Organizing for America

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As president, Barack Obama has the potential to refashion his party, as do all who hold that position. In his case, to the extent that he can marshal the power of the organization which was seen as key to his electoral success into the realm of governing, he can alter the basic framework of Democratic party organizational politics, including the fundamental relationship between the president and the party.   The task, however, seems fundamentally difficult, perhaps hopeless.   Indeed, some might even argue that it is undesirable.   At a minimum the difficult challenge of sustaining a movement over time and the underlying logic of activism, both compounded by qualities of the current political climate, recommend caution in predicting success, especially as borne out in a monumental reshaping of party politics.

This paper explores Organizing for America (OFA), the current iteration of Obama for America, the president's much-touted campaign organization. When OFA took shape in early 2009, its entrance into the political world was newsworthy and cast in both positive and negative light. On one hand, it was heralded as a brilliant and transformative move by Obama insiders David Plouffe and Mitch Stewart, seeking to enlist the people who had fueled the election campaign – namely, those on the famed e-mail list – in the business of governing. On the other hand, OFA was described as a potentially nefarious organization, with unthinking members pledged to support their leader, and an organizational

precedent no-less-threatening than Chairman Mao's Red Guards.[1] The political science community

weighed in with decidedly less hyperbole. Noting that OFA represents an institutionalization of a

campaign organization, itself a remarkable phenomenon, Milkis and Rhodes (2009) posed one of the

pressing questions of the day: *Can OFA be as effective in governing as its earlier iteration was in*

campaigning? Many doubted that it could be. And in the time that has transpired since the birth of the

organization, we begin to see a portrait of the activities of OFA and to get a feel for its effectiveness, in

particular regarding the national debate on health care that has waged over the summer and fall of

2009.   At this juncture, it looks like OFA is not the "player" in politics, even in party politics, that some

might have envisioned. Still, final judgment should be reserved for a time at which the president's

efforts as a leader and shaper of the Democratic Party have run their course. Even then, a little more

time might be in order for a clear perspective.   Regardless of the ultimate policy impact, it is worth

remembering that assisting the president in advancing his policy agenda may not be the sole criterion on

which OFA should be judged.

As this paper considers these issues, it will place OFA in the context of a broad view of party

organizational politics, especially as it reflects the role of the president as a party leader. It will address

specifically the potential OFA has to affect the distribution of power within the Democratic Party

apparatus. And in doing so, it will consider whether OFA represents an *expected development*, a natural

evolution of a political world that has become – over the last decade – more grassroots-oriented and

emboldened with technological advancements, *or* whether it is something *path breaking and*

fundamentally new. In other words, is this organization a difference of degree or kind? This, in turn,

speaks to the prospects for the future of this sort of party structure, independent of the success or

failure associated with OFA and President Obama.

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[1] See a positive interpretation embedded in Zeleny, Jeff, "Can Grass-Roots Supporters Fire up the Budget?" *The New York Times*, March 18, 2009. The threat is illustrated in Manning, Lonna, "The Knock on the Door," *American Thinker*, March 18, 2009.

OFA Origins and Development[2]

To envision an Obama organization that would extend beyond the election was a bold idea, though not without precedent, and certainly not uncharacteristic of the Obama team's approach to party leadership.   President Obama shows signs of being a strong party leader, but is plagued by the same internal party tension that prevails in many aspects of U.S. party politics; these combine to make the U.S. parties difficult to lead.

In the early summer of 2008, at the conclusion of the state nomination contests, nominee-apparent Obama took a first stop toward exercising control over the party. He moved some of the key functions of the national party – including voter mobilization and voter identification – to the campaign headquarters in Chicago from the DNC in DC.   Bill Clinton did something similar in 1992, when he repositioned the geographic focus on the national party during the campaign to Little Rock.   At about this time, observers of the 2008 contest were alive to the possibility that the presumptive nominee would replace DNC chairman Howard Dean at an early juncture. However, the candidate retained Chairman Dean but moved Paul Tewes, a top strategist who had run his Iowa caucus campaign, to DNC headquarters on Capital Hill to negotiate the terms of the future relationship of the campaign and the formal party.

Chicago remained the hub of activity through the fall, certainly for the campaign but also for many of the formal party's activities.   This is typically a difficult time organizationally for the party's

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[2] The account presented in this section, and also throughout the entire paper, represents a multi-method approach to data collection. Over the summer and fall of 2009, I interviewed approximately 20 individuals, including OFA activists, journalists, local party leaders, congressional staff and informed observers of OFA activity. The interviews were semi-structured, though the substance covered varied considerably from subject to subject. There is a noticeable absence of paid staff among the interview subjects. This analysis also relies on data from documentary sources, like the Federal Election Commission and newer organizations formed to consider aspects of technology and politics. Special note should be made about the role of the blogosphere in informing my account. I find that blogs, granted the usual concerns about quality and reliability of information, are extremely useful. When possible, I confirm information gleaned from blogs with traditional sources.

internal structure, especially when the candidate at the top of the ticket is a non-incumbent. The

newcomer has garnered enough support to secure nomination, but the strength of the general election

candidacy may still be up in the air. As much as the party organization may be on board, the candidate

has not yet proved worthy of controlling the it. From the candidate's perspective in a post-reform era,

nomination is a function of his own doing, not the party's.   At the same time, the candidate organization

poses a challenge to the traditional party structures, which is long-standing and represents interests

more inclusive than those of a single candidate. These various considerations generally mark the early-

to-mid summer environment, necessitating a delicate dance on the part of the party and the candidate

to set the parameters and the tone for the remainder of the campaign. Some do it better than others.

In 2004 for example, tensions between the Kerry campaign and the DNC were legendary, and infighting

during the 1996 Bill Clinton reelection bid was also apparent.

The notable quality about this dance in 2008 was that there was not much of it, at least as

manifest in the "coordinated campaign."   A mainstay of Democratic party politics since 1984, the

"coordinated" aspires to reap gains in efficiency associated with coordinating the activities which are

played out at the state and local level– especially voter registration and mobilization – among

candidacies up and down the ticket.   Though it is premised on the idea that *a rising tide lifts all ships,* in

a presidential year the race at the top of the ticket typically becomes the most important "ship." But in

2008, there was very little coordination, even in theory, let alone in practice. In fact, it was either the

Obama forces *going it alone*, dominating the coordinated fully, *or* the state party in effect running a

shadow coordinated effort. Both of these dynamics extended at least partially from the timing of the

nomination contests. Because the battle between Senators Clinton and Obama lingered so long, there

was not time for the typical spring negotiation in states among candidates, including the presidential

nominee, of the coordinated plan. Thus by early summer, when the Obama nomination was largely

secured, the coordinated structures were either already in place, in which case the Obama campaign

layered on its own effort, or the structures would be formed in the summer, in which case the Obama

forces would dominate fully, bolstered by the strength of the candidate's remarkable nomination win.

Indeed, as this case shows, states are ripe arenas for tension between the president's campaign and the

state party, since the latter – unlike the national committee – is actively involved in campaigns all the

way down the ticket, and it tries to balance the interests of each.[3]

When it comes down to it, for party insiders presidential politics involves a strong dose of both

intra- and inter-party tension. But the promise of a winning ticket can go a long way to attenuating the

former and, in fact, things went fairly smoothly at the national level. It helped that the candidate

demonstrated a degree of sensitivity to the formal party. A "no drama Obama" effort was a stated goal

of the candidate and his national organization, acknowledging that there were plenty of challenges

facing the candidate – his inexperience, his race, and by the end of the nomination season, the fences

that needed to be mended with Senator Clinton and her supporters; with these in mind, there would be

no need to create more challenges by unnecessarily stepping on the toes of the party regulars. The path

toward a relatively smooth integration of the campaign and party apparatus during the summer and fall

was also aided by the close fit of Howard Dean's "50 state strategy" with the goals of the campaign.

Chairman Dean's signature program at the DNC was also the stated plan of the campaign as it looked

toward November. And the nominee, like party operatives in the states, seemed to appreciate the

inroads in party organization-building that the chairman had made during his tenure

Establishing a permanent post-Election integration of the Obama forces and the party

organization was little more complex. Discussions began as early as September, with pointed debates

about what would eventually happen to the famed e-mail list, which was highly celebrated as a critical

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[3] Intraparty tension at the national level is more likely to occur among the national central committee and the hill committees. Democratic infighting reach extreme proportions in 2006, when the resource distribution of Chairman Dean's nationwide party-building effort seemed at odds with the targeted efforts of the Democratic hill committees under the direction of Senator Charles Schumer (NY) and then-Representative Rahm Emanuel (IL).

factor in Obama's strength. There were some options, including keeping the list at the White House,

handing it over to the party, or giving it to some other outside entity. The talks took on new urgency as

Election Day approached, with concern that the momentum of the fall would quickly fade away.

Ultimately, the decision that emerged was that the list would be under the control of campaign

manager, David Plouffe. This move departed from the norm established by Bill Clinton and George W.

Bush, both of whom *loaned* their campaign lists to their parties upon winning the election.

The public launch came immediately before President Obama's inauguration, with OFA playing

up its close association with the winning campaign operation. The new entity shared the same initials as

Obama for America, the same BarackObama.com web address and essentially the same logo, factors

that suggest a degree of strategic planning from the upper ranks of the organization.[4] OFA was billed as

a "special project" of the DNC, thereby maintaining a structural connection to the formal party

apparatus. But the party acknowledged that OFA had a unique status, emphasizing that OFA built "on

the movement that elected President Obama." In the DNC organizational structure, OFA is considered

a "department" unto itself, but one with connections to the party's New Media operation. In fact, the

party's description of New Media reveals the real lines of demarcation, insofar as it distinguishes

"longtime supporters" from "folks from the Obama campaign."

As such, the DNC, while embracing the new organization, made it clear that OFA was distinct

from the party. From the perspective of OFA, this is all for the better. To keep the campaign-spinoff

intact, rather than to subsume it under the normal structures of the DNC, offers a layer of protection to

OFA supporters. This arrangement also exempts OFA at some level from the more mundane work of

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[4] The rising sun of the logo had been inspired initially by an old Mayor Harold Washington campaign pin which was meant to represent "a new dawn, a new hope" (Wolffe 2009, 75), significant for Chicago sympathizers, and applicable in equal parts to the electoral campaign and the new era ushered in by the inauguration. The early fall registration of OrganizingforAmerica.com and .org, potentially valuable domain names after the public launch, suggest impressive foresight or very early active planning for OFA, according to Mithras blog, "Fables of the reconstruction" at http://mithras.blogs.com/.

the organization, letting the party handle that. The DNC, on the other hand, can reap the benefits of the

fundraising capacity of the e-mail list, without much effect on its day-to-day operations. And it regards

the Obama loyalists as simply 'doing their own thing' until the point they are reactivated for a reelection

bid.[5] Despite the distinctive role that OFA serves in the party, the finances of the two are merged

together, at least as far as the FEC is concerned. Opponents see this as deliberate obfuscation. At a

minimum, it renders the task of isolating the financial prowess of OFA and its strategy effectively

impossible.

Looking back at the relationship between the Obama forces and the Democratic Party – over all

of the various iterations since the end of the nomination era – it is clear that internal division within the

party has been alive and well, vocal as ever, though affected by the unique nature of the nomination

race and some of the bold moves made by Barack Obama as an emerging party leader. The next section

explores the structure of OFA and its activities, keeping in mind the lingering issue of intraparty divisions

as well as the question of whether this structure and its activities are, indeed, new.

Organization and Activities[6]

OFA is staffed at the national level by a handful of paid operatives, including its director Mitch

Stewart, drawn from the ranks of the Obama presidential campaign and the coordinated. Gradually

over 2009, the organization extended its reach to the state level, putting in place state directors, and in

some cases field directors. Journalistic accounts, reporting figures released by OFA, show that there was

staff in 30 states by early June, an additional 12 by early August. As of September 1, 2009, staff were in

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[5] Bellantoni, Christina. "Obama's 'permanent campaign': Organizers pressure Congress to pass agenda." *The Washington Times,* September 1, 2009.

[6] In this, I supplement the empirical material with some small-scale studies, quasi-experimental of sorts, I have undertaken with OFA e-mail communications directed to me over the period of March through October 2009. I also consider another full set of e-mails from the election campaign through October 2009, collected by a Grinnell College student. And I have examined letters to the editor in a variety of newspapers, national and local. Finally, I explore the national website, as well as a number of state OFA websites.

place in 45 states, putting OFA "within weeks" of reaching its goal of having hired staff in every state.[7] Mitch Stewart reported that in many states OFA staff operates out of state party headquarters.

By traditional measures of party institutional strength (Cotter *et al.*; Aldrich 2000) this organization is weak. And it pales in comparison to its earlier campaign iteration. Perhaps it is apt that the "O" in OFA stands for *organizing*, not *organization*. However, while unwise to ignore completely traditional standards of organizational strength, the institutional capacity of an entity like OFA is not captured fully by those same criteria.   In fact, in large part both its presence and its activities are virtual, represented by the ability of a small number of operatives to reach a large number of activists by means of advanced communications technology. It does not require a lot of people or space, but rather a shared "sense of mission" (Cornfield 2009, 221). Yet at the same time, OFA is institutionalized within the confines of the DNC, an organization in the more traditional sense of the word.

Beginning in March, 2009 and extending through the fall, OFA undertook a number of activities. These can be loosely categorized according to purpose, the first set oriented to *organization building*, which was the focus of the spring and early summer.   Organization building appears to have been eclipsed in the summer – to the extent that the two are separable – by the second set of activities, *grassroots mobilization*.   Through the entire time frame, *fundraising,* namely in the form of e-mail solicitation, has marked the OFA effort.

The ongoing process of organizing the states began in earnest in March and April of 2009 when OFA began to put in place state directors in a small number of states. These individuals had typically served in the campaign, though not necessarily in the state in question; on whole they are young (i.e., 25-35), yet experienced politically. One of the first activities undertaken by the state director was to take an organizational "listening tour" across the state, connecting with former campaign activists and organizers, as well as with county party leaders. These listening tours were for the stated purpose of

[7] Bellantoni 2009.

soliciting ideas about how to organize the OFA state effort and what to prioritize in terms of issues. The

first states to have in place state directors included a number of 2008 battleground states like Iowa,

Wisconsin, New Mexico, Missouri and Colorado. But OFA in its nationwide effort appears to have

organized early in Republican presidential strongholds like Texas and Georgia as well. Also in the mix of

early states is Indiana, an Obama surprise win in 2008. A nation-wide shell of state OFA organization

filled out in the late spring and summer, with many states complementing the state director with a field

director, and in some cases multiple field directors. The precise size of the operation remains a bit of a

mystery, though I offer an informed estimate, piecing together available information, of the number of

paid staff nationwide in October 2009 at 125-150.

OFA activities in the early stages of the organization, indeed even as early as December, before

the official announcement, appeared to be directed toward sustaining the interest and involvement of

the campaign supporters in an ongoing effort to support the new president, yet under parameters that

had yet to be determined. In other words, OFA was feeling its way. In December 2008, the nascent OFA

activists reportedly held 4,500 house parties nationwide, though the precise purpose was unclear.

House parties, a technique promoted first nationally in the 2004 Howard Dean nomination campaign,

are meant to bring together like-minded political people, neighbors often, in a small, intimate gathering.

In some respects this is an orchestrated version of structures and relationships among party regulars

that marked the distant past of party politics in the U.S. However, the precise purpose of house parties

at this juncture for OFA was ambiguous, beyond providing a venue to engage activists at a time

traditionally marked by inactivity. Indeed, everything typically crashes to a hault after an election.

A later push for house parties in February coincided with congressional consideration of the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the "stimulus package," which was the first major legislative

initiative of the new administration. Reportedly fewer in number, these house parties seemed to vary in

effectiveness.   For example, while some 100 house parties had been scheduled in the greater Atlanta

vicinity during December, there were 38 house parties at the time of the stimulus debate. Furthermore, the purpose for the gatherings was unclear. Told by the President by e-mail that "I need your help to spread the word and build support," house party attendees were not necessarily advised what should follow.   "It was unclear exactly what people were supposed to do, other than watch a streaming video from [OFA] and talk about it."[8] Participants were not systematically asked to contact legislators, or otherwise mobilized to "service", an OFA push that would come later in the spring and summer. Yet other participants found the experience of attending a "stimulus party" valuable and inspiring. Commentary on a gathering of 36 people in a Maryland home reports that group leaders distributed "information-packed handouts" after an initial "30-40 minutes [of attendees] sharing their stories." Later, break-out sessions focused on issue areas which were included in the stimulus and on a plan-of-action to contact members of Congress.[9]

The budget was the second major legislative initiative that engaged OFA; the timing of this involvement was coterminous with the first listening tours. As the budget debate waged during March in Washington, a significant coalition of interests formed in opposition to the president. This included not only Republicans, but some of the Presidents fellow-partisans, most notably a number of moderate Democrats.   OFA called up the troops for a weekend of canvassing in late March, with volunteers asking people to sign a "pledge" – a petition really – that would eventually be delivered to Congress. Canvassers were also asked to encourage people to take direct action by visiting the OFA website and then contacting members of Congress directly in order to convey popular support for their president. This campaign garnered significant attention, including that from traditional news media, which in other

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[8] Garner, Marcus K. 2009. "Grass-roots network may be "tapped out."   *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. February 9.
[9] Quinn, Sean. "OFA 2.0, and A Stimulating "Working Session" in Maryland." www.538.com. February 9, 2009.

cases of OFA coverage, seems to be eclipsed by new media outlets and the blogosphere.[10] During this

late March period, Obama voices walked a fine line between touting the novelty of the effort and

keeping expectations intact. David Plouffe emphasized the desirability of the "conversation" and

debates about politics occurring on "doorsteps and diners", not just "on cable TV among Washington

politicians". He acknowledged, at the same time, that "[t]here will be some trial and error".[11]

Even as OFA turned more directly to mobilization activities, it continued to work on organization

building, naming state directors and field directors well into the summer. It also encouraged activists to

engage the local party organizations – to attend precinct committee meetings and otherwise work to

enlist the formal party in the OFA effort. The operation made a deliberate effort to draw activists and

the party organizations into service activities on an ongoing basis, but especially as directed toward a

"National Health Care Day of Service" in late June. This service-day campaign and others like it have

been highlighted by President and Mrs. Obama, who espouse a personal commitment to community

service. And it dovetailed with the emerging health care policy battle. That said, this sort of activity is

something quite new for traditional party organizations, which have historically focused their efforts

more narrowly and directly to the election of candidates under the party label (Cotter *et al. 1984*,

Aldrich 2000). Undoubtedly many party leaders and activists have a service-oriented impulse at a

personal level. And, in fact, service might even indirectly advance the cause of the party and its

candidates, by engendering positive reactions among the community. Still, it remains that community

service, first and foremost, serves a narrow, instrumental purpose for both the traditional party and for

organizations like OFA. Cynical as the idea may seem, service is a vehicle to sustain engagement of

activists between election seasons and, as such, helps fulfill organization-building goals.

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[10] The Huffington Post, Politico, and Marc Ambinder, blogging in *The Atlantic,* have offered thorough and insightful commentary in 2009 on OFA.
[11] Zeleny, 2009.

Summer OFA mobilization activities began with a dual focus, but one quickly surpassed the other. OFA efforts directed at supporting the confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court focused on encouraging its ranks to "Stand with Sotomayor" – to contact senators and to write letters to the editor, both activities facilitated by the communications technology embedded in the OFA website. But prospects for confirmation congealed, essentially when Sotomayor testified before the Justice Committee in the third week in July. Senator Lindsey Graham's (R-SC) comments reflect this with unmistaken clarity: "Unless you have a complete meltdown, you are going to get confirmed." In light of this momentum in the nominee's favor, OFA turned its undivided attention to its other major concern of the summer, one with a prospect much less certain: health care reform.[12]

The health care campaign of summer and fall 2009 represents the most ambitious initiative yet of OFA, as it tries to insert itself into the policy-making process; it is certainly also the longest continual effort in the organization's short history. Analytically, the case is important because it reveals the fundamental difficulty of sustaining activism in pursuit of an outcome decidedly less conclusive than winning an election. And it also exposes those fault lines that exist within the organization and, once again, between the organization and others in the party.

The dynamics of the health care reform debate of 2009 are fluid, at this point still ongoing; it is all too apparent that the terrain of the debate changes routinely. OFA activities and involvement, similarly, have been fluid. In June, as the debate inched its way toward congressional consideration, OFA asked its activists to be, in effect, conduits for the dissemination of information potentially relative to the health care debate. They were urged to participate in letter-writing campaigns, both to members of Congress and newspapers, in doing so pushing the same tactic – at the same time – that it used in the Sotomayor contest. But with health care, OFA experimented with new techniques. For example, it asked members to collect "health insurance horror stories" to post online.   E-mail recipients were urged

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[12] OFA was largely silent and inactive on "cap and trade" as it worked its way through the House in June.

to create "Phone booths," that is impromptu public gatherings in which cell-phone users approximate a traditional phone bank, both to convey messages via telephone and to garner public and media attention for their ingenuity.

As OFA activity ramped up in July, so did a debate about strategy among prominent Democratic voices and even among OFA activists. An intra-party fault had formed between the congressional "Blue Dogs" and more liberal ranks of the party, especially on the topic of whether the "public option" should be included in the White House proposal. This prompted a strategic dilemma of sorts for reform advocates. Given Republican opposition, the president needed the support of the moderate Democrats. But to pressure them, especially on the matter of a public option – considering that many represented moderate Democratic constituencies – could endanger the members themselves, and possibly threaten their support of a more watered-down package that might well emerge in time. Put differently, the strategic concerns weighed short- and long-term prospects, all in an environment of considerable uncertainty about what would eventually happen. Unsurprisingly, given these circumstances and Democratic propensity toward factional division, internal party conflicts emerged in full measure.

One ad run by the DNC, promoted by OFA, was generally positive in tone, arguing that "it is now time" for reform. But at that point, the president maintained his insistence on a public option, so the placement of the ad in districts of wavering Democrats appeared to be a strong-arm tactic, a threat to fellow partisans whose support of a public option was questionable. The ad ran in about 20 media markets. Majority leader Harry Reid spoke up, saying that "[i]t's a waste of money to run ads from Democrats attacking Democrats." But at about the same time, OFA ventured into the fray directly, with some of its supporters resorting to confrontational tactics – demonstrations outside offices, for example – of congressional Blue Dogs. More forcefully, MoveOn, now approaching a decade as a prominent grassroots voice of the left, actually ran attack ads at the end of July targeting Democratic congressmen who didn't support the president. During the next month, Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel weighed in on

the issue, only with more colorful language than Senator Reid had used. Emanuel reportedly called

Democrat-on-Democrat attacks "fucking stupid." July had exposed the underlying tension within the

Democratic Party, as the details of policy emerged and were negotiated. Indeed OFA was a part of the

tension, to the extent that it supported voices that seemed to prioritize the details of a particular policy

position – and the president – over the party itself. In some measure, this tension was heightened by

the pressure imposed by the president's insistence that health care legislation pass through both

chambers by the recess.

At about the same time that Democratic infighting emerged, there was a growing awareness

that despite the promise of a new politics with this president, in many ways the health care contest

represented politics as usual. Figures released earlier in the summer had highlighted the extraordinary

sums spent on lobbying by interests in the health care industry on both sides of the issue. *CQ*

MoneyLine reported that the health sector had spent $149 Million on lobbying in 2009. And the media

devoted considerable attention to the inside politics of the Senate Finance committee, with its

bipartisan "gang of six" plodding toward a compromise, and the House committee hung up on its 1,000

page bill, trying to build support among a set of varied Democratic interests. This included some new

Democratic members who represented affluent districts, exerting strong, anti-tax sentiment within the

party.[13] As the recess approached with no chance of legislative accomplishment, OFA began to mobilize

for the next battle, its biggest push thus far to mobilize activists – through traditional and new means –

to express their support for reform when members were back in their districts for the August recess.

OFA's August and September arsenal of activities was wide-ranging, at times "shot gun" in

quality. It devoted considerable effort to mobilizing supporters to the recess "town hall" meetings,

especially to offer a counterweight to vocal and disruptive anti-reform forces whose voices dominated in

many settings. It reactivated the house party technique and experimented with some new tools on the

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[13] Weisman, Jonathan. "Democrats' new Worry: Their Own Rich Voters." *The Wall Street Journal*. July 20, 2009.

web portal.   And it made an apparent one-time use of a robo-call in August, in this case after the death of Senator Kennedy asking supporters to "take the opportunity to pay tribute to the late Ted Kennedy."

As the health care battle waged over the summer and fall, OFA routinely returned to the activity that had so marked its success during the campaign: fundraising. Indeed, from January through October, OFA regularly made fundraising appeals to its supporters. A noteworthy October campaign was framed as an effort to fund television ads, in order to bring the compelling stories of reform supporters to the American viewers.   One prominent component featured "the cavalry," doctors and nurses in white who would offer heart-wrenching accounts of Americans, whose health and lives had been compromised by their lack of access to insurance and treatments.

With appeals like these and with its repeated attempts to mobilize activists, OFA has attempted to affect the policy-making process, hoping to rally support for the president's initiatives. Its techniques are sometimes new, at other times versions of established ones. And while it appears ready to tailor in a flash its strategy to the twists and turns of the policy debate, it also appears to continue to "feel its way," some nine months after it formed.

Something New?

When OFA emerged on the political scene in early 2009, it was touted as an innovative organization.   However, to leave it at that ignores the important story about the diffusion and development of new political structures and campaign activities that provides the historical context and the practical foundation for OFA.   OFA neither invented nor *re*invented the wheel, but it did reposition it.

On an abstract level, OFA represents one cog in President Obama's approach to party leadership that confirms the he is perpetuating the idea of a partisan presidency, so clearly a departure from the dominant model of the second half of the 20th century. To lead by means of the party was an approach

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challenged by FDR, who oversaw the expansion of the administrative capacity of the presidency and

who as a result, substituted the exercise of executive power for party power.   Indeed, under FDR, the

Democratic Party became "the party to end all parties." (Milkis 1993, 5) But in time, the pendulum

returned. The election of Ronald Reagan ushered in a new era in which the president both exercised

control over the party and used the party to accomplish his political goals. If FDR was the "modern"

president, in light of his use of the modern administrative state to govern, then Ronald Reagan and his

successors returned to a partisan approach. Perhaps no president did this more forcefully than George

W. Bush, a consummate partisan president who even perfected the use of the administrative state for

partisan ends (Skinner 2007; Milkis and Rhodes 2009.)

While the stage is still early for President Obama, his approach appears to resemble his

precessor on at least one count: his attempt to place his imprimatur on the party and to use the party

as a tool of governing. President Obama does this, though, at the same time that he adopts rhetoric of

bipartisanship and a strong impulse to stay above the fray. Somewhat ironically, it is his partisan

approach to the presidency that permits him to try to transcend party politics.

The record thus far seems to support the contention that Obama is cut from the Bush mold. He

moved quickly and with assuredness to make his mark on the party, even before his nomination, with

the placement of Tewes at the DNC. And once elected, he turned to his ally and friend Tim Kaine to be

his voice at the DNC as in-party chairman. As details of the Obama appointment process emerge, we

see some of his practices that might enhance a sense of obligation that Democratic members of

Congress feel toward him.[14]   And recently he has ventured into territory typically off-limits to

presidents, urging New York Governor David Paterson not to run for election 2010.[15]

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[14] He departs from strict dictates of senatorial courtesy in some cases, favoring a process that ensures a consensus choice emerges from the entire state Democratic delegation.
[15] On one level, this resembles FDR's attempted purge of conservative Democrats from the party in 1938. But in so far as "the purge was hastily contrived and its execution amateurish," FDR looks like a president without a real

If President Obama resembles his predecessor in his general orientation as a partisan, he does

as well with respect to OFA, at least as the entity was sketched out at its origin.   OFA looks like a George

W. Bush initiative, run by Ken Mehlman, former Bush-Cheney campaign manager, then chairman of the

RNC. This initiative, described by Edwards (2009), drawing from *The Washington Post* coverage, is

marked by the following:

> [A] national database of 7.5 million e-mail activists, 1.6 million volunteers, and hundreds of
> thousands of neighborhood precinct captains – to build congressional support for Bush's plans,
> starting with Social Security. (197)

Apparently the brainchild of Karl Rove and Mehlman, the Axelrod/Plouffe team of the day, the Bush-era

entity is in some respects a vivid precedent for OFA. But it did not accomplish much. "What was

probably the largest and best-organized public relations effort to sell a policy in the history of the

Republic ended with a whimper –and in failure." (Edwards 2009, 198) Nonetheless, OFA resembles with

eerie similarity the description of President Bush's policy-promoting initiative.

There are other precedents as well. In fact, in terms of basic structure, OFA looks like a typical

national electoral campaign in its nascent stages. But perhaps more aptly, it looks a lot like such

organizations as MoveOn, which rely heavily on their e-mail lists and have remarkably small staff.

Indeed, over the last decade, the "netroots" organizations of the left have developed and refined those

same organizational tactics and activities that Obama for America pursued before the election, and that

OFA has pursued during this last year.

The close connection between what OFA does and what Obama for America did prompts some

to refer to OFA as the "permanent campaign." This particularly powerful image, because it also

resonates with the idea that in time – perhaps in 12-18 months – OFA well be reinvented again, this

time returning to a stark electoral orientation. But in perhaps the most significant connotation, OFA is a

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interest in strong party leadership. (Dunn, Susan. "All the President's Meddling." *The New York Times*. October 4,
2009.)

permanent campaign in the sense that Hugh Helco used the term. It is an entity that permits "a *nonstop*

process of seeking to manipulate sources of public approval to engage in the act of governing itself."

(Ornstein/Mann 2000 [quoting Heclo], 219.   But this is far from new. Ronald Reagan cast the die when

he appealed to the public on television to contact their congressmen and to push for support on

Reagan's tax-cut initiative. The permanent campaign has simply been taken to extraordinary levels in

the intervening years (Edwards 2007)

In many ways OFA is an extension of structures and activities that have marked the politics of

the 21st century. In this sense, even its reliance on cutting edge communications technology is a step in

a natural progression, one that we have seen move from elections to governing, and now even to

government, as seen in the Obama administrations foray into what has become known as "Gov 2.0."

OFA offers a dizzying number of new communication technologies to engage its supporters. Activists

who visit the BarackObama.com website, whether mobilized by e-mails from OFA or otherwise inspired,

find a visually active – at times downright busy – site, bombarding the viewer with offers of more

information and invitations and tools to participate. It is "Web 2.0" in orientation, promoting

interaction, not simple passive viewership, and facilitating person-to-person exchanges and on-line

communities. To the Facebook generation, this is familiar territory. To the over-35 crowd, it may be a

bit daunting.

Though the content of the website and the activities promoted change frequently, three things

remain constant. First, the OFA logo is everywhere; it visually greets the viewer as the page opens, and

it peppers the entire site.   Second, sapphire blue dominates the color scheme; it is drawn from the logo,

presidential in feel, reminiscent of the blue in the seal of the president and the oval office. And third,

despite its dynamic quality and the routine introduction of new material and offers, the site consistently

buries the link to the DNC, at a minimum forcing the viewer to scroll beyond the first screen. The clear

message emanating from the site is that OFA is an Obama-centric effort.[16]

Visitors who register with BarackObama.com gain entre to my.BO and its arsenal of activities

and opportunities: form a phone booth, create a blog, receive text messages, participate in an on-line

video challenge or an on-line conference call – and track your activities and progress. While this may all

seem new and foreign to some, it is quickly becoming a *modus operandi* of politics. And while some of

the individual techniques have been invented by OFA, the most significant, new aspect of all of this is

that OFA is housed in the party. That, indeed, is path-breaking.

Effectiveness

Milkis and Rhodes (2009) posed that important question of whether OFA would be as effective

as its earlier campaign iteration. Granted, from a social scientific perspective, judging effectiveness is a

particularly difficult task. But drawing from a variety of sources, there is a consistent picture that

emerges about OFA's effectiveness, in particular as it is directed toward affecting public policy in a way

consistent with President Obama's goals.

The challenge of judging empirically the effectiveness of the organization is due in part to the

unavailability of good data.   Even basic measurements of the capacity of this entity – basic descriptions

– are more elusive than for other political organizations. OFA's shroud of secrecy contributes to the

problem.   Still, the available evidence suggests that the structures in place and the activities actually

undertaken are but a fraction of what characterized Obama for America during the campaign.   Of

course, one first concern is to know something about those activists who names and e-mail addresses

reside on the list. Though the list is top secret, we can infer some qualities from available information.

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[16] While similar in color scheme, the DNC website is more static in approach, though at times promoting or piggy-backing on OFA efforts. The DNC link to BarackObama.com is similarly buried toward the bottom of the screen. State OFA websites vary with respect to mimicking the main website.

First, the list is in-house and separate from that of the DNC. Obama for America, during the campaign, was keen to keep proprietary control over its list, while still contributing to the larger Democratic effort to build and refine lists. In fact, 2008 was a breakthrough year in general for Democrats in this regard, having historically lagged behind Republicans in terms of detailed and workable list. The notable "Voter Vault" and the "72-hour project" of the GOP had been the centerpiece of the party's successful GOTV in the recent past. And despite Democratic stabs at list refinement and mobilization since as early as 20O0, their efforts paled in comparison to the Republicans'.

The situation in 2008 was markedly different, with the party and many left-leaning organization contributing to a for-profit data management consortium, Catalist, run by Bill Clinton-ites Harold Ickes and Laura Quinn. This, in conjunction with the "VAN," and other web-based platforms by which party and campaign workers (including canvassers in the field) updated voter records, put the Democrats on par with, possibly even in advance of, the GOP for the first time ever.[17] The DNC and Obama for America both contracted with Catalist during the 2008 campaign, and the DNC continues to use its services. Yet it appears that the OFA list operation is not dependent on Catalist efforts.

Descriptions that emerged after the election shed some light on the campaign's own techniques for list management and innovation. One can presume that OFA continues in the same vein when possible. In 2008, the campaign worked to refine the list in light of complementary information provided about voters and activists – e.g., through polling and canvassing – which was collected during the campaign. To the extent, however, that this information, standard for an electoral campaign, is not present in the governing stage, one can infer that the task of list management is more difficult for OFA than it was for the campaign. Certainly, the "13 million" designation that has gotten so much play over

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[17] Marc Ambinder's release in early October 2009 of the Catalist report on its 2008 efforts, prepared for its client organizations, offers to the larger community a unique window on the operations of this firm. Along with other reports about 2008, including the August 2009 Colin Delany report on on-line communications and the Obama campaign and a 2009 M&R Strategic Services benchmark study of non-profits, a clear picture is emerging about state-of-the art lists and techniques, especially on the left.

the entire life of OFA masks some flaws in the system. E-mails erroneously directed to a "student,"

presumably because of the presence of an ".edu" domain, suggests that OFA may not be doing the sort

sophisticated list enhancement that is offered by such firms as "Catalist." One even wonders about the

size of the list. It is not uncommon for individuals to be registered with OFA under two e-mail different

addresses.   And most certainly in the nine months of its OFA-life, the list has experienced some "churn,"

with activists unsubscribing or otherwise discontinuing their involvement. At the same time, some

undoubtedly have been added to the list.   Yet it remains, whether too high or too low, that "13 million"

is a value that seems set in stone.

        To judge the list as an embodiment of the organization, one needs to know something about the

live person on the receiving end. This is only possible to the extent that the e-mail recipients respond in

some way. Though no data are currently available that address this specifically for OFA, we do know

that the "open rate" for non-profits hovers around 16%. That is, on average 16% of the total number of

messages sent by an organization are opened.[18] Precisely what this implies for OFA is not entirely clear.

Certainly presence on the list is taken as an indication of membership in the organization. And to expect

someone to open an e-mail seems like an incredibly low hurdle to confirm membership. At the same

time, e-mail is but one of the means of communication between OFA and its members, and even among

members, with a plethora of other options (e.g., social networking, texting, Twittering) available. Yet all

things considered, logic would hold that the size of the list that would emerge if it were cleaned and

contained only those who pass some minimal – even nominal – criterion like opening an e-mail, would

be considerably less than 13 million. Still, the reputation of the e-mail list is strong. In its consideration

of the best e-mail lists, POLITICO ranks the OFA list as number one. "It is in a league of its own, not only

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[18]   There are more stringent standards for recipient action beyond merely opening an e-mail. The response rate refers to percentage of respondents who take the action requested by the email (e.g., call your member of Congress, contribute money).   While the response rate for advocacy messages is under 5%, it is under 1% for fundraising appeals (M+R Strategic Services and the Nonprofit Technology Network, 2009.)

in terms of size, but with regards to its management."[19] Second and third places in the POLITICO ranking

go to MoveOn and the RNC respectively.

Even In-house mail operations generally have the ability to track easily the response to their

appeals. In all likelihood, OFA knows who opens an e-mail, who follows a web-link, and even who

forwards the appeal to someone else. And evidence from the campaign era suggests that the

organization would use this information to finely tune appeals.

> Campaign staff would frequently break their supporter list…into several randomized groups,
> whose members would then receive different emails based on the message or feature being
> tested…[With] the results in hand (messages opened, actions taken, donations made)… the
> team could apply this information to the next round of emails" (Delany 2009, 34-35).

This assess-and-modify approach is representative or a more general observation about the mindset of

the campaign. Namely, it developed tools and techniques that were sufficient and then "incrementally

improved them through testing and experience." (Delany 2009, 17.)   It looked beyond the short term,

and envisioned a more-effective arsenal in time. This is actually an approach more easily undertaken

with the luxury of time than under the tight constraints of an election campaign.[20]

Some measures that attempt to tap into the extent of the activity of those OFA activists, and

even begin to address the effectiveness of OFA appeals, though their reliability and validity as measures

of either is somewhat suspect. YouTube viewership of OFA's YouTube channel is tracked by TubeMogul.

Figure 1 shows viewership from June through the beginning of October, 2009. Notice that there is

considerable fluctuation on a daily basis, with some remarkable spikes over the time span. September

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[19] Vogel, Kenneth P. 2009. "The best e-mail lists in politics." *POLITICO.* May 24, 2009.

[20] There is a rapidly growing sector in the campaign profession that focuses on "analytics," a practice derived from the business/marketing world that involves designing small-scale studies to be undertaken in a short period of time, in order to judge the effectiveness of appeals. In politics, this approach seems to have been inspired as well by the deluge of studies employing field experiments of the last decade, many of which emanate from Yale and follow in the path of Donald Green and Alan Gerber.   Cornfield (2009) asserts that there has been much practical research in this "analytics" spirit undertaken on turnout techniques over the last decade.   But this notion of collecting information and adjusting would be quite foreign to many experienced politicos. Ari Fleischer talks about his time in the George W. Bush White House, noting that there was "so little time to look back and take stock." Because of this, gut responses substituted for empirical analysis (Edwards [citing Kumar] 2007, 77)

13th was the day that the president addressed the United Nations general assembly. And on September

23rd, the OFA YouTube channel showed the Steve Kroft "6O Minutes" interview with the president,

which was aired just days after Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) interrupted President Obama's address

to a joint session of Congress with shout of "You lie." [21]

Figure 1
Viewership of Obama YouTube Channel
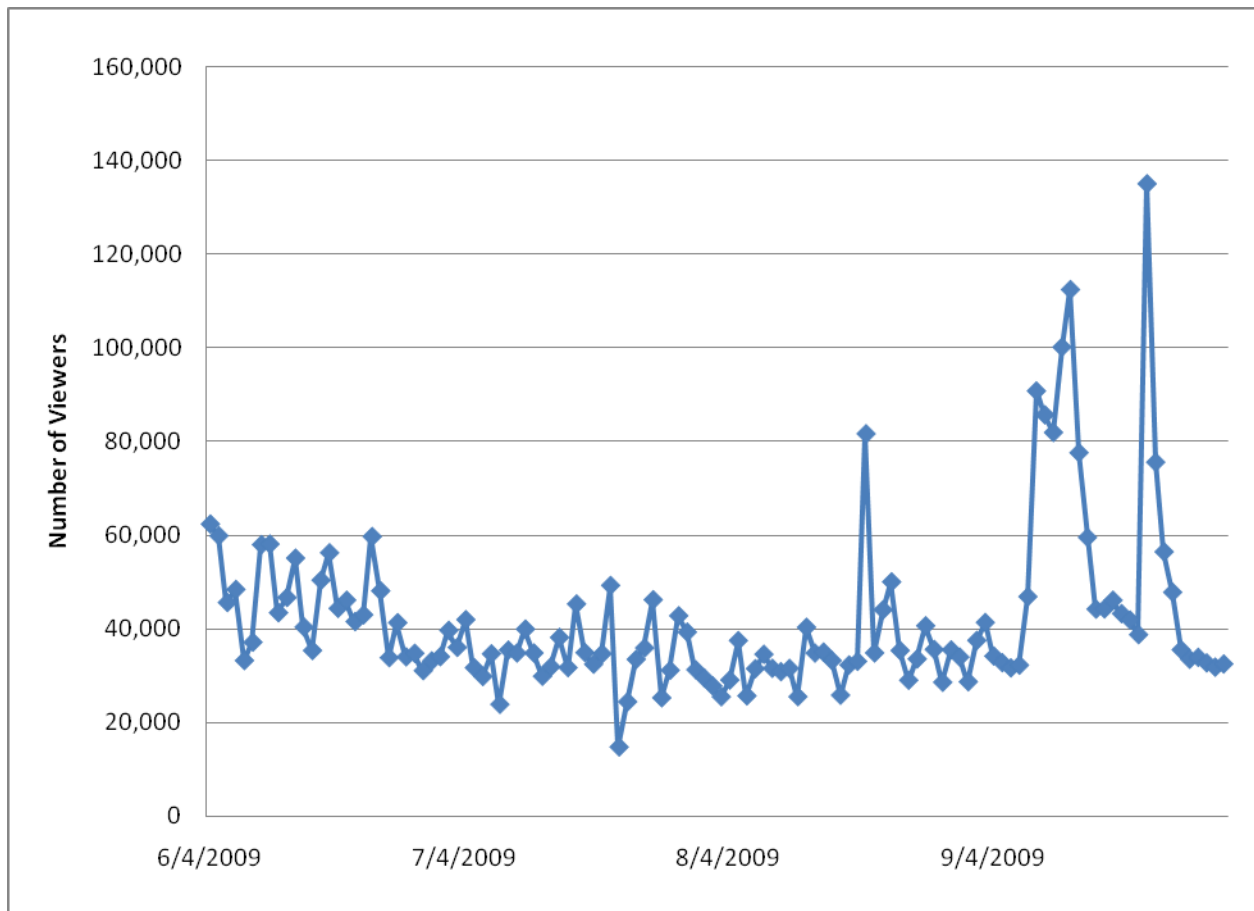
Note: TubeMogul data.

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[21] A YouTube "view" simply means each instance the video is started, which can obscure a variety of information. A single visitor can start the same video multiple times. And a viewer can play a video for a few seconds or in its entirety; the "view" measure does not distinguish. TubeMogul research on "top video sites" finds that the typical view is very short. (YouTube was not one of the sites.) On average, 10% of views are for less than ten seconds. A three minute video will be viewed in its entirety in only about 17% of the views. (TubeMogul, "How Much of a Typical Video Online is Actually Watched?")

With the exception of the spikes in views in late summer and early fall, there is a slight downward trend

shown over this time frame. OFA YouTube viewership in summer and fall, however, falls far short of the

levels established during the campaign and even at the outset of the new administration[22]

Of courses, there is no clear way to identify *who* is part of the on-line traffic; it can just as easily

be the mobilized opposition as it is supporters. But it does seem clear that considering the various OFA

social networking activities, the texts, the Twitters, and the other tools of MyBO.com, OFA has

generated a certain degree of activity among real supporters. Still, on a very concrete level this is little

more than an interesting phenomenon. Something more has to happen for it to be significant

politically. In the words of Mitt Romney's communications director from the nomination campaign,

"Converting the online buzz to offline activity, that's the Holy Grail."[23] The discussion thus far has

focused primarily on measures that speak most directly to the size or the extent of the organization and

activities that relate to it, which could arguably be cast as a measure of effectiveness. However,

reaching supporters is different than engaging them enough to become offline-active. With this

standard in mind, it looks like OFA has not experienced overwhelming success.   Data on money, as well

as impressions of the extent to which OFA mobilizes its supporters, both speak to this.

Measured in terms of contributions to their national committees, Democrats lag behind

Republicans. Because OFA's finances are indistinguishable from those of the DNC – at least as revealed

in FEC data – this measure is not ideal. But it shows that the image of endless money entering the

Obama coffers, though applicable to the campaign, does not characterize OFA.   This is the message of

Figure 2. Of course the GOP advantage in monthly receipts during January is stark, outpacing the

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[22] Facebook friends are marked by the opposite trend. On Election Day, Barack Obama had 2.4 million friends, compared to John McCain's .6 million. But after a sizable boost in friends in February and early March, when the president had 6.0 million friends, his numbers climbed just a bit more to the 6.6 million mark on September 1, 2009. (Facebook data fromTechPresident.com.)

[23] Ryan Grim. "Campaigns seek measure of Internet success." *Politico.com*. October 23, 2007

Democrats 4-to-1, and contributing to a nice cash-on-hand cushion which extends over the entire time frame. Indeed, after the third quarter (not shown), The Republicans held $21.0 million on hand, compared to only $15.3 million for the Democrats. [24] Notably, for the entire time frame, the RNC carried no debt. The DNC, on the other hand, just whittled away at its debt, moving to a still-significant $5.3 million by the end of August.

Despite the poor Democratic performance in January of 2009, for the remainder of the time shown, the monthly lead in receipts went back and forth between the parties. It is worth noting, however, that the March DNC lead would be erased, if not for the $2 million transferred from the president's campaign organization to the DNC. All and all, the DNC, though on reasonably solid ground after a good part of a year controlling the presidency, does not appear to reap huge financial benefit from being the in-party. And though OFA's role in this is not clear, one can surmise that it is not pulling in the sort of cash that Democrats had envisioned. The money situation for the Hill committees is a little different. The DCCC, in particular has seen considerable success in fundraising over 2009, with banner months in March and June, drawing in $7.2 Million and $10.2 million respectively. The DCCC, however, carries sizable debt over the year as well, for example $4.7 million at the end of the third quarter.

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[24] Cash-on-hand and debt figures taken from The Center for Responsive Politics.

Figure 2
National Committee Monthly Receipts
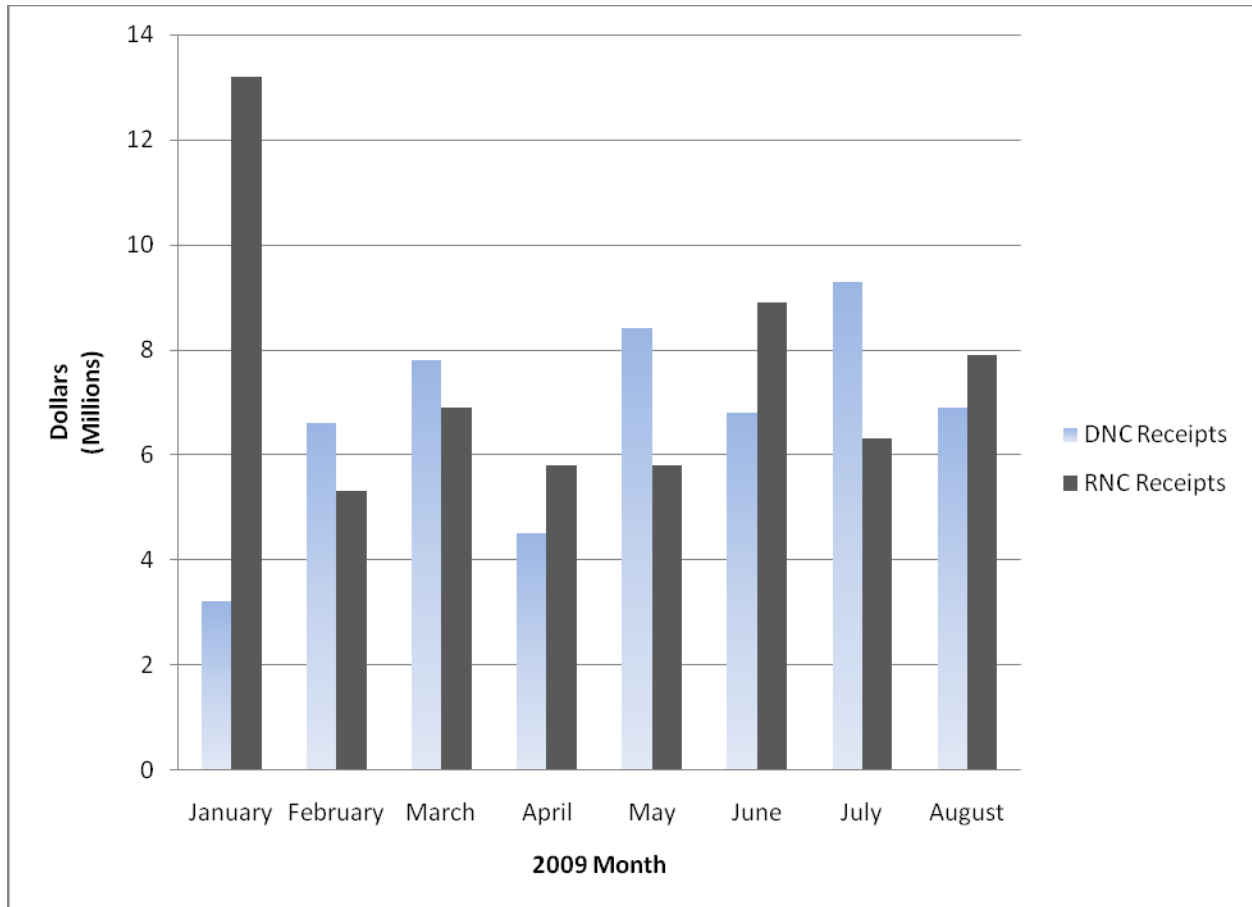
Note: Data compiled from *CQ MoneyLine* and Swing State Project, both of which report FEC monthly receipts.

    The limited data of a systematic character, along with the qualitative judgment of observers,

points to a judgment that OFA efforts have not been very effective. Its efforts to mobilize the activist

base seem to have been met with limited success.   Campaigns to produce petitions, to deliver

supporters to meetings, to get letters placed on editorial pages – and to garner positive media

attention, for that matter – all seem marked by modest results.[25]   To deliver 214,000 petition signatures

to Congress after the vigorous budget campaign seems somewhat unimpressive when compared to the

reported size of the list; it is the equivalent of .02% of the 13 million. At the same time, observers have

pointed out that for a congressional office, 1000 signatures offering support of the president on the

budget can effectively balance the 1000 calls, faxes and e-mails that might have been sent by opposition

forces. Furthermore, to deliver 200-300 bodies to a recess town hall could balance or even overwhelm a

strong anti-reform turnout. In other words, in order to understand the effect of the mobilization

activities of OFA, one needs to consider the targeted nature of the appeals. It is quite possible that with

this mind, OFA has been more effective than otherwise estimated.

However, the qualitative judgment of the traditional and new media, as well as some academic

voices who weigh in, over the life of the organization and certainly now in the fall of 2009, is skeptical.

Political scientist Thomas Mann, commenting on the petition-drive of spring budget campaign, called it

"a pretty lame start to the effort, and largely inconsequential to the outcome".[26]   On the issue of health

care reform, Harold Myerson of *The Washington Post* acknowledged the efforts of OFA and its activists,

but offered a biting prediction: "All very commendable, and about as likely to affect the outcome of the

health-care deliberations as the phases of the moon." [27]

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[25] The following describes a mini-study in which I enlisted the help of a student research assistant to track placement of OFA-inspired letters for two weeks in the summer. This was at a time when the OFA website and e-mail encouraged activists to use an on-line tool to locate newspapers and to send off letters-to-the-editor in support of Sonia Sotomayor and health care reform. The student monitored 16 of the newspapers linked by the tool for 15 consecutive days (i.e., June 24-July 8). Of the 1,182 published over this time frame in these papers, 82 (14%) dealt with health care or the confirmation. About a quarter of those 82 showed any signs of OFA influence – either in terms of substance or style as it was reflected in the templates offered on the OFA website. Granted there are numerous limitations to this small empirical study. Still, it offers little supper for the image of effective letter-to-the editor campaign.

[26] Eggen, Dan. "Obama's Machine Sputters in Effort to Push Budget." *The Washington Post*. A03. April 6, 2009.

[27] Myerson, Harold. "An Army Untapped." *The Washington Post*. July 8, 2009.

Undeniably there is some foundation to this skepticism. But there also seems have emerged a tendency, especially among the new media, to find newsworthy the fiascos and debacles of OFA.   Under one such account, myBO.com offered a "Tweet your Senator" tool, provided activists with pre-loaded Tweets – a "Tweetbomb." However, in one case it used the wrong e-mail address, thereby bombarding an innocent bystander with Tweets.[28]   A similar flop occurred with another myBO.com tool.   Blogging for *Mother Jones*, Sonja Sharp describes Senator Diane Feinstein's (CA) dissatisfaction with OFA, after it offered activists access to an "appointments widget," that led some constituents to believe that they had really scheduled appointment with the Senator. In light of this, Sharp asks a pointed question: "Is Organizing for America making itself a nuisance?"[29] At the same time, OFA does some creative things. When "death panels" entered the lexicon of health care reform in late summer, OFA purchased ads on Google to accompany the results of a Google search on the term. Shown at the right of the screen under "Sponsored Links," the advertisement read: "They [Death Panels] Don't Exist. Obama's Plan Will Protect Seniors. Get the Facts Now!" The ad also provided a link to OFA, which, if followed, offered the death-panel Google-searcher with an array of OFA communications tools to help dispel the rumor.

Anecdotes may illustrate both limitations and potential of technology, but in the end judgment about the effectiveness of OFA, at least in the short term, will likely rely heavily on the outcome of health care reform.   If something significant passes, then OFA will be paraded as a success. But if the reform effort falls short, it will be seen as complicit in failure.   In either case, it will be judged not necessarily by true indications of its impact, but by inferences drawn from the outcome, an outcome of a complex political process.   Just as election outcomes provide little insight into their own meaning (Dahl 1990) and into the identification of what worked and didn't work (Hershey 1984), so too would the message inherent in the policy outcome be subject to interpretation.

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[28] Chrisholm, Karl. " DNC tries to TwitterBomb Jeff Merkley, Misfires. Badly. *Blue Oregon* (blog). July 29, 2009.
[29] Sonja Sharp, "UPDATE: Organizing for America's Health Care Visit Debacle." *Mother Jones (blog)*, August 12, 2009 (www.motherjones.com)

Discussion

OFA faces some fundamental challenges in carving out a productive role for itself in the realm of policy. Two seem particularly pressing, the first dealing with a challenge of sorts from within and the second from without. Keeping the former in mind, the activists on whom OFA relies so heavily are pulled in directions not necessarily conducive to the organization.

Certainly a sense of exhaustion, at least figuratively, marked many Obama for America activists, who worked so hard for the campaign, some literally for more than a year. This, of course, is precisely what OFA fought to overcome. But even for those activists for whom there was still room for political activity, other agenda items vied for their attention. Local issues can pull away activists from involvement with the entity, which is focused on the national level. Gay marriage, for example, returned to the policy agenda in states, with notable developments in Iowa and Vermont motivating activists on both sides.   Local off-year electoral contests, and even national issues that are not among those highlighted by the organization, exert on activists a pull away from OFA. For those who have remained active within the organization into the fall, I sense some growing disillusionment, a feeling that the appeals to contact members of Congress will never end, nor will the requests for money. Indeed, the beauty of the typical electoral campaign is that it is over at some known point, but a policy campaign can go on, seemingly, forever. And though the public has grown to accept that it plays an important role in financing electoral campaigns, it is arguably hard for activists to understand why the president continues to ask for their money to advance his policy agenda.

The challenge from above comes from an embarrassment of riches, a massive and active set of organizations on the left, some well-funded, many with creative leaders and active grassroots support – all reinvigorated from the outcome of the 2008 election. But this massive progressive force is not monolithic; its policy foci vary – from the environment, to concerns unique to labor, to international

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aspects of human rights. And despite new efforts to coordinate the left – especially in DC – at some

critical point the dynamics become zero-sum. There is only so much space on the policy agenda, so

many activists to mobilize and so much money available to raise.   It would seem that the Obama

administration has situated itself firmly in this progressive nexus. Top Obama insiders are reportedly

regulars at the weekly Tuesday meeting of the "Common Purpose Project." But there is no clear role for

OFA in this arrangement. And at a minimum, OFA is just one of many voices and organizations of the

left.

There is also a second challenge from outside of the organization – namely, the realities of

policy-making that maintain that strong dose of *politics as usual*, with critical details hammered out in

committee chambers, replete with tradeoffs and compromise, and even occasionally with deliberation.

In its starkest form, the "permanent campaign"- aspect to OFA does not lend itself to the "cooperation,

negotiation, and compromise" (Edwards [citing Heclo] 2007, 286) necessary under the typical mode of

governing.

All of this is to say that perhaps we should look beyond the realm of public policy for signs of

OFA effectiveness. Three areas in particular come to mind; the first involves future electoral efforts.

Sometime well before the 2012 contest, President Obama will in all likelihood reactivate the famed list

for the purpose of his reelection bid. To the extent that the ongoing work of OFA will make it easier and

more productive, OFA may serve a useful purpose for the President. Until then, it walks a fine line,

needing to approach but stop short of that legal thread that separates a party from a campaign

organization. Undoubtedly, the GOP is watching this carefully.

A second realm of impact or effectiveness is less pragmatically instrumental; it involves a bit of a

pipedream, in the possibility that there could be some currency in OFA as a device to help change the

culture of politics, to facilitate citizen's ongoing attention and involvement. Over the last two decades,

organized interests on the left and the right have done this quite effectively, while the parties have

barely made an effort.   To instill in citizens a sense of meaning as a partisan, whose political

involvements and connections are central to their lives is a noble goal. Of course, emphasizing a person

over a party may not be the way to go about this. And admittedly as well, the image of OFA and its

activists spinning their wheels will unlikely contribute to a real culture change.

Finally, scholars and practitioners alike should give due consideration to the idea that OFA is, in

reality, an experiment. It is an experiment both in terms of structuring a party organization and utilizing

the new technologies offered to politics. Reflect on the merits of placing such a candidate-centered

organization at the party. Assess objectively the techniques and the technologies associated with OFA.

As we are reminded, "[f]or better or worse, the new forms of media that came of age in the 2008

elections are here to stay." (Gulati 2009). We have known for a long time that lists are here to stay.   If

the party can learn from this experiment in the long term, then it might ultimately lead to enhanced

success or strength, even if OFA is deficient on measures of policy impact. OFA, despite the impression

that it is still trying to figure out what it wants to do, does seem to reflect on the question of what works

and what doesn't. It is incumbent on the party at large as well as the Obama-based party forces to do

the same. Possibly, with a long-term time frame in mind, President Obama could advance the cause of

other presidents in their efforts to lead their parties and to perform effectively in office.

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