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# Advocacy Group Activity in the New Media Environment

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## **Advocacy Group Activity in the New Media Environment**

[Preliminary analysis, please contact the author before citing]

Paper Presentation at the 2010 Political Networks Conference  
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**Abstract:** This paper presents an analysis of early data from the newly-launched Membership Communications Project (MCP). The MCP is a data-aggregation effort concerned with tracking the email practices of progressive advocacy organizations in American politics. Based on 2.5 months of data collection across 70 organizations (998 messages in total), the goal of the paper is twofold. First, the paper establishes the purpose behind and construction of the MCP dataset, offering an “annotated user’s manual” of sorts for interested members of the research community. Data collection will continue for at least six months, and the dataset is freely available to other researchers. Second, the paper uses the MCP email data to create two types of social network graph – an affiliation network of organizations and issue areas and a social network graph of the “strong ties” formed through joint outreach efforts between organizations. The analysis is preliminary in nature, but it strongly suggests that the new generation of internet-mediated organizations include issue-generalist “grazers” and issue-niche specialists. It also indicates that there is substantial variance between organizational email strategies, with no evidence of any overarching, thematic set of “best practices.”

## Introduction

Despite the journalistic and scholarly attention paid to the latest wave of novel online venues for political participation, e-mail remains the ‘Killer App’ of American Politics. A new generation of internet-mediated, data-driven advocacy groups communicate with their membership primarily through e-mail. The activity of groups like MoveOn, Democracy for America, and the Progressive Change Congress Committee are mediated almost entirely through email communication. These groups track the issues, frames, and actions that are of greatest appeal to their membership by monitoring clickthrough and open rates on messages, engaging in “A/B testing” on randomized portion of their list to compare issue frames, and inviting their membership to give direct input through online surveys. (See Karpf 2009, Karpf 2010 for related discussion) Older groups have likewise made substantial commitments to online activism (Bimber 2003), partnering with data management firms like Convio, Blue State Digital, and Democracy in Action to keep pace with the new online behemoths of the left, MoveOn and Organizing for America (OFA). If we are to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the internet is changing political advocacy, membership communication via email simply cannot be ignored.

Yet despite the heavy reliance on this rather basic online communications tool – Democracy in Action alone reports having sent out 1.73 *billion* emails for its client list in 2009<sup>1</sup> -- email communication has remained almost completely unexplored terrain in the scholarly literature. Political technology conferences like Personal Democracy Forum,

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<sup>1</sup> Reported via Twitter, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 8:43AM EST, by username @Salsalabs, the organizational account of Democracy in Action.

Politics Online, Rootscamp and Netroots Nation routinely feature panels and workshops on “best practices in email use,” but the academic literature has been virtually silent on the subject matter. While websites and blogs have attracted increasing attention, there has to date been no systematic study of the use of email by political associations (Wallsten 200X, Merry 2010). Shulman (2009) provides an investigation of email-driven public comments, and Nielsen (2009) discusses the reliance by electoral campaigns on “mundane mobilization tools” such as email, but even those promising works limit themselves to the perceived impact of the medium, rather than gathering data on the medium itself.

Following up on a dissertation project that investigated the disruptive effect of new communications technologies like email on the interest group ecology of American politics, I have launched a new data-gathering effort which tracks email communication between organizations and their members. Launched in January 2010, the Membership Communications Project (MCP) is meant to provide an empirical lens for scholars interested in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) usage and political associations. Covering 70 prominent leftwing political associations, the dataset is designed to track issue networks, compare fundraising appeals, study requests for membership input, and better classify the fields of activity composing online activism today. It is designed to aggregate data over time, allowing researchers to explore questions of how organizations activate their modern-day “issue publics,” as well as helping us to evaluate how the interest group ecology of American politics is changing thanks to the internet. (see Karpf 2009 for further discussion) The MCP is meant to be an

open data resource for the scholarly community, of particular utility when paired with my Blogosphere Authority Index open dataset, which has been in operation since 2008.

This paper represents the first preliminary report from the MCP. Based on 2.5 months of data (998 email messages in total) and prepared for the 2010 Political Networks conference, it will focus primarily on answering questions of interest to students of social network analysis regarding the increasingly networked field of political advocacy. Which issues received organizational attention over the course of these months? Did organizations remain within tightly-circumscribed issue areas, or “headline chase,” activating their membership around the issue-of-the-day? Which organizations partnered with one another, and what advocacy activities did they ask their membership to engage in? What observable clusters of groups can we observe through these activities, and how do these clusters compare to commonly-held beliefs about the interest group ecology of American politics? Centrally, I find evidence that several recently-formed, internet-mediated organizations do indeed mobilize around a larger set of issues, keeping astride of issues as they rise in the media agenda, while the older generation of organizations mostly remain focused on their issue area. Single-issue internet-mediated organizations have also recently emerged as well, however. What follows should be viewed not as the final word on organizational membership communications, but as the first sentence of a new paragraph on the matter. A second report, based on six months of data collection, will be presented at the 2010 APSA Political Communication Preconference.

Since this is the first of several reports based on a new, open dataset, the paper is structured to serve two audiences. The first section will provide an “annotated user’s

manual” of sorts, detailing design choices and data collection methods involved in the creation of the dataset itself. This section will also report several population-level findings from the first 3 months of data collection. The second section will then use the MCP data to construct a series of social network graphs of the advocacy community under study. This section will answer questions about the advocacy-community-as-network, particularly looking at which organizations and issues have been most central and peripheral during the first quarter of 2010. A discussion section will follow, highlighting dominant themes in the data thus far and identifying areas for future research.

### **The Membership Communications Project Dataset**

The MCP dataset relies on a relatively simple, intuitive design, accessing publicly-accessible membership communications from a large cluster of progressive advocacy organizations. On January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010, I created a dummy email account via gmail. I then visited the websites of 70 advocacy organizations and signed up for any email lists or outreach efforts provided on through those sites. For the first two weeks of data collection, I used a broad descriptive classification scheme, then refined it to a set of seven categories based on observed patterns and commonalities between emails (described below). The purpose here is to do the basic descriptive work of categorizing what organizations contact their members about, at what frequency, and with what requests. This data can then be synthesized for a variety of purposes, including matched comparative analysis (how do categorically- and topically-similar fundraising appeals

differ in framing and monetary request, for instance) or augmented case-based research on specific issue areas.

This section of the paper will provide details on three hurdles I faced in designing the dataset, as well as population-wide findings based on the first three months of data collection. Hurdles included identification of an appropriate sample of political associations, deciding what to do about conservative groups, and accounting for the limitations created by proprietary data and important email lists that are left “unseen” by this analysis. Each hurdle is discussed in turn below, to be followed by a description of the headings used in the classification scheme and trends in the data thus far.

### *Identifying Organizations*

The first major hurdle in any study of American interest groups involves identifying the relevant population under study. As Walker notably demonstrated (1991), this is no mean feat. It is made even more difficult in this case for two reasons. First, I am interested in public interest advocacy groups – organizations that seek to mobilize some form of public pressure to affect public policy decisions out of concern for the public good. These “post-materialist” political associations (Berry 1999) are the most visible segment of the DC interest group community. Yet the large majority of lobbying organizations and Political Action Committees (PACs) represent business or other private interests. Sampling from directories of Washington lobbying organizations or PAC spending reports thus does not present a solution. Unlike other recent work that focuses on documenting the lobbying community as a whole, I am interested solely in those that



seek to galvanize an issue public to take action around their shared values. Second, the internet has facilitated novel structures for “netroots” political associations. Given my interest in including such groups in this study, it would be imprudent to assume that novel organization forms will appear in Washington directories. MoveOn has 5 million members, 38 staffpeople and zero office space. The PCCC has 400,000 members, between 4 and 11 staffpeople, and no office space. Interest group studies have traditionally been equated with studies of “the DC lobbying community.” Though both groups have *some* presence in the nation’s capital, their decision to eschew the substantial overhead costs associated with a large staff of policy experts and lobbyists may be indicative of a broader change in the field of internet-mediated political associations. It is unclear whether the traditional indexes of DC interest groups appropriately capture this new generation of infrastructure-poor, communication-rich organizations.

To provide a workaround of sorts, I chose to rely on some high-profile moments in recent history to create a relevant convenience sample. In the aftermath of the America Coming Together 527 effort<sup>2</sup> in the 2004 Presidential election, a large network of progressive/liberal major donors was unhappy with the results of their donations. Rob Stein, Erica Payne, and a few other high-profile individuals connected to the community began presenting a slideshow on “The Conservative Message Machine Money Matrix.” Their central argument was that conservative donors had built a set of institutions that helped them achieve greater successes in elections and governance than the single-issue groups prevalent in the American left. This led to the founding of the Democracy

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<sup>2</sup> “527” refers to a line in the tax code 527 groups are organizations that engage in Independent Expenditure Campaigns during election cycles, under guidance established by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002.

Alliance in 2005 as an umbrella organization for the major donor community.

Altogether, Democracy Alliance donors have provided over \$100 million in funding to the organizations that they have jointly identified as representing important pieces of progressive infrastructure. (Brookes 2008)

The list of groups eventually funded by the Democracy Alliance thus provides a network of interest in its own right. Funding from the Alliance not only represents a substantial investment of resources (creating a practical floor for the advocacy groups represented in the study), but also indicates that the groups fit together in an attempt at building a set of progressive institutions. Though support from the Democracy for Alliance is not a necessary and sufficient condition for including an organization in the list of “public interest political associations,” it is a highly suggestive place to start. Furthermore, though this direct donor list is not public information, the former Director of the Democracy Alliance published a helpful guide to the groups she/they felt were part of the new progressive infrastructure in her 2008 book *The Practical Progressive*. Technically, we do not know if the groups listed in this book represent the full population of supported organizations, but we *do* know that the list was assembled by a panel of 24 progressive “experts” with links to Payne and the Democracy Alliance. From the perspective of prominent public interest group leaders, this list provides a starting point for populating a study of the political left. Payne’s book lists a total of 81 organizations, though 30 of those organizations represented elements of progressive infrastructure that do not engage in direct mobilization (*The Nation* magazine and blogs like the *Huffington Post* and *DailyKos*, for instance). In all, 51 of the 81 groups had some form of email list to which a member or supporter could subscribe.

In addition to this list of 51 groups, I added 19 additional organizations that were either well-known members of the political left (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Organization for Women, Amnesty International, American Civil Liberties Union) or prominent “netroots” groups that had been founded since the book had been published (Organizing for America, Change Congress, Progressive Change Campaign Committee, Courage Campaign). This augmented list also included several environmental orgs (Greenpeace, Alliance for Climate Protection, 1Sky, 350.org, National Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund, Defenders of Wildlife) in preparation for a related study I will be conducting on that community. Note that those environmental orgs include very old groups (Sierra was founded in 1892) and very new groups (350.org was founded in 2007). I am open to adding other clusters of issue groups to the dataset upon request. The appendix to this study lists all of the groups included from the Democracy Alliance list, along with the 19 groups I augmented the list with. I encourage the reader to peruse the appendix at this point and consider whether the compiled list seems appropriate.

### *The Left-Right Divide in Organizational Communications*

Absent from this study is any advocacy group representation from the political right. Particularly during a time period when conservative grassroots mobilization appears to be on the rise through the “tea party” movement, this design choice requires explanation. I leave conservative advocacy organizations out of this study for two reasons: network structure and historical patterns.

Regarding network structure, political associations demonstrably learn from one another through four forms of networked communication. First, staff of like-minded political associations move from one group to another over the course of their careers, bringing skills and learned organizational habits with them. Given that the nonprofit community is a relatively low-paying sector, structured around the rewards of “doing good, rather than doing well,” this staff mobility remains concentrated within ideological sectors. It is common for a staffer from the Sierra Club to move to the National Resources Defense Council. Moving from the National Organization for Women to the National Rifle Association is far less common. Likewise, professionals within the political left have learned best practices for email communication at a series of conferences and trainings – events like the New Organizing Institute’s “Rootscamp,” Camp Wellstone trainings, and the annual Netroots Nation conference – where conservative nonprofit professionals are absent. There are a few industry-wide conferences – events like the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet’s Politics Online Conference and the annual Personal Democracy Forum conference, but conservatives are in the minority at these events as well. Most progressive organizations use the same consultants to manage their email programs – primarily Democracy in Action, Blue State Digital, and Convio. These consultancies cater to the ideological left, and presumably help to educate organizations on email best-practices. Finally, organizations learn best practices through coalition work, sustained working relationships between Executive Directors, and confidential data-sharing agreements with organizations such as Catalist. All of these linkages display a heavy ideological bias. I thus would hypothesize greater overlaps among progressive organizations than among

political associations as a whole. The groups in this study compete for donors and volunteers, working toward similar, often overlapping goals. They learn from each other through conferences, partnerships, and staff transitions. Little if any of that connectivity is present across the ideological spectrum, suggesting that conservative political associations (particularly the new wave of tea party-related groups) ought to be treated separately.

Not only are various forms of network tie more prevalent within ideological communities than across the partisan divide, there are strong reasons to expect the American right to adopt new media in different ways. Matthew Kerbel has argued that conservative “netroots” institutions are more vertically-integrated, while the progressive netroots are more horizontally-integrated due to the previous existence of major media institutions on each side (2009). Similar trends are likely present in the area of organizational communications, with longstanding conservative groups inheriting the legacy of direct mail pioneer Richard Viguerie (whom Jeffrey Berry once described as a “one man tragedy of the commons”) and organizations like Americans for Prosperity and Americans for Tax Reform run by longtime conservative leaders Dick Armey and Grover Norquist. Between those major groups, the prevalence of Fox News, and conservative discussion sites like FreeRepublic.com, we should not expect the email usage patterns of the political left to mimic those of the political right. A comparative analysis of these differing trends would be a worthwhile undertaking, but such an analysis moves beyond the limits of the current research endeavor. Particularly in the relatively new field of email communication, one should not expect all organizations to develop similar

practices. I thus set out to gather data on the political left, leaving the political right as a puzzle for another time.

*Backchannels and Proprietary Data: Limits of the Dataset.*

It bears noting that a study such as this *cannot* cover all of the email communication occurring between these organizations and their members. As one staffperson of an internet-mediated group noted to me, “the only way to see every message we send out to the membership is to be on staff.” Organizations segment their lists in a variety of ways, with the newer groups like MoveOn engaging in much more sophisticated data segmentation than their more longstanding counterparts. The data collected for this analysis thus presents an “audience-eye view” of membership communications. Lacking an omniscient-narrator perspective, the study lacks three types of data that would otherwise be of substantial interest: listserv communications, backchannel google groups, and clickstream/segmented data.

Listservs have been a staple of intra-organizational communications since the mid-1990s, leading to some amusing anecdotal evidence about the uptake of new communications technologies by legacy organizations. When one major political association was discussing the launch of a new presence on blogs and social network sites, several board members indicated that they were “just more comfortable with traditional listservs.<sup>3</sup>” That email has diffused so widely as to be considered “traditional” in comparison to new media technologies is a testament to the pace of technological

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<sup>3</sup> Participant-observation, May 2007

change. Regardless, it also serves as an indicator that even the slowest-adopting organizations have developed capacities for internal communication through listservs and other closed channels. This represents a large bulk of email communications between political associations and their stakeholders (staff, volunteers, and donors) excluded from the MCP dataset. The dataset is concerned with *external* communications between organizations and their large supporter lists, though the boundaries between “external” and “internal” are themselves an organizational choice often put to debate.

Likewise, networks of cross-organizational stakeholders communicate frequently over private, semi-secret backchannel lists, organized through the Google Groups utility. The largest of these lists is “Townhouse,” which encompasses the progressive netroots and is named after a bar in Washington, DC where leftwing bloggers often congregate in person. (Shulman 2007) Blogger Ezra Klein also organized “JournoList,” which attracted brief notoriety in public circles for coordinating activity among progressive bloggers and progressive journalists. The backchannel lists provide an important forum for progressive advocacy groups, particularly among the new “netroots” cohort. With political blogs making strategic debates increasingly public, advocacy professionals require a space where they can freely discuss the merits of particular policy stances, privately share breaking news about upcoming events, and coordinate activities. Lists like Townhouse provide this functionality by requiring that all participants obey 3 rules: 1. All messages are considered private, off-the-record, and not for distribution, 2. The name and existence of the list should not be mentioned in public or to the press, and 3. If

someone forwards you a message from the list, please contact a list administrator.<sup>4</sup>

Though Townhouse and JournoList are two major backchannels whose names have become public, there is an untold number of additional lists, presumably organized by issue area, in use as well. Given the restrictions imposed by list administrators, these quasi-internal email lists also are excluded from the MCP.

Finally, missing from this study is any indication of email effectiveness. Data such as clickthrough rates, message tests, regional variation, and email segmentation are kept proprietary by the advocacy groups themselves. Though these groups frequently contract with organizations such as Catalist for industry-wide analysis, those reports likewise are conducted behind the veil of confidentiality. For this reason, the MCP dataset's reliance on public data is quite limiting. Do (some) organizations send different messages to Providence, RI than to Tucson, AZ? Do they make different action or funding requests? How closely do they track and respond to individual-level clickthrough rates? Which types of email appeal are most and least effective. There is a wealth of private industry knowledge on this subject which, at present, cannot be tested, though it is my hope to develop future partnerships in that area.

Recognizing those limitations, the following section details the MCP categorization scheme and provides distributional findings thus far.

### *Data Collection*

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to these requirements as “*Fight Club* rules,” in reference to the popular book and film of that name.



Having used the augmented Democracy Alliance list to identify a convenience sample, I then created a dummy account through gmail, visited each organization's website, and signed up for any email lists, online membership status, or action alert programs offered by the organization. Knowing that some organizations send more additional emails to the subset of members that take action, I clicked through and took the first online action offered by all groups as well. As messages came in to the account, I coded them based on 9 variables. [date], [organization], [topic], [digest/e-newsletter], [action ask], [fundraising ask], [request for member input], [event advertisement], [media agenda link]. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below:

1. Date. Records the date the email was sent. Useful for measuring the flow of information from the population over time, and also for using the dataset to construct timelines of activity for related research projects that rely on this dataset as one of many sources. (see Karpf, forthcoming, on the Arkansas Democratic Senate Primary contest between Lt. Governor Bill Halter and Senator Blanche Lincoln) Data collection began on January 21, 2010. For this paper, I examined all emails sent through April 21, 2010, providing three months of activity in total. Figure 1 reveals the flow of emails over the initial three months of this study. The low point occurred during the week of the DC blizzard, when many organizations had to close their offices. The high point occurred in the week leading up to final passage of the Health Care Reform package in the House.

--Figure 1 here --

2. Organization. Records the organization that sent the messages. In the initial two and a half months of the study, one organization (Campaign for America's Future) sent out 13% of the total messages (137 messages). This was primarily due to the groups twice-a-day digest emails, "Progressive Breakfast" and "PM Update." The second most-frequent emailer, Faith in Public Life, similarly sent out a "Daily Faith News" digest, comprising 58 messages in total. The next most-frequent emailing groups were the Sierra Club, with 57 messages of various types, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities with 53 messages announcing a report release or a statement on proposed legislation, and MoveOn with 49 action alerts. 11 groups sent no email during the months of study, and 10 groups sent three or fewer messages. Figure 2 provides the distribution of group emails.

--Figure 2 here --

3. Topic. Here I categorized the messages by issue topic, or by other dominant feature. The "Legal Services E-Alerts" from the Brennan Center, for instance, is a series of alerts about legal services generally, and thus received that topical heading. Likewise, Faith in Public Life sent out "Daily Faith News" every weekday, listing faith-related headlines in the news. I relied on the dominant language of the email to determine issue topic, so if the message was framed around Health Care, but also discussed the Recovery Act, it was coded as "Health Care." Likewise if a message was framed as "weekly e-news," it was simply recorded as "e-news." Topical

headings are used in category 9, [media agenda] and in constructing the affiliation network presented in the subsequent section.

4. Digest/E-newsletter. This is the largest category, encompassing 45.2% of the messages received. It includes daily news digests from groups like Campaign for America's Future and Faith in Public Life, featuring links to news or blog posts of potential interest to their supporters. Also included are report releases from organizations like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and emailed versions of blog posts by groups like the Sierra Club. Note that these make up the top 4 organizations in emails-sent. A small set of groups use email to frequently send informational updates to their membership, and those updates make up nearly half of the email traffic from the organizations in the study. These emails generally do not attempt to mobilize the resources of any members, with only 52 action alerts (11.5%) and 15 fundraising, member input, or event announcements (3.3%). Nearly all of those action alerts appeared in heavily-formatted e-newsletters that include sidebar columns inviting readers to take action. All e-newsletters, digest emails, or other information-only messages are coded as a 1 in this column. All other messages are coded as a 0. Total messages by category are presented in figure 3 (categories are non-exclusive, so some messages are double-counted).

--figure 3 here --

5. Action Ask. Recent scholarship has focused on the over-reliance of political advocacy groups, particularly in the environmental sector, on using email to flood government agencies with mass produced, identical public comments, spamming the agencies and limiting the effectiveness of the public comment process. (Shulman 2009) The “action ask” measure captures such action alerts from the perspective of those sending them. For any “action alert” message, which includes a prominent request to contact an elected official or other influential decision-maker (generally with a link to a pre-written email or phone calling script), I record the type of action requested and the target recipient of that action. All other emails are coded as a 0. 432 messages included some form of action alert (43.2%). Contra-Shulman, the overwhelming majority of action requests targeted either President Obama or Members of Congress. This preliminary finding may merely represent the heightened focus on health care reform (a congressional action) during the first two and a half months of study, but it bears further examination.
  
6. Fundraising Ask. Along with mobilizing the membership to take political action, mobilizing the membership to donate money represents a crucial activity for organizations. Particularly as direct mail marketing is in industry-wide decline (Flannery and Harris 2008), email-based fundraising provides a replacement revenue stream with lower overhead costs, faster turnaround, and the potential for dynamic message testing and sophisticated data mining. This category includes three distinct types of fundraising email. The first is a general request to become a member or supporter of the organization by donating to their work. Such an ask is virtually

identical to the direct mail-type fundraising appeal. The second is a request to support a specific action, such as giving \$10 to put a television commercial on the air. This has been referred to elsewhere as “MoveOn-style fundraising” (Karpf 2009). Such fundraising is event-specific, introducing restrictions on its use for general organizational overhead costs. It is generally thought of as easier-to-raise, but less useful to the organization.<sup>5</sup>

A third type of fundraising appeared frequently in the dataset as well. This was a form of “pass through” fundraising, in which organizations urged their membership to donate directly to supported political candidates. These donations are bundled together, so the candidate knows which advocacy group they are associated with, but they otherwise do not provide for organizational operating expenses. The links provided frequently lead to an ActBlue.com fundraising page, meaning that none of the money flows into the mobilizing organization’s coffers. In this column, I record either the type of fundraising request made or a zero if no request was made. For some portions of the data analysis, I collapse all three types of fundraising request into a 1, allowing the fundraising column to be treated as a bivariate variable. In total, 150 messages (15%) included some form of fundraising ask.

7. Member Input. Online membership communication makes it theoretically possible for organizations to radically expand the degree of input they receive from members.

In the absence of the internet, membership deliberation can be prohibitively resource-

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<sup>5</sup> Universities face an equivalent dilemma in fundraising, with alumni often wanting to donate to specific programs or new construction projects, and the Office of Development urging alumni to give to the General Fund so the donations can be put to their greatest use.

intensive for a national organization, requiring either an expensive annual convention or a lengthy series of in-person membership meetings. Early scholars and practitioners had hopes that the speed and flexibility of email and other online communications platforms would make organizations far more participatory. (Fine 2006, Trippi 2004) Those hopes have mostly been dashed at this point, but the MCP provides a novel opportunity to gather empirical data on membership input. When do organizations solicit member input? Which organizations do so, and how frequently? This column codes user surveys, membership votes, and invitations to submit user-generated content as a 1, and all other messages as a 0. In the first 2.5 months of data collection, only 43 messages in the entire dataset have requested member input (4.3%). A separate study, focused on comparative analysis of these messages is slated for the fall of 2010.

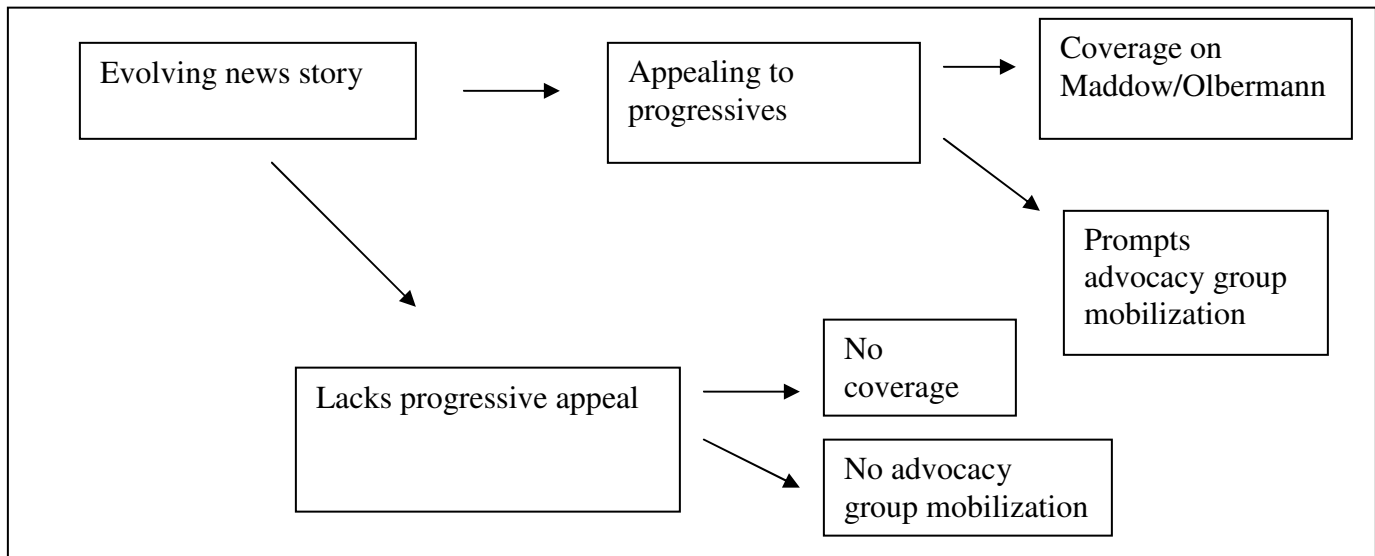
8. Event Advertisement. This column covers announcements of upcoming conferences, trainings, or other organizational events. Though this type of email, coded as a bivariate 1 or 0, does not appear very frequently (89 messages/ 8.9%) one organization (New Organizing Institute), *solely* sent out event announcements during the 2.5 months of data collection, while another (Advancement Project) sent out only event announcements and a monthly e-newsletter.
9. Media Agenda. One major claim that I have made in previous research (Karpf 2009) is that the newer, internet-mediated advocacy groups engage in “headline chasing,” mobilizing their membership around whatever topic is currently at the top of the

media agenda rather than focusing attention on a single issue domain. As a test of this claim, I compare the topic of organizational emails (listed in column 3) to the topics covered on the top two left-leaning news programs, *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*. These two hour-length programs appear in the primetime news slots on MSNBC (8PM and 9PM, rebroadcast at 10PM and 11PM). Their hosts are liberal icons, frequently cited by the political netroots, with Olbermann occasionally blogging at DailyKos.com. If an email topic received coverage on one of these programs on the day of, the day before, or the day after the date that the email was sent, it is coded as a 1. Otherwise it is coded as a 0.

The choice of these programs as a representation of the left's media agenda may be controversial and bears further elaboration. I would stress that I am not making the claim that these two television programs set the left's media or political agenda. Though Rachel Maddow occasionally holds exclusive interviews that are newsworthy in their own right, and though Keith Olbermann's occasional "special comments" likewise attract broader attention, for the most part these programs are *reflecting* the news of the day, rather than *creating* it. An emerging research tradition documents the fragmentation of the news environment (Jamieson and Cappella 2010, Sunstein 2001, Xenos and Kim 2008). The current state of media fragmentation suggests that not only are the issues of the day *framed* differently, but also that different issues receive attention from left-leaning and right-leaning venues.

It is my contention that the audience of Maddow and Olbermann heavily overlaps with the membership/supporter base of progressive advocacy organizations. As such, the issues which, on a day-to-day basis, appear to the two programs' editorial staffs as

being of high audience interest could be termed the issues which are at the top of the progressive media agenda. This relationship is depicted in the flow chart below.



Daily coverage from the two programs was recording according to topic area. Health Care Reform dominated coverage on the two shows, receiving coverage on all but 3 programs between January 21 and March 31, 2010, generally as the lead story. Maddow demonstrated a preference for coverage of Don't Ask, Don't Tell hearings, coverage of the C Street house run by Christian organization "the Family," that houses several prominent Members of Congress, and filibuster reform. Olbermann demonstrated a preference for criticizing Sarah Palin, organizers and activists in the "tea party" movement, Republican officials and Fox News contributors. Both programs featured some coverage of Financial Reform, unemployment legislation, and breaking news stories on disasters (Haiti and Peru earthquakes, plane crash into Austin IRS building) and Republican scandals. Both programs turned central



attention from Health Care to extreme rightwing responses to the bill's passage in late March and early April.

The 9 headings mentioned above constitute the MCP dataset. The distributional data and trends listed above represent findings that hopefully will prove interesting to students of interest groups and online political advocacy. The next section will convert portions of the dataset into a series of social network graphs to investigate the issues and organizations that had the highest centrality over the first three months of 2010.

### **Network Analysis of Advocacy Group Membership Activation**

The MCP dataset can be used to tell us substantially more than has previously been known about advocacy group mobilization priorities. What issues do advocacy groups contact their members about? What do they ask them to do, and how tightly do these activities tie the groups together? As an initial foray, I converted the MCP dataset into a source of network data and use it to answer the following three questions:

1. **Issue Areas.** Bimber (2003), Chadwick (2007) and others have argued that online communications has allowed advocacy groups to move beyond their single-issue niches and mobilize around a wider variety of topics. Organizations and issue topics can be assembled in a two-mode affiliation network, with organizations occupying the rows and issue topics occupying the columns. This can yield information both

regarding which issues are most-central to the advocacy groups in the study and which advocacy groups organize around the widest variety of issues.

2. **Coalition Formation.** Overlapping issue-focus can be treated as a weak tie of sorts, as we can expect that two progressive organizations contacting their (likely overlapping) membership around the same issue are likely to communicate on other topics as well. The dataset also includes examples of strong ties, in which multiple organizations engaged their membership around a joint action. Whether this was an email campaign, call-in day, or “virtual march on Washington,” these joint activities are evidence of close organizational ties and shared strategy. Looking solely at joint actions, I construct a one-mode network dataset, in which the nodes are organizations and the ties are joint actions, regardless of issue-area.

Methods and findings for each of these questions are provided in independent subheadings below.

*Issue Areas as Affiliation Network. A New Geography of Advocacy Group Mobilization*

For the issue area study, I relied primarily upon the [organization] and [topic] columns in the MCP dataset. Organizations were placed as rows in a matrix, and topics were arrayed as columns. For e-newsletters and digests, I took the lead topic mentioned in the email and classified on that basis. Note that this provides an indication of ties between an organization and an issue, but no indication of the depth of those ties. While

a small core of organizations emailed their membership two dozen or more times on the topic of Health Care Reform, some others only sent a single message in the days leading up to the final congressional vote. All such organizations are recorded simply as a 1. Given that 11 organizations in the study sent no emails, I was left with 59 organizational nodes. 6 additional organizations were removed from the matrix as isolates (Amnesty International, Alliance for Justice, New Organizing Institute, Gathering for Justice, and FairVote) – each of these organizations had sent emails that could not be classified as primarily issue-focused. These were mostly event announcements or e-newsletters that focused on organizational activities rather than issue priorities. This left 53 rows in the 2-mode matrix. I identified 33 separate issue areas, ranging from the specific (MA Senate, filling out census forms) to the general (civil rights, gay rights, abortion rights). I attempted to fold specific issues that received brief activity into a related broader category, while leaving specific issue areas that received sustained activity or did not have a clear broad issue area separate. Network matrices were created in Microsoft Excel, and graphs were created through the java-based application visone (visone.info).<sup>6</sup>

Among the 33 issue areas, the average issue received attention from 5.18 groups, while the median issue received attention from 4 groups and the modal issue received attention from 5 groups. 6 issues received attention from only 1 group (Faith-Based Initiatives, Child Nutrition, New GI Bill, Patriot Act Reauthorization, Defense Spending, International Human Rights) while 6 other issues received attention from 10 or more groups. Health Care Reform received the most attention, with 22 groups contacting their

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<sup>6</sup> This selection required hand-drawing the network graphs, a tedious and unhelpful process. Working from a Macintosh, I was left with few alternatives. I hereby acknowledge that I clearly have to learn *R*...

membership on that subject. The jobs bill/Recovery Act received 16 links, while the Supreme Court's *Citizen's United* decision and energy/global warming-related messages received 11 links. Wall Street Reform and Democratic primaries received 10 links apiece. The full list of issues, ties, and degree centrality (Ties/Total Groups) is presented in table 1.

--Table 1 here --

Among the 53 advocacy groups, the average group contacted their membership regarding 3.23 issues, while the median and modal group focused on 3 issues. Figure 4 provides an affiliation network graph. 5 groups focused on 6 or more issues, with Faith in Public Life covering 10 issue areas, Campaign for America's Future and MoveOn both covering 9 issue areas, True Majority covering 7 issue areas and the NAACP covering 6 issue areas. 7 groups covered 5 issue areas – Organizing for America, the ACLU, NARAL, the Center for Community Change, Color of Change, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and Progressive States Network. Figure 4 provides an affiliation network representation of these link patterns. Blue rectangles are organizations, green diamonds are issues.<sup>7</sup>

--Figure 4 here --

For further clarity, I converted this two-mode network into a one-mode matrix, following Wasserman and Faust (1994, pps 291-312). Here shared affiliations with a given issue are treated as a link between groups. Given the large number of groups that sent at least one email regarding health care reform over the course of the preliminary

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<sup>7</sup> I had initial intended to present this as a bipartite graph, but that appeared to be beyond the capacity of the visone software application.

study period, figure 5 provides a one-mode network of all organizations with at least two shared affiliations. The central cluster of organizations all mobilized around a health care and either wall street reform or the jobs bill – the three issues that received major congressional attention during the preliminary study period. This implies a note of caution regarding the current network graph. Given that the health care debate raged for nearly the entire period of study, the current time horizon is rather limiting. Extending the study to its full six months should include a wider range of issues that received time in the public spotlight, and this in turn should yield a more useful network study (particularly through subgroup analysis).

--Figure 5 here --

Note that two of the most-linked organizations are (unsurprisingly) the two groups that sent *by far* the most digest-based emails – Faith in Public Life and Campaign for America’s Future. Both of these groups sent once- or twice-daily emails summarizing news of the day that is of interest to their issue public. Given that nearly half of all messages are of this informational type, I segmented the MCP dataset based on headings 5 and 6, [action alert] and [fundraiser] and constructed a second affiliation network, this one consisting solely of groups that had attempted to mobilize member resources (either by taking action or giving money) around an issue area. Narrowing the dataset to action alerts and fundraising emails eliminated an additional 11 organizations (Advancement Project, Brennan Center, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Century Foundation, Citizens for Tax Justice, Demos, Economic Policy Institute, Faith in Public Life,

Progressive States Network, Women’s Voices, Women Vote, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America) and eliminated two issue areas (New GI Bill and Faith-based Initiatives) while providing greater clarity regarding the use of email for resource mobilization. Figures 6 and 7 present the stripped-down two-mode and one-mode network graphs. Note that in figure 7, the environmental “neighborhood” with the exception of the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) becomes entirely self-contained when  $c = 2$ . At  $c = 1$ , VoteVets, Moms Rising, and LCV all share ties with the five environmental groups. Furthermore, note that the internet-mediated environmental groups all become isolates and are dropped from the network graph at  $c = 2$ . This is because all of those groups focused solely on energy/global warming-related mobilization, sending out no messages regarding either toxins/environment or wildlife/environment-related issues. LCV’s ties came from a focus on Citizen’s United (as part of a fundraising pitch) and primary endorsements.

--Figure 6 here --

--Figure 7 here --

Among mobilization-related emails, the average issue received attention from 4.06 groups, while the median issue attracted 3 groups and the modal issue attracted 1. Health Care Reform remained substantially more popular than any other issue, attracting attention from 18 of the 42 groups (degree centrality: .423). It was followed by the jobs bill/recovery act, with 11 group-ties (.261) and primary endorsements with 10 ties (.238). Energy/Global Warming received ties from 8 groups, though this should be discounted due to the oversampling of environmental organizations in the study – interestingly, two

environmental organizations (Environmental Defense Fund and Defenders of Wildlife) sent no energy or global warming-related messages, while the three internet-mediated environmental organizations (1Sky, 350.org, and Alliance for Climate Protection) sent no messages related to toxins or wilderness/wildlife related environmental topics. Thus those other two environmental headings received only 5 organizational ties. The only ties between environmental organizations and non-environmental organizations came through political mobilization around Democratic primaries and fundraising discussion of how the *Citizen's United* ruling would let corporations flood the system with donations. *Citizen's United* and Wall Street Reform attracted 7 and 5 ties, respectively. Another interesting note is that only 3 groups – Progressive Change Campaign Committee, Democracy for America, and MoveOn – sent mobilizational messages around the “public option” in the health care legislation, despite this receiving frequent media attention as a central negotiating priority for progressive interest groups.

Among groups, the average group contacted their membership around 3 issues. The median and modal groups also recorded 3 issue areas. MoveOn emerges as the leading issue-grazer, contacting members regarding 9 distinct topics. True Majority follows with 7 issue ties. The NAACP mobilized around 6 issues, and a cluster of 6 groups mobilized their supporters around 5 issues (Campaign for America's Future, Color of Change, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, NARAL, Organizing for America, and the ACLU). Preliminarily, it appears as though internet-mediated groups cluster around the higher and lower ends of issue areas, with a set of generalists covering many issues and a set of niche specialists only covering one area. I would caution the

reader that this is a preliminary analysis, however. I will develop a statistical test of this hypothesis for the later report, based on six months of data.

*Strong Ties: Joint Membership Activation Efforts*

Turning from issue overlaps to joint mobilization efforts dramatically changes the picture of advocacy group mobilization that emerges. Here I am concerned solely with action alert messages, looking particularly for emails that mention working in partnership with another organization. Each such instance of joint mobilization is recorded as a tie, in order to develop an image of partnership frequency. Given that explicitly coordinated activity proves exceedingly rare in the first 2.5 months of the study, I include isolates (color-coded by approximate issue area) in the network map. Figure 8 records the results.

--Figure 8 here--

The most striking finding is the frequent collaboration between two internet-mediated generalists: the PCCC and Democracy for America (DFA). This collaboration was primarily around two issue topics – the public option and the Blanche Lincoln/Bill Halter Arkansas Senate primary. During the period of study, PCCC and DFA engaged in a series of tactics designed to revive the public option, which other organizations had apparently given up on. This included sign-on letters in the House and Senate, for which they requested that supporters contact their member of Congress, and also included follow-up actions were they sought to reward the authors of those sign-on letters through member donations. Overlaps between those groups and MoveOn were more sporadic, with MoveOn joining them for one public option sign-on letter action and joining them in



urging members to support Bill Halter's primary challenge of centrist incumbent Democrat Blanche Lincoln.

Other joint events primarily took the form of day-of-action events, with the Campaign for America's Future (CAF), Campaign for Community Change (CCC), Leadership Council on Civil Rights, AFSME, and True Majority partnering to push the Local Jobs for America Act in April 2010, and CAF, CCC, and True Majority partnering in mid-February as part of the "Jobs for America Now" coalition. MoveOn and DFA partnered with CAF and CCC for a February 24 "virtual march on Health Care Reform," and the Sierra Club, 1Sky, and Alliance for Climate Protection jointly organized a clean energy call-in day in early March.

The joint action network graph reveals a surprising lack of ties between many organizations that otherwise share overlapping issue interests. Women's rights groups all mobilized in response to *CBS* agreeing to air a commercial by the conservative group Focus on the Family during the Super Bowl, but their mobilization was simultaneous rather than coordinated. Or, more to the point, if it *was* coordinated, that coordination occurred at the strategic rather than tactical level. Likewise, 6 of the 9 environmental organizations in the study did not take part in the March 1<sup>st</sup> clean energy call-in day. Given longstanding relationships between these groups that are maintained through the "Green Group" and other existing institutions, this *could not* have been due to a lack of knowledge. Rather, these environmental groups either decided they had some other resource to add to the mix or they actively chose not to participate in the coalition mobilization. In light of Bimber's (2003) prediction that the internet will lead to increased "event-based mobilization" between political associations, these strong ties are

suggestive of a new method for collecting “digital traces” of organizational partnerships. The MCP dataset lets us not only identify which issue areas an organization affiliates with, but also how organizations seek to activate overlapping memberships when the political moment and place on the issue agenda are held constant.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been twofold. First, to introduce the Membership Communications Project to the academic community, both as a resource to academics and as an initial opportunity for critical feedback on the design. Second, the paper seeks to use email communication patterns to map the network of organizational relations. In the long-term, this should help us to move beyond classifying organizations based on elite interview or content analysis of aspirational mission statements, instead letting researchers classify organizations based on what they actually do. At the approximate midway point of a new data collection effort, the findings are all preliminary, but hopefully mature enough to receive feedback.

Several of the network-level findings were rather unsurprising. The reader probably could have guessed that, during the months of February and March 2010, health care would be the most central topic of organizational emails. That environmental groups hold tight to environmental issues, and abortion rights groups likewise for abortion issues, is likewise unsurprising. Indeed, it may eventually be the case that the highest-value data in the MCP comes not through network-level analysis, but through the matched comparative analysis it enables. Forthcoming studies of member surveys, fundraising appeals, and issue-specific action alerts all will rely on detailed readings of

the messages sent out by specific segments of this network, rather than examining the structure of the network as a whole. Further, I must apologetically confess to the reader that many of the network-level attributes were only barely analyzed due to problems with software availability. Conducting this study using Microsoft Excel and Visone was far from ideal.

A lingering question is whether “issue areas” have been properly defined. As currently constructed, the measure could make much greater use of the “media agenda” data, as tracked through Maddow and Olbermann. Specifically, rather than collapsing all emails in a shared topic area into a single heading, I could instead expand them outward to capture the specific events that groups are mobilizing around. Several of the generalist groups that contacted supporters informationally about energy/global warming, for instance, were making reference to the DC Blizzard. That is a distinctly different activity than participating in the clean energy day of action. Likewise, there is a substantial difference between the League of Conservation Voters emailing supporters about the release of their “Dirty Dozen” electoral target list and MoveOn/PCCC/DFA asking their supporters to donate to Bill Halter. Though this realization came to me too late to be included in the preliminary report, such a shift – from affiliations with broad topics to affiliations with specific mobilization events – would add a large amount of useful data in distinguishing subgraphs in the larger network.

One final point concerns revision of some initial expectations on my part. In previous research (Karpf 2009), I have described the generation shift among advocacy groups as a move from DC-based, single-issue groups to “internet-mediated issue generalists.” The activity of Change Congress, 350.org, 1Sky, and the Courage

Campaign causes me to amend that statement. Each of these internet-mediated groups has a single issue priority, and it works *only* on that issue priority. They are niche specialists, taking advantage of the lowered costs of online communication to engage in nimble mobilization, but without the “headline chasing” evidenced by the generalists. As a result, they have smaller supporter lists, but they also likely develop a reputation for expertise in that single issue area. This finding further points us towards a revised “ecological” perspective on the advocacy group community in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

<b>Node</b>	<b>Ties</b>	<b>Degree Centrality</b>
Health Care Reform	22	.415
Jobs Bill/Recovery Act	16	.302
Citizen's United	11	.208
Energy/Global Warming	11	.208
Banks/Financial Reform	10	.189
Primaries/endorsements	10	.189
Right-Wing Media Bias	6	.113
Environment/wilderness	6	.113
MA Sen	5	.094
Stupak Amendment	5	.094
Abortion Rights	5	.094
Net Neutrality	5	.094
Toxins/environment	5	.094
Census	5	.094
Right-Wing Extremism	5	.094
(1)Public Option, (2)Gay Rights/Don't Ask, Don't Tell, (3)Student Loans, (4)Civil Rights, (5)Immigration, (6)Education Reform	4	.075
(1)Haiti, (2)Nuclear Policy	3	.057
(1)OR ballot initiative, (2) Guantanamo, (3)Government Transparency, (4)Supreme Court Nominee	2	.038
(1)International Human Rights, (2)Defense Spending, (3)Patriot Act, (4) New GI Bill, (5)Child Nutrition, (6)Faith-Based Initiatives	1	.019

Table 1: Issue Centrality

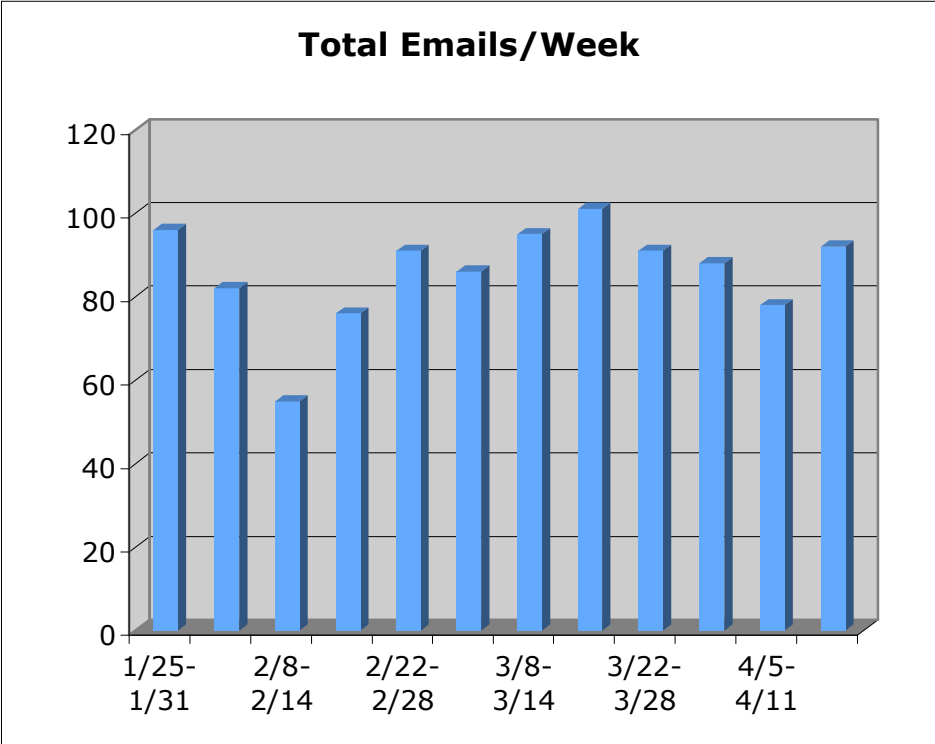


Figure 1: Total Emails/Week

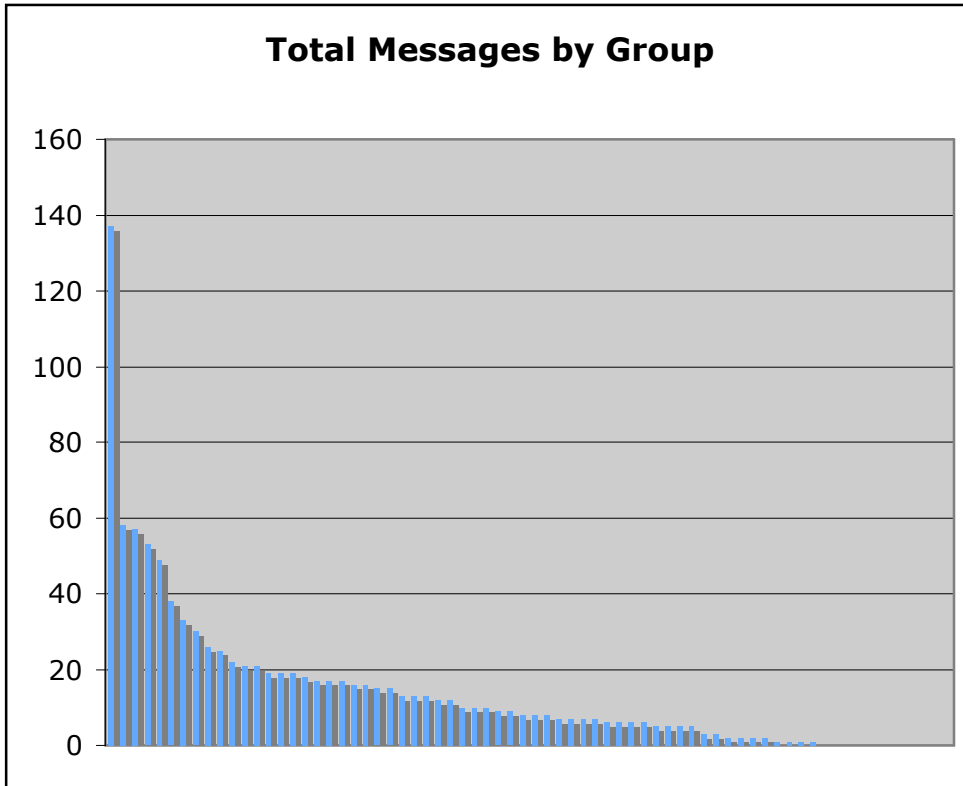


Figure 2: Total Messages Ordered by Group

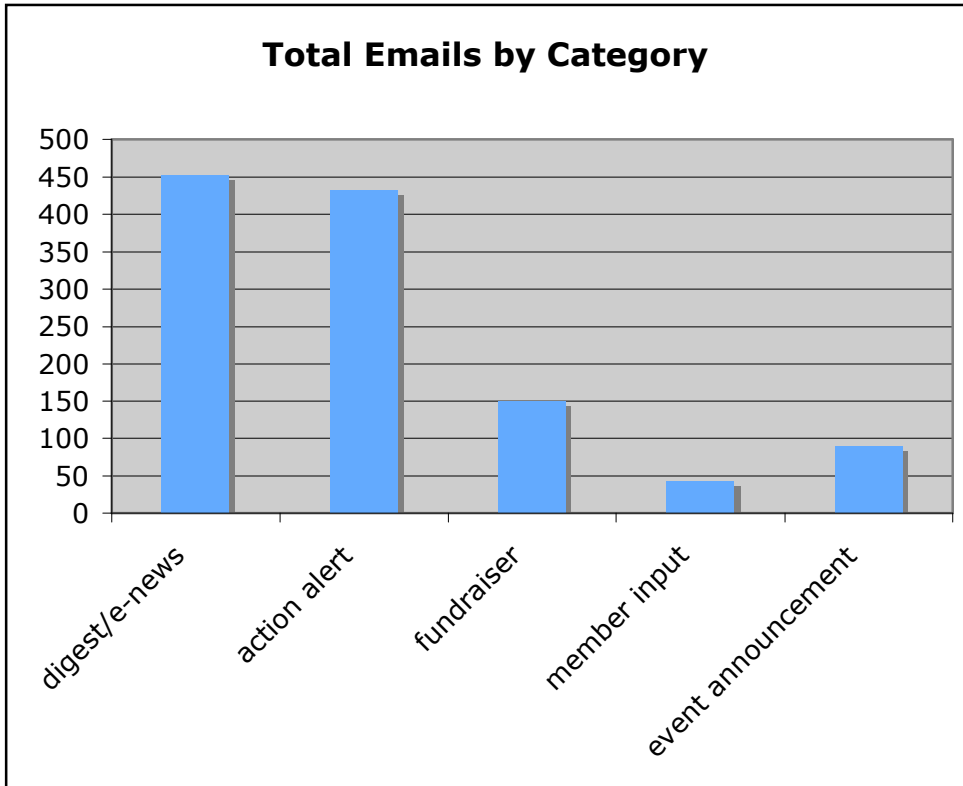


Figure 3: Total Emails by Category



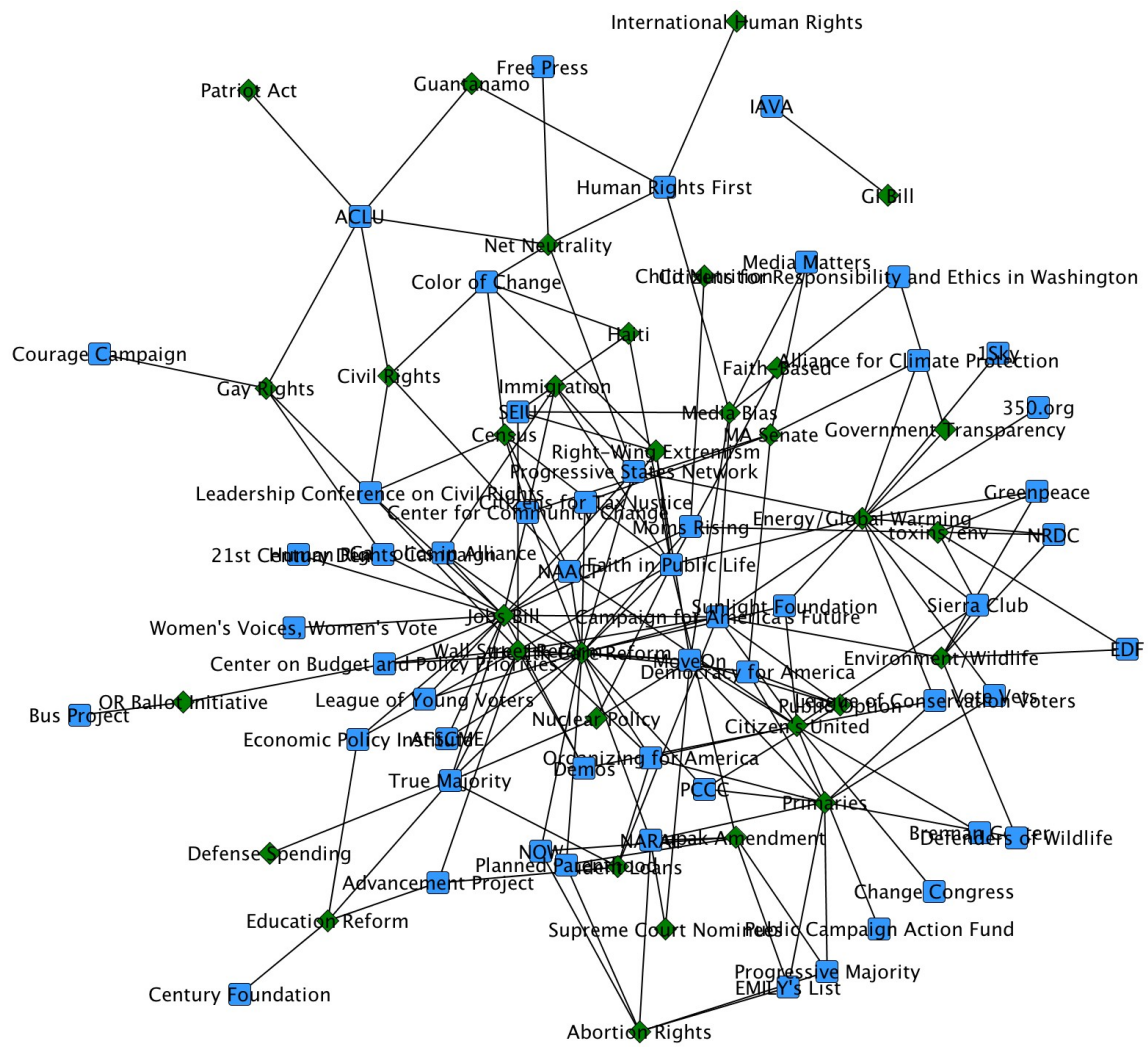


Figure 4: Affiliation Network. [Diamonds are issues, Rectangles are groups]

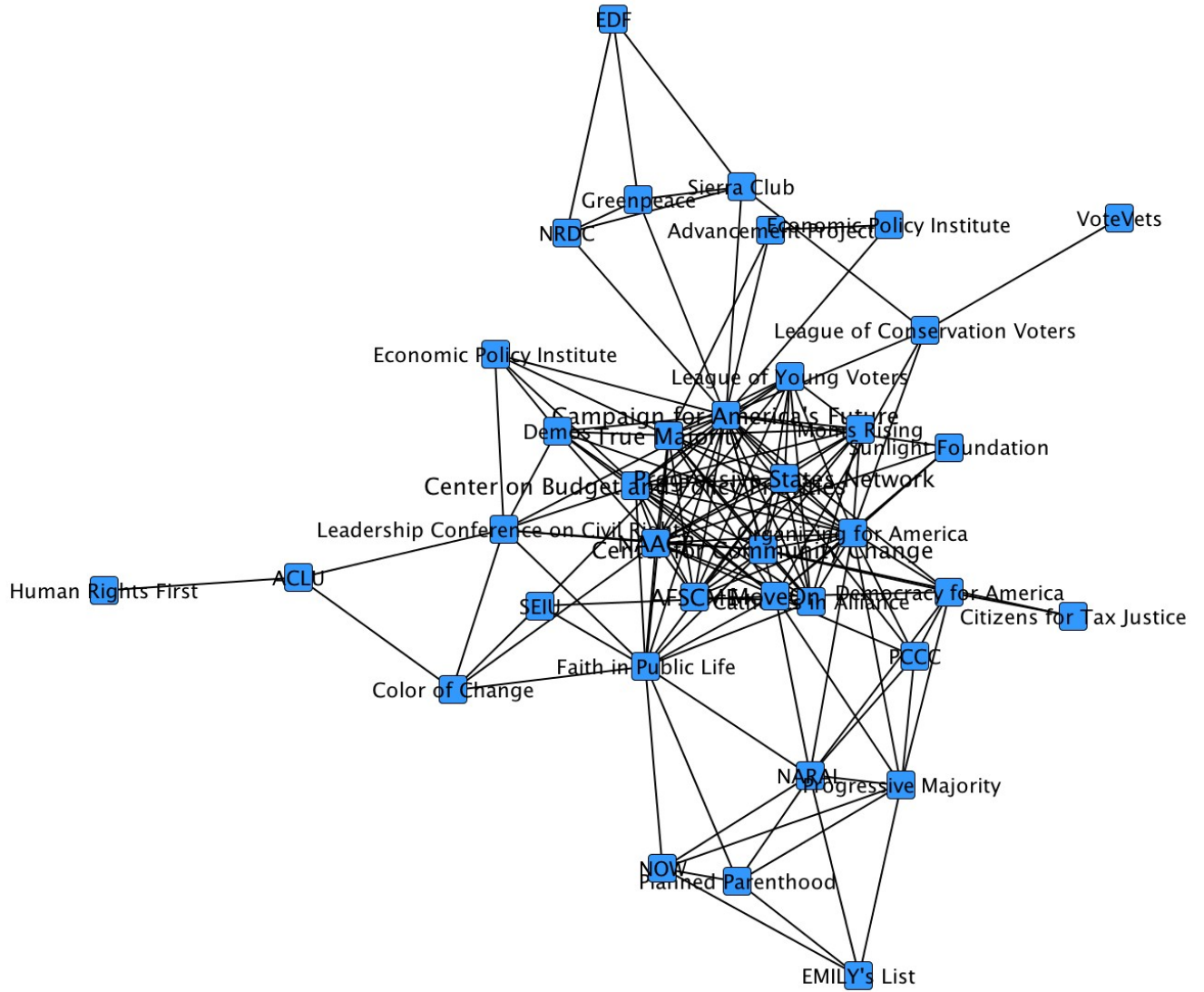


Figure 5: 1-mode network of organizations with at least 2 shared issue affiliations



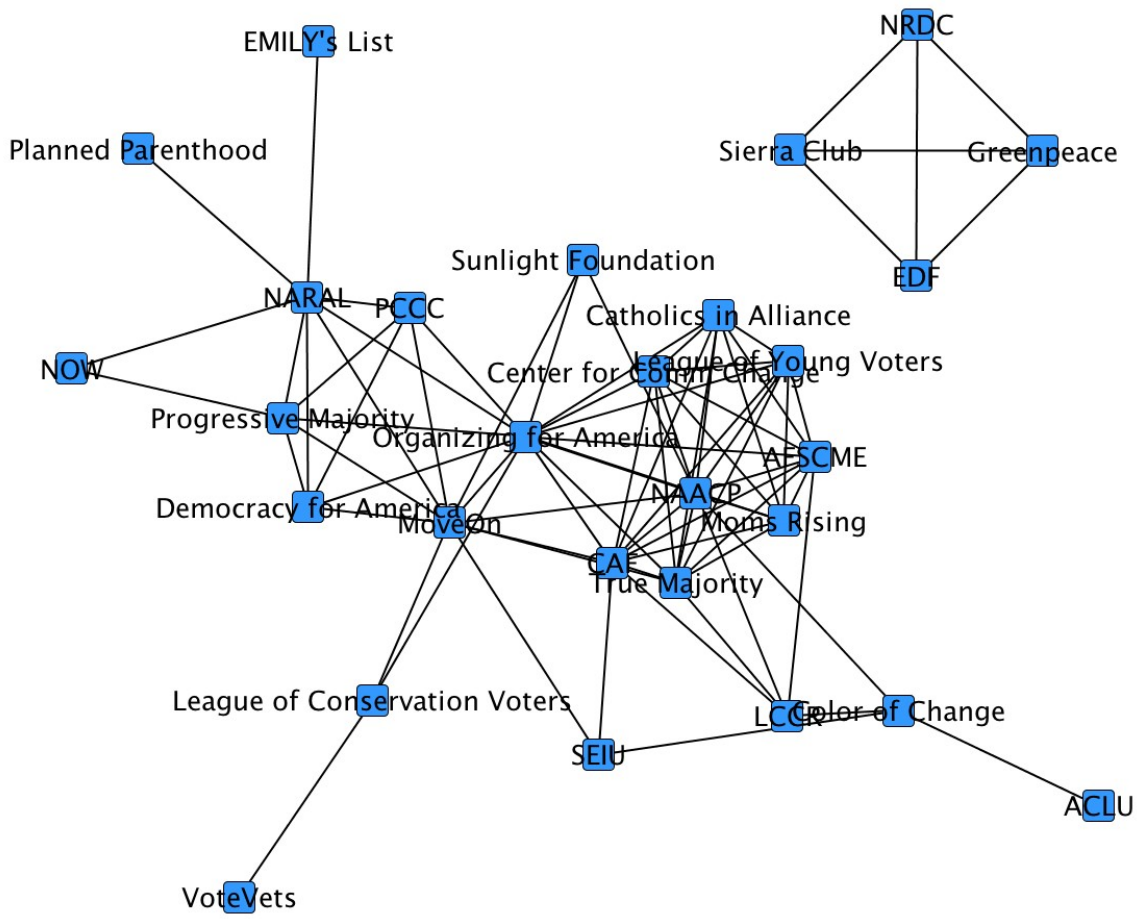
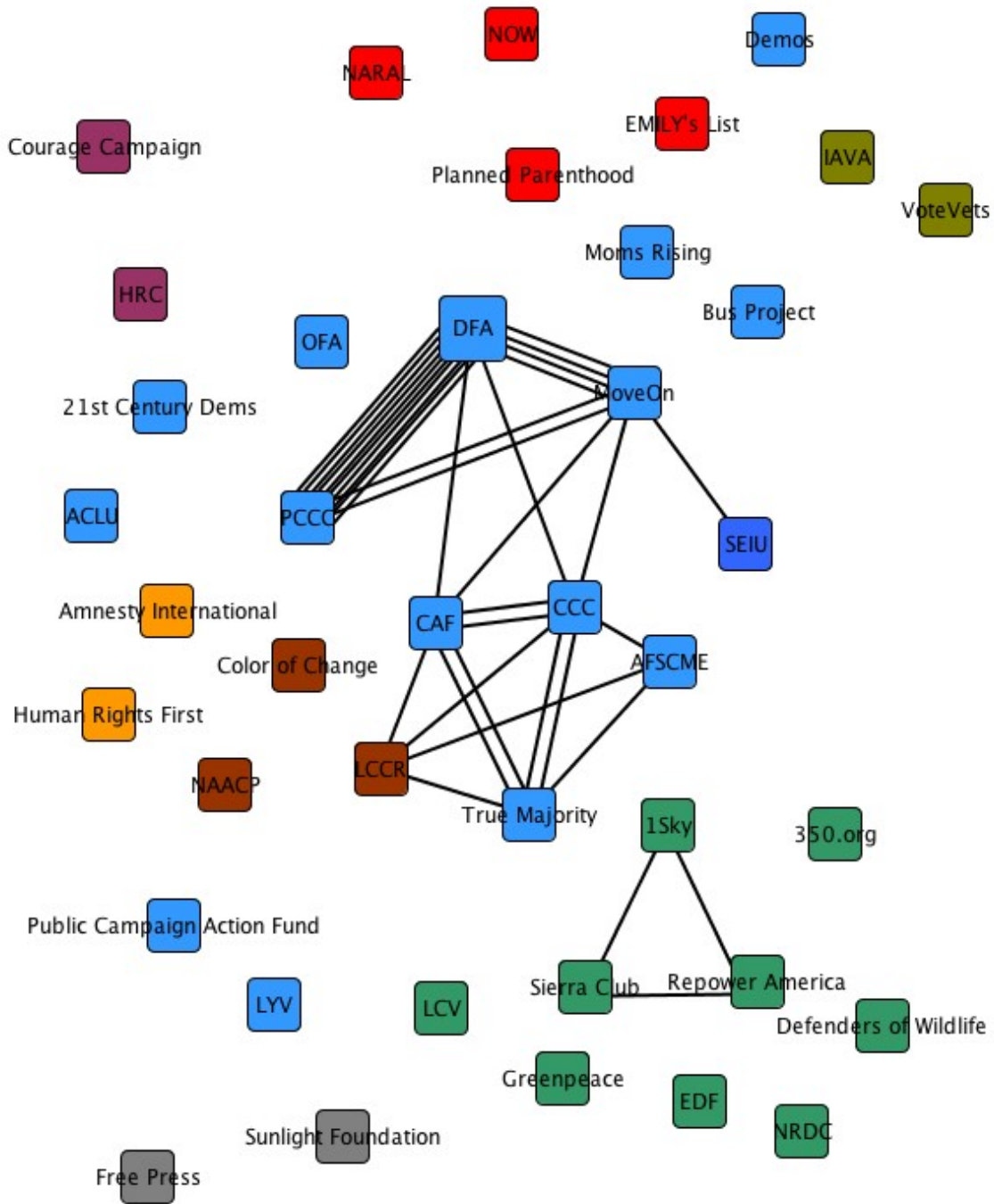


Figure 7: 1-mode network of organizations that mobilized member resources around at least 2 shared issues



**Figure 8: Joint mobilization emails between organizations**

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## **Appendix: List of Organizations Included in the Study**

From *The Practical Progressive* (51 groups)

21st Century Dems

ACORN

Advancement Project

Air America

Alliance for Justice

American Constitution Society for Law and Politics

American Progressive Caucus Policy Foundation

Brennan Center for Justice

Bus Project

Campaign for Americas Future

Catholics in Alliance

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

Center for Community Change

Center for Progressive Leadership

Century Foundation

Citizens for Tax Justice

Color of Change

Citizens for Responsibility and ethics in washington

DemocraciaUSA

Democracy for America

Demos

Economic Policy Institute

EMILY's List

Fair Vote

Faith in Public Life

Free Press

The Gathering

Human Rights Campaign

Human Rights First

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

League of Conservation Voters

League of Young Voters

Media Matters

Moms Rising

MoveOn

NARAL

National Council of La Raza

National Security Network

Planned Parenthood

Progress Now

Progressive Majority

Progressive States Network

Public Campaign

Rock the Vote



SEIU  
Sierra Club  
Sunlight Foundation  
Truman Project  
US Action/True Majority  
Vote Vets  
women's voices, women's vote  
Young Dems

*Additional Organizations*

Organizing for America  
Courage Campaign  
New Organizing Institute  
EDF  
NRDC  
350.org  
1sky  
Alliance for Climate Protection  
PCCC  
Greenpeace  
NOW  
ACLU  
NAACP  
IAVA  
AFSCME  
AFL-CIO  
Amnesty International  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Change Congress