

Organizing for Democratic Renewal



By [Marshall Ganz](#) - March 27, 2007, 10:45AM

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"Democracy is based on the promise that equality of voice can balance inequality of resources." Prof. Sidney Verba, Harvard University, 1993.

"In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others." Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1835.

In 1831, French aristocrat Alexis De Tocqueville came to America to study our penal system, but used the opportunity to investigate American democracy. He worried that political equality could so erode social relationships rooted in family, church, and guild that citizenship would turn into a series of arid exchanges between isolated individuals and a powerful state. That individualism uncurbed by claims of community, could not sustain a healthy polity in which the common good would receive its due.

But what he found was a vibrant society, sustained by civic associations. Modeled on parties organized to contest political power, the art of association had reached into all realms of public life. Associations had become the great "free schools" in which citizens learned the "habits of the heart" that made their new democracy work – an understanding of self-interest linked to the interests of others and thus requiring active collaboration in pursuit of common goods. When scale was required, collaboration was also modeled on parties – and government itself – that organized across locality, state, and nation as a self-governing three tiered representative associations.

In other words, he saw that we had learned that choices a few people make about how to use their money could be balanced by choices many people make about how to use their time.

But only by joining with others could we come to appreciate the extent to which our fates are linked, gain an understanding of our common interests, and make claims on the political power we needed to act on those interests.

Our collective action, citizenship as association, was also rooted in the churches.

Self-governing congregations based on the moral equality of the believer, located authority in the governed who made collective choices as to clergy, doctrine and worship. And although anchored in New England Protestantism, the great Methodist and Baptist movements created this foundation across the country.

The impulse for change in America – given especially the fragmentation of our electoral institutions – took shape as movements that linked civic association with evangelical campaign. Movements calling for temperance, abolition, labor organization, suffrage, populism, civil rights,

women rights, environmental protection and, most recently, conservative renewal swept across the political landscape asserting moral claims, redefining collective identities, reshaping political parties, reformulating public policy, and often restructuring institutions of government itself. The people who led these movements, whether called agents, representatives, delegates, stewards, lecturers or something else, were America's "organizers."

Late in the 19th century, however, other currents began to run counter to this populist, if not always progressive, form of association. A new form of large-scale organization took root, modeled on the mass armies of the Civil War, the bureaucracies of European states, and the engineering vision of industrialists – the national corporation. But unlike the civic association, the object of which was to amplify the voice of its members, the corporation was designed for control. The authority of its leadership based on property, not voice, it enabled the few to efficiently – and profitably - harness the effort of the many. And conflict ensued.

By the 1940's, however, largely as a result of the New Deal and World War II, a kind of balance had been struck based on the fact that the influence of associations could be amplified by public institutions to challenge the property -based economic power of corporations and wealthy individuals. This is also when Saul Alinsky formulated his approach to community organizing.

A University of Chicago student of criminology deeply skeptical of social work, Alinsky was greatly impressed by the organizing successes of the CIO, led by John L. Lewis. Although labor had begun to win a seat at the table at which urban interests were negotiated, others had not – especially those who lived in lower income communities, did not have unions to represent them, or had no other way to get in on the deal making. One answer, he concluded, was to build community organizations modeled on the CIO. They would bring people together, create a venue in which they could discover common interests, and mobilize collective resources to get the power to win their own seat at the table. Unlike the CIO, these associations were organizations of organizations, not individuals, to leverage existing community leaders and their networks.

This approach contrasted sharply with two others: that of social workers and that of socialists. Traditional social work ignored the power disparity most often responsible for poverty, and treated its victims as clients seeking public patronage, rather than citizens able to act together to make their voices heard and thus do something about the power disparity responsible for the problem in the first place. And unlike the socialists, Alinsky eschewed any ideological orientation other than that of populist democracy, coupled with a pragmatic interest based approach to program.

One institutional leader for whom this approach held real promise was Chicago Bishop Bernard Sheil, soon Alinsky's partner. Alinsky's approach to social justice offered an alternative to socialists with which the Church was in conflict and contributed tools for citizen participation less well established in the Roman Catholic tradition than among Protestants.

As it was taking shape, however, Alinsky's approach was both energized and eclipsed by social movement organizing that burst on the scene with the civil rights, anti-war, women's, and environmental movements of the 1960s and '70's. To many younger activists, whose agenda was driven by constituencies for whom the issue was not simply one of "interests", but rather of

identity, core values, and social transformation, Alinsky's approach seemed too narrow. Of course, so did the approach of associations who had made peace with the racial, gender, and generational boundaries that were no longer legitimate.

About the same time a market driven approach to advocacy and electoral politics also emerged, fueled by new targeting, fund raising, and information technologies that replaced constituency based organizing with direct marketing techniques. Advocates of many causes also eschewed associational organizing around common interests to focus more narrowly on "issues." Professional activists began mobilized individuals to support their causes by contributing money rather than organizing them to act together. And familiar forms of association were shunned in favor of local, unstructured and spontaneous activity. The effect of all this was simply to reinforce the power of money over time and reduce collective action into the expression of individual "preferences"

Organizers with a different set of values, on the other hand, but quite comfortable with associational organizing had launched a conservative movement newly energized by public reaction the government's role affirming racial, gender, generational and environmental challenges to the status quo, as well as a private sector increasingly restive under New Deal constraints. As Ronald Reagan put it in his 1964 speech supporting Sen. Barry Goldwater for President, "Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem."

By the time the smoke began to clear in the 1980s, the progressive social movements had won major changes in how we treat race, gender, youth, and the environment. But the conservative movement had seized the moral or ideological initiative, won control of major political institutions, including the Presidency, and channeled its energy into a deep restructuring of the relationship of public institutions - and the organized groups to whom they afforded influence - to private wealth. New challenges facing government, rather than providing an impetus to reform, became an excuse to outsource its functions - to the private sector if there was money to be made, to the nonprofit sector if there was not. And these institutions, whether for profit or not for profit - and whether large scale or small scale - assumed a traditional corporate form. As a result, the scope of citizenship itself as way to balance private wealth with public voice, narrowed, as we became "customers" of the private sector or "clients" of non-profit funders.

This was the period in which Alinsky style community based organizations, rooted in Roman Catholic parishes, became one of the few venues in which the art of organizing continued to be practiced. But it was with a twist. At a time when problems of local communities were increasingly driven by national if not global forces, these groups remained insistently local. At a time when the moral initiative has been seized by the right, they continued to speak language of "self-interest." And at time when a New Deal style "table" at which interest groups could bargain had vanished, they took an interest group approach to formulation of program, tactics, and strategy. As a result, their influence as a whole was less than the sum of their parts.

So what has changed that may be giving organizing a new lease on life, especially in electoral politics? I'd suggest four reasons.

First, elections have been very, very close. Even the most media oriented of political consultants recognizes that in close elections, effective grassroots mobilization can influence outcomes. And when conducted by people with ties to one another – as opposed to bussed in canvassers – it is more effective. The commitments people make to people with whom they maintain relationships are far more reliable than answers given to an anonymous caller, over the phone or in person. This is especially true of the presidential primaries in small states like New Hampshire and caucus states like Iowa.

Second, the promise of “connectedness” via the Internet is an invitation to a dance that has yet to begin. The Internet is a market place, not an organization. As such it offers motivated participants an opportunity to give money, exchange information, and market causes. Organizations, however, as Alinsky organizers know, are built of interpersonal commitments people make to each other of their time, money, and energy. With skilled leaders, organizations have the capacity to strategize, motivate, and engage in purposeful effective action – and develop more skilled leaders. But in the last election, opportunity created by the Internet was only intermittently translated into action because there were few organizers. This time, perhaps it will be different.

Third, the recommitment to organizing by the labor movement during the 1990s, especially by SEIU and its associates, afforded thousands of young people an opportunity to learn organizing skills, acquire experience, and make a real difference. This is true not only of young people recruited from colleges, but also new immigrants, one of the most energized constituencies in America and which has only begun to develop its political potential. Similarly, some campaigns offered unique training grounds for organizers, such as the New Hampshire Dean campaign, the Iowa Kerry campaign, and others.

And finally, at some level, we may finally be coming to understand what De Tocqueville saw – the promise of democratic politics is in people’s ability to enter into relationships with one another to articulate common purposes and act on them. Organizing to bring people back into politics is not a cost, but an investment in rebuilding the democratic infrastructure of our public life under assault for far too many years.

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