

YEAR ONE OF ORGANIZING FOR AMERICA

The Permanent Field Campaign in a Digital Age

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Foreward: Organizing Baselines

There are no baselines.

President Obama came into the White House with the largest, most wired supporter network in American history.¹ Many observers anticipated that the Obama administration would tap the organizing and technological successes of his innovative campaign to revolutionize governing.² Since the inauguration, Obama's initial experiments contacting and mobilizing his supporter network have been compared to the campaign's performance during the peak of the election season,³ or to outreach innovations by other U.S. presidents,⁴ or even to conventional lobbying campaigns.⁵

None of these comparisons, however, provide a very relevant baseline for political organizing. No President has ever managed the federal government while simultaneously attempting to lead a wired supporter network that can talk to itself, and organize itself, on a local and potentially national scale.⁶ While many Presidents do try to speak directly to the public by routing around Congress and the media, no President has possessed such a massive, interactive list of supporters.⁷ Furthermore, no President has ever converted a winning campaign's volunteer network into an organization devoted to enacting a national agenda.

On January 17, 2009, one year ago, the Obama for America Campaign was converted into Organizing for America (OFA),⁸ and incorporated as an arm of the Democratic National Committee.⁹

¹ The scale of Obama's supporter list dwarfs precedents in both parties. The list was about *five times* the size of the DNC's list in 2008. It is also far larger than the organic segment of the RNC's list – the people who signed up as supporters of the RNC or Republican candidates. The RNC's list also includes purchased emails from websites and media organizations such as *Human Events* and *The Weekly Standard*, totaling 12 million in all. "The best e-mail lists in politics," Kenneth P. Vogel, *Politico*, May 24, 2009.

<http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=74A3DCF4-18FE-70B2-A89117770273219E>

² See, e.g. "Web Experts: Obama's Vision for E-government Will Take Work," Grant Gross, *PC World*, December 12, 2008.

http://www.pcworld.com/article/155413/web_experts_obamas_vision_for_egovernment_will_take_work.html

³ See, e.g. "Initial response to Obama's grassroots appeal: It's a bust," Frank Greve, *McClatchy Newspapers*, February 6, 2009 (comparing attendance at OFA's policy house party events in 2009 to larger crowds generated "before the election").

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/227/story/61724.html>

⁴ See, e.g. "Fireside Chat 2.0," John Dickerson, *Slate*, March 16, 2009 (comparing Obama's online outreach to FDR's radio addresses, a common theme among political journalists). <http://www.slate.com/id/2212898/> Also see "Using Community Organizing to Run a Country," Neal Peirce, *Washington Post* Writers Group, Sunday, November 23, 2008.

⁵ See, e.g. "As Health Bill Is Delayed, White House Negotiates," David M. Herszenhorn and Jeff Zeleny, *New York Times*, July 24, 2009.

⁶ David Plouffe notes that the campaign's technological networks connected a "remarkably" high portion of supporters to each other, and to the campaign for direct information. He writes that the email list enabled the campaign to "communicate[] directly with no filter to what would amount to about 20 percent of the total number of votes [needed] to win - a remarkably high percentage." "The Audacity to Win," David Plouffe at 364, Viking (2009).

⁷ About 69 million people voted for Obama on Election Day. A major portion were connected to the campaign online: 13 million by email; five million on independent social networks; two million on the campaign network (MyBO); over one million by text message. "Obama Raised Half a Billion Online," Jose Antonio Vargas, *WashingtonPost.com*, November 20, 2008.

http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html

⁸ All references to "OFA" in this report refer to Organizing for America. Obama's presidential campaign, Obama for America, also has the same acronym. The campaign website, barackobama.com, was converted into the OFA website.

⁹ Then President-Elect Obama first announced the decision in a January 17 video, "Barack Announces Organizing for America," distributed through the presidential campaign's YouTube channel, BarackObamadotcom. "[OFA] will build on the movement you started during the campaign," Obama says in the video, adding, "As President, I will need the help of all Americans to meet the challenges that lie ahead."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfGNgacysHg> Also see "Obama For America Becomes Organizing For America," Marc Ambinder, *TheAtlantic.com*, January 17, 2009. http://marcambinder.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/01/obama_for_american_becomes_org.php

This report focuses on OFA's work during the first year of the Obama administration. The objective is to better understand this unprecedented attempt by a President to build a "governance organizing" model,¹⁰ and to assess the experiment on its own terms. The report is designed as a resource for practitioners and observers of political organizing, both in the specific context of OFA and broader implications for developments in organizing, new media and grassroots outreach in the digital era.

It is organized in sections that can be read separately, enabling readers to go directly to sections that are most relevant, while the divisions separate primary reporting from broader analysis. All sources in the report are quoted on background to encourage candor.¹¹ Interviews with individuals are cited for their qualitative value; they are not presented, and should not be interpreted, as representative of broader public opinion. (See the appendix for more information on methodology.)

The first section reviews OFA's activities in 2009, which have been covered and discussed only sporadically by most media and political observers. This section includes a detailed chronology of OFA work *for readers who are unfamiliar with OFA*, in order to begin with a clear archival record, particularly in the health care effort. Readers who are more familiar with this recent history, however, may prefer to peruse Section One briefly and focus more on the following sections.

The second section breaks new ground by soliciting and exploring new reactions to OFA's 2009 work among three salient stakeholder groups: Congressional staff, former staff for Barack Obama's presidential campaign, and members and volunteers of OFA. Through background interviews and survey interviews with selected OFA members, this original reporting provides a window into the views of some stakeholders and participants.

The third section provides a broader analysis of this new reporting on OFA, and explores areas for potential further debate and inquiry into OFA and its new organizing model.

¹⁰ Governance organizing for lobbying is discussed in contrast to conventional organizing around movement or electoral objectives.

¹¹ Previously public statements are simply quoted and cited by name.

Introduction: A New Permanent Campaign

Strategists and scholars have long defined the modern presidency as a “permanent campaign.” The concept was most famously enunciated by President Carter’s pollster, Patrick Caddell, who argued it was no longer possible to separate “politics and government.” “Governing with public approval requires a continuing political campaign,”¹² Caddell wrote in 1976, in an influential transition memo for the new President. Sidney Blumenthal, a journalist who later served in the Clinton White House, wrote “The Permanent Campaign” in 1982, a book warning that presidential governance was sliding into a model of constant politicking – an “engineering of consent with a vengeance.”¹³ Political scientists have sought to demonstrate these trends, measuring increases in campaign-style media¹⁴ and fundraising activity by recent Presidents.¹⁵

“Governing with public approval requires a continuing political campaign.”

These analyses of the modern presidency, however, are premised on a view that defines “campaigning” as media messaging, political outreach and fundraising. In the current era, however, a key distinction is a new, permanent

field campaign – contacting, organizing and mobilizing voters about governance between elections.

OFA marks the first time a political party has deployed permanent field program with its own communications channel to contact and organize volunteers to advance a policy agenda between elections.¹⁶ The national parties’ previous experiments with off-season field efforts were limited to *electoral* goals, like the “50 State Strategy;”¹⁷ gestures towards policy “campaigns” that did not include actual field mobilization;¹⁸ or “citizen corps” that attempted

¹² Patrick Caddell, “Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy,” December 10, 1976, quoted in “The permanent campaign and its future” 62, Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, eds, American Enterprise Institute (2000).

¹³ Sidney Blumenthal, “The Permanent Campaign,” Beacon Press (2000).

¹⁴ E.g. Corey Cook, “The Contemporary Presidency: The Permanence of the ‘Permanent Campaign’ George W. Bush’s Public Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, 2002.

¹⁵ E.g. Brendan Doherty, “Elections: The Politics of the Permanent Campaign: Presidential Travel and the Electoral College, 1977-2004,” Presentation at the Annual Meeting Of The Midwest Political Science Association, April 12-15, 2007 (studying presidential fundraising and travel and finding strategic targeting has increased over time, supporting the hypothesis that the “permanent campaign is on the rise”).

¹⁶ Former Obama campaign manager David Plouffe has noted that *because* there is no real precedent for OFA’s model, there is no way to know whether it will succeed. As the *New York Times* reported before Obama was sworn in: “Plouffe said the list could be used to invite grass-roots participation in government or to build support for the administration’s policies. ‘We’ll see whether it works or not,’ he said. ‘It’s never been tried before.’ “Between Obama and the Press,” Mark Leibovich, *New York Times Magazine*, December 21, 2008.

¹⁷ Under Chairman Howard Dean, the DNC described the 50 State Strategy’s field organizing success in electoral terms. See, eg, “A 50 State Strategy: Rebuild, Show Up, and Ask for People’s Votes,” DNC memorandum, November 5, 2008, excerpted in “DNC Memo: This Is The 50-State Strategy Realized,” Sam Stein, *Huffington Post*, November 6, 2008. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/11/06/dnc-memo-we-deserve-some_n_141878.html

¹⁸ After President George W. Bush’s reelection, the RNC did announce to reporters that it would mobilize volunteers from the reelection campaign to pressure Congress to enact Bush’s legislative agenda. No coordinated field effort ensued, however, and the RNC’s emphasis was more on running a media-driven permanent campaign model than a field organizing program. The *Washington Post* reported on the effort: “[T]he RNC’s incoming chairman[] said the campaign apparatus — from a national database of 7.5 million e-mail activists to tens of thousands of neighborhood precinct captains — will be used to build congressional support [for Social Security Reform]. ‘There are a lot of tools we used in the ‘04 campaign, from regional media to research to rapid response to having surrogates on television,’ he said.” “Bush faithful enlisted for Social Security fight,” Mike Allen and Jim VandeHei, *Washington Post*, January 14, 2005.

to advance general support for a President's agenda, but without a dedicated mass communications channel like email, or a coordinated national event program.¹⁹

Within the first year of the Obama administration, by contrast, OFA deployed a paid staff in 50 states for an ongoing field policy effort. Based primarily on OFA, in fact, the DNC is on pace to assemble the largest paid staff in its history.²⁰ Growing out of a remarkably vast campaign network and aided by breakthroughs in communications technology, OFA presents a novel opportunity for policy advocacy and party building.

Political scientist Daniel Galvin, who has studied “presidential party building” in the modern era,²¹ contends that OFA has fundamentally different assets and objectives than the conventional model of national political parties. While the traditional DNC is “charged with electoral-support responsibilities, such as aiding state and local parties, recruiting and supporting candidates,” Galvin writes, “OFA’s mandate is different: it is to carry out policy-publicity responsibilities, such as building support for the president’s legislative agenda, articulating his ideas, and countering the opposition’s attacks.”²² This foundation presents high stakes for Obama and the Democratic Party in general, Galvin argues:

“OFA... makes Obama much better positioned to make serious party-building inroads than his predecessors ever were.”

... 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 well-organized and vibrant campaign organization, and none opted to fold what they did have into the DNC. Obama has already done so... But because OFA holds the promise of so much organizational power, the stakes could not be higher. If Obama converts OFA into a multipurpose [policy and electoral] entity that can help the party enhance its myriad electoral operations at all levels, he can change the course of the Democratic Party’s history. If he does not, he risks more than a loss of momentum: he risks falling behind a

¹⁹ For a discussion of these earlier efforts, including the Eisenhower administration’s “Citizens for Eisenhower,” the Kennedy administration’s “Operation Support,” and the Carter administration’s “Carter Network,” see “The Party of Obama,” Charles Homans, *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2010. Also see, “Can Obama’s ‘Organizing for America’ Evolve into a Party-Building Entity?,” Daniel Galvin, Britannica.com, November 16th, 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2009/11/can-obamas-organizing-for-america-evolve/>

²⁰ “[T]he DNC has built a staff of about 380 employees across the country – a hiring pace that puts it on track to far surpass the staffs assembled by [] predecessors. The lion’s share of the hiring is to support a new organizing project called Organizing for America... Dean’s DNC had only 217 staffers at a comparable point in his tenure as chairman.” “In his own image: Barack Obama’s DNC,” Kenneth Vogel, *Politico*, October 24, 2009. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1009/28674.html>

²¹ See, e.g. “Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush,” Daniel Galvin, Princeton University Press (2009).

²² “Can Obama’s ‘Organizing for America’ Evolve into a Party-Building Entity?,” Daniel Galvin, Britannica.com, November 16th, 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2009/11/can-obamas-organizing-for-america-evolve>

Republican Party that has not abandoned its own organizational party building even as it drifts...²³

Departing from electoral objectives is difficult, of course. A permanent field campaign to advance governing, rather than electioneering, requires rallying support for specific policy initiatives. It is harder to sell policy than candidates, which is why so many political campaigns focus on biography, values and symbolism over the content of candidates' actual platforms. Yet OFA has consolidated Democratic infrastructure with policy as the core focus of its first year, primarily health care, with an outreach strategy that essentially operates on two tracks.²⁴

At the broadest level, OFA does outreach and organizing to build social, diffused support for the administration's priorities. Through local events, meetings and petition drives, for example, OFA can try to boost the awareness, support and enthusiasm for specific initiatives. On this indirect track, a resulting increase in support might be demonstrated through turnout at events; citizen voices in letters to the editor; local media coverage; people's conversations with their neighbors; or even through national polling on support for Obama's agenda.

This approach can be conceived as "mandate support." It operates on the (generally accepted) political premise that Presidents enact more of their agenda when their public mandate is large – or perceived to be large. In this model, a President aims to maintain his base not only for reelection (a political goal), but also because maintaining base support helps enact the administration's policies (a governing goal). Again, the traditional mechanism for such backing was through political, financial and media efforts, not sustained field organizing, but the strategic framework is quite similar.

The other track for OFA is directly lobbying Congress. Obama supporters are asked to engage their members of Congress regarding the administration's agenda. This engagement is done through phone calls, office meetings and local events. OFA typically encourages supporters to use a positive tone to voice support for a general administration plan or set of principles, such as "health care reform," without drawing more precise lines. The posture

²³ Id.

²⁴ Even before Obama won the election, some Democratic analysts concluded that his team was unusually assertive in its efforts to "consolidate" the party around Obama. "[I]t's time to get ready for a party that is being taken apart and rebuilt as the Obama movement," wrote Democratic activist and blogger Matt Stoller in May, before the nomination was settled, pointing to Obama's focus on shaping the message, field, finance and registration of the national Democratic Party. "Obama's Consolidation of the Party," Matt Stoller, OpenLeft, May 7, 2008. <http://www.openleft.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=5637> Another Democratic activist and commentator, David Dayen, contended during the 2008 campaign that Obama's field operation was simultaneously recruiting new supporters and "building a new Democratic infrastructure, regimenting it under his brand, and enlisting new technologies and more sophisticated voter contacting techniques to turn it from a normal GOTV effort into a lasting movement. The short-term goal is to increase voter turnout by such a degree that Republicans will wither in November, not just from a swamp of cash but a flood of numbers. The long-term goal is to subvert the traditional structures of the Democratic Party since the early 1990s, subvert the nascent structures that the progressive movement has been building since the late 1990s, and build a parallel structure, under his brand, that will become the new power center in American politics. This is tremendous news. However, despite his calls that change always occurs from the bottom up, these structures are very much being created and controlled from the top down." "The Obama Party," David Dayen, Hullabaloo, May 8, 2008. <http://digbysblog.blogspot.com/2008/05/obama-party-by-dday-on-saturday-in-over.html> Also see, "Notes on The Obama Disconnect," David Dayen, FireDogLake, January 3, 2010. <http://news.firedoglake.com/2010/01/03/notes-on-the-obama-disconnect/>

ranges from encouraging members of Congress to vote for the administration's agenda, to thanking individual members for votes backing the administration, to pressing selected members who vote against key items on the agenda. Unlike many lobbying and advocacy groups, OFA's direct lobbying track generally avoided more confrontational postures towards elected Democrats in 2009.

Proponents of such field policy efforts contend that governance organizing expands the civic and political opportunities for engagement, providing citizens with a tangible way to volunteer and advocate beyond the confines of an electoral campaign.²⁵ By tapping the interest in a (popular) President, OFA can even recruit new governance activists who would not be as likely to engage the legislative process under the status quo, or through actions that focused on their individual member of Congress. (After all, most voters cannot even name their member of Congress.)²⁶ And Obama's political allies tend to view OFA as a basic opportunity for supporters to advance the agenda they backed in the election.

According to OFA, in 2009, the governance organizing program attracted new volunteers who were not active during the campaign. More broadly, grassroots governance organizing, by either political party, might mitigate some of the distorted influences in the current political market. If the media and financial machinery of the modern presidential policymaking already operate a permanent campaign, a program engaging more regular citizens – as supportive volunteers or persuadable decision-makers – could restore some balance to a process that often focuses on media and financial advocacy more than pressure from regular citizens.

Others caution that simply layering a field component over a permanent campaign model could actually heighten some problematic trends in civic life. The academic literature on permanent campaigns, and the increasing politicization of the entire federal government bureaucracy, raises this concern. "Campaigning is geared to one unambiguous, [competitive] decision point in time," argues one such critique,²⁷ contrasting that dynamic to a governing ideal that would proceed more cooperatively. This argument, also reflected in public opinion that dislikes "partisan bickering," raises the prospect that constant campaigning fosters an adversarial, rather than collaborative, approach to governing.

A related concern focuses on the growth of the modern "plebiscitary presidency." Scholars, commentators and members of Congress have raised concerns about how presidents increasingly make appeals directly to the public, rather than working directly with the

²⁵ See, e.g. "Organizing for America: Looking Back, Marching Ahead, Jeremy Bird, *Huffington Post*, January 6, 2010.

²⁶ "...70 percent [of Americans] can't name either of their state's senators and, even at the height of a campaign, a large majority can't name any candidate running in their congressional districts." "American voters' knowledge of current affairs," Kate O'Beirne, *National Review*, November 8, 2004 (citing National Election Surveys). For more longitudinal data on public ignorance and disconnection from members of Congress, see "The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in The American Electorate," W. Russell Neuman, Harvard University Press (1986).

²⁷ "The contemporary presidency: The permanence of the 'permanent campaign': George W. Bush's public presidency," Corey Cook, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, Issue 4, December 1, 2002.

representative branch of government. Fortifying that model with a powerful, national whip operation could further undermine Congress' autonomy, in this narrative. Conservative critics of Obama have also argued that he would use his email lists to dominate Congress by conducting the presidency in "campaign mode."²⁸ This report probes opinion within the legislative branch on OFA's evolving role in the legislative process.

Finally, a more direct political question, at least among Obama allies and the progressive organizing community, is whether OFA's first year provided an organizing program that is both effective and empowering for its members.²⁹ Some former Obama campaign aides interviewed for this report, for example, are concerned about whether OFA is maintaining the meaningful, successful relationships developed among Obama supporters during the presidential campaign, both for their intrinsic valence and, of course, for the instrumental benefit to Obama's next campaign.

This report explores all of these issues during the first year of OFA. If there is one certainty about OFA's future, it is that the organization's priorities will change in 2010. After a year devoted to health care reform, OFA must choose a new agenda to engage its members.

²⁸ See, e.g. Transcript, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 6, 2008, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_110608/content/01125104.guest.html. Also see, "Obama White House to Marshall Online Army," Rick Klein, ABCNews.com, November 11, 2008. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/President44/Story?id=6223143&page=1>

²⁹ For example, some former Obama campaign advisers have questioned whether OFA has prioritized a bottom-up, movement-building ethic in its first year. See, e.g. "We Have Hope, Now Where's The Audacity," Marshall Ganz and Peter Dreier, *Washington Post*, August 30, 2009. Other Obama supporters have countered that OFA has empowered its members and was crucial to advancing health care reform in Congress. See, e.g. "OFA: Obama's Secret Weapon," Robert Creamer, *Huffington Post*, January 5, 2010.

Section I: Community and Reform

Overview

In its first year, OFA focused overwhelmingly on two priorities: Maintaining the community networks developed during the presidential campaign and advancing the administration's plan for health care reform.

OFA occasionally engaged members in other areas, such as the budget, economic recovery, the Supreme Court and fundraising appeals,³⁰ but its main lobbying focus in 2009 was decidedly on health care reform. There were more OFA communications to supporters about health care than any other topic; the most significant "asks" for volunteer activity were tied to the health care battle in Congress; OFA's most valuable resource – the President's time – has been spent primarily on OFA health care events; and most OFA organizing on the direct track, engaging Congress, was designed to build momentum and political space for the passage of health care reform. Indeed, by OFA's own estimate, during the second half of 2009, "95 percent" of the organization's efforts have focused on health care.³¹

By another rough but influential measure, health care absolutely dominates communications on the OFA email list. The organization's email priorities are especially revealing, since the list remains one of Obama's most valuable political³² and financial assets.³³ (It topped 13 million people after the election – larger than any other political list, as detailed in the Introduction – and remains a crucial tool for raising money for the party and advancing Obama's reelection.)

³⁰ For the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, OFA sent emails from Joe Biden rallying support, distributed one of the first extended videos of Obama explaining the nomination – one of OFA's most viewed videos of 2009, topping 440,000 – and provided "Stand with Sotomayor" icons for people to share their support online. For economic recovery, including the budget and federal stimulus, OFA gathered petition signatures, sponsored grassroots events around the nation, and organized 3,200 economic recovery house meetings. OFA also ran an early pledge drive for the President's budget. See "President Obama's Message to the Economic Recovery House Meetings," OFA blog, February 7, 2009. <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGx23L> "Special Delivery! OFA's Budget Pledges Given To Members," *Hotline on Call*, April 1, 2009 http://hotlineoncall.nationaljournal.com/archives/2009/04/special_deliver.php

Also see MyBo pages: <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGx5WL>

<http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGx23L>

<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/economicmeetings/> OFA emailed members with requests for DNC fundraising, and with opportunities to engage in local elections, see MyBo pages:

<http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGGGDn>

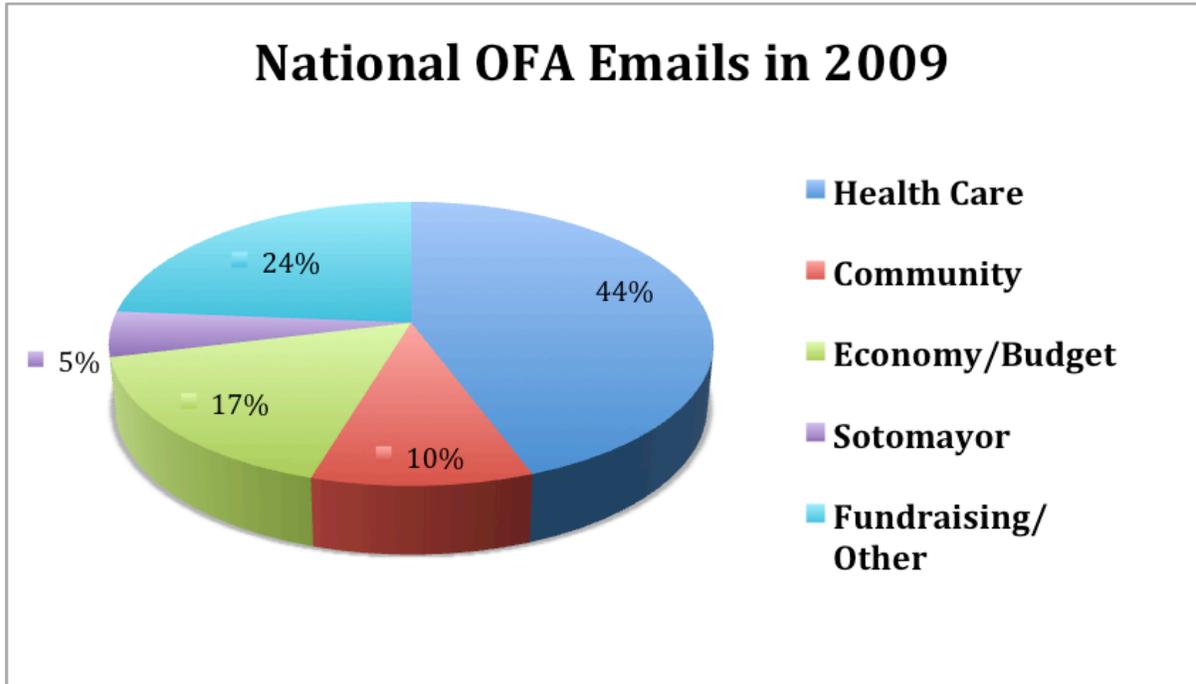
<http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGxxH>

³¹ "Transcript: OFA's Mitch Stewart And Jeremy Bird Speak To TPMDC," Christina Bellantoni, TalkingPointsMemo. November 11, 2009. <http://tpmlivewire.talkingpointsmemo.com/2009/11/transcript-ofas-mitch-stewart-and-jeremy-bird-speak-to-tpmdc.php> In the interview, Stewart said that "since June 6 we've been focused 95 percent of our efforts on health care."

³² Reflecting on the list's ongoing power in December 2009, David Plouffe argued it was a crucial and underappreciated part of OFA's activities: "One of the things OFA does -- they didn't appreciate this in the campaign, and its not fully appreciated now-- [is] reach over 10 million people directly ... that's more than any nightly newscast." "Plouffe Counters Obama's Healthcare Critics," Ari Melber, TheNation.com, December 16, 2009. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091221/melber> Plouffe stressed a similar point in his book about the 2008 campaign, writing that the email list "essentially" provided the campaign with its "own television network, only better." He contended that the list enabled the campaign to "communicate[] directly with no filter to what would amount to about 20 percent of the total number of votes [needed] to win - a remarkably high percentage." "The Audacity to Win," David Plouffe at 364, Viking (2009).

³³ The email list was considered so valuable, in fact, that the Obama campaign offered it as loan collateral at one point during the 2008 campaign. "Under Obama, Web Would Be the Way," Shailagh Murray, Matthew Mosk, *Washington Post*, November 10, 2008.

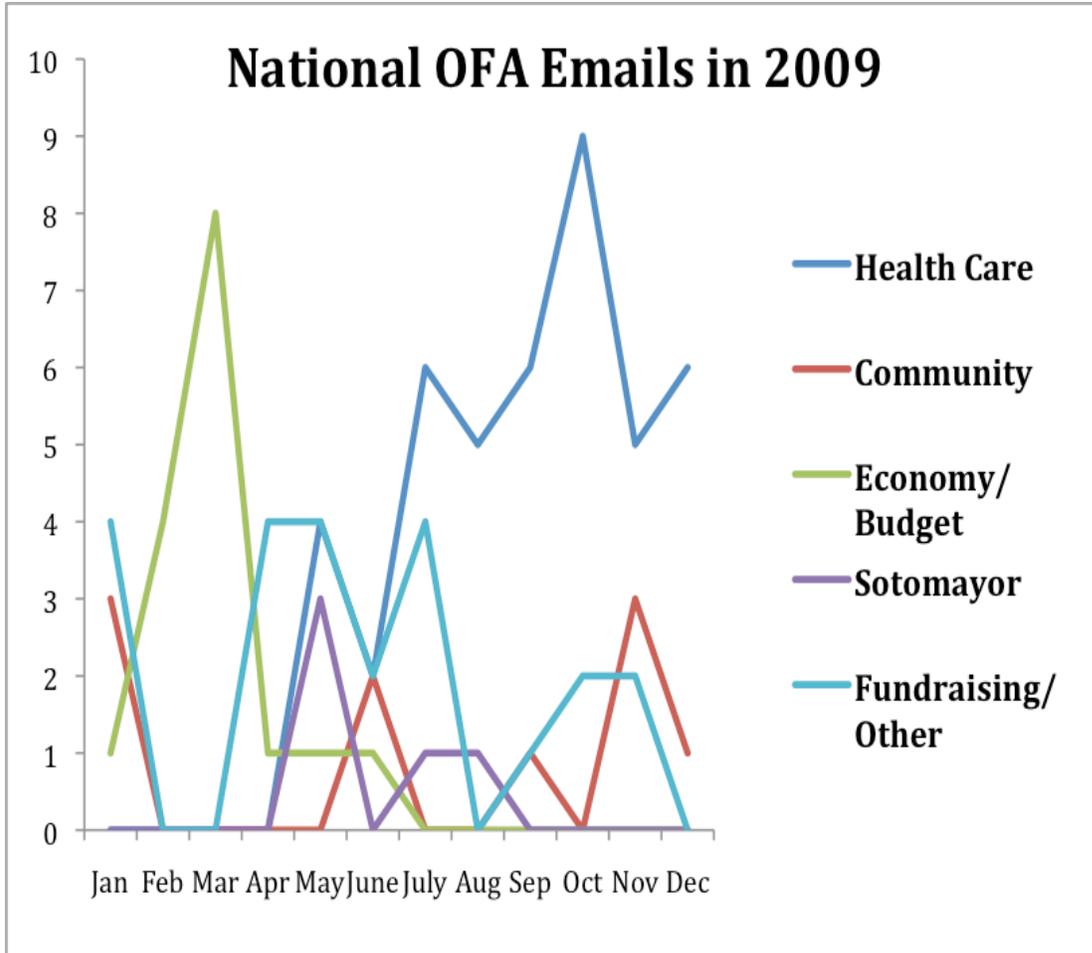
According to a tabulation of emails sent to the national OFA list on the official OFA blog, health care dominated over every other topic.³⁴ In 2009, 44 percent of OFA’s emails focused on health care, while 17 percent addressed economic and budget issues, and five percent discussed the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. This graph shows the breakdown:



Health care was actually more important than the annual breakdown suggests, because communications about other issues were concentrated in the first few months of 2009, as OFA experimented with its outreach.

A chronological breakdown of the email program shows that by the middle of 2009, health care became the major and often the only topic on the list, shutting down all other emails besides fundraising.

³⁴ Tabulations in this report are based on publicly available records. OFA has not released comprehensive information about all its communications or activities, and it runs additional targeted and state-based programs that may not be reflected in these national estimates. Nation emails were tabulated from OFA blog. (Targeted emails posted on the blog, such as constituency emails for a single group like seniors, were not included in the national tabulation.) <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hqblog>



This section focuses on OFA’s programs for community maintenance and health care lobbying.

Community Maintenance

Social Capital

Most politicians do not maintain continuous, direct contact with volunteers and supporters once victorious campaigns end.

First, there are few access points in government to directly engage supporters. Explicitly tailoring government activity or communication for political supporters is generally prohibited.³⁵ (The Obama White House manages a non-political government email list,

³⁵ See, e.g. The Hatch Act, 5 U.S.C. 1501-08 (1966) (originally titled “An Act To Prevent Pernicious Political Activities.” Also see “Hatch Act for Federal Employees,” U.S. Office of Special Counsel website, http://www.osc.gov/ha_fed.htm

separate from campaign and OFA lists,³⁶ and White House officials publicly stress their outreach is “not in any way connected” to OFA.³⁷ While there are surely some individual exceptions among elected officials and state parties, Presidents, members of Congress and the national party committees generally do not maintain direct, frequent contact with their base of supporters on a massive scale between elections. “It’s been a failure of conventional politics that we didn’t engage people – even activists, even people who are deeply committed to politics and to public policy, [were] only [engaged for] a few months every two or four years,” observed Jim Jordan, a political veteran who managed the DSCC and John Kerry’s Presidential Campaign. “[It’s] a waste of people’s energy [and] attention,” he explained in an interview about OFA in July 2009, noting that the new organization was “trying to fix that.”³⁸

“It’s been a failure of conventional politics that we didn’t engage people – even activists [outside campaign season]”

Second, until recently, the only dedicated channels for mass communication with supporters were in-person events and direct mail, (which is largely used for fundraising). While email has obviously been a force in politics since the late 1990s,³⁹ few politicians maintain active, community-oriented email lists between elections. Some of the largest national lists were

generated during failed presidential campaigns, but these lists typically atrophy⁴⁰ or are cut and sold for fundraising.⁴¹ (The major exception is Howard Dean’s 2004 campaign list, which was effectively rolled into a separate, ongoing organization, Democracy for America.⁴² Yet as DNC Chair, Dean was obviously not running the federal government, and the scale of DFA’s list was far smaller than OFA.) Moreover, it is worth noting that most of the successful, enduring political email networks, like MoveOn, have grown around a series of causes – impeachment, Iraq war – rather than the ambitions of individual candidates.

In a break with those trends, of course, Obama’s aides prioritized the continued cultivation of the campaign’s email list immediately after the election.⁴³ While emails about policy can also

³⁶ See, e.g. Statement by Nick Shapiro, White House spokesman for New Media, August 16, 2009. “White House responds to Major Garrett’s questions about unsolicited emails,” Fox News, <http://whitehouse.blogs.foxnews.com/2009/08/16/white-house-responds-to-major-garretts-questions-about-unsolicited-emails/>

³⁷ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, August 6, 2009 http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Briefing-by-White-House-Press-Secretary-Robert-Gibbs-8/6/09

³⁸ “Obama Taps Volunteers for Health Care Outreach,” Mara Liasson, NPR, July 23, 2009 (quoted in segment).

³⁹ See, eg David Dulio, Donald Goff, James Thurber, “Untangled Web: Internet Use during the 1998 Election.” PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. 32, 1.

⁴⁰ John Kerry experimented with using his list for legislative advocacy and fundraising after the 2004 campaign, to mixed success, while the lists of candidates like McCain, John Edwards and Wes Clark generally atrophied.

⁴¹ After her presidential campaign ended, Hillary Clinton rented and sold parts of her 2.5 million email list to local candidates (Mayor Gavin Newsom), former rivals (Obama’s inaugural committee), liberal groups (EMILY’s List, Media Matters) and even to her own senate election committee, for \$2.6 million. The best e-mail lists in politics,” Kenneth P. Vogel, *Politico*, May 24, 2009. <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=74A3DCF4-18FE-70B2-A89117770273219E>

⁴² “Dean promises his group will raise money, recruit candidates,” Elizabeth M. Gillespie, *Associated Press*, March 18, 2004.

⁴³ Before Obama was inaugurated, the email list was used to generate house party gatherings on December 13 and 14, 2008, as discussed further below.

advance community engagement, Obama's post-election effort provided a separate, non-policy organizing track *explicitly focused on fostering community*.

The overarching goal of community maintenance is to retain and refresh relationships. The list is used to launch local events for supporters to spend time with each other -- and with OFA. Unlike volunteer or legislative events, these community gatherings do *not* have a short-term legislative objective, such as calling Congress. Instead, they are designed to provide more subtle, long-term benefits. The goal is to replenish *social capital*. For community maintenance, OFA members are invited to commune at points of maximum consensus and emotional valence, such as commemorating the election, engaging participants at a social, friendly level.

This is a "social capital approach" in the sense that political scientist Robert Putnam postulates -- encouraging local, social associations *even when they do not* contain an immediate mechanism to impact public policy. Putnam's 1993 analysis of this process remains relevant to contemporary organizing:

Our political parties, once intimately coupled to the capillaries of community life, have become evanescent confections of pollsters and media consultants and independent political entrepreneurs -- the very antithesis of social capital. We have too easily accepted a conception of democracy in which public policy is not the outcome of a collective deliberation about the public interest, but rather a residue of campaign strategy.

The social capital approach, focusing on the indirect effects of civic norms and networks, is a much-needed corrective to an exclusive emphasis on the formal institutions of government as an explanation for our collective discontents. If we are to make our political system more responsive, especially to those who lack connections at the top, we must nourish grass-roots organization.⁴⁴

Thus people-to-people organizing stokes better conditions for democratic activity, in this model, even though the events do not "exclusive[ly]" focus on "formal institutions of government."

For grassroots organizing online, effective campaigns tend to create social capital online, convert it to tangible action offline, and then run structured programs to maintain that capital. In a 2008 article about social capital and netroots activism, for example, political scientist Diana Cohen stresses that a key ingredient in the online "social capital framework" is "maintenance" -- essentially an ongoing program to "maintain the capital so it does not

⁴⁴ Robert Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *American Prospect*, Spring 1993.

deplete.”⁴⁵ And while there is a broader debate among scholars and practitioners about whether email and Internet politics advances broader civic participation,⁴⁶ an issue beyond the scope of this report, it is clear that in the case of the Obama campaign, new media organizing drove effective political action (fundraising, volunteering, voter registration, and event attendance).⁴⁷

Events

Community maintenance was OFA’s very first priority.

Community maintenance was not OFA’s most frequent program in 2009, but it was OFA’s very first priority. In fact, even as senior Obama aides were debating the structure and strategy for managing Obama’s valuable campaign list in late 2008⁴⁸ – before OFA had been established, let alone announced – OFA convened a staff summit in Chicago,⁴⁹ meetings and conference calls for organizers,⁵⁰ and a coordinated series of thousands of house parties.

David Plouffe, the former Obama campaign manager and DNC consultant, emailed supporters inviting them to “help plan the future of this movement” by attending local events in December, before the inauguration. “Your continued involvement is crucial to the future of this movement,” he wrote. Plouffe promised an influential role for governance organizing: “The grassroots organization you built to win the election will continue to set our country on a new path.”⁵¹ He also recorded a video invitation message, standing prominently in front of The White House, which drew over 290,000 views.⁵² The strong interest in the invitation was also reflected in offline attendance: over 4,000 events were held in December, according to

⁴⁵ Diana Tracy Cohen, “Netroots: Ned Lamont, Social Capital, and the Liberal Blogosphere.” Connecticut Public Interest Law Journal, Vol 8:1 (2008).

⁴⁶ Researchers and commentators continue to debate the Internet’s impact on social relations, social capital and political culture, with several scholars arguing that in many cases, time online reduces social capital and political dialogue. See, e.g. Robert Kraut on social involvement and Cass Sunstein on diverse ideological exposure and dialogue online. This report discusses social capital and community maintenance in the specific context of the networks and volunteerism that grew out of the 2008 Obama campaign, which does not necessarily apply to all online organizing or political outreach.

⁴⁷ See, e.g. “The Obama Campaign: A Great Campaign, Or The Greatest?,” Sarah Lai Stirland, Wired.com, November 30, 2008.

<http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2008/11/the-obama-campa/> “Obama Raised Half a Billion Online,” Jose Antonio Vargas, WashingtonPost.com, November 20, 2008. http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html

⁴⁸ At the time, it is significant to note that Obama aides were still debating whether the campaign network should be folded into the DNC or organized as an independent entity. See, eg “Vast Obama network becomes a political football,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2008.

⁴⁹ “Report from Chicago: ‘We’re Making This Up As We Go Along,’” Micah Sifry, techPresident.com, December 9, 2008.

<http://techpresident.com/node/6593>

⁵⁰ “More Hints from Chicago on Obama For America 2,” Micah Sifry, TechPresident.com, December 11, 2008.

<http://techpresident.com/node/6607>

⁵¹ David Plouffe, “Change is Coming,” Obama for America email, November 25, 2008. Plouffe also indicated that the meetings would provide opportunities to “discuss the issues that are most important to you, what you can do to support Barack’s agenda, and how you can continue to make an impact in your community.”

⁵² While later videos drew less traffic from the Obama campaign’s presence across the Internet, the Plouffe video drew an unusually high share of its audience from the Obama campaign’s MySpace account – 15 percent of viewers – according to YouTube statistics. The video was also most popular with people aged 45-65. “Change is Coming.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOSkrDhN4bc>

OFA.⁵³ (For Obama’s inauguration, OFA also aimed to cultivate a sense of national community, emailing supporters about ten OFA members who were selected to attend the inaugural through a DNC fundraising contest.⁵⁴)

On a state-by-state basis, OFA also convened community maintenance events with local staff, including “listening tours” and trainings. Most state staff participated in listening sessions to introduce themselves to local activists, who might also appreciate scheduled time to reconnect with each other. There were listening events at over 400 sites, 200 trainings for organizers and a dedicated “Summer Fellows” program⁵⁵ for “hundreds” of organizers, according to OFA’s public estimates.⁵⁶

Dedicated, national community maintenance activities took a backseat for a long stretch of the health care fight, both because health care was the top priority and policy events operated as a concomitant boon to maintenance. However, OFA did convene service events in June, during the health care reform battle. These events touched on health care – but they were *not* health care lobbying events. To the contrary, these were primarily community maintenance events, focused on convening people around a common purpose and local action – but not national lobbying.

Political scientist Barbara Trish discusses this contrast, between traditional party action and community maintenance, in a 2009 address about OFA:

[OFA] 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... [T]his 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 [] 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*

⁵³ “He can't do it by himself. He's gonna need our help.” Christopher Hass, OFA Blog, December 10th, 2008 <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/stateupdates/gGx872>

⁵⁴ “Our First Guest,” Michelle Obama, OFA email, January 6, 2009.

⁵⁵ See OFA website: <http://my.barackobama.com/page/s/summerorganizers>

⁵⁶ “OFA Metrics Nine Months In,” Christina Bellantoni, TalkingPointsMemo.com, November 11, 2009 <http://tpmlivewire.talkingpointsmemo.com/2009/11/ofa-metrics-nine-months-in.php>

*election seasons and, as such, helps fulfill organization-building goals.*⁵⁷ (Emphasis added.)

This “organization-building” is OFA’s community maintenance. Trish is correct that the approach is “quite new” for national parties, and it need not seem cynical. Most OFA members came together around the goal of electing Obama,⁵⁸ many are currently enthused about his reelection, and thus many welcome opportunities to do intrinsically worthwhile projects that can also benefit the reelection.⁵⁹ Those who prefer explicitly legislative or political volunteering, by contrast, can choose other activities. (For OFA members’ views on this score, see Section Two.) Furthermore, volunteers and participants can appreciate the role of community meetings for their intrinsic value; some even directly refer to the “social capital” that is generated.⁶⁰

For its part, OFA presented the service day as an opportunity to help people directly and immediately – in contrast to the longer process of lobbying to pass health care reform. As Stewart told OFA members:

We're working hard together to help pass real health care reform by the end of the year. We also know that for so many people in our communities, America's broken health care system is a daily crisis -- but there are ways that we can help right now... Some groups will organize blood drives to boost local supplies... Others will volunteer at local clinics... [S]ome of us will run healthy food drives to promote health awareness and fight hunger in our communities...

*No matter which way you serve, you'll be connecting with like-minded supporters in your area, helping those who might otherwise fall through the cracks of the current system, and at the same time building awareness and support for the comprehensive health care reform our country so desperately needs.*⁶¹ (Emphasis added.)

⁵⁷ Barbara Trish, “Organizing for America,” Presentation to The State Parties Conference, October 15-16, 2009, Akron, Ohio. Accessible at www.uakron.edu/bliss/docs/Trishpaper.final.pdf

⁵⁸ Over the tenure of the first term, of course, OFA continues to recruit new members who may not have participated in the 2008 campaign. The impact of new members (or newly active members) is especially pronounced among online donors: about 25% of online donations in 2009 were from new donors, according to OFA. This figure suggest that OFA is reaching some new people in the governance phase, or activating supporters for the first time, though figure may appear high as a percentage of total donor because many campaign-era donors feel tapped out and are not donating in 2009.

⁵⁹ Some former OFA staff have indicated 2012 is a key organizational priority, noting that is a logical and positive goal. Quoting one aide, for example, *Politico* reported: “...organizers for the [OFA] group have also been instructed to focus on Obama’s 2012 reelection, according to a former regional director, Jeremiah Anderson. ‘Even in the midst of training, they were asking us to start thinking about 2011 and what our areas would look like then,’ said Anderson, 28, who left the job last month to attend to family issues and eventually return to school. ‘I thought that was cool, because I’m not that big of a fan of advocacy. I’d much rather work for a candidate.’ “In his own image: Barack Obama’s DNC,” Kenneth Vogel, *Politico*, October 24, 2009. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1009/28674.html>

⁶⁰ Mandate citation

⁶¹ See, e.g. OFA: Harnessing Obama’s grassroots network in Massachusetts,” May 27, 2009 (discussing an OFA meeting with Marshall Ganz and OFA Director Mitch Stewart). <http://socialcapital.wordpress.com/2009/05/27/ofa-harnessing-obamas-grassroots-network-in-massachusetts/>

⁶¹ Mitch Stewart, “National Health Care Day of Service,” OFA email, June 12, 2009.

Stewart stresses service and community first, while also suggesting the activities can prime support for Obama's health care agenda. This is precisely the secondary benefit to service that Trish proposes: The party's cause is "indirectly advance[d]" if service "engender[s] positive reactions among the community."

While this approach is not a common strategy in American politics, other groups backing Obama later experimented with it in 2009. One ad-hoc coalition raised over one million dollars to sponsor free clinics for the uninsured – but with the explicit goal of rallying support for health care reform.⁶² (It is possible that OFA's summer service events helped "mainstream" this model, or at least enlarged the number of potential volunteers and donors for this kind of effort.) In late June, OFA announced that it convened "thousands" of service events in all 50 states.⁶³

Later in the year, OFA launched community events to coincide with the anniversary of Obama's election. President Obama recorded a video for the anniversary, telling supporters, "Over 2 million of you have taken action in support of Organizing for America's health care campaign," and thanking volunteers for making a difference "in their own way." The video drew about 170,000 views after David Plouffe sent it to the email list. That audience was more than quadruple the prior five videos from the same period – mostly health care segments drawing under 40,000 views each – suggesting that more supporters are interested in the campaign connection to Obama as a person, rather than the agenda-oriented content. OFA also convened "watch parties" for the President's health care address (discussed further below), an event that achieves both community maintenance and policy mobilization.⁶⁴ OFA also sent community, non-policy emails to members for the holidays in December, inviting people to create and send personalized, electronic greeting videos to their friends.⁶⁵

Overall in its first year, 10 percent of OFA's communications were devoted to community maintenance.⁶⁶

⁶² See, e.g. "Free health clinic in New Orleans highlights need for reforms," Sue Sturgis, *Facing South*, November 17, 2009 (reporting on clinics drive backed by National Association of Free Health Clinics and MSNBC anchor Keith Olbermann); Also see "Health reform's human stories," Rich Stockwell, MSNBC.com http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33975919/ns/msnbc_tv-countdown_with_keith_olbermann and DailyKos diary entry, "WATCH: Keith Olbermann Free Health Care Clinic New Orleans 1000'S without Health Care Show Up," Tazzz, (including MSNBC television segment), November 17, 2009. <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/11/17/805455/-WATCH:-Keith-Olbermann-Free-Health-Care-Clinic-New-Orleans-1000S-without-Health-Care-Show-Up>

⁶³ "TOMORROW: Organizing for America Will Hold Thousands of National Health Care Day of Service Events Across the Country," DNC Press Release, June 26, 2009.

⁶⁴ "Host a Watch Party," OFA blog, September 7, 2009. <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGM4DN>

⁶⁵ New visitors who sent the video through the OFA website were automatically signed up to "receive emails" from OFA; recipients of the videos would not receive OFA emails or have their information stored by OFA. <http://holiday.barackobama.com/Holiday-2009/Send-To-Friends.aspx>

⁶⁶ This is a higher percentage than most political email lists for issue groups or the national parties. The email breakdowns are featured in the introduction to Section One.

Health Care Reform

Grassroots Mobilization

OFA's health care lobbying effort officially began on May 22, 2009. David Plouffe emailed supporters with a plan for national health care house parties featuring President Obama.⁶⁷ Drawing on the aspirational language from campaign season, Plouffe told supporters that they would one day remember the upcoming events as "the moment when the fight for real health care reform began in your neighborhood -- perhaps even in your own living room." OFA cultivated a program for active volunteers to host and organize events, and then use those volunteers and list outreach to drive attendance for the gatherings.

President Obama did a telephone conference call with volunteers on May 28, in advance of the house meetings the following week. Calling in from Air Force One, Obama said the need for volunteers was urgent. "If we don't get it done this year, we're not going to get it done," he stressed. "We're going to need all of you to mobilize. We gotta have you knocking on doors, making calls educating your neighbors, and when that happens -- I promise you -- politicians take notice, members of Congress take notice."⁶⁸

A national policy conference call with a President is unusual, and OFA aimed to leverage it in several ways. It used the call to reward and motivate volunteers, suggesting a special connection with the President. Afterward, OFA distributed recordings of the call to other supporters, conveying to a wider audience that the President was in touch with his grassroots supporters and offering a potential rallying point for new activists. The audio was posted on the OFA blog,⁶⁹ as a mobilization venue, and on YouTube,⁷⁰ and on a dedicated petition site. The petition portal invited visitors to "listen to the President's call" and sign up to "declare your support" for the health care plan.⁷¹ This approach, combining mobilization and outreach, also helps replenish the OFA email list with new people who are drawn in by a given opportunity.

The President's remarks to OFA made national news, providing public validation for the idea that the communication with supporters was a genuine, important part of the health care

⁶⁷ OFA emails rotate the sender depending on the subject and "ask" of a given email, including people who are not official OFA staff. Plouffe does not retain an official leadership position inside OFA at the DNC, though he remains engaged as a paid DNC consultant. The DNC paid his firm over \$375,000 in 2009. "Steele shows fundraising savvy and spreads the wealth around," Reid Wilson, *The Hill*, September 24, 2009 "In his own image: Obama's DNC," Kenneth P. Vogel, *Politico*, October 24, 2009.

⁶⁸ "Time is now on healthcare, Obama says," Foon Rhee, *Boston Globe*, May 28, 2009 (with transcript of conference call).

⁶⁹ "President Obama's Phone Call to Volunteers," Christopher Hass, OFA blog, May 30th, 2009.

<http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/obamaforamerica/gGxnjn>

⁷⁰ The video received about 10,000 views. "President Obama's Call with Health Care Volunteers," June 4, 2009

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPWtZLR3OBo>

⁷¹ Recognizing that many people are more interested in hearing a call than signing another petition, the site also assured visitors that the "audio will continue to play" when they submitted their information. "Organizing for Health Care," Organizing for America dedicated call petition page <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/organizingforhealthcarecall>

strategy -- not simply a venue for symbolism or dated talking points. “President Barack Obama warned Thursday that if Congress doesn't deliver health care legislation by the end of the year, the opportunity will be lost, a plea to political supporters to pressure lawmakers to act,” began one typical A.P. article covering the call.⁷² For volunteers who are active media consumers, this kind of coverage can reinforce OFA as a credible, alternative source of news and information – the President is not only “warming up” the troops, but actually conveying news before it hits the wire. (Plouffe has also emphasized that this kind of direct communication dynamic with supporters, routing around the media, builds trust and relationships.)⁷³

In June, OFA held several thousand health care meetings were held around the country.⁷⁴ The events also featured screenings of a new video of Obama advocating reform and speaking directly to OFA volunteers.⁷⁵ (It was also uploaded to the Obama-Biden YouTube channel,⁷⁶ drawing about 20,000 views.) The video presented OFA’s political director asking attendees to take three actions for the new effort:

- 1) Review and support the administration’s reform agenda;
- 2) Tell their personal health care stories; and
- 3) Commit to taking local action for health care, including future organizing and participating in a “day of service” the following month.

At this stage, the OFA events and strategy operated primarily on the indirect track. People were invited to commune, discuss their experience and role in health care reform, and take action in social outreach and community service (discussed below), rather than in direct legislative advocacy.

Like the presidential conference call, OFA also leveraged these gatherings for both organizing and media objectives. It promoted the events to national and local media, distributing four press releases about the effort and directing reports to attend one of 31 events handpicked for

⁷² “Obama Says Health Care Changes Must Come This Year,” Philip Elliott, A.P. May 28, 2009. The article’s subheader also treated the mobilization appeal to OFA as an important development in and of itself, noting that Obama’s warning was issued to “political supporters.”

⁷³ See, e.g. “Campaign dissected: Obama manager promotes book in Portsmouth,” Foster’s Daily Democrat, November 18, 2009. The article reports on Plouffe’s disintermediation strategy: “It was clear to the campaign early on that it had to communicate with voters in a way that could circumvent traditional media, Plouffe said. Therein lies the importance of the campaign’s vast e-mail network, which shared unfiltered messages and videos among supporters and others. ‘We thought the most important conversations were the ones happening’ locally, Plouffe said.” Also see, “Obama’s Bush Rebuttal Breaks Another YouTube Record,” Ari Melber, TheNation.com, January 29, 2008. “[R]eporters are noticing that Obama is not using them to get stuff out....whenever possible, he is routing around the filters and gatekeepers so that he can speak directly to voters.... a classic disintermediation approach.” http://www.thenation.com/blogs/state_of_change/277245

⁷⁴ “Obama Campaign Activists Find Health Care Harder Sell,” *Bloomberg*, Heidi Przybyla, June 17, 2009.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=washingtontory&sid=aRcF4fftIlg1s>

⁷⁵ “Health Care Organizing Kickoff Host Guide,” OFA website. <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/HCKickoffHostGuide>

⁷⁶ Health Care Organizing Kickoff Video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfJM0zrqZv4>

media guests.⁷⁷ Much of the media coverage of the events was positive, especially at the local level.

OFA initially collected about 238,000 health care stories,⁷⁸ and featured several in television ads.⁷⁹ White House officials also said the stories collected through OFA helped “continually remind each and every leader in this country of the importance of health care reform.”⁸⁰

OFA also estimated that it collected over two million declarations of support for the President’s plan. (It did not indicate what percent of those declarations were by individuals who were already OFA members.)

On another public track, OFA supporters reported that they sent about 233,500 letters to the editor in local publications on behalf of health care reform. (A year-end tally later estimated the figure at 250,000.⁸¹) The official website also provided an activist portal to “set the record straight,” providing fact sheets, talking points and videos to rebut misinformation about health care.⁸² In one indication of the audience for the effort, the video embedded on the main page drew about 78,000 views over several months.⁸³

On the indirect track, OFA later launched a contest inviting members to create their own health care ads. OFA’s New Media Director explained the idea in an OFA email as “30 seconds to win reform”:

⁷⁷ Organizing for America Kicks Off Grassroots Health Care Reform Effort at Thousands of Meetings Across All 50 States, OFA Press Release, June 3, 2009. http://www.fosters.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091118/GJNEWS_01/711189925/-1/FOSNEWS

⁷⁸ OFA provided a ‘stories’ portal on its official website, which operated as a collection point for contact information and endorsements of the President’s plan. Users were asked to consent to public use and endorsement of their story: “I agree that by submitting my story, my name, city/state, and personal story will appear publicly in a powerful display of support for the President’s principles and I agree to the Submission Terms.” “Health Care Stories for America,” OFA website. <http://stories.barackobama.com/healthcare/>

⁷⁹ “Organizing for America Announces New Television Ad, ‘It’s Time,’” OFA Press Release, July 15, 2009. Two ads ran in the following states, calling on Senators to support the President’s plan: AR, IN, FL, LA, ME, ND, NE and OH calling on Senators in those States to Support Reform

⁸⁰ Excerpt from White House Press Briefing: “Q. The President talked to [OFA] yesterday and they have this campaign where they’re asking people to not only go knock on doors, but to gather people’s stories, which has been a theme of story collection from the beginning of the campaign. How do you envision these stories then actually being used, since very specific legislation is being written in Congress right now for the health plan. How will ... this story collection really translate into policy, since we’re not dealing just with principles in Congress now, which is what the President talked about, and the call was about, to go support these several principles. How do you envision this going down to the actual writing of legislation that’s going on right now? MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think that just as the President gets letters each day that illustrate some very specific and real-world examples of what Americans are going through... The illustration of stories that are -- I think are vivid examples of the problems that Americans face and what they want addressed through this legislation. ... Q: ...these stories that you’re collecting... you give the impression to people that somehow this is going to affect what’s going on in Congress. Well, Congress this very week is writing it. It’s not in the future. It’s not distant. So how can you -- MR. GIBBS: If stories that are being crafted or written or told aren’t impacting the process of government, then you and I are going to have a hard time rationalizing to our prospective employers how we’ve spent the previous, say, 45 minutes. Q: No, no, no, I’m talking about your collection... you’re having house parties, campaign-style house parties... So I’m asking you, since you are now sending out a nation of your volunteers to have these house parties and to go knocking on doors to collect more stories about how rotten the health care system is and why we need change, which no one is disputing, because your allies in Congress are writing a bill to remedy this -- what is all that activity really for? MR. GIBBS: To continually remind each and every leader in this country of the importance of health care reform. Look... if it was done and we could all go home, it would be great; we could call it a win and nobody would have to do anything. But I don’t think that’s the case.” Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, May 29, 2009. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Briefing-by-White-House-Press-Secretary-Robert-Gibbs-5-29-09

⁸¹ “2009,” Mitch Stewart, OFA email, December 30, 2009.

⁸² <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/settingtherecord>

⁸³ A Message from OFA on Health Care Town Halls, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyTASLyNpzs>

This is your chance -- you ingenious, insightful, funny people out there -- to make a 30-second ad telling the story about why the status quo has got to go, or explaining how the Obama plan will ensure we get the secure, quality care we need... The top submissions will be voted on by the public and a panel of experts, with the winning ad aired on national television. This is your opportunity to add your voice and creativity to the debate, get some great exposure for your work, and make a huge difference.⁸⁴

Over 1,000 videos were submitted, with some of the top entries drawing over 180,000 views each, while the entire series netted a cumulative three million views.⁸⁵ The participation and viewership rates were quite high for this kind of political video contest.⁸⁶ David Plouffe announced the winner in a November OFA email, asking supporters to watch it, share it, and donate in order to “spread the message on national television.”⁸⁷ The video about the winning ad, a somber collection of children sharing their families’ struggle to obtain health care, drew another 130,000 views.

The video contest marked OFA’s most consequential foray into enabling members to impact the message, if not the substance, of Obama’s health care reform strategy. While OFA retained control as a moderator, ensuring it could remove entries that were offensive or controversial, the winning ad was a *definite departure* from the administration’s messaging. Administration officials routinely pressed reform based on practical considerations and self-interest – lowering costs for all, improving access, avoiding deficit spending – the winning video hammered the moral imperative of caring for the most vulnerable members of society.

“I’ll die
because we
couldn’t
afford health
care.”

“Two years from now, I’ll be diagnosed with leukemia, and I’ll die because we couldn’t afford health care,” says one of the children, staring at the camera in a tight close-up. Even the ad’s creator, Eric Hurt, said he was surprised to win, since he thought the ad’s style was probably “too heavy.”⁸⁸ If the ad had been produced by consultants through the normal DNC process, it is unlikely it would have ever made it through vetting. After all, the video cast children as the starring spokesperson for health care reform – in a year when

⁸⁴ “30 seconds to win reform,” Natalie Foster, OFA email, September 26, 2009.

⁸⁵ The cumulative figure counts the view for each video, not individual viewers.

⁸⁶ A similar video contest during the 2008 presidential campaign, MoveOn’s “Obama in 30 Seconds contest,” drew about 1,100 entries, and the top videos were viewed a few hundred thousand times as of May 2008, when they were first uploaded. See “Obama in 30 Seconds,” MoveOn, <http://www.obain30seconds.org/>

⁸⁷ OFA “Contribute” page with embedded video

https://donate.barackobama.com/page/contribute/dnc08viddonatends?source=20091117_DP_ytwinner_nd

⁸⁸ “Local filmmaker wins national contest,” *Charlottesville Daily Progress*, November 18, 2009.

Obama faced repeated attacks for “involving children” in politics.⁸⁹ Indeed, some commentators criticized the ad on those grounds.⁹⁰ (Others tried to tarnish OFA by criticizing Hurt’s previous film work.⁹¹) By opening up OFA’s message to grassroots participants, however, supporters were able to exert some of their own influence over the kind of arguments OFA marshaled in the national health care debate. And for other health care ads, OFA appealed to supporters for stories, discussed above, or fundraising to buy airtime.⁹²

Direct Lobbying

While OFA continued to expand its indirect organizing in the summer, spearheading events for calling and canvassing neighbors to build public support, it also began the first direct legislative lobbying in earnest. During this period, OFA’s appeals to members took a disciplined, even stern tone, urging volunteers to commit to a hard slog.

“With Congress debating their plans for health care reform this week, building strong local support couldn’t be more urgent,” wrote Deputy OFA Director Jeremy Bird on July 14. “That’s why, last weekend, [OFA] volunteers across the country called their neighbors and went door-to-door, asking them to support the President’s agenda for health care reform and to urge Congress to do the same. Next week, we’re doing it again, and this time it has to be even bigger,” he continued. (Legislative strategy is discussed in more detail in Section Two and Three.)

In addition to local grassroots events, OFA led an August bus tour with 18 stops around the country. OFA estimated that 20,000 supporters attended events connected with the bus tour, and about 90,000 people attended other OFA events over five weeks in August and September.⁹³

⁸⁹ Conservative critics charged Obama with politicizing communication with school children, based on his national address to schoolchildren and an incident involving a school that reportedly taught students a song regarding Obama. While many dismissed the attacks as spurious political theatre, the context is relevant for assessing the contrast between Obama’s top-down messaging and OFA’s experimentation with supporter-generated health care argument.

⁹⁰ Blogger Michael Roston criticized the ad for using children: “I hoped... that kids could be kept out of the health care debate as stand-ins for the partisan wars of their parents. But this [OFA ad] is what it looks like when an important Democratic-affiliated group, with the help of volunteers, feeds a dire health care-related script to someone’s precocious camera-friendly children.” <http://trueslant.com/level/2009/11/18/what-it-looks-like-when-democrats-exploit-kids-for-political-ends-health-care-reform-shadegg-maddie-obama/>

⁹¹ Attacking supporters who are even briefly spotlighted in political efforts is an increasingly common tactic, a trend that has only enlarged the risk of tapping bottom-up input for parties and politicians. The modern “vetting” and criticism of supporters and citizens who engage the political process has made many politicians reflexively wary of tapping supporters for any messaging at all. This dynamic occurs online and off, from “Joe The Plumber” in the 2008 campaign to the scrutiny of Eric Hurt. Bonnie Goldstein, a writer for AOL Politics Daily, seized on another video by Hurt: “OFA has not released Hurt’s other entry to the public[,] but I’m guessing it was not the humorous but slightly outré short film titled “So Stoned” ... featured on his Vimeo account...” “Winning Health Care Ad Maker Eric Hurt’s Creative Range,” Bonnie Goldstein, AOL Daily Politics, November 17, 2009. <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/11/17/winning-health-care-ad-maker-eric-hurts-creative-range/>

⁹² We’re working on a new television ad... explaining why doctors and nurses so strongly support President Obama’s plan,” wrote Mitch Stewart in one September appeal. “But to produce and air the new ad before the Senate starts debating a final bill, we’ll need to raise \$300,000 by Thursday. Please donate \$5 right away “The cavalry, in white coats and scrubs,” Mitch Stewart, OFA email, September 30, 2009.

⁹³ “OFA Metrics Nine Months In,” Christina Bellantoni, TalkingPointsMemo.com, November 11, 2009 <http://tpmlivewire.talkingpointsmemo.com/2009/11/ofa-metrics-nine-months-in.php>

Town Hall Backlash

Even OFA field efforts turned out crowds, however, OFA shifted its message to acknowledge supporters' deep frustration with the coverage and tone of the summer's health care debate. While reform supporters were out in the field, the congressional town halls and health care media coverage increasingly focused on intense and rowdy opposition at public health care events. During several stretches of August, health care and "angry town hall meetings" dominated the national news more than any other topic, according to measurements from Pew's Excellence in Journalism project.⁹⁴

"Where's the other team?"

Meanwhile, media coverage that did focus on Obama's field campaign turned increasingly critical. A representative August headline trumpeted Obama's "floundering campaign on health care," quoting experts who found OFA's outreach lacking.⁹⁵ "A campaign that was able to activate its grass-roots constituency through the Internet and then activate and send them into the streets to meet their neighbors to persuade them to vote for Obama has not been successful in mobilizing individuals in this health insurance effort," concluded Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, in a typical interview.⁹⁶

Several new media commentators, who were often sympathetic to Obama, also interpreted the protestors' success as an OFA failing. Josh Marshall, the founding editor of *TalkingPointsMemo*, contended that Obama's aides were struggling to turn out "supporters at these events."⁹⁷ Addressing both Obama's aides and his own readers, Marshall asked, "Where's the other team?" Blogger Greg Sargent replied by noting, "the other team [] is supposed to be Organizing for America." He reserved judgment on OFA's performance at that point, but echoed the common refrain that health care was the first crucial test of the OFA experiment:

...OFA is supposed to be doing exactly what the right is now doing: Staging very visible displays of passionate support for their side's goal — i.e., health care reform. I don't know if OFA is succeeding or not. If so, its successes are decidedly less visible than what we're seeing from the anti-reform forces, though this could reflect the fact that OFA events don't employ the raucous agitprop we're seeing from anti-reform crowds... [It is] yet another reminder

⁹⁴ "Anger and Rancor Fuel Cable's Health Care Coverage," Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

<http://www.journalism.org/node/17176> August 10-16, 2009. Also see "Town Hall Showdowns Fuel Health Care Coverage," August 3 – 9, Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

http://www.journalism.org/index_report/pej_news_coverage_index_august_39_2009

⁹⁵ "A floundering campaign on health care," *Boston Globe*, August 21, 2009.

⁹⁶ Id.

⁹⁷ "And for the Blue Team?," Joshua Micah Marshall, *TalkingPointsMemo.com*, August 3, 2009.

http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/2009/08/and_for_the_blue_team.php?ref=fpblg

that health care is the ultimate test of whether Obama's vaunted campaign operation can drive Obama's legislative agenda and achieve real results.⁹⁸

OFA responded to the mounting summer angst with several direct appeals to supporters. An email from Mitch Stewart singled out some of the most egregious tactics of anti-Obama protestors, including the report that a congressional office "was defaced with a swastika." Stewart cast the protestors as tools of "a deliberate plot by the special interests" out to "kill reform."⁹⁹ (This critique found more sympathy among Democrats than Republicans or independents, according to Gallup polling.¹⁰⁰) An email and web campaign featured pictures from months of field events from around the country, promoting the "untold story" of grassroots activism as the "real story" of August.¹⁰¹ And in a separate bid to reenergize supporters, OFA tapped David Plouffe for an email rebutting media coverage and inviting people to join another event with the President:

The D.C. media has been trumpeting coverage of town halls disrupted by angry opposition to reform. But the reality on the ground is very different. Organizing for America supporters are showing up in huge numbers at these meetings all across the country -- outnumbering opponents of reform, often by overwhelming margins. You've organized 11,906 local events in all 50 states... since we launched our big campaign for reform in June.

Plouffe invited supporters to watch or listen to "a live strategy meeting" with the President on August 20.¹⁰² About 280,000 people watched the official webcast of the proceedings,¹⁰³ and the YouTube video of the 77-minute event drew another 125,000 views.¹⁰⁴

OFA officials also used the event to release figures on their field work since June, providing these estimates¹⁰⁵ to the public: 1.5 million members took some action and members organized 11,906 local events. Between August 21 and November 11, when OFA released another batch of estimates, volunteers held another over 10,000 more events and another

⁹⁸ "Is Obama's Vaunted Political Operation Getting Outworked By Tea-Baggers?" Greg Sargent, Plum Line Blog, August 4, 2009. <http://theplumline.whorunsgov.com/health-care/is-obamas-vaunted-political-operation-getting-outworked-by-tea-baggers/>

⁹⁹ "Time to set the record straight," Mitch Stewart, OFA email, August 19, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ An August survey found that 61 percent of Democrats thought orchestration by "political activists" were a major factor in town hall protests, while only 42 percent of Republicans and Independents thought so. "Town Hall Meetings Generate Interest, Some Sympathy," Frank Newport, Gallup Poll, August 12, 2009.

¹⁰¹ See, eg <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/HIRNEvents> A coordinated slideshow on Flickr gathered several hundred views per picture: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/barackobamadotcom/tags/HIRNGLID/>

¹⁰² "Obama To Hold Live Strategy Meeting With Organizing For America Supporters," Brian Beutler, TalkingPointsMemo.com, August 18, 2009.

¹⁰³ "Let's Get It Done!," Jeremy Bird, OFA email, August 22, 2009.

¹⁰⁴ Obama's Strategy Session Draws 270k, Dems Claim Good Week, "Sam Stein, Huffington Post, August 21, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/08/21/obamas-strategy-session-d_n_265056.html

¹⁰⁵ In the presentation, OFA also asserted that it "outnumbered" protesters at town halls. It did not provide numbers for that comparison, however, and most observers agreed that the anti-health care protesters were effective precisely because they had impact despite their relatively small numbers, not because they had organized an equally large presence. Jeremy Bird, National Health Care Forum with President Obama <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdrXh7wunMM>

700,000 people were counted as taking some action, from signing petitions to attending events. (These events were distributed throughout the country.)¹⁰⁶

Yet in the more skeptical climate, media coverage of the strategy session tended to note that Obama was struggling to get traction for reform -- and that many Democrats, including OFA members, preferred a more progressive health care plan with a guaranteed public option. "Obama spoke to a gathering of OFA, the group of activists who supported his candidacy," reported the *New York Times*, for example. "Many members of the organization, along with other liberal groups, have accused him of wavering on his pledge to include a public insurance option as a central part of his health care plan, but no such concerns were expressed [as] Obama delivered a pep talk to the group in a meeting at the [DNC] that was broadcast on its Web site."¹⁰⁷

OFA's follow-up email about the event, however, quoted the President's remarks on the public option: "The President made the stakes of reform crystal clear. He talked about how, with health care costs rising three times faster than wages, the cost of inaction is simply too high," wrote Jeremy Bird, in an appeal for supporters to attend reform events. The email continued: "And he made plain his stance on the public option: 'So let me just be clear: I continue to support a public option, I think it is important, and I think it will help drive down costs and give consumers choices.'"

Lobbying Homestretch

Meanwhile, OFA's direct lobbying continued. The legislative message remained quite broad, calling on lawmakers to support Obama's general principles for health care reform. In the several months leading up to the House vote, the outreach was not generally targeted by district or differing political goals. Instead, OFA asked supporters, regardless of location, to call and visit with their members. In a one-week push in August, over 64,000 members participated in Congressional office visits. (Congressional visits are discussed further in Section Two.)

OFA also leveraged the President's September 9 address to Congress as a mobilizing point. After the speech, "members of Congress have no doubt about where the President stands," wrote Mitch Stewart in an email. "Call your representatives, and tell whoever answers where you are from and that you watched the President's address. Then tell them that you want your representatives to support the President's plan." OFA also excerpted a clip from the address

¹⁰⁶ The summer events were geographically diverse, according to real-time listings on OFA's website. See, eg "Organizing for America, Obama's Sleeping Beast, Starts to Awaken," Micah L. Sifry, TechPresident, July 15, 2009 <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/organizing-america-obamas-sleeping-beast-starts-awaken>

¹⁰⁷ "Obama Sees G.O.P. Plan to Derail Health Proposals," Jeff Zeleny, Carl Hulse, *New York Times*, August 21, 2009.

for targeted outreach to seniors concerned about Medicare changes,¹⁰⁸ which drew 30,000 views

In October, OFA sponsored a “day of action,” driving volunteers to make 315,000 phone calls to Congress. In an email to supporters, Mitch Stewart reported back on the results:

It's late; I know you've gotten a lot of messages from us recently, and everyone here at OFA headquarters is pretty tired. But the last reports of calls and commitments are just coming in from events on the West Coast, and I wanted to share the news with you. As you know, we set a big goal: 100,000 calls to Congress placed or committed to in a single day by OFA supporters and allied organizations. By 2:30 p.m., you had crushed it. So, we gulped and said let's go for 200,000, not knowing what would happen. But the calls just kept pouring in... I'm looking at the numbers, and with almost all of the reports now in, the tally wasn't 200,000 calls placed or pledged -- it was 315,023. You did it.¹⁰⁹

The coordinated calls provided another opening for OFA's grassroots activity to generate some media coverage, as new media reported that Congress was “crushed” with lobbying by OFA members.¹¹⁰ Much of the traditional media, however, did not cover the effort as part of health care stories at all.¹¹¹

Passing Legislation

OFA used the U.S. House's November 7th vote to pass health care reform as a pivot point to motivate supporters and open up a new line of lobbying against targeted Republicans who voted against the bill. OFA sent an email from President Obama the night of the vote to supporters, urging them to celebrate, keep fighting, and donate to the DNC:

This evening, at 11:15 p.m., the House of Representatives voted to pass their health insurance reform bill. Despite countless attempts over nearly a century, no chamber of Congress has ever before passed comprehensive health reform. This is history. But you and millions of your fellow Organizing for America supporters didn't just witness history tonight -- you helped make it. Each "yes" vote was a brave stand, backed up by countless hours of knocking on doors, outreach in town halls and town squares, millions of signatures, and hundreds

¹⁰⁸ President Obama Speaks To Seniors, http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hcsignon_seniors Also see http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hcsignon_seniors

¹⁰⁹ “Off the hook,” Mitch Stewart, OFA email, October 21, 2009.

¹¹⁰ See, eg, “Congress ‘Getting Completely Crushed’ With Over 100,000 Calls For Obama's Healthcare Reform,” Dawn Teo, *Huffington Post*, October 20, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dawn-teo/ofa-healthcare-phonebank_b_327418.html

¹¹¹ “The day after Congress members were flooded with calls, for example, an 878-word story in the New York Times headlined ‘Obama Takes a Health Care Hiatus’ did not mention the calls.” Jose Antonio Vargas, *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2009.

of thousands of calls. You stood up. You spoke up. And you were heard. So this is a night to celebrate -- but not to rest... OFA has built a massive neighborhood-by-neighborhood operation to bring people's voices to Congress, and tonight we saw the results... Winning will require each of us to give everything we can, starting right now. Please donate \$5 or whatever you can afford so we can finish this fight.¹¹²

The OFA email from Obama uses a double discourse familiar from the 2008 campaign. On one level, supporters can hear inspiring gratitude from the President – an acknowledgment of their work and its place in the bigger picture of the movement’s impact. In this narrative, the legislative process rests on a grassroots foundation, with each vote backed by organizing, door-knocking, and phone-banking of regular people. On another track, supporters can hear Obama asking them to do more, and donate more. For those who view their work and connection to Obama through fundraising, this kind of direct message can be a welcome invitation to forge a bond, and stay connected, with a legislative agenda that might otherwise seem ephemeral, or far away. Thus the message capitalizes on a key moment, and operates as both a health care mobilization email and a fundraising email.

In November, OFA also launched the first major coordinated effort spotlighting Republican members of Congress. OFA focused on 32 G.O.P. legislators who voted against the Democratic health care bill, but who hailed from districts that voted for Obama. The effort aimed "to remind these members that voters in their districts voted for change last year," according to OFA officials, "and urge them to reconsider their position when the House votes again on a final bill later this year."¹¹³

OFA Director Mitch Stewart described the effort as the more confrontational side of Obama’s bipartisan politics, telling supporters in an email: “The message was clear in these districts: Americans want change, and they expect their Representatives to work with President Obama and reach across the aisle to help deliver it," he said. The GOP opposition to health care reform shows that Republicans are standing "with the insurance companies and right wing pundits to put politics above doing the right thing," he added. The language reflected a sharper tone for OFA emails. In an interview, an OFA official discussed the strategy behind engaging these G.O.P. offices:

[We] targeted Republicans who represent districts that the President won -- the thinking being these people are going to be much more responsive to their constituents on this issue because the President won there. Also our reach within those districts is deeper, because we have a lot of supporters there.

¹¹² “Making History,” President Barack Obama, OFA email, November 8, 2009.

¹¹³ “OFA Volunteers To Target House Republican Members Who Voted Against Health Insurance Reform, DNC Press Release,” November 12, 2009.

[Those constituents are] open to not only idea of health care reform, they're turned off by the idea of someone who, for partisan reasons, would want to obstruct the President's process.

When the legislative battle moved to focus on the Senate, OFA reiterated general, positive appeals. One December email asked supporters to “send a holiday card to your senators, telling them that your wish this season is for them to pass health insurance reform.” Yet as the political class and media focused on deal-making and shifting provisions in the Senate legislation, OFA was largely silent in communications regarding changes to the Senate bill. While Obama supporters and prominent liberals from Howard Dean to Paul Krugman engaged in vigorous, extensive public debates about the merits of the final health care compromise, OFA emails largely held to the same positive tone about historic progress. One December OFA email from President Obama, attempting to fundraise off health care as if there were no concerns about the bill among the base, presented a dramatic example of how OFA's legislative communications diverged from the expectations of some supporters.¹¹⁴

In late December, OFA appeared to shift its communications slightly to address concerns about compromises in the Senate bill, sending a 13-point policy brief from David Plouffe to specifically advocate for the legislation emerging from the Senate.¹¹⁵ The email directed supporters to share a link to an OFA page, “The Benefits of the Senate Health Reform Bill,”¹¹⁶ by email, Facebook and Twitter. Plouffe also spoke to supporters on a conference call on December 18.¹¹⁷ OFA also sent emails from President Obama when the Senate reached 60 votes for cloture on December 21, and again when the Senate passed the bill on Christmas Eve. “If we finish the job,” Obama wrote, “We will have beaten back the special interests who have for so long perpetuated the status quo. We will have enacted the most important piece of social policy since the Social Security Act in the 1930s.” He also credited OFA members for their calls, letters and organizing, directed supporters to a web portal¹¹⁸ to send “note of appreciation to all the senators who have worked so hard to make this possible.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ See, e.g. “Idiocy,” Markos Moulitsas, *Daily Kos*, December 9, 2009 (arguing “this is insulting, betraying a lack of understanding of just how pissed the base is at this so-called reform”). <http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2009/12/9/812139/-Idiocy>

¹¹⁵ “What's Really At Stake,” David Plouffe, OFA email, December 22, 2009.

¹¹⁶ “The Benefits of the Senate Health Reform Bill,” OFA website, <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/senatoreformbill/>

¹¹⁷ “Conference Call with David Plouffe,” OFA website (recording). <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/1218call>

¹¹⁸ “A historic moment,” OFA website. http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/senateletter?source=20091224_nd

¹¹⁹ “A historic moment,” OFA email, December 24, 2009.

Section II: Reaction to OFA

Congressional Reaction

Overview

While influencing Congress is a major goal of OFA, there have been few explicit, public reactions from members of Congress to OFA's work in 2009.¹²⁰ The absence of public congressional statements regarding OFA is fairly unremarkable; members of Congress often discuss democratic influence in terms of listening and responding to their constituents, not by citing the work of membership or lobbying organizations. Unlike many traditional Washington-based interest groups, OFA has not convened the kind of annual conferences, "insider" events, or lobbying days where members of Congress would publicly speak to activists and (potentially) credit their work.

To learn more about reaction to OFA on Capitol Hill, I conducted telephone interviews with selected congressional staff in both parties.¹²¹ The interviews focused on members' offices that had been strategic priorities for OFA legislative initiatives. Sources were granted anonymity to encourage candor, and the interview selections are divided by political party.

Democratic Congressional Offices

Most Democratic congressional staff interviewed viewed OFA fairly positively, and crediting it for mobilizing Obama supporters around coordinated lobbying efforts. Democratic staff did not generally view OFA as overstepping Congress' role, or necessarily having a large impact on day-to-day activities on Capitol Hill.

One senate chief of staff saw OFA as an effective force that both supported and prodded Democrats. The staffer concluded that OFA had improved its legislative outreach over the course of 2009.

I think [OFA has] definitely evolved. I think they've gotten more micro-targeting; they worked out the kinks a little bit in their on the ground

¹²⁰ The few instances where members of Congress have publicly addressed OFA have often focused on concern regarding the group's lobbying logistics, but not major substantive issues. For example, in August, some Republican members and one Democratic Senator, Diane Feinstein, publicly questioned whether OFA's effort to mobilize office visits had confused constituents into perceiving that they had scheduled a specific meeting with their representative. OFA responded, saying "we've had a few offices call to clarify that these were visits and not meetings. Of the tens of thousands of people who signed up, it wouldn't be surprising if a few may have mistakenly thought they had an appointment." See, e.g. "Republicans Charge Democrats With Confusing Constituents," Jackie Kucinich, *Roll Call*, August 11, 2009. Also see, "Dianne Feinstein's Office Gripes To White House About OFA-Inspired Constituent Visits," Greg Sargent, *Plum Line*, August 12, 2009. <http://theplumline.whorungov.com/health-care/dianne-feinsteins-office-gripes-to-white-house-about-oft-inspired-constituent-visits/>

¹²¹ Interviewees were drawn from press secretaries and chiefs of staff, the two positions typically authorized to speak on behalf of the office.

operations – looping them into the national strategies, doing what they did best during the campaign, being able to take a grassroots local message and making it a national campaign.

By contrast, the staffer voiced concern about some of OFA’s initial lobbying efforts. While noting that the tactics were common practice, the staffer contended that early mobilization efforts did not acknowledge their senator’s supportive position on health care:

They have been thinking they’ve done things that are more helpful than they’ve turned out to be, [and] instead have accidentally caused some hiccups. We’re on the Finance Committee – in an effort to persuade every member of congress to support health care, they hit up a massive ‘call your senator to support health care reform’ [program]. It ended up burying our offices in lobbying calls, screaming at the senator to support health care reform – which is *not* to say that other organizations haven’t done the same – but the challenge being when you’re trying to lobby from the friendly side to keep people going you need to be more specific with your messaging. You need to be more politically savvy. I think there’s a difference between sending a blast email that says, ‘call Senator [X] and let them know you support health care reform,’ versus ‘support their [allied] efforts on health care reform.’ One is more helpful than other.

The staffer also volunteered a contrast with MoveOn, contending that the health care debate showed MoveOn was interested in “keep[ing] their base active,” and not “in having a conversation with Members. OFA has been “more constructive” in its outreach, the staffer said. The staffer also said that constituent contact mobilized by OFA is treated with the same “respect and responsiveness” as any other type of constituent contact.

A House staffer credited OFA for effectively and constructively mobilizing support for The President’s priorities: “My experience with them is that they’ve been very effective in mobilizing constituent calls.” On the budget and health care, the staffer recounted, “We noticed a significant uptick in calls and constituent outreach.... Certainly, it’s a fairly significant outpouring of support that we see, when they try to get their members motivated.” This staffer noted that it can be challenging to rally around affirmative goals, and that OFA’s work was helping “progressive” offices, including theirs. “It’s always helpful to have very large groups of people who are motivated on the side of reform,” the staffer said. “A lot of times it’s easier to be against something, than it is to motivate people for a big complicated reform of a sixth of the nation’s economy. And [OFA is] helping do that.”

Another House staffer said OFA was a “pretty well known presence” on the ground in their district. “At least in our case, from our office,” the staffer observed, “they’ve been in good contact with our constituents, people on the ground, definitely been an effective advocate and mobilized people.” The staffer added that their district staff had ongoing contact with OFA staff and volunteers. Similarly, a House staffer from a Democratic office backing Obama’s health care plan said, “OFA folks were active in district... [and] it was a very positive interaction.” The staffer said they received visits, calls, thank you cards and about 200 letters that specifically cited OFA in advocating for health care reform. “Since the beginning, [my boss] was a supporter of reform with a strong public option,” said the staffer, and when there is agreement on an issue, such “members appreciate that groups thank them for the work they’re doing.”

“[OFA has] definitely been an effective advocate and mobilized people.”

A staffer from a Democratic representative who voted against the health care bill, and who represents a district that McCain won in 2008, said OFA was a positive force, but it had not altered the underlying public opinion against Obama’s plan in the district. “Hopefully, [OFA] will be able to change some minds and form that community of [our] party base – whether they be fully progressive or consider themselves moderate Democrats – I just think [their] impact is harder to measure than it would be in bluer districts,” said the staffer, adding “It’s definitely important that there be something holding that [more progressive] community together.” The staffer also said their member of Congress might have voted for Obama’s health care bill, had there been more local support.

Republican House Offices

Most Republican offices in the House and Senate did not have significant contact with OFA members. The main OFA program for Republicans targeted House members who opposed Obama’s health care plan, and represented districts that Obama carried, (as discussed in Section One). The following excerpts are from interviews with staff from those 32 districts.

As with Democratic offices, one consensus among the Republican offices interviewed was that constituents mobilized by OFA are treated and counted like any other constituents. No staffers argued that the advocacy was less influential because it was somehow “orchestrated.” Furthermore, while many Republican officials contended that OFA was not overwhelmingly represented or influential in their districts, none suggested that OFA or the DNC should refrain from these activities. The concerns about a “permanent campaign” or constant

mobilization effort were not top of mind among the congressional staffers interviewed. (That may be because they do not view this engagement as problematic, or because they have accepted this dynamic as an inevitable part of the modern legislative process, as discussed further in Section Three.)

For example, this Republican staffer's description constituent lobbying was typical:

If they're a constituent they're a constituent -- no matter what prompted them to call. We're going to take down that information and make sure it's recorded. We don't distinguish that much, if someone took the time to write out a well-thought out letter, we address their concerns individually. Mass form letters -- in the overall tally we count them all the same -- but the answers may be different [for individualized lobbying].

This staffer said health care sparked one of the larger grassroots outpourings the district had seen over any issue, both pro and con, and it was evident that OFA had mobilized some of the supportive activism. "On both sides, it's been a larger quantity of contact, the only thing I can compare it to was 2007 illegal immigration," the staffer said. "When it's a big issue and hits close to home," the staffer continued, "whatever side is mobilizing [can get] people involved and call[ing] the office. Even with the OFA push, we've still just seen, for our district, overwhelmingly people are against the bill. Maybe that goes to the nature of our district -- the issue is big, and people will find a way to get involved, and that's great."

Another Republican staffer said the office was aware of OFA's health care effort from local newspaper coverage and a gathering of about 20 people at a district office, and there were also phone calls during the stimulus debate. The staffer said OFA's field efforts did not impact the member of Congress "making decisions," though "that might reflect the [conservative] tone and nature of our district." The staffer also volunteered that the DNC was airing a radio ad in the district on health care, but contended that effort was mobilizing support for the member's opposition to Obama's health care bill.

...I know they're doing it in the 32 some odd districts that President Obama won in the 08 cycle. To tell you the truth, from comments I have seen -- [we're] pretty active in the blogosphere and new media type stuff -- it has actually emboldened people to say 'thank you,' or [engage] folks who may not have been vocal supporters in the past, but now. [OFA's] intention is to get more folks to participate, in favor of President Obama's agenda, but the same goes for the other direction.

Like most offices, the staffer said the mobilization and engagement spurred by OFA was positive, both in mobilizing support and disagreement with the President's agenda.

Another staffer reported a similar reaction to OFA ads: "We've actually gotten more calls thanking her from the ad that's been running in the district, anecdotally." Unlike other offices, however, this staffer said the office had not "gotten more calls than would be normal for a major issue, as far as calls being pushed to our office from this [OFA] campaign."

"I see [OFA's] name so rarely that they don't really register."

Another staffer said the office had not detected an increase in constituent contact during OFA's congressional push, and that the "only" OFA-effort the office recalled was confusion in August regarding scheduled office visits.¹²² The staffer contended OFA had not impacted the office. "I understand that Obama won [our district]," said the staffer, "but I think he won it because of the wave of his campaign," rather than an endorsement of his policy agenda. "You know, I talk with the entire delegation," added the staffer, "I see [OFA's] name so rarely that they don't really register. And maybe that's because they really are just focused on Democrats."

Other Republican officials stressed that Obama's electoral support in the district simply did not translate into a policy endorsement, and argued that OFA was simply not in a position to alter those underlying dynamics:

Here's the thing: He did win our district for a variety of reasons, but the people in our district have been pretty clear that they don't want the [health care] plan, and they've been supportive of our stance throughout. Naturally, you're going to get a certain amount of calls supporting Obama's plan, but same as you see in other [conservative areas], they like The President personally, but they don't like his policies... not seeing a large influx at all of people supporting his policies. As I said, there's been a couple of letters to the editors - that's the extent [of OFA impact in the district]. We've heard tons, throughout whole health care campaign, that they were going to come to our offices and do all sorts of protests and meetings, and its really been quite overblown, in large part because people in our district don't support the agenda that they're pushing.

¹²² "Republicans Charge Democrats With Confusing Constituents," Jackie Kucinich, *Roll Call*, August 11, 2009. Also see, "Dianne Feinstein's Office Grips To White House About OFA-Inspired Constituent Visits," Greg Sargent, *Plum Line*, August 12, 2009.

The same staffer credited Obama's organizational strength, and noted its repercussions on Capitol Hill and in media coverage:

I think what happens -- and partly with good reason because the Obama Campaign was great at mobilizing people in the campaign -- [is] they'll put out a release that they're making a big push, and media will pick it up and we'll get calls on it, and nothing really materializes. I'm sure that they're have been people in our office coming from OFA, but it is not by any stretch a large amount. Frankly, I've heard almost none, I got to imagine at some point, someone has come in... The amount of calls we get on a daily basis, in a district that Obama won, are overwhelmingly in support of us...

... I think rightly so, their organization is taken very seriously, because of how well they organized in 08.... You see the difference between campaigning and having to govern. Once they have to go out and support an actual policy, obviously their base is weaker supporting, and they're not getting the same support across the board. I don't think the media is stoking it -- the media rightly takes them seriously. On the flipside, we're not seeing a huge presence. Now, maybe other districts are, but we're not.

According to the Republicans staffers interviewed, OFA established a brand and presence in its first year, but did not have sustained grassroots contact or impact on these congressional offices.

OFA Members

From Polling to Practice

There is limited quantitative data focused on OFA members. OFA conducted one post-election survey of its members in November 2008,¹²³ drawing 550,000 responses, and released summary answers to a few of the questions.¹²⁴ (It conducted a second survey at the beginning of 2010, which has not been released at the time of this writing.¹²⁵) As a competitive political entity, OFA logically does not release much of its most valuable data, such as fundraising analytics, email open rates, and geographic breakdowns of political activities. Such intelligence could be illuminating to observers, but also useful to opponents.

The major polling organizations generally track people by party identification and political behavior, but not by OFA membership. (There are several challenges to polling OFA members directly, as one pollster explained when interviewed for this report.)¹²⁶ Given the sheer size of OFA's list, however, some topline conclusions can be drawn from these surveys. Democrats overwhelmingly approve of Obama's first year in office and retain very positive views of him,¹²⁷ for example. That population includes most OFA members, so the baseline OFA sentiment towards Obama presumably remains quite warm.¹²⁸ Turning to ongoing engagement, far more self-identified Liberal Democrats donate online, watch web videos and read political blogs than any group in either party. Therefore, this group tends to overlap more with OFA,¹²⁹ and may

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¹²³ "Supporter Survey," OFA website. <http://my.barackobama.com/page/s/pesurvpage1>

¹²⁴ David Plouffe wrote several bullets of highlights from the results in a December email:

"* House meetings were the primary way supporters got involved in the campaign * People are excited to volunteer around a number of top issues, including education, the environment, health care, poverty, and the economy * 86 percent of respondents feel it's important to help Barack's administration pass legislation through grassroots support * 68 percent feel it's important to help elect state and local candidates who share the same vision for our country * And a staggering 10 percent of respondents indicated that they would be interested in running for elected office," "What you're saying," BarackObama.com email, December 19, 2008.

¹²⁵ In addition to an email solicitation from David Plouffe, OFA Director Mitch Stewart recorded a year-end video asking supporters to take the survey, and stating it had generated an "incredible response." "Mitch Stewart on OFA: Historic Year, More Work Ahead," January 8, 2010, OFA YouTube video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDRB723-x0U>

¹²⁶ "We have not tracked them," a pollster for Pew said, referring to OFA activists, in an interview for this report. There are two challenges for scientifically surveying OFA activists: OFA would ideally have to cooperate in creating a representative list, and longitudinal data would still not be available from the past. The pollster explained that they were "not even sure how you do it without the cooperation of the group [OFA]." After the 2004 presidential campaign ended, by contrast, Pew worked with former Dean aides to survey a sample of former Dean activists. "[That was] the best thing we did in terms of smaller samples of activists," the pollster added. For longitudinal data, the pollster indicated that ideally, "from our perspective you'd have to track these people over time, and we haven't done that. If you got a group now, and said 'what did you during the campaign?', it's a retrospective... [Maybe] people over-report or under-report their level of activism at the time," the pollster said, adding that such surveying could still be valuable and "interesting."

¹²⁷ See the Democratic cross-tabs in recent polling on Obama's administration and personal qualities. E.g. "Obama Approval Ratings Steady, Personal Image Remains Positive," Pew Research Center, September 17, 2009.

¹²⁸ The Pew pollster interviewed for this report concurred with this rough interpretive approach. "In a public opinion survey, the best you can get would be people who strongly support Obama now, and see what they're doing [in volunteering and OFA activities]."

¹²⁹ At the conclusion of the 2008 election, for example, Liberal Democrats were twice as likely to attend events than Moderate Democrats, and three times as likely to donate money online. Compared to Conservative Republicans, Liberal Democrats were twice as likely to watch political videos online. "Liberal Dems Top Conservative Reps in Donations, Activism," Pew Research Center, October 12, 2008.

provide a rough touchstone for its views.¹³⁰ Furthermore, a very high portion of *all* Democrats who made online donations to a campaign in 2008 have been on the Obama email list, at least for some time, since the campaign aggressively collected emails of online donors and tried to convert small dollar donors and merchandise purchasers into OFA email volunteers.

Without more precise data on OFA members from the DNC or polling organizations, this report does not attempt a quantitative (or representative) discussion of all OFA members. To augment the public record, I conducted online surveys of 72 OFA members and volunteers, probing their views and experiences. Interviewees were selected independently, with an attempt to reach people around the country at a range of engagement levels. The sampling method was a snowball sample, contacting OFA members and soliciting their recommendations for other OFA members to survey. (The Appendix discusses methodology in more detail.)

To be clear, this qualitative reporting does *not* provide a random sample; readers should *not* interpret the responses as somehow representative of all OFA members.

Instead, the survey and interviews provide new reporting and qualitative information about the experiences and views of some OFA members. In certain instances, these members' experiences and ideas may overlap with broader trends or provide insight into OFA's work. In other instances, they may simply provide input and ideas that are worthy of consideration, even if they are not representative of broader trends among OFA members.

Four Types of OFA Members

Among OFA members interviewed, four different types began emerging in 2009.

Leading the pack are **super-activists**, discussed below and in Section Three, who are enthusiastically seizing on new governance activism opportunities to volunteer at rates that rival campaign season. Some of these members are active in politics for the first time in their lives.

Other Obama supporters are taking the role of **critical participants**, volunteering on OFA tasks while also voicing skepticism about aspects of Obama's strategy or policy.

Some OFA members have shifted into **supportive bystanders**, intensely backing Obama but passing on volunteer opportunities, because they do not feel needed or are busy with other activities.

¹³⁰ Pew also conducted one post-election survey that addressed a few questions to "wired Obama voters," referring to "those who go online," cited further in the discussion section below.

Finally, there are **former members**, Obama voters who dropped out of participation and communication with OFA in response to its first year activities, but still feel positively towards Obama.

Resilient, Intense Obama Support

A major theme in discussions with OFA members is the resilient, positive views towards President Obama and his agenda. Even among OFA members who have scaled back their participation or consumption of OFA communications, many hold high hopes for Obama – and for other supporters’ efforts. Some supportive bystanders describe their decreased activity as a logical shift once the campaign ended, or cast their drop off as a reaction to the kind of opportunities provided by OFA. Even people who do voice disagreement with OFA strategy, or who have unsubscribed from the email list and ceased all participation (former members), still tend to separate that preference from their positive views of Obama.

The surveys suggest that the most active OFA volunteers, super activists, are remarkably engaged. Some sustain schedules that rival their work during the peak of the campaign. While there is no way to measure how many people fall in this category,¹³¹ this is a relatively unusual activism pattern for American politics.¹³² One teenage OFA member, who volunteers between one and five hours a week, said he has attended in-person meetings, in-person service projects, wrote to Congress, called Congress, emailed the media, forwarded Obama email to friends and participated in student organizing. He noted the challenges facing OFA and legislative activism, but sounded very optimistic in describing why he devoted so much time to OFA:

It's one of the most effective ways of being involved in key political battles of our time because of the scale and tools OFA brings to the table. It is sometimes a challenge to stay active in legislative issues because they are harder to stay active on than campaigns. Campaigns have a set time period and a clear objective: Getting a candidate elected.... Healthcare is much harder, in that the goal is not as clearly defined, and [the] influence of activists is less clear. But all of that is not through any fault of OFA.

Another highly active OFA member, who first connected with the campaign in early 2007, said she has taken every type of action for OFA, and continues to volunteer 30 hours a week. She explained her motivations:

¹³¹ See polling discussion in the introduction to this section.

¹³² See, e.g. “The Narrowing of Civic Life,” Theda Skocpol, *American Prospect*, May 17, 2004.

I want to see key pieces of legislation successfully enacted, and what we are doing in building capacity in every state and in every Congressional district will have a huge impact on the future of the Democratic Party and on progressive policy goals. It's been a slow build, which I'm comfortable with, because that is how our field campaign has always worked.

She added that OFA is doing several projects “really well”: “training volunteer leaders, building local organizing teams, and managing a pretty big impact on healthcare.” Another highly engaged activist, a 28-year-old who began helping Obama in the 2008 primaries and still volunteers 30 hours a week, described his ongoing motivation as a natural progression: “I worked as a volunteer throughout the campaign. OFA was the logical next step for me to support President Obama and the platform he ran on.”

“I love ...
supporting our
incredible
President and
his/our policy
agenda!”

Similarly, one 53-year-old member volunteers 5 to 10 hours a week, reads most emails and has taken every type of action for OFA. “I am 100% convinced Obama remains on the best path for the country,” he said, though he thought OFA has not yet “made the transition to articulating how their volunteers can influence legislative progress.” Another active member, an unemployed 29-year-old, said he still volunteers 20 to 30 hours a week, has taken every type of action for OFA and reads every email. His motivation to volunteer is “to help strengthen America through enhanced community networks and wide-scale cooperation,” he said, adding that he didn’t think there is anything OFA could do better.

One 42-year-old Democrat stressed that she had “*never* been involved in politics at all before Obama,” but she volunteered ten to twenty hours a week for OFA in 2009. (She attended political and service projects, called Congress, contacted friends and wrote email to the media.) She views OFA as a meaningful opportunity to support Obama and work with other people: “I love the fact that we are joining together to support our incredible President and his/our policy agenda!” she wrote. Similarly, a 62-year-old who volunteers five to ten hours a week marveled at the chance to continue working on Obama’s behalf. “What a gift to have President Obama's policy agenda,” he said, “it is too much of a gift to pass up the chance to participate in making sure it happens.” Although he is not a member of any political party, this volunteer said OFA inspired him to attend political and service events, call and email Congress, and contact friends. He was very enthusiastic about OFA’s program and fellow organizers in his area:

Mostly, [OFA] so much exceeds my experience with human nature in prior volunteer efforts, that I just marvel at their degree of cogentness and on-target organization. I am fortunate that in my locality there is an exceptionally committed core of volunteers, always ready to make things work on the ground.

Diverging Views of OFA Strategy

Other volunteers raised concerns about OFA's strategy, though many of these critical participants continue to volunteer despite their strategic disagreements. One member, who has attended political and service events, said she wished OFA "would send emails on how to contact Democratic representatives who oppose the President's agenda" – referencing OFA's reticence to use a confrontational posture towards Democrats opposing Obama's agenda (discussed further in Section Three). The volunteer also contended that OFA "withheld" information about certain legislative developments, citing OFA's silence regarding Rep. Stupak's pro-life amendment to the health care bill, but said she continues to volunteer an hour a week for OFA.

Another OFA member, who volunteers one to five hours a week, lamented that OFA had "no interest in push back against poor decisions such as Stupak," and he also criticized an organizational sensitivity about "attacking other Democrats." The volunteer, who has attended in-person meetings, service projects, and contacted Congress by phone and email, contended that many "OFA1" people are "very disappointed in OFA2." He said he reads every email and thought that while the quantity was right, the quality and "depth of information is low."

Another 51-year-old OFA member said she had hoped OFA would function as a more "progressive," reformist force in American politics, but she remained enthused about volunteering one to five hours for the current effort:

I personally had hopes that this movement, which has now become OFA, would somehow become the New Progressive Party movement – rather than part of the *status quo* DNC. However, I am still committed to working as a C.O. and will support OFA with those projects and agendas that mesh with mine. I think OFA could use a little less *rab-rab* and a bit more substance in their messaging, particularly when it is dealing with items within the Democratic Party, like the Blue Dogs and the push back on [health care reform]. But overall, it is impressive that this movement that began with the campaign has not only stayed together, but [] grown in influence.

She said she first joined the campaign after the 2008 primaries began, and she continues to read every OFA email. Similarly, a 37-year-old supporter who volunteers 5 to 10 hours a week said she felt the health legislation was “obviously [] not perfect” and she had ongoing “concerns” about the process, but she intended to keep working for OFA. “I want to make as many of [Obama’s] ideas as possible into realities for the USA,” she explained, and she believed the “summer campaign” to lobby members of Congress in their offices had “some positive effect.”

Other volunteers were more critical. “Plouffe said he didn’t want this to be a ‘call and email your congressman organization,’” noted a 22-year-old who volunteered 40 hours a week for OFA as a summer organizer in 2009, “but that’s exactly what it was, because it was the least controversial tactic and it was approved throughout the bureaucracy.” This person said volunteer efforts to advocate alternative strategies, such as confronting resistant Democratic legislators, were rebuffed. “I got in trouble for saying focus on [a particular Member], because that was targeting. This whole tactic that is central to Saul Alinsky organizing is to pick out the power player who has the authority over the specific tactic that you want done, and use a variety of pressure tactics,” the volunteer recounted. “So OFA specifically denounced that targeting ... I don’t know if it came down from above, but the state director communicated it to summer organizers.” The former OFA volunteer continued:

I think that, to a large extent, this Obama election hasn’t signified a new moment in American politics... Going through OFA showed me that they’re using these same insider tactics that political machines have used forever... The White House was directing this mobilization and marketing effort, and pitching it as organizing to its supporters. It made me feel like the White House was using me to mobilize supporters for a rally, rather than to *organize* -- to build power through real grassroots organizing. [Instead] I was part of this machine to enact the White House political directives; I didn’t have influence on those political directives; there was no reciprocal relationship... It’s not a new opportunity for grassroots organizing. It’s just a different political climate.

This person no longer reads OFA emails, but remains fairly positive about President Obama: “He seems to be making the best of incredibly tough political and policy situations. He hasn’t made all the right decisions, but no president or politician does.”

Reduced Volunteering

Some members work less for OFA, but remain positive about its efforts and role as a conduit of information. An activist who had attended political and service events, called Congress, emailed Congress and contacted friends for OFA in 2009, for example, decided to volunteer

for the local party instead, because it “needs” her more. The activist said she still reads every OFA email for information about local events.

“OFA seems to lack that sense of urgency... There's no big goal to work towards like the election.”

Other Obama supporters say they left OFA because of its activities in 2009. One 45-year-old said he unsubscribed from OFA after participating in one initiative to call Congress. OFA “overpromised” whether “input is meaningful or even heard,” he said. “Seriously, I feel that OFA's main objective is to facilitate and maintain pseudo-personal relationships with supporters in order to exploit them,” he contended, adding, “I think it’s called relationship marketing.”

Another activist, who connected with the Obama campaign in early 2007, said that while she has not unsubscribed from OFA, she doesn’t read the emails and does not know the main objective of OFA. OFA should “take the Kool-Aid off the agenda,” she said, and instead provide more opportunities for people to take “meaningful action.”

A 31-year-old member, who attended a service event and still reads some OFA emails, said her relationship with OFA had evolved. “I just don't feel as connected to OFA as I did the campaign. OFA seems to lack that sense of urgency or mission,” she said, adding, “There's no big goal to work towards like the election.”

Other volunteers questioned whether their volunteering was effective. “I've been disinterested in calling on members of Congress to ‘support Obama's agenda,’ since I don't feel like I fully understand the details of what that agenda entails,” said one 33-year-old Democrat who has called Congress, wrote email to Congress, and contacted friends for OFA. “I would like to see OFA doing a better job of informing us - or maybe just reiterating - what is involved in Obama's agenda,” she continued. “With respect to the health insurance reform, I feel like this has kind of fluctuated over time - with respect to the inclusion of a public option - and it's hard for me to really understand what I'm saying if I encourage others to sign on to ‘The Obama Plan.’” While she still reads some OFA emails, the activist said she feels less motivated to volunteer through OFA’s legislative program:

While I'm compelled to support the President and especially to have my progressive voice heard by the Executive and Legislative branches ... it hasn't seemed like OFA has been a useful vehicle for me to do this. Rather, it seems as though it's more of a way to enlist my neighbors [and] social network to support the President's agenda. Calling and doorknocking seems to be more socially acceptable - at least among my neighbors - for the purpose of a

political campaign, for which citizens can cast their own vote. On the contrary, engaging in these activities in order to encourage Members of Congress to pass a vague idea of "Obama's" health care plan isn't as palatable to me.

Similarly, a member who had called Congress and wrote to Congress in 2009 for OFA decided to stop reading emails entirely, because of the “embedded fundraising requests.” The respondent also said they were not sure what OFA’s objective was.

Other OFA members say they are less active for personal reasons, regardless of what OFA is doing. A 59-year-old independent, who attended a political event and forwarded OFA emails in 2009, decided to reduce her volunteering to under an hour a week, because of her own schedule. “I worked a lot for the election,” she said, having first gotten involved when primary voting began, but “regretfully” she has not “had as much time since.” She continues to read most emails, she said, and she is “thankful” for the information that rebuts the “untruths out there.” One 24-year-old, who first connected with the campaign as the general election began, said she attended one in-person event in 2009 and reads some emails, but finds it hard to stay engaged. “I have really fallen off. I care a lot about passing healthcare legislation, so I was trying to stay involved with that,” she recounted. “However, it's tough to stay engaged for so long since the campaign when other life priorities come up.”

One 59-year-old, who reads every OFA email and volunteers under an hour a week, said she is less active simply because of the “timing of events.” Still, over 2009 this volunteer had called Congress, emailed Congress, contacted friends for OFA, attended political events and wrote emails to the media. In passing, she also noted the change in personnel from campaign outreach to OFA: “The blog is pretty weird now, with few of the original bloggers still on board from the campaign.”

Others have shifted their volunteering to different outlets. A 20 year-old-student, who connected with the campaign in late 2007, struck a typical note for a supportive bystander: “[I] stopped volunteering for Obama specifically after he was elected.... I am a full time student and president of [my college] Democrats,” she explained, “I do not have time to give to the [OFA] campaign.”

Increased Volunteering and Local Strategy

Finally, some OFA volunteers and local party officials are pushing the boundaries of the activism opportunities that OFA provides members – with intriguing results. In one especially active OFA network, volunteers have organized their own outreach events, phone banks and localized legislative strategy, and then coordinated their efforts with the OFA’s state staff to drive new supporters and volunteers to their own grassroots events.

“We may be the only operation like this in the country.”

“When OFA sends out an email saying ‘please call your congressman,’ our folks didn’t want to call [our progressive Democratic member] anymore because there’s no point,” said the party official. “There seemed to be a limited value to see if she’s on board with health care... we felt that what would be helpful is to use our volunteer energy to push people who really need to be pushed.” So the volunteers began organizing their own phone banks, recruiting people from both homemade email lists¹³³ and national OFA lists, to call supporters in other districts and areas where there were not “extensive volunteer networks.” In some of those areas, the official said, people “hadn’t been getting phone calls, or been asked to do things - so we were assisting in that.” They estimated that they made over 8,500 calls from their recurring phone banks, which are attended by 30 to 40 people. The official said the events continue to draw new volunteers:

What’s really incredible and continues to demonstrate, despite all the naysayers, the power that OFA still has - and [the] Obama brand - when one of those [OFA] emails goes out, or even the general, we will still get people who show up that we’ve never seen before. They’re responding to being asked by OFA to come in. Sometimes its because of the issues, really committed to health care. Sometimes these are folks who participated during campaign, and haven’t gotten involved yet, and get pushed by some desire... we had a senior citizen who came in for several nights of phone banking, who had never ever done political work before, not even during the campaign... but finally the health care issue and the fact that it seemed like it might not be getting through Congress, and getting that OFA email - that’s what brought him into office. There are people out there who pay attention, and they still respond.

The official said this model was not only valuable for meaningful volunteering, but also believed it had legislative impact:

I think that partnership has been particularly productive and effective. It’s great for our volunteers because they feel like they’re doing something worthwhile. And it’s good for areas in our state where they didn’t have extensive OFA networks built up... and it also was effective politically, because we were extremely gratified when all of the House Democrats [in our delegation] voted for health care reform -- that was not at all a certainty.

¹³³ They estimate the open rate on their local email appeals is typically 28 percent.

Finally, the official contended that their local collaboration was likely unique. “I suspect, and I’ve been told this fairly directly by OFA folks, that we work with, that we may be the only operation like this in country.” The official elaborated:

There may not be a lot of outposts like ours – Democratic Party operations with a sizable volunteer base that have a close working relationship with OFA. Nonetheless, we represent an important, and especially successful, element of what's going on with OFA. Your questions tend to presume that people come to OFA on their own, evaluate emails individually, and then determine how to respond. But we have an effective symbiotic relationship here, where both OFA and the [local] Democratic Party ... reach out to our networks, and we draw in large groups of volunteers to do critical work that way. For various reasons this may not be possible in lots of places, but where it is it is an especially powerful partnership.

This experiment may be rare at this juncture in OFA’s development, but it suggests one model for citizens and volunteers to make more local and strategic decisions in some of the legislative approach.

The anecdotal examples of newly engaged governance volunteers – in contrast to activating campaign volunteers – suggest that OFA is providing a new, less political gateway to civic engagement for some citizens. Anecdotally, surveys of OFA members found that while the largest plurality of members became involved in the campaign during 2007, before primary voting even began, several people said they first became involved after Obama was inaugurated.

Former Obama Campaign Staff

While OFA's public communications focus on organizing work, highlights and achievements of the organization, I conducted telephone interviews with a range of former Obama campaign staff to solicit views and analysis of OFA's first year. Former campaign aides can offer a salient perspective on OFA's work and challenges, since they have an insider, practitioner's understanding of what worked for Obama and his supporters during the campaign. (Like all interviews and surveying for this report, individual staffers are cited on background to encourage candor.) This section generally quotes one source per paragraph, for clarity.

“How do you recapture a grassroots movement of people fighting Washington insiders when you're sitting inside Washington?”

OFA is not OFAC:

Why Organizing for America is not the Obama for America Campaign

The clearest point of consensus among former staffers is that OFA's mission is drastically different than Obama's presidential campaign – and that many political stakeholders and observers do not seem to fully appreciate the challenge of transitioning from a campaign to OFA's current experiment.

“Organizing a movement around one man, [and then] moving it to organizing around his agenda -- that was a big challenge,” noted one former staffer, explaining:

You have this amazing charismatic central figure, and while he's still in the picture, it's a change dynamic to keep people as enthused as during the campaign -- when there's a clear end date and a clear goal. Introducing the concept of OFA to folks, getting them excited about it, I think that's the main challenge.... [Given the challenges,] they have wildly exceeded expectations, and that's amazing, and I'm really happy for them.

Another former staffer said the campaign's outsider ethos is hard to sustain from party offices in the Beltway:

They have a specific challenge different than the campaign: How do you recapture a grassroots movement of people fighting Washington insiders when you're sitting inside Washington trying to direct this movement? It's difficult. I think its been difficult for them to find that sweet spot.... I think that they're in a very tough position.

While OFA's overarching, aspirational message still echoes the campaign, this staffer noted, the messenger is now different. "*Come together to move government to do the right thing*" – that message is not getting through in their program, because unfortunately they are seen as part of the system," the staffer concluded. This dynamic may have been reinforced by the decision to focus on the health care battle, a protracted, insider process, as opposed to a range of issues that may have presented more dramatic or decisive moments.

Another staffer emphasized that the campaign provided more resources and independence. "They have a lot fewer resources than we had on campaign," the staffer said, adding, "They were set up unfortunately in a way that has not empowered them to have as much autonomy." "I think they're doing fine," the staffer concluded, noting "it's really easy to criticize these organizations from the outside, and it's always more difficult, more complicated, the more you get in to the details."

Structure

"This is the most unprecedented list by far in political history, with the potential to be an incredible tool for social change ... Yet it doesn't feel like it's being treated that way.

While former campaign staffers were not in unison on this point, most interviewees stressed that OFA's current structure, within the DNC and reporting to the White House, put significant constraints on OFA's activities. In this narrative, while the campaign operated as a single, holistic strategic entity, OFA is now inevitably subsumed in a sprawling organizational matrix, including the White House, Congress and party infrastructure. Thus it can be easily outranked.

"It's very, very hard, because you're being led around by the White House, which has shifting strategy and different political concerns," noted one former staffer. The organizational chart makes it hard to quickly answer practical organizing questions, this person observed, or even settle on the right "political rhetoric" for communicating with supporters. This former staffer was also concerned about the commitment to a robust OFA at the White House, a view echoed by other campaign staff.

The White House is not only a bureaucratic hurdle, according to some former campaign staff, it has emerged as an intramural opponent with diverging strategic priorities. Unlike the presidential campaign leadership, one ex-staffer contended, White House management is

simply not very enthused about grassroots organizing, or convinced of the potential benefits of mobilizing OFA's millions of members:

It's complicated, because OFA is not a campaign – they are an arm of the White House. They have to do what White House tells them. The White House, it seems to me, Rahm and whomever else, [they don't] give a crap about this email list and don't think it's a very useful thing. They want to do stuff the delicate way – the horse-trading, backroom talks, one-to-one lobbying. So they see it as more effective to get [Deputy Chief of Staff] Jim Messina on the phone with all these folks; the way to deal with this is to get on the phone. [They say] 'unleashing a massive grassroots army is only going to backfire on us.' But at the same time, they have unleashed it, letting it call Congress...

“Rahm
[doesn't]
give a crap
about this
email list.”

Within this power dynamic, this former staffer argued, many potential concerns or criticisms about OFA do *not* actually stem from OFA decisions, and instead should be leveled at the White House. (Other Democratic operatives, like former Howard Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi, have presented the same argument.¹³⁴) The ex-staffer elaborated:

For the sake of relationship-building, it seems to me there are two warring things. One is pleasing the White House. The other is pleasing this 13 million-person list. You can't do both, but it seems to me that there has been not enough emphasis on [the idea that] this is the most unprecedented list by far in political history, with the potential to be an incredible tool for social change and a legislative hammer to help pass progressive reform. Yet it doesn't feel like it's being treated that way. It feels a little like [the White House thinks], 'Here's this list, we don't have to change the way we do anything to please that list. Just have that list conform to the way we do things.' The consequences for that are that it's going to weaken the list, and more and more people are going to unsubscribe. It will still be huge, but if they do finally want to unleash it, and turn it into a powerful thing, what then?

Another ex-staffer echoed the concern about White House management:

¹³⁴ Trippi pointed to the White House when asked about OFA's progress in November 2009, saying, "They were outsiders who made a conscious decision to play the inside game... They decided that the best way to get things done is to get somebody who can run legislation through, who can tough-mouth and arm-twist anyone who gets out of line. That's why Rahm is there. To arm twist people and Rahm is good at that." See "Obama Online -- What's the Future of Organizing for America (OFA)?" Jose Antonio Vargas, *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jose-antonio-vargas/obama-online---whats-the_b_343598.html

I don't think the White House is interested in using a grassroots organizing network to really advance their agenda. I can say that flat out. And I think the backstory, if you're talking about the White House [staff] – and not OFA [staff] – is [the people] working at the White House are the [campaign] communications people, who never, I don't think, fully appreciated the network of activists in the first place. So, that means that when they're there, [this organizing] becomes an extension of a larger communications and messaging strategy, and much less a concerted effort to use a lot of people who care a lot [about] creatively pushing through a legislative agenda.

This staffer also lamented that David Plouffe was not in a daily management position at the White House or the DNC. “I think the absence of Plouffe is really felt. When you talk about the top echelons of campaign, who are the people who got the technology, got the organizing and got the network, the single person at the center of that was David Plouffe,” the staffer contended. “And without him in the room on a daily basis, I think the technology and the grassroots networks get a lot less attention.” (Plouffe has publicly responded to questions about communications staff gaining more influence than organizing and Internet staff, noting that some shifts are understandable since “in the White House, obviously you're not really raising money and you're not really doing organizing.”¹³⁵)

Mobilizing Legislative Activism

Another campaign staffer said it was impressive that OFA had clearly generated sustained, grassroots contact with members of Congress and mobilized attendance at events around the country.

It's important they've motivated people to make phone calls and contact their congressmen. I think that a lot of people made a lot of noise at townhalls in August, but more people have been making calls and writing the letters – even if they're not doing the circus [act] of standing up and screaming at their congressman... The fact that that many people [participated] means there is a bunch of interest out there. People still are engaged; it's a myth that just because Obama won people are tuning out. I think there still is a lot of passion out there, and people still want to be part of a movement.

¹³⁵ “The Nation’s Full Interview with David Plouffe,” YouTube, December 17, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCwgeRumlXk>

Beyond the vote of confidence in OFA's general mobilization, this staffer added that governance activists could benefit from more precise information on health care, partly because the activist community has become especially fluent with health care policy this year:

I think [some supporters] have suffered from a lack of specifics [from OFA]. People need to know what they're specifically asking of their member, other than generally 'health care reform.' I think people have become very educated in this debate, and there's a group – people are more informed about the specifics of this legislation than at any other time in recent history about other legislation... The hardcore people understand the details, things like what a public option is, and how that's different, and the different kinds of public option. Not giving people specific things to push for has meant that a lot of people don't understand the point. So I think the lack of specificity has hurt their efforts.

Targeted Legislative Strategy

While most former campaign staff interviewed said they support OFA's focus on Obama's legislative agenda, several questioned whether the (evolving) mobilization model was as sophisticated and effective as possible. These ex-staffers also volunteered that OFA is in an early, learning stage, and noted the inevitable transition constraints (discussed above).

“Why is this email in your inbox, and why is what I'm telling you not a waste of time?”

Several still argued, however, that depending on future refinements, OFA's 2009 model may not only be a missed opportunity to advance more of the administration's agenda, but could also reduce some of the trust and relationships between Obama and his supporters.

“Why is this email in your inbox, and why is what I'm telling you not a waste of time?” Every effective political appeal must have clear answers to those questions, suggested one staffer, and some of OFA's legislative communications fall short. “It's always going to be a hard needle to thread, but asking people to call safe incumbent Democrats who are voting the right way anyway – like Barbara Boxer or Chuck Schumer – at a certain point has diminishing returns on the actual action, and on people's willingness to spend the time,” the staffer argued.

In this pragmatic critique, the argument is that it may ultimately be counterproductive to urge supporters to repeatedly deliver the same lobbying message, regardless of who represents them in Congress or how a legislative fight has evolved over time. The staffer suggested an

alternative legislative strategy that directed OFA members to target vulnerable members and swing votes, committing support for their reelection campaigns:

Imagine a whole other thread of communications to OFA people before the [health care] vote, instead of sending the same old email saying ‘call congress or sign a pledge.’ If you live in a tough district, tell [members of Congress] we are going to be there to tell why this was the right bill next year. Get people from surrounding districts to contact people in tougher districts... If you told someone who lived in San Francisco or Brooklyn to write a note to the vulnerable member in the district next door, 90 minutes away, committing to go tell my health care story in your district – to tell why this was the right move when you’re running for reelection next year, I want to be standing there with you.

Especially after all these emails have been about telling [politicians who already support reform like] Barbara Boxer how to vote on health care, it would be interesting to people. Even if its not something you think would be effective, it’s interesting, connects to elections next year, reinforces value of being part of this community. Even if it persuaded zero members, it’s a different kind of action that – versus another email saying call Barbara Boxer – would make people pause and think it’s something interesting to consider: A unique avenue of political action that they can’t get elsewhere.

Like others, this staffer noted such a strategic shift depended on the White House, not OFA leadership.

Another staffer noted the shortcomings of directing so many supporters to lobby members of Congress who already back Obama’s health care agenda. “It’s a major ask to ask people to call a Congressman. It takes a good amount of your time, it’s awkward – it’s easier to donate than call a congressman,” noted the staffer, suggesting other avenues:

[What if OFA told us] we have targeted a congressman in a certain congressional district, which is not your district, and they are going to vote against a health care bill. Your voice doesn’t matter in terms of [lobbying] – if I called that congressman they don’t care [about non-constituents], but what are the other things I can do? Theoretically, I could donate money to run advocacy ads in his district. I could call other people on the MyBO list who live where these Blue Dogs are, and say, ‘Hi, I was a volunteer on the campaign just like you, do you think you have time today to call your congressman?’ I feel like there’s stuff that we could do. I don’t know how the

legislative process works, but it offends my sensibilities to be asked to call [liberal members who are] obviously going to vote for health care reform... Or for me to call Chuck Schumer – author of the [public option plan] that passed the subcommittee. Why am I calling him? And what does it mean to thank someone who is already a left liberal in a liberal district?

This argument not only echoes the targeting critique, but also questions the purpose of OFA’s “thank you” drives. Another campaign staffer raised the same question regarding legislative targeting. The staffer contended that it is “literally useless” to ask people to call Members who are “clearly going to support the President’s health care proposal.” The staffer elaborated:

That doesn’t mean that I necessarily need to call Snowe’s office, because I don’t have anything to do with Maine, but I sure as hell would love to call to OFA volunteers, or potential volunteers, or swing voters who are in Maine, and talk to them about [health care] and what they can do to make sure their senator supports it. It would be not only valuable, but help give me a feeling that I was actually doing something. Having that feeling is really important; it’s [a] commitment, it’s inspiring, too, and that’s also what leads to fundraising success and other organizing success.

This former staffer felt that OFA’s health care drive repeatedly presented supporters with “traditional asks,” which did not “take advantage of the technology or sheer organizing capacity they have.” The staffer added:

Calling Congress is fine... [but] showing up at every public event that Olympia Snowe has in Maine with people who are actually for the health care bill – and even only ten people, making sure you get their names in the newspaper next day, that feels like public pressure on a senator that, at least in theory, could vote either way on this. They could easily do that --easily agile enough to get people out to a particular place at a particular moment in time... My suspicion is they’re just not allowed to do that politically, by the White House, and that’s a shame. Maybe I’m not sensitive enough to all the political nuance.

This bundle of advice tracks with effective strategies from the Obama presidential campaign, when the email list was used to drive and target volunteers to specific areas that were most consequential for the campaign’s objectives. People made calls into the most important states, not necessarily their home state, and people traveled to where the campaign needed them. Applying that approach to OFA in the future would likely find a receptive audience, since OFA members are primed for that kind of activity from the campaign season.

Relationships

Finally, several campaign staff interviewed felt that the tone and relationship quality of OFA emails had shifted. Some raised concerns about the potential impact on the strength and intensity of the supporter list, both in the near term and as a resource for a 2012 reelection campaign. (Such concerns were usually discussed in the context of the challenging and constrained environment facing OFA, as discussed above.)

“I think if you look at the body of emails that have gone out in general, the things that haven’t been about health care have not done enough to buttress the reality of the relationship [between supporters and Obama],” said one former staffer, “and the more practical things that people could do, and feel, and consume in order to balance out the very tough reality of that health care relationship.” The mix of communication towards supporters focused too much on health care, the staffer argued: “There’s got to be a home at OFA, and in the party, for people who aren’t really fired up about the way health care is being handled.” The staffer continued:

When I get email from [OFA] it feels like a bunch of people sitting in a building who are really into their jobs, but who don’t have an appreciation for the fact that this email is being dropped into inbox in the middle of everything else that [people are] doing, in the middle of all the other communications and news that they’re seeing, and there’s supposed to be a value, and a significance, and a resonance... Is it meaningful? Does it frame what we’re trying to do? Is it a real relationship? There’s language about what we need to do... but when I’m reading this ... as a person, is this actually meaningful to me? Not *‘do I think it would be meaningful to some pool of people,’* but the best test is, Are the first two graphs of this email meaningful to me? To go back and look at stuff from the campaign ... that’s the big difference

But the larger relationship, we’re hitting send on an email to 13m people, that should be a very balanced diet that reflects all the things that the administration feels are its successes so far, and its priorities moving forward. It should be balanced, and every once in a while you do another sweep [] spending time popping the big list with opportunities to opt in to health care – but [you] can’t pretend the whole list is health care.

The same ex-staffer worried about the OFA’s participation rates for governance activism, and whether the data OFA already publicly released was undercutting its potential clout in Washington:

Thirteen million people making 300,000 phone calls? What are the other 12.7 million people doing? ... [O]nly 2.1m took action, and 1.5 of those actions are signing a pledge that feels pretty empty and meaningless anyway, I wouldn't put that number out. If you thought Obama had 13 million -- actually he only has 10 percent of that... Imagine the leverage, if people really believed there were 13 million people and 4 million donors -- and it was all really well curated and taken care of and interesting -- and backed up by this field program, imagine the carrot effect for these squishy [members of Congress] who are worried about their reelection next year. Instead of dropping OFA in cacophony of people banging on Congress' doors, could be powerful leverage for political commitments.

“I don't think [Obama's reelection is] going to be anything like 2008.”

Another staffer worried that a degradation of the email network could impede the intensity among supporters and volunteers going into the reelection campaign.

“Unless people feel like they have a voice, and they're empowered by campaign infrastructure, I don't think you'll see them participate the same way,” the staffer

argued. “Technology is just the means to help people work for what they believe in, and connect with the other people who are similar to them more easily. Who knows what will happen in 2012, unless you have a campaign run by different people in the White House right now, I don't think its going to be anything like 2008.”

Part III: Discussion and Analysis

Metrics and Impact

No clear consensus has emerged yet, among practitioners or observers, over the proper metrics to assess OFA's work.

Thus far, the actual universe of governance volunteers is smaller than the list of active campaign volunteers, which is to be expected.¹³⁶ Yet as an institution, OFA has an incentive to stoke the perception that it continues the huge, active network that it managed during the campaign. Then members of Congress are more likely to worry about OFA volunteers in their backyard, even before particular lobbying actions are taken, and media and political figures are more likely to treat OFA seriously, (or at least view it as a potential "sleeping giant"). At the same time, however, the notion that OFA is an active, 13-million-member organization can advance inaccurate metrics for its organizing work. Those metrics can, in turn, undermine the very perception of efficacy that drives OFA's potential clout. This tension has been visible in OFA's description of its work in 2009, and in outside commentary.

It is not logical to assess OFA participation as a percentage of the campaign's peak engagement level.

Independent observers, OFA officials and OFA allies have assessed OFA's mobilization as a percentage of the entire campaign list. OFA's delivery of 214,000 policy pledges in April, for example, was covered by one reporter as "a low percentage of OFA's total number of supporters ... 1.65 percent."¹³⁷ Some former campaign staff hit a similar theme, citing volunteer estimates to ask what the "other 12.7 million" supporters are doing.¹³⁸ David Plouffe touted OFA's success in December 2009 by the same standard, presenting volunteer rates as a percentage of the entire email list. Pointing to the over two million people who took some action on health care for OFA, he said, "you basically have around 20 percent, a little under 20 percent of our entire list having volunteered on health care – that's great."¹³⁹

It is not logical, however, to assess OFA participation as a percentage of the campaign's peak engagement level.

¹³⁶ As discussed throughout the report, the available data on volunteer participation is lower than during the campaign, according to OFA, while web traffic and views of online videos are lower than during the campaign.

¹³⁷ "Organizing for America Kicks Off Health Care Campaign," Chris Good, *TheAtlantic.com*, June 6, 2009. http://politics.theatlantic.com/2009/06/ofa_kicks_off_health_care_campaign.php

¹³⁸ See Section Two.

¹³⁹ "The Nation's Full Interview with David Plouffe," YouTube, December 17, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCwgeRumlXk&feature=channel>

In fact, given OFA's focus on health care, the 2009 participation rates are likely constituted by two groups within the list – the super-activists, who would seize on most available volunteer opportunities, and health care activists, who have a strong or ongoing interest in health care reform. With that context in mind, OFA's first year participation rates appear quite high. Contrary to the metrics that implicitly treat participation as a slice of campaign season peaks, OFA has galvanized significant policy and community volunteering in the campaign off-season.

OFA estimated that members spent a cumulative 200,000 hours volunteering in 2009.

From the outset, it was not assured that campaign supporters would choose to continue volunteer actions after the campaign ended. (The initial expectations and enthusiasm was present: Over 60 percent of Obama supporters said, when polled in December 2008, that they would ask others to support the administration's agenda; 25 percent of supporters expected to do so by phone. Yet it is difficult to convert that interest into sustained volunteering.)¹⁴⁰ OFA's participation data suggests that substantial volunteering continued throughout 2009. In a year-end review, OFA estimated that over 2.5 million members took some action on health care, from signing on to petitions from home to taking offline action at rallies, phone banks and congressional offices.¹⁴¹ Within that universe, volunteers made over a million calls to Congress; over 230,000 people submitted health care stories; 250,000 letters to the editor were sent; 65,000 people attended Congressional lobbying events; and 37,000 local events were executed around the country.¹⁴² In all, OFA estimated that members spent a cumulative 200,000 hours volunteering in 2009.¹⁴³

Apart from any questions about the efficacy and sustainability of OFA programs, it is clear that a large number of people were engaged by these new activism opportunities. OFA provided a new, national and local structure for governance activism within the Democratic Party, and a significant number of people participated in the first year of the experiment.

It is simply too early to tell whether these initial numbers reflect a floor for future growth, or a ceiling for activist engagement during a particularly intense governing period, coming after an unusually spirited and lengthy election. Future participation turns on several variables, from external conditions, like the political climate, to internal decisions, such as the range of issues and type of volunteer opportunities that OFA presents to members. Even beyond these

¹⁴⁰ On the receiving end, 17 percent of Obama supporters said they expected to receive phone calls from the new administration. "Post-Election Voter Engagement," Aaron Smith, Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 30, 2008.

¹⁴¹ "Organizing for America: Looking Back, Marching Ahead," Jeremy Bird, Huffington Post, January 6, 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeremy-bird/organizing-for-america-lo_b_413000.html

¹⁴² Id.

¹⁴³ "2009," Mitch Stewart, OFA email, December 30, 2009.

broad, thinner types of participation, another potentially significant development is OFA's cultivation of a new type of intense party activist during the governance period.

Super-Activists

In a departure from most other presidential election cycles, when the Obama campaign ended, a very large share of its voter base was already primed to continue communicating with and working on behalf of the winning candidate.¹⁴⁴ This unusual dynamic was often underappreciated by political observers and commentators.

Engaged online supporters were more representative of the entire population than the traditional demographics of politically active Americans.

After the election, a full third of Obama supporters said they expected Obama to contact them by email in the following year.¹⁴⁵ And while OFA's frequent emails set a new precedent for national party communications between elections, many Obama supporters were already anticipating such contact. Among the supporters who expected email from Obama, about a third said they anticipated it would come on a *weekly* basis.¹⁴⁶ Many Obama supporters were not only ready to listen, but also to talk up the new administration's agenda. The same post-election survey found that one out of four Obama supporters

said they planned to ask other citizens to support "Obama policies" by phone (as discussed above).¹⁴⁷ The enthusiasm for such outreach was even higher among Obama supporters who were active online: 68 percent of online supporters said they "expect to press others to support the new administration's policies in the coming year."¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, the economic and racial makeup of these online Obama supporters was striking. Immediately after the election, Obama's engaged online supporters were *more representative of the entire population*¹⁴⁹ than the traditional demographics of politically active

¹⁴⁴ For example, these trends are reflected in one post-election survey focusing on political participation, "Post-Election Voter Engagement," discussed throughout this section.

¹⁴⁵ "Post-Election Voter Engagement," Aaron Smith, Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 30, 2008. The polling asked Obama and McCain voters about hearing from their respective candidates in the future, though in Obama's case, some questions included potential contact from the Obama administration, not simply his political operation. (Among McCain voters, 20 percent said they expected to hear from McCain by email.)

¹⁴⁶ As discussed in Section One, outreach and email from the administration and the campaign list are distinct. Some Obama supporters quickly gathered that distinction; before Obama was sworn in, about 6 percent of Obama voters who were active online had already signed up to receive dedicated email updates from the government transition team. Id.

¹⁴⁷ Id.

¹⁴⁸ Id.

¹⁴⁹ Id.

Americans, or of wired Americans.¹⁵⁰ During the transition phase, more black Obama voters were engaging politics online than white Obama voters. High school graduates engaged online at the same rate as college graduates, a reverse of typical trends. And voters from households making under \$30,000 were *more* engaged than those from the wealthier bracket of \$30,000 to \$50,000.¹⁵¹ The campaign activated voting, volunteering and other political engagement that was both unusually deep and broad – the open question was whether such intensity could be maintained.¹⁵²

Apart from public polling, Obama campaign staff also reported after the election that the campaign discovered and cultivated an essentially new class of hyperactive volunteers, or “super-volunteers,” as they were dubbed by Field Director Jon Carson.” He recounted the role of super volunteers at an election forum in December 2008:

The most important part of that massive group of people [doing volunteering] were the super-volunteers that we had. We figured out in the primary how to take advantage of them. What we really ended up having was an extra layer of staff out there. In Ohio, we had over 1,400 people who were putting in 20, 30, 40 hours a week – and we empowered them.... The scale of voter contact that we achieved was pretty enormous. What allowed us to grow exponentially at the end was the base of super-volunteers that we had. You can’t, with just a couple hundred staff in a state, put on the kind of operation we had...¹⁵³

Carson also estimated that three out of four of the campaign volunteers “had never been involved in a campaign before.”¹⁵⁴

In its first year, it appears that OFA has succeeded in providing another outlet for some of those highly engaged supporters, among those interviewed for the report. While national polling is not available for overall volunteering trends, the surveys of OFA members and anecdotal information about their activities suggests there is still a national corps of super-volunteers. They have shifted from campaign volunteering to OFA activism, lobbying for federal policy and operating in tandem with an incumbent President. In this report’s survey of

¹⁵⁰ By contrast, see, e.g. “Online politics reserved for rich,” BBC News, September 2, 2009 (discussing 2009 Pew survey finding that “online political engagement such as contacting officials, signing petitions and making donations is skewed towards richer and better educated Americans.”) <http://www.pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2009/Online-politics-reserved-for-rich.aspx>

¹⁵¹ “Post-Election Voter Engagement,” Aaron Smith, Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 30, 2008.

¹⁵² As one commenter wrote in November 2008, “How the Obama campaign might affect the long-term civic culture of the United States is a very open question, however. Will the networks and contacts and relationships established during the campaign endure, and what shape will they take?” “What Next for the Obama Network? Four Critical Questions,” Thad Williamson, *Social Capital Blog*, Harvard Saguaro Seminar, November 14, 2008. <http://socialcapital.wordpress.com/2008/11/14/what-next-for-the-obama-network-four-critical-questions/>

¹⁵³ “Electing The President, 2008; The Insider’s View,” Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ed., at 44-5, University of Pennsylvania Press (2009) (transcript of Jon Carson on “Campaign Management and Field Operations,” quoted from December 2008 meetings convened by the Annenberg Public Policy Center).

¹⁵⁴ Id. at 42.

OFA members,¹⁵⁵ sizable pluralities say they still volunteer from several to more than ten hours a week.

At the structural level, OFA's labor distribution also relies on these super-activists. The presidential campaign used a large paid staff and a national corps of "neighborhood team leaders" to run field and volunteer work. OFA, by contrast, uses a comparatively tiny paid staff¹⁵⁶ and a national corps of "community organizers" to do governance organizing. OFA officials say "the defining characteristic" of its "organizational structure" is a system tapping volunteers willing to "dedicate[] 20 to 30 hours a week to OFA"¹⁵⁷ between elections. Much of OFA's work in 2009 would not have been possible without this volunteer corps, according to David Plouffe:

In the campaign, we were very reliant on volunteers, but we also had 6,000 staff. We have very few staff right now [in December 2009]. This is almost [an] all-volunteer enterprise. So we're trying to surface people who choose to be community organizers -- to use a word Sarah Palin loves -- and they take responsibility...They might have a job -- they might have two jobs. But they're also doing this. They're recruiting the volunteers around health care, and next year, it'll be around other issues.¹⁵⁸

Much of the media and political discussion of OFA's first year understandably focused on its political strategy and orientation towards Congress. Yet those discussions may overlook one of OFA's most consequential contributions to civic life, the development of an active, national corps of volunteers focused on governance and federal policy. If these volunteers remain engaged on multiple policies and activities throughout President Obama's first term, and transition effectively into a reelection field program, it may portend a new field model for both parties in American politics.

The President's Permanent Field Campaign

Most of OFA's direct advocacy towards Congress operates in potential tension with the traditional role of the DNC, which reports to Democratic members of Congress. In fact, when the party does not control the White House, Congressional Democrats are the DNC's main client and source of funding. That relationship is typically subsumed when a Democrat

¹⁵⁵ Discussed further in Section Two.

¹⁵⁶ The DNC employs more staff in the off-season than most precedents in national politics, as discussed in the Introduction, but it is still a tiny fraction of the 5,000 staffers on the Obama presidential campaign.

¹⁵⁷ Organizing for America: Looking Back, Marching Ahead," Jeremy Bird, *Huffington Post*, January 6, 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeremy-bird/organizing-for-america-lo_b_413000.html

¹⁵⁸ "The Nation's Full Interview with David Plouffe," YouTube, December 17, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCwgeRumIXk>

wins the presidency and takes the helm of the party, but members of Congress traditionally retain influence over the DNC. Thus one of the looming questions about OFA's lobbying, in its first year, was whether it would somehow interfere with Congress' independent role, and its representative relationship with constituents, and whether that could spark greater tensions between the party and the legislative branch.

At this juncture, these concerns do not appear to have found a significant voice among congressional staff.¹⁵⁹ Even congressional offices that were interviewed *because of* a potentially adversarial relationship with the President's legislative agenda – such as targeted Republicans in Obama districts and (non-targeted) Democrats who voted against Obama's health care bill – do not generally raise or endorse the argument that OFA is interfering with the independent role reserved to Congress.

It is noteworthy that congressional staffers say they accept this unprecedented organizing and policy campaigning role, in the off-season, by a national political party. There are three key factors however, to interpreting such a legislative reaction to OFA in 2009.

“[OFA targeting] certain Democrats puts the party in a weird position.”

First, of course, it is possible that Capitol Hill staff do resent OFA's activities, but believe that voicing such sentiment would only make the organization appear even more influential. (If that is the case, official statements from congressional offices may be of limited value in this context.)

It seems unlikely, however, that staff in a range of offices from both parties would adopt the same strategy of downplaying their genuine views on this score.

Second, it is possible that many congressional staff are content with OFA precisely because they do not consider OFA a major force on Capitol Hill. Most interviewees, for example, did not begin with the premise that OFA had a significant impact or presence in their daily routine on Capitol Hill. Furthermore, consider the matrix of legislators relevant to OFA and Obama's agenda: Allied, progressive Democratic members have found OFA essentially supports them; Republicans in “Obama districts” say they do not think OFA has much policy-related leverage over their constituents; and Democratic members voting against the President's agenda – the elected group most likely to worry about facing mobilized opposition from within the party – do not indicate that they have been aggressively targeted by OFA. Party officials have even publicly acknowledged that OFA largely avoids confronting Democratic members who vote against Obama; a DNC official told the *Washington Post*, for

¹⁵⁹ Even if Congress and the wider political establishment have accepted the model of a permanent, presidential field campaign, of course, that does not preclude independent analysts and citizens from raising the substantive concerns and flaws in this model of governing.

example, "we can't target individual [Democratic] members of Congress," since telling OFA members to "target certain Democrats puts the party in a weird position."¹⁶⁰

Third, the particular political climate in Obama's first year in office may have seriously reduced incumbent sensitivity to an overbearing executive branch. If anything, one of the top critiques of Obama in 2009 was that he should have used his power to intervene and pressure members of Congress *more*, within the legislative process. In this argument, both elected Democrats¹⁶¹ and commentators¹⁶² suggested that the White House should use its mandate to dominate Congress. In a different political environment, there might have been consternation about the executive branch overriding the proper role of the legislative branch. (Indeed, prominent Democratic members of Congress used to warn of a mounting "plebiscitary presidency," arguing that President Bush had systematically undermined the independent authority and proper role of the legislative branch.¹⁶³) Yet the rancor and coverage associated with opposition to health reform may have overshadowed the novelty of OFA's experiment. In other words, even as OFA launched the largest governance organizing effort by a national party in history, party insiders and commentators spent the summer worrying that Democrats and OFA were actually *not doing "enough" field organizing* to counter the tea party and town hall protests.

As one liberal commentator noted, Democrats were struggling to contend with the first "right wing street protest movement" in modern history, a development widely reported and inflamed by the political press.¹⁶⁴ Frustrations over the August events even led one prominent Democratic organization, led by former Clinton pollster Stan Greenberg, to advocate for a new, online, permanent field organization beyond OFA to counter conservatives.¹⁶⁵ (The proposal for an "online social organization – a 'Democratic Activist Corps,'" was proposed as a confrontational, sharp field presence that would compliment OFA, though the idea did not get much traction.) Meanwhile, leading conservative complains about an overbearing federal government under the Obama administration have focused on federal spending, taxes and economic policy, not on political outreach to pressure or undermine Congressional autonomy. Thus, in the unusually intense political environment that greeted the beginning of Obama's

¹⁶⁰ "An Army Untapped," Harold Meyerson, *Washington Post*, July 8, 2009.

¹⁶¹ See, e.g., Russ Feingold criticizing Obama's lack of intervention on specific provisions of the health care legislation. "Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.), among the most vocal supporters of the public option, said it would be unfair to blame Lieberman for its apparent demise. Feingold said that responsibility ultimately rests with President Barack Obama and he could have insisted on a higher standard for the legislation. 'This bill appears to be legislation that the president wanted in the first place, so I don't think focusing it on Lieberman really hits the truth,' said Feingold. 'I think they could have been higher...'" "Lieberman expresses regret to colleagues over healthcare tension," Alexander Bolton, *The Hill*, December 15, 2009.

¹⁶² See, eg "White House as helpless victim on healthcare," Glenn Greenwald, Salon, December 16, 2009.

http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2009/12/16/white_house/index.html

¹⁶³ See, e.g. "Bush's Plebiscitary Presidency," Rep. Barney Frank, Speech on the floor of the U.S. House, *Congressional Record*, Page H5212-H5216, July 13, 2006.

¹⁶⁴ Political journalist Michael Tomasky argued that the summer protests against Obama were a highly unusual development in American politics: "We have never seen, at least in the modern history of the United States, a right-wing street-protest movement." "Something New on the Mall," Michael Tomasky, *New York Review of Books*, Volume 56, Number 16, October 22, 2009.

¹⁶⁵ "Strategy Memo," *The Democratic Strategist*, James Vega, September 16, 2009.

tenure, political allies and independent commentators¹⁶⁶ largely criticized OFA for not taking enough action to counter conservative pressure on Congress, not for doing too much.

While that dynamic might hurt morale for a new, experimental organization, it has provided the concomitant benefit of inoculating OFA against criticisms of improper congressional interference that might have otherwise surfaced. As the organization continues to establish itself as part of the national political landscape, it is less likely to face challenges to its legitimacy or proper role in congressional policymaking.

¹⁶⁶ See, e.g. “An Army Untapped,” Harold Meyerson, *Washington Post*, July 8, 2009.

Legislative Strategy

OFA's legislative posture – not *whether* it runs a permanent field campaign, but *who* the program targets – cuts across most of the issues facing the organization.

The permanent campaign may be less controversial (as discussed above), if it is primarily waged on behalf of established allies. In turn, however, it becomes less effective when the most pivotal members of Congress receive the least contact and pressure from Obama supporters. And it may be less sustainable, if volunteers conclude that their primary role is to reinforce and thank incumbent allies, rather than actually change the pressure dynamics or voting patterns in Congress.

OFA's greatest practical problem is that it focused least on the legislators that Obama needed most.

While OFA often glosses over this issue in its member emails and public statements, Obama is intuitively cognizant of the distinction. He raised it in his very first health care address to OFA members as President, when launching the grassroots lobbying effort:

Some of you are already in Democratic districts where your elected officials are strong allies, *but some of you are in districts or in states that where, right now, politicians are resistant to bringing about change.* And you need to help to mobilize these communities to say: It is not acceptable to preserve the status quo. [emphasis added]¹⁶⁷

Obama's remarks can be read as a simple call for indirect advocacy – mobilizing support among neighbors and “communities” for his agenda (mandate support). It also references, however, the conundrum facing a party organization that presses Congress to pass a particular agenda. It is *precisely* the legislators who are, in Obama's telling, “resistant to bringing about change,” who require more pressure from grassroots mobilization. Yet in its first year, OFA's greatest practical problem is that it focused least on the legislators that Obama needed most.

It is far too early to tell whether this approach will continue to define OFA's legislative posture in the future, or whether this model will significantly impact membership and volunteerism. Interviews for this report, for example, suggest that former Obama campaign staff were more concerned about the impact on OFA members than the members themselves. While some members predictably reduced their volunteering after the election, and some voiced disagreement with OFA decisions, there was little indication that people were turned

¹⁶⁷ “Time is now on healthcare, Obama says,” Foon Rhee, *Boston Globe*, May 28, 2009 (with transcript of conference call).

off or deeply upset with the available volunteer opportunities during Obama's first year in office.

Health care was also a particularly vexing legislative challenge to tackle. The policy process ultimately lasted longer than the general election. The decision to mobilize OFA members primarily for the administration's broad principles, rather than specific planks of a bill, led to a divergence between the organization's lobbying message and the endgame on Capitol Hill. As the Senate debated specific compromises regarding the public option program and Medicare buy-in in December, for example, with significant media attention on those developments, OFA continued to urge people across the country to call their Senators and reach the milestone of one million calls. At that juncture, however, even people loosely following the Senate process knew that almost every Senate vote was established, pro or con, and the legislation hung on the filibuster threats of a handful of members.¹⁶⁸ And apart from any decisions made by OFA, the remaining votes may have been unmoved, or resentful, of efforts to target them. Princeton public affairs professor Paul Starr, a longtime expert on congressional health care issues, touched on this problem in January 2010:

Obama's success in using digital media during the election may have led some to expect that as president he would be able to do the same. The job, however, is different. *Rallying your activist base may not be the best way to win marginal votes in Congress.* What Obama needs to do to win those votes—for example, make concessions to moderate Democrats on health-care legislation—may, in fact, disappoint his most passionate supporters.¹⁶⁹ [emphasis added.]

In the same vein, OFA communications diverged from the national conversation during the final stretch in December and January (as discussed in Section One). However, a more targeted program, or opportunities to mobilize different OFA members around multiple issues, might address some of those challenges.

Campaigning Versus Governing

Every type of stakeholder interviewed for this report agreed on OFA's largest, most glaring challenge: Campaigning is clearer than governing.

It is clearer for organizing, because it is simpler, with a single goal and a clear finish line. It is clearer for inspiring and mobilizing, because it is competitive, with a unifying opponent to

¹⁶⁸ Senators Lieberman, Nelson, Snowe were still threatening to join a filibuster of the bill, depending on its final form, that would deny cloture on a motion to proceed to a floor vote.

¹⁶⁹ "Governing in the Age of Fox News," Paul Starr, *The Atlantic*, January/February 2010.

defeat. It is clearer for social outreach, because it is highly focused on people – from the intense identification with the candidate himself, to viewing his family and staff as characters in an important story, to joining that story as one of many people in a movement.

These motivations are evident in the big moments from the 2008 campaign that were most compelling to supporters. During two years of campaigning, for example, the most popular entries on the campaign blog were items that simply featured photos of Obama.¹⁷⁰ This audience priority suggests that supporters were more drawn to content focusing on Obama *as a person*, rather than on any recitation of policy plans. Similarly, the Obama Campaign's most effective email appeals were focused on *competition* -- such as the unusual, swift response to Sarah Palin's convention speech, which sparked a record-breaking response raising over \$10 million in one day,¹⁷¹ and when the campaign countered Palin it "reinvigorated" the base and increased "volunteer numbers."¹⁷² (Even though Obama himself was not enthused about the tone of some of those efforts.¹⁷³) Similarly, the campaign's email sharing the (independently created) "Yes We Can" video was forwarded so many times that the open rate broke 100 percent.

Unlike the daily skirmishes of a campaign, the governance period provides fewer clear opportunities to organize around political competition. Furthermore, in Obama's first year, OFA did not seize on salient, politically competitive moments to drive organizing.

To cite two specific examples, while OFA arranged events and communications in coordination with the President's health care address to Congress, it declined to engage one of the most dramatic competitive moments in Obama's first year in office – Rep. Joe Wilson's "you lie" outburst from the House floor. While there may be overriding political and strategic reasons that The White House declined to engage the dispute,¹⁷⁴ it is the kind of resonant, competitive moment that would provide an entry point for activism and volunteering. Indeed, the incident drove large online fundraising for Wilson's previously unknown opponent,¹⁷⁵ and captivated national discussions online.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ The top three most popular entries, out of thousands, were photos of Obama in Texas, photos of Obama at Johnny J's, and a slideshow of Obama and Michelle. The most popular policy item came in tenth, when Obama wrote a response to supporters who criticized his vote on surveillance legislation. Aysu Kes-Erkul, R. Erdem Erkul, "Web 2.0 in the Process of e-participation: The Case of Organizing for America and the Obama Administration," Aysu Kes-Erkul and R. Erdem Erkul, National Center for Digital Government Working Paper No. 09-001, October 6, 2009. (The paper's title may be confusing, as some of the data from BarackObama.com was collected during the 2008 campaign, before "Organizing for America" existed as an organization.)

¹⁷¹ "Obama raises \$10 million after Palin speech," *Associated Press*, September 4, 2009. Also see "The Audacity to Win," David Plouffe at 314, Viking (2009) (discussing supporters "venting via contribution").

¹⁷² For an Obama campaign perspective on Palin's impact on field, see Jon Carson's recollection. "Electing The President, 2008; The Insider's View," Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ed., at 52, University of Pennsylvania Press (2009)

¹⁷³ See, e.g., "The Audacity to Win," David Plouffe at 309-310, Viking (2009).

¹⁷⁴ President Obama immediately sought to put the incident behind him, for example. "Obama Accepts Joe Wilson's Apology," Susan Davis, *Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2009. <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2009/09/10/obama-accepts-joe-wilsons-apology/>

¹⁷⁵ Rob Miller, Wilson's Opponent, Raises Over \$1 Million Off "You Lie," Rachel Weiner, *Huffington Post*, September 11, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/10/rob-miller-wilsons-opponent_n_281931.html

¹⁷⁶ "Joe Wilson' top trending topic on Twitter," Jordan Fabian, *The Hill*, September 9, 2009.

OFA also declined to engage in competitive efforts that *were* initiated by the White House. For several weeks in October, for example, the White House waged a high profile confrontation with Fox News over its coverage of The President, including the accuracy and treatment of administration policy priorities.¹⁷⁷ The dispute received extensive attention from media and political leaders, and significant interest from rank and file Democrats, just as the Obama presidential campaign's attacks on Fox drew interest during the general election.¹⁷⁸ OFA did not send national emails about the issue, however, nor provide opportunities to link the battle with other media activism opportunities (such as OFA's letters to the editor and "set the record straight" program). While such media activism may not be a priority for many activists, it could provide an arena for some supporters to support the administration with non-legislative actions. At the same time, both the media disputes and the Wilson incident included partisan baggage that some OFA members, especially independents and Republicans, might resent.

Going forward, OFA could explore politically viable ways to engage such national moments for organizing, fusing competitive energy with governance goals.

Overall, one year into OFA's transition, it is understandable that converting the campaign network into a governing force remains an ongoing challenge. OFA management has a finite number of opportunities to sort out how volunteers can choose to participate in programs to advance Obama's agenda, and how to develop a range of volunteer projects that are both instrumentally effective and personally meaningful. Volunteers, for their part, must decide first, whether it is worth their time to pay attention to OFA communications and opportunities; and second, whether those activism opportunities are worthwhile, either because they are personally fulfilling, or because volunteers simply have faith in the organization's ability to direct their activities to impact Washington.

Future Opportunities

While this report focused on what OFA has actually done in its first year, and related reactions to that work, there is a broader conversation among Obama supporters and commentators about other programs and opportunities that OFA could theoretically embrace. While much of that discussion is beyond the scope of this report, this final section raises a few potential opportunities and areas for further inquiry and debate.

OFA has conducted two general surveys of its members' interests, but in its first year, it did not offer any formal mechanism for group decision-making by members. OFA could

¹⁷⁷ See, e.g. "Behind the War Between White House and Fox," Jim Rutenberg, *New York Times*, October 22, 2009.

¹⁷⁸ See, e.g. "Obama Versus Fox News (Part 534)," Jake Tapper, ABC News, October 27, 2008.
<http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/10/obama-versus-fo.html>

empower members with authority over certain group decisions, through binding polls, like other membership organizations.¹⁷⁹

OFA could democratize the DNC for grassroots members.

While OFA is part of the DNC, it has not provided many opportunities for members to increase their access or power to the DNC's formal membership, decision structure or superdelegate system.¹⁸⁰ OFA could run programs encouraging members to democratize and run for formal DNC positions, such as members of the party's Rules Committee, and the (election-year) platform committee, and the superdelegate roster.

In 2010, the DNC is considering reforming the superdelegate system and their power over the presidential nomination process.¹⁸¹ Beyond limiting potential superdelegate interference with the primaries, however, reforms could also empower more grassroots party members to take formal positions commensurate with their volunteering and contributions to the national party. OFA could even empower members to pick their own representatives who would visit or work on site, at certain times, in party headquarters in Washington. While few expect an organization devoted to advancing the President's agenda to become a completely bottom-up entity, there are several incremental ways to invite more people into the decision-making process.

While moving from campaigning to governing is difficult, as discussed, it is worth noting that OFA faced an even tougher transition by focusing so much on a single issue in its first year. The Obama campaign organization not only shifted to focus on governance, it essentially morphed into a single-issue pressure group. A simple but important question for the rest of Obama's tenure is whether OFA moves methodically to tackle one big issue at time, or whether it moves from health care to engage a range of administration priorities for its members. (OFA's 2010 survey queries members on six issues: health care, economy, green jobs, education, financial regulation, and immigration.¹⁸²) Tackling several issues would be more difficult for limited staff and message coordination, to be sure, but it would give Obama supporters more entry points into volunteering and supporting his agenda. (To extend the analogy to single-issue groups, very few actually email their members with volunteer requests as frequently as OFA did on health care.)

¹⁷⁹ MoveOn.org, for example, enables members to issue group endorsements and take positions via supermajority in online polls. While OFA cannot (and should not) shape federal policy by vote, there are political activities, endorsements and strategic questions that could be informed by transparent member participation.

¹⁸⁰ Some active OFA volunteers have been recognized for symbolic roles; one Arkansas volunteer who runs an OFA phone bank twice a week was invited to sit in the First Lady's box at the President's health care address to the joint session of Congress. "Guest List for the First Lady's Box, 2009 Joint Session of Congress," White House Press Office, September 9, 2009

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Guest-List-for-the-First-Lady's-Box-at-tonights-Joint-Session-of-Congress

¹⁸¹ "DNC commission recommends end to superdelegate system," Tony Romm, *The Hill*, December 30, 2009.

¹⁸² There is also an open form for people to write in additional issues. "What's Next in 2010," OFA website, <http://my.barackobama.com/page/s/whatsnext2010>

Furthermore, defining OFA through a single issue adds baggage that the group need not carry. While some supporters felt Obama “compromised too much” on health care, for example, campaigns on a range of policies could diversify OFA’s brand in advocating Obama policies. And while substantive domestic policy, like the economy, is obviously most important to many Americans, OFA could spark enthusiasm and renew some of the campaign’s spirit by giving members the opportunity to fight for procedural political reform – reforming lobbying rules, the filibuster, holds, the appropriations process, and campaign financing – to change how Washington works. (Political reform was not, however, on the six “issues” OFA provided members to choose from in the 2010 survey.)

On legislative strategy, it is likely untenable for OFA to run the same playbook for calling members of Congress over the entire course of Obama’s presidency. As an alternative, OFA could run more confrontational and targeted campaigns against members who are actually pivotal on a given issue – if the White House strategy evolved, as discussed – or, failing that, shift its tactical assignments beyond phone calls. For example, OFA members could more effectively impact Congressional activity by working on partisan information gathering projects, such as questioning and pressuring Congressional offices for open-source whip counts on specific provisions in legislation.¹⁸³ Or members could be tapped to use lobbying and research to challenge undemocratic hurdles to reform in the Senate, such as the practice of secret holds¹⁸⁴ – a process that could not only advance legislation and presidential nominees, but, like procedural political reform, could also reinforce Obama’s pledge of a new, open politics.

¹⁸³ See, eg “Senate Whip Count: 45 Public Option Supporters!” Chris Bowers, OpenLeft, August 19, 2009. <http://openleft.com/diary/14691/senate-whip-count-46-public-option-supporters>

¹⁸⁴ “Digitally Democratizing Congress? Technology and Political Accountability,” Jane Schacter, *Boston University Law Review*, 89 B.U.L. Rev. 641, April 2009 (discussing coordination between citizen groups, online activists and elected officials to pressure Senators to confess to “secret holds” placed on legislation).

Conclusion: 13 Million Emails Later

Despite the tremendous interest in Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign, the American political establishment has not closely followed or assessed the unusual experiment that OFA began in 2009. In part, Washington was focused on more pressing political developments, from the financial crisis to terrorism, while the political discourse often prioritizes message and money over grassroots activity. It is far too early to draw any final conclusions about OFA, but several themes emerge in this report that may inform deeper public discussion and further inquiry into governance organizing in the digital age:

OFA 2009

- OFA successfully mobilized and sustained a new corps of super-activists between election cycles in 2009, according to cumulative participation estimates and OFA members interviewed for the report. This kind of governance activism is unusual for the national political parties – and has never been achieved at this frequency, or with such a massive, direct communications network.
- OFA focused on two priorities in its first year: Lobbying for health care reform, which constituted 44% of the group's member communications; and community maintenance, aimed at sustaining the social capital and community networks developed during the presidential campaign, which constituted about 10% of communications.
- Congressional staff in both parties say OFA has mobilized constituent lobbying, but do not say OFA was a major or powerful force on Capitol Hill in its first year. Congressional aides do not think OFA is changing Members' votes.
- Some former staff for Obama's presidential campaign contend that the White House did not prioritize grassroots organizing in 2009.
- While noting that OFA faces a large challenge in converting a campaign network into lobbying activities, some former Obama campaign staffers say OFA's programs are not targeting Congress effectively, or providing sufficiently diverse engagement opportunities for OFA members

- Among Obama supporters interviewed, four different types of OFA members seem to be emerging:
 - *Super-activists*: These supporters seize on governance activism opportunities, often volunteering at rates that rival campaign season.
 - *Critical participants*: Engaged and critical, these activists volunteer for OFA while voicing skepticism on some policy and strategy.
 - *Supportive bystanders*: These OFA members intensely back Obama, but decline current volunteer opportunities. Some say they do not feel needed by OFA programs, others say they are simply busy.
 - *Former members*: These people unsubscribed from OFA in 2009. Most interviewed said that they still back Obama.
- OFA's strategy of waging a permanent field campaign to pressure Congress has not drawn complaints among congressional staff interviewed for the report of improper executive pressure on the legislative branch. If anything, Obama allies were more concerned that the President did not use his political operation to intercede more forcefully with Congress in 2009.

Future Opportunities

- OFA often functioned as essentially a single-issue lobbying organization in its first year. It will almost certainly turn towards another issue or issues in 2010 – a decision that may have a profound impact on the participation, sustainability and flexibility of its programs during the rest of Obama's tenure.
- With White House backing, OFA could explore legislative strategies that are more targeted or confrontational; or organize around a range of policies; or prioritize issues to “change how Washington works” such as political and campaign finance reform.
- OFA could also empower members to set more local and legislative strategy, and make OFA a platform to democratize the DNC's committee and superdelegate structure.

OFA has developed an experimental precedent for a new type of policy field campaign. Over the long-term, if it successfully mobilizes and sustains a large, permanent volunteer program, the model is likely to endure for its political benefits. If it successfully impacts legislative

action in the future, the model will likely endure for its governing utility. And if OFA eventually manages to do both, the organization could raise the stakes of modern policymaking, establishing a new template for political parties' efforts to organize mandates and enact their legislative agendas.

Methodology

All interviews for the report were conducted on background to encourage candor. Interviews with congressional staff and former Obama presidential campaign staff were conducted by telephone. OFA members and volunteers were initially surveyed through a battery of questions online, and some participated in follow-up phone interviews. Initial OFA members and volunteers for geographic diversity and a range of engagement levels. Through a snowball sample, those respondents were asked for recommendations of other OFA members. OFA members were contacted through several approaches, including directly via email by the author, and indirectly with introductions from politically active Obama supporters, and indirectly via solicitations on social networks. Congressional offices were selected to reflect a range of experiences, including Members on both sides of the health care debate, from both parties, and Members from “split districts” (Republicans in districts won by Obama and Democrats in districts won by McCain.)

Some congressional and former campaign staff directly declined to be interviewed. The two most common explanations were that the person did not feel well-informed about OFA’s activities, or that political sensitivities prevented participation. Among all three stakeholder groups, some potential interviewees simply did not respond to interview requests. OFA officials discussed some research inquiries, but declined repeated requests to make management and field staff available for background interviews.

All interviews with individuals are discussed for their qualitative value; they are not presented, and should not be interpreted, as representative of a segment of public opinion.

About the Author

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