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ALTERNATIVES IN AMERICAN POLITICS:
A STUDY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS FOR REFORM NOW

A Dissertation Presented

By

DANIEL RUSSELL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 1986

Political Science

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Daniel Russell

1986

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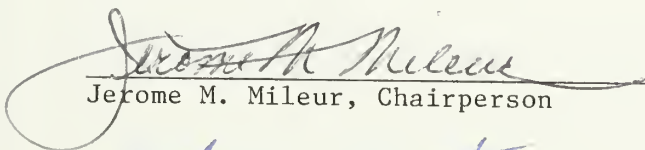
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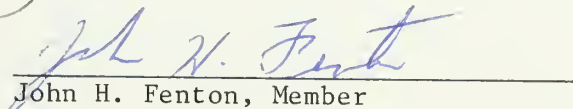
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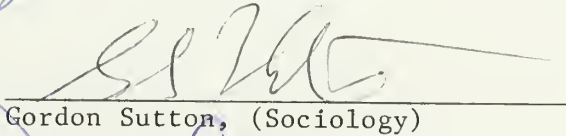
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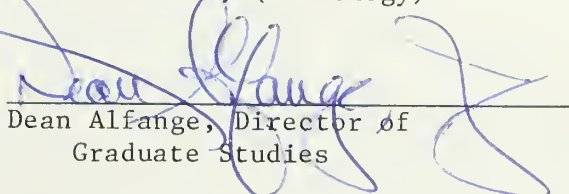
DANIEL RUSSELL

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DEDICATION

To Beth with love.

PREFACE

This study began with a desire to combine political science research with a contribution to social justice. My initial involvement in political organizing in 1976 was a bicentennial gift to American politics--a low- and moderate-income community organization. That experience made a lasting impression on me both for its sense of having accomplished something significant and for its whetting of my curiosity about low- and moderate-income political organizing. Ten years later, both of these feelings are still strong and have contributed to the writing of this study.

There are numerous individuals who have aided in the successful completion of this effort. The success of my work in 1976 is largely due to the help and cooperation of Wade Rathke, Alice Baudy, and Zach Pollett. They are three remarkable individuals who were extremely helpful in that effort. Since that time, my continued involvement in ACORN has borne fruit only because of the acceptance and warmth of the members and organizers I encountered in my activities with ACORN and in informal settings.

This study of Boston ACORN was aided on two ends, in Boston and in Amherst. In Boston, I had the privilege to work with Barbra Gross and her staff and the members of Boston ACORN. They were not only informative and insightful but a pleasure to know. The time I spent in the research in Boston was dear to me as a result. In

Amherst, on the academic end of the project, particular thanks are due Jerome Mileur whose careful and patient guidance throughout was essential to the entire project. Debra Gross provided essential substantive input complemented by Glen Gordon's profound sense of good scholarship. I also wish to thank the members of my committee, Gordon Sutton, whose insight has been invaluable and John Fenton, whose participation is highly regarded and appreciated. Also essential to the success of this study was Brian Anastasi, whose careful work and extra effort to meet schedule eased the entire process tremendously.

I also wish to express my appreciation to my parents, who so often provided the wherewithal, materially and supportively, to complete this work. Finally, I owe my wife, Beth, a tremendous debt and wish to thank her for her support throughout--when things were going smoothly and when they were not.

ABSTRACT

Alternatives in American Politics:

A Study of the Association of

Community Organizations for Reform Now

(September 1986)

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The study of political organizations has been an important topic in American political science from early in its development. This is due to the importance of political organizations in the shaping of public policy, influencing other institutions in the political system, and shaping the political behavior of individuals. This research is a case study of those who are participating in the Boston chapter of a specific organization of low- and moderate-income people, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

This study researches questions that have been basic to political science studies of political organizations by using information obtained by the researcher's participant-observation in ACORN over a period of ten years and responses to interviews with twenty-four members and organizers of Boston ACORN.

The first chapter discusses the development of the political science literature on political organizations, emphasizing those concepts that are important to low- and moderate-income organizing and developing the concept of an "organizing strategy." The second chapter discusses theories of low-income organizing. The third chapter examines the organizing strategy that ACORN uses in its organizing.

The second part of the research discusses the responses of the organizers and members to the interviews. It identifies the issues that they consider important and compares responses of the organizers and members regarding their involvement in ACORN. Chapter four discusses the organizers' responses, chapter five, the members'. Chapter six ties together the literature and the interview responses, raising issues about the problems of understanding the complex behavior of individuals in such an organization.

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INTRODUCTION

Enough is enough. We will wait no longer for the crumbs at America's door. We will not be meek, but mighty. We will not starve on past promises, but feast on future dreams.

--ACORN People's Platform¹

The assertion of dissenting political views in American politics is protected by Constitutional guarantees; there are no guarantees that efforts to promote those views will succeed. The authors of the statement above, members of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), have chosen a goal that is particularly difficult to attain: empowerment of low- and moderate-income Americans through a national organization of community organizations. To the degree that it has been successful, it is due to a well-considered plan executed by dedicated and talented professionals and volunteers. The researcher has been privileged to have the opportunity to join in ACORN political activities on a number of occasions. He became involved in ACORN out of political conviction, but quickly discovered that there was much to be learned about the American political system from this group of people and their organizational efforts.

The researcher's association with ACORN over the last ten years has convinced him that they are a remarkable group of people. His conversations with them and his observations of their activities

have provided him with numerous insights into politics, communities, and organizations. It is for that reason that he has chosen ACORN as a subject for study and chosen to use the perceptions of ACORN participants as a primary source of data.

The method used is a case study based on structured interviews with a non-scientific sample of the people involved in the Boston chapter of ACORN. The most recent studies of voluntary political organizations, Terry Moe,² and David Knoke and James R. Wood,³ use surveys and statistical analysis of survey responses. Norman I. Fainstein and Susan S. Fainstein⁴ use interviews and historical data. As yet, there are no major studies of low-income organizations that have used participant-observation.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Surveys give the researcher a large body of respondents that assure a valid sample. Moreover, they provide data that can be statistically manipulated to determine relationships among variables. They do not allow the researcher to probe the respondents' responses to assure a common understanding of terms or to allow respondents to offer their own ideas of what is important. Finally, as Sidney Verba and Norman Nie's attempts to determine the causal relationship between variables related to organizational membership illustrates, establishing causality is also problematical.⁵

Interviews give the researcher opportunities to delve into the respondents' minds and explore their ideas. Open-ended questions allow respondents to contribute their own insights and to clarify

points that the researcher may not appreciate at the beginning of the study. The number of interviewees must remain small, however, raising the possibility of an unrepresentative sampling of the population being studied. The data derived from interviews is also vulnerable to potential bias in the interviewing process. The participant-observation process also places the trained social scientist in a situation to report experiences and perceptions. This process contains the potential for bias that interviewing does, perhaps in even greater degree as the participant comes to share values and orientations of the group. Thus, each technique offers opportunities and contains pitfalls for the researcher.

Interviews for this study were designed to ascertain how Boston ACORN has succeeded (as have ACORN chapters in other places since 1970) in attracting and maintaining members since 1980. The method of data collection is open-ended interviews with volunteer activists, leaders, and organizers of Boston ACORN.

The interviews probed the following kinds of questions:*

- 1) What incentives does the organization use to attract members and keep them active?
- 2) To what extent do members get involved in the activities of the organization?
- 3) What do the members perceive as the goals of the organization?
- 4) How much consensus is there on important political issues among members and between members and organizers?

* See Appendix I for the interview questionnaire.

- 5) How are important decisions made in ACORN?
- 6) What are the members' perceptions of the means by which ACORN pursues political goals?
- 7) What are the members' feelings of efficacy and perceptions of politicians?

Responses to these questions yield a picture of the means by which ACORN, a voluntary organization, is able to get its constituents to join and contribute their time, energy, and other resources to the organization on a sustained basis. In addition, it provides insights into the internal politics of the organization and the self-perceived impact of membership on the constituents.

The Interviews

The researcher drew volunteers for interviews by asking the Head Organizer of Boston ACORN to provide him with a list of willing interviewees. The Head Organizer asked the organizers in the office for possibilities and these names were given to the researcher to contact and schedule. There is no sense, therefore, in which the interviews constitute a random sample of ACORN members. Several of the interviewees signed up at a board meeting of the organization; others were contacted by phone by the organizers. The data shows that the sample is biased in favor of older members and leaders, but includes some who are less active and newer. (The researcher interviewed all of the professional organizers who were assigned to that office at the time.) The interviews were scheduled on enough weekends to enable working members to be included as well

as retired members or those on welfare.

The questionnaire is designed to satisfy three criteria: 1) it addresses the basic questions raised in the literature; 2) it is sufficiently open-ended to stimulate independent responses from the interviewees; and 3) it addresses experiences that might result from ACORN activities, e.g., confrontational tactics, neighborhood organizing, and participatory membership. The interview was administered in a conversational format and, at the end of the interview, respondents were asked if there were any topics they felt were not covered adequately by the questionnaire. Several added comments about their experiences. Finally, interviewees were asked to complete a second questionnaire, the text of which is also in Appendix I, to determine pertinent demographic information.

All interviewees agreed to have the interview taped to insure accuracy. The researcher advised the interviewees that no part of the interview would be attributed to them without their explicit permission in order to preserve confidentiality. All interviews with members took place in private homes with the exception of one that was held in the ACORN office in a private room. The interviews with organizers were conducted in private at the ACORN office or in a deli across the street.

The interviewees were quite generous with their time and ideas. The data from the interviews, most of which is included in this study, provide many insights into the experiences and perceptions of the dynamic and interesting group of people engaging in

an unusual pursuit and belonging to an unusual organization.
Their comments provide a useful contribution to the understanding
of voluntary political organizations.

Notes to Introduction

¹ACORN People's Platform in Program to ACORN 1980 Convention (mimeographed, n.d.).

²Terry M. Moe, The Organization of Interests (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).

³David Knoke and James R. Wood, Organized for Action (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1981).

⁴Norman I. Fainstein and Susan S. Fainstein, Urban Political Movements (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974).

⁵Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, Participation in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 200.

C H A P T E R I
THEORIES OF POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

On July 12, 1980, thirteen delegates to the Republican National Convention that chose Ronald Reagan as its presidential standard bearer accepted an invitation to tour the poorer neighborhoods of Detroit. It came from a leftist organization that represents low- and moderate-income people called the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). The organization was trying to point out the contradiction between tremendous development in Detroit's Renaissance Center and neighborhoods outside of the commercial district that had not benefitted from federal development grants. The ACORN members rode with the delegates on a church bus and offered their solutions to the problems of urban decay in a document they called "ACORN's People's Platform." Their suggestions included federal public housing, low- and moderate-income representation on corporate boards, and bank financing for rehabilitation of low-income housing.¹ According to the New York Times reporter, Iver Peterson, one delegate, a Ms. Joanne Mueller, of Hibbing, Minnesota, made an interesting comment: "I tried to tell them if they had a concern they should get involved in politics, that's what I did."²

Despite her willingness to participate in ACORN's tour of

Detroit and her concern that social problems be addressed through political action and membership in political organizations, Ms. Mueller failed to recognize political activity when it confronted her. Moreover, she failed to recognize a relatively sophisticated form of political activity, undertaken by people from the lower end of the income scale who are generally noteworthy for their lack of participation in American politics. Indeed, what is perhaps most striking about the event is that low- and moderate-income people participated at all in an organization that staged a media event to demonstrate a contradiction within federal urban policy by interacting with the more conservative of the two major parties at the time it was nominating its most conservative candidate in almost twenty years.

Political scientists have not taken such activities for granted or failed to recognize how unusual they are among low-income Americans. Rather, they have attempted to develop theories to explain when and how such activities are likely to occur. While the most rigorous of these arguments apply to middle- and upper-income Americans, the long commitment of the left in American politics to organizing and mobilizing lower income people has shed some light on that phenomenon as well. This study attempts to clarify certain issues in the general literature on political organizing by applying them in a case study of ACORN. Organizational theories will be tested against ACORN's efforts to organize low- and moderate-income people for sustained political action. The discussion begins with

a review of the basic concepts in the literature on political organizations.

Theories of Political Organization

It is precisely the kind of activity in which ACORN engages--overt attempts to influence public policy--that provides the impetus for the study of political organizations in American political science. Arthur F. Bentley, writing in 1908, attempted to develop a systematic understanding of political behavior divorced from rhetoric and constitutions.³ He emphasized the role of groups and group interests in American politics, arguing that neither Fourth of July speeches about freedom nor constitutional language on the powers of the president is the engine that drives the American political system. It is, instead, the interaction of political interests expressed by groups in the political system. Bentley's goal was to "fashion a tool" for this analysis.⁴ His work prompted subsequent studies by Pendleton Herring, E. E. Schattschneider,⁵ and others that eschewed the traditional study of political ideas and government institutions. From that time onward, a major theme of political science would be the activities of groups and organizations.

The post-war study of political organizations in political science dates from David B. Truman's seminal work, The Governmental Process, published in 1951. It prompted renewed attention to interest groups and other forms of non-electoral political

organization.⁶ Truman developed a theory of American politics that explains political outcomes as a meshing of interests expressed by the various groups in society. He directed attention to both organized and unorganized groups, which could be identified by their shared interests. Truman's influential work provoked an outpouring of studies of interest groups--how they interact, express preferences, and form organized groups as institutionalized expressions of their interests.

Two of Truman's arguments have a special relevance for this work. First, he says that organized groups form during periods of stress or rapid changes when people with shared interests interact more frequently. Second, he contends that behavioral and internal dynamics of political groups are "shared in their essential features, with non-political patterns of social interaction."⁷ The first of these claims has become a pivotal point in the study of the formation of political organizations, while the second has become a precedent for studying the behavior of political organizations.

Truman's first point suggests a sociological model of group formation that sees political organizations as emerging from "a disturbance in an institutional pattern...or frustration in varying degrees of the habits of the participants, a circumstance that is always unpleasant and may be extremely painful."⁸ Truman's claim is rooted in apparently rational patterns of behavior--people responding to stress by seeking others with whom they can alleviate that stress. Truman's assertion which views political organizations

as operating on essentially the same principles as non-political organizations leads him to borrow theoretically from anthropology, sociology, and organization theory⁹ and to use concepts developed in research on work organizations and bureaucracies to develop insights into political organizations. Many subsequent studies follow Truman's lead in this respect. Other studies, however, challenge this understanding of political organizations, claiming instead that political organizations are unique and operate on their own principles.

James Q. Wilson and Peter Clark, for example, apply general principles of organization to the study of political organizations.¹⁰ They argue that all organizations "provide tangible or intangible incentives to individuals in exchange for contributions of individual activity to the organizations."¹¹ Their analysis borrows an incentive classification from Chester Barnard and claims that "much of the internal and external activity may be explained by understanding their incentive systems."¹² Barnard, in his analysis of bureaucratic organizations,¹³ identifies three basic types of incentives: material, solidary, and purposive. Material incentives are exchangeable, referring to tangible rewards such as salary, tax benefits and the like. Solidary benefits are intangible socially-derived rewards, such as status, social interaction, and conviviality. Purposive incentives are motivations deriving from a desire to achieve a worthwhile goal. Clark and Wilson argue that this "incentive system may be regarded as the principle variable affecting organizational

behavior."¹⁴

Other studies of political organization have challenged this approach, arguing instead that political organizations are unique and operate on their own principles. Mancus Olson, Jr., an economist, applied economic and marketing theory to the question raised by Truman's analysis of the formation of political groups. His analysis, though strictly limited to economic interest groups and argued within an economic rational choice model, raises serious questions about Truman's sociological model of group formation.¹⁵ Olson shows that one cannot take for granted that it is logical for people to respond to threats to their interests by contributing resources to an organization. His application of economic statistical analysis, using rational economic models, casts new light on the organization of interests and suggests that it is not reasonable to assume that organizations will form in the political system except under specific sets of circumstances.

Olson's argument rests on the distinction between collective and selective benefits. Collective benefits are those that affect everyone equally. Selective benefits can be divided only among those who have contributed to their creation. Olson contends that it is unreasonable to expect an individual to expend resources toward collective economic benefits expecting to "return a profit." The only circumstances under which it is reasonable to expect people to join and contribute to an organization are those in which there is a positive balance of costs and benefits. Olson claims that the

only way to create such a balance is to (1) offer unrelated selective benefits to contributors, like group insurance, (2) apply legal coercion, such as union shops and medical associations do, or (3) only organize small groups that are able to profit by their efforts.¹⁶ Olson's analysis is of particular importance to low-income organizing since success requires recruitment of relatively large numbers. Numerically, the most successful attempt to organize low-income Americans, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, did not really grow steadily until legal coercion was implemented in the form of the union shop. Even then, however, unions continued to provide selective benefits such as job-training, conviviality and newsletters.

Robert H. Salisbury's research on political organizations once again borrows from another discipline, operating from Truman's premise regarding the universality of organizational dynamics.¹⁷ He applies exchange theory from sociology to devise a theoretical approach to the formation and maintenance of political groups. He claims that a political organization is an exchange system in which an entrepreneur/organizer offers inducements to consumer/members to join, participate, and pay dues. The model he proposes is similar to Olson's marketing concept but personalizes it in the form of the entrepreneur. His approach is "neither true nor false but to be tested by its intellectual utility."¹⁸ Its importance stems from the historical insights it provides by focusing on "origins and originators"¹⁹ of organizations as calculated acts and rational actors.

The above studies have laid the groundwork of basic concepts

and approaches to political organizations, borrowing from social psychology, anthropology, organization theory, economics, and marketing theory. Recently, several social scientists have tested and evaluated these theories using behavioral social science approaches. Two studies in particular, Terry Moe's The Organization of Interests²⁰ and David Knoke and James R. Wood's Organized for Action,²¹ have taken this approach and develop syntheses of the above theories backed by empirical social science arguments.

Moe's research focuses specifically on economic organizations in an effort to test the model he develops based on Olson's analysis. He includes the Minnesota Farm Bureau Association, the Minnesota Farmers Union, the Minnesota Retail Association, the Minnesota-Dakotas Hardware Association and the Printing Industries of the Twin Cities, all economically oriented organizations that pursue their goals by political means, principally lobbying. From his study, Moe offers revisions in Olson's theory of interest group formation that expand the scope of Olson's analysis to make the explanatory model "simple enough to clarify the nature of individual and organizational behavior, yet elaborate enough to address questions that are obviously important to a more comprehensive understanding."²²

Moe's analysis addresses three areas pertinent to an understanding of political organizations: the decision individuals make to join, the organizational framework, and the internal politics of political organizations. The membership decision

involves the prospective member's rationale for joining an organization. Moe argues that, in Olson's economic rationality model, the assumption of perfect knowledge of costs and benefits restricts unduly the applicability of his theory. In Moe's model, actors possess "bounded rationality," and "imperfect perception of the objective situation...."²³ Moe retains the collective/selective distinction but expands the concept of benefits to include the typology Clark and Wilson offer--material, solidary, and purposive--rather than strictly economic benefits. By increasing the complexity of individual motivation, Moe injects a clearly political dimension into the analysis that Olson fails to do.

The organizational side of Moe's analysis includes an entrepreneur/leadership concept as devised by Salisbury, accompanied by staff and other paid personnel such as lobbyists and researchers. The entrepreneur serves as a focus of attention to examine "entrepreneurial options under varying conditions...." and their effects on the organization.²⁴ He includes the internal politics of organizations to add depth to the model and the degree to which the decision making process includes members, leaders and groups within the organizations.

Moe is eclectic in his choice of concepts and analytical techniques. He relies heavily on variations in Olson's analysis, yet expands it to make it more inclusive, to inject more of a political dimension, and to reflect as much as possible the kinds

of organizations and phenomena one is likely to find in the political system.

[O]nce we move beyond the idealized world of perfect information and economic self-interest, we are no longer led to Olson's non-political perspective. We are led, rather, to a broader view that leaves a good deal of room for political action and that outlines the theoretical roles of perceptions and values in explaining why political action occurs.²⁵

Moe's model, for example, includes the possibility of an entrepreneur manipulating information critical to the decision to join. It is both possible and likely that entrepreneurs will exaggerate members' efficacy and the value of benefits, and also minimize the costs of joining and participating in order to persuade people to come into an organization. In this way, Moe seeks a median point in his analysis between the simple and theoretical, the complex and real.

Knoke and Wood emphasize the role of internal controls as a determinant of organizational success:

The internal social control system plays an essential role in an organization's ability to acquire resources necessary to sustain collective life. Resources available to the organization, in turn, are crucial for the attainment of the group's external goals.²⁶

Their organizational model highlights what they consider the three most important determinants for success: purposive incentives, opportunities to participate, and the legitimacy of leadership. They reason that an organization must mobilize its resources in

order to achieve its goals. Mobilization occurs when the organizational control system can elicit commitment from membership and apply resources toward organizational goals. Their findings indicate that

Associations trying to develop high levels of membership enthusiasm should try to foster all three conditions conducive to more effective organizational self-regulation: an emphasis on the purposive benefits from affiliation, widespread opportunities for membership participation in making important decisions, and ties to supralocal units that exercise formally legitimate restraints on local policy.²⁷

By arguing for the importance of purposive incentives, Knoke and Wood favor the Truman approach to group organization. Their arguments for the importance of participation and legitimacy diverge from Olson's analysis of benefit distribution problems. Their findings, however, should not be seen as a refutation of Olson's claims, especially in light of what Moe argues: Olson's view is limited to a specific type of organization, and the applicability of his analysis to that organizational type is further limited by his ideal type economic model.

This discussion of political entrepreneurship and incentive theories of political organizations strongly suggests parallels between political organizing and product marketing. Olson's writing, in particular, develops analogies between these activities. It is useful, therefore, in both an analytical and practical sense, to think of political organizations as products to be marketed. In

this case study of ACORN, the market is low- and moderate-income citizens and the product is membership and participation in a political organization. Owing in part to the peculiar nature of this market and product, this analysis focuses on a somewhat different notion: the idea of an "organizing strategy." It is a concept familiar to community organizing professionals and a term that Moe uses at least once.²⁸

An organizing strategy is a long-range plan for creating and maintaining a political organization. The components of an organizing strategy are (1) the targeted constituency, (2) the terms of the exchange relationship, and (3) the organizational structure. Each component is dependent upon the others and plays a crucial role in the life of the organization. While the relationship between these organizational features obtain in any kind of political organizing, no matter the constituency or goals of the organizer/entrepreneur, the concept of organizing strategy has not been fully articulated in the political science literature. It is so basic to so much of politics, however, that analysts have discussed parts of the concept, either directly or indirectly, and occasionally used the Salisbury thesis in this way.²⁹ But the notion has not been applied as explicitly as its centrality to political action demands.

The targeted constituency is the segment of the entire population from which a political organizer attempts to draw members. Many criteria are possible: sex, income, race, age, occupation,

ideology, and so on. The choice of criteria shapes every other decision the entrepreneur makes, including the incentives to offer, resources to seek from members, organizational structure, and issue agenda.

Like the market in the economy, the constituency one chooses to attract determines the terms of exchange. The question must be asked: What can I offer, and what can they give? The incentives the organizer offers must be suited to the tastes of the constituency to motivate prospective members to join, be active, and contribute resources. The constituents' status in society--the role they play in the social, economic, and political spheres--determines the resources they can most easily and effectively supply to the organization. Harry Spence, for example, notes that "The exercise of economic power by the poor to relieve their condition is foreclosed to them by definition. They have only the choice of political power or violence...."³⁰ Thus, the organizer/entrepreneur must offer the targeted constituents something they need in return for something they have and can afford to expend.

Organizational form is the physical shape of the organization. It includes factors such as the size of constituent groups, the presence or absence of meetings, dues, the physical location of organizational headquarters, and so on. One need only consider the differences between community and workplace organizing or mailing list and grassroots organizing to appreciate the importance of this factor in an organizing strategy. While this concept is not

entirely distinct from the exchange relationship--the higher the dues, for example, the greater the demand made on the constituents--it is useful to account for the differences that unit size makes to the operation of an organization and its ability to attract and sustain members, for example.

Thus, it is possible to distill the concept of "organizing strategy" from the literature on political organizations. The concepts of incentives, entrepreneurs, rational choice, and marketing strategy all suggest such an approach. Like a marketing strategy, however, an organizing strategy must suit its constituents, and some approaches are more fruitful than others. The next chapter will discuss the kinds of organizing strategies that have been tried with low-income organizing and attempt to formulate some research questions that might yield a better understanding of political organizing. Some of the questions to be addressed are:

- 1) Under what circumstances will targeted constituents decide that it is in their interests to join a political organization?
- 2) What kinds of incentives are used in the circumstances found in this specific case and why?
- 3) Are those the same incentives that keep members active?
- 4) How do members perceive the purposive incentives the organization offers?
- 5) Are purposive incentives shared by members and organizers?
- 6) How important is participation in the decisionmaking process as perceived by the members?
- 7) What role does the organizational structure play in the success or failure of the organization?

This study concentrates on the activities and perceptions of members and organizers of one low-income group--ACORN--with the goal of shedding new or additional light on the questions pertaining to political organizations.

Notes to Chapter I

¹The People Decide, Program of the ACORN National Platform Conference, St. Louis, June 30-July 1, 1979, pp. 10-16.

²Iver Peterson, "Glimpse of 'Real Detroit' Given to 13 Republicans," New York Times, 13 July, 1980, p. 12.

³Arthur F. Bentley, The Process of Government (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1967).

⁴Ibid., n.p.

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⁶David B. Truman, The Governmental Process (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

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⁸Ibid., p. 29.

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¹³Chester I. Barnard, The Functions of the Executive (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1938).

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¹⁵Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977).

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- ¹⁷Robert H. Salisbury, "An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups," Midwest Journal of Political Science 13 (Feb., 1969), p. 1.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 31.
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- ²⁰Terry M. Moe, The Organization of Interests (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).
- ²¹David Knoke and James R. Wood, Organized for Action (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1981).
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- ²⁷Ibid., pp. 109-110.
- ²⁸Moe, p. 40.
- ²⁹James Q. Wilson, Political Organizations (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), pp. 30 ff.; Moe, pp. 36 ff.
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C H A P T E R I I
PRINCIPLES OF LOW-INCOME ORGANIZING

Major studies of political participation show a clear, consistent and strong correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and membership in political organizations: higher income and upper status citizens participate more, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than do those at the other end of the income and status continuum.¹ While many studies document the relationship between SES and group membership, Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie explore the implications of that relationship for public policy and power relationships. They find, in cross-national studies, that the correlation between political participation and SES in the U.S. is as high or higher than in any of the other nations studied.² They note, for example, that 57% of the respondents who scored in the highest one-sixth category of participation on their scale were in the upper third of the SES index. Only 14% of them were from the lowest third.³ Hence, the upper SES people who participate at the highest rates numerically outnumber the lower two-thirds SES group. It is not a statistical sleight-of-hand that makes SES and political participation seem so closely connected. As Verba and Nie explain, the "relationship that looks so moderate from some perspectives (the correlation between our SES and participation scales is, after

all, only .37) is in fact a quite striking one from the point of view of what it implies about the composition of a population."⁴

Verba and Nie speculate as to whether group membership is a factor that increases or decreases the impact of SES on political participation. They find that for an individual, group membership increases the amount of participation more for low SES participants than for high SES participants. Given the higher rate of membership among upper SES citizens, the overall effect of group membership in American politics is to "push in the direction of increasing the disparity"⁵ of influence between class.

Table 2-1 illustrates the organizational activity of people in different SES categories:

TABLE 2-1
PROPORTIONS ORGANIZATIONALLY ACTIVE IN LOWER, MIDDLE,
AND UPPER THIRD OF SES (in per cent)⁶

	<u>Lower SES</u>	<u>Middle SES</u>	<u>Upper SES</u>	<u>Total</u>
Nonmember	56	34	20	38
Passive Member	23	22	21	22
Single Active	16	28	24	22
Multiple Active	<u>6</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>19</u>
Total	101	100	100	101

The findings of Verba and Nie strongly suggest that lack of participation in political organizations by lower SES groups reduces their influence on public policies that affect their lives.

Truman's sociological model of group formation is problematic for the study of low-income organizations. He argues that political organizations emerge in times of stress, yet low-income Americans are in a more or less continual state of distress but join organizations in lower numbers than higher income Americans. Truman points out that while low-income people suffer unemployment and other dislocations during economic slumps or adjustment periods, their low rate of political participation means they have no organized channels through which to express grievances. This increases the potential for radical political movements, which have not internalized the prevailing political folkways that encourage stability in the political system. Short of a radical outcome, Truman believes that government will continue to be skewed in favor of upper-income citizens at the expense of lower-income interests.⁷ The lower rate of low-income participation in political organizations thus both renders the political system less stable and denies a major portion of society equal opportunity to express its political interests.

The concern of political analysts for the low rate of participation among low-income Americans spans the political spectrum. The question of how to attract and maintain low-income members is of critical importance to both leftist organizers and conservatives, although for different reasons. It is a widespread belief among

leftists that the way to achieve social justice in American politics is through sustained, organized political power of the lower classes, which has led among other things to their support for the labor movement. Saul Alinsky premised his early organizing and writing on this idea. Conservatives have also considered ways to build organizational ties among low-income Americans as a way to stem anomie and potentially destructive radical mass movements. Among social scientists, however, there is little agreement about the most effective way to organize low-income people. To understand the debate and the possibilities for success in this endeavor, it is first necessary to examine the explanations commonly given for the difficulties encountered in organizing low-income people.

Organizational Problems in Low-Income Organizing

Almond and Verba, as well as Verba and Nie, suggest hypotheses to explain the lower rate of organizational membership among lower-income respondents. They suggest that factors contributing to upper SES activism might include higher levels of social and organizational skills, socialization processes that encourage group activity, greater resources like time and money, stimulation by their active SES cohorts, and a higher sense of efficacy with respect to political activism. At this point, however, it becomes difficult to determine the flow of relationships. For example, which of the following most accurately depicts reality?

those that deal with community problems and political issues. To do so requires an understanding of the problems encountered in low-income organizing, and the political organization literature provides limited guidance in this area.

Wilson's Political Organizations¹⁰ argues that low-income citizens are best organized around material incentives, solidary incentives that provide "opportunities for vivid and uninhibited expansion of core lifestyles," and purposive incentives that "involve personal and intense, not anonymous or vicarious experience."¹¹ He claims too that low-income activists operate in a relatively shorter time frame than do upper-income activists.¹² That claim is echoed by Saul Alinsky and others who have studied the organizational politics of low-income citizens.¹³ As a result of this shorter time frame, low-income activists need to be constantly working on issues or member activism diminishes. Thus, the combination of incentive types and shorter time frame requires political organizations of low-income citizens to produce a stable supply of what Sherry Arnstein terms "deliverables,"¹⁴ i.e., outcomes of political demands expressed by the organization and conceded by government or other opponents in the political system. Arnstein's analysis closely parallels Alinsky's contention that low-income organizing requires the delivery of "wins," that are quickly achieved and yield visible benefits wrested from political and economic institutions.¹⁵ Without a steady supply of "deliverables," building a political organization of low-income

citizens is thought virtually impossible by Arnstein and Alinsky. Hence, it is necessary for an organizer of low-income people to include ways and means of procuring such benefits on a regular basis. This leads Alinsky to enunciate three basic tenets of community organizing: 1) issues must be winnable; 2) tactics must entail confrontation; and 3) the organizing process must provide opportunities to express anger and overcome fear.

These analyses yield useful insights into participation of low SES individuals. None of them, however, adequately explores the perspectives of the groups least likely to participate in political decisionmaking: racial minorities and low-income people. A full study of why certain groups in the system are participating far less regularly and effectively should examine the experiences and perceptions of those groups more carefully. It should also examine the integral relationship between power and participation. A recent study of politics and power in Appalachia by John Gaventa takes this approach.¹⁶

Gaventa's analysis is a study of power. He argues that neither the pluralists nor their critics explain enough about the relations between the powerful and the powerless, nor does either adequately identify the causes of class differences in participation rates. He claims that there are three dimensions of power in American politics, the first treated by the pluralists, the second by the critics of pluralism, and the third primarily by sociologists like C. Wright Mills and Steven Lukes.¹⁷

The pluralists, Gaventa argues, accurately depict power struggles in American politics, but only those that pit reasonably evenly matched opponents within decisionmaking institutions. These struggles are based on democratic principles of conflict and involve opposing arrays of strategies and resources applied in public policy settings. When an issue arises between less evenly matched opponents, however, the stronger side is able to apply resources to deny the other side access to decisionmaking institutions and can thereby prevent an issue from being placed on the political agenda. Schattschneider describes this as the "mobilization of bias," and it is the second level of power analysis. Gaventa, however, sees a "third face of power."

This third dimension of power exists when power resources are so highly skewed in favor of one group that they are able to go beyond "bias." This third face of power is more extreme. It "influences, shapes, or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict."¹⁸ Hence, powerless people do not challenge the status quo; they accept it as legitimate and inevitable. Gaventa suggests a number of processes by which powerholders maintain consensus through apathy and quiescence of the powerless despite clear conflicts of interest: 1) controlling information and manipulating symbols; 2) instilling fatalism by consistently denying opposing claims; 3) denying the benefits of participation, including political education; and 4) manipulating emerging attempts to challenge the

status quo.¹⁹

In the case of low-income citizens who attempt to become politically active by promoting economic issues that will redistribute wealth, the third dimension of power works in the following manner: 1) public and private institutions withhold as much information as possible and couch their arguments as defending free enterprise against "creeping socialism"; 2) the low-income activists are easily intimidated as they have no experience or tradition of political victory to bolster them; 3) the activists are also somewhat weak in their convictions since they do not have a background of political activism to educate them "in the broadest sense"²⁰ about their rights in a democratic society; and 4) for the above reasons, the activists are easily intimidated and misled by the arguments and strategies of their opponents. Thus, where the pluralist political system is populated primarily by upper-income, better educated people, and Schattschneider's analysis adds only one dimension to the process by which large portions of the citizenry are excluded from the political process, Gaventa explains much more and in terms that are testable and therefore suited to the tools of political science.

Gaventa applies his theory of power relations to an explanation of apathy and quiescence among people in Appalachia who are clearly receiving a disproportionately low level of benefits from society. In his view, it is not a matter of cultural values, consensus, or a lack of resources as pluralists claim,²¹ nor is it

merely a matter of the mobilization of bias successfully excluding them. It is, rather, a situation in which "power serves to maintain [the] prevailing order of inequality...through the shaping of beliefs about the order's legitimacy or immutability"²² that makes it difficult to organize low-income citizens into unions, welfare rights organizations, or groups like ACORN. Robert Botsch, for example, interviewed North Carolina furniture workers who objected to union organizing despite the clear benefits of increased wages, safer working conditions, and the fairer work practices they agreed unions provide, and concluded that people who have been dominated tend to lose sight of the possibility for change.²³

In his analysis of power, Gaventa offers a process by which he claims powerless groups can build power that will enable them to bargain and compete successfully in a genuinely pluralist fashion. His theory is essentially a reversal of the three dimensions of power by developing a "consciousness of the needs, possibilities, and strategies of change";²⁴ then, they must "overcome the mobilization of bias";²⁵ and finally, they must develop resources with which to conduct political action in decisionmaking areas of the first dimension of power. It is, in fact, only in the first dimension of power, Gaventa claims, that "genuine participation" takes place: "self-determined action with others similarly affected upon clearly conceived and articulated grievances."²⁶

Gaventa's prescription for arriving at that point and his

analysis of the dimensions of power suggest the basic tenets of community organizing. First, winnability is crucial, because a "single victory helps to alter inaction owing to the anticipation of defeat, leading to more action, and so on. Once patterns of quiescence are broken upon one set of grievances, the accumulating resources of challenge--e.g., organization, momentum, consciousness--may become transferable to other issues and other targets."²⁷

Second, confrontational tactics--"to err on the side of too much action"--help to overcome institutional barriers against low-income activism. Confrontation gives institutional leaders reason to want to include the activists without having to be subjected to confrontational politics. Clearly, if an organization of low-income activists has what it considers effective access to an institution's decisionmaking process, it will not take the trouble to fill meeting rooms with raucous, shouting protestors. If they must, however, the resistance that they experience demonstrates for the politically uninitiated the nature of institutional barriers and their effectiveness in preventing grievances from being aired in the institutional agenda. The members who learn this lesson are then better able to begin working on bringing down those barriers and perceive others more readily.

Finally, when low-income activists have dealt effectively with their anger and fear, other things being equal, they are prepared to use their available resources more effectively in power struggles with government and corporate leaders. It is at that

point that Dahl's advice in After the Revolution? is appropriate:

In order for those who are politically weak to push through a crucial if still incompleated process of democratization, they have to learn how to pyramid their political resources very much in the way that, in the economic realm, an aggressive young man-on-the-make sometimes arranges to transform his personal situation from poverty to riches.²⁸

Prior to that, however, resources, energy, strategy and organization must all be focused on the highly unequal struggle to achieve some degree of political parity on the road from quiescence to meaningful activism. Gaventa argues that, in addition to the special problems that Wilson and others cite in organizing low-income people, the power relations that exist prior to any organizing attempt are a critical factor in the means by which the organizing must be conducted. According to Gaventa, the three dimensions of power determine the course of any organizing projects by requiring the three techniques mentioned above. Clearly, they are mainstays of low-income organizing. There are, moreover, other considerations that play roles in determining the most desirable organizing strategies to use in low-income organizing.

Constraints and Available Choices

There are constraints on the organizing strategy that an organizer must accept. Constituents cannot give what they do not have, will only respond to meaningful incentives, and require a profitable exchange before they will join and maintain an organiza-

tion. The resources the organizer wishes to offer must be available in some form at a price that "customers" are willing to pay. In addition, the organizational form the organizer adopts must suit both the constituents and the resources the organization seeks to offer. Richard Rich describes a "political economy" of community organizations that delineates many of the constraints that community organizations face.²⁹ He argues that the two major costs are decisionmaking costs and deprivation costs.³⁰ Decisionmaking costs are the resources expended in collective decisionmaking, while deprivation costs are the price of "being bound by group decisions that run counter to their [individual] preferences."³¹ The decisionmaking process with the highest cost is the unanimity rule, i.e., it requires much more effort to achieve unanimous agreement than majority agreement to binding decisions. The highest deprivation costs are experienced in oligarchical groups in which a small leadership cadre makes and enforces binding decisions on the membership as work organizations do. The interplay of these factors means that the rational choice for communities with few resources and high demands is to remain unorganized and risk nothing or to adopt an "exit choice," i.e., allow for an option to quit, both of which would minimize both types of costs.³² "From the individual's short-term perspective," Rich argues, "voluntarism may be a highly rational response to the resource situation of poor citizens, even though it may handicap the community in the long run."³³ Thus, minimizing risk-taking

for individuals and making the decision to join more attractive weakens the organization that may subsequently be created.

The need to form voluntary organizations with exit choices in low-income neighborhoods leads to an increase in the costs of organizational maintenance and the reliance on selective and purposive incentives as substitutes for coercion.³⁴ Rich compares neighborhood groups from communities of varying SES and finds that the higher the SES, the greater the likelihood that coercive organizations--property owner groups and community development organizations--will exist. The greatest concentration of neighborhood organizations of any kind was in middle-income neighborhoods, since low-income neighborhoods are handicapped by the dynamics described above and upper-income neighborhoods reflect individualist strategies to meet residential needs. In addition to the higher maintenance costs of the voluntary organizations, Rich found that coercive organizations were more effective in obtaining collective material goods for their neighborhoods.³⁵ Hence, Rich argues that the choices available to low-income neighborhoods are limited and not very attractive. Moreover, they impose additional constraints on the organizer as well.

It is generally agreed among those studying voluntary organizations that the problems posed by Olson regarding rational choices in pursuit of collective action demand that organizers adopt two somewhat contradictory strategies: reliance on purposive incentives and stimulation of maximum constituent participation.³⁶

This dynamic is exaggerated among low-income constituents where 1) purposive incentives are easily obtainable, while material goods are not, and 2) the lack of material resources requires that low-income constituents contribute their labor to the organization. Moe argues that these dynamics conflict, since purposive incentives or ideology increase the power of professional staff and frequently displace the goal of organization-building.³⁷ He argues that the staff "who control political information and expertise and perform valuable political services will find they have a stronger basis for influence."³⁸ Goal displacement occurs when "the group's goals are not a means to...ends, but are ends in themselves that take on value because of the ideological nature; they are, from the entrepreneur's standpoint, the *raison d'etre* of the association."³⁹ When goal displacement occurs, Moe argues, "entrepreneurs" or organizers attempt to prevent constituent input into goal-setting by developing other incentive structures, propagandizing, manipulating group activities toward group goals only, and hiring staff according to their beliefs rather than their competence.⁴⁰

Constraints therefore pose real problems for organizers attempting to build low-income organizations. The effect of these constraints is that organizers are forced to rely on voluntary organizations, develop some form of purposive incentives, and stimulate constituent participation as much as possible. Accommodating these constraints, however, are only the first set of choices to be made.

Available Choices

The idea of constraints on choices of organizing strategies is of course theoretical. Organizers have historically chosen a wide variety of exchange relationships and organizational forms with varying degrees of success. To develop further the notion of organizing strategy and to delineate the available options requires an examination of different organizing strategies that have been attempted with low-income constituents.

One of the more closely studied organizing strategies for low-income constituents is that of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). The constituency of the short-lived NWRO was welfare recipients, mostly female, black, and clearly low-income. Lawrence Bailis found that NWRO members had an especially intense dependence upon governmental service agencies for their livelihood and that many were not receiving nearly the amount of government benefits to which they were entitled. This clear and easily remedied gap between entitlements and benefits provided a unique opportunity for organizers of the NWRO. It offered the chance to obtain "tangible benefits that are quickly realizable."⁴¹ An exchange relationship could thereby be created in which material incentives were offered to members by the organizer's ability to manipulate welfare entitlement regulations while making the least possible demand on their welfare constituency. As Bailis put it, "demands on the membership should be minimized: the less

asked, the better."⁴²

The organizational form of the NWRO was simple. The organizers developed lists of welfare recipients by any means they could and contacted prospective constituents to persuade them that they could obtain increased benefits through the NWRO. The organizers then staged a mass meeting of recipients in a local church or hall, elected pre-appointed officers by acclamation, and took the meeting to the local welfare office to demand supplementary benefits for items such as furniture, winter clothing, and other special grants written into welfare legislation but poorly publicized. Dues were one dollar per year, used largely as a token of members' contribution and an expression of commitment and to accommodate the standard organizational rituals for the sake of lobbying claims and inquiries regarding funding sources.⁴³ Finally, although individual NWRO chapters lasted less than a year, during that time, organizers maintained "intensive and continuing personal contact" with the members.⁴⁴ For the most part, the groups were loose, short-lived, closely managed by staff, and based largely on personal relations between members and staff.

Nationally, the NWRO could not sustain itself long either. The source of its incentives, the special grants from the welfare offices, dried up when state legislatures instituted flat grant systems of benefits. Other strategies, such as advocacy and grievances, were insufficient to maintain the organization since recipients of such benefits from the NWRO no longer had reason to

stay in the organization when their problem was resolved. The only purposive incentive attempted was to convey the belief that "[t]he reason welfare is so bad is because welfare recipients are not organized. One by one they can't get what they need because they have no power--and that's what this country responds to, power."⁴⁵ Any ideological articulation beyond that was eschewed: the NWRO organizers "put down attempts at ideological justification for a course of action as 'radical bullshit.'"⁴⁶ Nor, as their organizing strategy dictated, did the NWRO attempt to stimulate constituent participation. Rather, they made as few demands as possible in order to keep the benefit/cost ratio as high as possible.

The NWRO was therefore incapable of developing or maintaining incentives adequate to the constituents it sought to organize. Material benefits had only a short-term effectiveness, and the organizers chose not to develop members' commitment through participation or purposive incentives to inspire constituent allegiance. The combination of targeted constituency, exchange relationship, and organizational form was not effective in the environment in which it was attempted. While a single case does not prove a rule, it is clear that this organizing strategy did not operate within the constraints outlined above with the predicted consequences.

Another organizing strategy that has been widely attempted is Saul Alinsky's technique of community organizing. Unlike the NWRO, as Joan Lancourt has shown,⁴⁷ Alinsky's groups lasted, in some cases, for many years, rescuing several communities from

urban blight and providing services to community residents on a long-term basis. The constituency targeted by Alinsky organizers was the leadership of local community organizations within low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. These included religious leaders, block club officers, people in business organizations, and officers of ethnic organizations. Alinsky and his organizers tried to enroll these leaders and their organizations as constituent groups under umbrella organizations set up by Alinsky.

The exchange relationship between organizer and constituents was more varied and intense than the NWRO's. It is basic to Alinsky groups to offer immediate, tangible incentives to their constituents, such as jobs, fair treatment at the local supermarket, and improved city services. Longer-term goals of Alinsky groups included establishing services such as Community Development Corporations and protecting neighborhoods from urban redevelopment and freeway construction. The purposive incentives offered were the ideals of democratic participation in the political system for the local leadership of the community. The intended result of the incentive system was to enable "each intermediate or short-term struggle to broaden the participants' consciousness, propelling them on to the next set of issues. Without this clear, overall perspective, which imbues individual victories with a larger significance, the benefits of each advance, no matter how valuable..., may dissipate, overwhelmed by the new problems arising from the ever-changing reality."⁴⁸ Hence, the incentive system is structured

to expand the constituent commitment and understanding from the immediate and concrete to the more distant and idealistic.

The demands Alinsky groups made on the constituents were greater than the NWRO's. The Alinsky confrontation techniques required members to picket, rally, and protest at times, and to support local institutions such as the Community Development Corporations at others. Lancourt points out that the demands on leaders was far greater than it was on members of the constituents' groups.⁴⁹ Compared to the NWRO, however, participants in Alinsky groups were asked to provide a great deal more of the resources necessary for organization-building and achievement of community goals.

The organizational form of the Alinsky groups, as noted above, is the federated umbrella structure. The dues payers are the constituent groups--churches, ethnic organizations, and block clubs. The boards of the Alinsky groups consist of leaders of the constituent groups who meet regularly and make the important decisions about group goals and strategies. The boards receive a great deal of guidance from the organizers early in the process who then withdraw until they actually leave the organization completely to its own devices after a pre-determined period of time--usually four years.

The Alinsky groups generally stay within the constraints outlined above. They exercise some important options regarding constituency and organizational form as well as applying conscious

progression of incentives designed to develop the allegiance and sophistication of its constituents. They also demand a fair degree of participation from constituents, as Moe argues is necessary. While that increases the cost of a benefit/cost ratio, the relative success of Alinsky groups and the NWRO suggests that there may be utility in that strategic choice.

There is then no consensus as to the most effective means of organizing low- and moderate-income people for political action. There are principles and techniques that have been developed and some rules guiding their use given the constraints of different settings. But there is no one right way. Understanding the politics of low-income organizations requires further examination of these groups, and that of course is what the study does. It looks specifically at the organizing strategy of the Boston ACORN chapter to determine which choices they have made to attract and maintain members in their organization.

Notes to Chapter II

¹Lester W. Milbrath, Political Participation (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1965), p. 132; and Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, Participation in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 181 and 204.

²Verba and Nie, p. 340.

³Ibid., p. 131.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 204.

⁶Ibid.

⁷David B. Truman, The Governmental Process (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1962), p. 522.

⁸Verba and Nie, p. 200.

⁹Ibid., p. 342.

¹⁰James Q. Wilson, Political Organizations (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973).

¹¹Ibid., p. 73.

¹²Ibid., p. 62.

¹³Si Kahn, Organizing (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982), p. 168.

¹⁴Sherry Arnstein, "Maximum Feasible Manipulation," Public Administration Review 32 (Sept., 1972), pp. 377-402.

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- ²⁰Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 15.
- ²¹Gaventa, pp. 40-42.
- ²²Ibid., p. 42.
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- ²⁶Ibid.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 25.
- ²⁸Robert Dahl, After the Revolution? (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), p. 106.
- ²⁹Richard C. Rich, "A Political-Economy Approach to the Study of Neighborhood Organizations," American Journal of Political Science 4 (Nov., 1980), pp. 559-591.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 565.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Ibid., p. 566.
- ³³Ibid., p. 578.
- ³⁴Ibid., p. 570.
- ³⁵Ibid., p. 572.
- ³⁶Terry M. Moe, The Organization of Interests (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980); and David Knoke and James R. Wood, Organized for Action (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1981).

- ³⁷Moe, pp. 134-136.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 134.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 135.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 136.
- ⁴¹Bill Pastreich and Rhoda Linton, "The Boston Model," a mimeograph paper quoted in Lawrence Neil Bailis, Bread or Justice (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1974), p. 19.
- ⁴²Bailis, p. 21.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 40.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 21.
- ⁴⁵Pastreich and Linton, p. 40.
- ⁴⁶Bailis, p. 91.
- ⁴⁷Joan E. Lancourt, Confront or Concede (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1979).
- ⁴⁸Ibid., p. 35.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 121.

C H A P T E R I I I
THE ACORN ORGANIZING STRATEGY

The plan that ACORN uses as an organizing strategy for low-income people lends itself to analysis because it is clearly articulated and recorded in a variety of places. The founder of ACORN, Wade Rathke, drafted this plan, much as the Boston Model of the NWRO was drafted, before he began his work. Rathke designed the ACORN organizing strategy so that it could be executed and replicated throughout the country. Moreover, he has cited the sources that inspired his organizing plan. For these reasons, it is possible to apply the foregoing analysis of organizing strategy to the ACORN organization.

When Rathke began the organization he was working as an organizer for the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO). He developed a plan to organize a majority constituency using techniques that would mobilize lower class Americans. He promoted the idea with the MWRO and received a grant to go to Little Rock, Arkansas to create such an organization. Rathke described his goal:

With the welfare issue, you're always dealing with a minority. We all knew that we had to break out of the single-issue campaign. I wanted to build on a majority constituency rather than on a minority, where the next-door neighbors are in it together, not fighting each other.¹

Hence, Rathke clearly fits the Salisbury model of an organizer/entrepreneur with a strategy for selling an organization to a group in the political system. Moreover, he has discussed his plan in a variety of sources, including memos, news articles, and commentaries on organizing techniques.

Rathke also provides the sources of ideas for his organizing strategy. The nature of the sources and the manner in which Rathke blended them shows both what his intentions were and the kinds of problems he thought were important. All of the sources of ideas were organizations attempting to organize low-income people. The Civil Rights Movement developed the ideas of using confrontational tactics, as did Saul Alinsky's community organizing. Fred Ross of the United Farm Workers developed the notion of house meetings "to build a sense of community among potential organization members..."² The membership dues system started with the labor movement and the Non-Partisan League of North Dakota.³ The notion of training and supporting professional organizers was also a product of Non-Partisan League organizing. Finally, the idea of developing a clearly articulated model and applying it in neighborhoods across the country was inspired by the Boston Model created by Rhoda Linton and Bill Pastreich.

The Boston Model was used as "the basis for NWRO's ability to send raw white organizers...into Minnesota, Ohio, Illinois, Rhode Island, and New York and, in a matter of months, produce organization."⁴ Rathke, the former NWRO organizer, devised a

similar organizing strategy designed for a majority constituency. Because the plan is inspired by previous attempts to solve specific organizing problems of the past, it is possible to identify in the ACORN organizing strategy what Rathke saw as the relevant problems and the most suitable solutions, i.e., how do you create and sustain a political organization of low- and moderate-income citizens in American politics?

The fact that the ACORN organizing strategy is, like the Boston Model, designed to be implemented and replicated anywhere in the country also reinforces the notion that it is very much like a marketing strategy consciously designed to appeal to a specific constituency within the political system. The fact that the strategy has been applied for over fifteen years in settings both urban and rural and in twenty-six states, plus the District of Columbia, clearly indicates that the strategy is capable of dealing with many of the problems of low-income organizing cited in the previous chapter.

Finally, the goal that Rathke set for ACORN, "Power to the People," makes clear the intention of its founder and provides a guide for evaluating its success. In more formal terms, Rathke describes the goal of the organization in the beginning of his detailed memo entitled "ACORN Community Organizing Model":

GOAL: To build a mass community organization which has as its primary principle the development of sufficient organizational power to achieve its individual members' interests, its local objectives, and in connection with other groups, its state interests. The organization must be permanent with multi-issued concerns achieved through multi-tacticed [sic] direct action, and membership participating in policy, financing, and achievement of group goals and community improvements.⁵

The model, when applied in neighborhoods across the country, aims at building a national organization made up of the local chapters which can "deal with the manifestations of power in whatever form they take."⁶ When the local groups coordinate their efforts, Rathke believes, they are capable of redistributing power in the American political system to the ACORN constituency.

The Targeted Constituency

The targeted constituency in the ACORN organizing strategy is a majority of the American people. Writing in 1975 with Steven Kest in the ACORN Organizing Handbook #2, Rathke stated:

it is imperative that ACORN see as its constituency all the people in this country who are shut out of... power. As a rough working guide ACORN has traditionally defined this constituency as consisting of those of low to moderate income. By any standards you hit upon, that constituency contains within it a majority of the people in this country. It is that majority that is going to have to be organized if there is any hope for changing--for reversing--the prevailing distribution of power.⁷

Hence, the constituency that Rathke targeted is defined by its income and lack of power. It is clear from ACORN's history that

all racial groups are included, and that, essentially, the criterion of income has remained consistent.

The selection of members occurs by the area in which people live. Since neighborhoods are heterogeneous in their economic makeup, it is possible for members to be relatively well off. The choice of neighborhoods that ACORN organizes is determined by a variety of considerations:

This happens in one of two ways: Either ACORN is invited into a neighborhood by some of its residents, or the Executive Board picks, for various strategic reasons, a neighborhood to be organized. The Board might choose a neighborhood because it is in a city council ward where ACORN isn't as strong as it would like to be; or because the racial or income character of the neighborhood will help give the overall organization its vital balances; or because an important issue that might affect the whole area (a new highway, for example) is making its first appearance in that neighborhood.⁸

Thus, the choice may be either tactical or for the types of people residing in a neighborhood, but historically, the basic determinant has been income. Gary Delgado's study of ACORN's membership found that, of 50,000 members, 70% are "black and Latino, 70% female, and almost all from the working class...."⁹

The Exchange Relationship

"Deliverables." The organizers of ACORN seek members from their low- and moderate-income constituency who will contribute time and resources. In pursuit of those members, they initially

offer the "deliverables" described in the previous chapter. Organizers are instructed on how to develop and pursue such issues when the organizing model is applied in each neighborhood. The initial organizing drive that creates the individual neighborhood groups--virtually every ACORN group is started de novo by ACORN organizers--is where the exchange process begins.

The Organizing Model describes the process by which organizers should look for issues that will interest prospective members to join:

Driving or walking through a neighborhood you can often spot visible issues--streets, open ditches, drainage, bad lighting, condemned or dilapidated housing, curbs, gutters, sidewalks, litter, domestic and commercial eyesores, weeds and overgrown lots, lack of parks or recreational facilities, bus routes, and a number of other issues. Depending on the situations, all of these things are potential organizing issues.¹⁰

While seeking issues that are winnable and relatively easy to achieve, the organizer must also discuss what the residents perceive as the most important issues in the neighborhood.

At the beginning of an organizing drive, there are two basic means through which neighborhood residents may identify issues, the "Organizing Committee" and the residents contacted in their homes through the process of "doorknocking." The Organizing Committee is a small group of twelve to twenty people who are the core of the organization during the drive. They usually consist

of people who have contacted ACORN requesting that a group be organized in their neighborhood, friends of those contacts, or people known to the contacts as interested in political activity.¹¹ They provide legitimacy for the drive and become leaders in the organizing work and are often the original officers of the group. "Doorknocking" is the process by which the organizer and as many members of the Organizing Committee as can be recruited contact as many of the people in the neighborhood as possible before the "First Meeting," or initial neighborhood-wide meeting. The interaction "on the doors" is critical to the success of the drive and is where a great deal of the "salesmanship" for the organization occurs. The Model states:

There is no substitute for personal contact in convincing people to become active in the organization. Doorknocking does it best. It gives the doorknockers a chance to answer questions and create the impressions of the organization. It allows you to bring people in, and define some people out.¹²

In each relatively brief interaction (fifteen minutes is recommended) the doorknocker learns what the residents think about the neighborhood and what issues they consider important. It is an unusually direct interaction between citizen and political organizer, and occurs with nearly a thousand residents in each neighborhood organized.

Typically, the issues with which the organizers begin are relatively easy to identify, such as clearing vacant lots, obtaining needed traffic control, open ditches, and so on. In most cases, a

visit to a city official is all that is needed to obtain satisfaction for the residents. These "wins" are tangible, quite visible, and provide clear proof of success for the local organizing drive. In organizational terms, the deliverables can be defined as collective material benefits, i.e., they are tangible and all of the residents of the neighborhood benefit regardless of whether they pay dues or participate in ACORN. Thus, the incentive that ACORN organizers rely on to launch each community group and to bring members into the organization are material collective ones. They do not deal in any significant way with the problems of free riders or maintaining supplies of accessible "deliverables."

Non-purposive Selective Incentives. There are three types of non-ideological selective incentives available: material, camaraderie, and status. Surprisingly, in light of the political organization literature, ACORN's organizing strategy does not mention the social incentives, and does not treat selective material incentives as critical to organization building. While it is difficult to conceive of an organization that does not offer any social incentives in practice, ACORN does not cultivate that type of incentive in its model or its literature. The Organizing Model discusses the development of discounts from local merchants that only ACORN members can receive. But it does not discuss discounts as a means of attracting members for the value of the discount, but rather states that discounts make "it easier to build legitimacy with your community contacts...."¹³ The types of selective material

incentives offered by ACORN groups around the country, such as oil co-ops, are not intended to be primary motivations for members to join or remain involved in ACORN. The main reliance, however, is on purposive incentives. Organizers ground their appeal on the organization's goals.

Purposive Incentives. Ideology, as it is generally discussed in political views, includes the kinds of world views epitomized by liberals, conservatives, and socialists. In that realm, one might expect low-income organizers to espouse and apply ideologies to the left of the political spectrum. However, this is not always the case. As Fainstein and Fainstein discovered, urban political activists are sometimes forced into a position of opposing liberal ideals:

While the costs of attacking "liberal" institutions may be high, their salience to the lives of ghetto inhabitants is great; Congress or big business might be more important causative factors in the situation of the poor, but they are much less visible and much less the immediate creators of the people's misery than the schools, hospitals, and welfare offices. The latter, therefore, become the foci of attack, and the movements develop an ideology to counter the Progressive ideology which supports these institutions.¹⁴

Moreover, the more extreme leftist ideologies have been discredited in American politics even among low-income citizens. Hence, there is no clear option for low-income organizing on the ideological left.

ACORN has dealt with this dilemma in several ways in its literature, public pronouncements and organizing practice: 1) it

has adopted the term "populist" to describe the organization; 2) it has taken an anti-corporate stance on a consistent basis; and 3) it has eschewed ideology and promoted an "action as ideology" approach, especially in its internal communications. The result of these three approaches in their public statements and organizing strategy creates confusion and is somewhat muddled, but may provide some important insights for the use of ideology as an incentive in low-income organizing.

ACORN frequently refers to itself, on fliers and in the press, as "populist". The term, however, denotes little and connotes much. It has been associated with a wide variety of political views and politicians, as well as a major political movement of the late Nineteenth Century. Political scientists have rarely tried to use the term with any precision, associating it negatively with racism and anti-intellectualism¹⁵ or positively with the practice of initiative and referendum and increased political participation generally.¹⁶ Recent historical revision by Lawrence Goodwyn¹⁷ has altered the view of the Populist Movement. He argues that the Populists were egalitarian anticapitalists, not backward-looking racist romantics as many historians have depicted them.

Similarly, George McKenna argues that populism is a bona fide ideology with a reasonable degree of complexity and an historic consistency that he attempts to document with letters, speeches and platforms from American political history. McKenna distills six

basic tenets of populist ideology: 1) lack of class consciousness; 2) the assumption of consensus among "the people"; 3) strong patriotism; 4) the belief that wealth should belong to all and not just some Americans; 5) a fear of bigness, corporate or governmental; and 6) mistrust of intellectual elites. Despite a lack of systematic effort by ACORN staff or membership, ACORN's rhetoric and strategy bear striking similarities to populism.

ACORN's avowed aim is to organize the lower seventy per cent on the income ladder. ACORN rhetoric always refers to "the people", and avoids identifying race, gender, class, region, or other divisions within the American public. As an organization, therefore, ACORN operates on the assumption that American society is divided between what ACORN refers to consistently as "low- and moderate-income people," or "the people," and those to whom they refer to as the "fatcats" or "the few." ACORN does not, however, expound theories of class struggle, keeping the analysis at the level of "the people" struggling to be heard or the "majority" trying to "take control of the government." Like the Populists, they maintain that the struggle is between "the many" and "the few" where "the many" struggle for their rights as American citizens.

ACORN operates on the premise that there is a consensus among "the people" regarding what McKenna calls "what is right and wrong, fair and foul, legitimate and crooked."¹⁹ ACORN organizers argue that as long as ACORN deals with economic issues or the building of political power, low- and moderate-income people will

hold together.²⁰ ACORN's People's Platform, for example, clearly avoids social issues such as ERA and busing, since, as Gary Delgado argues, "[1]ike many populist organizations ACORN...opted to preserve class unity by developing an anti-corporate political program that did not directly address salient issues of race and sex."²¹ This has been an integral part of ACORN's organizing strategy from its inception: to organize people around economic issues using government and corporations as its target and avoiding divisive social issues.

Patriotism has not been a salient issue in ACORN's history. The only issues that relate to patriotism in any manner are ACORN protests of President Reagan's increased military spending, and in some instances, the nuclear freeze. However, there have been no Vietnams to divide people who might otherwise unite, or to raise doubts about the patriotism of ACORN as an organization.

ACORN's ideological approach to private property is similar to McKenna's depiction of populism. The idea that "the land and commodities of America belong not to some but to all of the American people" is expressed by ACORN in both word and deed. The ACORN People's Platform provides clear evidence of this belief in the preamble when it demands "the best of our energy, land, and natural resources for all people." The clearest expression of this belief came from ACORN's "squatting" campaign. ACORN saw a contradiction between a housing shortage, on the one hand, and the existence of thousands of vacant houses in ACORN neighborhoods, on the other.

These houses had been abandoned by their owners and frequently assumed by city and federal governments for unpaid taxes, HUD mortgage foreclosures, or other reasons, and they became the target for ACORN squatters. ACORN organized public rallies to break into and claim the houses for low-income families in need of housing. Claiming no legal grounds for their actions, ACORN instead justified and publicized squatting on the moral grounds that people were "Taking What's Ours!" Many squatters were evicted and arrested for trespassing, but in Congressional hearings ACORN members expressed determination to continue squatting despite police and official action.²² Hence, unused resources, in this case, abandoned houses, have been claimed by ACORN to promote views on human rights versus property rights.

McKenna's claim regarding populist fears of bigness is somewhat muddled in ACORN. Delgado argues, for example, that the People's Platform expresses "ambivalence between anti-corporate populism and the social-democratic state."²³ While a great deal of the platform is directed at control of corporations and their abuses, and the difficulty in controlling big government, some of the proposals would require massive bureaucracies and tremendous budget outlays that have historically led to unresponsiveness to and abuse of low-income citizens. The demand for federal programs capable of building a million units of housing per year seems contradictory in the face of ACORN's organizing strategy which dictates extreme localism and a scale responsive to individual

inputs, and the association bylaws which include an explicit goal of maintaining organizational democracy. Thus, ACORN appears ambivalent about the most desirable size of institutions; it struggles against large corporations and government bureaucracies, but is attracted, at times, to large government programs.

ACORN has had little to say about intellectual elites, the last tenet of populism that McKenna cites. ACORN chapters have frequently been involved in public education affairs, including running and supporting candidates to school boards and promoting legislation for free textbooks in Arkansas. However, there have been no issues or statement akin to William Jennings Bryant's behavior at the Scopes Trial or George Wallace's attacks on "intellectual snobs."²⁴

Anti-Ideology in ACORN. ACORN's internal approach to ideology and action is quite unusual for an apparently leftist organization. ACORN's avowed reasons for being anti-ideological are 1) the goal of redistributing power is adequate inspiration and direction, 2) understanding of politics is best gained by experience rather than study, and 3) it is not possible to predict, given the complexity of society, what will be the best means of redistributing power in every policy area.

Kest and Rathke argue that specific issues and policy stands are not the essence of ACORN's activities. Rather, they contend, that "[b]ehind the organization's concern with these issues is a basic understanding that all these issues are mere manifestations

of a much more fundamental issue: the distribution of power in the country."²⁵ Hence, the single concern that the organizers of ACORN address is the distribution of power in American politics.

ACORN also claims that a well-developed ideology is not useful for community organizing because it is not possible to impart political knowledge without a solid base of participatory involvement. Indeed, one of the most important reasons for designing ACORN activities to involve as many members as possible is to provide them with the experience necessary to develop a good understanding of the political system and the alleged maldistribution of power. It is the aim of ACORN activism to put low- and moderate-income people in situations where they are making what they consider reasonable demands and to have those demands resisted or rejected. In this way, they will learn what to expect from politicians and corporate representatives. Fainstein and Fainstein observed this same process at work in several urban political movements they studied.²⁶ Having experienced first-hand the maldistribution of power, ACORN participants are then likely to see that the connections between that issue and other issues revolve around the distribution of power.

Finally, the ACORN approach is predicated on the claim that, in order to make policy stances attractive to constituents, it is necessary to be actively involved in those areas. In addition to being a corollary of the preceding claim, ACORN strategists argue that it is unwise to make claims regarding a policy area in which

one had not taken sides on some matter directly affecting the members of the organization. Further, it makes no sense to take a position unless one is willing and able to act on it. Thus, until one is in a position of some power and until one has organized constituents around an issue, there is no benefit and possibly some danger in taking a position on it.

Rathke claims that "[a]n organization like ACORN doesn't develop an ideology until it finishes growing, until it has some power to exercise.... I'm confident that that process produces the best of all philosophies and ideologies."²⁷ When the organization's precepts are kept simple, educational functions are provided by action, and issue stances are only taken in areas in which the group is engaged. This assures the organization's needs can be met, and also that it will not be encumbered with ideological baggage that can lead to the kinds of goal displacement that Moe describes.

Thus, ACORN's anti-ideological approach stems from several concerns that are ultimately based on three considerations pertaining to the low- and moderate-income constituency: 1) power in American life is maldistributed; 2) knowledge comes from power; and 3) action is the most effective means of learning and expressing political values. This level of abstraction and analysis appears to provide sufficient direction to ACORN organizers and members without painting them into the corner that Moe describes of goal displacement and organizer dominance. The combination of the vagueness of the

popular understanding of populism and the fear of the organizers' abuse of ideology warrants the use of the term "anti-ideological" to describe ACORN.

Anti-corporatism in ACORN. The third dimension of ACORN's purposive incentives is a crude anti-corporatism. Kest and Rathke argue that the most important thing about high utility rates is "the fact that...in reality rather than rhetoric a bunch of corporate directors and New York bankers have the power to unilaterally make decisions that affect the lives of ACORN members."²⁸ This claim that economic power is undemocratic and should be redressed by political action permeates all of ACORN's activism and rhetoric. ACORN chapters have fought corporations over toxic wastes disposal, utility rates, plant sitings, tax structures and abatements, banking and investment practices, and many other issues. The preamble to the ACORN People's Platform specifies a subordinate rather than dominant role for corporations in American society: "Corporations shall have their role: producing jobs, providing products, paying taxes. No more. No less. They shall obey our wishes, respond to our needs, serve our communities."

In sum, ACORN's approach to ideology is a form of praxis, where action informs thought. This is augmented by the vague yet appealing principles of populism, the "perennial" ideology of protest in American politics, and a crude form of anti-corporatism. The history of ACORN, its literature and the comments of observers substantiate the nature of ACORN's ideology and suggest that it is

effective in overcoming some of the difficulties in using ideology as a purposive incentive for low- and moderate-income Americans.

The Members' Contribution

ACORN organizers make it clear to prospective members that they must contribute substantially to the organization for it to succeed. One of the major goals of the organizers in the organizing drive is to collect dues before the first meeting. This fact alone makes the exchange relationship clear: members must provide the means by which the organization survives. The principle that ACORN uses is the "membership organization." Members and prospective members are thus initiated into the organization with a clear message that their role in the organization is contributory and not passive.

One of the clearest assertions of members' financial role in ACORN stems from the organizational goal of financial self-sufficiency. The "ACORN Members' Handbook" states

ACORN has always been committed to the principle of financial self-sufficiency and we've made great strides toward that goal. The principle is important because only an organization that raises and controls its own funds can be truly independent. Because ACORN members pay the organization's way, we call the shots.²⁹

Hence, despite the fact that ACORN's constituency is on the lower end of the income scale, the organization requires its members to contribute dues regularly and with great emphasis.

ACORN organizers are also advised to persuade members to

contribute as much time as possible to the organization as well. This begins with the exhortation to assist in the large task of doorknocking the entire neighborhood in the organizing drive. The Organizing Model is quite blunt about this matter when it describes the agenda for Organizing Committee meetings: "Doorknocking: Get agreements on when, not if."³⁰ The organizers are also trained to delegate as much of the other duties of the group as possible, including phoning, taking parts of the meeting agendas, distributing fliers and fundraising. Moreover, one of the basic principles of designing ACORN actions is to involve as many people as possible. Thus, the level of expectations on the membership is quite high and frequently involves a great deal of time and commitment. The Organizing Model is quite explicit about the nature of the exchange relationship:

Contract: Make clear [w]hat they can expect from ACORN (services, research, assistance, contacts, political power, literatures [sic], etc.), and what ACORN expects of the group (dues, affiliation, news distribution, etc.).³¹

Organizational Structure

ACORN's organizational structure can be described by its organizational groupings, the three roles that participants play in the organization, and the committee and governing structures above the local level. All of these features of ACORN were designed to contribute to the success of the organization and to fill the

needs of the constituents and express the values of the organization.

The basic component of the organization is the neighborhood organization. One cannot be a member of ACORN unless one lives in an area that has been organized by ACORN and contributes dues and participates in the group. The neighborhood structure is intended to provide a physical association for the membership, i.e., the organization represents a geographical entity with clearly defined boundaries. Besides providing members with territorial allegiances, geographical basing provides a sense of permanence, according to Kest and Rathke:

To its members, the organization, rather than just whatever issue is being worked on at that time, is of number one importance. The point is that in order to address the fundamental questions of power, low- and moderate-income citizens must be organized; in other words, be committed to a permanent organization that, over the long run, will attack the maldistribution of power in every way it can.³²

This sense of permanence provides the necessarily long-term mission with a concrete representation.

The local nature of the organization also makes the experience of membership personal and tangible. Upper-income Americans frequently participate in politics by writing checks to distant post office boxes and following the organization in the papers and monthly newsletters. Lower income citizens, however, respond better to visible, tangible, and local organizations. The members are able to meet face-to-face with leaders and can personalize the organization

rather than experience it only in an abstract way.

The local groups meet monthly and constantly work on issues within the neighborhood, as well as in the larger community, along with other local groups. This is part of the strategy to keep the organization constantly in view and maintain a degree of momentum that organizers feel is necessary to keep members motivated. Historically, lower-income people have seen organizations come and go and the resulting mistrust of organizational solutions to their problems creates the need to overcome constituents' skepticism. This is done by keeping the local groups close to the members, both geographically and temporally.

The local groups consist of approximately 100-200 members who hold membership cards and pay dues. They are, for the most part, the people in the neighborhood who joined during the organizing drive or at the first meeting. Active participants number far fewer than the entire membership. Active members are generally the officers and a loyal cadre, usually around a dozen people in all. They attend meetings regularly, respond to requests to assist in distributing fliers and making calls, and participate in actions. Moreover, they serve on larger committees at the community-wide level, such as the ACORN Political Action Committees. The disparity between active and inactive members is calculated into the organizing strategy, as expressed in the Organizing Model:

Attendance: The majority of first meetings are the biggest meetings that groups will ever have, depending on the quality of the issues. Build a core which you can depend on for consistency in the group in both size and quality. This is a natural organizational event. You must convince the groups, though, that they never have enough people to be satisfied, but don't allow numbers to depress their activity or stability.³³

Thus, the reality--a small core of activists--is accounted for in the organizing strategy, yet an ideal is established that prods the activists to greater efforts to expand their numbers. The activities of this cadre, meanwhile, represent the tangible organizational solution to neighborhood political problems.

Participant Roles

The three roles in ACORN are member, leader, and organizer. They are clearly defined in the organizing strategy and are essential to understanding the nature of the organization. Briefly, members pay dues and participate in the organization. Leaders are formally elected or appointed to interim posts. Organizers are paid, professional participants who are not indigenous to the neighborhood, and rarely come from the constituency.

Members are formally designated by being current on their dues and possessing membership cards. As stated above, one must be a resident of an ACORN neighborhood in order to join a group and become a member of the larger organization. They receive ACORN publications and have access to the ACORN organizers and the

services they provide upon request.

Leaders come from the membership, i.e., they are residents of the neighborhood who have agreed to serve in positions in the local group. Occasionally, interim officers are appointed when circumstances require it, such as the sudden departure of a current officer. Leaders are required to operate the group, chairing meetings, leading actions, and conferring with organizers on the operations of the organization. Offices in a typical neighborhood are chair, co-chair, secretary and treasurer. While the roles are not tightly defined, they generally are for the chair and the co-chair to be the executive leadership of the group, the secretary fulfills communications functions, and the treasurer maintains dues records and keeps the books.

Organizers, as in any voluntary organization, are the only paid participants in ACORN. They are quite different from the members and leaders in their demographical characteristics and serve at the pleasure of the Head Organizer. Organizers are almost all well-educated, white, middle- and upper-income young people. ACORN recruits them most frequently from Eastern colleges and universities from which they are then assigned to posts anywhere in the twenty-six ACORN states or the District of Columbia. Thus, there is some built-in distance between the members and the leaders and the organizers--social, economic, geographical, educational, and frequently racial. In addition, the organizers' allegiance is to the organization at large while the members tend to perceive the

organization mostly within their neighborhoods. Finally, the organizers' perspective is that of professionals applying skills and ethical standards, while the constituents' main concern is with issues and power.

While the organizers are trained and encouraged to delegate as many of their functions as possible, they have a tendency to do as much of the work as they can. The ACORN model is built on member control and participation which, it is expected, will lead to commitment to the organization and its goals, but the nature of the organizers tends to mitigate against this approach. The organizers, many of them high achievers, feel the responsibility of their jobs rather heavily and become uncomfortable when others are doing the job for them. Structurally, the role of the organizer counterposed against the constituency is a source of conflict within the ACORN organizing strategy.

Regional Structure

The two main regional structures are the Executive Board and the ACORN Political Action Committee (APAC). They manage the citywide (or, in the case of rural areas, countywide) executive and electoral activities of ACORN, respectively. The Executive Committee consists of the Chairs of the neighborhood groups and meets monthly to make the broader decisions of the regional organization. The Head Organizer of the area reports to the Executive Committee and confers with them on issues, strategies,

and financial affairs. The APAC conducts the electoral activities of the regional group by analyzing campaigns, interviewing candidates, if any, to support, and co-ordinating the electoral efforts of the regional ACORN group. Both of these bodies offer members and leaders opportunities to contribute, control, and participate in the larger workings of ACORN. Like any board of directors or political action group, they exercise as much control as they see fit and oversee staff (organizers) as much as they feel is necessary. There is nothing absolute about their functioning, which is in keeping with standard practices in voluntary organizations of any kind.

This chapter has described the organizing strategy of the ACORN model. Throughout, it is clear that the strategy is adapted to the constituency and the goals of the organization. Moreover, it is clear that the decisions that go into it are conscious and goal-directed. Thus, the concept of the organizing strategy is quite capable of providing insights into the model ACORN applies in organizing its constituency for political power. The chapters that follow will examine the experiences and insights of ACORN participants in the city of Boston through interviews in order to determine the impact of the organizing strategy on its participants.

Consistent with the notion of the organizer/entrepreneur as the rational (and, historically speaking, actual) progenitor of the political organization, this study will look first at the perceptions of the professional organizers. The interviews in Chapter 5 will attempt to establish the intentions of the organizers and determine

what effects they wish to create in their interactions with the targeted constituents of the organizing strategy. Once it is established what the techniques the organizers use are designed to achieve, the interviews with the members and leaders (the constituents) will provide insights into their effectiveness and their perceptions of the organization and the organizing strategy.

Notes to Chapter III

¹Wade Rathke, quoted in Andrew Kopkind, "ACORN Calling: Door-to-Door Organizing in Arkansas," Working Papers 3, no. 3 (Summer, 1975), p. 14.

²Gary Delgado, "Organizing the Movement," Diss. Univ. of California, Berkeley School of Social Work, 1984, p. 50.

³Steven Kest and Wade Rathke, "ACORN: An Overview," in Community Organizing Handbook #2 (New Orleans: The Institute for Social Justice, 1979), p. 3.

⁴Delgado, p. 51.

⁵"ACORN Community Organizing Model," (mimeographed, n.d.), p. 1.

⁶Kest and Rathke, p. 4.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 7.

⁹Gary Delgado, Organizing the Movement (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1986), p. 187.

¹⁰"ACORN Community Organizing Model," p. 5.

¹¹Ibid., p. 9.

¹²Ibid., p. 11.

¹³Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁴Norman I. Fainstein and Susan S. Fainstein, Urban Political Movements (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 56.

¹⁵Robert Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

¹⁶Robert Dahl, A Preface to Democratic Theory (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 34-62.

- 17 Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 334-342. He clarifies the use of the term "populism" in history and social science.
- 18 George McKenna, *American Populism* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974).
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 20 Kest and Rathke, p. 4.
- 21 Delgado, diss., p. 64.
- 22 Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development of the Committee on Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs, 24 June, 1982, author in attendance.
- 23 Delgado, *Ibid.*
- 24 George Wallace quoted in McKenna, p. 222.
- 25 Kest and Rathke, *Ibid.*
- 26 Fainstein and Fainstein, pp. 182-183.
- 27 Wade Rathke quoted in Martin Kirby, "A Citizen Action Force That Really Works," *Southern Voices*, 10 no. 2 (May/June, 1974), n.p.
- 28 Kest and Rathke, *Ibid.*
- 29 "ACORN Members' Handbook" (mimeographed, n.d.), p. 5.
- 30 "ACORN Community Organizing Model," p. 10.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Kest and Rathke, p. 5.
- 33 "ACORN Community Organizing Model," p. 19.

C H A P T E R I V

THE ORGANIZERS

Interviews with the organizers were designed to ascertain their perceptions of their roles in ACORN and the impact of their activities on ACORN. Clearly, their role in ACORN as the professional staff and entrepreneurs of the organizing strategy is critical to an understanding of ACORN, for they are the ones who "sell" membership and participation in ACORN in return for the benefits they claim they can supply. The responses of the organizers will be discussed under four broad headings: 1) their impressions of the nature of ACORN organizing; 2) their impressions of the benefits members derive from ACORN; 3) their perceptions of the decisionmaking process; and 4) problems they encounter in their work.

The questions that the researcher used to explore the organizers' experiences approached their work as one would any other occupation. ACORN organizers consider themselves professionals, i.e., political activists who possess practical and ethical standards of performance.

Organizers' Incentives

The organizers' perception of the experience of ACORN

organizing derive from their reasons for becoming ACORN organizers, the satisfactions they receive from their work as an organizer, and their experience with ACORN organizing. The impetus for the organizers to "hire on" with ACORN appears to be either ideological or social. The ideological attraction of ACORN stems from its commitment to social change and social justice for low- and moderate-income people. The organizers themselves were all oriented to left-wing political activities prior to becoming ACORN organizers.

I was a radical in college and involved in a student group there. I'd planned to work for social change some way after I got out of school. I wanted to go into the trade union movement but I...didn't know how to do that...I found out about ACORN...and sent in an application.

I'd always been interested in progressive stuff.... I'd done a fair amount of work for a couple of years out of college with some peace and social justice organizations, working on international and foreign relations, things like that, so, I'd gotten fairly frustrated with, number one, there were never any concrete results, and number two, it really did seem we were talking to the same people. So ACORN is a real change of pace.

I had been involved in other things, like peace stuff, and that just didn't seem to be valid and it seemed to be a shell game. I became convinced very quickly that the only way to do something about the arms race was to radically restructure the society that implied the arms race. And any of the peace organizations that are around now aren't in the least bit interested in changing anything. That was the conclusion that I arrived at and ACORN seemed to be the organization that was interested in changing some very basic things in American society, trying to change the way people think about themselves and their environment. So that's why I began working for ACORN.

It is notable, too, that this group, while not a valid sample of ACORN organizers nationally, emphasized foreign policy issues as the focus of their pre-ACORN activism.

The other major factor in their decision to become ACORN organizers was the opportunity to explore a part of American society that they had little experience with in their lives up to that point. As a grassroots organization that works directly in the neighborhoods, ACORN puts its organizers in frequent direct contact with low-income minority people within their communities. Hence, one organizer responded that he was to a great extent motivated to become an ACORN organizer by his desire to learn about the ACORN constituency because of a curiosity first peaked by his study of social anthropology in college. For the ideologue, the opportunity to work directly with low- and moderate-income people also provides a test of ideological assumptions.

For the most part, the organizers' experiences either met or exceeded their expectations:

It's a down-to-earth, seriously organized group. I didn't expect it to be so tight and well run. In terms of other organizations I've been involved in, being able to lay out a plan and go through with it, being able to make plans for a year or more and being able to respond in a real way to things that are happening in the community and the country.

Very much so and very much better. I couldn't imagine myself, after working on disarmament, getting terribly excited about vacant lots and stop signs and all. But it obviously turned out to be a lot more exciting than I expected it to be.

The opportunities to work with low-income minorities in their communities were also realized, due to the extensive time necessary to organize an ACORN group on the streets, in peoples' homes, and in meetings at neighborhood churches and halls.

In recruiting new organizers--usually, college-educated, white, middle-class people like themselves--the organizers voice the same themes. They try simultaneously to make the experience of ACORN organizing attractive and to interpret the experience for someone relatively unfamiliar with it.

What I try to do...is to try to deal with them the same way I deal with members. Before I launch into my song and dance, I listen to them to see what interests them, what motivates them politically. I talk a lot about action. I talk a lot about the transformation that you can see happening in leaders and in members who never thought of themselves as ever being anything but a domestic worker. They get on TV two weeks after they join ACORN yelling at the mayor...and everybody on the block pats them on the back, and it really does change the way people look at themselves.

I also spend a good deal of time trying to differentiate between ACORN and other groups. I know when I was in college, to me, I had heard about ACORN and ACORN was like the Mobilization for Survival, like all those left-center political groups. I didn't really understand what made ACORN different.

I think the contact with people in the neighborhood is a major factor in new organizers. Basically, try to make people feel comfortable on the job. You can get people to give you the political rap about anything, but they won't be willing to do the work.

These themes--social justice, organizational effectiveness, and social contact with the constituents--prevail in the discussion

of the experience. They also dominate the responses to questions about the kinds of satisfactions organizers have received, what ACORN's national goals are, and how successful they feel ACORN has been in achieving its goals.

The pursuit of social justice remains a primary motivation of organizers after their decision to join and after they have been on the staff long enough for the novelty to wear off:

What I get out of it is the sense that I'm part of a movement [that]...in the end will lead to a revolution and will, in time, increase the power of working people. To overcome the system. Being involved in that is what I want to be right now and what I want to do. And in a lot of day-to-day stuff in ACORN you don't really see that very much, but things like Dallas, or when you have a good action against...one of the city officials or housing officials, you can really see clearly what the people can do, how people get a sense of their power as a group.

What keeps the job satisfying, according to the organizers, is the experience and assurance of success in pursuit of social justice. This point is particularly critical when the organizers consider ACORN relative to other groups with the same goals but without ACORN's successes and when they consider the relatively powerless status of their constituency:

During the 70s and 80s, no other left-wing organization has really survived and prospered in any real sense like ACORN has...and they've been around for fourteen [sic] years. As far as an independent, self-financing organization, I don't know any other organization in the country that does that...apart from unions or somebody that gets serious money from foundations....

Obviously, I think we're doing much better than other organizations, or I wouldn't stick with it. I think we are having an effect, particularly in the political arena. Jesse Jackson's folks, the way they courted our participation in a number of states was pretty amazing, and sort of gratifying. It's gratifying that other people are beginning to recognize the skills and power that we do have. Locally, Mel King, we busted our butts for him last fall, and in many ways it's paid off for us. He's going to raise \$500 for APAC this year. He's writing a letter for us that says ACORN helped me in my campaign, you should give them money, going out to the people in his campaign as well as to other lefties around town, and things like that....

In the last year and a half...I've almost had to define "success" as survival. We went through a couple of really bad years, really hard years. And we came through them okay, with a strong organization and having won some victories along the way. It speaks to some internal strength that we did survive the last couple of years. A lot of organizations didn't. A lot of people went under or stopped organizing or because something else. And we're moving in broader directions.... In most cities that I know close up, it isn't at the expense of the neighborhood base. We can still call ourselves, and mean it, "grassroots."

Clearly, the organizers feel that the fact that ACORN works for social justice and general left-wing causes is not sufficient to keep them involved. It is necessary that their efforts in ACORN be rewarded by success, something they perceive as being rather rare among such organizations.

Finally, as a motivation for staying on the job as a political organizer with ACORN, social interactions are quite effective. The following show several ways in which these incentives operate:

It's in contact with a new segment of the population. Which is basically the people we deal with...mostly black...it's a really new exposure to me, so I enjoy it. I think the fact of working with some of the people I work with is one of the best parts of the job....

On a personal level, I just love our members, they're just tremendous people. At this stage of the ballgame, one of the things that keeps me going is personal connections on the staff. I have a tremendous respect for our staff. Over the last several months I've been traveling around and my assumption has always been that all these people whose names I'd read on the charts were, in fact, (a) wonderful people, and (b) good organizers. It's been confirmed time and time again over the last six to eight months.

The social satisfaction the organizers reported included getting to know a segment of the population they had never had the opportunity to meet, individuals among that segment, and their fellow staff within ACORN. Those incentives, coupled with the ideological goals, compose the bulk of the reasons organizers work with ACORN. None cited any other commonly used incentives such as income, flexible work hours, working conditions, fringe benefits, and so on.

The Organizer Role

Another theme that the interviewees centered on was the relationships they developed in the course of the organizing work. While some of their experiences provide insight into the organizer's role in ACORN, others of them are reflections on the nature of the work. It is important to recognize the context of the organizer's responses. Their work for ACORN is usually the first full-time

employment they have had after graduation from college, so they have limited experience with which to compare it. Nevertheless, all have some experience as political activists in other organizations and, clearly, the venture from their middle-class backgrounds into low- and moderate-income neighborhoods lends itself to a profoundly different experience. Moreover, the organizing profession is, in many ways, different from other occupations. The two themes that the organizers developed most clearly were (1) that they "inject" themselves into peoples' lives, neighborhoods, and political relationships, and (2) that they must create changes in peoples' lives in order to succeed. The result, according to the organizers, is that they occupy a somewhat unusual position in society.

One of the essential roles of the organizer in ACORN is to knock on peoples' doors and promote membership in ACORN:

Part of the reason we have the ability to go door-to-door to recruit people that other organizations don't is because we have full-time professional organizers. A group can maintain itself at some level without an organizing staff, but there's always some amount of attrition, and unless there's some constant recruitment of new members, it's just a matter of time before the group kind of dies, or doesn't move forward.

At the same time, the experience is one that is somewhat alien to the organizers in the beginning.

The organizing part of it is strange. Knocking for three hours at strange doors, asking to come in the door, we talk with them and for me it's something I've never done before.

Just by going door-knocking every day, you're challenging peoples' interests of privacy and property, and that varies from person to person.... That may seem very trivial, but it has implications for much larger schemes of thinking.

On the other side of the relationship, that of the "intruder," one of the organizers reported that the same sense of privacy appeared to constrain some organizers' behavior:

Not long ago, one of our newer staff members expressed some hesitation about doing second and third visits to people on a drive because he felt like it would be kind of "hounding" the members. My experience has always been just the reverse. We always hear that the members don't hear from us enough; I've seen that happen.

To succeed as an ACORN organizer, it is necessary to intrude on people's privacy beyond what is generally considered acceptable in order to reach the constituents, and not all organizers are entirely comfortable with this.

Once the organizers have entered their constituents' lives, the goal is to change their ideas about their neighborhoods and political relationships. According to ACORN organizers, however, it is not possible to change members' thinking by persuasion or lecturing. One organizer, for example, reported that "what makes ACORN sometimes so frustrating is that its structural ideas are so radically different from the mainstream structure of ideas in the world today." ACORN organizers believe the only effective means of imparting ACORN's "structural ideas" on authority, social

justice, the rights of low-income people, and other fundamental political concepts is through experience. The researcher asked one organizer if ACORN is able to educate its members in political matters:

I think it's incredibly true for people who get involved. Both in terms of the resources available to the communities, more though, in terms of how the bureaucracy functions, how the government functions, who's who in politics, who's who in the power structure. I think it really breaks down a lot of peoples' notions of what seems it means to be in a position of authority. It helps them realize that the heads of all these agencies and all our targets are real people and they're really screwing up. It's been a real eye-opener for a lot of our members who are active...they'll get involved, thinking all you have to do is write a letter to your councilman and you'll get this pothole repaired. Then people get active and realize that, no, people in City Hall have their own set of priorities and it's based on a whole different set of things. You need to influence that set of priorities.

From the organizer's viewpoint, then, "education" involves more than information imparted to members. It requires members to change their attitudes towards authority and their way of dealing with it. Indeed the organizing process itself requires many of the same skills that ACORN's opponents use to maintain their positions against change, first, to motivate members' activism and, then, to overcome resistance:

I was sort of disappointed to realize that people who work for ACORN don't think very differently from people who work for New York law firms. They don't think very differently from Madison Avenue advertising people. The strategies that we use are just as high-powered as any of the oppositions'. But on the other hand, if that's the way the American system works, we have to beat people at their own game....

They don't want thirty angry people showing up at their office with signs and chanting. It's sort of like winning through intimidation. I can think of one case. I had a two-week plan around getting an enormous trench filled in. All it took was one phone call. Someone called and said they were from ACORN and they wanted action now or we'd take some action, and it was done that morning.

In order to carry out their mission as organizers, therefore, the interviewees reported that they have to invade peoples' privacy, pressure them to attend ACORN activities, and then apply strong pressure to achieve goals that are not widely shared, or even understood by the majority of people in American society.

Membership Incentives

One of the foci of ACORN organizing is the incentives used to persuade its constituents to join and participate in the organization. Critical to an understanding of these incentives is the perception that the organizers have of what they are and how they work to build and maintain the organization.

The organizers see three factors as playing a role in the members' decision to join ACORN: self-interest, anger, and the nature of ACORN as an organization, but self-interest is the

organizers' bread-and-butter when they are appealing for new members:

People join around very specific issues on their streets and in their neighborhoods. Something they feel very immediately. The majority of our members join when after an organizer has knocked on their door and the conversation is about the vacant lots on their block or the school down the street. Housing may be the number one issue, next to, maybe, crime, that comes up on the doors. I think initially people join out of some level of self-interest on a specific issue.

We're concerned about these things in the neighborhood... basically the common denominator, things that almost anybody in the neighborhood, if they have any kind of desire to improve the situation, will be upset about... potholes, abandoned houses...or if I work in a tenants' group, the conditions of the apartments...that's what people really relate to....

The obvious is the feeling that community improvements can be achieved. Whether they be small, whether they be big. I guess that's the most important one....

The way self-interest operates in neighborhood organizing, however, seems to create a dynamic that expands the benefits beyond the individual and into the larger community in some cases:

Some people, a person in my group is working really hard for a park which she would never use because she lives so far away from it. But she spends so much energy on it, it's crazy. I feel really strange about it. I think it's great. She tells me she wants to see something done. I think it's a commitment towards the community which she really likes...and it's a commitment towards other members of the group that she enjoys that live close to her.

Self-interest then is the mainstay of the incentives used to persuade people to join, but since ACORN organizes specific geographical areas, self-interest can, at times, expand to include issues that are somewhat removed from the specific individual.

One organizer took the notion of self-interest and identification with one's neighborhood a step further and suggested that some members join out of a desire to support an organization to represent the community:

Another reason would be just to participate in being part of some organization within the community, the notion that the community has to be more unified and to participate in it. Some are really oriented toward the goals and some like the idea that there's a community group to belong to.

Hence, the notion of there being an organization to support is a way to persuade some prospective members to join. In a similar vein, but with greater emphasis on the goals and the creation of the means of achieving them, another organizer stressed the value of using the strength of numbers to persuade people to join ACORN:

Sometimes, depending on where somebody is politically, I will talk about the general notion of having an effective organization, touch on a wide range of issues but usually just a real specific pitch emphasizing the idea that you and I can't do it. If you and I go down and complain 'bout getting a bus shelter, they're not going to listen to us. But I talked to six other people today, and they're concerned about it too.... We've got two hundred members in this group, don't you think even if half that many went downtown they'd get something done?

Not unlike the role that effectiveness plays for the organizers, that same role is important in the decision that constituents make to join ACORN.

Finally, anger is important in the organizers' calculations for appealing to prospective members. The organizers claim that many of their constituents are people who have been frustrated because their needs have been ignored for so long:

People are attracted to ACORN because...we do a lot of actions, we make a lot of noise, we get some stuff done, in terms of getting improvements in the neighborhood, different aspects of peoples' lives that before they didn't know they had any control over. People who are fed up with it and feel that if they band together they can get something done join ACORN because they see that it helps.

In addition to awakening peoples' anger over long-neglected problems, one organizer noted that the severity of some of the problems they find in neighborhoods is as effective in promoting anger as a stimulant to join:

I ask very, very general questions and I use words like "change," "neighborhood," "What do you want?" "What do you think?" and sometimes people can't think of anything off the top of their head, so you toss off a couple of specifics. That can get people oiled up. They don't like the fact that there's a playground around the corner from them that's filled with drunks. You can get them steamed up about that. The ACORN model depends on playing on peoples' anger to get them to join, to get them to say what they already know...and capitalizing on that to get them into the organization.

Part of the organizer's tool kit for recruiting new members, therefore, is the anger their constituents experience when they are confronted with the condition of their neighborhood or the lack of services they receive from the government.

ACORN members are thought by the organizers to stay in the organization for somewhat different reasons than they join. These reasons include commitment to the organization and some intangible incentives that they receive from their participation in ACORN. In addition, they also argue that some members stay involved with ACORN for the continued supply of tangible rewards. Clearly, however, the tangible incentives are not sufficient to maintain the organization:

People often join for one very, very narrow reason, streetlights on their block, and then after they get them in the organization, they do work on other things. They see other reasons for having an organization like that.

I think people stay involved over time because...they develop...a sense of what can be achieved through organizing. And then there's definitely a core of people..., especially some of the leaders, who stay active out of a commitment to the notion of organizing. It definitely goes beyond the issues.

Eventually, people go beyond an understanding of the group as just a neighborhood group but also a political force in the country. I think people get a sense of that after they've been involved in the organization for a while.

The organizers claim that the organization itself becomes the focus

of the members' energies and the force that keeps them involved.

The organizers offered several explanations of why people become so committed to ACORN and its maintenance as an organization. The sum of these explanations seems to be a combination of qualities that ACORN organizations possess and the qualities that committed members possess:

I think that the general excitement of the group keeps people involved. Members like actions, they like to come to well-run meetings...that do follow an agenda and get things accomplished. I'd say those two things, more than anything else. And a lot of our members, they just like the notion of fighting City Hall.

My experience has been...that people who come to three or more meetings or actions...that's the one objective determining factor. The experience is somewhat addictive. I would say that people who are willing to work, also, that's a determining factor...who aren't incredibly busy or...lazy. Again, people who get out there and doorknock their block with an organizer, who make phone calls for meetings and all that kind of stuff, I think it sets up a sort of dynamic in their head where it's very difficult for them to live with the inconsistency of investing all this time and energy and then not coming out for the meetings or actions themselves.... People who stay involved are people who have a little bit of time on their hands, are genuinely concerned about their neighborhoods and neighborhood issues, and we've gotten to come out two or three times.

I think that what enhances peoples' commitment is just that they do something that changes their way of thinking, they participate in some kind of action where the action gets something accomplished or at least they scare a person that they see has been pushing them around for a long time or ignoring them. Or if you have a big meeting and you have a new person who chairs it or takes a big part of the agenda. That's the sort of thing that enhances their commitment or it sort of divides...-some people will do that and feel really good about it...other people won't be able to handle it.

In essence, the organizers believe that when the right kind of people are exposed to ACORN they will develop commitment to the organization. Note the features of ACORN activism that they claim will create this effect for the members: excitement, effectiveness in fighting City Hall, addiction, consistency of action and thought, vented anger, and the opportunity to assume responsibility.

Because of this belief in the effectiveness of the ACORN experience in creating the desire for more, the organizers believe strongly that persistence is the key to ACORN's success:

It would have to be ACORN's organizational persistence. They don't let go of people. People who have achieved a goal of theirs and don't come out to meetings for a while but they're on your list and you call them anyway. And then, once in a while something comes up and they do come out. I think what keeps people in is that once ACORN has its grip on someone, they don't let go.

Finally, one of the organizers expressed the belief that ACORN taps an understanding that low-income people have that they should belong to organizations like ACORN:

Just the fact that they're joining an organization shows some kind of knowledge that poor people, wherever they are, have to get together to get organized. There's already that germ of consciousness about how poor people have the same problems everywhere and got to get together. I think getting involved in the organization deepens their understanding of that.

Once the understanding is realized by joining, he claims that it becomes the source of continuing commitment to the organization.

In addition to the commitment that organizers claim the members develop toward the organization, several suggested the purposive incentives operate to promote members' participation in ACORN. One organizer suggested that that was the only way the organization could survive:

What gets them in is a more narrow view, what keeps them in is a broader view. Because I've always thought about in some way the idea of keeping members involved is so difficult because if you look at it, we either fight that specific issue that they're concerned about and win, they'll go home and not come out again. If we fight on an issue and lose,... they'll probably have even more reason not to stay involved in the group, or we don't tackle the issue at all. Again, if that's why you joined, they won't be inclined to stay involved, so the pressures or forces that keep people from staying involved are pretty high.

By this logic, for ACORN to persist, it must recruit members who respond to incentives that are not purely self-interested. The organizers suggested that that was possible in several ways. First, one organizer argued that the members

...are sophisticated enough. You have to give them credit. Just because they aren't saying it doesn't mean they aren't thinking it. You just haven't asked them the right question, you haven't spoken to them at the right time....

Another organizer argued that purposive incentives can be experienced in such a way that the individual can feel rewarded personally for making a contribution toward a public good:

Probably the greatest selective incentive we provide is the intangible one: people knowing that they're part of an organization that is fighting for a lot of important things. That's why press coverage is so important, so that our members that don't ever come out to meetings can...see ACORN on TV fighting to get a traffic light at a dangerous intersection. It makes them feel really proud. I think that's a real selective benefit, because other than their church, there aren't that many organizations our members can feel like are good, positive, helpful organizations that they belong to. There are service organizations like Eastern Star,...but I think it's a different feeling for most of our members.

If we're defining that sense of "I'm involved in something important,"...as the major selective benefit, then certainly people who feel that more emphatically, people who have been defining themselves all their lives as being fighters, they definitely participate. That woman,...all of her life, she's defined herself as somebody who stands up for the little guy and fights to change stuff, doesn't take "no" for an answer. And for that reason,...she's out to everything.

Thus, members apparently derive benefits from contributing to what they perceive as the public good. Paradoxically, however, the same organizer who argued for the effectiveness of selective purposive incentives also argued that ACORN organizations must provide tangible benefits in order to succeed:

Members say you gotta crawl before you can walk. So we do that in organizing. By working on tangible, winnable, immediate, specific kinds of issues. We don't knock on somebody's door and talk to them about...socialized medicine. We deal with those issues that we know we can win and we can look at and point to. And when one of their neighbors say, "That guy who was at your house--is he from ACORN? Did you join that group? Do they get anything done?" They can point to something.

Most people like to see something visible. Again, there are [those]...who understand what the whole struggle is about and we can probably go a year without actually winning something concrete in her particular neighborhood. She won't necessarily be disappointed. But she's obviously the exception.... People who respond most to that sort of approach are people who have tried on their own....The people who have, for example, called the ambulance and had the ambulance not show up for forty-five minutes and then they read that the...city is going to triple the ambulance fee. They respond much better.

His argument makes two basic points: 1) you must keep working on tangible benefits in order to keep recruits; and 2) those who respond primarily to selective purposive incentives are really quite rare and cannot be counted to constitute the entire organization.

The organizers, therefore, offered a wide variety of comments on the kinds of incentives that they are capable of offering to their constituents in return for joining and participating in an ACORN group. The incentive that plays the biggest role, both in recruitment and maintenance, is the specific tangible benefit that satisfies the self-interests of the constituents. The organizers claimed that it is a necessary component of the recruitment process, in particular, but was actually quite significant in the maintenance of an ACORN group as well. The other three incentives that they felt were important in their efforts to create and maintain ACORN groups were anger, the organization itself, and purposive incentives. By their account, they are able to use all of those resources to persuade

their constituents to participate in ACORN.

Organizational Goals

The interview also elicited organizer responses on the kinds of goals ACORN could pursue, given the nature of their constituency. As professional organizers, they responded in a way that reflects their relationship to the ACORN members and their use of issues as organizing tools. This discussion will deal with the organizers' perceptions of: (1) how broad ACORN's goals can be; (2) what limits exist and why; and (3) how flexible the members are.

The two most experienced organizers had a great deal to say about the value of expanding the issue agenda at the same time recognizing that is a difficult task:

It should be broader...in that--we'll probably always be able to say this, or I'll be able to say this--again, because of the intense day-to-day demands,... when doing direct neighborhood organizing, I didn't spend nearly enough time talking with the leaders and members about the broader issues involved. I would talk to them about why it's important to work on this campaign or that campaign, and...in a campaign against a landlord, I'd talk about a particular landlord and the injustices that we've got to fight to change, but not often enough did I spend time talking about the larger housing issue--why landlords get by with this sort of thing. I sort of did with leaders but not enough with members. Part of our whole philosophy or outlook is that people don't learn those kinds of things from conversation, they learn them from actions.

Issue generation, or the process by which ACORN organizers raise

and articulate issues that are both concrete and important to the constituents, pose the difficulty of translating what organizers see as worthwhile goals into campaigns the constituents will support:

Often times, I think we have to work harder to get peoples' interest, or make people understand why this particular issue is very important even though their neighbors aren't knocking on their doors saying, "Hey, why aren't you guys out there doing voter registration?" So I think we have to work with some of those issues a little bit harder and we have to dig deeper into our membership and find the people who are motivated by those things.

His solution to this dilemma is the fact that ACORN pursues many goals at the same time:

That's one of the benefits of being a multi-issue organization; people who are going to be coming to tonight's APAC meeting...may not have come to neighborhood actions for four or five months. They're just not that concerned with potholes or whatever, but they do understand the importance of electoral politics.

The goal of their organizing efforts, as the organizers see it, is to impart their understanding of political issues to the members through political action on those issues. The potential for such a broadened understanding is equal to the members' potential for learning from experience, either in ACORN or, as the following statement indicates, from daily life.

ERA, that surprised me that's on there. It is a less concrete kind of issue among the issues on here. It doesn't surprise me in that most of the people that you talked to are women that are really struggling in their lives, but I wouldn't have thought there would've been as much of a consensus down the line on that. There's no question that the consensus comes out of peoples' experiences and where people agree, it's on issues that they're dealing with every day.

One goal of ACORN organizing, therefore, is to reconcile the organizers' political views with the daily lives of their constituents by changing the latter's lives to include political activism:

The way a lot of these things can become reality is only by doing the kind of work that we do. I think that the military buildup is not going to be stopped by...those who oppose military increases now. They're just a small, small percentage of the population. While a lot of peace groups will talk about getting more rank-and-file blue collar worker people involved... by doing our work, we're making their job easier because people begin to see the links. I always describe our work to people as enlarging the whole arena of political actors. We're getting people who... have never defined themselves as being politically inclined, whatever,...so we're enlarging the progressive end of the political spectrum.

The limits on issues that Boston ACORN can address stem from several factors. First, there is the above-mentioned problem of concreteness:

On the issues where there is the least amount of consensus, they're also the issues that are the hardest to grasp campaign-wise in some ways; they're not concrete, day-to-day things that affect our members' lives. Although you might argue that abortion certainly affects our members' lives. But questions about military aid in Central America and defense spending [are] less a part of peoples' day-to-day living. We...avoid getting heavily involved in those issues for that reason as much as because there's a lack of consensus on them.

The organizer quoted above also expressed the ideal of reconciling broad issues with the daily concerns of members under specific circumstances:

I also...think that on the membership side that there's a difference between peoples' intellectual responses to things like that and peoples' responses after some amount of discussion or context put to the questions. Our board voted to endorse the Central American Referendum that was on the ballot in Boston last fall after a fair amount of discussion on it. Because it was tied to domestic spending and...social programs, and when people make those connections there tends to be more of a consensus on where that issue should go than when it's talked about in a vacuum.

The second limit cited by the organizers is the problem of natural divisions among their constituents: race, gender, and ethnicity. One of the organizers voiced an acute awareness of the limits imposed by the differences within ACORN's class-based constituency:

I think it's important that left-wing organizations address the special needs of minorities, Blacks, Hispanics. ACORN's existence promotes those rights, but we don't really raise those issues..., affirmative action, pro choice, ...or anything like that. Our existence helps those organizations that do, but we don't, mainly because it would split the organization.... We were working on a police protection campaign and right in the middle of it this kid was killed by a cop....Of course, all the Whites said, "Oh yeah, a Puerto Rican, he stole a car, so they should have shot him." A lot of Puerto Ricans, and even some Blacks, were charging police brutality. Most of our leadership felt that way too, though we didn't raise that banner, although we did work with the Puerto Rican group that was involved with the campaign. At one point, we had a number of our White members walk out of a hearing where the issue of police brutality was raised. That wasn't even raised by ACORN, this was raised by some other organization. You could see what would happen if those issues were raised. One of the reasons that ACORN has really failed to see that it's not just a class issue, there are issues of race, that generate excitement among the minorities, and you have to address those issues, too.

The other limit that the organizers discussed is created by the necessities of ACORN's organizing style. Since the constituency responds to short-term, concrete issues and campaigns, the organizing style itself places limits on the kinds of issues the organization works on:

[Many issues] just don't fit into the base. When I go out on the doors with people and ask what they'd like to see better, ...I never hear anybody say, "Stop killer cops." I've never heard anybody say that. But what we ask doesn't lead to statements like that. We ask what they want to see improved on their block, around their neighborhood.

Of course we're ignoring things we should look at. I don't know what we've ever done about healthcare in a major way. We've been able to pack hearings so hospitals remain open in low-income areas, things like that. But so much of what ACORN does is so short-term. We don't have the time, or the staff, or the leisure to really approach basic problems....

Nevertheless, within the issue agenda the organization pursues, the organizers claim there is significant flexibility on which ones should be dealt with at any given time:

In part, it depends on what prompted the change [in the agenda]. In one of our local groups recently, we kind of put on hold a campaign on asbestos in the schools. To a degree, because the organizer was really frustrated about the campaign. But we also put it on hold because there was a twenty-story, 168-unit elderly high-rise run by the Boston Housing Authority that had two elevators that were always broken down. We actually cancelled a meeting on the asbestos issue. We called people back and said... we've cancelled this meeting, this action is going on the day after tomorrow, we need your help in it... I don't think anybody got terribly upset. One thing you have to remember is that most of the issues that our members are concerned about have been hitting them in the face for a long, long time. If they don't see progress over some long term, then it does become a problem.

Most of the primary and secondary leadership see the main goals of the organization, not so much the neighborhood issues. So, if we drop everything and work on the Dallas trip [to the ACORN 1984 National Convention], the members will get behind the idea that we have to spend more time on Dallas and less time on vacant lots.

This flexibility, they claim, stems from the long-standing nature of unresolved grievances in their lives and organizational commitment

and a broader view of issues than just narrow concrete concerns.

The organizers' statements regarding issues they use in their organizing and their constituents' responses to them center on a recurring theme: the desire to generate left-wing progressive political issues limited by the narrower, more concrete political vision of their constituents. The organizers claim that these limits can be expanded by creative organizing and by the members' commitment to the organization. The expansion of their constituents' limits, in fact, seems to be one of the major goals of ACORN organizers.

Views on Tactics

Several of the questions in the interview asked the ACORN organizers to discuss the kinds of tactics they thought were the most desirable for attaining the goals they seek. ACORN literature emphasizes that it is a "direct action" organization; hence, the questions asked why confrontational tactics are important, what effect they have on members, what tactics members prefer, and if organizers have philosophical commitments to confrontational tactics. Once again, the critical question becomes: What technique is the most effective for promoting low- and moderate-income membership and participation in a political organization? Clearly, the tactics the organization adopts to achieve its goals comprise a major portion of the experience the constituents have as members and therefore assume a critical role in the success of the

organization.

The organizers expressed a preference for confrontational tactics in their organizing for a variety of reasons: their educational effects on the members, the excitement they generate, their salutary effects on the organization, and the impact they have on everyone involved. The organizers noted, however, that they must be strategic in the choice of tactics; that is, they must apply the style of tactic that will be the most effective at any given moment in the campaign they are conducting. Moreover, the organizers noted that there are costs for confrontational tactics, even when applied at the appropriate times.

The campaigns for which the organizers develop strategies follow a kind of natural progression that begins with requests for action on an issue, as for example asking that a city agency have vacant lots cleared in an ACORN neighborhood. If the members are not satisfied with the response they receive, they become more direct and forceful:

You just have to think organizationally, what's gonna be best for us. If bargaining or building a coalition is going to advance your cause, fine, but if that fails, then you have to confront people. That's one of the reasons that ACORN is here--to confront people with received opinions, to confront their...very comfortability....

While the organizers prefer the more direct tactics, they recognize that the members do not want to be confrontational until the target has had an opportunity to respond to their non-confrontational requests first:

People say, "Well, let's not go out to his house yet. Let's do this or that first." It's always harder to drive people toward militance. It would be far easier for me to stomach...a tactic that I didn't think would be effective, because that's a one-shot deal. If you take a particular type of action and it doesn't work, on the whole that can be a very positive experience for the group. It can show them that in fact you do need to be militant. In fact, six hundred names on a petition hasn't moved this asshole. We've gotta do something else. I know a lot of times we do an action we know isn't going to be effective but it will build peoples' commitment and involvement....

Despite the organizers' preference for confrontational tactics, one cited a case in his experience in which non-confrontational tactics were preferable:

You build the organization more in the sense by confrontational tactics, though, at the same time, cooperative tactics can be good, I mean it depends on what you're trying to achieve. Cooperative tactics...can be very effective. I've been dealing with vacant lots [since starting with ACORN] and we're trying to get some funding from the federal government or the city for a landscaping project. And that's definitely cooperative tactics. It's gonna be the members doing most of the work, planting the seeds and all that. Rather than getting the city to do it. In that sense, we're getting money from the federal structure of the group to get money from the city...so the group is useful for that. Some people take leadership in that project and are definitely developing their leadership there....

Clearly, organizers apply tactics as they fit strategies, but for reasons noted below, confrontational tactics are the most desirable.

The organizers cited four basic reasons why confrontational tactics are the most effective for the long term: educational

effects, excitement, organization-building, and impact. Clearly, if ACORN organizers are trying to broaden their constituents' view of politics, the educational effects of a tactic would be an important consideration:

It's...the best way to educate the members. When there's a lot of conflict...that's when people change their ideas, that's when new leaders come forward, people that aren't really into the organization. You can't be super-militant all the time, but you have to be able to pull off militant actions, and the most militant actions possible. That's the only way to get anywhere.

Two organizers noted that confrontational tactics are particularly useful for educating members about the organizers' perceptions of the nature of authorities:

They're more polarizing. If you get somebody at a neighborhood ACORN meeting and you're giving him or her a real hard time, either they're going to cave in or they're going to become more defensive and sort of lash out and that's really important because it shows our members [that] in the heat of confrontation people say things they really don't intend to say and it shows our members their true colors sometimes. They'll make some terrible slur about poor people or something...and the members will learn that when push comes to shove, everybody else is going to stand up for his own self-interest and therefore you can't believe him when he says, "Gee, I'd really like to help you guys...." So that's a tremendous benefit.

We went to the BRA [Boston Redevelopment Authority] and the BRA director was furious and it was good to see him get that angry. Because his notions of order had been drastically rearranged. And it was good for us because he was arrogant, rude, and condescending and that helps us all the time.

Thus, by stimulating conflict and forcing a situation in which officers feel threatened and become less diplomatic, organizers feel that members will have an opportunity to see what powerholders truly think about ACORN members and their grievances.

The organizers also claim that the excitement of confrontational tactics generated also makes them more desirable. They described the experience in terms of the feeling of power that it creates for both members and organizers:

I'm sure people remember confrontational longer... than...bargaining or negotiating. I think confrontation is a lot more fun. That's one of the reasons that I like this job, for the fun, sometimes.

Confrontational tactics also help keep the staff going. You can literally see targets sweat, sometimes. And feel pressure you know they never, ever feel.

The one street-blocking that I did, the people... thought it was fun. One man, who I just assumed wouldn't come, came, and [while] everyone else was sort of milling around he was the one who got the ball rolling saying, "Well, I can give them some garbage," and then he began throwing things out on the street. He had such a good time doing that! It felt like you were nine years old. Everyone had fun. The house visits were fun...they're a little afraid to do those, but once things got moving and once a couple of people took charge, people after the fact...tend to think they were more fun than when they were doing it.

One organizer cited what he believes are organizational benefits from confrontational tactics:

Confrontational tactics also help determine who's really a good leader. A lot of people sit on the front porch and rant and rave about the assholes down at City Hall and when they get down there they're quiet and meek as a mouse. Again, when you have a 58-year-old woman standing two feet from the mayor shaking her finger at him and all this stuff and two days later the vacant lots get cut, everybody in the room knows that it wasn't coincidence. So that's yet another benefit.

In other words, besides providing clear and tangible benefits for time and energy involved in ACORN activism, direct action helps to separate the sheep from the goats, helping to determine the degree of commitment members possess.

The organizers' discussions of the impact of confrontational tactics on members and targets identified two valuable results: targets are moved and members feel satisfaction. The effectiveness of confrontational tactics were critical to the organizers:

The ones that are the most militant are the best.... You've always got the...sort of..."bad guys," the people [targets] that are extreme, but then you've got people who are sort of trying to do something. As far as tactics for the "bad guys," militant tactics are the best because that's the only way you're ever gonna get them to listen to you, that's the only way you'll get them to do something.

The more militant the better. It's just so hard to move people toward those things in a lot of ways. And yet, when we do, we almost inevitably win. If we hadn't squatted, we would be nowhere on the home-steading.

While effectiveness and satisfaction are not entirely distinct categories--there is a lot of satisfaction in winning--at least

some of the satisfaction the organizers described was apart from or in addition to success:

I think the more militant, the more popular. People really feel like...they're much more satisfied with really giving hell to some official than being nice to them and not getting anything out of it. We went down to the HUD office and really got into a shouting match with HUD, the head of the Northeast Region..., calling him a liar and a bastard, people were swearing at each other and everything, and maybe we went a little too far, but people came out feeling much better about that than if they had gone down and been really nice to him and still not accomplished anything.

The organizers' evaluations of confrontational tactics are not all positive. Given peoples' preference for dignity and decorum, confrontational tactics have cost ACORN members at times:

A small "down" is that once in a while we lost some of our more mild-mannered members who feel we've been too tough on a target, particularly if they come in on the fourth action of a campaign and this is their first action. They tend to think, "Gosh, why are people being so rowdy?" And they...weren't paying attention during the prep session or they didn't really believe earlier when they said he wouldn't return our phone calls...and that's why we're taking this step.

People tend to just eliminate themselves without a lot of conflict. Going to someone's house or doing a street-blocking, you always lose people. We did a street-blocking and a woman who was very active and attended a lot of meetings just won't have anything to do with us anymore. She hasn't come out and said it, but she hasn't been to a single meeting since. And she's very cool and noncommittal on the phone now.... And so you just can't please everyone and change things. You have to offend somebody.

This same preference for dignified behavior seems to be operating, the organizers said, when outsiders observe ACORN's confrontational behavior:

And we're getting into situations where anybody got arrested or anything like that. That would be a disadvantage. Legal fees...and depending on how the press made it look,...you know, "troublemakers"... but even if you get arrested, it can make them look bad.

And there's the larger picture in which the public perception of ACORN is we're a bunch of crazies, we do what the general public regards as some outlandish things. But that's not a particularly compelling argument against doing militant tactics.... We've got to be true to our membership rather than some amorphous group of people that haven't done anything but read a newspaper.

Finally, the organizers noted that, since confrontational tactics require greater commitment, better preparation, and widespread agreement on the goal and the tactics, their use makes cooperative ventures with other organizations much more difficult:

ACORN tends to "Lone Ranger" it a lot. And, I think, for really good reasons. What ACORN does best is direct action, and a lot of groups simply don't like to do that. And if you get involved with coalitions and if you need a consensus for what you're going to do, other groups are pointless. And if you get wrapped up in coalitions, you dilute whatever strength you have.

Thus, despite the drawbacks the organizers cited, they prefer confrontational tactics for the benefits they provide the members, the organizers, and the organization. While they do not and cannot

use confrontation indiscriminantly, its effectiveness, its ability to shake things up, and its educational value make it a desirable choice of tactics.

The Decisionmaking Process

The organizers recognize the importance of the decision-making process to the quality of their work. The organizers convey a professional concern for the manner in which important decisions are made, first, because they are sensitive to past criticisms that they control the organization and, second, because they feel that, if they are going to organize a group of low- and moderate-income people to educate them in political activism, the place to start is within their own organization. Consequently, responses to the questions regarding the decisionmaking process stressed, in most cases, the complexity of the process and the need to strive for the ideal of member control.

Responses of organizers to the question, "Who makes the decisions in Boston ACORN?" were quite consistent:

Different kinds of staff and different kinds of membership--the head organizer, the rank-and-file organizer, the leadership of the members, and the rank-and-file of the members. In terms of who makes the decisions, you can't pinpoint one of those four elements as making a decision. It's hard to say, because I don't want to say the members make all the decisions because it simply is not true.

It's sort of like...the decisions are made by the leaders, and the leaders are the leaders in the organization and also the staff help make decisions, but always in consultation with the leadership of the group. And those decisions are always made in the context of what the feeling in the broad membership is, or perceived to be.

I think the staff has more power than it should. Probably because it's more expedient to think of something yourself and raise it with the membership in such a way that they'll think it's a good idea. Or even if you have a couple of choices, they're the choices the staff picks, sometimes.

Formally, our executive board does, which meets once a month, but in reality, organizers have a tremendous amount of influence. Some things that we get involved with arise strictly out of membership, things the best organizers would never have even thought of.

...[T]he structure of the organization is such where even if staff is pushing for certain decisions nothing's going to get carried out that the members aren't into. There's no question the final say comes out of the board and the leadership and that the members perceive the staff as working for them, for the organization.

These responses indicate that organizers clearly have a lot of power within the organization but that there are important checks on their power.

One of the most important checks is the desire expressed by the organizers to develop the members' skills and commitment by making sure they are the ones making important decisions. There is a recurring theme throughout all the interviews that the most effective organizers are the ones who delegate as much as possible and confer with the members as much as possible, thereby diluting

their control over the decisionmaking process. Delegating power and responsibility is a major topic and ideal expressed by the organizers:

[T]he times that I've grown most as an organizer and developed is when I've tried to juggle two or three local group campaigns at one time. By taking on that additional load, it's forced me to prod, push, pull, whatever, our members into doing more. And that's what it's all about, I think. If we take fewer [issues] we take more of the load as organizers and therefore we don't empower people as much as we should. There's always a temptation to do more of the job ourselves than we really need to be doing.

Allowing them to take part of the organization, allowing them to take a part of the agenda, allowing them to speak at a public hearing, chair a meeting, just in any of the million different ways of things you need to do to get an organization going. By letting the members participate as fully as possible, by delegating a lot of the stuff the organizer has to do to all the members. That really builds peoples' sense of ownership of the organization.

It's very interesting to me...the degree to which we push membership ownership of the organization. And getting leaders involved in a real serious way. Something we could certainly do more of, and every time we do more of it, it's wonderful for both the leaders and the members. I think that may be one of our shortcomings. We do need to make a concerted effort, just constantly, to get members to be doing things that they certainly are capable of doing and that we certainly don't need to be doing. I wouldn't recommend that everybody be stuck in an office for six months by themselves, but the benefits of that were just tremendous. It made me feel somewhat foolish for not having part of the members do more.

The process of conferring with members and leaders is critical to the proper practice of professional organizing,

according to the organizers interviewed:

Obviously, the organizer is playing some kind of leadership role. People, for good reason, are suspicious of outsiders in the community. One time, me and the staff director...thought it was a good idea to go ahead and move a campaign about something...and said, "Let's do it, we gotta do something. There's all these people out there that want something to happen." And we didn't really involve the leader in the discussion. And we went ahead and did it and she got all upset about it and how we bypassed her, even though it was a good thing and she came, she thought it was a bad way to do it.

I think conflict comes out of a lack of communication, when organizers stop listening to the members...and make assumptions. It's a fine line the organizers are walking sometimes, and that part of what happens... is that organizers...expect...members to pull the reins. It shouldn't work like that. The organizers, themselves, should be from the get-go just asking the questions and making sure that they're structuring things so it is the members making the decisions. Sometimes it happens almost out of convenience... an organizer knows this is what the group needs or we want to build the group in this way, so it'll be quicker if I just make these things happen.

Thus, the potential for organizer control of decisionmaking exists, but at the same time, the organizers are sensitive to criticism and express professional ethics that counter that tendency to some extent.

The organizers' descriptions of the process by which important decisions are made seem to agree that the process requires member involvement for them to be effective.

The organizers will talk to the members and leaders about [a campaign]. The average organizer talks to ten or twelve times more people about neighborhood issues than even our best leader does. So if there is something that's happening,...[an organizer] will find out about it sometimes before the neighborhood leaders will.

In one of the groups I have, they have this playground that's filled with winos, it's just across the street from a liquor store. I didn't all of a sudden decide to work on that like no one else had thought to do it before. People for years have been trying to do something about that. And if you say that to someone and the group will say, "Yeah, that's a good idea." Then you mention it to everyone else, you have a campaign going. I wouldn't say that I made a decision to do that. If people had said it's a bad idea, we just wouldn't have done it...but certainly there's power in the fact that you're a catalyst, that you're certainly the one that's bringing people together. That's powerful. But on the other hand, people won't be brought together for a reason they don't think is good. So you're always held in check.

[Y]ou have a planning meeting before we have a big meeting or an action or anything like that, and for the planning meeting, in theory, the organizer who's pulling it together is supposed to consult with all the different leaders, five or six leaders, and find out what the key issues are, work on getting the agenda together, finding out what people think we should do...and at the planning meeting pretty much make a decision on what we're gonna do, or else, or at least the rough guidelines of what we're gonna do. Then we have a big neighborhood meeting where people from the whole community meet to ratify the ideas of the planning meeting. It's a process between the leaders...and the mass of the membership. The final outcome is dependent on how it is accepted or how people react to it.

In terms of the issues to work on, I believe it's really the membership that decides the issues to work on. The way that can happen is that some people can talk about some issue and others get more excited about those issues at meetings. The organizers sort of transmit those issues to other members and see what they think. In that sense we're sure to get a lot of people involved in the issues that we work on.

Thus, the consensus is that for the organizers to do a good job of promoting a decisionmaking process which generates popular decisions that build excitement and enthusiasm for the organization, they must consult with the members and leaders in a variety of ways, on the doors, while planning meetings, and in the meetings. While all of the organizers recognized that they and other organizers in Boston ACORN possessed and exercised power, they also recognized that ideally they should do so as sparingly as possible, for both ethical and practical reasons.

Summary

The organizers interviewed considered themselves professionals in a field that requires both expertise and responsiveness to their constituents. The responses of the organizers to the questions that sought to discover their motives for pursuing this profession combined goals that they have for American politics, the progressive political agenda, for example, and the opportunity to empower low- and moderate-income people. The combination of these goals seems to contain a contradiction that the organization attempts to reconcile in the way it provides incentives to the members, pursues its goals,

and makes its important decisions. By the organizers' admission, the process is imperfect, yet the organizers claim to hold professional standards of practice and ethics that they feel will promote the issues they, as left-wing political activists, believe in, yet preserve the democratic control of the organization for the membership. The interviews with the members and insights by the researcher and writers on the topic of community organizing will examine their claim in chapters to come.

C H A P T E R V

THE MEMBERS

This chapter will discuss the results of interviews with ACORN members and compare them with the goals of the ACORN organizing strategy. The topics explored by the interviews include the characteristics of the members, their views on why they and others join and participate in ACORN, their perceptions of the decision-making process in ACORN, their views on American politics and political issues, their sense of how the purposes of ACORN activate members to contribute, and their perceptions of the tactics that ACORN uses to attain its goals. The responses of the members allow one to evaluate the impact of ACORN organizing on the constituency. The members' responses also provide insights into the questions raised by the literature and the problems faced by the political organizers.*

*It should be noted that the text of the interview responses will include grammatical errors and underlining to express emphasis where the interviewee was clearly intending to emphasize a word or phrase. The researcher has sought to reproduce the language used by the interviewee as closely as possible and has used this language in the text.

The Characteristics of the Interviewees

The nineteen members interviewed are but a small part of the 2,500 total Boston ACORN members. They do, however, represent a fairly large portion of the more active members and officers of the organization. Among the interviewees were ten officeholders, the representative to the ACORN National Board from Massachusetts, and eight members who have attended national ACORN conventions. The demographic characteristics of the interviewees are quite different from the average political activist, however. Eighteen of the members are black, one white. Seventeen are women. The age and education levels of the members is given in Table 5-1:

TABLE 5-1
AGE AND EDUCATION OF INTERVIEWEES

Age	Number	Education Level	Number
18-25	1	Grade school	1
26-31	2	Some high school	3
32-39	4	High school diploma	7
40-49	3	Some college	3
50-59	2	College degree	3
Over 61	7	Graduate or professional training	2

Six of the interviewees are retired, two are on welfare or disability, and eleven are employed full-time. Only four of them have spouses and nearly all have children. Thus, the group is predominantly black, female, older, high school educated, employed or retired, and single. This is in marked contrast to the Boston ACORN organizers who are all white, single, childless, and college-educated. Moreover, they are considerably younger, between twenty-one and thirty-two, and only one was a woman. Hence, the demographic data is important not only in terms of how similar individuals tend to behave politically, but also in terms of the differences between them and the organizers.

The participation rates of most of the interviewees is quite high, though there was some mix of relative newcomers or people who have remained somewhat on the fringes of the organization. The activities members reported break down into four categories, from those most frequently engaged in to those that are not often engaged in. Table 5-2 gives the data on participation rates in these activities. The average number of activities the interviewees participated in was 9.47 and the range was from one to all eighteen activities. Nine of the interviewees are very active, six active, and four not active. Nine of them are what might be called "charter members" of Boston ACORN, joining during the first round of ACORN organizing in 1980. Thus, the group interviewed comes primarily from the most active, most knowledgeable and most committed segment of the organization, and the responses generally reflect the experiences and insights of long-time members who have participated frequently and in a wide variety of activities.

TABLE 5-2
 ACTIVITIES IN WHICH INTERVIEWEES ENGAGED

Frequency	Activity	No. who engaged
Most frequent	Fundraised	17
	Phoned	17
	Marched in action	16
Very frequent	Flyered	14
	Recruited members	13
	Campaigned in election	12
	Served on APAC	12
Less frequent	Held office	10
	Chaired meeting	10
	Recruited in public	9
	Attended national convention	8
	Doorknocked	8
Least frequent	Led action	7
	Hosted meeting in home	7
	Attended national action	7
	Attended public hearing	6
	Signed support letter	6

The Membership Decision

Responses to the question, "Why did you join ACORN?", fell into four major categories: service to community, serving others, specific issues, and self-development. Few interviewees restricted their answer to one reason, and some of those cited other reasons in response to other questions in the interview. Hence, few of the ACORN members made the membership decision for only one reason. Rather, they were attracted to the organization for a variety of things. It is also noteworthy that few of the interviewees joined for clearly self-interested reasons, referring instead to broader concerns.

The respondents that cited community or neighborhood improvement, for example, discussed issues such as beautification, safety, and crime. Beautification included cleaning up weeds and trash in vacant lots, removing abandoned cars, and development of park areas. Safety issues involved traffic controls at dangerous intersections, WALK signals for pedestrians, and abandoned buildings that threaten children's safety and present fire hazards. They addressed crime issues by their desire to rid the area of buildings that are used as drug hangouts, or that offer opportunities for rapists to hide and commit crimes. They were also concerned with street corners or parking lots in which people regularly gather to drink and dark streets in need of lighting. In the typical ACORN neighborhood, there is always an abundance of potential issues of this kind due

to poor city services in lower-income, and especially black, areas. The ACORN technique of doorknocking virtually always uncovers issues that organizers can use to recruit members. Eleven of the interviewees cited reasons of community improvement for originally joining ACORN.

Two members stated that they joined ACORN in order to help others. They welcomed the opportunity to get involved in a program to do "something to help the poor." Several described ACORN as a service organization like the Eastern Star (and were, in fact, members of that organization also) in which they could help those less fortunate than themselves to obtain life's necessities, such as housing, health care, and public safety. For example, several were involved in a campaign to improve a nearby elderly high-rise. Hence, the felt obligation to help others prompted their decision to join ACORN.

Several members said that they were originally interested in ACORN because it gave them an opportunity to get involved in an interesting organization and engage in new and educational activities. They felt that it would improve the quality of their lives via community involvement, expanded horizons and chances to meet interesting people. They expressed a need to find an outlet for excess energy or extra time in their lives, a need that arose when they experienced changes in their lives such as a move into a new neighborhood or their children's leaving home. One woman said she joined ACORN for two reasons:

Number one, to get out of the house; number two, it's interesting. It's very interesting. You learn about other things, other people, how they doing, how they felt.

Another responded similarly:

I really joined because of my daughter. She was growing up. She was my last daughter...I know pretty soon she was going to be leaving home and I said, "I've got to do something for myself that's interesting to me instead of staying home and being bored all the time."

Perhaps this motivation explains why so many of the members are retired or older people, looking for stimulation once childraising and work are no longer occupying their minds and energies.

Finally, at least five respondents mentioned specific issues that do not fall into the above categories. Most of these were interested in housing, a major campaign in Boston ACORN. Several wanted to obtain housing for themselves. One woman stated: "I got tired of renting and it got so high. And I want a house of my own." A woman, who was in a HUD program already, stated: "I was having a problem with housing. I went to ACORN. Someone had given me the information that ACORN was helping the tenants get results." For one interviewee, health care was the attraction to ACORN:

I got involved because of the health care issue.... They had started to let over half the staff go [at the local community health program where she brings her children] and say to us that they would still give the same health care. We know that wasn't possible.

Thus, in addition to place-related and self-improvement issues, ACORN has appealed to people with individual economic problems, particularly housing.

ACORN therefore appears to fill a variety of needs. Much of the same response came when members were asked about attempts to recruit new members, though neighborhood issues were more frequently noted here. Thirteen respondents emphasized the importance of stressing the benefits ACORN brings to the community or neighborhood. One woman said:

I tell them it actually is an organization that is here to help with anything that you feel as though you can't stand in the neighborhood. You can call the office at any time and put in your complaint. And if it's something we can handle, it'll come up at the meeting and we can handle it.

Another responded: "They need to belong to something that is concerned with the neighborhood and community. They do come into the neighborhoods." Four members emphasized the opportunities to satisfy personal needs. At the same time, they made it clear that this could only be done by actively participating in the pursuit of needed services or goods:

I explain to them that it is a self-help program. A lot of people expect that you pay "X" amount of money per year and you want something done, you come to ACORN and ACORN do it for you. But it's people--ACORN is people. Getting together and getting things done.

I tell them that when you come in you don't come in expecting the board to do your work that you want done. Because you are ACORN. As though when you come in there, you have to be the one come out, and if there's something coming up, you have to get it done because you are ACORN. There's a lot of misunderstanding among people--"I want ACORN to do this, I want ACORN to do that"--ACORN cannot do that. You are ACORN. You come, and ACORN joins along with you. You have to work with us, you can't say, "This didn't get done, that didn't get done." In other words, you have to work with it, in it, and I do that. And I tell them that.

Finally, the respondents noted the effectiveness of recruiting new members by emphasizing the opportunities to help others:

It's helpful to others, a chance to help others... and serve themselves. To get knowledge, to know how to handle certain things in their life.

Thus, the respondents feel that the incentives that were effective in recruiting them into ACORN are also the ones most likely to persuade new people to make that same membership decision, confirming that their experiences in ACORN have met their original expectations.

Why People Stay

Members find satisfaction in their ACORN experiences that run the gamut from solidary incentives to purposive incentives. In the course of the interviews, virtually every kind of incentive available to a political organization was articulated in some fashion by the interviewees. They expressed satisfaction in working with other members, gaining status by their association

with ACORN, learning about politics and the world, improving their neighborhood, helping others, making their lives easier, contributing to a worthy cause, fighting against a common foe, and so on.

Solidary incentives were clearly expressed by several of the members. One woman referred to ACORN as "a friendly organization where everybody is friendly and everybody tries to help one another. [They] try to be cautious of everybody going home in the evening after the meetings all by themselves." One woman went as far as describing ACORN as "a big family. It's a very friendly bunch of people and they're concerned about what's going on in their areas, no matter how small one might think it is, it's of importance." An individual whose social and ethnic background differed greatly from the main body of the ACORN membership stated:

A lot of it is social--I met a lot of nice people, the organizers, the members. I've met people whom I never would have met before. The fact is, I never went to Roxbury, and in the last three years, I've been to situations where I've been the only white man present. And there's never been any unpleasantness.

One member also reported solidary incentives in the form of status:

I've gained a lot of ground with ACORN. I've traveled places that I probably would have never gotten to travel. I've had a lot of good experience with them. I even got a chance to be on the platform with a presidential candidate. And I watched 80-, 90,000 wishful people wishing they could be there. And I got there through ACORN and I'm telling you it was electrifying, it really was. I was in like another world. I got to embrace Senator Kennedy who you'll probably never see unless you talk to an aide and he'll say what he said but you're never gonna get near these people, but I was right there, feeling just as important as they were. All through ACORN.

Material incentives clearly play a role in keeping members involved in the organization. A woman, whose primary motive for joining was to obtain housing, was asked why she stays involved though she has succeeded in her original intentions: "We gotta stay on HUD to be sure they do all the repairs. Hot water, holes in the hallways, no security, no bells, leaks...." Another respondent expressed satisfaction at the material successes within the neighborhood:

It gets a little more interesting every time we accomplish something. And one thing that came to light yesterday...was the fact that we had worked, and we worked very hard up here with blocking the street up here, because we want a streetlight up here. And to my surprise, this weekend, we do have a traffic cop there. We have accomplished the fact that the police have been out.

Hence, material incentives provide satisfaction both at the individual level and the collective level.

Purposive incentives were also among the responses of several

of the members. The satisfaction of working toward a goal with the organization was revealed in statements such as:

I get a great deal of satisfaction knowing that I'm involved with this particular thing, and that some good can come out of it and it's not just for me, it's for everybody. I do like doing things in conjunction with other people, dealing with other people's concerns, not only mine. What's good for me is good for my neighbor.

Another member expressed the sentiment that:

ACORN is the kind of organization that...we fight for what we really want. At first I thought it was a place...like a church that just began, it just a place where people go to talk over their problems. It's not that. People don't go there to discuss their problems, they go there to try to help other people that have problems like police problems, like the police should solve but they don't.

Hence, it is clear that, for some of the members, the organization provides an opportunity to work on issues for the general good--to influence public policy. Thus ACORN organizing does not limit itself to one or several of the incentives available to such an organization, but rather it provides all of those incentives in an effort to maintain members' desire to stay and participate in the organization. There is not a dependence on any one form of incentive. In fact, for any type of incentive, there was a respondent who articulated the importance of that incentive for ACORN's ability to attract and maintain its members.

The Decisionmaking Process

Most of the recent literature on organizing stresses the importance of a decisionmaking process that is participatory and democratic. Respondents offered several views on the level of membership control of ACORN's decisionmaking process. The dominant response, however, was that ACORN is a democratic organization with an open agenda, debate on important issues, and a fair voting process. Twelve of the respondents said that it is the members who make the important decisions in ACORN; two said it is a cooperative effort between members and organizers; one said that organizers make the decisions; four said they did not know. Naturally, it was the less active respondents who expressed no opinion, but the other respondents were equally divided among the active and less active respondents.

The interviewees who claimed that decisions are made democratically were enthusiastic in their support for the process. They expressed their view of the process in the following manner:

The members. All the members. They have a chance to voice their opinion.

Everybody has their say. And then they decide. We all sit around there, and we say, "you think we wanna do so-and-so-and-so-and-so?" And then she go around and ask, "What are you gonna think about this? Do you think we should do so-and-so-and-so-and-so, or shouldn't we do so-and-so-and-so-and-so?" That's the way they do. It's very democratic, you can say whatever you wanna say. At the meetings. I don't know what goes on further up, but they must do it the very same way. We decide, the members themselves... what we gonna do, and how we gonna do it.

You set up a meeting on a particular issue and we have the members come in, especially the board members...and they'll talk about the issue that is at hand and they'll come out with what we would like to see obtained from this meeting. This how the goals are set....

Some members were more critical and either qualified their belief in member control or felt that organizers had more control over decisionmaking than they should. One suggested that organizers were responsible for setting the agenda:

The organizers put it on the table and ask us whether or not we will support or not support a group. We discuss it, if there are any questions, if we do or we don't agree with it, like when they mentioned rent control, whether or not we'd support it, I had a problem with it, supporting rent control. Everybody looked at me like "this" and I said there's some new rules so I don't mind once they explained them to me.

Several went further and suggested that organizers dominate the organization and should give the members more control of important decisions:

The organizers will maintain their control in the organization. It's not their place. To me, it is not their place. It's up to the members to get things going. And I hate to see them always say, "Oh, let's organize." What about us, can't we free the organizers up?

My observation has been it is frequently the organizers [who make the decisions]. And that one of my objections has been that they frequently sit down and talk with themselves and then try to convince the membership. I think, sometimes, that as well-meaning as the organizers are, they should listen to what the membership has to say. It's easy to convince someone who's participating for the first time rather than sit down and talk and get his input and let him make up his own mind. It may not get done as well or as quickly, if you have to get some eighth grade dropout to do a particular task, but, ultimately, that should be the way a democratic organization works--the membership not only pay their dues, but they participate in the decisionmaking and on-going tasks.

Hence, given the opportunity to criticize the decisionmaking process or praise it, nearly all the members praised it.

Members were also asked how they felt when decisions are made counter to their wishes. These questions included three areas of ACORN activity: issues, support for candidates in elections, and tactics. The intent behind splitting these responses is to give ample opportunity for interviewees to express their ideas and to jog their memories for specific events. The responses fell into four basic categories: 1) dissent and abstention from the activity; 2) expression of disagreement; 3) disagreement and then consenting to majority wishes; and 4) keeping quiet on any disagreement.

The most common response was for a member to abstain from participating in an issue campaign with which they disagreed, or not to campaign for a candidate they could not support, or to abstain from an action of which they did not approve. The following

are some clear examples of this response:

That's happened once or twice. For example, the post card registration--I just don't believe in that. I just don't assist in organizing for that issue. And I don't think they expect anyone to support an issue where they have some objection or philosophical objection.

Well, I still have to work to maintain unity. If I didn't agree on it, the majority wins. As I said, we take a vote on it. And if twelve members are there, and I'm three, nine want it, three don't, I'm one of the three, then, you know, I have to go along with the board. I'll support it. That doesn't mean I'll work on it, but I'll support it.

More than likely I won't support them. It goes back to the type of person I am. I would say, "No, you can forget me this time. I'll catch you when you get something else. I don't feel like you doing the right thing."

That has happened. And I have managed to kind of work around that. As they were working with different candidates. So I get to work with a candidate that I liked. That has happened.

I would have no part of it. I wouldn't bother.... There was one night they was having a meeting...at the church. I had on some pants that night and it was kind of cold. And I don't believe in wearing pants to church. That night we attending meeting outside because I refused to go in. There was two or three other women in pants and they felt the same way. If you feel strongly, speak your mind, stand by it.

Thus, these members express their views and act on them by absenting themselves from the organization's activities, a form of democratic choice.

The second response that members expressed, disagreement, contains an element of obligation on the part of the dissenter.

The following statements express a readiness to dissent openly and clearly as a part of the decisionmaking process:

I'd tell 'em. That's as far as I'd go with that. Do you mean would I pull out? If it bothered me enough I'd just disagree with them, that's all.

I would tell them. The majority wins when you start, you know. If they decided and I didn't agree with it, then I'd let them know I didn't agree with it, that's all. I wouldn't say that I'd win. But just like everything else, I'm entitled to my opinion. If I didn't like what they was doing, then I wouldn't agree with them. [What if you lost?] I'd just drop it. If the vote went against me and the majority won, I'd still support it.

Everything's supposed to have a leader, yes, but you're not supposed to be a blind follower. If you disagree, disagree. It's a democracy; you're entitled to your own opinion.

Interestingly, these interviewees expressed the willingness to go along with the decision once the process had been followed. This sentiment was most clearly expressed in the following statement:

If I'm outvoted, then I go along with the organization. Because I realize that no matter how strong I feel like, it doesn't make it the best way to do it. So I go with the majority.

Despite the eagerness many expressed to dissent when they were not agreeing with the ideas that were being considered, one member took a rather different view of the role of the dissenter:

I guess I would just have to keep quiet. There's too many members for me to be the one to persuade anybody. A decision would be made by the three communities [Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan].

Thus, the members seem generally willing to exercise their rights to dissent within ACORN. Failing that, they recognize the opportunity to dissent by abstaining from whatever activity they wish to.

In a similar vein, the researcher asked if there was any persistent conflict between participants in ACORN. The existence of such conflict and the manner in which it is resolved would reflect on the degree of democracy in the organization. Few interviewees felt there is any serious conflict. Only five could identify any significant conflict in Boston ACORN. Of these, none thought the conflict presented a serious problem, as the following statements suggest:

I've seen conflict, for example, where members feel the organizers are having too much to say. And that has been the cause of a group of people splitting off who felt they should have a bigger say and that the organizers should be sitting back from it. Usually if there is a dispute, the members speak up and the organizer adjusts. They don't realize they're intruding too much. The organizers I've been with have universally been well-meaning and if you tend to say, "Well, look, I think we should do it this way instead of that," they'll be reasonable to listen. And if they don't think they should back off, they'll convince you or if you think you're right, they'll do it.

Since I am the head person within the community... the membership will call on me and make a complaint. Then I'll go directly to the organizer. And it's always worked out.

One might reasonably expect members to be somewhat reticent to discuss serious dissatisfaction with the organization's handling of conflict with a researcher, but the evidence that they provide under the circumstances does not suggest that it is a serious problem.

Thus, the interviewees expressed rather strong endorsement of the quality of democratic decisionmaking in Boston ACORN. Their perception is that they play the most important role in the process and that organizers do not dominate the organization. While several of the respondents expressed mild dissatisfaction, this was outweighed by the enthusiasm of the others. Moreover, the interviewees who serve on important committees such as the Boston ACORN board and APAC are in a position to observe the decisionmaking process and many of them are very concerned that they be able to control the organization.

Members' Political Views

In order to assess the value of purposive incentives in ACORN and understand the potential conflicts that such incentives may create, it is necessary to determine the members' political views and analyze them. Also, if ACORN is attempting to politicize its constituents and involve them in a progressive political movement, then one way to assess this effort and its impact on ACORN constituents is to examine the members' political views. The interview included two sets of questions designed to do this. The first was

a set of opinion questions on issues that are generally associated with a progressive political agenda. The second asked what the interviewees' ideological views and party affiliations are.

The opinion questions included a variety of issues and allowed for five responses: "Strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree," and "don't know." The questions included topics from nuclear power to a guaranteed annual income. Two of the questions were about issues ACORN has been actively involved in: housing and health care. Several issues (the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion) were social issues included to determine if responses would differ from those for the economic issues. Finally, there were foreign policy and arms spending questions to determine if they were part of a significant pattern in the interviewees' political views. (The complete text of these questions is found in Appendix I.)

Responses to issue questions fell into three patterns of consensus and dissensus among the respondents. Table 5-3 shows a distribution of the members' responses dividing the issues into categories based on level of agreement among them.

TABLE 5-3
MEMBERS' ISSUE STANDS

	Str. Agree	Agree	Dis- Agree	Str. Disag.	Don't Know
<u>Strong consensus</u>					
Pass ERA	8	9	1	0	1
Free medical care for needy	8	11	0	0	0
Free housing for needy	8	10	1	0	0
<u>Dissensus</u>					
Provide guaranteed annual income	4	4	7	1	3
Govt. should pay for abortions for needy	2	5	8	2	2
Women have a right to abortions	3	9	5	1	1
<u>Dissensus with many undecided</u>					
Should socialize essential public services	0	5	7	1	6
Should stop nuclear power	3	8	4	0	4
Cease U.S. involvement in Latin America	2	6	4	1	6
Should continue arms buildup	1	7	5	1	5

The three patterns one may discern in the interviewees' responses are the "strong consensus," "dissensus," and "dissensus with many undecided." The question on ERA, health care, and housing elicited strong agreement among nearly all the respondents with only one "don't know" response among them. This suggests, first of all, that the members' involvement in ACORN campaigns on the health care and housing issues may have influenced their responses. Also, since all but one of the respondents were women, the support for ERA suggests a high level of solidarity among them on this issue. It is not possible to determine if this came before or after the members' decision to join ACORN.

There was strong dissensus on the issues of guaranteed annual income and the abortion questions. Again, there were not many "don't know" responses, indicating strong and well-developed opinions. The "strongly agree" and "strong disagree" responses suggest more than mild disagreement being expressed on these issues. Moreover, the dissent from the progressive agenda is clear. The dissensus on the social issue of abortion demonstrates that social conservatism is present among the interviewees in this study. The question on the guaranteed annual income also suggests problems surrounding government benefit programs for low-income people. Thus, the group of issues labeled "dissensus" reveals problems that progressive political organizers must deal with when they work with this constituency.

The third category had fewer responses in the "strongly

agree" and "strongly disagree" categories and many more "don't know" responses. This suggests that these issues, vital to many activists on the progressive left, are not salient to the interviewees. It is particularly noteworthy that the issues of American involvement in Latin America and the arms buildup under the Reagan Administration are quite similar to the kinds of issues that the organizers cited as being critical to their original involvement in political organizing. Moreover, the question on socializing essential public services such as electric companies might well have struck a responsive chord among political activists who have been involved in many utility rate conflicts. Certainly, the utility issue has not been framed in that manner, but long-time members surely have had opportunities to acquaint themselves with issues related to public service corporations. Hence, this third category included some important issues that have not been addressed directly by ACORN but are important to the progressive left agenda.

The contrast between the organizers' views and the members' views can be demonstrated as well by comparing their responses to these issues. The four organizers were unanimous in their "strongly agree" response to the following questions: pass the ERA, free medical care for the needy, housing for the needy, and the woman's right to an abortion. The only other responses were "don't know" (3), "agree" (6), and two "undecided" responses. (The question on the arms buildup was transposed to correspond to progressive views.) Thus, it is clear that the organizers adhere to the progressive

agenda contained in the issue questions in a way that is both consistent and intense.

Another way to compare the political views of the members and organizers is to look at their responses to the questions on ideology and party identification. Table 5-4 compares the ideologies of the two groups:

TABLE 5-4
IDEOLOGY OF MEMBERS AND ORGANIZERS

	Very Liberal	Liberal	Mod- erate	Conser- vative	Very Cons.	Don't Know
Members	3	5	8	1	1	1
Organizers	2	1	0	0	0	1

The members show a tendency toward the middle, hence, the eight "moderate" responses. Nor were they reluctant to describe themselves as "conservative" as two of them did. The organizers, on the other hand, readily referred to themselves as "liberal" or "very liberal." One refused to classify himself since he felt his ideology is too unlike the categories offered to be included with them.

Party identification showed differences between the members and organizers as well. Table 5-5 presents these differences:

TABLE 5-5

PARTY IDENTIFICATION OF MEMBERS AND ORGANIZERS

	Strong Democ.	Democ.	Indep.	Repub.	Strong Repub.	Don't Know
Members	6	7	4	1	1	0
Organizers	0	1	2	0	0	1

The organizers have either weak or no allegiances to party while some members have strong allegiances showing further differences in political views and perspective.

ACORN Activism and Political Views

Since organizers operate under the assumption that ACORN activism will change the way members think about politics, it is useful to compare levels and longevity of activism with political views on the issue questions in the interview. The respondents' length of membership in ACORN and the number of activities in which they have engaged can be multiplied to create an overall measure of ACORN activism or Activity Scale. When the respondents' Activity Scores are computed, they fall into three levels of participation. A level of progressive ideology can also be calculated by assigning a value of two to "strong agree" responses, one to "agree," zero to "don't know," minus one to "disagree," and minus two for "strong

disagree" with the arms buildup responses reversed. This presents an estimate of the conformity of the respondents' responses to a left progressive agenda, a Progressive Index. Table 5-6 provides the scores of all the respondents on these indices.

TABLE 5-6

ACTIVITY SCORES (Years in ACORN x Activities) v. POLITICAL VIEWS

Activity Score	Years Member	Activities	Ideology	Party ID	Progressive Index
72	4	18	L	D	12
56	4	14	VC	D	7
45	3	15	VL	I	10
44	4	11	M	I	8
42	3	14	L	SD	4
40	4	10	M	D	6
39	3	13	VL	SD	5
36	4	9	L	SD	10
30	5	6	M	R	2
28	4	7	M	D	2
26	2	13	L	SD	3
22	2	11	M	D	4
18	2	9	M	SD	-1
16	4	4	C	R	1
8 2/3	2/3	13	VL	D	7
2	1/2	4	M	SD	1
1 1/2	1/2	3	L	I	3
1	1/6	5	DK	D	5
3/4	3/4	1	M	D	7

The respondents' scores on the Activity Scale fall into three categories: high, medium, and low. The respondents with the high scores are all long-time members who have engaged in most of the activities cited in the interview. The middle category includes members who have been in ACORN for a moderate length of time (two years) or have been in longer but have not participated in a wide variety of activities. The respondents with the low Activity Scores have all been in ACORN for less than a year. The distinction between the categories as determined by score--high equals 36-72, medium equals 16-30, and low equals $3\frac{1}{4}$ - $8\frac{2}{3}$ --corresponds to distinct differences between the interviewees' experiences. It is useful, therefore, to compare the three categories according to ideology, party identification, and Progressive Index, to determine if there are significant differences. Any differences, of course, would only suggest possible differences within the ACORN membership. The small size and unscientific nature of the choosing of this sample prevents making claims about ACORN members generally. Table 5-7 shows the ideology and party identifications of the three groups.

TABLE 5-7

ACTIVITY SCORES v. IDEOLOGY AND PARTY ID

POLITICAL VIEWS OF RESPONDENTS WITH HIGH ACTIVITY SCORES (N=8)

<u>Ideology</u>		<u>Party ID</u>	
Very conservative	1	Strong Republican	0
Conservative	0	Republican	0
Moderate	2	Independent	2
Liberal	3	Democrat	3
Very liberal	2	Strong Democrat	3

POLITICAL VIEWS OF RESPONDENTS WITH MEDIUM ACTIVITY SCORES (N=6)

<u>Ideology</u>		<u>Party ID</u>	
Very conservative	0	Strong Republican	0
Conservative	1	Republican	2
Moderate	4	Independent	0
Liberal	1	Democrat	2
Very liberal	0	Strong Democrat	2

POLITICAL VIEWS OF RESPONDENTS WITH LOW ACTIVITY SCORES (N=5)

<u>Ideology*</u>		<u>Party ID</u>	
Very conservative	0	Strong Republican	0
Conservative	0	Republican	0
Moderate	2	Independent	1
Liberal	1	Democrat	3
Very liberal	1	Strong Democrat	1

*1 "Don't Know"

There do seem to be some significant differences between the high activity group and the others in the ideology responses. They seem to identify with liberalism more clearly. To a lesser degree, they express allegiance to the Democratic Party. What most clearly distinguishes them from the others, however, is the Progressive Index. The average index for the high activity group was 7.75 with scores ranging from four to twelve. The medium activity group average was 1.83 and the range was from minus one to four, while the low activity group averaged 4.6 and ranged from one to seven.

The evidence from this data shows that intensity and duration of ACORN activism has had an impact on the interviewees' political views. It is noteworthy, also, that the low activity group exceeds the medium group in several of the categories, which suggests that Boston ACORN has attracted some individuals with progressive views from among its targeted constituency and not had to rely solely on ACORN participation to instill those ideas.

The differences among the interviewees, while not conclusive and only suggestive, raise some questions about the way that purposive incentives operate in ACORN. The members that fell into the middle category, for example, who had been long-time members yet were quite conservative, raise the question of what the members perceive as the goals of ACORN. In other words, why do they contribute to an organization that promotes a program designed to foster progressive leftist change in American politics yet they do not

share those values? The entire question of the relationship between ACORN activism and ideology surely merits further study. The next section raises the question of what they think ACORN is trying to accomplish and, of equal importance, how likely it is that ACORN will succeed, for what is the purpose of contributing when the chances of success are small?

Organizational Goals

Members were asked about the goals of ACORN and in particular about the goals of Boston ACORN. While some members responded with specific goals, such as rent control or more housing for low- and moderate-income people, others spoke in more general terms about creating a power base, such as the following:

We hope to gain more political power through the neighborhood structure. And that's by getting more people involved in political issues. Say, for instance,...the majority of people in the neighborhood don't know who their representatives are so that's one of our goals we would like to give the people, so at least they know who their representative is and make the representative accountable to the neighborhoods.

Those who responded with specific issues were asked to be as thorough as possible in order to obtain a numerical count of issues and be able to better compare answers. One interviewee could not cite any goals of Boston ACORN, four cited fewer than three, eight cited between four and seven, and five either cited more than seven or gave responses that reflected a broader, more involved

understanding of Boston ACORN's goals such as the one quoted above.

When members were asked about ACORN's national goals, they gave similar responses but with lower frequencies. Six stated they did not know of any national goals that ACORN had, some adding they were not at all familiar with the national organization. Five cited four or fewer goals, two cited a moderate number of goals, and six either gave a long list of goals or made broader statements such as:

All the things we've been trying to work: unity, between low- and moderate-income people, and that way we can crack poverty and all the hardships poor people have, education-wise, foodwise, even, in some cases, things like that.

or:

Better conditions of the poor. That's the way I see it. They want change, they want things people are entitled to. That's the way I see it.

It is clear from the higher incidence of "Don't Knows" that the members were more familiar with local than national activities of ACORN.

A further sense of identification with the goals of the organization was tested when members were asked if and why they thought ACORN was successful in attaining its goals. The positive responses followed three themes: unity, hard work, and the development of political clout. Negative responses centered on the difficulties of motivating members to participate and the

recalcitrance of powerholders in the political system. Thirteen of the nineteen responded that they felt ACORN was quite successful, one said it was unsuccessful, and three were ambivalent. Two did not have an opinion of ACORN's degree of success.

Positive responses to ACORN's political success were unreserved in their praise. The ones who praised its unity made comments such as:

It's an organization. It's a community. It's working with different issues. You work with housing, there's a number of organizations that only work on one issue, they only work on housing. But if you've got a health problem, that's not their problem. That makes a big difference in how ACORN works and how other organizations work.

Togetherness they have been. In dealing with people. They even brought people together that wouldn't be together.

We fight hard. Like I said, it's a handful of people, but when a handful of people band together, it's a whole community. All we do is just band together.

We're always just like a big happy family. When they come in and we all go out to a meeting they all come back here to my house and sit down and eat together. They get tired out in the street, that's [pointing to her couch] they bed. We're just like a big happy family. There's no prejudice with us.

Further evidence of identification with the organization and its goals was shown by statements regarding the hard work invested in ACORN's success:

Communications among the people and the members, and hard work. Very hard work.

Because they are very active. And they started off with nothing they've been working up and I think they're doing good.

Finally, those who cited ACORN's political power as a reason for its success displayed a degree of pride and identification though not as direct as the statements of the kind made above.

Because sometimes when you call the people [e.g., city officials] up, they think you're another ACORN group. They have heard about ACORN. There really is some recognition there. I think they're successful where they need to be successful--the people that's responsible for the things we want. They seem to know that we are here. We're not an invisible person...as we were without the organization.

In the different campaigns that we have launched, we have gained more recognition, more clout and everybody's really acknowledged in the goals that we've had how really successful we are....

For one thing, they have the backing and support of the people. And then, I notice that when we have to go to city officials or state officials, they kind of fear ACORN for some reason. I guess they're aware that we're a group that has a lot of power and strength behind us. When we send them a letter or make a phone call or go to their office for an action, nine times out of ten, they respond quickly. Because they fear if they don't, ACORN is going to go to the newspapers and blow it up. So they get results because I think they really fear they're playing around with a powerful organization.

Among the respondents who thought ACORN was successful, therefore,

the three themes of unity, hard work and power were clearly articulated to explain that success.

Not all of the respondents were as sanguine about ACORN's level of success. Doubts about its performance center on the difficulty of developing a powerful organization of low- and moderate-income people:

You're dealing with people who are inexperienced, in politics, and naturally, they make mistakes, sometimes. People join and drop out. Ultimately, when you consider we began with people who were just unemployed sharecroppers out in Arkansas, and we're in twenty-six, twenty-seven states now, and in three or four cities we're having some effect in the elections we're very successful.

We've got a long way to go yet. Well, mostly, I know not all members can be like me, but I haven't been attending the meetings and keeping up with what's going on, but the rest of them don't do that either. It's going to pot. If the younger people stick with the meetings and keep up with what's going on they can do much better.

If we don't get the members to actively push for all these issues then we're not gonna get anywhere. I think that Boston is a little slow compared to some of the other places.

Hence, several of the members recognize that low- and moderate-income people lack skills and experience and, as much of the scholarly literature attests, are not strongly motivated to participate in political organizations on a sustained basis.

Finally, one respondent emphasized the resistance that ACORN faces in working on its goals:

At City Hall they more or less ignore our issues, they don't see the importance. They're more interested in the business district, in putting more money in that.

The final set of questions, designed to determine the members' commitment to ACORN's goals, asks what they would do if ACORN departed from its multi-issue agenda and became a single-issue organization. The researcher chose the single issue the interviewees had previously stated was most important to them. Many of the responses asserted strongly that ACORN's goal was power or that remedying the problems of all of the members was the primary goal:

I think all goals are important. I can't say that one is more important than the other. No matter how small, they're all important. Ten blocks away might be an issue concerning street lights that ACORN's dealt with. To those families over there that's a major importance to them because of safety in their area--to walk and there's no streetlights and it's dark and there's crime, people are afraid. So that's important to them. I think every issue is important.

The most important, of course, is jobs. And the health. And housing. All of it is the most important. Trying to separate is kind of hard, because they're all like connected. You've got to have health to work, you've got to have a house to live in when you come home from work, so they all connect, so you can't say, "The most important."

The important goal is power. People are getting some sense of control of their own lives, rather than simply following the drift of obeying orders from some civil servant. They can organize and get some input for a little bit of control over their day-to-day lives.

The same sentiments were expressed when they considered the question of transforming ACORN into a single-issue organization:

I wouldn't feel too great about that because that's what makes us an organization above all other organizations. Most of the other organizations just have one thing that they can deal with; they can't deal with other issues. I think that's a handicap. I would not feel good about it at all.

If you just start focusing in on just housing, on just jobs, then you're coming away from where you said you were. And I wouldn't like to see them do that at all. I like the way they're set up, I like the way they work, I've been happy working with them, and if there were any changes geared that way, in other words, coming in from other organizations, focusing on just main issues, I wouldn't like to see that. Because ACORN has many goals, and the main goal is to help the low- and moderate-income person.

The response indicated a high degree of confidence in the organization and satisfaction with the multi-issue format. Further, many of them articulated one of the central themes of the ACORN organizing strategy within their responses: the necessity of the multi-issue strategy for building power and realistically addressing the needs of the low- and moderate-income constituency.

Tactics

Given the organizers' views on tactics and their impact on the members and the kinds of effects they are designed to create, it is useful to examine the members' views on those tactics, especially confrontive tactics. It is critical to the success of

the organization that the members are positively disposed to the tactics in which they are engaging.

Discussion of tactical questions with the members took two paths: questions as to 1) the kinds of groups the members feel are good allies, and 2) the kinds of tactics that are effective in achieving the organization's goals. The first set is designed to determine how the members feel about other organizations; the second set is intended to probe the experiences members have had participating in these tactics, discover their preferences, and determine their readiness to engage in the various tactics. Finally, interviewees were also asked if they prefer confrontational or bargaining tactics. This gave members an opportunity to expand on their preferences and cite which features they think are most important about the tactics the organization uses: respectability, hostility, drama, camaraderie, dignity, and so on.

Table 5-8 gives the results on questions about coalition partners the members feel are most effective to work with:

TABLE 5-8
COALITION PARTNERS

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't Know
Unions	4-1/2	9-1/2	0	0	5
Churches	2-1/2	5	4-1/2	1	5
Peace groups	2	4	4	0	9
Politicians	1	9	3	0	6
Community organizations	2	6	4	0	7
Students	1	7	1	0	10

It shows little difference between organizations. The only important difference seems to be that between unions and other groups, as it is the only category in which there are no "fair" or "poor" responses and it leads in "excellent" and "good" responses. Aside from that, members seem to be rather charitable in their assessments. Only one "poor" was chosen, and every choice got at least one "excellent." Thus, the responses do not seem to indicate a distaste for other organizations for whatever reason, and some sympathy for unions, suggesting perhaps, some class solidarity.

Table 5-9 also shows few differences in responses.

TABLE 5-9

MEMBERS PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF TACTICS

Type/Tactic	Effectiveness Ratings				Didn't Know
	Very Effec.	Effec.	Somewhat Effec.	Not Effec.	
ELECTORAL:					
endorse candidate for election	5	11	2	0	1
campaign for an endorsed candidate	6	10	0	0	3
elect ACORN member to office	5	5	1	2	6
CONVENTIONAL:					
attend public hearing on issue	7	5	1	0	6
have political supporter speak at an ACORN meeting	5	10	1	0	3
conduct a referendum campaign	3	0	0	0	10
CONFRONTIVE:					
conduct an action in a public place	8	7	1	0	3
conduct an action in a private place	3	7	1	1	7
demonstrate on the street	3	9	1	0	6
have political opponent speak at an ACORN meeting	9	7	0	1	2
block traffic on a street	4	6	1	4	4

The two tactics that received the highest number of "very effective" responses were actions in a public office and inviting opponents to attend ACORN meetings. Both of these held honored places in the standard notions of what is democratic in American politics. Certainly, one must be able to protest to public officials for redress of grievances, and one should give an opponent an opportunity to be heard. The two "don't knows" given to inviting opponents to meetings also seems to indicate that members are familiar with this tactic, as it is widely used by ACORN groups. The same can be said about endorsing candidates, an activity that the Boston chapter of ACORN has done a lot of in the last two years. Conversely, ten "don't knows" for referenda campaigns shows a clear unfamiliarity with this political tactic. Finally, the four "not effective" responses given to blocking streets seems to indicate a distaste for this activity among the interviewees. The difficulty of executing it and the risks involved could explain this figure.

The interviewees expressed several different views on the desirability of confrontation versus bargaining tactics. Their support for confrontation was not strong. The categories of responses include: 1) confrontation is the most effective; 2) bargaining works better; and 3) one must choose the style that fits the given situation. People who preferred confrontation did so for a variety of reasons:

...Everyone knows and sees and hears about it. And lots of those things are embarrassing to the public--...they don't want to be embarrassed. It's more public...people know more what's going on. We've been out marching and dealing and people they had no idea what was happening. The more people know, the more effective it is.

Bargaining can be a long, drawn-out thing. To do it directly is much more impressive to the people [the target of the action].

It's a shock to the system. To shake you up. Wake up somebody. Somebody said once they didn't think there was a racial problem in Boston. They needed confronting. Because if they can't see a problem, something wrong somewhere. They probably have never been confronted with the real issues. Sometimes it's more effective.

[confrontational?] Always. You have to meet the person face-to-face. In order to get whatever you want done. You cannot, I never like an aide writing me back for anything. The mayor, for example, "the Mayor said..." There's nothing like meeting the Mayor face-to-face. I'd rather hear it from the Mayor's mouth. I want to hear it from the Senator's mouth. I want to hear it from the President of the bank's mouth. I don't want to hear it from his secretary.

It is clear that the members who chose confrontational tactics feel that opportunities to address the individual responsible for solving a problem and express grievances directly is both more effective and more satisfying. Moreover, the public nature of it draws attention to an issue that the members feel strongly about and increases their moral leverage. Finally, their responses indicate they feel that confrontation conveys more information to

the target about the gravity of a situation and is capable of being more powerful in moving the target.

Not all of the respondents share this affection for confrontational tactics. Several felt they hurt more than helped:

I thought they carry to many members when they went down to talk with city officials. It was to get in to talk with city officials. It was hard to get in to talk to them, but if they'd had two strong mens or a woman and a man, to...sit down and talk to them they might have talked to them. We couldn't get to Mayor White, none of them. We just couldn't get to them, they just wouldn't come out.

...We went there with papers demanding and as a result, we didn't get it. I don't think it was a good tactic to use.

Others seemed more pragmatic and suggested that the tactic should fit the situation. Hence, bargain when the other party seems prepared to bargain in good faith and confront when they do not:

They all work. It's according to the people, but the end is the same because you never start out confronting them. We always start out calling them and talking to them. And if that gets what we want, that's all we do. We only confront them when they will not talk. When they tell you they're going to a meeting and they will not give you an appointment to come in and talk to them, the response you get from whom you are approaching determines what procedure you're gonna follow.

Thus, some of the answers express desire to confront, others, a reluctance. Still others feel it is a matter of expediency; whatever will succeed in a given situation.

Conclusion

The members' comments and responses on the interviews provide a great deal of information on their experiences and perceptions of ACORN membership. They help answer some of the critical questions regarding political organizing of low-income people in American politics: why they join political organizations, what their role is in such organizations, and how it affects their views on American public policy issues. While the data from this interview is limited by the number and selection process of the respondents, it does provide substantive and interesting data on this topic.

C H A P T E R V I

CONCLUSION

When this researcher completed the fieldwork for the Master's Thesis, organizing a neighborhood in a low- and moderate-income area of New Orleans, he experienced two overwhelming feelings: satisfaction and wonder. The satisfaction came from looking over the neighborhood and seeing stop signs erected and vacant lots cleared at the request of the newly-formed group in a period of a few months. Residents of the neighborhood were aware of the problems that existed and over the years, had made attempts to form community organizations to deal with them. At no time, however, had so much been accomplished to improve the quality of life in so short a time. Moreover, the improvements came as a result of a group effort by community residents. This laid the groundwork for continued improvement by and for the community. Several years after the group was organized, an open drainage canal that bordered two sides of the neighborhood was covered over at a cost of several million dollars, attesting to the continuing impact of the organization--and adding to the wonder that the researcher experienced.

The researcher had no significant political experience prior to the fieldwork he conducted. Had he gone into the

neighborhood and begun speaking to its residents about the need for improved traffic safety or covering the drainage canal, there is no reason to believe that he would have succeeded in creating the degree of change that actually occurred. Nor did the researcher, despite many hours spent in the hot New Orleans summer sun, sense that he had done anything dramatic, difficult, or brilliant. Rather, he simply followed the ACORN model of neighborhood organizing relatively closely, maintaining procedures and schedules prescribed by the model. The experience was very much like following a recipe in cooking and creating a beautiful dish, never having made anything similar to it or understanding the theory behind the process. The process unfolded, the members joined, the "wins" were achieved, and the organization succeeded. It was a process that has occurred many times in ACORN's history--a new organizer without skills or experience signs on and receives training on the job in the first neighborhood organizing drive.

This experience goes to the heart of the study. The satisfaction and wonder this researcher experienced is integral to an understanding of the creation and maintenance of political organizations as this case study approaches it. The two vital ingredients to which the political science literature has not given adequate attention are the organizer/entrepreneur and the organizing strategy. Both of these are implied in much of the literature, but this case study has sought to expose them more fully and recognize their importance for the understanding of political organizations.

The satisfaction and wonder this researcher experienced point up several of the dynamics that emerge from the interviews in this case study as well. First, the satisfaction was not what the researcher would have predicted. While the ideological leaning of the researcher was generally to the left and sympathetic to ACORN rhetoric, he did not expect that stop signs and mowed vacant lots would be critical to fulfilling ACORN's fundamental goals. Second, he did not realize that an individual organizer was so critical to the success of an organizing drive. Neighborhood residents made major contributions to the organization's ultimate success, but it was the organizer who initiated the process, coordinated the work, maintained the schedule of events, and orchestrated interests, issues, energies and goals. Without the initiative of the organizer to enlist members, either personally or with the help of members, virtually no one would have joined. Few, if any, joined without being asked directly to pay dues and take part. Some, in fact, only joined after being approached several times and, of those who participated, most did so in response to frequent and repeated requests to take part in a number of specific activities, from meetings to actions at City Hall. The requests, however, were not appeals to specific self-interest but were part of the organization's routine activities as the organizer presented them. For the most part, neighborhood residents and members were largely ignorant of the implications and significance of their participation in ACORN. Nor did they know if these activities were

routine for ACORN or similar political organizations. They relied on the judgment of the organizer and on their sense of the legitimacy of the organization. Eventually, the researcher's notions of what would attract people to the organization and sustain their allegiance were discarded in favor of the members' options about what projects to target. Indeed, the process taught by the ACORN Organizing Model and the Head Organizer who trained the researcher seemed to involve little in the way of rational calculation or thorough organizational planning, yet it resulted in an organization that had a significant impact on the quality of life for the neighborhood and its residents. This study has sought to frame that satisfaction and wonder into a better understanding of the process--one that strengthens understanding of political organizations in general.

The data from the interviews do not provide conclusive findings, nor are they major departures from the conventional wisdom regarding the membership decision and subsequent formation of political organizations. The analysis of incentives and the application of the concept of organizing strategy do not revise thinking on political organizations, either. Rather, they confirm some notions and refine others in the process of reorganizing the concepts in a systematic fashion. Clearly, an additional strength of this study is that it offers two levels of analysis and two perspectives from which to view these data: 1) from the individual level, and 2) from the organizational level. The perspectives are those of the constituent

and of the organizer/entrepreneur. We are able, therefore, to learn what the entrepreneur is trying to do and what the constituent reports is the impact of the entrepreneur's efforts. The result is that we can evaluate the theories of group formation and membership decision in light of each other. The conclusions one can draw from the data are not new but possess an added degree of validity owing to their origin.

Theories of Group Formation Revisited

Before evaluating the results of the interviews and their implications for the major theories of group formation, it is useful to review the contending theories. Essentially, they fall into two categories, plus a synthesis of these. These categories are generally referred to as the sociological theory, argued by David Truman,¹ and the economic theory first proposed by Mancur Olson.² Truman's sociological theory claims that stress on a group that shares interests in the political system by virtue of, for example, common socio-economic status, will cause members of that group to increase mutual interaction and therefore promote the formation of groups that will protect their shared interests. The economic theory argues that it is not rational for people to behave in that manner under most circumstances since they will not benefit from it given the costs of group formation and the likelihood of recovering these costs by the benefits of the group activities. Hence, the people who are under stress calculate that their decision to join the organization to

promote their interests will cost them more than they will get in return. Thus, the focus of study becomes the tradeoff of contributions required and incentives offered.

Syntheses of the two theories, especially Terry Moe³, argue for a more complex process of group formation. Moe focuses on the relationship of the constituent and the entrepreneur and how the constituent is capable of calculating tradeoffs of contributions and incentives in the complexity of the actual political process. He notes, for example, that the entrepreneur is strongly motivated to manipulate the information so that the constituent is more likely to decide to join. This notion of "bounded rationality" is clearly more like a real interaction between organizer/entrepreneur and constituent than either of the theories above. Moe also provides the broader categorization of incentives that includes all of the varieties that James Q. Wilson⁴ identifies: material, solidary, and purposive. With this broader categorization, it is possible to appreciate the complexity, again, of the actual political interaction.

The ACORN Model of organizing, in essence, makes claims about the manner in which constituents make the membership decision and the means by which it is possible to create ACORN organizations. In particular, the organizing drive described in the model should be considered as a prediction of results one should expect if an organizer follows the model and attempts to organize a neighborhood. It is the experience of the researcher that following the organizing drive recipe works quite well despite the inexperience of the organizer. Naturally,

experience and acquired skills improve the quality and efficiency of organizing work. Yet, the model, based on an incentive system of collective material benefits, anger, and constituent desire to join forces with others in the neighborhood, is sufficient to recruit approximately ten per cent of a low- and moderate-income neighborhood one is attempting to organize. This has been borne out by hundreds of successful drives, many conducted by very inexperienced individuals. Thus, it is a case of technique based on organizing principles applied to constituents of similar economic background in Organizing Committee meetings and at their doors via direct contact successfully persuading people to join and create ACORN groups anywhere in the country.

The organizers of Boston ACORN speak in terms that are nearly identical to those of the ACORN Model that they all study and apply in their organizing. They claim, for example, that self-interest is necessary to motivate constituents to join an ACORN group. The organizers recognize that the self-interest they describe is, perhaps, somewhat broader than the individual, i.e., it frequently involves the quality of life for the neighborhood at large and may not specifically affect every individual member. They attribute the impact of their claim to produce deliverables to be self-interest that is then calculated in a manner very much like Olson's analysis of tradeoffs and decisionmaking. The purposive incentives they cite include the opportunity to build an effective community group and take action on what one organizer said were "aspects of

peoples' lives that, before, they didn't know they had any control over." They also admit to using anger--getting constituents "oiled up"--as per the ACORN Model. Thus, it is the perception and expectation of the Boston ACORN organizers that the bases of the ACORN Model are valid both as predictors of phenomena and analyses of the relationship between the organization and the constituents.

Group Formation According to ACORN Members

The responses of the members differed from the ACORN Model and the organizers only in emphasis. Even the members' responses were almost identical when they discussed the means by which they recruited people themselves. The most important factor that influenced members to join was the opportunity to help the community. While similar to the claim that the constituents are responding to self-interest writ large in the form of community, this appeal shifts the emphasis to community service and away from individual benefit. The category of service to the poor is an even greater shift of emphasis away from self-interest. The most direct articulation of the pursuit of self-interest is the desire to work on specific issues, such as health care or housing, and the desire for self-improvement expressed by several of the respondents. The question that helped to augment the interviewees' contribution to the understanding of the membership decision, How do you recruit new members?, provided the response that most clearly resembled the approach that the organizers used to persuade people to join.

Hence, it seems that the answer to the question of what induces people to join depends, in its emphasis, on whether the interviewee is referring to his or her self or another who is being recruited. The literature does not provide any insights into this phenomena, nor does the data from this study.

The case study is useful in considering the debate between the sociological and the economic approaches to the membership decision. The members and the organizers of Boston ACORN seem to agree that the ACORN Model is fundamentally sound, that some notion of self-interest combined with anger, a desire to serve the community, and the purposive incentives that ACORN offers are effective in motivating people to join. This conclusion supports the economic model, more because of the involvement of the organizer/entrepreneur than for any other reason. Truman's contention that increased interaction causes group formation fails to take into account the potent impact of face-to-face contact between organizer and member that the interviewees describe. One organizer stated the point clearly from a strategic point of view:

I think that's something that we really pride ourselves on is that that's how we recruit our members,...by knocking on peoples' doors. And that's why, in a lot of ways, our base is made up of a lot of people that aren't necessarily gonna get themselves involved politically or organizationally in something else.

Thus, the claim that increased interaction alone leads to group formation is inadequate, especially in reference to a group in

society that is nearly always in some kind of social or economic stress--low-income people.

When one attempts to analyze group formation (as opposed to the individual's membership decision), it is clear that this case study provides a basic insight into a theoretical claim: Robert H. Salisbury's argument⁵ for the importance of the organizer/entrepreneur is strongly substantiated by the researcher's experiences and observations, the literature on and by ACORN, and the comments in the interviews of both members and organizers. The organizer/entrepreneur is an essential feature of group formation and an understanding of that role is required for an adequate analysis of political organizations. The fact that the interviewees, both organizers and members, responded positively to questions that implied the economic model concepts helps to substantiate that model as well. Moreover, their articulation of the goals of the organization provides support for the expansion of the incentives beyond purely economic ones, despite the arguments that Wilson offers that low-income people require greater economic incentives than higher income people do. But perhaps what is most compelling as a refutation of the sociological model is the fact that the actions of the professional organizers are what is critical to the creation of political organizations, just as it is for increasing the likelihood that individual constituents will agree to join the organization. Thus, from either the level of the organizer or that of the members, the successful creation and application of an organizing strategy is

what creates organizations and enlists members.

Maintenance of Membership

The basic question of what keeps members in ACORN or organizations in general is closely related to the membership decision. This is even more so for a voluntary activist organization of low-income people. Unlike organizations that require only that members send their annual dues, voluntary activist organizations continually ask their members to provide resources that the organization requires. Hence, members ask themselves, in the model of the economic analysis, is it in my self-interest to engage repeatedly in the activities of this organization? Moreover, as Richard C. Rich argues,⁶ the nature of the voluntary organization offers the exit option each time the organization requests resources. Again, while this feature of the organization lowers the costs of membership for the constituent, it raises the cost of organizational maintenance.

Given the nature of ACORN as a voluntary activist organization, David Knoke and James R. Wood's analysis of social control,⁷ or commitment, is applicable to this question. Their argument is that commitment grows from three features of an organization: purposive incentives, member participation, and professional legitimacy. The interviews treated these topics in several ways.

Purposive incentives involve either goals or ideology. Hence, the interview questions that dealt with ACORN's goals are pertinent as well as the questions that probed the members'

perceptions of policy issues. It is clear that members did not articulate ACORN's goals effectively, especially its national goals. Only the members who had attended national conventions had a good sense of the national goals or of the nature of the national organization. Several suggested that issues like stop signs were important for the national organization. According to Gary Delgado, realization of the members' lack of understanding of larger issues in ACORN is what led to the People's Platform in 1980. The process of widespread input into the planks of the platform was specifically designed to integrate the national organization by articulating national goals and involving members in the creation. The responses of the interviewees in this study show that this strategy did not touch many ACORN members.

Ideological commitments of the members were neither uniform or strong. The only issues on which there was solid agreement were ERA, housing, and health care. While it is important to note that the consensus on housing and health care issues very likely resulted from ACORN's efforts, it is also important to recognize deep splits on issues like abortion and, potentially, government income supplement programs. These splits suggest limits on issues on which ACORN can effectively mobilize its membership.

Interviewee responses to the questions relating to ideology present more insights into this problem. Several of the members stated that ACORN's goal as an organization is to create power for low- and moderate-income people. This kind of organizational

purpose seems sufficient as a purposive incentive, however vague. Nevertheless, in apparent contradiction to Knoke and Wood's thesis, these interviews suggest that members are willing to continue to contribute to ACORN despite a lack of commitment to goals they cannot articulate and an ideology that is not particularly salient to them.

The question of participation as a means of enlisting the continued allegiance of ACORN members raises a related question: How much control do members have over the decisionmaking process in ACORN? Knoke and Wood argue the necessity for involvement of members in the decisionmaking process, but this in fact raises some serious problems for the organization. To operate an organization of low-income, inexperienced activists effectively, an organizer must at times make important decisions. This dilemma has troubled ACORN greatly. While the professional role of the ACORN organizer is to promote maximum participation in the decisionmaking process and the formal structure of the organization is designed to ensure member control via the board of directors, ACORN is faced with the classic problem that all organizations of its type face: the desire of the professional staff to control the decisionmaking process in order to ensure the success of the organization.

The ACORN Model and the responses of the members and organizers in the interviews all suggest that the organization generally succeeds in eliciting members' participation and allowing them at

least a veto over the organization's decisions. Moreover, many of both types of participants argued strongly that the members have a profound control over the decisionmaking process. One organizer, for example, claimed that issues never arise solely from the organizing staff but only from the inputs of the members via the door-knocking process.

Delgado, a long-time ACORN organizer, also found that when asked, ACORN members only cited the "technical assistance and/or resource development" as the role of ACORN organizers.⁹ He goes on to say that

Within ACORN, as within most large community organizations, organizers do in fact call the shots in terms of organizational direction; the organization has in fact become a staff oligarchy. That development is understandable: with greater size and complexity, increased specialization, and departmentalization, it is simply not possible for all members to possess enough of the relevant information for informed decisionmaking; therefore, communications increasingly flow from the top down.¹⁰

The importance of this kind of dynamic for the role of the organization in the lives of the members is that, without genuine involvement of the members, it is not possible to change their perceptions of themselves as politically efficacious and as identifying with the organization. Moe argues this point as pertaining particularly to voluntary membership organizations with mixed incentive systems:

[A] participatory context...is significantly different from what we have found for material associations. It is more open, in the sense that any individual can be highly motivated to engage in various activities, regardless of his economic position. It is also more conducive to socialization effects, in which individuals can be changed in important ways as a result of their participation. And, notably, it enhances the prospect for member involvement in decisionmaking, especially through purposive bases for contributing and participating....¹¹

While Delgado refers only to decisions of the national organization, the fact remains that participation in the decisionmaking process is not possible. Thus, at that level, members cannot use participation opportunities to develop their commitment to the organization. On the other hand, local chapters of ACORN do involve the members, both on the board and in the local groups. Judging by the interviews, however, organizers frequently are the ones who translate the issues they hear in their contacts with members while in meetings or while doorknocking into campaigns, strategies, and tactics. Thus, even at that level, there appear to be limits to membership control of the organization and the commitment that that engenders.

There are virtually no limits, however, on the amount of participation that is possible for members in functions such as member recruitment, leadership roles at lower levels, fundraising, actions, and so on. Organizers use every opportunity to involve members in activities such as these, not only to lighten their load, but to build involvement and commitment among the members. The members' listings of activities in which they engaged attests to

the success of the organizers in this effort. Further, the members' increased identification with the progressive agenda that results from the long-standing and intense involvement with ACORN indicates that Knoke and Wood's thesis can be brought to bear at a level of participation below that of the decisionmaker.

The third part of the social control concept offered by Knoke and Wood is legitimacy of the professionals. The question that this raises is the faith that the membership has in the integrity and abilities of the organizers. The lack of conflict members report with organizers is one component of professional legitimacy within ACORN. The members also defer to the organizers' ability to make important decisions regarding tactics and issues. Moreover, descriptions that the members gave of their initial reluctance to engage in some kinds of tactics, particularly confrontive ones, and their subsequent participation in them attests to their faith in the judgment of the organizers. Interviewees also reported a willingness to change campaigns on which they were working without particular distress or misgivings. Hence, when the organizers suggest that a particular tactic or issue is vital to the organization, the members go along with that decision.

Thus, in applying Knoke and Wood's formula for organizational commitment, the interviews suggest that the degree of commitment to purposive incentives is limited, opportunities to participate in decisionmaking are limited, though other kinds of participation are extensive, and professional legitimacy is high. This combination

has been effective on those interviewed: nearly all were very enthusiastic about ACORN and many contributed their time and energy generously. While some of those have strong commitment to ACORN's goals, and are involved in important decisions, others seem to be active due to the organizers' persistence combined with tangible results and opportunities to serve their community. Thus, the goal of creating an organization of involved, informed, and progressive low- and moderate-income people is being achieved but only with the support of those who join and support ACORN without developing the world view of the progressive political activist.

Organizers

The professional organizer is a poorly understood role in the study of American politics. Recent studies of political organizations have given the organizer a theoretical place in political science literature and begun a process that should bring that role into a proper focus as creator and motivator of many political organizations, especially voluntary membership organizations. This study began by examining some important questions about political organizations in the light of the perceptions of participants in a particular organization. These perceptions have led back to fundamental questions of organizational dynamics that can only be appreciated if one understands the role of the organizer. Moe argues forcefully, for example, that limited rationality is the basis for the membership decision, and that this prompts organizers

to "bend" the realities of group membership in a way that is most likely to persuade people that their interests will be served by joining.¹² Yet he does not fully develop the concept as it applies to continued participation by members. Knoke and Wood stress the importance of social control for the organizer's success but do not pursue the extent to which the organizer devises and implements the organizing strategy.

The lack of attention to the central role played by the organizer is probably a function of the kind of organization studied. Moe concentrated on economic organizations; Knoke and Wood examined middle class cause organizations. Both types rely on organizers in different ways. Economic groups prefer to leave the operation of the group to professionals entirely. Middle-class groups can and do call on a reservoir of experienced and educated members to serve in planning and organizing roles. Boston ACORN recruits a constituency of inexperienced, poorly educated people who, unlike small businesspeople and professionals, for example, have few organized means of expressing political interests. The impetus for organizing the ACORN constituency comes from outside the constituency. A consciously devised plan is articulated and applied by professionals, who have a vague but compelling goal for their constituents. As Delgado points out, the continued operation of ACORN requires more skill, time and energy than the membership has available to it. Hence, the organizers have a more demanding role in the organization than might otherwise be the case. It is

a role that this case study, owing to its methodological limits, can at best only suggest.

The value of a better understanding of the organizer's role in an organization like ACORN yields practical as well as scholarly insights. For anyone interested in creating an organization with a constituency similar to ACORN's, the conceptual groundwork has been laid by ACORN in the Organizing Model and the incentive system, i.e., the organizing strategy that has proven effective over the years for ACORN. For students of American politics, this approach to political organizations provides useful insights about the members of such an organization, e.g., that they are generally not highly ideological but are at the same time committed to the organization and its goals. For both practitioner and scholar, it is important to recognize the significant but limited role of the organizer. Constituents are not controlled or even manipulated to any great degree by the organizers, and recognition of the limits organizational dynamics place on the organizers allows one to see the relationship more clearly.

The Organizers' Relationship to the Members

Given the connections between ideology, socioeconomic and cultural background, and goals for involvement within ACORN, it is necessary that a special kind of relationship be established between the organizers and members. This is particularly true in light of the importance of professional legitimacy for many of the members' continued involvement in ACORN. This relationship centers on two

basic ideas: the exit option and professionalism. Both of these rein in the organizers' notions of what ACORN should do, both in terms of issues and tactics. Thus, when organizers want to pursue issues or tactics that fit their views on politics but do not fit their members' perceptions, they limit themselves by their professional ideals, and the members limit them by exercising the exit option. Thus, if the members perceive that an issue, candidate, or tactic is not desirable, given their ideology or views on political life, the organizers are unlikely to persuade members to participate in those activities. In an important sense, then, the exit option keeps the organizers honest, keeping the ideological differences between organizers and members from causing serious problems in ACORN.

It is more, however, than just the exit option that controls the behavior of the organizers. It is also the professional ethos that they share. It is clear from the responses of the organizers that they feel an ethical obligation as professionals to promote the maximum amount of member participation in ACORN in order to gain the benefits thereof: increased allegiance, improved skills, increased resources, greater turnout and enthusiasm, and democratic control of the organization. One purposive incentive that drives the organizers is the desire that ACORN play a democratizing role in the political system, give low- and moderate-income Americans a genuine opportunity to influence the political system without being controlled by organizers.

In the case of the ACORN organizers, the ethos of member participation contains within it several other elements as well. First, it is part of the democratic ethos that has shaped reformist and radical components of American political culture. This is profoundly different from the role which the organizer/entrepreneurs play in traditional economic organizations. They perceive their role as professionals akin to lawyers: hence, they provide the incentives, operate the organization, lobby according to the interests of their constituents, yet have no desire to train their constituents to become more effective citizens. Lawyers have no desire to teach their clients the law or improve their ability to promote their interests via legal means. Traditional organizer/entrepreneurs operate similarly, keeping information costs high so that their clients will need their services as much as possible. While ACORN's organizing ethos does not prevent ACORN organizers from controlling many of the decisions of the organization, it acts as a constraint against it. Second, the democratic ethos the organizers articulate is as much a part of the organizing strategy as the organizing drive itself. It has proven an effective way to recruit and maintain membership, as is evident in the almost mythical quality it has attained among members and organizers. That the organizers also recount instances when it has benefited them in their organizing efforts further attests to its utility.

Thus, the strains within ACORN created by cross purposes of organizers and members are, to some extent, controlled by other

features of the organizations: professionalism and voluntarism. The ethic of the organizer to maximize member control and the fact that the organization is a voluntary one with the option available to abstain from whatever activity is undesirable provide clear constraints against organizer abuse of power within the organization.

Ideology as Incentive

The treatment of ideology of ACORN is particularly important, given the responses of members and organizers to policy questions. There are clear differences between members and organizers, and the way these are handled is critical to the success of the organization. The motives of the organizers for taking a low-pay, high-demand job are strongly centered on the desire to change society and pursue left-wing internationalist goals. There is no indication in the members' responses that they share these kinds of goals. Some of the members have adopted the rhetoric of ACORN--power for low-income people, "Taking What's Ours!" and so on, but there are clear differences of ideological perspective in specific policy areas, ideological self-identification, and party identification. The organizers avoid conflict or erosion of trust by using vague language and populist sentiments rather than Marxist ideology or leftist rhetoric. This allows a degree of latitude for the organizers to pursue policy goals that are anti-corporate without being explicitly leftist; it provides a broad canopy for both white and black constituents; and it excludes as few people as possible given the possible range of political views

that could be attracted to such an organization both in terms of potential organizers and members. Thus, ACORN's approach to ideology serves organizational ends of unity between disparate groups whose energies and commitment are both engendered and endangered by ideology.

The interviews suggest that ACORN's approach has been effective. The members regularly defer to the organizers' views on what the organization should do. The level of conflict between the two groups is low. Moreover, both members and organizers agree that the sources of conflict that do exist have nothing to do with their views on politics, but rather center on the operation of the organization without proper consultation by the organizers with the members. The members believe the organization should be run by them and, when it is not, they make it an issue. Members and organizers agree on how ACORN should be run and act accordingly. The closest thing to ideological conflict is that which arises occasionally about the level of confrontational tactics that are desirable. As the organizers note, they sometimes have difficulty persuading members that they should confront their targets. The difference surfaces not on the issue or the choice of target, but on the degree of conflict that is appropriate for the situation. Hence, there is an area of agreement on issues and broad goals large enough to appeal to all the participants in the organization, conflict only arising around the intensity necessary to pursue these these issues and goals.

Confrontation as Ideology

The issue of confrontive tactics has several dimensions: demands on the membership, tactical effectiveness, and organizational identity, both internal and external. In addition, confrontive tactics are part and parcel of the vague ideology that ACORN has adopted.

Confrontive tactics increase the demands on the members in the exchange relationship. Members recognize immediately that one difference between behaving with decorum in a meeting and carrying signs and raising hell is that more is being asked of them. More energy is required; more risks are involved; there is greater chance of arrest; they will not be welcomed. Participants in prospective confrontations commonly have doubts about the propriety of rowdiness, and the justification for disrespect expressed toward the target. Mike Silver notes that members are "sometimes...most put off not by fear of arrest or violence but by confusion, uncertainty, and a sense of helplessness in unknown situations."¹³ Mary Kay Harrity, writing about members of the Bridgeport, Connecticut chapter of ACORN, noted that the members

seem somewhat hesitant about some of the more dramatic actions ACORN has used to make its point, like a candlelight march in Colorado that ended with demands for changes in utility rates being nailed to wooden planks... or claiming "squatters' rights" in abandoned Philadelphia homes...."¹⁴

The cost to some members is in social status as they perceive it:

respectability. Thus, confrontational tactics have costs to members; they increase the demands the organization makes on the membership.

Confrontational tactics, according to several writers on organizing, are the bread-and-butter of low-income organizing. The low-income constituency has rather limited resources available to it. If their resources are forcefully and directly applied, the argument goes, they will be more effective:

It isn't conflict for its own sake, but to create incentives for the other side to negotiate in good faith, to reach an agreement that takes care of a problem. The point is, to have genuine bargaining, first we have to show the other side we have power.¹⁵

Frequently, the mass confrontation is the most powerful weapon the ACORN group has available to it. Thus, as Lee Staples suggests, it is wise for local ACORN groups to reserve that tactic for a point in an issue campaign in which other less costly and difficult tactics have proven ineffective.¹⁶

The importance of confrontational tactics extends beyond their ability to move others to respond to their demands. It involves the identity of the organization in some important ways. First, it separates ACORN from its opponents: utility companies, many of the local politicians, bureaucrats, and others who are in a position to satisfy or deny their demands. They also unify ACORN internally, building identification among the membership:

The best victories will be those achieved through direct action on the part of large numbers of people. Campaigns featuring a high level of direct action enable the leaders and members to experience their own collective power. The organization lesson is, We won because lots of us stuck together and fought like hell.¹⁷

Taking demands to the extreme and engaging in highly expressive protest creates strong ties among the members and shared feelings of great intensity, especially if the tactics pay off in a victory. The memory of the activity and the expression of solidarity builds into the organization a sense of unity and identity. A tactic at the 1982 Democratic National Mid-Term Convention illustrates this point well. While ACORN members demonstrated in the street for low- and moderate-income representation in the nominating process, a group of ACORN members snuck into the hotel where a fund-raising luncheon was being held with some large donors of the Democratic Party. The ACORN members worked their way into the hotel via the coffee shop, the gift shop, and other avenues singly and in small groups that would not attract attention. When they arrived at the service door of the luncheon hall, they burst suddenly into the hall chanting and demonstrating in what was a directly confrontive tactic. This and other tactics that require bravado and make noise all serve to increase the solidary benefits of the organization and increase the members' shared identity with ACORN.

In light of the above discussion of ACORN's approach to ideology, the role of confrontation as ideology becomes clear.

While avoiding specific issues such as abortion, ACORN has defined itself in terms of its opponents and its internal solidarity. Also, when ACORN assumes a policy position, it expresses that position in terms of action and style rather than specific points of argument. Delgado explains the manner in which ACORN used this technique to express its views on housing issues:

While it is clear that tactical militancy does not necessarily relate to or translate into a progressive ideology, ACORN's recently launched multistate squatting efforts, in which low-income people in twelve cities are taking over abandoned houses, certainly demonstrates the organization's attitude toward private property and translates the attitude into action.¹⁸

The use of squatting actions gave the membership an opportunity to express its views without having to articulate complex arguments or adopt ideological stances. For their purposes and ACORN's, the actions were sufficient for the need to create and pursue purposive goals.

This approach, ACORN organizers hope, will avoid internal division over ideological issues and alienation of potential members and allies. Perhaps more important still is that ACORN organizers avoid expending energies on deciding the "correct" stance to take on issues. Rather, as Rathke has stated, the way to organize is to appeal to constituents' concerns, not philosophical issues:

Our membership aren't out there in the clouds somewhere saying this is the way the world should look in 100 years. Our philosophy is very closely related to our membership's daily life experience. There's no ideology that instructs what we do. People make decisions and start moving.¹⁹

Hence, developing an ideology is not a part of effective organizing according to ACORN organizers. Confrontation is an important means by which ACORN can maintain purposive incentives while keeping goals as vague as possible.

The ACORN Organizing Strategy and the Majority Constituency

The goal of ACORN from its inception as an organization has been to organize a majority constituency of the lower 70% of the income scale. ACORN's history and the history of similar organizations indicates that there are formidable problems involved in achieving this goal. While ACORN's organizing model is capable of creating organizations in neighborhoods of either low- or moderate-income people or mixes of them, difficulties have arisen when ACORN has pursued objectives broader than neighborhood improvement issues developed while doorknocking or in Organizing Committee meetings. Moreover, the confrontive tactics have created divisions among the low- and moderate-income groups.

The unifying feature that Rathke defines for the constituency ACORN targets is that they are not participants in the important decisions that shape their lives. He claims that the important decisions in American political and economic life are made by large

corporations and the very wealthy. His goal for ACORN has always been to unite low-income and moderate-income Americans into a unified organization that can vie successfully with the decision-makers in American society. The unity of these two groups, however, requires that they can be convinced of their mutual interests. That has not always been the case.

This problem of unifying the targeted constituency has arisen in a variety of ways, including disagreement over tactics, dominance by moderate-income members, and conflict over issues. Each of these issues has been a problem in ACORN's history that the leaders and organizers have grappled with in an effort to keep ACORN moving toward its organizational goal of organizing the majority constituency. Both the problems and the means by which they have been addressed provide insights into the nature of political organizations and the organizing strategy they employ.

As noted above, confrontive tactics have not been popular among all of the ACORN members. This plays a role in the internal divisions within ACORN as well. Low-income members more readily agree with organizers that the issues that concern them and the resources they possess to promote their interests require the adoption of confrontive tactics. If they need jobs from construction firms building in central city areas, they do not have resources to pressure the job providers behind the scenes. Rather, they must disrupt the job site or go to City Hall with pickets in order to get results. This situation is quite different for moderate-income

people. Cloward and Piven, writing in 1979 about the differences between community organizing among the two groups, distinguished between low-income organizing and "citizen action" organizing.

They note that citizen action organizing

produces a membership with a marked reluctance to go beyond conventional political channels. Citizen action consists mostly of meetings, hearings, research memoranda, petitions, lobbying, and referenda. "The impulse not to demonstrate," says Mark Splain [an ACORN organizer], "but to call the alderman because they know the alderman!"²⁰

Moderate-income members who are originally attracted to ACORN for community improvement are often repelled by confrontational tactics that hardly correlate with the genteel goals they joined to promote. In 1979, Pearl Ford, a board member resigned from ACORN due to the tactics in which she was asked to engage:

The tactics sounded good at first. They come into a neighborhood and ask if you need stop lights and your trash picked up. The next thing you know they get you involved in storming City Hall and other things that I don't approve of.²¹

Conversely, low-income members would not respond to the same kinds of tactics that the moderate-income members prefer. The low-key style of politics denies them the opportunity to participate effectively using the resources at their disposal--anger, disruption, and enthusiasm. Moreover, the issues that they must address--jobs, housing, medical care--for their livelihood are often controlled at a higher level of society than city services like streets, vacant

lots, garbage removal, and stop signs. Thus, there is a distinct difference between the tactics that are usable for the two different ranges of income within the intended ACORN constituency.

Writers on community organizing have noted a tendency among community organizations to be dominated by moderate-income members. Michael Walzer argues that

[T]heirs is not, by any means, a "poor people's movement." They have not done very well among welfare recipients, tenants of public housing projects, unemployed men and women. The groups they are able to form and sustain mostly involve (relatively small numbers of) better-off workers and members of the low-to-middle class. And the politics of these groups is clearly reformist; the neighborhood alliances often take on a kind of "community uplift" character. Self-help against crime, the defense of old residential areas, improvement of local services, beautification; these are the goals, to which the organizers too must stand committed.²²

Cloward and Piven recognize this same phenomenon and argue that it results from three causes: 1) the search for anti-corporate issues via consumerism; 2) the ease of organizing moderate-income neighborhoods; and 3) the dependence of many neighborhood organizations on canvassing as a source of income.²³ In an effort to forge an anti-corporate stand that will attract members, particularly from the upper end of their constituency, consumer issues have been effective and attractive. Also, moderate-income neighborhoods have residents that are less intimidated by political activity and organizational membership. Finally, the canvassing method of fundraising in which canvassers go into upper-income neighborhoods

and request donations has had a conservatizing effect on some groups.

It is reasonable to surmise that the growing financial dependence of these groups on canvassing contributes to their emphasis on popular consumer issues and on conventional politics. "If our canvassers tell us that an issue or tactic won't sell in the suburbs," one organizer said, "we give it a second thought."²⁴

Cloward and Piven, however, excepted ACORN from the organizations that had adopted this course. They attribute this difference to "ACORN's organizers [who] have a commitment that guides their organizing and orients them to low-income people. Much of this direction probably comes from Wade Rathke, ACORN's chief organizer, whose professionalism is tempered by a strong sense of mission."²⁵

In the late 1970s, Rathke and other members of the national ACORN staff recognized the upward drift in the incomes of their members and adopted a course of action to involve more low-income people in the organization. They pursued organizing drives of the unemployed in several cities and worked to organize low-income labor groups such as household workers in New Orleans and home health care workers in Boston. The result has been that ACORN has avoided an overdependence on moderate-income members as some other groups have.

The history of ACORN has, in fact, followed that pattern of development, at one time pursuing one end of the income scale, at another, the other end. Madeleine Adamson and Seth Borgos, both former ACORN professional staff, describe the process of alternating

between the two ends of the income spectrum of ACORN's targeted constituency:

For ACORN, the squatters campaign was the culmination of a five-year quest to recover the audacity and militance of its welfare rights origins--qualities which had been diluted in the pursuit of a majority constituency. More recently, ACORN has moved closer to the contemporary mainstream, organizing a national coalition of labor, church, minority, and peace groups to challenge the policies of President Ronald Reagan. Such periodic swings are characteristic of ACORN's evolutionary pattern: a continual dialectic between low- and moderate-income, mobilization and organization,²⁶ expansion and consolidation, militance and accomodation.

Thus, ACORN has sought a balance between the desire to include low-income constituents and the need for the resources that the moderate-income constituents can provide. The historical evidence, however, provides clear arguments for the difficulties of unifying ACORN's targeted constituency. As Adamson and Borgos claim, ACORN has been forced to "drift towards one or another segment of their constutuenc[y] or to oscillate between them, never really mobilizing the whole."²⁷

The problem with issues within ACORN clearly demonstrates this dilemma. Historically, the lower-income ACORN members have pursued more progressive issue stands than the moderate-income membership. This is very clear from the events surrounding the drafting of the ACORN People's Platform. Delgado reports that the difference between the income groups was reflected in the age of the groups represented:

The older ACORN groups were dominated by low-income people who had fought for welfare and Medicaid reform; the newer ones were more likely to comprise homeowners and blue-collar workers. The difference was especially prevalent in the ACORN affiliates in California, North Carolina, and Georgia, where the lowest-income elements were the senior citizens' groups.²⁸

Some of the Arkansas representatives were people who had been a part of the original drives to organize welfare recipients in Little Rock and who were disposed to pursue clearly progressive issues such as the guaranteed annual income:

It was on this issue that the tenuous coalition of low- and moderate-income people on which the organization is built was most seriously challenged. Advocates of the plank (mostly black and low-income members) argued that all families were entitled to a basic income, health care, and housing; opponents of the plank (the most vociferous of whom were also black but more moderate-income) argued for income based on employment.²⁹

The responses of the Boston ACORN members to the same question showed a lack of understanding of the issue and certainly no unified support. Thus, the problem of creating and maintaining the majority constituency manifests itself in terms of tactical militance, the attractiveness of the moderate-income group as organization-builders, and the conflict that arises between the two groups over issues within the organization.

Nevertheless, the necessity of unifying the two groups is clear. If one is attempting to oppose the political and economic elite in American politics, it is not possible to do it with only

part of the low- and moderate-income constituency. Saul Alinsky recognized that fact late in his career as an organizer. While he began his career in 1939 in the Back of the Yards area of Chicago, one of the most desolate slums in America at the time, by the early 1970s he began advocating for a rather different organizing strategy. His pursuit of a middle-class constituency that would promote radical or anti-corporate goals led him to devise the proxy strategy. This strategy would enlist middle-class corporate shareholders and those who are capable of influencing institutions that hold shares, such as universities, to raise issues at shareholders' meetings of large corporations and disrupt their proceedings.

I'm directing all my efforts today to organizing the middle class, because that's the arena where the future of this country will be decided. And I'm convinced that once the middle class recognizes its real enemy-- the megacorporations that control the country and pull the strings on puppets like Nixon and Connally--it will mobilize as one of the most effective instruments for social change this country has ever known. And once mobilized, it will be natural for it to seek out allies among the other disenfranchised--blacks, chicanos, poor whites.³⁰

Alinsky did not live to pursue this strategy to its end. Nevertheless, ACORN's experience suggests that the assumptions he made about the natural inclination of the middle class to seek allies among low-income and minorities is questionable.

An observer of ACORN politics, however, must recognize that Rathke and the other top leaders and organizers in ACORN are working

toward long-term goals. As Rathke has stated, his goal is power for the majority constituency over the fundamental decisions in the American political and economic system. Because the goal is so far-reaching he argues that it is not possible to predict what form that power will take. Moreover, it is not possible to predict under what circumstances that assumption of power might occur. It is conceivable that an extraordinary turn of events, a crisis of great proportions like the Great Depression, could provide unity for the low- and moderate-income groups. In order to take full advantage of the situation, it would be necessary for ACORN to be an operating organization; that is, to survive and be ready for such circumstances. Thus, if there were an economic disaster, the alienation of the middle class from the upper class and the issues that would naturally align lower-income Americans with middle-income Americans would create the opportunity for the larger goal of ACORN organizing. Until that time, ACORN organizing continues in its present strategy of fluctuating between the desire to be radical and the necessity for organizational survival.

Organizing Strategy and Political Analysis

Organizing strategy, a notion originally conceived by political organizers to facilitate organizing by replicating organizational characteristics in many places at once and ensure effective organizing, is also an effective means of analyzing political organizations. In this case study of Boston ACORN the

use of the concept of organizing strategy has succeeded in directing the research at the important features of the organization and appreciating their interaction in the functioning of the participants.

Perhaps the most important contribution of organizing strategy to political analysis is the stress it places on the strategic nature of political organizing. Because it compares political organizing to product marketing, it illuminates the kind of thinking that is required for the organization to succeed. The organizers, as entrepreneurs, must decide on a constituency and determine what incentives will effectively mobilize that constituency. They must also decide what resources the organization requires from the constituents in order for it to succeed. Finally, they must determine what organizational structure will best serve the goals of the group. The concept of organizing strategy requires that the analyst see all of the above decisions as part of a whole. For example, the decision to use neighborhood improvement as an incentive to initiate members into ACORN requires that the structure of the group be based within neighborhoods; the desire of ACORN organizers to pursue progressive political issues prompts them to organize a low-income constituency that will agree to those issues in an enthusiastic way; the need for a broad-based constituency requires that organizers demand a maximum amount of participation by the membership.

Finally, organizing strategy helps to explain some of the wonder and satisfaction the researcher experienced upon completion of organizing an ACORN neighborhood. It makes the connection between

mundane items like stop signs and great issues like housing and democratic control of corporations. It helps to explain how an organization is capable of bending and shaping the goals of both members and organizers to coincide in a mutual effort. It shows how well an organization is capable of developing the political skills of people who have historically both avoided and been excluded from political participation. It explains how the apparently undramatic actions of organizers and constituents in neighborhoods across the country have the potential for dramatic impact on the lives of many low- and moderate-income people and, conceivably, the American political system.

Notes to Chapter VI

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¹⁴Mary Kay Harrity, "ACORN: Putting Down Roots in Bridgeport," Fairfield Advocate, 2, no. 13 (Nov. 14, 1979), p. 7.

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- ¹⁶Staples, p. 97.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 65.
- ¹⁸Delgado, pp. 156-157.
- ¹⁹Ibid., pp. 190-191.
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- ²¹Delgado, p. 117.
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- ²³Cloward and Piven, pp. 38-40.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 40.
- ²⁵Ibid., p. 38.
- ²⁶Madeleine Adamson and Seth Borgos, This Mighty Dream (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 125.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 128.
- ²⁸Delgado, p. 141.
- ²⁹Ibid.
- ³⁰Eric Norden, "Playboy Interview: Saul Alinsky," Playboy, ~~magazine~~, volume 9, no. 3 (March, 1972), p. 177.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

Member Interview

- I. I want to start with some questions about how you and others originally get involved in ACORN.
 - 1) How long have you been an ACORN member?
 - 2) Were you involved in politics before you joined ACORN? Tell me about that.
 - 3) Why did you join ACORN? What attracted you to ACORN?
 - 4) What does it mean to you now to be an ACORN member? What do you get out of it?
 - 5) How has the experience of being in ACORN differed from your original expectations?
 - 6) When you talk to someone who is thinking of becoming involved in ACORN, what reasons do you give them to join?

- II. Now, I want to talk to you about your activities and involvement in ACORN.
 - 1) Do you belong to other organizations? Are you active in them? Hold office in them? How many hours a week do you spend on them?
 - 2) How many hours a week do you spend on ACORN?

3) Which of the following have you participated in?

- Attended a national ACORN convention
- Organized or worked for an ACORN fundraiser
- Held an office in ACORN
- Signed a letter of support for ACORN
- Recruited new members
- Spoken at a public hearing, like the City Council, as an ACORN representative
- Marched in an ACORN action
- Led an ACORN action
- Canvassed your neighborhood -- "got out on the doors"
- Held meetings in your home
- Flyered a neighborhood
- Talked to people about ACORN in a public place like a store
- Chaired an ACORN meeting
- Made phone calls for an ACORN meeting or action
- Worked on an election or issue campaign
- Helped provide direct member services
- Attended a national action or training workshop
- Served on the ACORN Political Action Committee

III. The next set of questions deals with ACORN's goals and your feelings about them.

- 1) Can you list ACORN's political goals here in Boston and in your neighborhood?
- 2) What are ACORN's national goals?
- 3) Has ACORN been successful with those issues?
If YES, what do you think makes ACORN successful?
If NO, why do you think ACORN has not been successful?
- 4) Which goal is the most important? Why?
- 5) Are any of these goals not very important? Why?
- 6) Do you think ACORN should pursue more issues or less? Why?
- 7) If ACORN changed the way it operates--say, it only dealt with one goal ["most important goal" above]--how would you feel about that?

IV. I'd like to learn some things about ACORN's direct member services. Things that only ACORN members can get, like the newsletter.

- 1) What direct member services does Boston ACORN offer? Do you participate?
- 2) If ACORN stopped providing direct member services and only worked on political goals, would you stay in ACORN?
- 3) If ACORN stopped working on political goals and only gave the direct member services, would you stay in ACORN?

V. Now I want to talk to you about your views on some important political issues.

1) First, which of the following best describes you?

- a) very liberal
 liberal
 moderate
 conservative
 very conservative

- b) strong Democrat
 weak Democrat
 Independent
 weak Republican
 strong Republican

2) Now tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements. Please respond: "Agree strongly," "Agree," "Disagree Strongly," or "I Don't Know."

- 1-The federal government should provide a guaranteed income to all citizens.
- 2-The government should take over industries that provide public services, like the utility companies.
- 3-It is important to pass the Equal Rights Amendment.
- 4-The federal government should provide free medical care to all needy citizens.
- 5-The construction and use of nuclear power plants should be stopped.
- 6-Government should build or subsidize housing for those in need.
- 7-The federal government should help low-income people pay for abortions.
- 8-Abortions are a constitutional right.
- 9-The U.S. should not get involved in Latin American affairs.
- 10-The U.S. should continue to build up its military defense.

- 3) Is ACORN working on the right issues? Do they ignore issues you think should be addressed?

VI. I'm interested in how ACORN makes decisions about issues and tactics.

- 1) Who makes the important decisions in ACORN? How is it done?
- 2) Are you involved in making important decisions?
- 3) If your ACORN group took a stand on an issue that you could not agree with, what would you do?
- 4) If your ACORN group endorsed a candidate you could not support, what would you do?
- 5) If your ACORN group used a tactic you could not participate in--picketed a church gathering, for example--what would you do?
- 6) Do conflicts ever arise over important issues within ACORN? If so, how are they worked out?
- 7) Are there ever conflicts between organizers and members? What causes them? How are they resolved?

VII. I'd like to know some things about the way ACORN pursues its political goals. Use the choices on the sheet to answer these questions: "Very effective," "Effective," "Somewhat effective," "Not effective," or "Don't Know."

- 1) Of the following groups, tell me what you think of them as partners in coalitions with ACORN:
 - unions
 - church groups
 - peace groups
 - elected officials
 - other community organizations
 - student groups
 - any I left out?

- 2) Of the following tactics, tell me what you think of them as a means of achieving ACORN's goals.
- ACORN members running for office
 - demonstrating in public offices; the Mayor's, for example
 - demonstrating in private offices, like a corporate building
 - demonstrating in the street
 - speaking in public hearings
 - inviting opponents to speak at ACORN meetings
 - inviting supporters to speak at ACORN meetings
 - blocking streets
 - endorsing candidates
 - campaigning for endorsed candidates
 - running referenda campaigns
 - anything I left out?
- 3) Which do you think are more effective: confrontational tactics or bargaining tactics?

VIII. Finally, I'd like to discuss with you your feelings about your impact on politics. Use the choices on the page to answer this group of questions: "Very Likely," "Likely," "Not Likely," "Very Unlikely," or "Don't Know."

- 1) If the Mayor and City Council were considering an ordinance that would hurt your neighborhood, could you help prevent it from passing?
- 2) If the state legislature and Governor were considering a law that you considered unfair to you or your interests, could you help prevent it from passing?
- 3) If the President and Congress were considering a law that you opposed, could you help prevent it from passing?
- 4) If you took an issue to a government office to express your views--on a budget question or a housing program, for example--would you be treated as well as anyone else?
- 5) If you tried to explain your views on an issue to city officials, would they take your point of view into serious consideration?

- 6) Do you think: a) city politicians in Boston do--
 b) Mass. state politicians do--
 c) politicians in Washington do--

an excellent job?

a good job?

a fair job?

a poor job?

don't know.

PERSONAL DATA:

Race:

___ Asian
 ___ Black
 ___ Hispanic
 ___ White
 ___ Other

Sex:

___ Male
 ___ Female

Age:

___ 18-25
 ___ 26-31
 ___ 32-40
 ___ 41-50
 ___ 51-60
 ___ 61 or over

Education:

___ Completed 6th grade
 ___ Completed 9th grade
 ___ Completed high school
 ___ Some college
 ___ Completed college
 ___ Graduate school

Household Income:

___ under \$8,000
 ___ \$8,100-\$9,999
 ___ \$10,000-\$14,999
 ___ \$15,000-\$19,999
 ___ \$20,000-\$29,999
 ___ \$30,000 or over

Number in household:

___ one
 ___ two
 ___ 3-4
 ___ 5-8
 ___ 9 or more

Occupation _____

Spouse's occupation _____

Organizer Interview

- I. I'd like to start with a discussion of why people get involved in ACORN.
- 1) How long have you been an organizer?
 - 2) Why did you become an ACORN organizer?
 - 3) Has ACORN organizing been what you expected it to be? Explain.
 - 4) What do you get out of ACORN organizing?
 - 5) What attracts members to ACORN?
 - 6) When recruiting new members, what kind of appeal do you make?
 - 7) What keeps members in ACORN?
 - 8) When recruiting new organizers, what kind of appeal do you make?
 - 9) Do you think members' goals for ACORN change over time?
 - 10) Do you think organizers' goals for ACORN change over time?
- II. Next, I'd like to discuss peoples' level of involvement with ACORN.
- 1) What kinds of members become most committed to ACORN?
 - 2) Do you think level of involvement enhances commitment?
 - 3) Do you think organizers are subject to those dynamics?
 - 4) What about your involvement--have you held staff or supervisory positions?
 - 5) How long do you expect to keep on with ACORN? Why? Other plans?

III. I'd like to talk about ACORN's goals and its ability to achieve them.

- 1) What are ACORN's political goals locally/statewide/nationally?
- 2) Is ACORN achieving those goals? Explain.
- 3) Should ACORN tackle more or fewer issues?
- 4) Do you think ACORN's goals should be broader or narrower?
- 5) Are members flexible about changes in goals? Is one type more or less flexible than others?

IV. I need to learn some things about ACORN's selective incentives.

- 1) What selective incentives does Boston ACORN offer its members.
- 2) What is the participation rate?
- 3) Do selective incentives improve recruiting or membership?
- 4) What purposes do they serve?
- 5) Are selective incentive participants more or less goal-oriented than non participants?

V. I'd like to discuss your general views on political issues. What are your politics?

1) First, which of the following best describes you?

- a) ___ very liberal
 ___ liberal
 ___ moderate
 ___ conservative
 ___ very conservative

- b) ___ strong Democrat
 ___ weak Democrat
 ___ Independent
 ___ weak Republican
 ___ strong Republican

2) Now tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements. Please respond: "Agree strongly," "Agree," "Disagree Strongly," or "I Don't Know."

1-The federal government should provide a guaranteed income to all citizens.

2-The government should take over industries that provide public services, like the utility companies.

3-It is important to pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

4-The federal government should provide free medical care to all needy citizens.

5-The construction and use of nuclear power plants should be stopped.

6-Government should built or subsidize housing for those in need

7-The federal government should help low-income people pay for abortions.

8-Abortions are a constitutional right.

9-The U.S. should not get involved in Latin American affairs.

10-The U.S. should continue to build up its military defense.

3) Is ACORN working on the right issues? Do they ignore issues you think should be addressed?

VI. I'm interested in how ACORN makes decisions about issues and tactics.

1) Who makes the important decisions in ACORN? How?

2) If ACORN took a stand on an issue that you disagreed with, what would you do?

3) If ACORN endorsed a candidate you could not support, what would you do?

4) If ACORN used a tactic you disagreed with, what would you do?

5) Do conflicts ever arise between members and organizers? between members and members? between organizers and organizers? If so, how are they resolved? Wht is their source?

VII. I'd like to discuss some of the ways ACORN exercises its power tactically.

- 1) Tell me what you think of the following groups as coalition partners. Are they "Very Effective," "Effective," "Somewhat Effective," "Very Ineffective," or "Don't Know"?
 - unions
 - church groups
 - peace groups
 - elected officials
 - other community organizations
 - student groups
 - any I left out?

- 2) Tell me what you think of the following tactics. Are they "Very Effective," "Effective," "Somewhat Effective," "Very Ineffective," or "Don't Know"?
 - ACORN members running for office
 - demonstrating in public offices
 - demonstrating in private offices
 - demonstrating in the street
 - speaking in public hearings
 - inviting opponents to speak at ACORN meetings
 - inviting supporters to speak at ACORN meetings
 - blocking streets
 - endorsing candidates
 - campaigning for endorsed candidates
 - running referenda campaigns
 - anything I left out?

- 3) Do you have any philosophical commitments to specific tactics or types of tactics?

- 4) What is the importance of confrontational tactics? Do they have advantages over cooperative coalition-building?

- 5) Do you find that some tactics are more popular among members than others?

VIII. Finally, I'd like to discuss the members' efficacy and confidence.

- 1) How do you build efficacy among your members? How effective is it?

- 2) What kinds of members respond best to efficacy-building efforts?

- 3) How do political officeholders and bureaucrats respond to ACORN members? Do they take them seriously? Why or why not?

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