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Barack Obama's "Organizing for America" and the Dynamics of Presidential Party Building

Daniel J. Galvin, Northwestern University

magine this scenario: in September of his first year in office, the president appears before a joint session of Congress and describes the urgent need for health care reform. His team at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) then launches a two-pronged follow-up campaign—a grassroots "ground war" to pressure fence-sitting congressmen to vote for reform and a public relations "aerial war" to ensure message control and generate further public support. The president marshals his supporters from the recent presidential campaign and sends DNC field operatives across the nation to coordinate the on-the-ground effort.

But when opposition groups launch a devastating television advertising blitz, the party is slow to respond; its grassroots campaign proves to be too cumbersome. As the details of the bill become increasingly controversial, the party's field force is unable to keep the troops "on message" and in full campaign mode. The president scrambles: he shuts down the ground operation, brings the field coordinators back to Washington, and diverts the party's remaining resources to television commercials in the hope of regaining control of the debate.

Meanwhile, the party's core electoral functions—candidate recruitment, campaign support, fundraising, activist training, and voter mobilization—are neglected. The president tells concerned Democrats not to worry: victory on health care will redound to the benefit of the entire party in the midterm elections. Publicizing the merits of the policy should remain the party's top priority.

But as the midterm elections approach, the party organization is in shambles. Its health care campaign apparatus has long since disappeared. Democratic donors and volunteers have been tapped too many times, and enthusiasm for the party and its once popular president has dissipated. The manpower needed for voter registration and getout-the-vote operations on Election Day does not materialize, and the Democrats lose their congressional majorities.

The above scenario, of course, relates Bill Clinton's ill-fated health care reform effort in 1993-94. Despite many similarities to Barack Obama's recent campaign, there are also important differences. First and foremost, policy success appears much more likely this time around (at the time of this writing), which, by itself, could invigorate the party rather than enervate it. Second, Obama's Democratic Party is better organized, better equipped, and more experienced than Clinton's. Where Clinton's party was stretched to the limit by the health care campaign, Obama's could ultimately benefit from it.

But Obama, thus far, does not appear to have forged an altogether different relationship with his party than Clinton did in the early 1990s. In fact, his approach to his party looks strikingly (disturbingly?) similar to the approach adopted by every Democratic president since John F. Kennedy. As I explain in my recently published *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton University Press), modern Democratic presidents either ignored their party organization, exploited it for short-term gain, or undercut its capacities. Obama appears to be following suit. But he also has at his disposal something his predecessors never had (and could have only dreamed of): Organizing for America. He only needs to decide what to do with it.

Obama's "Organizing for America"

The primary political organization charged with building support for health care reform in 2009 was Organizing for America (OFA), the successor to Obama's 2008 campaign committee of the same initials (Obama for America). Formally, OFA is a "project" of the DNC and the custodian of the campaign's 13 million email addresses. But what it means to be a "project" of the party and how, exactly, OFA fits into the larger party structure remains quite hazy.

We know that mainstream divisions of the DNC, as well as state and local Democratic parties, undertake primarily *electoral-support* responsibilities, such as recruiting and supporting candidates and helping to contest elections at all levels of government. OFA's mandate is different: it is to carry out *policy-publicity* responsibilities, such as building public support for the president's legislative agenda and countering the opposition's attacks. Political parties in America have

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always carried out, to some extent, both the electoral-support and the policy-publicity functions. They run into trouble, however, when they allow one function to overwhelm the other.

We don't know, at present, how much of the party's resources are being devoted to OFA versus mainstream organizational activities. But we do know that OFA has been growing in size and importance by the day.

Its first campaign was to build public support for the administration's budget proposal last spring. The effort was an operational success, but it was only a trial-run: the real contest was always going to be over health care reform. In preparation, OFA ramped up its organization dramatically. In every state, it set up its own organizational structure, hired paid staff, and established clear leadership roles (political directors, state chairmen, finance directors, and so on). Effectively a "shadow" or "parallel" party organization unto itself, OFA cooperates with state and local Democratic parties where possible but bypasses them when necessary.

The organizational apparatus of OFA seems here to stay. It is an open question, however, whether it will evolve into a more constructive vehicle for Democratic Party building. Will it continue to emphasize its policy-publicity role all the way through the fall of 2010? Or will it transition into more of an electoral-support mode? Such a transition is by no means guaranteed.

For starters, it's not clear that OFA *can* be converted. The health care campaign sapped a good deal of energy and enthusiasm from the activist base, and it remains to be seen whether that enthusiasm will return (Vogel 2009). But even if it does, transitioning from a policy-promotional role to a more election-oriented role may not be as seamless as one might think. It is one thing for OFA to rally the troops to publicize a major policy change; quite another to disaggregate into different states, districts, and localities and adapt OFA structures and operations to fit the very different political, economic, and social contexts of each Democratic campaign.

Even if OFA *can* be converted into an organizational force on behalf of Democratic campaigns, it's not at all clear that Obama will *want* it to make that transition. The temptation to keep OFA apart from the nitty-gritty of local electoral politics next year in order to preserve its strength for the reelection campaign in 2012 could be quite strong. As OFA coordinators are already saying, their volunteers include independents and Republicans who support the president but not necessarily the Democratic Party per se (however strained that claim may be in today's polarized environment).

What's more, the history of such efforts is bleak. Obama's four Democratic predecessors also used their party organization to rally public support for their policy initiatives, but none ever seriously contemplated making constructive investments in its electoral-support operations. By exploiting their party without giving anything back, they left it in worse shape than they found it, less able to assist candidates' campaigns, less able to raise money, less capable of performing core electoral functions. Thus far, OFA looks like the latest manifestation of this approach.

The Traditional Democratic Approach

The central operational focus of the DNC under John F. Kennedy was a program called "Operation Support." Eerily similar to Organizing for America, Operation Support was also labeled a "project" of the DNC, and it, too, aimed to capitalize on the cult-of-personality surrounding the president to build support for his legislative agenda. Volunteers were encouraged to write letters to the editor, call their congressmen, and rally their neighbors, just like OFA volunteers. But Operation Support made no effort to train volunteers in campaign techniques or teach them other organizational skills. "You know how to organize to do this job," ground troops were told in the "action kits" they received. The goal of the program was never to improve

the party's organizational capacities—it was to bring pressure to bear on Congress right now, on behalf of current policy initiatives making their way through the legislature. Once the legislation was enacted (or tabled), the operation was over and the troops could return home. Without simultaneous investments in the party's structures, personnel, and operations, the DNC Kennedy bequeathed to Johnson in 1964 was a highly personalized organization that proved to be more of a burden for LBJ than a resource.

Johnson's main fundraising vehicle was the "President's Club," also an adjunct program of the DNC. A fundraising vehicle that solicited big donations from wealthy supporters, the President's Club funneled contributions into a separate account that was under the president's exclusive control. Johnson's enthusiasm for the Club and his willingness to headline its events made it the Democratic Party's most lucrative fundraising program. But because the resources went directly to the president, and not to the party, fewer funds were made available to state parties, local parties, and Democratic candidates. Johnson either used the funds to purchase the support of pivotal members of Congress or hoarded them for his 1968 reelection campaign (which never was). The party's organizational disarray during the 1966 midterm elections and its inability to offer a reliable organizational foundation for Hubert Humphrey's late-breaking campaign in 1968 were two of the more consequential effects of Johnson's approach.

Jimmy Carter, like Kennedy, also used his national committee primarily as an instrument to build public support for his legislative agenda—and like Kennedy, Carter also did so while allowing the rest of the organization to atrophy. Carter's DNC leadership team launched multiple "public relations offensives" on behalf of Carter's policy initiatives, but failed to make simultaneous investments in the party's voter mobilization capacities, activist networks, or technological resources. Meanwhile, Carter nurtured his 150,000-member "Carter Network" (activists from his upstart 1976 campaign), but insisted that it be kept separate from the Democratic Party proper. Ironically, these self-serving moves proved to be detrimental for Carter's own purposes: by 1980, he found the Democratic organization to be more of a liability than an asset in his reelection campaign.

Bill Clinton, as discussed, abandoned a potentially valuable operation within the DNC at the very moment that it might have been converted into something more constructive for the party as a whole. The Democrats' across-the-board losses in 1994 cannot, of course, be attributed solely to his exploitation of his party during the health care campaign; but his actions certainly did not help. His basic approach remained the same through the 1996 election cycle, when he funneled soft money through state party committees to pay for television commercials while neglecting those parties in every other way. Clinton won reelection, but his campaign left the national party deep in debt and the state parties in organizational disrepair. He became much more supportive of his party during his second term, but found that his earlier actions had raised the costs associated with launching new party-building programs.

What is the tie that binds these four presidents together? It is more than their party affiliation: it is also how they prioritized the condition of their party organization. All four enjoyed strong and stable majorities in Congress, at the state level, and in the electorate—and consequently, all four had more pressing concerns than their party's organizational capacities. (Note that Clinton only became interested in organizational party-building once it became clear that his party's newfound minorities were more than a temporary aberration.) With comfortable majorities, these presidents perceived no urgent need to tighten their party's "nuts and bolts" or ensure that its resources were distributed to needy Democratic candidates. Their top priorities were legislative, not electoral—they wanted to use their current congressional majorities to deliver on their policy goals *now*, not build a new majority for later.

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This may have been somewhat myopic, but it was not irrational: since Democratic voters outnumbered Republican voters, cost- and labor-intensive get-out-the-vote drives were considered unnecessary in-house expenses. Incumbents could be left to run their own campaigns, and most other electoral tasks could be outsourced to organized labor, urban machines, and liberal advocacy groups—all constitutive elements of the broader Democratic majority coalition.

And because this post-New Deal Democratic Party represented a heterogeneous coalition of interests and groups (as majority parties typically do), these presidents prioritized party management over party building. Without a pressing need to focus on organization-building, they spent most of their time nurturing their extrapartisan alliances and trying to resolve intraparty factional disputes. Meanwhile, the party atrophied at the organizational level.

Obama's Prospects

In many ways, Obama's situation parallels his predecessors': his party enjoys large majorities in Congress, at the state level, and in the electorate; his legislative agenda is ambitious and extensive; his party's coalition is heterogeneous and its constituency diverse; and liberal extrapartisan groups are still active and important. Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons to think he might ultimately place a higher priority on organizational party building than they did.

First, despite its current numerical advantages, the Democratic Party seems less secure, electorally speaking, than it was during the 1960s, late 1970s, and early 1990s. It was only four years ago that a reelected and emboldened George W. Bush seemed on the verge of building the "permanent Republican majority" about which he and Karl Rove frequently spoke. The Democrats were the ones in the wilderness, searching for a way out (Bai 2007). It is doubtful that Obama has forgotten how far his party has come in four short years. One reason he might engage in party-building, therefore, is that when he looks back to 2005—and ahead to likely congressional losses in 2010—the Democrats' overall competitive uncertainty could motivate him to try to consolidate his party's recent gains and invest in its future.

Second, OFA itself makes Obama much better positioned to make serious party-building inroads than his predecessors ever were. None of his predecessors had such a large or well-organized campaign organization, none inherited a national party apparatus as robust as the one Obama inherited from Howard Dean, and none opted to fold the former into the latter. Because Obama has already lodged OFA at the DNC, he has given himself something of a head-start if he decides to integrate its operations with mainstream party operations (notwithstanding the complications discussed above).

Either way, the stakes are high: if Obama decides to convert OFA into a multipurpose entity that can help enhance the party's myriad electoral operations, he could not only make a potentially major contribution to the party organization, he could help to break its old habits once and for all. But if he does not, he risks more than a loss of momentum: he risks falling behind a Republican Party that has not abandoned its longstanding commitments to organizational party building.

As I discuss at much greater length in *Presidential Party Building*, while Democratic presidents were neglecting or exploiting their party organization, Republican presidents were persistently investing in theirs. Indeed, I find that every Republican president since Dwight Eisenhower worked to strengthen his party's structures and operations. Pursuing dreams of a new Republican majority, they poured resources into campaign training workshops, group outreach efforts, candidate recruitment operations, state party infrastructures, new technologies, new methods of fundraising, and so on. As Philip Klinkner shows in his masterful *The Losing Parties* (1994), alternating "out party" RNC chairman engaged in precisely the same sorts of organization-building efforts.

The Republicans' commitment to organizational party building runs quite strong: even as Bush's presidency imploded in the second term, his team at the RNC continued its organization-building projects. It grew the party's donor lists, email lists, and volunteer networks; held multiple regional meetings; launched new surrogate-training initiatives; invested in new technologies; and expanded its fundraising operations. John McCain leaned heavily on the party's infrastructure during 2008, and in 2009, the RNC outraised the DNC, despite Obama's participation in seven DNC-specific fundraisers during his first nine months in office alone (he headlined 26 total fundraisers for Democrats—four times as many as Bush in the same span).

Thus, despite the Republican Party's current lack of leadership and deficit of new ideas, one should not dismiss the organizational capacities it has spent decades nurturing and developing. To be sure, organization is no substitute for enthusiasm in politics: without enthusiasm at the grassroots, there is little a robust organization can do (something McCain can attest to). But if the GOP regains momentum over the next year—and even if it doesn't—Obama would do well to rethink his party's organizational strategies. OFA stands poised to be a major boon to the party organization—if only Obama is willing to expand its mission.

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FROM HEADQUARTERS

Letter from the Chair — February, 2010

Dear Colleagues,

I want to share some news of an exciting opportunity. POP and the journal *Party Politics* are issuing a call for proposals for a special issue of the journal. The call for proposals is quite broad, and it includes research on parties and interest groups both in the American and comparative contexts. It provides a terrific opportunity for a scholar or team of scholars to pull together a collection of manuscripts on a subject they deem important. Those selected also will be able to try their hand at editing a journal. Please see the call for proposals published in this edition of *VOX POP* and, if interested, send a proposal to the ad hoc committee.

With Best wishes,

Paul Herrnson University of Maryland pherrnson@capc.umd.edu.

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CALL FOR PROPOSALS

POP and *Party Politics* are issuing this call for proposals for a theme and an editor (or co-editors) of a special issue of the journal. The special issue should ideally reflect the diversity of the section and as such we would prefer a topic spanning both interest groups and parties, and including both American and comparative politics. An issue of the journal runs about 40-45,000 words (usually 5 or 6 articles), so this provides a framework for planning the number and form of the contributions to the special issue.

We are requesting brief proposals on the thematic focus of the proposed issue and a list of potential articles and authors (5-10 pages). For best consideration, proposals should be received May 1, the launch date for the journal/POP association. An ad hoc committee of the section's executive committee will review proposals to identify a candidate for this special issue in consultation with the *PP* editors. As a peer reviewed journal, *Party Politics* has blind review of articles for prospective special issues. So the quality of the proposal and the fit to the section's research themes will be the prime criterion.

Send proposals to Barbara Sinclair, chair of the ad hoc committee, at sinclair@polisci.ucla.edu.

Interest Groups & Lobbying Around the World

Dr. Conor McGrath, Independent Scholar

It is not a novel idea to note the paradox that while we know more about interest groups in the United States than in any other political system, America is an exceptional case. Lobbying is different in the U.S. for reasons of historical constitutionalism, scope and scale, political culture, and institutional design. A point less often made is that lobbying is different everywhere, for similar reasons. Each nation has an exceptional interest group system. That is not to say that lobbying techniques and tactics are not similar in most locations, for they are. In every interest group community—to greater or lesser extents and to greater or lesser degrees of effectiveness—lobbyists talk directly to policy-makers, join coalitions, stimulate grassroots efforts, undertake policy research and frame policy issues, use the media to advance issues, and so on. These activities, if not entirely universal, are quite common. What is exceptional about every lobbying environment is the political, cultural and institutional framework within which those ubiquitous activities occur.

The range of entry points by which lobbyists can access the policy-making process, the existence or absence of lobbying regulations, the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns, the autonomy and expertise of bureaucracies, term limits on elected office-holders, the openness of government towards civil society, the capacity of the judicial system to challenge official decisions—all these, and more factors, determine the scope of interest group behavior.

To take one instance, that of lobbying regulation, it is clear that the presence or absence of a regulatory regime conditions the activities of lobbyists. Indeed, that is the fundamental purpose of such regulation. Among the nations examined in this collection we see an extraordinary spectrum in this regard—from most Latin American nations in which lobbying is entirely unregulated, through systems like the United Kingdom where (a minority of) lobbyists have attempted to exercise some form of self-regulation and like the European Union where a new voluntary and rather loosely defined model of regulation has been recently introduced, on to nations such as Lithuania which have enacted lobbying reforms with significant flaws in their subsequent

implementation, right up to quite precise and strict statutory regulation in the United States. The practical impact of these alternatives is explored in individual chapters, and in such a brief overview as this it is still necessary to note that many Latin American lobbyists may behave with utter propriety while some U.S. lobbyists will deliberately break every rule, but nevertheless it remains true that regulation is an area which varies enormously around the world and in which those variations will shape the general pattern of lobbying behavior. Lobbying is different in the UK as compared with Brazil, Lithuania or the United States, in part because of the different modes of regulation.

If we cannot generalize about lobbying, what scholars can certainly do much more of is to examine a wider range of individual cases than tends to be true of the existing literature. I have recently edited a three-volume collection:

- Interest Groups & Lobbying in the United States and Comparative Perspectives
- Interest Groups and Lobbying in Europe
- Interest Groups & Lobbying in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia

Since the collection has over 40 chapters on dozens of nations, the full range of content cannot be summarized here. However, for those who want to gain an overview of worldwide trends in interest group behavior—or who would like to be able to assign course readings on nations which tend not to be featured in the standard works on interests and lobbying—it is intended to provide an accessible and thorough resource.

Another example, the nature of the state-civil society relationship, further illustrates the variety of interest group activity. Organized interests thrive in the U.S. partially as a direct result of the constitutional right to freedom of association, which guarantees that individuals may coalesce in organizations to promote their self-interest. The European Union institutions combine both a philosophical belief in the virtue of public participation and engagement with a practical need to lean on the expertise of outside groups in formulating policy. In France there is an ingrained tradition of state authoritarianism and a more conflictual and splintered relationship between the state and private actors, which contrasts with the German corporatist tradition of formal involvement with policy institutions by external interests. The pattern of state-society relations in Russia has been enormously varied over the last three decades as successive rulers have sought to redefine the balance of power between a host of competing interests. As the nations of Central and Eastern Europe have transitioned towards democracy, many of them tended initially to develop corporatist-style arrangements which encouraged the formation of sectoral associations which enjoyed a monopoly on interest representation in their area, but a more recent trend towards pluralist competition between associations is becoming apparent.

Most Latin American nations were actively hostile to the emergence of interest groups until relatively recently. In Malawi, the state has at times colluded with (select) economic interests and at other times entirely dominated the private sector; no consistent or sustained pattern of healthy state-society relations has yet emerged. Tensions are clear in the Iranian debate over the respective roles of reform movements and established religious interests. Organized interests in China often simultaneously compete against and cooperate with the government in a unique political economy. The public-private boundary remains blurred in Japan, where hierarchical structures and dominant elites exist alongside informal personal and financial relationships within policy-making processes. It can be difficult for an outsider to tell where interest groups end and government begins in Macao, as government retains the formal power to forbid the formation of particular groups and where local political autonomy remains firmly subservient to national authority, yet inside Macao the government is dominated by a

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few hugely influential interest groups which have essentially captured local government.

Again, such disparity makes it impossible to generalize about the proper role of interest groups—every political system is different, and so every lobbying or interest representation system is different. But it is certain that institutional arrangements matter enormously to lobbying behavior. Other nations dealt with in these volumes include Croatia, Estonia, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Tanzania, South Africa, Israel and Australia.

If any POP member would like to contact me at conor.p.mcgrath@gmail.com for more information, I would be very happy to send full tables of contents along with an order form which allows individual scholars to purchase each book at less than half price.

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