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Barack Obama, Organizing for Action, and Executive-Centered Partisanship

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This article examines the historical significance of Barack Obama's creation of "OFA," a presidential grassroots organization. It attempts, as Theda Skocpol has put it, to analyze American political development "as it happens." Born as "Obama for America" during the 2008 campaign, OFA was renamed "Organizing for America" and ensconced in the Democratic National Committee during Obama's first term, where it served as the "grassroots arm" of the party. After 2012, it was spun off as a nonprofit social-welfare entity called "Organizing for Action" dedicated to advocating for Obama's second-term objectives: immigration reform, efforts to fight climate change, gun safety legislation, LGBT rights, and the implementation of health reform in the face of continuing intense opposition. That OFA was kept intact after Obama's successful election and reelection efforts marks it as an especially pioneering effort. Making use of several personal interviews, a wealth of primary documents, and data on spending and mobilization tactics, we explain how Obama's paradigm-shifting organization marked an effort to meet the challenges of forging a new progressive coalition in a fractious polity. More broadly, the article considers how this digital age grassroots effort has been influenced by, and in turn has contributed to the advance of an executive-centered partisanship characterized by high expectations for presidential leadership in a context of widespread dissatisfaction with government, strong and intensifying political polarization, and high-stakes battles over the basic direction of domestic and foreign policy programs.

Toward the end of 2015, Organizing for Action (OFA), a nonprofit group that grew out of Barack Obama's formidable campaign organization, sent out a flurry of emails to its members urging recipients to chip in before midnight, December 31. These sorts of appeals are standard less than a year before a general election. But Obama was facing the twilight of his presidency—in all likelihood, he had run his last political campaign. So each dollar that flew into OFA's coffer was, presumably, a dollar not going to a candidate with battles yet to come. Yet there was no outcry against OFA from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) or congressional Democrats or the party's frontrunner's—Hillary Clinton's—campaign. Why was OFA pushing forward as Obama's presidency was winding down?

The answer says something about how Obama intended to defy lame-duck status and influence his party for years to come. At a time when a good deal of partisanship takes place outside of regular party organizations, OFA works to mobilize support for progressive priorities in the face of continuing fierce opposition. Beyond the struggles of the moment, OFA was seeking, as it had since its creation in 2013, to move beyond loyalty to Obama himself and find ways to deepen his political and policy legacies after his presidency.

Organizing for Action was actually the third iteration of Obama's grassroots movement. He and his allies built a digital-age grassroots organization that proved central to the success of his two presidential campaigns. Born during the 2008 campaign as "Obama for America," this mass mobilization effort, unlike other presidential campaign organizations, was not dismantled once the 2008 campaign ended. Envisaging a postelection role for OFA, the president-elect; the newly appointed chair of the DNC, Tim Kaine; staffers; and volunteers engaged in extensive discussions, finally resolving that it should be absorbed as a significant part of the national party's expanded field operations in the states.[1] Reconstituted as the "grassroots arm of the party," OFA was

1. Tim Kaine (chairman, Democratic National Committee), interview with author, August 9, 2010.

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inserted into the DNC as "Organizing for America" during the president's first term, where it was tasked with mustering support for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the ACA), the president's signature program; working for Democratic candidates in the 2010 off-year election; and developing a ground game for Obama's reelection campaign. After the 2012 election, it was rechristened "Organizing for Action" and spun off as a 501(c)(4) social-welfare group explicitly "committed to the agenda Americans voted for in 2012": implementation of the ACA, immigration reform, climate change legislation, LGBT rights, and gun control.[2] Removing his organization from the DNC, President Obama promised his followers, would strengthen its potential as a grassroots advocacy group—one that would tie him directly to a scattered but potentially formidable coalition that represents the maturing of the Great Society: minorities, youth, the LGBT community, and educated white voters, especially women.

Clearly, then, Barack Obama's experience as a community organizer did not disappear when he entered presidential politics. And yet, even though OFA represents an important experiment in a reciprocal top-down and bottom-up form of executive leadership—one that seeks to mobilize and empower supporters in local communities—few political scientists have considered its significance for party politics, in particular, and American government, more generally. Nonetheless, the creation of an elaborate personal organization dedicated to the election of America's first African American president and the advocacy of his policies has struck pundits and politicians as a highly significant institutional development.[3] Most of OFA's significance has been attributed to the sophisticated digital platform that Obama and his close political allies forged to mobilize support for the 2008 and 2012 campaigns.[4] As important as the fascinating combination of Internet-based targeting and old-fashioned canvassing was to Obama's election to two terms, our study of the trajectory of his presidency and the evolution of his personal organization has persuaded us that the most innovative feature of this organization is how it was kept intact after both elections and redeployed to support the White House's programmatic ambitions.

This article is written in the spirit of Theda Skocpol's call for scholars of historical institutionalism to examine important political developments "as they happen."[5] We seek to add historical depth and a more systemwide perspective to a growing body of scholarship inspired by the "UCLA School," which defines parties as "coalitions of interest groups and activists seeking to capture and use government for their particular goals," a definition at the heart of some of the most important contemporary work on partisanship.[6] Although we share the view that constellations of demanding and fractious advocacy groups are fundamental to the dynamics of current partisanship, this article examines the origins of contemporary coalitions and the important role that presidents play in forming and managing these critical and unruly constituencies. Our core argument is that OFA's evolution, especially its development as a policy advocacy group, represents a novel effort to strengthen the president's influence over policy and his party. OFA's creation will likely be duplicated by other presidents and, thus, will mark a new stage in the emergence of what we have described as executive-centered partisanship. The origins of executive-centered partisanship can be found in the Progressive Era, but this transformation began to take more definite shape with the Reagan "Revolution"—and came fully into view during Obama's two terms in office.

Scholars of American politics have paid scant attention to how partisan conflict and polarization have reconfigured the relationships among presidents, parties, and groups. In fact, some scholars who conceptualize parties as coalitions of groups suggest that the modern presidency is the instrument if not the victim of the demanding constellation of organizations that compose their party's coalition.[7] This perspective ignores the clear influence presidents have had on their parties as well as their party's interest group allies. Taking account of the important role that Republican presidents, especially Ronald Reagan, have played in forging a conservative coalition, scholars such Daniel Galvin and Katherine Krimmel have viewed the White House Office,

2. Organizing for Action, accessed June 2014, https://www.barackobama.com/about-ofa/.

3. In the year and a half after Organizing for Action was established, it was the subject of 54 stories in the *Washington Post*, 10 *New York Times* articles, and 11 features on NPR.

4. Sasha Issenberg, *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* (New York: Random House, 2012).

5. Theda Skocpol, "Analyzing American Political Development as it Happens," in *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 48–68.

6. Kathleen Bawn, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 571–97.

7. Paul Pierson provides an especially provocative view of this position. Invoking the UCLA school, he writes, "[the] two most prominent domestic initiatives of our most recent presidents—the Bush tax cuts and Obamacare—are typical. These initiatives emerged, completely unsurprisingly, from each president's partisan coalitions. Substitute a different leader from the same party at the same time and arguably the policy agenda would look similar." Pierson, "Conclusion: Madison Upside Down: The Policy Roots of Our Polarized Politics," in *The Politics of Major Policy Reform in Postwar America*, ed. Jeffery A. Jenkins and Sidney M. Milkis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 282–301, 292.

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especially the Office of Public Liaison (OPL) —a White House institution developed by Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter to provide outreach to a wide and bipartisan network of groups—as pivotal in the transition from "less structured, 'pluralist' party-group relations to more institutionalized, long term linkages that hold together modern party networks."[8]

Like Reagan, the Obama administration deployed the White House Office to build connections with partisan groups. Indeed, Obama renamed the OPL the Office of Public Engagement to signify its role in forming ties with Democratic advocacy groups. But OFA—a multi-issue, grassroots organization that serves the president's ambitions and agenda—has been an especially critical ally in Obama's efforts to strike what Bruce Miroff calls a "symbolic balance point" between the White House and progressive groups.[9]

Our research suggests that the president's decision to turn his campaign organization into a nonprofit dedicated to pursuing his progressive agenda represents an effort to manage the increasingly difficult, if not intractable, political environment that has affected all occupants of the White House during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but has blighted Obama more than his immediate predecessors. In particular, Obama's experiment in presidency-centered policy advocacy is a response to three major challenges: the increased reliance upon the president to set the nation's programmatic agenda, even as growing partisan conflict and new media have made this task problematic; the expanded responsibility of the president to carry out policy unilaterally, as Congress and, increasingly, the country have become fractured by competing programmatic commitments; and, perhaps most importantly, the weakening of the formal party organization by party reforms such as the direct primary and campaign finance laws. The modern presidency, which had seemed to establish a large measure of independence from parties from the end of the Second World War through the Great Society, has thus been thrust into the vortex of a contentious advocacy politics where a loose coalition of ideological interest groups, think tanks, political action committees (PACs), and wealthy mega-donors, have filled the vacuum left by the declining influence of national party committees and traditional party organizations.[10] Dubbed "shadow parties," these networks are highly partisan—and tend to sympathize with either the Democratic or Republican parties.

Presidents are not the sole stewards of party coalitions, of course. But as party politics has increasingly become the province of "outside groups" rather than formal party organizations, the presidency becomes one of the few places that can impose some coordination and centralization on these inchoate networks. Republican and Democratic partisans have come to rely on presidential candidates and presidents to pronounce party doctrine, raise campaign funds, campaign on behalf of their fellow partisans, mobilize grassroots support, and advance party programs—and to do so in a context of widespread dissatisfaction with government, strong and intensifying political polarization, and high-stakes battles over the basic direction of domestic and foreign policy.[11] The development of presidency-centered partisanship has been greatly abetted by partisan gridlock in Congress, which has foisted further policy responsibility on the executive office. Not only have the president's partisan affiliates in Congress been willing to delegate considerable policy responsibility to the president, but the White House also has become the principal target of group demands.

The president's capacity to knit together and leverage constituencies might cultivate a new form of collective responsibility. It remains to be seen, however, whether the presidential partisanship practiced by Obama's information-age, grassroots organization offers a novel and enduring form of party building or marks, instead, a new stage of executive aggrandizement that subordinates collective party responsibility to a cult of personality. Since it was first formed, some Democrats have viewed OFA as the vanguard of an Obama party that weakens the Democrats as a collective organization with a past and a future. Yet such concerns have abated: With partisan loyalties trumping institutional loyalties, Obama's copartisans in Congress have often cheered him on as he carries out the programmatic agenda in the absence of law in matters such as climate change, immigration, and LGBT rights. By the same token, the partisan gridlock that set in after 2010 has led congressional Democrats to accept OFA's evolution as a political and policy arm of the White House. As political scientists have long argued, policy makes politics, and most Democrats in the party committees and Congress have welcomed, rather than militated against, the

8. Daniel Galvin, "Presidents as Agents of Change," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (March, 2014): 95–119, 112–16; Katherine Krimmel, *Special Interest Partisanship: The Transformation of American Political Parties* (unpublished PhD diss., Columbia University, Department of Political Science).

9. Bruce Miroff, "Presidential Leverage over Social Movements: The Johnson White House and Civil Rights," *Journal of Politics* 43 (1981): 1–23, 14.

10. David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics: Organization, Electoral Settings, and Government Activity in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1986). Julia Azari, *Delivering the People's Message: The Changing Politics of the Presidential Mandate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

11. On the origins and development of executive-centered partisanship, see Sidney M. Milkis, Jesse Rhodes, and Emily Charnock, "What Happened to Post-Partisanship? Barack Obama and the New American Party System," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2012): 57–76.

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creation of a 501(c)(4) committed to facilitating the advance of the president's program.

As our detailed case study of OFA below suggests, it is far from clear that Obama and OFA have succeeded in building a durable foundation for a new progressive coalition. In contrast to the UCLA School and scholars who view presidents as managers of stable partisan networks, we see contemporary coalitions as highly contentious and fragile. As the fractious state of the Republican and Democratic parties illustrate, contemporary partisan groups—many of them with ties to social movements—severely test the bonds that join partisan networks. Progressive advocacy groups' frequent criticism of the president and his grassroots organization as being too timid in the face of ferocious Republican opposition and the emergence of the "democratic socialist" Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders as a serious contender for the Democratic nomination in 2016 raise serious doubts that the Obama White House has successfully harnessed progressive advocacy groups. Moreover, "Obama's Family," as OFA staff and volunteers refer to themselves, is dedicated to the president's—not the Democratic Party's—political and programmatic ambitions. It is telling that the effectiveness of OFA in winning two presidential contests and advancing the president's most important policy achievement—the ACA—went hand in hand with historic Democratic defeats in congressional as well as state and local elections.

Obama's pioneering information-age grassroots organization thus raises important questions about the state of the modern presidency and American democracy. Will this digital-age machine set a precedent that will enable future presidents to bypass party organizations and thus further advance what Woodrow Wilson once termed the "extraordinary isolation" of the modern presidency? Or amid the seeming gridlock of sharp partisan conflict, might OFA have facilitated stronger partnerships and more effective coordination among nonparty activist groups like MoveOn.org, the National Women's Political Caucus, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the National Council of La Raza, and the Human Rights Campaign, thereby preparing the ground for a new progressive governing coalition? Making use of several personal interviews, a wealth of primary documents, and data on spending and mobilization tactics, we seek to answer these questions and, in doing so, shed new light on the critical and uneasy relationship between modern presidential politics, social activism, and partisanship.[12]

OFA AND THE DNC: A SHORT MARRIAGE

Through all three of its phases, OFA has sought to merge Obama's magnetic personality with a new progressive coalition and to provide a springboard for his leadership of the nation.[13] After his election in 2008, when Obama for America (OFA 1.0) became Organizing for America (OFA 2.0), the group's leadership decided to leverage Obama's grassroots machine for another end as well: strengthening the DNC. Shortly after the campaign ended, OFA's leadership and DNC chairman Tim Kaine agreed that OFA would become the semi-autonomous grassroots arm of the national party committee. This was a major windfall for the DNC. Over the course of his primary and general election campaigns, Obama for America amassed 13 million email addresses (to which the two successive organizations have added an additional 17 million), three million donors, and two million active participants in 250 chapters across the country. From the perspective of OFA, the arrangement with the DNC ensured that the group's formidable grassroots network and digital infrastructure would be maintained and, if possible, expanded upon for Obama's next election. Staff and volunteers also hoped from their redoubt within the DNC that OFA could support the White House's political allies in the midterm elections and, more significantly, advocate for the president's programs.

From the very beginning, however, the decision to house Obama's campaign organization within the DNC aroused concerns. Some worried that OFA would not be able to maintain its unity of purpose and activist fervor while married to a national committee that seemed to have such a different culture, method of operation, and set of objectives. In a nod to the concerns raised by opponents of the merger who had hoped to keep the organization separate so that it could remain an independent power base

12. In the course of our research, we carried out twenty-five interviews, lasting between an hour and an hour and a half, with OFA staff and volunteers, as well as White House officials, members of Congress, and leaders of other advocacy groups who had close relationships with the president's grassroots organization. The interviews, conducted in person or by phone, were not recorded. We took notes during the interviews, and our participants were given the right to edit the notes according to their recollections of the conversation. Participants were also given the choice to remain anonymous. We have been very careful to use our interviews in appropriate ways to ensure that conclusions drawn from these discussions are valid. Specifically, we have used these data to draw conclusions about our interviewees' *perceptions* about the relationship between the Obama administration and OFA. Throughout, we have avoided equating interviewees' statements with *objective* factual information about the Obama presidency or OFA. Rather, interview information has been used to shed light on how individuals in the White House and OFA understood the objectives of grassroots organizing and why they took the actions they did. Whenever possible, we have corroborated the information gleaned from interviews with other sources.

13. No one should be surprised that OFA personally has changed considerably over these three phases. At the same time, some key staff people and effective volunteers have stayed the course, so that OFA has evolved over Obama's presidency; it has not had to be reinvented.

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for the president, OFA enjoyed "departmental" status, retained control of its own email list, and was managed by Obama campaign staffers, rather than DNC personnel.[14]

By some standards, OFA's turn as a DNC subcommittee was successful. The digital infrastructure—the donor roles, detailed data sets allowing for precisely micro-targeted email campaigns and walking lists, and an impressive social media footprint—were not only maintained but also dramatically improved. Jeremy Bird, who organized Ohio for Obama in the 2008 campaign and was national field director in the 2012 reelection effort, reflected that Organizing for America's sophisticated operation made the president's historic 2008 campaign organization look like "amateur ball."[15] This was not just the view of OFA's leadership. As one local volunteer in Virginia put it, with the organizational enhancements carried out between 2008 and 2012, "Obama's Family" evolved into a "well-oiled machine."[16] While OFA always had sent emails, now these Internet messages could be specifically micro-targeted to recipients on the basis of their gender, race, age, voting history, magazine subscriptions, car registrations, property values, and hunting licenses.[17] While OFA had always attempted to solicit donations, now volunteers were automatically prompted to stop requesting monetary contributions once a donor had reached the legal limit and would, instead, ask the supporter to volunteer his or her time. And while OFA always canvassed, now they could focus in on people who were likely Obama voters *if* they made it to the polls, but who had a history staying home on Election Day.

Although OFA 2.0 improved upon the campaign organization's digital infrastructure during Obama's first term, its grassroots network languished, hampering its ability to help sustain the president's support in Congress and mobilize grassroots support for his policy initiatives. For months after the election, OFA's leadership made no contact with the organization's broader activist community. By the president's own admission, after 2008 "some of that [grassroots] energy just kind of dissipated and we were only playing an inside game, and I'm sitting in a room with a bunch of folks negotiating all the time, but those voices are no longer heard."[18] OFA activists we interviewed in Maryland, Virginia, and Illinois had similar complaints about the loss of momentum after the election. When the Tea Party mobilized en masse against the president's agenda in the summer of 2009, OFA was slow to mount a countermobilization, and the fact that there did not appear to be any grassroots support *for* reform only amplified the outcry from the Right.

OFA did finally rally against the Tea Party tide to play an important role in building support for the enactment of health care reform, the president's signature program and one of the Democrats' most memorable platform planks. It collected more than two million declarations of support for the president's plan, as well as more than 238,000 "health care stories" that were gathered by OFA volunteers on the ground that dramatized the problems of the existing system. OFA also encouraged supporters to write letters to the editor on behalf of health reform, ultimately accumulating more than 250,000 such letters sent by the end of the year. In the most prominent example of OFA's policy advocacy—an October 20, 2009 "day of action"—members made more than 315,000 phone calls to members of Congress in support of health care reform.[19] Although it is difficult to determine precisely what effect these efforts had on the final resolution of the fight over the ACA, the president, Tim Kaine, as well as OFA staff and volunteers strongly believed that the health care bill would have died without OFA's "robust communication with members of Congress through phone calls, letters and meetings," as one staffer put it.[20]

OFA also defended Obama against the criticisms of progressive advocates that he too readily compromised key progressive provisions, most notably the "public option," a public insurance plan modeled after Medicare that would compete with private plans to enroll those without coverage. Most OFA staff and volunteers we interviewed, although disappointed that Obama gave up on this provision of the bill, were more willing than activists in organizations like MoveOn.org to acknowledge the difficulties of governing in a polarized environment. OFA 2.0 thus made a significant contribution to the long-standing trend of presidency-centered partisanship. OFA's local volunteers, encouraged by "best

14. Barbara Trish, "Organizing for America," in *The State of Parties: The Changing Role of Contemporary Parties*, 6th ed., ed. John C. Green and Daniel J. Coffey (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2011), 163–84.

15. Molly Ball, "Obama's Edge: The Ground Game That Could Put Him over the Top," *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/10/obamas-edge-the-ground-game-that-could-put-him-over-the-top/264031/.

16. OFA official, not for attribution, interview with Sidney M. Milkis, December 3, 2012.

17. Craig Timberg and Amy Gardner, "Democrats Push to Redeploy Obama's Voter Database," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/democrats-push-to-redeploy-obamas-voter-database/2012/11/20/d14793a4-2e83-11e2-89d4-040c9330702a_story.html?utm_term=.40980aa7616f.

18. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Organizing for Action Event," Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, DC, March 13, 2013.

19. Ari Melber, "Year One of Organizing for America: The Permanent Field Campaign in a Digital Age: A Tech President Special Report, 2010," accessed May 2014, www.techpresident.com/ofayear1.

20. Organizing for America staff member, not for attribution, interview with Sidney M. Milkis, August 4, 2010.

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practices" training sessions, referred to themselves as representatives of "Barack Obama's Organizing for America," rather than as Democratic Party activists.[21] That the Tea Party and OFA both referred to the health care program as "Obamacare" made clear just how executive-centered partisanship had become. Although the president paid dearly in the coin of public opinion for the partisan nature of the battle over health care reform, the bitter struggle steeled his personal organization for his reelection campaign. His grassroots organization outperformed that of his opponent, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, in the 2012 presidential election, providing the edge in a polarizing campaign. The Democrats did not win back the House, but OFA's effective grassroots work contributed to the party strengthening its hold on the Senate; more significantly, Obama's "well-oiled machine" displayed a determination that overcame the torpor that weakened OFA after the 2008 campaign. As one volunteer put it, "Everyone was excited in 2008; in 2012 people may have been less passionate, but they worked just as hard. It was more businesslike this time. It wasn't just a bunch of excited people on a major quest to make history."[22]

This sense of mission would continue after the election. Even though Obama would not be running again, and it was unlikely that an organization so dedicated to the president's personal fortunes could be handed over to the 2016 Democratic nominee, the fervor OFA displayed in lobbying for "Obamacare" persuaded the president that a reconstituted version of his centralized grassroots organization would give him a stronger voice and greater administrative capacity amid the harsh and unstable partisan environment that was likely to characterize his second term.

The Obama White House's reinvention of OFA as an independent advocacy group also was a response to the kind of partisan polarization that flourished with the weakening of party organizations—to the shifting of considerable partisan politics to the "shadows." As we shall discuss below, this transposition was accelerated by campaign finance laws, most notably the enactment of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), which proscribed party organizations, but not "independent" issue groups, from raising and spending "soft money," that is, unregulated funds dedicated to purposes other than "electioneering" on behalf of candidates. The "shadow party" is a term popularized during the 2004 election to describe groups like Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, whose controversial advertising campaign impugning John Kerry's war record brought outside spending into the light. Groups like Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, Crossroads GPS, Priorities USA, and MoveOn.org are not part of the formal party or campaign—in fact, they are legally barred from coordinating their expenditures with a party or candidate—but their work on behalf of candidates and policy advocacy often has a sharp partisan edge. Indeed, advocacy groups gained currency, not only to circumvent campaign finance regulations, but also because many activists believed that the national committees and state parties were dominated by power brokers who were not capable of mobilizing the base support of liberal and conservative causes.

Obama and two political strategists—Jim Messina, director of the 2012 campaign, and Jon Carson, White House assistant for Public Engagement—thus recast OFA as a nonprofit "social-welfare organization" that could rally a loose constellation of advocacy groups around his unique personal appeal and forge them into a new coalition for programmatic action. After an in-house poll of one million supporters found that two-thirds were eager to stay involved in pushing forward the president's agenda, the decision to create a nonpartisan issue advocacy group was finalized. In an email to supporters on January 18, 2013, President Obama announced the creation of Organizing for Action (called here OFA 3.0), a 501(c)(4) that would turn 2012's campaign machine into a permanent issue advocacy group. In the email, Obama said: "It has always been about more than just winning an election. . . . Together, we've made our communities stronger, we've fought for historic legislation, and we've brought more people than ever before into the political process. . . . Organizing for Action will be a permanent commitment to this mission."[23]

Framing the construction of a presidential shadow organization as transcending electoral victory was an effective way to bury the potential charge that sustaining OFA outside the DNC was simply a self-serving action. OFA 3.0 was joined to a long-term plan to restructure the policymaking process so that it was better suited to achieve success in a highly fragmented partisan environment. The next day, Carson, OFA's soon-to-be executive director, gave more details as to contours of the new nonprofit at the Obama Campaign Legacy Conference in Washington, DC. Carson made it clear that OFA 3.0 would rely more than ever on grassroots mobilization: "Here's the plan: Our team leaders and team members, we're putting you in charge. We are going to challenge you to lead it. We are going to challenge you to organize it. And we're going to challenge you

21. OFA official, not for attribution, interview with Sidney M. Milkis, August 4, 2010.

22. Interview with OFA official, not for attribution, interview with Sidney M. Milkis, December 3, 2012.

23. Glenn Thrush, Reid J. Epstein, and Byron Tau, "Obama Unveils 'Organizing for Action,'" *Politico*, January 17, 2013, http://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/obama-campaign-to-relaunch-as-tax-exempt-group-86375_Page2.html.

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to pay for it."[24] The volunteers we have talked to confirm that in OFA's newest iteration, the balance of power shifted closer to the grassroots. They were given far more discretion than they had during the campaign and became responsible for many tasks, such as fundraising and managing the press, that formerly were undertaken by paid staff.

However, the direction of the organization—what policies it advocated, when advocacy took place, and the major talking points on each issue—was determined by paid staff either at headquarters or at the state level. This did not seem to bother the volunteers, whose devotion to and trust in Obama is thoroughgoing. The chapter-level volunteers we talked to seemed very content with the division of labor. Far from bucking against direction from above, to a one, our interviewees voiced appreciation that guidance from OFA's leadership and the organization's digital infrastructure gave grassroots activists the capacity for simultaneous, nationwide direct action that would not be possible otherwise. As one volunteer said, "If it wasn't for this organization, we wouldn't have found each other."[25]

OFA 3.0 thus seems to have accomplished what OFA 2.0 struggled to do: keep the grassroots actively engaged after an election in order to fight for the president's program. According to internal OFA numbers, 3.6 million people participated in more than 400,000 events during the 2013 "Action August," a headquarters-initiated campaign meant to coincide with Congress's recess and showcase public support for the president's agenda on issues like implementation of "Obamacare," climate change, gun control, and immigration reform.[26] Just as building a more powerful digital platform characterized Organizing for America's tenure, so keeping the volunteer network alive has apparently been a much higher organizational priority since the president's reelection. As Bird, Obama's 2012 National Field Organizer put it:

> Community organizing is not a turnkey operation. You can't throw up some phone banks in late summer and call that organizing. These are teams that know their turfs—the barbershops, the beauty salons; we've got congregation captains in churches. These people know their communities.[27]

Organizing for Action, therefore, seemed committed to the notion that if the digital apparatus built for 2012 was not maintained or updated, it could be reassembled with greater ease than it was built initially; but if the *human* network built up over the course of four years were to disintegrate, it likely would be impossible to reconstruct. The decision to decouple the organization from the DNC was an admission that the sort of community organizing Obama had learned in Chicago, put to use in his first campaign, and reprised for his reelection bid, was not within the core competencies of a national party committee.

OFA AS A SURROGATE PARTY COMMITTEE

Obama and OFA leadership's decision to reboot the organization as a 501(c)(4) wholly disconnected from the national party committees was a major move toward the fulfillment of a goal set over a century ago: a presidency untethered by the strictures and vagaries of party organizations. Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson both recognized that for the presidents to serve as the "steward of the public welfare"—to use Theodore Roosevelt's alluring phrase—executives would need to bend the decentralized parties to their will, to subordinate "collective responsibility" to the White House's ambitions and programs.[28] Laying siege to the strongly fortified but localized party machines of the early twentieth century was among the most audacious goals of progressive reformers. Even after the passage of the Pendleton Act, the Hatch Act, and the implementation of the popular primary and the Australian ballot, the job was left undone as the nation returned to "normalcy" at the end of Woodrow Wilson's tenure in office. As Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to build the capacity of the federal government to answer the challenges of an increasingly industrialized, economically diverse, and unequal society, he found divisions within his own party his most daunting obstacle. While his attempt to "purge" the party of conservative Democrats, mostly from southern and border states, did not succeed, he was able to elevate the White House's institutional capacity and enhance its political autonomy and, by extension, lift a reconstituted presidency above copartisans in Congress and the DNC. By the time FDR left office, there was little doubt that executive-centered partisanship had become an enduring feature of American politics and government.[29]

While FDR set a strong precedent for future presidents who might desire to steer their party or simply

24. Nancy Scola, "How Organizing for Action Plans to Keep Organizing for Action's Foot Soldiers Enlisted," *The Atlantic*, January, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/how-organizing-for-action-plans-to-keep-obamas-foot-soldiers-enlisted/267384/.

25. Owens interview with Milkis and York, May 5, 2014.

26. Jon Carson, "The Undeniable Success of Action August," letter to OFA supporters, August 2013.

27. Ball, "Obama's Edge."

28. James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Scott James, *Presidents, Parties, and the State: A Party System Perspective on Democratic Regulatory Choice, 1884–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

29. Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The American Party System Since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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ignore its platform, not all judged it advantageous to go it alone. As Daniel Galvin shows, over the last half century, Republican presidents have been much more apt to use the advantages of their office to build their own party than have Democrats.[30] Galvin argues that Republicans, aware of their minority status both in Congress and in terms of registered voters, judged party building—most notably, the investment of resources in the Republican National Committee (RNC)—a necessity if they were to achieve their policy goals. Conversely, Democrats since the 1930s felt confident that the New Deal and Great Society programs—especially "entitlements" like Social Security and Medicare—were capable of delivering majorities in Congress. They did not have to worry much about the maintenance of their party's organizations; rather, their task was to ensure that it served, or at least did not obstruct, their own ends. Complicating the situation for Democrats was the fact that for most of the twentieth century the Democratic Party was deeply fractured. Even though the New Deal and Great Society shifted the Democratic center of gravity to the northern and Midwestern urban areas, the party remained sharply divided, still split between its southern and northern wings. The Republican Party, although occasionally roiled by the tensions between the Goldwater and Rockefeller factions, was not so ruptured, at least until the rise of the Tea Party. So while Eisenhower, Reagan, the Bushes, and even Richard Nixon lent their reputations, time, and excess campaign funds to the party, Democratic presidents hesitated to indiscriminately empower the national committees, knowing that conservative copartisans might turn these very resources against them.

After the Republican Party seized a majority in both houses of Congress in 1994, the first time the GOP had controlled both chambers since 1949, many within the Democratic Party suggested their party's lackluster national and state committees were to blame. Bill Clinton, addressing party leaders gathered at the DNC Reception in Aspen in 1998, had to grant, as one official stated flatly in comparing Democratic and Republican capacity, "we are not so well organized."[31] Clinton became the first Democratic president to seriously invest in the improvement of the DNC. In his second term, Clinton began fundraising for the national committee and actively supporting Chairman Steven Grossman's efforts to rebuild the party's faltering state committees.[32]

Obama's decision to graft OFA to the DNC after the 2008 election seemed to signal that he, like Clinton, would build up the DNC's capacity during his presidency. Yet the decision to recast OFA as a 501(c)(4), signified the White House's understanding that a great deal of partisan activity had moved beyond the control of formal organizations and party brokers. As Galvin has acknowledged, political parties "consist of more than just the Democratic National Committee, state parties, and other formal party structures." Nor, however, as we argue above, could partisan coalitions be run out of the White House—through a revamped OPL—that Galvin stresses in describing the Reagan administration's stewardship of the Republican coalition.[33] OFA 3.0 was designed to enhance the influence of the president and his fellow partisans at the grassroots level, something the OPL had proven incapable of. As Carson described the Obama White House's strategy, relying on OPL presupposed that "we are the central power broker and this is our system to work with you on what we are doing—as opposed to the president's view that the change on the ground and the great work that is going on everywhere is what matters."[34]

Like the OPL, the national party committees had shown themselves poorly suited to the task of engaging the grassroots; Obama and Democratic activists believed that OFA's loss of grassroots vitality during the president's first term was partly a function of its merger with the national committee. Moreover, changes in campaign finance rules, first enacted on George W. Bush's watch and reconstituted by the Supreme Court during Obama's first term, dealt the formal party, already diminished by more than a century of reform, another blow that would make the prospect of keeping OFA within the DNC even less attractive. BCRA had a dramatic impact on the national party committees. Prior to its passage, parties were allowed to raise unlimited amounts of money for "party building"; these contributions became an important source of funds that gave the DNC and RNC, through fundraising, candidate recruitment and training, "messaging," and greater control over state and local organizations, resulting in the incipient formation of the first *national* machines in American politics. BCRA short-circuited this development. It forbade "soft money" contributions to parties in national elections and required that the national committees rely on "hard money," subject to federal contribution limits. Although BCRA appeared to privilege spending by "independent organizations," the law did proscribe advertisements by outside groups that mentioned a

30. Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

31. Bill Clinton, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Democratic National Committee Reception in Aspen," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Federal Register Division, National Archives and Records Service, July, 25, 1998.

32. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building.*

33. Galvin, "Presidents as Agents of Change," 112.

34. Jon Carson (former executive director, Organizing for Action), interview with author, December 14, 2015.

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candidate by name within thirty days of a primary and sixty days of a general election. *Citizens United vs. the Federal Elections Commission*,[35] however, tilted the law more favorably in the direction of independent groups. The Supreme Court's decision left in place the new regulations on party fundraising, but it declared the limitation on outside spending groups unconstitutional. Combined with BCRA, this decision shifted campaign contributions and spending dramatically toward 527 groups and super PACs.

Given the institutional impediments to traditional party organizations, the Obama White House and OFA officials concluded that building up the national committee, as Reagan or Clinton had, would be an act of futility. Indeed, recognizing the challenges facing the party committees following BCRA and the *Citizen's United* decision, few within the DNC voiced dissent when Obama decided to disassociate his campaign organization, its digital arsenal, records trove, and grassroots network from the party committee. Shortly after the announcement that OFA would become a 501(c)(4) group, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz stated very tellingly: "one of the powerful lessons we learned from our victory this cycle is that we can't start from scratch every four years. I'm thrilled that the president has announced that OFA will not end with the 2012 elections."[36] It is doubtful that Wasserman-Schultz was actually "thrilled" about losing oversight of OFA, but the DNC chairwoman's implicit assertion that relying solely on the national party committee to maintain the electoral apparatus that assured victory in 2012 would necessitate "starting from scratch" in 2016 was a telling admission of the formal party's incapacity.

Just as the formal party leaders did not seem to mind OFA co-opting some of their capacity, so politicians began to demand the organization fulfill some of the formal party's responsibilities. As the midterm elections approached, candidates for office began to call for OFA's assistance. Despite the fact the organization's tax status prevented it from directly assisting candidates, Democratic politicians argued that OFA could run issue advertisements and engage in voter registration, as many other 501(c)(4) groups did, that could boost Democratic fortunes in 2014.[37] Pointing to key battleground states like North Carolina, Arkansas, and Louisiana, Democrats argued that OFA's resources were needed to combat lavish spending by conservative groups like the Koch brothers–backed Americans for Prosperity, which falls under the same tax code as does OFA. But, wedded to its mission to advance the president's agenda, OFA hesitated to play a substantial role in the midterm elections.[38] Instead, in response to an upwell of anxiety following Democrat Alex Sink's surprising special election loss in Florida's 13th Congressional District, OFA announced in March that it would suspend its fundraising operations at the end of the month until after the 2014 campaign and cut its staff in half.[39]

OFA's concession to collective responsibility went beyond forbearance, however. Although OFA may have been tightfisted with its own cash, it did significantly aid the DNC in raising its own funds. In 2015, OFA handed over the email list that Obama's two campaigns had relied upon to out maneuver Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. The list, generally regarded as in a class of its own, allowed OFA to raise $690 million online during the 2012 campaign, $214.3 million of which came from donors giving less than $200.[40] Unfortunately, once it came into the DNC's possession, this vaunted outreach tool diminished somewhat in value. According to a very highly placed source familiar with OFA's fundraising, donations attributable to email solicitation dropped precipitously after the 2014 elections. This leading OFA official suggested several reasons for this drop-off. First, expected donor fatigue after a costlier than normal 2014 midterm was amplified by even more Democrat losses in Congress and a loss of majority status in the Senate. Second, inundated by the emails of the DNC, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), and OFA, users may have stopped reading or responding to any of the political messages they received. Last, compared to OFA's emails, the Democratic Party's solicitations were of a poor quality. While the OFA does a significant amount of market testing on what words and phrases spark curiosity, engage readers, and get results, the Democratic Party's emails do not seem to benefit from the same amount of studied care. This illustrates an important point. Like other sorts of political communication, not all emails are created equal. In the hands of OFA's staff, an email list can be an effective means of raising cash, bolstering support for the party's

35. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission,* No. 08-205, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

36. Joseph Cameron, "Rebranded Obama Campaign Group Causes Frustration for DNC," *The Hill*, January 23, 2013, http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/278703-rebranded-obama-campaign-causes-frustration-for-dnc.

37. Anna Palmer and Tarini Parti, "Dems Complain OFA Is MIA," *Politico,* February 26, 2014, http://www.politico.com/story/2014/02/organizing-for-action-mia-103922.html.

38. Reid Epstein, "Organizing for Action Pitches Help for Democrats," *Politico,* August 6, 2013, http://www.politico.com/story/2013/08/organizing-for-action-democrats-michelle-nunn-95237_Page2.html.

39. Phillip Bump, "How Much Longer Will Organizing for Action Survive?" *Washington Post,* May 20, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/05/20/how-much-longer-will-organizing-for-action-survive/.

40. Kenneth P. Vogel, "A-List: The Best Email Lists in Politics," *Politico,* May 24, 2009. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-list-the-best-email-lists-in-politics/.

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agenda, and igniting enthusiasm for Democratic candidates for office. In less capable hands, the same tool may be much less effective or even detrimental.[41]

Of course, money is only one important ingredient of a successful campaign. Another is human resources; one of OFA's most important contributions to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party has been to provide it with human capital. Many OFA volunteers—including many of the volunteers we interviewed—left OFA to work on Democratic congressional campaigns in 2014. Indeed, we learned that producing political campaign workers for progressive candidates was an important goal of the organization. OFA's Spring Fellows Program, ostensibly intended to mint new community organizers, was also meant to train a "resume-ready" workforce for Democratic candidates by 2014.[42] Of the 1,700 Spring Fellows trained between 2012 and 2014, 843 worked on political campaigns applying the skills OFA taught them. From effectively managing big data to orchestrating multiplatform social media blitzes to training volunteers in targeted canvassing, these OFA trainees had amassed the tools required of a twenty-first-century political operative.

Significant financial incentives made the "outsourcing" of campaign staff training to OFA especially attractive. Prior to BCRA, national committees were able to skirt campaign contribution limits so long as incoming money was earmarked for party-building activities rather than electioneering.[43] BCRA ended the so-called "soft money" loophole so that every donation to a party committee—no matter how it was to be spent—would be subject to the same cap. In response to this new fundraising obstacle, both the DNC and RNC dropped most of their party-building activities and focused almost exclusively on strategic advertising buys to candidates locked in competitive elections. Meanwhile, nonprofits like OFA are unconstrained by the Federal Election Commission and the Internal Revenue Service with regard to the amount they can spend on training. While 501(c)(4) groups are subject to strict limits on how much of their overall budget can be directed toward what is loosely termed "political activity," training community organizers does not fall into this category. If nonprofits like OFA were explicitly training campaign staff, its Spring Fellows program could be considered an in-kind contribution and would count toward its expenditure limit. The fact that graduates of OFA's fellowship program can, and regularly do, choose to apply their skills to the nonprofit sector or community organizing as well as political campaigning, ensures that 501(c)(4) organizations like OFA, unlike national party committees, are able to spend freely on training activity. Like so many areas in American politics, this is yet another example of outside groups stepping in to provide a service for candidates that the national parties are increasingly incapable of providing themselves. That OFA had the imprimatur of the White House gave it exceptional cachet among the plethora of "independent" groups performing such partisan tasks.

By shifting party functions to an organization explicitly dedicated to promoting his agenda, Obama significantly advanced the long-term trend of substituting presidential leadership for what seemed to be a vexingly inefficient and ideologically compromised party government. As politicians turn to the president for money and recruits, they become at least as beholden to him as they are to the party committees upon whom they once relied. But perhaps OFA's greatest contribution to the advance of executive-centered partisanship has been the role it has played in putting the president at the center of the "shadow party." The slow shift of power and resources to outside groups might have made the liberation of OFA from the DNC and its reincarnation as a stand-alone 501(c)(4) group palatable to partisan insiders, but this transition was even more critical to progressive advocacy groups who have increasingly looked to the White House for succor in advancing their causes. Forging these recalcitrant and demanding organizations into a partisan coalition represents a new and daunting challenge for presidents, especially those of the Democratic Party, which since the New Deal has been more reliant than the GOP on interest groups to mobilize support for campaigns and policies.

BINDING TOGETHER THE PROGRESSIVE COALITION

Obama has had a fruitful but contentious relationship to outside groups. He initially was a beneficiary of the shift of money and power from the formal party to the shadow party. In fact, without it, he almost certainly would not have won his party's nomination. After Kerry's wrenching defeat in 2004, many on the Left bemoaned the fact that they had selected a third candidate in a row from the moderate wing of the party.[44] While many progressives felt betrayed by a Clinton administration they viewed as overly conciliatory and troublingly unprincipled, his electoral success bespoke the wisdom of his strategy of triangulation. Now that two presidential tickets in a row had

41. Interview with OFA official, not for attribution, November 10, 2015.

42. Susan Ross (volunteer and field organizer, Organizing for America; chapter leader and Spring Fellows Trainer for Organizing for Action), interview with Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York, July 9, 2014.

43. Ray J. La Raja, *Small Change: Money, Political Parties, and Campaign Finance Reform* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

44. Matt Bai, *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers, and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007).

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failed against a candidate they viewed as a decidedly unimpressive foe, progressives resolved not to let the same thing happen in 2008. The key to regaining the White House, in their estimation, was finding a candidate that could offer an ideological counterpoint to the conservative narratives that had proven so devastatingly effective.[45] Hillary Clinton, though generally viewed to be a stronger progressive than her husband, was unable to overcome the combination of her last name and her vote in favor of the war in Iraq. In contrast, Barack Obama had unquestioned progressive bona fides, a rousing life story, a dazzling rhetorical flair, and a well-organized and impassioned cadre of grassroots activists in tow. Clinton's loss, despite her strong support within the Democratic Party's "insiders," was a striking illustration of how misleading the very distinction between "insider" and "outsider" can be in twenty-first-century partisan politics.

Yet, President Obama's relationship with the shadow party has been far more contentious than was candidate Obama's. MoveOn.org's Executive Director Justin Rubin summed up the progressive movement's disappointment when, only seven months after Obama's inauguration, he stated succinctly: "we are all incredibly frustrated."[46] Over the course of his first four years in office, Obama was barraged by criticism from the Left over his aggressive deportation policy, protracted timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan, unwillingness to throw his full weight behind Cap and Trade, failure to close Guantanamo, irresolute stance on same-sex marriage, and hands-off approach toward the drafting of the bill that, ironically, has come to be referred to as Obamacare. By 2012, George Soros went as far as to say, "there isn't all that much difference" between Obama and the Republican's presidential candidate Mitt Romney.[47] Progressive reformers had once targeted the pragmatic party machines of the midcentury; their heirs were now inveighing against a president who contemporary advocacy groups had done so much to elect. The modern reformist's criticisms of Obama were largely the same as the charges leveled against Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Daleys, the Scoop Jackson Democrats, and the Clintons; Obama was judged too unprincipled, too dispassionate, too eager for compromise.

In light of the degree of criticism coming from the powerful 527 groups, PACs, and billionaire donors who had boosted Obama to office, Organizing for Action played an important role in the effort to rebind the White House with progressive advocacy groups. Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and FDR sought to forge an executive-centered partisanship by subordinating party organizations to the White House; Ronald Reagan and, albeit to a lesser extent, Bill Clinton had sought to give institutional form to this presidency-centered partisanship by investing in the national committees, viewed as new machines for a transformed party system. Obama, with the support of OFA staff and volunteers dedicated to policy advocacy on issues such as health care reform, climate change, immigration reform, and LGBT rights, attempted to assert leadership over the shadow party—to rally a loose constellation of advocacy groups around his unique personal appeal and to forge them into a new coalition for programmatic action.

President Obama was not the first to try to harness and direct the power of social movements and outside groups. Recent research has shown that Lyndon Johnson and, as mentioned below, Ronald Reagan played central roles in forging the group networks that presently constitute the Democratic and Republican constellations. Deploying the two pillars of the modern executive—the rhetorical and administrative presidencies—for partisan objectives, presidents since LBJ have made efforts to expand and mediate the network of groups affiliated with their parties.[48] Still operating under the understanding of modern executive leadership advanced by Progressive and New Deal reformers, LBJ did not engage in strategic party building. Rather, the Great Society adhered to the progressive conceit that somehow presidents could lead the "whole people"—that they could transcend conventional party politics seen as favoring "special interests" with political alliances forged outside of formal party channels and nonpartisan administrative politics. Nonetheless, LBJ's troubled yet fruitful relationship with the civil rights movement not only resulted in landmark reforms but also wrought major changes in the Democratic Party.

Civil Rights activists formed what Daniel Schlozman calls an "anchor group" that roiled the Democratic coalition and reshaped the party's commitments.[49]

45. Ibid.; George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White Rive Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2008); Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

46. Jonathan Chait, "When Did Liberals Become So Unreasonable?" *New York Magazine.* November 20, 2011, http://nymag.com/news/politics/liberals-jonathan-chait-2011-11/.

47. George Soros, "George Soros on Obama vs. Romney (Freeland File)," *Reuters,* January 25, 2012. http://in.reuters.com/video/2012/01/25/george-soros-on-obama-vs-romney-freeland?videoId=229085598&feedType=VideoRSS&feedName=MostPopular&videoChannel=2602&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+reuters%2FINVideoMostWatched+%28Video+%2F+IN+%2F+Most+Watched%29.

48. Sidney M. Milkis, Daniel Tichenor, and Laura Blessing, "Rallying Force: The Modern Presidency, Social Movements, and the Transformation of American Politics," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2013): 641–70.

49. Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties: Electoral Alignments and American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). Unlike Schlozman, who sees labor as the anchor group of the Democratic coalition through our own political

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As a result, the coalition Obama led looked much different from the one that supported FDR or even LBJ. The New Deal coalition's core elements were organized labor, senior citizens, and moderate white southerners. But organized labor has dramatically declined in the private sector since the 1960s, senior citizens are now the most Republican-voting age cohort, and white Southern votes for Democratic presidential candidates are scarce, save in the atypical states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. New Deal liberalism stressed material incentives; the new Democratic coalition that Obama inherited from the Great Society—minorities, young voters, well-educated and single women, and the LGBT community—is much more sympathetic to the identity politics spawned by the civil rights revolution.

Just as the civil rights movement became the anchor group of the new Democratic coalition, so the Christian Right transformed the Republican Party. Reagan's contribution to the development of a decidedly right-of-center modern Republican Party, pledging to advance issues of critical importance to Christian conservatives, made the GOP an attractive venue for forging a strong bond between the White House and the Christian Right. The fact that Christian conservatives were less suspicious of executive power than civil rights activists had been might have diminished the Christian Right's reformist potential. Yet with their impressive march through American political institutions, these religious movement activists joined with Reagan in advancing a more centralized, polarized, and programmatic party system that defied national consensus and enduring reform, and appeared to result, instead, in a rancorous struggle between conservatives and liberals for control of the modern executive office. Transforming the OPL into a conduit for joining forces with an ideologically united network of conservative groups, the Reagan administration built a new party network that "represented a turning point in president-group relations."[50] Reagan's OPL put particular effort into building relations with Christian conservative groups, leveraging these groups' well-developed capacity to mobilize their membership, not only to support "family values," but also to use its vast network to support the administration's positions in foreign affairs and tax policy.[51]

Although these "long coalitions"—composed of nettlesome social movement organizations—proved difficult for Republican and Democratic presidents to manage, Obama's task of mastering the Democratic Party's coalition of interest groups was complicated by his, and the party's, increased reliance upon them. By the time Obama took office, the shadow party was performing more erstwhile party functions than ever before. Like prior waves of electoral reform, such as the expansion of presidential primaries, campaign finance reforms instituted over the last ten years exert a centrifugal force on the party system, pushing money and resources away from the national committees and out toward the shadow party. Since the Court stripped away all expenditure limits from super PACs in *Citizen's United*, groups such as Americans for Prosperity, Crossroads GPS, Priorities USA, and MoveOn.org have flooded the airwaves with often polarizing partisan messages, even as they were legally prohibited from coordinating a communication strategy with party committees or a candidate's campaign. Issue advertisements are not the only party committee function that 527s, PACs, and 501(c)(4) organizations undertake. Some groups, such as Progressive Majority, recruit, screen, and train candidates to run for state and local office. Others, like ActBlue, facilitate fundraising, while still others, like the Center for American Progress, exist to broker agreement and a common agenda among a sympathetic but myriad array of groups. For every function the formal party plays, there is now a shadow party group that fills the same—and sometimes a competing—role. While this co-optation of formal party roles has led to some infighting—friction between the Tea Party and the Republican "establishment" furnishes an apt example—the value of 527 groups, PACs, and 501(c)(4) groups in the face of an increasingly hamstrung formal party is difficult to deny.

This reliance on the shadow party presents two major problems for presidents. First, as President Obama experienced, ideological PACs and interest groups demonstrate an insatiable desire for ever-greater policy victories, not often pausing to think about the electoral consequences of their demands. Indeed, the interest groups, wealthy philanthropists, political activists, public intellectuals, and pundits that constitute the shadow party did not come to the fore simply for the sake of boosting the fortunes of candidates with D's or R's behind their names. Many of the activists and entities that stepped into the vacuum left by reform were motivated not principally by the prospect of winning elections, but by the hope that those victories would lead to certain

time, we consider the civil rights movement as the core of progressive partisanship since the 1960s. See, for example, Nelson Lichtenstein, "Pluralism, Post-War Intellectuals, and the Decline of the Union Idea," in *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism*, ed. Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 83–114.

50. Galvin, "Presidents as Agents of Change"; Krimmel, *Special Interest Partisanship*.

51. For example, the Reagan White House enlisted the support of the Moral Majority, which through pioneering use of direct mail and the radio reached millions of Americans and had a budget that exceeded the Republican National Committee's, to support Reagan's anti-Communist foreign policy initiatives. Milkis et al., "Rallying Force."

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policies. Though this seems natural to us now, programmatic change was not the primary motive for prior generations of political activists. Taking account of partisanship in the early 1960s, James Q. Wilson distinguished the modern "amateur" Democrats (so-called because they were not employed by a party machine or installed in a patronage job) from professional Democrats who were lured to public life by material reward rather than sense of purpose.[52] After the full implementation of the Pendleton and Hatch Acts, parties lost much of their ability to pay back loyal *aides de camp* with remunerative government positions. The predictable result was the retreat of ideologically center-leaning volunteers and an increased reliance on currying favor among citizens who find politics innately interesting, a segment of the population that tends to inhabit the far ends of the ideological spectrum.[53]

Like the Progressives of the turn of the twentieth century, the New Left, the Draft Goldwater Conservatives, the Watergate Babies, and the Reagan Revolutionaries, today's political activists yearn for ideological purity; and like those previous purveyors of reformist energy, they have changed the institutional context in which presidents are elected and govern. As resources are pushed from the party to the shadows, so is power. And, to transpose the words of *The Who's* Peter Townshend, the new boss is *not* the same as the old boss.

A second problem with relying on the shadow party to perform the functions of the party proper is that there are not as many overarching institutional forms assuring the shadow party's endurance and capacity. As the name implies, the shadow party is, of itself, formless and ephemeral. In some instances, the shadow party appears almost to exist as a concrete object; at other times, its shape is harder to pin down. When the shadow party is more organized and institutionalized, a party's reliance on it is nothing to fear. When, however, the shadow party's form becomes loose and the organizations of which it is composed begin to fall apart internally or militate against one another, the absence of true party committees to fall back on can present a serious problem.

Historically, the Democratic Party's strong connection to labor unions and social movements has enabled it to compensate somewhat for the decline of national party committees. It was simply unnecessary for the DNC to train large numbers of campaign volunteers because the labor unions were able to unleash significant ground forces to canvass, phonebank, and rally in support of Democratic candidates. To a lesser extent, the same can be said for environmental groups like the Sierra Club and for civil rights groups. While many have observed that the Democrat's party apparatus long lagged behind the Republican's in effectiveness and sophistication, the mobilization and organizational capacity of progressive outside groups relative to their conservative counterparts helped to create a more level playing field.[54]

Yet the new Democratic coalition, which has its roots in the identity politics of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, is far less organized than the cohort they replace. The so-called "coalition of the ascendant" that lifted Obama past Hillary Clinton is composed of young people, single women, nonwhites, and nonreligious voters (sometimes referred to as "nones" as this is their preferred response to polling questions about religious affiliation). These groups are not nearly as interconnected and thoroughly organized as the older generation of Democratic voting blocs. While labor could be considered a coalition partner, secular "nones" and single women are more accurately referred to as demographic groups. They exist as consolidated groups only in polls, not in reality. To be sure, there are a significant number of organizations that represent the issues of many of the groups that make up the new coalition of the ascendant. However, some of them, representing marginalized populations, have expansive demands and are not content to be reliable coalition partners: For example, social activists did not hesitate to hold demonstrations protesting Obama's initially cautious policies on immigration and same-sex marriage. Others resemble what Theda Skocpol labels "advocates without members": national organizations headquartered in Washington whose membership involvement begins and ends with the check they send in the mail.[55] Where organized labor has the union hall, and the Southern Christian Leadership Council had the black church, the National Abortion Rights Action League and the Secular Coalition for America have mailing lists. Without common spaces, local roots, or human interaction, interest groups cannot mobilize their constituencies as forcefully.

The White House and OFA attempt to address both the problems described above. Organizing for Action's fundraising and policy advocacy has not just answered the influx of outside spending on the Right, but also responded to the changing balance of power between the formal and shadow parties. In effect, OFA's messaging and grassroots mobilization represents a pioneering effort to take up what the

52. James Q. Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat: Club Politics in Three Cities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

53. Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

54. Galvin, "Presidents as Agents of Change," 44; Jo Freeman, "The Political Culture of the Democratic and Republican Parties," *Political Science Quarterly* (1986): 327–56.

55. Theda Skocpol, "Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civil Life" in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

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more constrained national party committees once did. In so doing, OFA both presents a counterweight to ideologically uncompromising groups and helps assure a more institutionalized, concrete, reliable shadow party that will be equal to the tasks thrust upon it. OFA corrects these two problems by aggressively pursuing common objectives with other groups while keeping some tools of the trade proprietary—such as its impressive mailing lists and digital infrastructure. Thus, they can not only be the common tie between the many fractious elements of the Left's new coalition, but can also maintain significant leverage over other shadow party groups. To put it another way, OFA is capable of both orchestrating a multigroup mass protest and helping the White House stave off such an assault.

We learned that volunteers often reached out to other progressive organizations, cosponsoring events with groups like 350.org (a climate change advocacy group), the Sierra Club, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, and SEIU (the largest and fastest growing member of the AFL-CIO, SEIU has been especially adept at organizing poorly paid service workers and minorities). Because of OFA's resources, like the vaunted Votebuilder tool, a gigantic email distribution list, and a nationwide grassroots network, it can be an invaluable ally to other issue groups and activist communities. As one OFA chapter leader told us, "We tell them, 'we'll provide what you need, we'll set up the phone banks for you, and we'll provide the leg work.'"[56] At the same time, OFA also attempts to recruit the support of these groups behind the president's agenda. As one union advisor said after meetings with Jim Messina, OFA's national chairman at the time, "They want the big political players to help move their agenda. There's no doubt about it."[57] Presidents from LBJ to Reagan to Clinton sought to harmonize movement and interest group demands within the White House; in OFA, Obama has sought to build his own movement that might mobilize social activists to work with, rather than simply impose demands on, the president. Scholars who view parties as networks of groups generally portray partisans as fierce advocates who regularly advance polarizing agendas that politicians are loathe to follow for fear of getting out of step with their electorate.[58] OFA has not been able to harness the Democratic shadow party totally, but it did give the White House a credible and far-flung voice within the progressive movement that has strengthened the president's relationship to his base constituencies.

To be sure, OFA's voice was strengthened by President Obama moving toward more progressive positions on issues such as LGBT rights, immigration reform, and environmental issues such as the Keystone Oil Pipeline. But OFA provided the White House some political cover as Obama worked his way through these thorny issues. For example, although the OFA staff and volunteers were divided on the timing of when the president should oppose the Keystone issue, this intramural struggle was resolved with an agreement to attack Republican opposition to climate change policy.[59] As Carson pointed out, "When we would have a meeting, people would be very passionate about the Keystone pipeline, and we would say, 'That's great, we acknowledge that. Here's what's happening with that, but how would you like to work with us on the climate deniers campaign?' And they would say, 'sure, that sounds great . . . '[V]olunteers are not these binary creatures that can only do one thing at a time. They can feel passionately about one thing and also get involved in a parallel thing or five parallel things."[60] The climate deniers' frame, as even many Republican conservatives reluctantly admitted, proved very successful, helping to build support for Obama's environmental policy; this support strengthened the president's hand when he finally took a stand against the controversial pipeline by vetoing congressional legislation to build it in February 2015.

OFA also supported Obama's controversial free-trade policy, mobilizing support for the White House's position that the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP), which was opposed by most Democratic advocacy groups, was a "progressive trade policy that puts American workers first, helps middle-class families get ahead, and levels the playing field for American farmers, ranchers, and manufacturers."[61] Although Democratic groups never lined up behind the White House on TPP—and it became one of the more contentious issues in the 1916 Democratic primary campaign—OFA engaged the agreement's detractors in a constructive debate that ultimately ameliorated the most vitriolic attacks on the White House. Despite the strong opposition of Sanders's supporters, a plank that was critical of trade agreements that "do not support good

56. Neeta Datt (chair, OFA Montgomery County, MD), interview with Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York, May 4, 2014.

57. Kevin Bogardus, "Obama Group Organizing for Action Courts Unions as Cash Grab Accelerates," *The Hill*, March 19, 2013, http://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/288893-organizing-for-action-courting-unions-as-cash-grab-accelerates.

58. Bawn et al., "A Theory of Political Parties."

59. A number of OFA field organizers had sent a letter to Obama after the 2012 election, urging their "awe-inspiring" leader to reject the Keystone Pipeline; but OFA doused this bottom-up appeal, disseminating "talking points" that instructed its staff and grassroots volunteers to support the president's agenda, which did not yet include opposition to the pipeline. Talia Buford, "Greens: OFA Dodging Keystone," *Politico*, May 20, 2013, http://www.politico.com/story/2013/05/green-environment-pipeline-ofa-keystone-91597.html#ixzz35iYYv5bD.

60. Jon Carson interview.

61. OFA email to OFA membership list, October 14, 2015.

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American jobs" but did not oppose the TPP was inserted in the 2016 Democratic platform.[62]

"When OFA [leadership] said in 2015: 'let's talk about free trade.' Let's talk about what TPP really is," Carson recounted,

> the people at headquarters were all really surprised by the volunteers' willingness to listen and willingness to engage in that conversation. I think a reason for that, is it becomes a little tiresome to just talk to people who won't talk to you. So it was actually kind of fun organizing among Progressives who disagreed about trade and would actually have debates and conversations. TPP was, for many OFA volunteers, what they wished all organizing could be: having substantive and civil conversations as opposed to just trying to embarrass congressman so-and-so with a protest in front of his office.[63]

More practically, OFA's effective support of the White House on free trade tapped into the "global" perspective of key parts of the new progressive coalition. OFA has made some effort to reach out to traditional Democratic constituencies such as organized labor; indeed, its support of the enactment and rollout of Obamacare helped advance a cause that had been the holy grail of progressive reformers since the New Deal. Nevertheless, the group's policy agenda is clearly geared toward the coalition of the ascendant. Besides the core issue of health care, the vast majority of the group's social media content and direct action has been dedicated to "social" issues like climate change, gun regulation, LGBT rights, and immigration reform.[64] On OFA's website, one can purchase a T-shirt listing in brightly colored block letters the group's priorities. While health care, marriage equality, and women's rights make the list, there is no mention of staple Democratic priorities like the minimum wage or collective bargaining rights.[65] Similarly, the White House did not try to engage OFA volunteers in international issues, such as the war in Afghanistan or the Syrian conflict, which exposed the most dangerous fault lines in the Progressive coalition.

In reality, OFA's focus on social issues is as much a reflection of grassroots interest as it is a concerted attempt to solidify a new progressive coalition. As Carson admitted, "it can be hard to find super volunteers sometimes to organize around some of the bread and butter economic issues like the minimum wage, whereas with environmental issues, there is always a core group who are willing."[66] The passion for Obama's agenda was not developed ex cathedra. Before the White House deployed OFA as a policy advocacy group, there were organizations that gave community activists who were passionate about a single issue the opportunity to fight for that cause. But OFA has enlisted and empowered previously uninvolved individuals, especially young people and minorities, who were inspired by Obama's remarkable ascension to the White House. As one volunteer told us, "These people are my friends now, but without OFA, there is no way we would have connected."[67]

Although OFA's third life as a 501(c)(4) has seen its active membership skew toward older volunteers, many of them retirees who have more time to stay the course, the group's ability to mobilize constituencies previously thought to be chronically apathetic has been proven over two elections as well as prepossessing policy campaigns, most notably the effort to enroll the uninsured in Obamacare, which we will discuss below. The recruitment of new activists is due in large part to OFA's ability to tailor its message to individuals in a way that was not possible just a decade ago. Because of the detailed information OFA has access to regarding its members, the group can send out emails to people regarding the issues they are most likely to care about. Although politicians have always tailored their message to fit their audience, they used to have to physically traverse their town or district stopping at union halls to talk about collective bargaining, Sierra Club chapter meetings to talk about the environment, and church potluck dinners to talk about their faith. This oldest vintage of targeted campaigning required interest groups or social institutions to do the work of collecting a constituency. In the days of mass mailings, information about the individuals on purchased mailing lists was often sketchy, and to the extent it did allow micro-targeting, producing and sending multiple mailers was (and still is) prohibitively expensive for most campaigns. Today, technology allows OFA not only to reach out to different constituencies but to connect with demographics that are minimally organized. There is no need to find literal common ground to connect; figurative common ground is enough.[68]

62. David Weigel, "Sanders Loses in Trade at Democratic Platform Meeting, *Washington Post*, July 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/07/09/sanders-loses-on-trade-at-democratic-platform-meeting/."

63. Jon Carson, interview with author, December 14, 2015.

64. Sidney M. Milkis and John Warren York, "Managing Alone: Barack Obama, Organizing for Action, and Policy Advocacy in the Digital Era" (presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, August 28–31, 2014).

65. OFA's "Organizing Tee" does list "economic opportunity" as one of its causes; and its website makes clear that this commitment that includes raising the minimum wage. But OFA's email blasts and paraphernalia clearly give priority issues such as health care reform, gun control; minority, gender, immigration, and LGBT rights; and climate change.

66. Jon Carson (director of OFA), interview with Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York, December 14, 2015.

67. Owens, interview with Milkis and York, May 5, 2014.

68. After the 2014 election, OFA laid off a large number of staff and transitioned to a more volunteer-based leadership model. As

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OFA AND POLICY ADVOCACY

The interest groups and social movements that shape so much contemporary partisanship have long realized the capacity of the president to serve as a "rallying force" and the executive bureaucracy as an avenue to advance their agenda in the face of fluctuating public opinion and inconsistent congressional attention.[69] Like reform-minded presidents, advocacy groups look for ways to slice through the Gordian Knot of complex constitutional forms to accomplish change; with Congress and the president divided by partisan realms, activists are especially prone to set their sights on the executive, along with the courts, as the most promising agent of progress. Since 2010, immigration advocates, the LGBT community, and environmentalists all have focused their energy on executive action rather than investing their efforts in the hollow hope of legislation. As a champion of Obama's administrative politics, OFA has been an important ally of partisan groups who rely on executive action and bureaucratic discretion to advance their causes.

Especially as the odds of further legislative action were extinguished by Republican midterm victories in 2014, OFA started to use its mobilizing capacity in support of executive action. OFA's engagement with administrative politics began after the Democrats lost the House in the 2010 congressional elections. In late October 2011, the White House launched a "We Can't Wait" initiative dedicated to advancing policies that the president and his progressive allies supported through unilateral action. As part of this campaign, the Obama administration took measures that authorized the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to implement greenhouse gas regulations that were stalled in the Senate; issued waivers that released states from many of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, which Congress had failed to reauthorize, only to bind them to the administration's own education policies; and bypassed the usual confirmation process to make four recess appointments that Senate Republicans had been filibustering. Finally, confirming the adage that policy makes politics, Obama announced in June 2012 an executive initiative—Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)—that granted relief to an entire category of young immigrants, as many as 1.4 million people, who would otherwise have been subject to deportation. Obama thus elided the Republican opposition to the Dream Act, the administration's bill designed to provide a conditional pathway to citizenship for immigrants brought to America as children. DACA not only contributed to the president's successful reelection campaign, which saw Hispanics support him by an overwhelming margin, but also, given the importance of the Latino vote to the future of American politics, may have contributed significantly to the formation of the new progressive coalition that Obama and OFA envisioned. This administrative blitz continued into the president's second term, as the We Can't Wait trope became a battle cry for advocacy groups, especially immigrant reform organizations and environmental activists, who urged, indeed demanded, the White House to keep pushing the envelope.[70]

Obama's administrative politics was thus joined to executive-centered partisanship. Having a grassroots network of loyal staff and volunteers whose first allegiance was to the president rather than their own agency, their constituents, or party, proved critical to the public advocacy of Obama's administrative partisanship. As the president launched the We Can't Wait initiative, Organizing for America began a public relations blitz that encouraged its members to "help get the message across by submitting something—a story, a photo, a video—about why you, your family, or your town needs things to change."[71] These testimonials were posted on OFA's platform on Tumblr account, a vast blogging and social network website.

Dedicated to policy advocacy, Organizing for Action was even better equipped than its predecessor to support the president's administrative crusade: deftly combining its promotion of the president's legislative program with careful attention to administrative politics, OFA 3.0 was especially active in championing the use of the presidential pen to advance progressive action on climate change and immigration reform. As one key OFA staffer described the transition to administrative politics, "This shift in focus changes how we organize a lot. It's not as important now to be able to target a specific member of Congress. We do not necessarily need to be able to mobilize a crowd in front of any given congressman's

one leading official told us, "We needed to give our new volunteer state leads tools to learn from each other. So, we established OFA Connect. It is basically an organizing tool that allows volunteers to share event information or send messages to one another about lessons learned. Across the country, organizers are advocating for the same sorts of issues, doing the same sorts of work, and confronting the same sorts of challenges. It makes sense that they should be communicating with each other, because it is pretty likely that an organizer in Iowa may be running into the same sort of problems as an organizer in Alabama, or Idaho, or wherever. That organizer in Iowa should not have to reinvent the wheel; they should be able to take advantage of the expertise of and lessons learned by the entire OFA family" (interview with OFA official, Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York, not for attribution, November 10, 2015).

69. Milkis et al., "Rallying Force"; Richard A. Harris and Sidney M. Milkis, *The Politics of Regulatory Change: A Tale of Two Agencies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

70. Kenneth S. Lowande and Sidney M. Milkis, "We Can't Wait: Barack Obama, Partisan Polarization, and the Administrative Presidency," *The Forum* 12 (2014): 3–27.

71. Organizing for Action Tumblr, accessed May 2014, http://barackobama.tumblr.com/post/11884196045/we-cant-wait

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local office. Instead, we are focusing more on facilitating public comments and changing the discussion around executive actions." In support of the EPA's controversial regulation of carbon emissions by power plants, for example, the president's grassroots organization joined environmental groups in mobilizing public comments. Of the more than 4.3 million comments the EPA received on the coal power plant rule, more than 10 percent came from OFA.[72]

OFA's potent combination of top-down messaging and bottom-up grassroots advocacy was intended to bring the modern presidency's institutional capacity in line with the demands of the office. While the "administrative presidency"[73] allows the White House to set policy to a greater extent than before, the size and scope of the bureaucracy, and the number of programs the executive is responsible for managing, presented a vexing challenge to Obama. Just as presidents have added, appended, and discovered new administrative tools, the bureaucracy has engaged in an age-old gambit for autonomy.[74] Meanwhile, fearing that the president and the bureaucracy will not execute the law in accordance with their original desires, members of Congress often write statutes with reporting requirements, sunset provisions, and limitation riders, the sum total of which not only constrain but often enervate executive departments and agencies. Intensifying this institutional arms race, presidents have often sought to circumvent Congressional micromanagement and bureaucratic inertia by centralizing policy authority in the White House Office (in the hands of assistants to the president who are dubbed "czars") and layering political appointees over the top of the careerist civil servants in an agency. The result of this escalating battle for control of national administration is a bureaucracy governed by a labyrinthine regulatory regime, often "managed" by presidential loyalists who all too readily become insulated not only from the Congress but also from the administrative department and agencies they are supposed to oversee. This has proven a treacherous terrain for modern presidents to navigate.[75] Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush sought to circumvent administrative rivalries, and both exercised unilateral presidential power to advance conservative policies. But their administrative actions often subordinated collective partisan objectives to their own political ambitions and threatened to undermine the rule of law that underlies effective collective action.[76]

OFA's efforts to salvage the troubled rollout of Obamacare, an undertaking the White House and OFA's leaders consider its greatest achievement, best illustrates how the group lent Obama much needed assistance in executing policy. From the moment open enrollment began until it concluded, the group leveraged all its digital and human assets to the highest extent possible in order to counteract the negative spin surrounding the statute, inform citizens as to their new options, and increase the number of new enrollees. The extent to which OFA was able to accomplish these goals indicates the degree to which this new institutional innovation—the president-connected issue advocacy group—can effectively enhance the institutional capacity of the modern presidency in light of contemporary challenges to executive-centered partisanship.

Organizing for Action had two important tasks. The first was changing the dialogue around ACA. In the weeks and months following the ACA's rollout, stories about the new insurance marketplace website's glitches, the low number of enrollees, bureaucratic inefficiency, and even security breaches dominated the mainstream media. Headlines like "Rough Obamacare Rollout: 4 Reasons Why," "Obamacare, Failing Ahead of Schedule," and "Why Obamacare Is On Life Support"[77] were common on a wide spectrum of media outlets; the rollout fiasco was not only trumpeted by Fox News but also the *New York Times*, CNN, and ordinarily Obama-friendly policy periodicals like the *National Journal*. This news registered with the public as an October 22, 2013, CBS News poll showed that just 12 percent of respondents thought the ACA rollout was going well.[78] More dangerous for the president, many apparently did not view the botched rollout as a bump in the road but, rather as a troubling sign of things to come. In just

72. Interview with OFA Official, November 10, 2105; Laura Barron-Lopez, "Organizing for Action Seeks Comments on EPA Carbon Rules," *The Hill*, November 31, 2013, http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/189961-organizing-for-action-seeks-comments-on-epa-carbon-rules.

73. Coined by Richard Nathan, this term refers to the growing practice of modern presidents to strengthen their capacity to achieve political and policy objectives by wielding administrative powers through the bureaucracy rather than navigating a complex system of separated powers. See Richard Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency* (New York: Wiley, 1983).

74. Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

75. Hugh Heclo, *A Government of Strangers* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1977).

76. Sidney M. Milkis and Jessie Rhodes, "George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the 'New' American Party System," *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (2007): 461–88.

77. Tom Cohen, "Rough Obamacare Rollout: 4 Reasons Why," CNN, October 23, 2013, http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/22/politics/obamacare-website-four-reasons/; Ross Douthat, "Obamacare, Failing Ahead of Schedule," *New York Times*, October 19, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/20/opinion/sunday/douthat-obamacare-failing-ahead-of-schedule.html; Josh Kraushaar, "Why Obamacare Is on Life Support," *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/11/why-obamacare-is-on-life-support/449031/.

78. Sarah Dutton, Jennifer De Pinto, Anthony Salvanto, and Fred Backus, "Poll: Obamacare Support, Obama Approval Sink to New Lows," CBS News, November 20, 2013. Accessed January 10, 2017, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-obamacare-support-obama-approval-sink-to-new-lows/.

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one month, the law's favorability rating dropped 12 points to an all-time low of 31 percent.[79] Predictably, support for Obamacare among Republican respondents were near zero, but more than two-thirds of self-described independents also had an unfavorable opinion of Obama's most important policy achievement.

If it affected new enrollments, the bad press surrounding the ACA could become much more than a public relations problem; it could jeopardize the survival of the new program. Based on the slow trickle of enrollees, commentators widely speculated that the exchanges would not meet the original Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projection of six million insured through the new marketplace. If the number of new enrollments fell much below this figure, or if young, relatively healthy people did not sign up for plans in large numbers to offset the expected expense of individuals joining with preexisting conditions, insurance rates would likely skyrocket in response. As early reports indicated that older Americans and individuals previously uninsured due to preexisting conditions did, in fact, make up the bulk of new enrollees, while the twenty- and thirty-somethings were largely sitting on the sidelines, the future of Obamacare appeared grim.[80]

To combat this negative publicity, OFA turned up their impressive social media megaphone to full volume. OFA's Twitter account, it's principal social networking tool, produced an average of about seventeen tweets a day, while the organization's email list, which, at 30 million, is fourteen times larger than the average readership of the *Wall Street Journal*'s weekday edition, distributed daily counterpoints to the media's primary narrative.[81] Some tweets urged readers to get insured; others urged OFA members to help register their family and friends; still others touted the benefits of the plan in the face of the negative story lines that dominated the media immediately after the healthcare exchange's botched rollout. As the mainstream press continued to document glitch-ridden websites, convoluted enrollment procedures, and low numbers of enrollees, OFA's Twitter account posted daily reminders of the sorts of preconditions that once barred people from receiving health coverage. As the kinks in the health exchange websites were worked out, OFA's social networking sites and emails trumpeted the steadily rising number of customers purchasing insurance through the exchanges.

OFA did not rely exclusively on new media to promote the president's progressive policy agenda. Spokespeople for the group often expressed the hope that their social media messaging would be the beginning of interpersonal conversations between group members and their friends, acquaintances, and family. Many of the OFA organizers we spoke to referred to this utilization of neighborhood volunteer networks to disseminate information as "the snowflake model."[82] Shortly before the 2013 Thanksgiving holiday, OFA's website reminded members to "make sure you have a plan for when, where, and how you'll talk to your family about health insurance."[83] Along with the supplication to "get talking," OFA's website also included a list of talking points to ensure that volunteers would know how to answer common concerns about the new program that might come up during the holiday repast. Organizing for Action's Twitter page often featured posts debunking popular Republican arguments or media tropes that cast the administration in a negative light. Not only does this sort of social media content likely serve to assure those who read it that the facts are on their side, but these talking points and rebuttals might also bolster OFA organizers in face-to-face debates with those who are not already inclined to support the administration.

Though OFA certainly seemed to have the social media and human assets to drive public opinion, there is evidence that it, nonetheless, struggled to do so. Despite the flurry of air support OFA provided via email and social media for health care advocacy, the approval rate for the president's signature policy achievement stood at 37 percent in December 2013, but has gained more than 10 percentage points since then (according to August 2016–January 2017 polling).[84] To the extent OFA's campaign for hearts and minds regarding Obamacare did have an impact, it may have fortified the faith of some Democrats by broadcasting popular features of Obamacare, stories of people helped by the bill, and updates on the number of enrollees. Even at its lowest ebb, Democratic support for Obamacare never dropped below 65 percent and quickly rebounded back to 76 percent

79. Ibid.

80. Elise Viebeck, "O-Care Premiums to Skyrocket," *The Hill*, March 19, 2014, http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/201136-obamacare-premiums-are-about-to-skyrocket.

81. Barbara Trish, "Organizing for Action" (delivered at the State of the Parties Conference, Bliss Institute, November 7 and 8, 2013); William Launder, "Journal Remains Biggest US Paper," *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2012, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304050304577377812281217548.

82. Personal interviews with Organizing for Action volunteers, Spring and Summer, 2014. The OFA analog of the snowflake, which comes in all sizes, shapes, and complex designs, is the neighborhood network of volunteers who share responsibilities—data, phone banks, volunteer recruitment, and canvassing—in pursuing common objectives. https://my.barackobama.com/page/content/snowflake/.

83. Organizing for Action, accessed August 2013, https://www.barackobama.com.

84. "Public Approval of Health Care Law," Real Clear Politics Poll, accessed January 10, 2017, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/obama_and_democrats_health_care_plan-1130.html.

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by 2014.[85] Moreover, the OFA's targeted and well-timed communication helped to sustain the morale and membership of "Obama's Family."

The rallying of the president's loyalists was critical to OFA's second objective: facilitating local OFA organizers to go into their communities and assist new enrollees in signing up for a healthcare plan through the state exchanges. This street-level campaign involved every active OFA member for nearly a year and a half. Volunteers promoting the ACA's healthcare exchanges benefitted from many of the technological innovations that OFA developed during Obama's first term and reelection campaign. Though local expertise was often relied on to know where in their cities and towns to distribute brochures, phone-bank call lists were generated at OFA's Chicago headquarters and distributed to chapters around the country. This was an important administrative innovation; to be sure, micro-targeting is old hat to political campaigns and policy advocacy, but it had not been translated into an all-out campaign of implementation before OFA's work in support of Obamacare. Instead of calling phone numbers at random from purchased lists, headquarters personnel scraped from their enormous register only those who were most likely to need health insurance but were unlikely to know about the law's provisions. This allowed volunteers to spend their hours much more fruitfully. Volunteers also benefitted from the political network established and carefully cultivated by OFA's leadership and staff. Throughout the enrollment period, regular conference calls allowed headquarters and state-level and chapter-level leadership to share best practices.

Much of the grassroots canvassing and phone banks were dedicated to filling senior centers, community centers, churches, and college and high school gymnasiums, where OFA healthcare experts would hold informational sessions espousing the benefits of the ACA, detailing how a policy could be purchased, and in some cases, helping attendees select a plan. The attendance at these forums varied widely, but the organizers we spoke with—all of whom worked near metropolitan areas—indicated an average attendance between 50 and 100 people, with at least one event, and often more, occurring each weekend of the fall, winter, and early spring leading up to the open enrollment deadline. These meetings best illustrate the powerful category-defying combination of top-down and bottom-up mobilization that is one of OFA's most distinctive characteristics. Although headquarters personnel largely prepared the PowerPoint slides presented at these meetings, chapter-level volunteers were relied upon to perform the fundamental tasks of community organizing, from reserving a location to bringing people in the doors.

OFA did not handle these tasks alone of course. Progressive partners on the ground included healthcare nonprofits, labor unions, and organizations known as connector entities, which were established by most state governments following the ACA's passage in order to provide target populations with information on eligibility and enrollment assistance. In many localities, OFA coordinated closely with these other organizations, often sharing volunteers and PowerPoint slide decks. This was not always the case. Some nonprofits sought to avoid the appearance of working too closely with OFA for fear of being perceived as partisan. Despite the fact that OFA is ostensibly nonpartisan, their dedication to a Democratic president's agenda kept some potential allies at arm's length. Nonetheless, without OFA, the campaign to salvage the ACA's rollout would likely not have been as successful as it was. Although the healthcare nonprofits knew the details of the statute, they didn't accurately perceive the nature of the task at hand. While the nonpartisan reputation of groups like Enroll Virginia, Healthy Howard (a nonprofit in Howard County Maryland), and many others may have allowed them to reach out to people in need across the political spectrum, their lack of true community organizing experience held them back in certain ways as well. As one OFA volunteer noted: "Connector entities . . . didn't understand the nature of the problem. Usually health care nonprofits are used to having a client that they monitor over a long period of time, continuously checking up on them and making sure they get the medical attention they need. They didn't understand that with Obamacare enrollment, the best-case scenario would be to see someone once, register him or her, and move on to the next person."[86]

That OFA was built for issue advocacy and born of a political campaign endued its staff and volunteers with a sense of the stakes and the appropriate tactics. Despite a painfully slow start, enrollments in the newly established healthcare exchanges surpassed the CBO's initial expectations, reaching 7.1 million by the end of open enrollment. Although it is not possible to isolate precisely the effect of OFA's grassroots mobilizing on Obamacare enrollments, it is significant that the White House thought its efforts made a difference. The White House signaled the importance of the organization's support when President Obama sent an email on September 2, 2014, entitled "I hope you remember this." Reminding his personal loyalists how in the face of the Tea Party assault five years earlier, "the pundits were declaring health

85. Scott Clement and Peyton M. Craighill, "Democrat's Support for Obamacare Surges," *Washington Post*, March 31, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/03/31/democrats-support-for-obamacare-surges/?utm_term=.ddc1372c498d.

86. Earnest Le (state healthcare coordinator, OFA), interview with Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York, May 4, 2014.

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care reform dead," the president praised OFA staff and volunteers for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat:

> Now that reform is the law of the land, millions of Americans are better off . . . That's because people like you never gave up. You refused to be scared off by cynics or powerful special interests. I'll always be grateful for that, as are Americans across the country who now have access to affordable, quality health insurance—many for the first time in their lives. That's something I hope you remember whenever your days get long: The work you're doing has the power to make history.

OFA staff members close to the president told us this email was not pro forma. Rather, Obama perceived the organization's role to be absolutely pivotal in turning what appeared to be a very high-profile failure for the president into his most surprising victory; more to the point, the president wanted to rally his loyal political army for the work that lay ahead. After a brief drawdown, during which OFA cut its staff by about half and curtailed volunteer activity to encourage its members to assist the midterm campaigns of Democratic allies, Obama's organization geared up again for the second open enrollment period, which began on November 15, 2014, and ended February 15, 2015. Volunteers once again fanned out to educate the public as to their insurance options under the bill, and headquarters personnel utilized their enormous email list to do the same. This second stage of enrollment received far less media attention than the first, but before it was over, 11.4 million additional Americans had signed up for insurance plans through ACA's online marketplace.[87]

Consequently, even though OFA's nationwide network may not have changed the public discourse in Middle America or political realities inside the Beltway, it enhanced the president's administrative capacity. Free of the bureaucratic and regulatory fetters that limit the discretion of the administrative state, and enabled by its capacity for nationwide grassroots mobilization, OFA did what government agencies are unable to accomplish: The president's grassroots network went out into underserved communities with the goal of leading them *to* a government program, rather than expecting them to show up in a government office or log on to a government website on their own. For many reasons—the sheer number of programs that exist, the limited funding available for advertising government services, the complexity of the application process, and conservatives' denigration of those who needs public aid—many people who are qualified for social welfare do not take advantage of it. To combat these inertial forces, OFA and future presidential 501(c)(4)'s will be of great importance.

OFA's grassroots mobilization during the critical stages of health care enrolment was not entirely novel. For example, Lyndon Johnson's Community Action Program, which connected many people to social-welfare programs, is an important historical precedent. But the War on Poverty tapped into the civil rights movement, which eventually turned on LBJ.[88] In contrast, OFA is a personal organization—"Obama's Family"—that has stuck with him in good times and bad. As an extension of his own political and policy ambitions, OFA might have accentuated the isolation of Obama from the Democratic Party and Congress; however, it served as a critical contributor to the Democrats' premier programmatic achievement during Obama's two terms in office. The verdict of his friends and foes suggests that it has served him well in a toxic political environment, and any future president is likely to try to build a similar information-age grassroots political machine.

CONCLUSION: OFA, ADVOCACY GROUPS, AND EXECUTIVE-CENTERED PARTISANSHIP

Seeking to bring the president back in, this article builds on and recasts the UCLA School's view of parties as constellations of demanding interest groups. But rather than emphasizing presidents as builders of party networks, we view current partisanship as a contentious yet formative collaboration between the White House and policy advocates. Our case study of OFA suggests how this uneasy alliance might be mediated by an innovative institution that allows for a "reciprocal top-down and bottom-up" mobilization in campaigns and policy advocacy that enables followers to "realize their collective strength."[89]

Like Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, Obama's commitment to partisan administration revealed that modern presidents can circumvent partisan gridlock by exploiting executive power for partisan purposes. Taking a longer historical view, however, Obama's special relationship with

87. Jason Millman, "White House: 11.4 Million and Counting Signed Up for Obamacare in 2015," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/02/17/white-house-11-4-million-and-counting-signed-up-for-obamacare-in-2015/?utm_term=.bad68d78cd91.

88. Sidney M. Milkis, "The Modern Presidency, Social Movements, and the Administrative State: Lyndon Johnson and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Race and American Political Development*, ed. Joseph Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren (New York: Routledge, 2008).

89. Hugh Heclo, "The Once and Future Chief Executive: Prophecy versus Prediction" (remarks delivered at the 4th Annual Symposium in Honor of Ronald Reagan, "The Future of the American Presidency," Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, February 6, 2009).

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OFA marks a new stage in the century-long development of presidential partisanship that both responds to and further undermines party organizations. OFA is a pioneering organization that holds the possibility of a new party system that joins executive prerogative, street-level politics, and collective responsibility. At the same time, the very effectiveness of this personal organization, combining a fiercely devoted activist core with the most technically sophisticated campaign organization ever seen in American politics, has sometimes presented the illusion that the president can campaign and govern independently of the Congress, bureaucracy, and regular party organization.

Even some of OFA's most sympathetic allies fear that OFA's commitment to transformative change has been subordinated if not extinguished by its personal loyalty to the president. As Joe Szakos, the founder and executive director of Virginia Organizing, the leading progressive grassroots group in a key battleground state, explained, "Obama's Family," for all its strengths, was not well equipped to orchestrate the building of a reform coalition. OFA could not be a reliable leader, or even partner, of such a coalition, Szakos lamented, because the "the hierarchy of the group and the fact that they are fundamentally about advancing the president's agenda make it very difficult to establish a close, enduring, working relationship with it."[90] Unlike a more locally rooted advocacy group, OFA community organizers do not have very much discretion to set their chapter's policy agenda. Knowing that their local OFA counterparts lack that authority, other group leaders fear that they cannot count on the president's personal organization to form a lasting multi-issue alliance. Still, OFA is not totally beholden to the vagaries of White House strategy. As noted, volunteers often reached out to other progressive organizations, cosponsoring events with groups dedicated to reform of health care, climate change, gun control, and immigration. OFA's resources and close connections to the White House has made it an invaluable ally to other issue groups and activist communities.

By marrying top-down direction and bottom-up grassroots mobilization, both facilitated by the digital toolkit built during Obama's election campaigns, the group was a formidable asset to the president. Some features of this grassroots mobilization effort made it uniquely suited to OFA's skillset and volunteers. Like a political campaign, the open enrollment period had a distinct beginning and a clear horizon. This is unusual. As one volunteer we spoke with stated, "not everything is going to look like the Obama campaign. … Most issues are going to be a long slog. You may die only having accomplished a little of what you want to see."[91] This has certainly been the case with immigration reform, gun control, the minimum wage, climate change, and many of the other issues OFA has rallied behind. The nature of these issue campaigns has made OFA's latest permutation appealing to only a subset of the individuals initially drawn to the sound and fury of Obama's reelection campaign. All of our interviewees confirmed that Organizing for Action's core of active members is far smaller and older than were Obama's campaign organization. Thus, the organization's presumed potency in this case may not extend to issue campaigns with less bounded timelines and more amorphous objectives.

Progressive advocacy groups viewed OFA as an unreliable but potentially powerfully ally; Democratic office holders, although they benefitted from its training programs and cheered its policy advocacy, tended to be jealous of its familial relationship with the White House. As noted above, to politicians seeking election in 2014, another hand in their potential donor's pockets has not always been welcome, especially since, as a 501(c)(4) group, OFA cannot engage in any electioneering—and unlike several nonprofits, OFA has adamantly refused to breech the wall of separation between policy advocacy and campaign activity. The uneasy relationship between the White House and Democratic legislatures underscored a long-held contention on Capitol Hill that Obama's political operation functioned purely for the president's benefit and not for his party's, an indictment that became especially bitter after the Democrats lost control of the Senate in the midterm campaign. Obama allies retorted that the president had shared with the Senate campaigns part of his massive lists of volunteer data and supporters' email addresses, considered by his advisors to be sacred documents. But as had been clear throughout the Obama presidency, OFA's personal allegiance to Obama was not portable, and the president's battle cry during the 2014 campaign—that he was not on the midterm ballot but his policies were—did little to extend his personal organization's loyalty to the Democratic Party.[92] Obama has thus presided over a greater loss of congressional seats for his party than any two-term president since World War II.[93]

90. Joe Szakos (president, Virginia Organizing), interview with Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York. July 21, 2014.

91. Earnest Le (state healthcare coordinator, OFA), interview with Sidney M. Milkis and John W. York, May 4, 2014.

92. Phillip Rucker and Robert Costa, "Battle for the Senate: How the GOP Did It," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/battle-for-the-senate-how-the-gop-did-it/2014/11/04/a8df6f7a-62c7-11e4-bb14-4cfea1e742d5_story.html?utm_term=.2830728664c1. The Republicans picked up nine seats in the Senate and thirteen in the House. The GOP majority in the Senate became 54–46; its 247–188 edge in the House gave the Republicans the largest majority it has enjoyed since 1948.

93. Between 2008 and 2015, Democrats have lost 13 Senate seats, 69 House seats, 913 state legislative seats, 11 governorships, and 32 state legislative chambers. The only president in the past

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Nevertheless, Obama's electoral and policy alliance with OFA has greatly upgraded the Democratic Party's voter outreach by expanding the national voter file the DNC first started in 2006. Moreover, the president's effective use of volunteers in campaigns and policy advocacy has infused the party with an expanded grassroots presence: For example, the number of Democratic campaign volunteers rose from roughly 252,000 in 2004 to 2.2 million in 2012. In August 2015, for the first time, OFA turned over the entire list of its supporters to the DNC, which national and state party leaders hoped might help their campaign efforts, not just at the presidential level but also down-ballot in the 2016 campaign. This upgraded campaign capacity has been joined to effective policy advocacy, as Obama and his information-age grassroots organization turned controversial issues, including immigration, gay rights, and climate change, to the Democrats' advantage.[94]

Just as the 2010 elections encouraged Obama to pursue Democratic causes unilaterally, so the 2014 midterm, which placed the president in opposition to a hostile Republican House and Senate, further encouraged him and his grassroots political machine to emphasize the administrative presidency. Indeed, soon after the election, Obama announced an expansion of the deportation relief he provided in the DACA initiative, extending protection to an additional 4.3 million unauthorized immigrants.[95] Concurrently, OFA roused its members to support the White House initiative and, more generally, to shift their focus almost exclusively to administrative politics. As OFA's Sara El-Amine, the group's national grassroots organizer, who replaced Jon Carson as executive director just before the midterm election, wrote in an email of December 12, 2014, "The last month has been a [big deal] for those of us who want to see meaningful action to fix our broken immigration system. But it came towards the end of a frustrating year. House leaders had more than 500 days to hold one simple vote on bipartisan, comprehensive reform, and they failed to act, making it clear that they were just running out the clock on this Congress. That's why President Obama refused to wait any longer."[96] The frustrations Obama and OFA experienced resulted in large part from the fiercely divided polity that confronted them. But their response to this bitter factionalism—the celebration of partisan presidential unilateral action—raises the fundamental question of whether the executive of a vast administrative state, even with the tools of instant communication and social media, can truly function as a democratic institution with meaningful links to the public. This question became more than theoretical when the federal courts stepped in to block the president's second, more ambitious immigration order.[97]

Whether the extraordinary partnership between Obama and OFA made an executive-centered democracy possible or if it was an illusion abetted by the White House's mastery of digital politics is a question that will confound scholars long after this historical presidency. Indeed, as Obama's presidency reached its final year, serious discussions were under way to keep OFA intact once he left the White House, a development which would make him "the first former president to do issue advocacy after he leaves office."[98] Moreover, the organization has provided enough value to the administration that we should expect other presidents—Democratic or Republican—will attempt to replicate it. One indication of how lasting an impact Organizing for Action will have on American politics is the degree to which this model is being duplicated by groups across the political spectrum. In the buildup to the 2014 election, much was made of the Republicans' efforts to close the yawning gap between the Democrats' digital infrastructure and their own.[99] But

seventy-five years who came close was Dwight Eisenhower, who witnessed a similar decline for the GOP during his presidency. Juliet Eilperin, "Obama, Who Once Stood As Party Outsider, Now Works to Strengthen Democrats," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-who-once-stood-as-party-outsider-now-works-to-strengthen-democrats/2016/04/25/340b3b0a-0589-11e6-bdcb-0133da18418d_story.html.

94. Ibid.; Nevertheless, although Obama and OFA gradually developed stronger ties with the party organization—indeed, since 2013, the president has devoted considerable time to fundraising for the DNC and both congressional committees—he and his political strategists remained skeptical how fruitful these efforts will be. David Plouffe, the principal architect of Obama for America, admitted, "I think we all agree something has to be done. The question is how. It's not going to be the DNC."

95. Immigrants would be eligible to apply for three years of relief from deportation and for work permits, if they arrived in the United States before 2010 and arrived in the United States under the age of 16; or arrived in the United States before 2010 and have at least one child who is a U.S. citizen or legal resident.

96. El-Amine, a highly respected grassroots organizer, promised to revitalize OFA's volunteer ranks. To strengthen its community advocacy of immigration reform, OFA launched a bilingual fellowship program as part of its summer initiatives to train volunteers for grassroots organization. Sam Stein, "Obama Ally Organizing for Action Has Major Leadership Change," *Huffington Post*, October 28, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/28/organizing-for-action-leadership_n_6061608.html.

97. Adam Litak and Michael D. Shear, "Supreme Court Tie Blocks Obama Immigration Plan, *New York Times*, June 23, 1916, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/us/supreme-court-immigration-obama-dapa.html?_r=0."

98. Interview with OFA official, November 10, 2015. Obama did, in fact, keep OFA intact after he left the presidency. As we were doing the final editing on this article, the Democrats were engaged in a "painful rift" over Obama's political legacy and whether OFA should continue to play a key role in policy advocacy, recruiting candidates, and training activists. Gabriel Debenedetti, "Obama's Party-Building Legacy Splits Democrats," *Politico*, February 9, 2017, http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/obama-democrats-party-building-234820

99. Kimberley A. Strassel, "Leapfrogging the Democrats' Tech Advantage," *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2014; Jon Ward, "The

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given Obama's personal organization's efforts to stand apart from formal Democratic channels, we should not be surprised to learn that conservative insurgents have exceeded Republican Party operatives in their devotion to learn from OFA's snowflake model. Americans for Prosperity, the organization largely funded by the Koch brothers—known more for big ad buys than door-to-door canvassing and for "AstroTurf" political theater than grassroots activism—invested more than half of the $125 million spent ahead of the 2014 elections on expanding its on-the-ground operations. As Americans for Prosperity's president Tim Phillips stated, "We've got to get to the point where we're a deeper part of a community, and the left has done that for a lot longer, with a much bigger footprint."[100] Another spokesman for the group added, "basically, our field directors are community organizers. . . . People used to make fun of President Obama's background, but community organizing works."[101]

It remains to be seen whether a replication of form leads to a replication of result. Future presidents with the benefit of an organization like OFA to support their agenda, but without the benefit of Obama's inspiring charisma to animate it, may discover that this new institutional form is actually of little use. Although the 2016 Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton played the heir to Obama's legacy in the 2016 campaign (Marlon Marshall, a leading architect of the 2012 version of OFA, is the field director of Hillary for America), many of the progressive activists OFA lured into political and policy advocacy were tempted by the insurgent "democratic socialist" campaign of Bernie Sanders. Although Clinton won the popular vote, the president's self-styled heir apparent failed to arouse the enthusiasm of key constituents of Obama's coalition, especially millennials; significantly, the failure of the "Hillary Machine" to ignite volunteerism at the grassroots level might have made the difference in the Democratic candidate's loss of the Electoral College and her shocking defeat to the iconoclastic businessman, Donald Trump.[102] As Shakespeare's Hotspur notes, anyone can call spirits from the vasty deep, but will they come when you do call for them? Indeed, the Republican nominee, Trump, summoned his supporters not by grassroots organizing, but rather by "populist" appeals through cable television, mass rallies, and social media.[103]

It is hard to disentangle, therefore, what of Obama's success (and of his failures) came from his own qualities and what came from his new institutional capacities. Suffice it to say for now that political actors often operate under the same data limitations as political scientists do. President Obama, Jon Carson, and the Koch brothers may not be able to say with any more certainty than we can that OFA's efforts have affected the dialogue surrounding issues like immigration or tangibly improved the implementation of Obamacare. Clearly, however, the perception is that the OFA model is successful, and it is this *perception* among political elites, rather than rigorous empirical verification of success by academics, that will determine whether OFA—marking a new and provocative application of executive-centered partisanship—will prove to be the durable institutional innovation that we argue it is poised to become.

Behind the Scenes Story of the RNC's Quest for Data Supremacy," *Huffington Post*, April 18, 2014.

100. Matea Gold, "Americans for Prosperity Plows Millions into Building Conservative Ground Force," *Washington Post*, October 6, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/americans-for-prosperity-plows-millions-into-building-conservative-ground-force/2014/10/06/692469b6-4b35-11e4-b72e-d60a9229cc10_story.html?utm_term=.80480ac9476a.

101. Ibid.

102. Nick Fouriezos, "On the Trail: How Deep Does Hillary's Support Go," *Ozy*, October 13, 2016, http://www.ozy.com/2016/on-the-trail-how-deep-does-hillarys-support-go/72244.

103. Although Trump did not form a multilevel grassroots organization like OFA during the campaign, and his objectives were entirely antithetical to Obama's, like his predecessor, he kept his distance from the regular party organization and viewed himself and his followers as a movement. More to the point, during the early days of his presidency, the Trump administration formed a 501(c)(4) presidential advocacy group, dubbed the Great America Alliance, co-chaired by two of the new president's most important supporters: Rudy Giuliani and Newt Gingrich. At this writing, it remains to be seen if the Great America Alliance will build support at the community level—but the very fact that Trump and his allies created such an organization testifies to the important role that OFA played in the Obama administration. "Newt Gingrich Joins Great America Alliance as Co-Chair to Advance President Trump's National Agenda," *PR Newswire*, January 30, 2017, http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/newt-gingrich-joins-great-america-alliance-as-co-chair-to-advance-president-trumps-national-agenda-300399062.html.

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