment" (Obama 2009). However, as Jonathan Alter writes, "One Monday of good deeds . . . is not enough" (Alter 2009). Obama's supporters "want to be told how they might do something for the United States beyond going to the mall. Their pent-up idealism could wither in harsh times without more outlets" (Alter 2009).

If Alter is right, the window for creating a new civic generation is narrow. In this time of financial crisis, many nonprofits are suffering from diminished donations and endowments. Yet, ironically, now is also the time of greatest need for national service, both at home and abroad. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, in the United States, "There is nothing the human will despairs of attaining by the free action of the collective power of individuals" (Tocqueville 2000, p. 181). One can only hope the Obama campaign finds a way to restore the collective power of Americans.

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NOTE

1. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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