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**VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS, THE NEWS MEDIA,  
AND THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS:  
THE PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY  
AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

**by**

**Sarah Sobieraj**

**A Dissertation**

**Submitted to University of Albany, State University of New York**

**In Partial Fulfillment of**

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and the Political Culture of Presidential Campaigns:  
The Promise and Limitations of Civil Society  
and the Public Sphere**

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**Sarah Sobieraj**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Like an academy award speech that has gone on too long, you may wonder if I am confused – thinking perhaps that I have put an end to world hunger or unveiled an AIDS vaccine rather than having completed what amounts to a large homework assignment. Let me assure you, I realize that my accomplishment means little to anyone other than myself, but the meaning that this moment carries for me is so extensive and profound that I must indulge in a series of acknowledgements that will undoubtedly seem disproportionately grand for the occasion...

Let me begin by saying that I loved my dissertation and hated it simultaneously. There were moments when it filled me with boastful pride, but it also left me feeling ignorant more days than I care to admit. I relished feeling that I was close to the end of a long graduate career, and I was captivated by the subject matter in a way that made a large part of the journey almost joyful. I fully expect that my field research will long remain on my list of best life experiences, and there were private moments of personal revelation that were deeply rewarding. Yet for all the satisfaction, I also experienced periods of anxiety, frustration, and boredom. Though the writing was often enjoyable, the frequent concern that what I had to offer was somehow too thin created bouts of self-doubt that were uncomfortable at best and agonizing at worst.

Through all of these moments, both pleasant and laborious, I was fortunate enough to be supported by several generous and patient people who deserve thanks. I am grateful to the members of my dissertation committee for taking the time to talk with me, read chapter drafts, and share their ideas. Steve Seidman offered important suggestions that involved a dramatic reframing of the first chapter after the proposal defense and changed the way I approached the research, for which I am very appreciative. Jim Zetka was instrumental in prompting me to rework early interview guides that would have proved far less fruitful. I thank him for this key assistance as well as for his extensive feedback on everything I gave him. Gwen Moore has been a constant support throughout graduate school, providing me with opportunities to get involved with new research projects and to develop a solid understanding of political sociology as a field. In the dissertation process she helped me to clarify the role of the news media in the project, a core piece that is better grounded as a result of her questions. Finally, I thank Ron Jacobs, my dissertation chair and advisor who spent hours mentoring me, offering encouragement when it was most needed (I particularly appreciated his willingness to share his own graduate school experiences, which helped me feel “normal” and reminded me that no one finds producing a dissertation easy.), challenging me to expand my thinking, and working with me in countless late afternoon meetings without which I would never have been able to complete this research. This is the first dissertation for which Ron has served as chairperson, and in the future he will undoubtedly develop a long list of grateful students. His guidance and support will be remembered with warmth and deep appreciation.

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Professionally, I owe thanks to *Sociologists for Women in Society*, a fantastic organization whose community of members have served as role models, and reminded me through example why I want to be a sociologist. I have also enjoyed graduate school more as a result of the guidance of Dick Hall and Richard Lachmann, both of whom helped smooth my transition to Albany and offered straight-from-the-hip advice on several occasions.

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Though I owe thanks to many, I owe something more than thanks to my husband, Jim, for a kind of generosity with which I had previously been unfamiliar. Jim supported my graduate work and dissertation in a complete way, not merely wanting me to be happy and successful, but also by personally climbing on board the challenge at every turn. He invested himself in my work -- helping me to grapple with challenges and to celebrate achievements. Over the years he helped me prepare for the GREs, typed handwritten papers late at night while I studied, coded cartoons and commercials for my Master's research, quizzed me orally for hours before comprehensive exams, transcribed interviews, checked over statistics assignments, helped me to search for SAS programming glitches, made trips to Kinko's, stayed up late when I worked late to boost my morale, and revamped my Excel tables and data displays when he felt they weren't up to snuff. He even shopped on my behalf (successfully) for job interview clothes when I was busy at home preparing talks. But perhaps most amazingly, Jim has taken the time to read virtually every version of every paper (and syllabus and cover letter) I have written over the last seven years, serving as an eagle-eyed copy editor for the vast majority, even for the dissertation, which was no small task. When he proofreads this page, which he undoubtedly will, I hope he will understand the depth of my gratitude for his role as my indefatigable advocate and my admiration for his remarkable patience, love, and integrity. Thank you.

## ABSTRACT

The contemporary literature on civil society suggests the arena is either consistently active or persistently disengaged, while social movements research emphasizes mobilization processes, focusing on the shift from inactivity to activity. I argue that civil society is neither consistently active nor persistently disengaged, but rather that the multiple associations that comprise this fabric choose to mobilize at certain moments. American presidential campaigns, as uniquely prominent national political rituals, present such moments of heightened activity for civil society, which, in turn, impact the public sphere. In this research, campaigns are used as a point of entry to examine the intricacies and outcomes of mobilization for associations and those who form them, and via this examination, an opportunity to reveal the existing strengths and shortcomings of civil society and the public sphere. I examine voluntary association responses to key events of the 2000 presidential campaign, namely the two nominating conventions and three televised presidential debates. Data on 29 associations were gathered via in-depth interviews (N = 81), field research, and text analyses of newspaper articles, literature distributed at events, and Internet discussion groups. With little exception, the associations that mobilized opted to engage in activities designed to communicate with outsiders. They planned a wide variety of events including comedic street theater performances, marches, speaker panels, and debate watch parties. Most organizations had little interest in influencing the election, but instead hoped to influence public opinion and ultimately generate social change. For associations, mobilization enhanced social solidarity, increased participant commitment, and yielded connections with other organizations. In the public sphere, the intense activity often transformed public spaces (e.g., streets, parks, community centers) into political arenas, but political discourse was severely limited by an inability to obtain news coverage, the seclusion of political figures, and aspects of association culture that stressed specific value positions, privileged agreement over debate, and constructed political discussions as inefficient. The lasting image is one of flourishing organizations that are relatively impotent in terms of their ability to impact mainstream political discourse, even when they employ extraordinary efforts.

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## **CHAPTER 1 CIVIL SOCIETY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS**

To understand the role of civil society and the public sphere in modern political life, we must come to terms with the concrete opportunities and limitations encountered in these arenas rather than rely on idealized visions. Much of the theoretical work on civil society and the public sphere is highly normative, examining the potential of each if fully realized, but in order to understand civil society and the public sphere in a meaningful way, empirical scrutiny of actually existing public life is essential. Further, exploring the unique moments when these ideals are most closely approximated provides concrete insight into the ways in which democratic ideals are embodied as well as distorted. In this research, I have attempted to accomplish just that - to study the associational terrain of civil society at its most vibrant - in order to acknowledge realized potential as well as those obstacles that even concerted efforts fail to overcome. This process has provided insight into the boundaries of civil society, as well as a more intricate understanding of the complicated relationship between civil society and the public sphere.

Implicit in this endeavor is an understanding of civil society as a sphere containing a multiplicity of formal and informal associations that vary in terms of their level of activity. Current research on civil society and the public sphere contains palpable silences surrounding the issues of mobilization that are central to the study of social movements. I argue that civil society is neither consistently active nor persistently disengaged as suggested in current work, but rather that the multiple associations that comprise this fabric choose to mobilize at certain moments.

My interest in the ways in which the opportunities presented during these moments of intensive engagement are either captured or lost drives this research and guides the way I interpret the findings. Durkheim (1995 [1912]) argues that rituals shift the focus of thought and action away from self-interest toward society and thereby revitalize a sense of community. In light of this, major rituals are predisposed to create such moments of vitality. American presidential campaigns, as uniquely prominent national political rituals present such moments of heightened activity for civil society, which in turn impact the public sphere. As such, campaigns serve as an ideal point of entry for an examination of the intricacies and outcomes of mobilization for associations and those who form them, and via this examination, an opportunity to reveal the existing strengths and shortcomings of civil society and the public sphere.

This chapter defines civil society and the public sphere and describes the idealized visions of these arenas. I argue for a new vision of civil society that introduces depth and variation into existing formulations, by drawing on the concept of mobilization from the social movements literature. In addition, I argue that American presidential campaigns provide moments of insight into civil society and the public sphere, because of the relationship between civic engagement and ritual action more broadly and the powerful mobilizing characteristics of these particular ritualized events.

### **Civil Society, The Public Sphere, and Mobilization**

In spite of the voluminous research conducted since the fall of the socialist governments throughout Central and Eastern Europe, theoretical work on civil society and the public sphere remains focused on the utopian promises made by idealized

versions of civil society and public sphere, rather than focusing on the true capacities and predicaments faced in these arenas. While these counter-factual ideals provide (oft-disputed) yardsticks by which real civil societies can be assessed, they fail to take seriously the ways in which the sector is limited by existing social arrangements. Rather than debating the desirability of the normative visions as they have been laid out, I examine an existing civil society at its most robust, in hopes of subsequently encouraging social and political theorists to rethink problems of democracy with a new, more empirically grounded, understanding.

Current debates implicitly conceive of contemporary civil society and the public sphere as either realms of continuous activity or as arenas that are increasingly disengaged, but empirically, voluntary associations and public political dialogue have degrees of intensity and engagement that vary.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the multiple institutional spaces of civil society are best understood as a form of infrastructure, as well-developed resources that are relatively disengaged at some moments and extremely active during others. Networks of people are connected by matters of common concern in a vast spectrum of formal and informal voluntary associations, which operate at varying degrees of intensity at different periods. In the case of Solidarity in Poland during the 1980s, a powerful national social movement emerged from the ashes of a heavily repressed, clandestine, civil society. The very possibility for this emergence was present as a result of the network of Catholic Churches that provided an existing organizational web, rallying points, and the physical space required for meetings and workshops (Sztompka

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<sup>1</sup> The social movements literature deals with mobilization directly; this will be addressed later in the chapter.



1998).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in his research on the African-American press during times of racial crisis, Jacobs (2000) argues that the power of the alternative press is not linked to its circulation, but rather to its presence: to the fact that it exists as a latent resource available for use.

Understanding civil society in this way raises interesting questions in regard to the catalysts for and outcomes of mobilizing the resources latent in these networks. As I address in Chapter 3, during the major events of the 2000 presidential campaign, I found that voluntary associations chose to increase their level of activity for a variety of reasons, the vast majority of which were unrelated to influencing the outcome of the election. Further, mobilization, which has the potential to take many forms, overwhelmingly involved associations attempting to communicate with others outside of their circle of supporters. In terms of outcomes of mobilization, Chapter 4 illustrates that the act of mobilizing yielded many positive outcomes at the associational level including, but not limited to, the development of social solidarity between participants and extending the bases of support for many organizations. Where mobilization appeared to be limited was in the ability of these organizations to fulfill their stated objectives: the groups' abilities to impact public political discourse in this context was substantially limited by the relative isolation of prominent political figures, the non-complementary objectives and professional demands of the mainstream news media, and by the political culture within the associations themselves. This complicated relationship between voluntary associations and the public sphere is detailed in Chapter 5.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course many factors were instrumental in the Solidarity movement including workers (e.g., Goodwin 1991; Laba 1991), intellectuals (e.g., Ost 1990), and civil society more broadly (e.g., Bernhard 1993). For more information on the academic debate over the origins of Solidarity and the role of the church, see Osa (1997).

Before delving more deeply into the nuances of voluntary association mobilization, I will define the concepts *civil society* and the *public sphere*, examine the ideals as they are currently laid out, point to contemporary theories of civil society that implicitly depict a sector of continuous activity or inactivity, and present empirical evidence that suggests that these current conceptions are incomplete. I will also explore the ways in which the social movements literature has utilized the concept mobilization and the usefulness of these formulations for understanding differential engagement in civil society. Further, I will outline a new approach to the study of civil society that reconceptualizes mobilization in an effort to reconcile our theoretical concepts with the empirical realities of contemporary civil society.

### **Visions of “Civil Society” and the “Public Sphere”**

Civil society seems to be the new buzzword in American public discourse. No longer the province of academics alone, politicians and concerned citizens now invoke the language of civil society in press conferences and interviews, in town meetings, on the floor of Congress, and on Internet listserves organized around resistance and social change. Perhaps most interesting about the way the symbol of civil society is employed is that this concept is constructed as sacred by both sides of the political spectrum, providing a utopian vision for all. Conservatives combine discussions of civil society with rhetoric of moral decline, family values, and community service. Deployed in this manner, civil society is used as a call for social responsibility and a renewal of civic life: an alternative to the public services and redistributive efforts of the modern welfare state. In this utopian vision, volunteerism and community are the non-state solution to the side

effects of healthy postindustrial capitalism (Cohen 1999; Eliasoph 1998; Skocpol 1996). For liberals, the symbolic value of civil society derives from something quite different. The liberal version of civil society is also linked with political possibility, but in a different way; it provides those unsatisfied with the status quo a space for empowerment, voice, diversity, and social change. The liberal version of civil society is one in which social movements are bred, particularism is preserved, and coalitions are formed. Both conservatives and liberals implicitly conceptualize civil society as something external to the state and external to the economy, as a space for private individuals to take action; however, for conservatives, civil society can prevent redistribution and public action, while for liberals, civil society can shepherd it in.

For academics, civil society has a lengthy history in social and political theory. Alexander (1998) depicts the evolution of the concept as having three phases. Early modern versions (e.g., Ferguson [1767] 1995; Smith [1759] 1976; Rousseau [1762] 1968; Hegel [1821] 1967; Tocqueville [1835] 1988) understood civil society broadly as those realms of social life distinct from the state. Virtually everything outside of the state (the market, legal structures, and the voluntary sector) was included under the auspices of civil society, with the exception of the family. Analytically, such a concept is unwieldy, encompassing diverse institutions and relationships. The second phase of the concept, most notably crafted by Marx, equates civil society narrowly with market capitalism. The third phase consists of more contemporary understandings of the sector, which separate civil society from the state and the economy in an effort to better understand the solidarities and activities that take place in the associational realm and seek to concretize

theoretical formulations by examining actually existing democracies (Alexander 1997; Cohen and Arato 1992).

Understood today as a sector of society distinct from the state and the market, civil society encompasses those associational spaces in which citizens voluntarily interact, discover common interests, develop community, act in unison, attempt to influence public opinion, and seek to initiate or maintain public policies consistent with their definitions of the good society. Utilized in this manner, civil society includes political and nonpolitical voluntary associations, social movements, the news media and their products, and political parties,<sup>3</sup> as well as social and cultural groups. Members in these diverse collectives may join together for social, professional, charitable, or political purposes. There is certainly interaction between civil society and non-civil sectors (each influences and is influenced by the others), but their activities are analytically distinct.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this "independence," civil society is often understood as a counterweight to state and market power, a watchdog present to intervene on behalf of the public, allowing groups and communities to assert rights and political preferences.

In addition to being defined in terms of structure and function, civil society is also constructed as a utopian vision of hope. The idealized version of civil society is one in which: 1) there is a collectivity of overlapping groups, autonomous from both state and

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen and Arato (1992) exclude political parties and trade unions from their conception of civil society. They instead conceive of these entities as intermediate organizations, mediating between civil society and the state (in the case of political parties), and between civil society and the market (in the case of trade unions).

<sup>4</sup> Much research on nonprofit organizations demonstrates that these three sectors are more accurately described as interdependent than independent (e.g., Hall 1987), but my intention is to make an analytic distinction to facilitate examining relationships *within* civil society, rather than to develop a nuanced understanding of the relationships between the state, the market, and the "independent" sector. Here I take a cue from Kane (1991) who distinguishes between two levels of autonomy when undertaking cultural analysis. She argues that analytic autonomy, which establishes an artificial separation of culture from society, permits a theoretical examination of a culture's components, processes, and reproduction.

market, which individuals enter freely, 2) these associations form on the basis of shared interests and work in critical, but constructive ways with state and market on their own behalf, 3) these groupings promote social solidarity including norms of trust, reciprocity and tolerance and 4) the populace is active and engaged, participating not only in the voting booth, but in all aspects of public life. Indeed, for many modern theorists, a robust civil society has been understood as an essential ingredient for a healthy democracy (Cohen and Arato 1992, Habermas 1989, Jacobs 2000). It is important to note that in the civil society literature, democracy is also a normative concept, rather than simply a system of choosing leaders and reaching decisions.

Although Habermas believes that at least temporary consensus can be reached through rational-critical discourse, this process of articulating and asserting the will of the public is complicated by the frequent presence of conflict rather than consensus over what constitutes the good society and how best this good society ought to be approximated. While in theory, the will of the people emerges through the development of shared interests and unconstrained communication; in reality, the public interest is defined in innumerable ways. In addition to political desires and group identity, cultural meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions themselves are often created, negotiated and challenged within civil society (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Meeks 2001; Melucci 1996). The coexistence of competing concerns, views, and objectives on multiple planes manifest themselves in constant pressure for and resistance against political and cultural change on a limitless array of fronts from minor community disagreements to issues of national significance. The ebbing and flowing of these struggles contribute to the ever-

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Meanwhile, concrete autonomy, which establishes the historically specific reality of culture, permits a grounded exploration of the interconnections between culture and the social world.

changing dynamics within and between voluntary associations, as well as between civil society and non-civil sectors. As a result, civil society is best understood not only as a homogeneous space of consensus and solidarity, but also as a fluid and heterogeneous space of contest and conflict.

If civil society is conceptualized as one domain of society, the public sphere can be understood as the numerous spaces for discourse created in this realm. The term public sphere refers simultaneously to: 1) the practice of open discussion about matters of common public concern that takes place in civil society, and 2) public space in the physical sense, including malls, arcades, parks, etc., which serve as settings for such dialogue. This incarnation of the concept stems largely from Habermas' The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. In this paradigmatic work, Habermas explores the development, transformation, and dissolution of the bourgeois public sphere during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and France. The bourgeois public sphere, understood by Habermas as a normative ideal of political engagement most closely approximated in the salons of France and coffeehouses of England during the eighteenth century, is defined as the sphere of free and equal private people assembled as a public, utilizing rational-critical discourse to debate matters of common concern.

The quality of the discourse depends on the ability for those involved to put aside their private status differences and debate matters of general interest, with the weight of the argument acting as the only factor influencing the decisions that are reached by the group. Habermas envisioned this process of consensus formation as shared critical activity, in which those involved in the discourse are flexible enough to allow their opinions to be swayed through dialogue. In addition to the quality of the discourse,

Habermas concerned himself with the openness of the discourse. In other words, a thriving public sphere requires not merely rational-critical discourse of matters of common concern among equals, but also that this discourse be inclusive, that all those impacted by the issues under discussion be involved in the debate.

While Habermas idealized a single public arena and the discussion of general rather than particular interests, scholars have since challenged his work both on the historical accuracy of its depiction, as well as its normative desirability. Historical evidence has demonstrated that the bourgeois public sphere, as described by Habermas, was indeed a public sphere, but was one of many. Competing publics taking different forms (e.g., nonrational, nonliberal, particularistic) and/or those comprised of participants formally and informally excluded by the bourgeois public sphere (e.g., women, the illiterate, the lower class) are absent from Habermas' account (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Ryan 1992). Further, the idealization of one communal public sphere has been critiqued as a step away from democracy in stratified societies, where those of subordinate status may be oppressed by the will of the majority because participatory parity is unachievable (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1992; Mouffe 1999; Young 1990).

According to Fraser, a plurality of competing publics provides the best structural arrangement for the approximation of participatory parity.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary empirical studies have demonstrated the salience of alternative publics for nondominant groups as spaces that build group solidarity, establish alternative cultural meanings, and facilitate

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<sup>5</sup> Fraser certainly acknowledges that the inequities present in mainstream publics may be reproduced in counterpublics, "I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous. Some of them, alas, are explicitly undemocratic and antiegalitarian, and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization." (1992: 124). Still, for Fraser, these competing publics widen discursive space, because they emerge in response to exclusion; therefore, she argues that multiple publics are a step toward democracy, even if an imperfect one.

engaging broader publics (e.g., Gregory 1994; Jacobs 2000; Aronowitz 1995). These compelling theoretical challenges and empirical findings have resulted in a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of civil society as a domain containing a multiplicity of connected and overlapping public spheres with varying resources, degrees of formal organization, axes of association, modes of communication, and objectives.

In the United States, the wide spectrum of formal and informal voluntary associations, which often serve as important components of these parallel discursive arenas, mirror and illustrate this diversity. The intricate web of competing, interconnected, overlapping institutional spaces of civil society often serve as partial public spheres in which people engage with others and discuss matters of common concern. In addition to providing separate spaces for the discussion of issues marginalized or neglected by mainstream public discourse (often between people who feel that they themselves are also marginalized), Fraser (1992) argues that these organizations also serve as strategic centers in which participants can prepare efforts to engage other publics. The presence of this dual nature is a critical point: as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, entering the mainstream political public sphere was the *raison d' être* of the events planned by nearly all of the associations I encountered, taking at least temporary priority over intra-group discourse.

In sum, civil society and the public sphere are idealized visions. Embedded in contemporary use of the concept of civil society is the belief that citizens will take an active role in the shaping of public life by forming groups, autonomous from the state and market, and act on their own behalf to promote the common good. The public sphere concept is used to describe egalitarian, rational, well-informed dialogue between these



citizens about matters of pressing public concern. The degree to which actually existing civil societies approximate these normative visions is a matter of current debate, which grows in importance as political leaders invest this third sector with increasing responsibility. The findings of this research indicate that while voluntary associations offer meaningful interpersonal experiences and connect individuals to the broader communities of which they are a part, that even the boldest efforts of politically oriented partial public spheres (be they splinters of what we might term the mainstream public or be they decidedly pieces of nonmainstream parallel publics) prove relatively ineffective at shaping mainstream political discourse.

### **Contemporary Theories of Civil Society: Activity or Disengagement**

Contemporary theories that address the relationships within civil society, and between civil society and other sectors, bring a variety of issues to the fore, including issues of boundary formation and social solidarity (Alexander 1997, 1998), discourse ethics and new social movements (Cohen and Arato 1992), visions of community and equality (Walzer 1992), and questions about what constitutes a political community (Calhoun 1991, 1993). Some of this work explores the relationships internal to civil society, those that take place within and between its multiple, overlapping publics, while other research explores the relations between civil society, the state, and the economy. What remains unproblematized is the prevalent implicit notion that these varied relationships, both internal and external, operate in some sort of constant fashion, that they are consistent and continuous.

While none of these scholars explicitly argue that action and engagement are maintained at a certain level, there is a silence around issues of differential mobilization.

Cohen and Arato, who have offered the most thorough theoretical development of the questions surrounding civil society, serve as an excellent example of this silence. For Cohen and Arato, agency abounds and is utilized: civil society is an active terrain. Indeed, much of their work examines new social movements and the role of civil disobedience in democratic societies. They explain, "civil society, beyond all functionalist and pluralist models, should be seen not only passively as a network of institutions, but also actively as the context and product of self-constituting collective actors (1992 xviii)." The institutions of civil society, such as the law and the mass media, are molded by the efforts of the multiple formal and informal organizations that inhabit this space. The reader is left with an image of a vibrant, contest filled, and productive sphere of group action.

In *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cohen and Arato explain that civil societies may vary in character. "There can be different types of civil society: more or less institutionalized, more or less democratic, more or less active (1992: 17)," but the implication is that this level of activity varies from society to society, rather than from time to time *within* a given society. In other words, they argue that civil societies of different natures exist, that civil society in a given nation may be more active overall than civil society in another nation. Their argument is strengthened by a cognizance of the ever-changing, historically specific, social context. The indication is that the nature of a given civil society is neither intrinsic nor fixed, but rather is fluid and expected to change in character over time. However, two additional layers of complexity are absent from the discussion. First, it is essential to extend this acknowledgement of historical specificity to a finer grained discussion of the ways in which the engagement and activity levels of a

particular civil society may fluctuate on a smaller scale, not just with long term historical transitions, but from day-to-day, month-to-month. Second, it is critical to look not only at variation between different civil societies across time, but also to examine variation within any specific civil society at any given point in time. A cross-sectional snapshot taken at any particular moment would reveal that the diverse associations within a society's civil sector are not simultaneously at an equal level of activity (or institutionalization or democratization for that matter), but rather that each association has its own unique composition that may at one moment be very active and at others lie close to dormant. Even in unusually thriving and particularly repressed civil societies, the diverse co-existing groups are unlikely to sustain equivalent levels of activity.

Habermas ([1962] 1989) depicts a similarly consistent image of civil society, though in stark contrast to the vibrant realm of activity described by Cohen and Arato, he depicts the contemporary public sphere as a bleak, depoliticized realm. Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere was refeudalized as a result of the development of a mass consumer culture, the intrusion of bureaucratic associations into the public sphere, the development of the welfare state, and the withdrawal of individuals into isolated worlds of work and leisure. The consequence, he argues, is that contemporary civil society has been reduced to an apolitical sphere, devoid of the critical activities of public discourse, and has deteriorated into a domain in which groups associate purely for social reasons. Habermas' depiction of a public sphere dominated by advertising and consumption and the disintegration of social collectives does not assume that these degraded associations and passive individual actors can be stimulated into increasing dialogue or activity. The lasting impression is one of non-reflexive individuals who have

retreated into family and occupational life and of bureaucratic organizations that seek nothing more than symbolic representation. We see no rise and fall of meaningful interaction in civil society. Instead, Habermas paints the nineteenth and twentieth century public sphere as one free of the sparks of life that ignited the ideal represented by the bourgeois version.

These visions of contemporary civil society diverge along one axis and merge along another. The divergence is striking; where Cohen and Arato find energy and agency, Habermas finds passivity and inefficaciousness. Their similarity is perhaps less apparent. In an effort to pinpoint the dimensions, characteristics, and qualities of contemporary civil society, both theories foreground the consistencies that they unearth. Cohen and Arato describe a civil society that remains in motion, while Habermas describes a civil society mired in inertia. While in his more recent work, Habermas (1998) is more optimistic about the role of civil society, and even acknowledges the presence of textural variations in the arena by arguing that crises can alter the social landscape in such a way that the relationship between civil society and the state changes, he describes variation in the balance of power, rather than changes in the arena itself.

In the United States, ample empirical evidence suggests that it is inadequate to conceive of the varied organizations and activities within civil society as continuously engaged or disengaged. Voluntary associations take on new forms during moments of crisis and celebration. Events that produce great excitement or great anxiety have the effect of generating new associations and of increasing the intensity, frequency, or membership levels of already existing organizations. For example, new organizations

arose in response to both the Elian Gonzalez case<sup>6</sup> and to the September 11 terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup> For associations already in existence, activity intensity can be sparked by such events. For example, the National Rifle Association has been more active and has attracted numerous new members since the political and cultural backlash against the private ownership of guns instigated by the spate of school shootings in 1998-1999 (Dao and VanNatta 1999).

This phenomenon is true not only of present day, but has been true historically as well. Skocpol (1999a) found that the major American wars from the Revolution through World War II each launched new voluntary associations and revitalized existing ones. Associational activity was also central to the rights-based movements of the 1960s. Competing publics formed by the marginalization of minorities from mainstream politics, provided both the training ground and the solidarity building that was central to the force of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the anti-war movement. Mobilizing moments exist that stimulate associational activity. During the Montgomery bus boycott of the civil rights movement, mass meetings were held daily to provide opportunities for strategizing, finding inspiration, and coordinating finances (Schudson 1998). Civil society is an agentic and responsive arena rather than a smoothly operating assembly line.

### **Social Movement Theory and Understanding Mobilization in Civil Society**

In contrast to the images of continuity described in contemporary theories of civil society, the literature on social movements is grounded fundamentally on the notion that

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<sup>6</sup> Associations such as Liberty for Elian and the Foundation to Send Elian Gonzalez Home formed on both sides of the repatriation issue.

collective action (taking place in the realm of civil society, even when not explicitly acknowledged) is not continuous. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald highlight this point. "Understanding the mix of factors that give rise to a movement is the oldest, and arguably the most important, question in the field. Moreover, virtually all "theories" in the field are first, and foremost, theories of movement emergence" (1996: 7). Though the theories vary tremendously, the central concern remains the same.

Those working in the traditional collective behavior paradigm differ on the nuances of movement formation (e.g., Smelser 1962; Kornhauser 1959), but they share a view of social movements as nonrational, extra-institutional group activity generated by individual responses to increased personal grievances stimulated by the "strains" that accompany social changes such as economic crises or cultural shifts. In contrast, resource mobilization theorists emphasize rationality, examining the role of political opportunity structures (e.g., McAdam 1982; Piven and Cloward 1979; Tilly 1978), mobilizing organizations (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977), and framing processes (e.g., Gamson 1975; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986) in social movement emergence. Those working in this tradition share a belief that social movements form as a result of individuals and groups rationally pursuing their interests as resources and opportunities for collective action arise. Finally, new social movement theorists (e.g., Touraine 1985; Melucci 1996) argue that social movements develop to contest social norms, assert collective identity, and democratize civil society. These three prominent traditions disagree upon the catalysts and goals of social movements, but they share a common interest in the fundamental question – what sparks collective action? Implicit in

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<sup>7</sup> WTC United Family Group, September's Mission, and CHARAS serve as examples.

this question is recognition that mobilization is neither consistent nor continuous, a fundamental oversight in the civil society literature.

So why not simply combine these two literatures? Can we not simply extrapolate what is known about mobilization in social movement formation to the other publics residing within the walls of civil society? Transferring the knowledge gleaned from social movements to civil society is problematic for two reasons. First, while civil society is the terrain of social movements, social movement organizations are but one of many types of associations existing in this arena. The multiple, overlapping associations that inhabit the space of civil society include profoundly diverse organizations. Trade unions (e.g., the Teamsters Union), professional associations (e.g., the American Medical Association), political parties, cultural organizations, special-interest/advocacy groups (e.g., the National Rifle Association), fraternal organizations (e.g., the Masons, the Elks), religious groups/congregations, altruistic associations and informal social groups (e.g., reading groups, community sports teams, quilting circles) are all voluntary associations united by dramatically different shared interests. In other words, what may serve as a catalyst for social movement organizations to form or to escalate their activity levels, may not compel a trade union or cultural organization to form or organize an event. It would be reductive and misleading to collapse the diversity of the public sphere into one overarching mode of organization.

Transferring the information about the mobilization of social movements to understanding activity changes in civil society is also problematic because mobilization, as it is currently conceptualized in the social movements literature, is limited by its vantage point. Although the social movements literature questions how social movements

emerge, their focus on goal-oriented action (regardless of whether the goal is economic, political, or cultural) prevents them from asking the compelling questions that would interest students of civil society.<sup>8</sup> What does the act of engaging or participating do for group life? What are the outcomes, not in terms of political or economic influence, but in terms of social solidarity, democracy, and civic engagement? As I will show in Chapter 4, simply acting, regardless of outcomes, has important consequences for a variety of associations. This is not to say that exploring effective strategies for goal-fulfillment is not of interest to those studying civil society, but rather that association, in and of itself, is valued in a way that is absent from dialogue around social movements. Exploring voluntary associations from a civil society framework involves the assumption that associational life exists and persists, not necessarily because there is an issue in need of address, but as a direct result of the shape of modern democratic society.

### **Networks, Mobilization, and Civil Society: A New Lens**

A distinction is made by resource mobilization and new social movements theorists between manifest modes of action utilized by social movements, such as protests and marches, and latent organizing, not visible to the public, which sustains member participation when mass mobilizations are not underway (Cohen and Arato 1992). This analytic distinction is, in part, transferable if we broaden the range of latent and manifest activities to encompass the full range of endeavors undertaken by the diverse publics residing in civil society (e.g., forums, voter registration drives,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Search for Political Community* (Lichterman 1996) serves as an excellent example of work that avoids this exclusive focus on goal-oriented action.



fundraisers). The more challenging issue, if we are to make use of these distinctions, is clarifying the meaning of manifest and latent as analytic categories.

If visibility is central to discerning manifest from latent action, the key question is: to whom must an activity be visible for it to be manifest? For theorists of civil society a seeming disjuncture exists in this distinction as it is currently employed in the social movements literature. Manifest, as utilized in reference to social movement activities, seems to connote endeavors that are explicitly public in nature, such as a sit-in or a rally. Manifest activities, then, include those that are visible to both members and nonmembers. Latent, on the other hand, connotes those activities that are invisible to the public, such as newsletter circulation, and often even to the membership at large, such as the personal motivations individuals have for maintaining contact with a social movement organization. Melucci (1985) even uses the term latent to refer to the unspoken cultural needs that precede symbolic challenges. If manifest refers to activities that are visible to all, and latent refers to those activities that are unseen, then the extensive range of activities that are created by, and run for, members themselves are rendered invisible at worst, and residual at best, because the default tendency is to equate manifest activity with mobilization and latent activity with mere preparation.

Activities that take place for members, outside of the view of nonmembers, are of vital importance for considering the mobilization of civil society, and to devalue such activity is problematic. For many formal and informal associations in civil society, gathering members together is, in and of itself, action. As a result, two steps are required to render this analytic distinction more useful for empirical analyses of civil society. First, it is essential to detach the implicit link that ties manifest activity to mobilization

and latent activity to maintenance in exchange for a stricter interpretation of these terms that ties them exclusively to level of visibility. Next, a third analytic category is necessary to distinguish association activities in which participants assemble, but do not attempt to engage a broader audience. On a spectrum of visibility, I argue that between latent (behind-the-scenes) activities and manifest (externally focused) activities; there are activities that are “communal,” events that are internally focused. Divorcing these terms from the level of mobilization connotation and adding a third substantive category produces a helpful set of analytic distinctions for classifying and describing the activities of the micro-publics within civil society.

Because the terms “manifest” and “latent” evoke, but are ill fitted to, Merton’s classic distinction between manifest and latent functions (1949), I have chosen to retain the analytical distinction, but to assign new terms: demonstrative (to connote high visibility and replace the term manifest) and fundamental (to connote low visibility and replace the term latent). In summary, we are left with a spectrum of activity types. First, there are fundamental activities, which include behind-the-scenes endeavors, frequently unseen by the majority of the membership, that facilitate the coordination of members. Second, there are communal activities, which include those activities that are run by and for members without the intent of reaching a broader audience. Finally, there are demonstrative activities, which include highly visible, externally-focused endeavors. In other words, these activities may or may not involve members, and they are directed toward non-members.

Some organizations choose to mobilize in ways that take on an external orientation, others may mobilize internally, while still others may combine multiple

forms of engagement. Demonstrative, communal, and fundamental, then, should be recognized as referring to distinctions between *modes* or types of action rather than as distinctions between *levels* of action (e.g., mobilized vs. typical). Typical activities are those activities with which organizations are engaged in a regular, day-to-day, or cyclical basis. These activities will naturally be particular to each specific association. In contrast, I consider those events that are out of the ordinary or involve a notable break from routine to be mobilized activities. In the simplest sense, mobilized activities are things that are a “big deal” or that require explanation even for regular participants. The distinction between these two levels of activity is relevant for all three modes of action. For example, communal activities may be designed for either mobilization (e.g., a special party to celebrate an accomplishment) or be part of a standard mode of operation (e.g., a monthly potluck dinner) depending upon the typical activities and goals of an association. This recognition allows us to examine organizational activity more fully, with a broader and more precise classificatory scheme. Table 1-1 provides a visual representation of this schema.

The associations of civil society can be understood as infrastructure drawn on in a variety of ways, with varying degrees of intensity and frequency at different moments. To explore the ways in which civil organizations mobilize, it is essential to first make an analytic distinction between levels of activity and engagement and the mode that the activity and engagement takes. As I conducted this research, I kept this classification scheme in the forefront of my thinking. As I show in Chapter 3, the overwhelming trend was for voluntary associations active around the presidential campaign to mobilize (level of action) in an outwardly focused, demonstrative manner (mode of action). As I will

**TABLE 1-1  
VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION ACTIVITY CLASSIFICATION SCHEME**

**Fundamental:** Behind-the-scenes endeavors that facilitate the coordination of the group (often unseen by the majority of the membership).

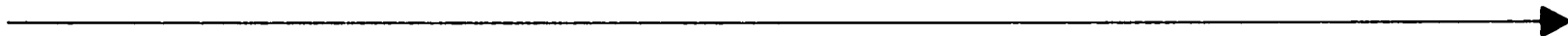
**Communal:** Activities run by and for members without the intent of reaching a broader audience.

**Demonstrative:** Externally focused activities intended to be highly visible (may or may not involve the majority of members and directed toward non-members).

**Sample use of classification scheme for the activities of a hypothetical local environmental group:**

Activity Type →	<b>FUNDAMENTAL</b>	<b>COMMUNAL</b>	<b>DEMONSTRATIVE</b>
Activity Level ↓			
<b>TYPICAL</b>	Newsletter circulation	Monthly membership meeting	Annual earth day rally
<b>MOBILIZED</b>	Urgent email alert	Retreat or training	Series of Hudson River vigils

**Level of visibility**



show, the associations I studied offered little in the way of variation, providing few opportunities to study other types of activity. Even so, the awareness that this range of alternatives exists proved helpful for understanding the strategic choices made by the organizations I studied and permitted insight into the ways in which their tactical efforts may have ultimately proved self-limiting.

Conceptualizing action alternatives in this way sparked an interest in learning more about what it is that mobilization means for the voluntary associations that comprise so much of the terrain of civil society and how the process of activating impacts the public sphere. In order to best come to understand mobilization, I sought an empirical case in which I might be able to examine broad associational mobilization. This search led me to explore those moments in which I would unearth an associational terrain at its most robust.

### **Civic Engagement and Ritual Action**

Many sociologists and anthropologists working in the tradition of Durkheim's later, culturally focused, work have devoted attention to understanding the relationship between ritual and society. Scholars such as Victor Turner (1967, 1969), Jeffrey Alexander (1988), Amitai Etzioni (2000), Edward Tiryakian (1988), and Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan (1992) have explored questions surrounding ritual processes and suggested that such events have the capacity to rejuvenate ties between participants and to the broader society. This section will demonstrate why historical changes in civic engagement have made ritual events more important than ever before for associational life. I accomplish this by discussing the contours of contemporary civic engagement and

exploring the relationship between civic engagement and ritual action. Finally, I discuss the empirical possibilities for studying the activation of the public sphere through examining national rituals.

### **Civic Engagement in the United States**

Much academic and political concern over the state of civil society hinges on the shared belief that a vibrant realm of association outside of the state and untainted by the market is essential to complete or achieve the American vision of the good society. Civic engagement describes the expanse of activities, in which participation in social life with other citizens takes place, involving the pursuit of common goals related to the betterment of the community.<sup>9</sup> These goals can range from a desire for more social interaction, to a desire for better schools, to a desire to help those in need. Civic involvement can take the shape of citizens seeking legal change, government support, or economic development, or it may involve citizens working exclusively within the realm of civil society.

Much ado has been made in academic and political circles, in newspaper columns, and in churches, about America's declining civic involvement. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton made an impassioned plea for the rebuilding of community as early as 1985, and Putnam's now famous 1995 article, "Bowling Alone," sparked deep concern about American isolation and individualism. Regardless of the legitimacy of such

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed exploration of the primary and secondary meanings of "civic" and "engagement" see Brint and Levy (1999).

claims,<sup>10</sup> most scholarly research and public discourse operates with the baseline assumption that civic engagement is valuable. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (1999) argue that voluntary social participation is important for three reasons: 1) it allows for individual growth by providing educational experiences (often improving confidence and feelings of efficacy in addition to competence in a variety of skills) and engendering positive feelings about self and community. 2) voluntary participation fosters stronger and more democratic communities via the development of trust, norms of reciprocity and cooperation, and a better understanding of the positionality of others in the community, and 3) participation matters because it ensures that the needs of multiple voices are communicated to public officials. In other words, sociopolitical participation is understood as important because it builds character, fosters social solidarity, and improves the legitimacy of representative democracy.

### **The Changing Landscape of Civic Engagement in the United States**

Recent research on civic engagement has painted a more nuanced picture of sociopolitical participation in the United States. Rather than understanding the vast changes in our participatory landscape as a downward spiral, these new works depict the change as a transformation. Individuals do participate, but participation has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Three prominent trends have resulted in a change in the modal forms of civic engagement. First, there has been a dramatic rise in mailing-list organizations that do not involve the traditional face-to-face interaction once envisioned by Habermas (Berry 1997, 1999). Second, many activities once undertaken voluntarily

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<sup>10</sup> For additional work by Putnam on declining social capital beyond "Bowling Alone," see Putnam (1995b: 1996). For critiques, see Galston (1996), Lemann (1996), Portes and Landolt (1996), Schudson (1996), and

by citizens have become increasingly professionalized (Schudson 1998; Wuthnow 1998). Finally, contemporary social participation tends to be less oriented toward lifetime memberships and more oriented toward temporary commitments (Wuthnow 1998). These changes indicate that contemporary civic involvement is more removed, more diffuse, and less intensive than civic engagement in the past. In light of these changes, it is particularly salient to develop an understanding of phenomena that stimulate civil society and what the outcomes of heightened activity are for associational life.

### **The Decline of Classic American Voluntary Associations and the Rise of Citizen Groups**

In the 1950s millions of Americans joined service clubs, veteran's organizations, fraternal associations, and ladies' auxiliary associations to develop social relationships with others in their neighborhoods and to improve their communities. These organizations thrived in the United States, peaking in size and activity level from the late 1940s to the mid 1960s. Most associations of this variety recruited members across class lines (though they typically had memberships that were all male or all female and had little to no racial diversity), held frequent local meetings (which members regularly attended), elected officers, formed numerous committees, and held periodic assemblies of elected leaders and delegates at regional, state, and often national levels. The activities of these organizations involved social gatherings and service events (including local community and charitable efforts, mutual benefit endeavors, and involvement in national affairs), and they frequently addressed many broad issues in contrast to the narrow focus

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Skocpol (1996). For Putnam's response to his critics, see *Bowling Alone* (2000).



more typical of contemporary voluntary associations (Skocpol 1999a). Culturally, these associations placed a high value on patriotism (ibid) and group loyalty (Wuthnow 1998).

Today, the number of people participating in classic American voluntary associations<sup>11</sup> has diminished tremendously (Hall 1999; Putnam 1995, 2000; Wuthnow 1998). Membership in virtually all such associations dropped substantially between 1958 and 1998. The Knights of Columbus has proved to be among the most resilient organizations, having only lost 17 percent of its membership during this period. Others have fared far worse; the Elks and the Free Masons have lost 37.2 and 69.8 percent of their respective memberships. A few classic voluntary associations have actually increased their membership rolls, such as the YMCA, which has increased its membership by 62.5 percent since it shifted its form and began to focus on family recreation, but these associations are the exception to the rule (Skocpol 1999b).

There has been a significant movement away from these participatory voluntary associations, toward representative associations. The rights-based mobilizations of the 1960s, (Skocpol 1999b) combined with an increasing blurring of family, work, and leisure (Wuthnow 1998), have reoriented civic engagement. Membership in self-help groups and professional associations has risen significantly (Wuthnow 1998), and a dramatic increase in national citizen groups and their memberships has taken place (Berry 1997).

Jeffrey Berry (1999) defines a citizen group as a political interest group whose axis of association rests on the notion that the organization will represent its members and donors in the political process, rather than on the vocational or professional aspirations of

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<sup>11</sup> I use "classic American voluntary associations" as Skocpol (1999a) does, to refer to the voluntary membership federations that were popular during the first two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S.

its membership. These groups (e.g., National Organization of Women, Christian Coalition) offer very limited membership benefits other than indirect political voice. These are generally single-issue or identity-based groups whose primary objective is lobbying. Membership typically involves paying dues and results in receipt of a newsletter. These are, by and large, mailing list organizations; they rarely, if ever, hold mass meetings or involve face-to-face interaction between members. Most of these advocacy organizations formed during or after the civil rights movement (Berry 1997), while others sprung from older organizations that successfully reinvented themselves.<sup>12</sup> Citizen groups are now estimated to make up over a quarter of all voluntary associations in the United States (Wuthnow 1998).

### **The Professionalization of Civic Engagement**

Since the 1960s, the social problems once thought to be ameliorated by the efforts of local service organizations have been increasingly recognized as pervasive, persistent, and complex public issues, rather than the temporary troubles of individual communities. The scale and severity of these problems have contributed to a belief that expert knowledge gleaned through extensive training and education are necessary to cope with most social problems (e.g., domestic violence, urban planning, racial inequality). The join-in-and-lend-a-hand efforts of the classic American voluntary associations began to appear awkward and ineffective in the face of these challenges. The dual emphases on expert knowledge and efficiency led to a new form of civic involvement that represented complete community service - the nonprofit professional - supported by dues paid by

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the National Rifle Association (founded in 1871) had a membership surge in the 1970s when it made a transition from a network of marksman's clubs into a conservative advocacy group opposed

members of citizen groups, federal funding, foundation grants, and contributions to charitable organizations (Wuthnow 1998).

This shift in involvement toward professional rather than participatory engagement is not simply a change from unpaid community efforts to paid community efforts; the form of engagement itself has changed. Service organizations of the past were structured such that members dabbled in many efforts; participants were typically involved with a variety of committees (e.g., social, charitable, political). In contrast, the energies of nonprofit professionals tend to be narrowly focused as a result of working for highly specialized associations (e.g., the American Cancer Society or National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League), and the extensive intra-organization bureaucratization that has led to task specialization (e.g., public relations, case management, research). Contemporary community involvement is consequently often in-depth and focused rather than diffuse.

Paid voluntarism might seem like an oxymoron, and it is certainly missed in surveys that ask about hours volunteered, but overlooking this mode of social participation downplays an important transformation in American civic engagement. This emergent form of participation is part and parcel of the shift in structure of many nonprofit organizations away from alternative modes of operation toward resembling proprietary corporations with their emphases on efficiency, production, and profit margin.<sup>13</sup>

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to gun control legislation (Skocpol 1999b).

<sup>13</sup> Kanter and Summers oft-cited 1987 piece, "Doing Well While Doing Good" is indicative of the pressure on nonprofit organizations to measure their accomplishments, in spite of the fact that the bottom line for many nonprofits is intangible.

The advent of the nonprofit professional is also significant because of the ways in which their emergence has altered the relationship between organizations and their remaining volunteers. Wuthnow (1998) explains that in the absence of vital service clubs, volunteering is contingent upon the presence of nonprofit organizations through which service can be given. As a result, nonprofit professionals coordinate volunteers and organize projects in which volunteers can participate. Volunteers are now less frequently involved in the planning process and increasingly relegated to those activities that are not viewed as requiring expertise. The tactile potency of volunteerism has diminished, because professionals increasingly handle consequential tasks.

### **The Amazing Shrinking Commitment**

The classic American voluntary associations involved a lifetime commitment: members had consistent, repeated, face-to-face interactions with one another through meetings, committee work, social gatherings and participation in sponsored activities. This long-term mode of civic engagement is now decreasingly common. The aforementioned citizen groups, whose members participate through financial contributions and may never meet one another, represent the other end of the participatory spectrum. Somewhere in the middle, between a lifetime relationship and complete anonymity, lies civic engagement where citizens meet and work together on a temporary basis. According to Wuthnow (1998), this type of ephemeral engagement has become increasingly popular in the United States.

Wuthnow's civic involvement survey found that currently, over half of Americans engage in some form of volunteer work,<sup>14</sup> but that most of these volunteers are active on an extremely limited basis. Participation is often temporary, centered on completing a specific task (e.g., park clean up day) or toward achieving a specific goal (e.g., raising consciousness about the plight of a prisoner on death row). Wilson and Musick (1999) found that over 40 percent of volunteers reported their volunteer activity as a one-time event rather than an ongoing commitment. The Wuthnow survey found that the average volunteer devotes two hours per week to volunteering and that this time is typically dispersed among different organizations (1998: 51). This is not to imply that two hours per week is inconsequential in terms of community benefit, but rather to highlight the weak ties between the individuals and the organizations they serve in comparison to club members of the 1950s. The relationships between volunteers, between volunteers and clients, and between volunteers and the full-time professionals that staff nonprofit organizations are hence structurally more limited than the relationships between service club members who meet regularly, serve on committees together, and work for a lifetime in the same community.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, the modal forms of contemporary civic engagement in the United States involve citizens participating through citizen interest groups, by volunteering for professionally run service organizations, and via committing to short-term endeavors.

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that this is a strikingly high percentage; Americans are twice as likely to engage in volunteer work than citizens of other countries (Ladd 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Self-help groups (e.g., alcoholics anonymous) provide an interesting contrast. The groups in this third growth contingent exhibit even more intimate ties between members than the traditional service organizations (Wuthnow 1994). These groups often encompass a very large part of members' lives and typically involve a substantial time commitment and extensive face-to-face interaction. It can be argued that support networks and self-help groups benefit the community by giving rise to healthier citizens (e.g., Wuthnow 1998), but the line between public-benefit and member-benefit is undoubtedly blurred by these organizations.

With these changes, scholars and politicians alike ask if civic engagement is still able to build character, foster social solidarity, and further democratization. Because citizens relate differently to the organizations with which they are affiliated, in order to answer these questions, it is essential to look beyond the old categories of social participation and open empirical explorations to consider new forms of engagement. For example, many participants I encountered did not consider themselves to be “members” of the organizations with which they were engaged. In some cases these changing definitions appeared to be the linguistically practical byproducts of the new forms of affiliation, while in other cases participants very deliberately avoided terms such as “member” because they implicitly suggest a category of nonmember, thereby separating insiders and outsiders in a closed fashion that fails to reflect the sense of openness they hoped to project. In light of this, it is certainly possible that much of the debate over America’s social capital has focused too heavily on formal membership and overlooked less formal or less consistent participation. In total, this project was undertaken with mindfulness of these trends in hopes of ultimately offering a more finely tuned representation of civic engagement.

This research reveals that these three trends in civic engagement present new opportunities and challenges for voluntary associations active around the presidential campaign events. Rather than understanding them as withering forms, I recognize them as deep textural changes that must be investigated in order to unlock the true consequences of their existence. As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 4, professionalization means different things in different organizations. While in some cases, a professional staff administers work in a hierarchical fashion to unpaid affiliates.

there are many other cases in which professionals and lay people work together as co-authors of their organizational activities and experiences. In addition, I argue that the trend toward more fluid attachments rather than being deleterious, introduced a responsive malleability that, in the context of a hyperactive civil society, brought with it the emergence of entirely new associations (some of which were temporary, while others sought to endure) and the formation of multiple coalitions between already existing associations. And, perhaps most unexpectedly, I found that while the often criticized national citizen groups did not generate meaningful face to face experiences for their members, they contributed a great deal to the campaign environment by creating environments for political education and dialogue. Of course, this story is heavily context dependent, as I explored civic life amidst a uniquely prominent national political ritual.

### **Ritual Action and the Public Sphere**

Sociologists and anthropologists explain that rituals connect the individual to society, foster social solidarity, define social roles, provoke emotional response, allow multi-vocality, and display the central elements of a culture in symbolic and behavioral space (Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Fine 1995; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Kertzer 1988; Turner 1969). Certainly national rituals perform such functions, reinforcing national identity and fostering a common sense of belonging. In the United States, the Olympic games, the inauguration of new presidents, and the observance of Independence Day all serve as examples of rituals that connect the citizenry to their national identity and, via this shared identity, to one another (Eisenstadt 1998). The highly valued social

solidarity building that takes place within civil society is depicted as generating organically, from the populace, while ritual events are also described as fostering social cohesion, though in a somewhat different manner. The implication in the literature on rituals is that they come from “above,” whether above is a tradition that precedes the actors (e.g., the Olympics), or above is via imposition by law or those in positions of power (e.g., presidential inaugurations), or both (e.g., Independence Day as a national holiday). It can be argued that most rituals, unlike civic engagement, build social cohesion inorganically.

However, to point to the differences between civic engagement and ritual events is to miss their complementarities. Rituals very likely pull people toward civic engagement. Durkheim (1995 [1912]) argues that rites allow people to express and celebrate their interdependence. Rituals thereby revitalize the sense of community, shifting the focus of thought and action away from self-interest toward society, unity, and community. Beyond complementarity, ritual events and voluntary association share much in common. Both draw people together, foster social solidarity, and reinforce individual and organizational identities. In spite of these common features, surprisingly little sociological research has examined the relationship between these two phenomena. Rituals deserve examination from scholars of contemporary civic engagement because they have the potential to create a moment in which mobilization takes place. Rituals present the possibility that the power inactive in the infrastructure maintained by voluntary associations will be utilized, drawn upon, dispersed.

Empirically, we know that many civic groups include ritual elements as a way of binding members to their respective groups and rejuvenating social solidarity. The



initiation ceremonies held by fraternal organizations, the milestone acknowledgements built into 12-step programs, and post-election celebrations held by campaign volunteer organizations are some examples of rituals that connect the members to the group and to other members. Less is known about the ways in which national level rituals impact civic engagement in general and voluntary associations in particular. How do rituals that are *external* to civic groups impact these organizations and their relationships with members and potential members? In spite of the overwhelming shared interest in social solidarity and social participation in the literatures on civic group life and national rituals, their intersection remains unexplored terrain.

I argue that major national rituals allow the best possible window into the activation of civil society because they create a community-focused environment in which individuals and organizations have both general knowledge about the events and adequate time to draw on (or attempt to draw on) their resources if they so choose. The communal, emotional, participatory, and pre-planned aspects of rituals engender them with the potential to serve as catalysts for the activation of civil society and the public sphere. Contemporary ephemeral forms of civic engagement suggested to me that that now, more than ever before, rituals are of critical importance for civic engagement and hence civil society. For this research, I chose a presidential campaign, because their substantive foci, tradition of drawing upon citizen participation, and sheer pervasiveness unquestionably render them the ritual most germane to civic life. I turn now to an exploration of their unique qualities.

## **Presidential Campaigns in the United States**

In the United States, presidential elections can be understood as the ritual of civic engagement par excellence. Edles (1998) explains that the three phases common to generic ritual processes, originally developed by Victor Turner (1969), are present in political transitions: separation, liminality, and reaggregation. The political transition is a liminal phase, a period of anti-structure between a known past and an unknown future. The campaign process beckons the public to reflect on their concerns and to participate in the democratic process.

Elections are rightly understood as instrumental means of placing new leaders in power, but they have important social and symbolic components as well. Campaigns open dialogue about our national identity, asserting and occasionally challenging what it means to be American through speeches and symbols, and via the invocation of historical figures, traditions, triumphs, and scars. Campaigns legitimize the democratic process regardless of voter turnout, because elections provide a "symbol of participation" (Herzog 1987), and as such, they serve to establish a "shared citizen role" that is understood by both participants and nonparticipants in the election process (Conover and Hicks 1995).

This section demonstrates that the existing research on presidential campaigns has failed to explore the relationship between this national political ritual and the mobilization of civil society, and begins to consider the sociological aspects of the presidential campaign process. I will briefly review the varied disciplinary approaches to the study of presidential campaigns, discuss the relationship between individual citizens

and presidential campaigns, and demonstrate why these political events in the United States present an ideal opportunity to research the mobilization of civil society.

### **Current Foci in the Study of Presidential Campaigns**

American presidential campaigns have been the subject of study in multiple academic disciplines, most notably political science, communications, and anthropology. Despite intra-disciplinary variation and cross-pollination, each field has a distinctive focus. The majority of political scientists focus on candidates, their interactions with the press, and the influence of campaigning on voter behavior (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996; Bartels and Zaller 2001). Some political scientists debate with political philosophers over whether elections provide an opportunity for political participation (e.g., Dahl 1961) or whether they are mechanisms of elite control (e.g., Edelman 1964; Mills 1956; Mosca 1939). Scholars in the field of communications generally emphasize the role of the media in campaigns and the content and reception of campaign discourse (e.g., speeches, newspaper articles, advertisements) (e.g., Hall 1993, 1996; Hall and Waldman 1997; Kendall 1995). Meanwhile, anthropologists approach campaigns as rituals or sociodramas (e.g., McLeod 1991, 1993, 1999; Kertzer 1987; Turner 1974).

Sociologists have examined networks of power and the influence that elites and corporations have over elections (e.g., Allen and Broyles 1989; Clawson, Neustadtl, and Bearden 1986), and political participation/attitudes in relation to social characteristics (e.g., Brooks and Manza 1997a, 1997b; Manza and Brooks 1997, 1998), but Herzog (1987) is the only sociologist who has dealt with campaigns as important entities in and of themselves. Herzog argues that campaigns have a lasting impact on society because

they are active arenas in which political worlds are socially constructed. She argues that elections serve as an example of what anthropologist Victor Turner (1982, 1986) would call a liminal stage; presidential elections are periods of ambiguity that fall between the known past and the unknown, but structured future. Liminal moments are moments of anti-structure.

Prior to this research, no empirical work had been completed within sociology that places presidential campaigns at the center of the analysis. These national events are worthy of further sociological analysis because beyond electing a president, I demonstrate that campaigns have an important effect on society. Herzog's argument that elections are liminal periods where new symbols and paradigms can arise is a valuable suggestion that I have taken. In this project, I describe what these liminal periods look like, who acts upon them, and what the outcomes are. I argue that campaigns create mobilizing moments in civil society that inform and transform civic engagement.

### **Campaigns and Individual Citizens**

Before delving into the reasons why civil society and civic engagement are potentially vitalized during campaigns, it is useful to consider the ways in which the relationship between citizens and politics changes during election years. Although frequently criticized as corrupt, expensive, and devoid of genuine political choice, American presidential campaigns remain important national moments because they heighten political interest; they engage people with politics. Research has demonstrated that political discussion increases as the supply of political information increases (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern and West 1996), and presidential campaigns generate a

tremendous amount of news coverage and secondary analysis from the Iowa Caucuses through Election Day. Grand 'media events' (e.g., televised presidential debates, Inauguration Day ceremonies), which are preplanned interruptions of normal programming, that are broadcast live, and characterized by a norm of viewing, further punctuate this constant supply of daily news coverage (Dayan and Katz 1992). In 1960, 80 percent of the population watched at least one of the televised presidential debates (Katz and Feldman 1977), and while no debate since has captured such staggering ratings, contemporary presidential debates still attract an extremely high audience share, rivaling all but a handful of events (Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992).

Campaigns are also compelling because they are public spectacles. The election year yields staged appearance after staged appearance, such as the aforementioned debates and inauguration as well as the national nominating conventions and myriad public events in which individual candidates address large groups in communities across the country. These spectacles are virtually all scripted (either in whole or in part), and many are exceedingly elaborate. The national nominating conventions are multi-day events with long lists of speakers, multiple receptions, performers, prayers, and balloon releases. In spite of the elaborate planning, these spectacles are often open ended. They can perhaps be best understood as planned chaos. For example, while conventions are intended as displays of consensus (to symbolically bridge the intra-party divisions created during the primary season), conflict inevitably emerges. The campaign period contains grand visual events with elements of uncertainty that attract interest from the public.

Even Putnam, who is quick to point to reduced rates of grassroots involvement in campaigns, acknowledges that Americans are no less likely to talk about politics or

express political interest *during campaigns* than they were 50 years ago (2000). Similarly, the findings of political scientists Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson (1999) suggest national elections in the United States can provide an environment that leads to increases in social capital. Even while scholars speculate about increased feelings of inefficacy and detachment from political life, presidential campaigns continue to capture public attention.

### **Presidential Campaigns and the Mobilization of Civil Society**

Presidential campaigns have five characteristics that imbue these rituals with unusual potential for mobilizing civil society: breadth, significance, liminality, dispersion, and publicity. By breadth, I am referring to the multiplicity of issues that open for debate during a presidential campaign. As many issues formerly deemed private have increasingly been thrust into the public sphere, presidential elections have become an opportunity for raising virtually all matters of common concern. A broad spectrum of topics simultaneously open for debate during election years: education, health care, inequality, the death penalty, foreign policy, reproductive rights, immigration, gun control, etc., are all discussed in the same forum. The breadth of relevant issues renders the presidential election salient as a period of potential engagement for a tremendous number of groups, associations, and individuals.

Second, presidential elections are significant and consequential: the winner of this election is arguably imbued with more power than the victor of any other election in the world. The weight of this process, then, may serve to intensify the desire for many to

become active. The result will have an impact not only locally, but also nationally and internationally. The outcome is meaningful and renders the ritual significant.

Third, presidential campaigns, as moments of liminality, offer genuine moments of political opportunity. The election outcome is uncertain and open to influence. This liminal quality engenders a sense of efficacy that presents itself only quadrennially. By empowering new leaders, elections present a political aperture, and voluntary associations can exert influence during this process. Voluntary associations can release statements in response to candidate comments or viewpoints, and journalists often seek out citizen groups, both local and national, for comments on the issues central to their organization. In terms of influencing the outcome of the election, associations can endorse specific candidates, make campaign contributions, stage protests, and apply pressure to their opponents by publicizing candidate records that displease them. Voluntary associations can even be influential in setting the political agenda by attempting to influence party platforms.<sup>16</sup> Many opportunities for potentially meaningful instrumental action arise during election years.

Fourth, presidential campaigns are geographically dispersed, moving politics outside of Washington and into communities across the nation. This physical accessibility provides a unique opportunity for sociopolitical participation. The nominating conventions and televised presidential and vice presidential debates take place beyond the Washington Beltway, and countless campaign stops are made across the country during the general election. Beginning with the state primary process, the campaign trail moves national politics into new locales and communities. This provides many citizens with an opportunity to see the candidates (and/or their spouses), several

bystanders with a chance to “press flesh,”<sup>17</sup> and in some cases the possibility to speak with them directly.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the public having increased access to candidates, the candidates have increased access to the public. Although most research focuses on what candidates say and the one-dimensional responses reported by opinion polls, two-way communication takes place during election years. The campaign brings the candidate in closer communication with the public than they are likely ever to be again, should they enter the White House (Hart 2000).

Finally, presidential campaigns bring publicity with them. The national press pool that follows each candidate and the throng of local news personnel that join them at each local stop, create myriad opportunities to garner publicity. The extensive campaign coverage affords voluntary associations an opportunity to attract publicity that may increase their political effectiveness and symbolic power. In addition to responding to journalists’ questions and releasing unsolicited press statements, these associations can stage events designed to capture the attention of the media. Dayan and Katz (1992) explain that the potential to get a message to a national or international audience renders media events vulnerable to “hijacking” by outsiders in search of publicity. Increased press attention may help voluntary organizations reach parties, candidates, and voters, as well as potential members and contributors. This serves a dual function. At the political level, the larger and more visible the organization, the more apt leaders are to be responsive. At the organizational level, increased membership generates greater financial

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<sup>16</sup> For an interesting article on the role of activists in platform development, see Toner (6/18/00).

<sup>17</sup> Shake hands

<sup>18</sup> Many candidates dine in local establishments, regularly make themselves available to community groups and classrooms, and some even go to citizen’s homes.



resources, expands the supply of volunteer support, and boosts morale of current members.

In sum, current research on presidential elections foregrounds the relationship between campaigning and election outcomes while neglecting examination of the sociological aspects of the presidential campaign process itself. Presidential campaigns are significant national rituals in the United States that increase the political interest of the public and act as catalysts for increased activity for a broad spectrum of formal and informal voluntary associations. As a result, campaigns serve as the perfect point of entry for empirical research on the differential engagement and activity that exists in civil society.

### **Chapter Conclusions**

Existing research on civil society and the public sphere has made two significant contributions. The first is the construction of a normative vision of both civil society and the public sphere that provides a yardstick by which we can measure various social arrangements and, for many, a goal or destination toward which we can aspire. The second contribution comes from empirical work that has provided insight into the existence and utilization of multiple public spheres as well as into the ways in which social inequality complicates the normative vision.

This research starts by understanding civil society as infrastructure whose components are active at some moments and inactive at others. I will show that the 2000 presidential campaign events, as the premier national political rituals in the United States, served as catalysts for the mobilization of civil society in the host communities, and I

then utilize this image of civil society at its most robust to flesh out the opportunities and limitations faced by contemporary voluntary associations.

I find that a variety of existing organizations increased their levels of activity and/or intensity and that many new formal and informal associations and coalitions formed in an effort to capitalize on these unique moments. In Chapter 3, I detail the diverse motives for voluntary association mobilization (which had little to do with influencing the outcome of the election), and describe the various forms that this heightened activity took. In Chapter 4, I show that voluntary associations are responsive entities that benefit in both symbolic and instrumental ways from mobilizing in this context. However, as Chapter 5 elucidates, I find that while the organizations that comprise the associational terrain of civil society express great interest in impacting public political dialogue, the heightened activity within civil society had relatively limited impact on mainstream political discourse. I argue that the professional imperatives of modern journalism, the physical seclusion of political figures in positions of power, and the political culture within many voluntary associations serve to restrict the potential impact of these groups.

As I expound upon in Chapter 6, the lasting image is one of an institutional terrain that springs to life with a plethora of distinctive organizations that are often turbulent, vocal, and creative in their efforts to communicate with those outside of their immediate network. Though these efforts bring with them increases in social solidarity and enhanced levels of commitment to the group as well as more tangible gains for those associations involved, they offer little in the way of objective success. The groups I am about to introduce to you had tremendous difficulty connecting with a general audience.

These associations often contributed to the public sphere by serving meaningfully (at least in a handful of cases) as partial publics, by building communicative bridges between themselves and other citizen groups, and in many cases by effectively politicizing the public spaces they entered. However, the quality and the openness of the dialogue remained thin. Reaching out via the mainstream news media proved effectively impossible to do in a meaningful way, but many organizations also failed to communicate effectively with those in their physical presence, with political leaders, and even internally with one another. Because this unique setting was one in which associations marshaled their resources and invested themselves deeply (in most cases) toward reaching their goals, I have come to see voluntary associations as robust cauldrons of solidarity and engagement, yet as spaces with little potential for political relevance<sup>19</sup> as a result of existing relations of power between civil society, the mass media, and elected officials.

While I recognize the atypical nature of the setting I chose to examine, it is precisely this quality that renders these conclusions significant. Because these mobilizations generally represented extraordinary effort on the part of the associations and took place in a setting filled with news media, political figures, and a public at a heightened level of political interest, I am skeptical that less extraordinary situations offer more promise. Put simply, I suggest that this may be as good as it gets. My intent is that social and political theorists, as well as voluntary association leaders and policy makers, embrace this more accurate vision of civil society and its relationship to the public sphere as they grapple with existing problems of democracy and barriers to the realization of the

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<sup>19</sup> Except perhaps in the case of wealthy associations that have the luxury of purchasing communicative venues, such as advertisements and direct mailings.

good society. The next chapter describes the methods by which I came to these conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY**

After reviewing the existing literature, I was left with four primary research questions. First, what does the process of voluntary association mobilization look like? Second, what are the outcomes of this mobilization for voluntary associations in civil society? Third, what is the relationship between voluntary association mobilization and political discourse in the public sphere? Finally, how are democratic ideals embodied and distorted in this environment? I selected the general election of the 2000 presidential campaign as the opportunity to delve into these research questions.

### **Methods and Data**

#### **Methods**

By virtue of their exploratory nature and unique ability to produce rich narratives of particular events and experiences, qualitative methods were best suited for these research questions. In order to develop a well-rounded and nuanced understanding, I combined qualitative interviewing (the primary method of data collection) with both fieldwork and text analyses. Lofland and Lofland (1995) explain that the goal of qualitative research is to collect the richest possible data. "Rich data mean, ideally, a wide and diverse range of information collected over a relatively prolonged period of time (16)." My research combined a variety of data sources: personal narratives, field notes from association-driven events, literature distributed by voluntary associations, Internet materials produced by these organizations, and newspaper articles. Utilization of

these different information sources permitted me to develop a multivalent understanding of each voluntary association in the sample.

Weiss (1994) lists several reasons to conduct a qualitative interview study: many of which are applicable to my research goals. One reason for choosing qualitative interviewing is to *develop a holistic description*. Weiss explains that assembling process reports from multiple people involved in an organization can help the researcher describe, “how an organization works, how it moves toward goals, or how it is paralyzed by internal friction (10).” Interviewing multiple members of individual voluntary associations yielded the dense information necessary to describe the political culture and strategies of these organizations. In addition, according to Weiss, semi-structured interviews enable the investigator to *describe processes*. I am interested in finding out how mobilization takes place within voluntary associations, the ways in which goals are transformed into initiatives, and how associations respond to increased activity. Qualitative interviewing allowed me to tap into these processes. Finally, Weiss argues that qualitative interviewing is appropriate when the researcher wants to *learn how events are interpreted*, in other words, when researchers want to know how respondents perceive and react to events. I could not access association members’ understandings of their organized activities or the press coverage they receive by observation or through quantitative survey methods. The respondents needed an opportunity to articulate these complex, internal processes in their own words.

Although semi-structured interviewing of voluntary association members is the primary method utilized in this research, these interviews are supplemented with other sources of information. I initially anticipated that a great deal of association activity

would be directed toward the media<sup>20</sup> in an effort to reach either voters, candidates, political parties, or potential members, and therefore I conducted a smaller number of interviews with political journalists covering campaign events. These interviews were intended to elucidate the ways in which journalists interpret the efforts of these associations and to provide a contrast to the interviews conducted with association members.

Lofland and Lofland (1995) explain that observation and interviewing inform and complement one another. In this spirit, I combined personal accounts with unobtrusive observation in order to construct a more complete picture of each organization. These observations generated data about intra-public communication, techniques for external engagement, and community building, which extended beyond the narrative accounts shared by members. The fieldwork component involved observing events held or attended by the voluntary associations in the sample, whenever such an opportunity presented itself. The interviews should be understood as the primary source of data collection, and observations should be construed as supplemental.

In addition, I supplemented the interviews and fieldwork with text analyses of: 1) newspaper articles that included references to the voluntary associations in the sample, 2) list serve and website postings produced by the associations, and 3) flyers and brochures distributed by these organizations during the campaign period. The newspaper articles were included to augment the journalists' accounts and to illustrate which association activities attracted publicity. The information gathered from the Internet postings and

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<sup>20</sup> This anticipation was based on: 1) the publicist orientation of these groups, as described in the civil society literature review in chapter 1, and 2) discussions that transpired in various Internet discussion groups that emphasize critiquing media coverage of association activity and developing "media strategies" in an effort to gain publicity and be accurately represented.

distributed materials supplement the association members' accounts, reveal organization strategies, and provide concrete information about the way the associations chose to present themselves to the broader world.

### **Sampling Design**

The sample was drawn from voluntary associations who organized activities that coincided with preplanned,<sup>21</sup> national-level campaign events during the 2000 general election in which one or more of the presidential candidates were present. Five such events occurred in the 2000 general campaign prior to Election Day: the Republican National Convention (held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), the Democratic National Convention (held in Los Angeles, California), and the three televised presidential debates (held in Boston, Massachusetts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and St. Louis, Missouri).<sup>22</sup> I traveled to each of the host cities for these events to draw my sample of associations.

I selected associations for the sample, via advance research on the Internet, by contacting community centers, by looking in local newspapers and phone books, and via canvassing the area immediately surrounding the official campaign event locations. In each city, I compiled a list of organizations with activities planned to coincide with the event period. For some organizations, campaign activism is a part of their regular activities, but for the majority, these activities represented a special break from their

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<sup>21</sup> Most events are preplanned to a degree, but many campaign stops are scheduled only days in advance, and may not be well publicized, giving associations little opportunity to respond. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, preplanned is intended to mean planned well in advance of the scheduled appearance. I have used six months advance notice as an arbitrary guideline.

<sup>22</sup> The Vice-Presidential Debate could be considered a sixth event of this type, but since the presidential candidates are unlikely to be present at this event, I excluded it from the sample.



ordinary business. I excluded organizations that did not respond to the campaign because I did not consider questions about why organizations chose *not* to mobilize as particularly helpful (though I did ask many representatives to discuss any reluctance they felt in deciding to mobilize). Because I sought to understand mobilizations, I felt comfortable that in all likelihood this method of sampling included predominantly organizations that *did* choose to mobilize in response to the campaign event. I then took a purposive sample<sup>23</sup> of voluntary associations in each city that varied on a number of relevant characteristics pointed to by the literature review. I sought out both national and local organizations, since the process of taking action might have different meanings and outcomes for these groups. Second, I chose organizations that had different *types* of activities planned (e.g., protests, fundraisers, rallies, voter drives, meetings), recognizing that organizations that plan different types of activities may have different goals and experiences. Finally, I sought diversity in terms of the axis of association: in other words, I selected groups whose common concerns varied (e.g., women's issues versus the environment).

When choosing among the associations available to me at a given location, diversity along these three trajectories guided my choices. For example, after my first stop in Philadelphia, I realized that in seeking out organizations with diverging axes of association, I had overlooked scope. As a result, my sample at that point contained more local organizations than national organizations, so I sought to correct this imbalance when I arrived at the next location. I evaluated my sample at multiple points during my

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<sup>23</sup> According to Singleton, Straits and Straits, in purposive sampling, "the investigator relies on his or her expert judgment to select units that are "representative" or "typical" of the population. The general strategy is to identify important sources of variation in the population and then select a sample that reflects this population." (1993: 160).

fieldwork, often daily, in an effort to attend events planned by, and interact with, members from the full range of organizations active in the environment. I continued sampling until I reached saturation, at which point I was no longer gathering new information by adding additional organizations to my sample. During the final field visit, for the presidential debate in St. Louis, I encountered tremendous overlap in terms of organizations present (and in the general *type* of organizations present) and events planned.

In total, data were gathered on 29 different voluntary associations. Fifteen of these organizations are large national or international organizations with a sizable number of paid staff members and, in most cases, multiple offices nationally. The remaining 14 organizations are local, statewide, or regional in nature, half of which have a small paid staff (generally one or two people, often part-time). The organizations in the sample planned a extensive range of activities that included civil disobedience and protest, a debate watch party in a movie theater, a full-sized concert in an arena, street performances, a forum on the Supreme Court with nationally recognized political figures, a \$250 per plate fundraiser, marches, rallies in front of government buildings, leafleting, member meetings, petitioning, and a national voter education drive. The associations in the sample are organized around a variety of issues including: the death penalty, gun control, environmental concerns, women's rights, religion, labor issues, campaign finance reform, globalization, voter turnout, senior citizen's issues, school vouchers, and nuclear weapons. Table 2-1 provides a breakdown of the associations in the sample and their activities.

**TABLE 2-1  
ASSOCIATION AND EVENT MASTER CHART**

<b>Organization Name (Alias)</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Primary Issue(s)</b>	<b>Event 1</b>	<b>Event 2</b>
ABOLISH!	state	death penalty	co-sponsor large legal rally	picket line
American Adult Network	national	seniors' issues	bus tour	
Bootstraps	local	civic responsibility	ethics hour	
Business Watch	national	responsible business	information table	
Christians for Families	regional	anti-sweatshops	co-sponsor large legal march	
Citizens' Campaign Watch	national	campaign finance reform	co-sponsor alt. conference	second conference
DISRUPT	local	results of structural inequality	civil disobedience	participant trainings
EnviroLink	national	environment	co-sponsor panel of speakers	
Federation for the Freedom from Religion	national	separation of church and state	protest	dinner party
Feminists for a Socialist Future	int'l	women's issues/economic justice	co-sponsor legal march	educational forum
GenNext	national	youth voter turnout	concert / debate watch	
Income Gap Attack	national	economic inequality	trainings	
Inequality Forever	regional	wealth in politics	street theater / march	street theater
Land and Life Protection League	national	environment/anti-globalization	street theater	scaled building
MassCares	state	protecting the public interest	co-sponsor debate watch	voter registration drive
National Union of Creative Artists	national	labor	flyering	picket line
NC Citizens for Smaller Government	state	smaller government	information table	
NC Parents Against Gun Violence	state	gun control	protest	
Network for Peace	national	nuclear disarmament	float tour	float and petitioning
Northeast Union of Professionals	regional	labor	co-sponsor legal rally	co-sponsor teach-ins
Pro-Choice and Paying Attention (PCPA)	national	pro-choice	fundraiser	
Rights Now	int'l	international human rights	street theater party	co-sponsor large legal march
School Choice, Family Choice	state	school vouchers	legal rally	
Stand-Up St. Louis	local	direct action/open debates	issues forum	rally / Nader speaking
Students for Change	local	student's issues	co-sponsor teach-ins	co-sponsor legal rally
The Freedom and Equality League	national	multi-issue progressive	panel of speakers	
United for Change	state	progressive unity	large legal march	dance / party
United Trades	local	labor	flyering	
Young Adult Voters Association	national	youth voter turnout	co-sponsor debate watch	participant trainings

It is impossible to make generalizations to the population as a whole with nonprobability samples; however, these samples can still provide rich descriptions that facilitate greater understanding of social phenomena and concept development. Since my goal is not to estimate the distribution of voluntary association strategies and experiences, but rather to identify ways in which different types of voluntary associations respond to the campaign environment, purposive sampling best fit the aims of the research. In other words, the purposive selection process may indeed result in an overrepresentation of certain types of associations, but this is nonproblematic.

From each organization in the sample, I subsampled one *typical member/participant* and one *core member/organizer/leader* of the organization.<sup>24</sup> Members who were instrumental in planning the event(s) organized by the association were considered core members. In most cases these were professional staff members, committee chairs, head volunteers, or officers of the association. Members who were not involved in the planning of the event(s), but participated in or attended the event were considered typical members.<sup>25</sup> The viewpoints of typical members and core members were each essential to the research. While both types of participants were able to share their (different) experiences and interpretations, the core members had access to critical information about the symbolic and instrumental strategies and motivations of the organization, which the typical members often lacked.

The first interviewee in each organization was selected in person, based on suitability, convenience, rapport, and willingness to participate. The subsequent

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<sup>24</sup> From this point forward, I will use the term "typical member" to refer to general members or participants in the events and "core member" to refer to key members, leaders, or organizers of the association events; however, it is important to note that these categories are not restricted in any way to formal membership.

respondent(s) for each organization were recruited either via in-person solicitation or referral. This process yielded a total of 61 useable interviews. In two instances, I had the sense that I did not get a complete picture from the two initial interviews; in each of these cases, I conducted an additional interview. In another instance, I interviewed a core member, but was never able to interview a typical member. I ultimately decided to include this organization in the sample, because I was able to obtain a substantial amount of information about the organization from other sources.

A small ( $N = 20$ ) contrasting sample of journalists covering the events was also selected. I used purposive sampling to recruit respondents who worked for both national and local news organizations. I made a special effort to contact journalists who covered the activities of associations in the primary sample, in hope that the dynamics of their interplay would be revealed by interviewing both parties.

### **Sampling Design for Supplementary Data**

The sample of field observations includes at least one member gathering or public event organized by each of the associations in the primary sample, in addition to observations recorded on the way to and from these events, around the campaign event sites, and at major designated meeting/protest areas. The sample of newspaper articles includes all articles referencing the organizations in the primary sample that appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the local papers published in the city where the specific campaign event was held. Articles published on the day(s) of the official campaign events have been included in addition to those that appeared on the two

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<sup>25</sup> In other words, "typical" refers to non-leaders and is in no way intended to indicate that these members were perceived to be representative of the membership overall.

days before and the two days after the events. The sample of Internet materials includes information from the official websites of the organizations in the primary sample and from the discussion groups generated by these websites. All literature about the associations or their activities that was distributed at the attended meetings and events organized by the voluntary associations has also been included.

### **Data Collection**

Initially, I set out to conduct face-to-face interviews on location in mutually agreeable public settings. The first two interviews, collected in Philadelphia during the Republican National Convention, were conducted in this manner, but they were accompanied by a series of obstacles. In each case, the respondents were busy and we were interrupted on multiple occasions. During the first interview, which was with a participant in a major legal march coordinated by a statewide organization, we were interrupted three times by a core member who appeared skeptical of my motives and wanted to cut the interview short, in spite of the fact that the core member had reviewed my credentials and *encouraged* me to interview the respondent in question. During the second interview, with a core member of a locally based direct action group, other participants interrupted us several times out of necessity as pressing matters arose (such as a police raid at one of the locations). The intensity of the organizing and activity proved detrimental to the interview process, in spite of the fact that both of these interview sessions were scheduled well before or well after the main events of the respective groups (two days after and two days before, respectively) at “convenient” times suggested by the respondents.

Because the respondents were geographically dispersed, it was impractical for me to simply conduct face-to-face interviews in subsequent weeks after events had calmed down, so I established rapport with respondents on location and then conducted the remaining interviews by telephone. I found the telephone interviews substantially easier to conduct; they were scheduled at times that were optimal for the respondent and in virtually all cases I felt that a strong research partnership was established, largely facilitated by our face-to-face introduction and on-site discussions. Most of the interviews were tape recorded (with permission). Four of the 77 total respondents preferred that their interviews not be taped; in these cases I took brief notes during the interview and then expanded them into a more complete account immediately following the session. Confidentiality is protected through the use of pseudonyms for both the individuals and their organizations. The political reporters were extremely concerned that the organizations for which they work, and in some cases their city of employment, remain confidential, due to the small population of political reporters in the field and the potential for identification. I have, of course, respected these wishes.

Two interview guides, one for association members and core members/leaders (Appendix A), and another for journalists (Appendix B) evolved throughout the research process. The topics in the original guides were based on the themes that emerged during the literature review and from my research questions. After the initial stages of data collection, the guides were revised to better probe emergent themes and to eliminate sections that proved less useful. Weiss (1994) explains that it is useful to consider all interview guides as provisional, because that frees the investigator to make additions, deletions, and modifications as new information arises during the research process.

Data were collected during the fieldwork through the compilation of field notes. Although observers in public settings can often take notes continuously during their observation and transcribe them later, the majority of observers are forced by the circumstances of their setting to take brief notes in the field and transfer them to full fieldnote form by elaborating after the fact (Lofland and Lofland 1994). I took brief notes, even in situations where continuous writing would have been acceptable, so that I could concentrate on observing, but I had little difficulty expanding the jottings into full field notes as I did so the evening after they were taken. These field notes consist of, "a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, and conversations with people (ibid 93)." Effort was made to collect raw data without inadvertently collecting analysis (Singleton, Straits and Straits 1993), by distinguishing methodological notes, inferential notes, and personal notes from the raw data.

Data were collected from newspaper articles, distributed literature, and Internet sites by evaluating these materials in the context of the interviews and observations done in association with each specific organization. The materials produced by voluntary associations were examined with careful attention given to the apparent objectives of the materials (e.g., consciousness raising, increasing membership), as well as to the symbols and stories that were presented. A brief analytic summary was completed for the materials produced by each organization. Newspaper articles were evaluated in terms of the prominence of the voluntary association in question, the presence or absence of interviews with group members, the degree to which the article represented the



association as the association seeks to be represented, and whether the overall impression of the organization was the article is positive, negative, or ambivalent.

### **Validity and Reliability**

One of the strengths of qualitative interviewing is that it maximizes validity. The in-depth interview allows the respondent to ask for clarification when they are uncertain about what the interviewer is asking. Similarly, if the interviewer recognizes that a question has been understood differently than initially intended, they can redirect the respondent. In addition, qualitative interviews allow participants to answer in their own words, thereby providing more accurate, detailed, and nuanced answers than they could if presented with a fixed-response survey.

In spite of these strengths, in terms of validity, interviewers do need to assess the credibility of their informants. One way to assess credibility is to continually reflect on whether or not the respondent is in a position to answer the questions being asked, and whether or not they have first-hand knowledge of the situation. In this research, I decided to interview core members in addition to typical members, precisely because they have different firsthand experiences and each is qualified to answer different key questions. Another threat to validity present with qualitative interviews is the potential for respondents to be dishonest.<sup>26</sup> Weiss argues that dishonesty is rare in an interviewing situation. "The lying respondent happens less often than people who don't do interviewing may imagine. For one thing it is difficult to maintain a counterfactual reality when being pressed to provide detailed descriptions of events. And why should anyone

want to do it?" (1994: 148). Incomplete reporting is a larger problem in qualitative interviewing, but this can be dramatically improved if the interviewer listens carefully for markers left by the respondent and probes extensively. In this research project, I minimized these threats to validity by being sensitive to: 1) inconsistencies in respondents' accounts that might indicate dishonesty (I found none), and 2) the markers left by respondents that indicated that they might have additional information to share.

Reliability is often a bigger challenge for qualitative research than validity. Is it reasonable to assume that another researcher would generate the same findings? Howard Becker (1970) provides considerable insight into this question. He argues that because researchers entering the same arena may have different research questions or may enter an *ostensibly* similar arena with similar research questions, it is unreasonable to assume that they would have similar findings. "What we have a right to expect is that the two descriptions be compatible, that the conclusions of one study do not implicitly or explicitly contradict those of the other." (Becker 1970: 41-42). Still, to improve the reliability of this research project, I attempted to reduce investigator bias as much as possible by practicing reflexive research. I reviewed the early interview transcripts to ensure that I was not asking leading questions and strived to consider alternative interpretations of my observations in the field.

The unobtrusive observation component of the research design was intended to gather first hand information about communication within and between publics and to observe some of the events that respondents interpret. Since these data will be used only

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<sup>26</sup> It is worthwhile to mention that although lying may indeed occur from time to time in a qualitative interview, it can also take place in standardized surveys, which are riddled with additional validity problems.

in conjunction with other methods, the usual problems that arise regarding validity and reliability are significantly ameliorated.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis should be conducted continually throughout the data collection process (Miles and Huberman 1984; Singleton, Straits, and Straits 1993). As data were gathered, they were evaluated in the context of existing data, which permitted me to continually focus in on key themes and concepts, and to consider possible improvements to extract relevant information as I resumed data collection. As a result of the temporal demands of this particular research, the data and the process by which they were gathered were scrutinized at three preliminary analytic points during the research: in the period following the first data gathering expedition (the Republican National Convention), in the period following the second session in the field (the Democratic National Convention), and at the end (following the cluster of televised presidential debates). After the two conventions, at roughly the midpoint of the data collection, I prepared a brief analytic memo that summarized the patterns that appeared to be emerging at that point in the research. This memo included the main categories and concepts, the relationships between them, and a statement of my theoretical argument in formation.

Further data analysis involved systematically reorganizing data from interview transcripts and field notes into new thematic files. Interview and field note transcriptions were managed using NUD\*IST, a qualitative software program. These themes were dictated by the concepts that emerged as I assigned codes or meaning labels to each section of data. The emergent concepts were explored through a careful examination of

the new theme-based files of data. The dimensions of each concept were specified, and similarities and variations across the sample were evaluated.

### **Chapter Conclusions**

By combining methodological strategies, I accumulated a wide variety of information on each voluntary association in the sample. For the vast majority of the organizations, I was able to obtain an interview with a core member, an interview with a typical member, field notes from an event they organized, online materials from their website, and copies of the literature that they chose to distribute.<sup>27</sup> For some associations, I was able to further augment this information with published news articles, interviews with journalists present at the events, and listserv discussions between members or participants. The use of multiple methods produced a lush archive for analysis and yielded great insight into the research questions presented at the outset of this chapter.

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<sup>27</sup> In some cases literature was not distributed at the event I attended, and/or a website did not exist.

### **CHAPTER 3**

## **MOBILIZATION AND THE DEMONSTRATIVE MODE OF ENGAGEMENT**

In contrast to the images of consistency embedded in existing theories of civil society (e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992; Habermas 1989 [1962]), this chapter suggests that civil society is not continuously active or persistently disengaged, but rather that the associations within this arena are mercurial entities that employ a wide array of action alternatives at fluctuating levels of intensity. In response to the major presidential campaign events, voluntary associations designed activities that represented notable departures from their routine organizational practices, which were almost universally directed toward nonmembers. This chapter addresses the different catalysts that led the associations to choose to adopt an external orientation, and it explores in ethnographic detail the dramatically different ways in which voluntary associations attempted to enter the public arena. In doing so, I hope to provide a sense of the associations' primary objectives as well as a feel for the events themselves, to describe both the why and how of mobilization during the 2000 campaign, and to lay the ground work for Chapters 4 and 5, which examine the consequences of this process for civil society and the public sphere.

### **Mobilization**

Though I sought out associations that were active during the major campaign events, interviews with members provided me with the opportunity to learn about the regular operations of each organization and the role of the campaign-related activities in the broader context of the organizations' lives. While most of the associations have traditions and patterned rhythms of engagement, they are by no means bound by these

routines. The participants described their organizations and the people in them as responsive, apt to be compelled by events in the broader world, and also vulnerable to moments of apathy. This section illustrates the inconsistency in civil society, by utilizing a case study to display the varied forms of activity as well as the dual levels at which such activities transpire. Special attention is paid to one unique expression of mobilization – the formation of new associations in response to the campaign events.

### **Variation in Activity Level and Mode: A Case Study**

At first blush, it may seem as though uncovering mobilization was a forgone conclusion - that the quadrennial nature of presidential campaigns might demand that activity around these events automatically be a break from the ordinary. However, I utilized the form, size, requirements (e.g., in terms of organizational resources), and substance of their activities, rather than their context, to judge their uniqueness. In addition, I asked members to provide background information about their organizations (e.g., membership requirements, whether they hold regular meetings, what activities their organization regularly undertakes, etc.), and to compare their campaign event activity to their regular activities. This information allowed me to assess whether a certain event involved mobilization in the context of each organization's individual circumstances. I illustrate the range of activity alternatives by using *ABOLISH!*, a statewide anti-death penalty organization, as an example, but also step away from the case study in order to address the broader patterns of activity.

As a part of their regular organizational practices, *ABOLISH!* is involved in a variety of activities. The regular, behind-the-scenes work<sup>28</sup> of the association includes maintaining the finances of the organization, staffing the main office in Philadelphia, communicating with other organizations involved in anti-death penalty work, and sending out quarterly email newsletters. Like most organizations, *ABOLISH!* also consistently engages in activities that involve gathering the members or subsets of the membership.<sup>29</sup> The organization is structured into chapters, which have regular membership meetings, though some chapters have a more involved membership base than others. In addition to these backstage and inwardly focused activities, the organization also routinely seeks to communicate with those outside of its auspices.<sup>30</sup> In an effort to generate support and apply pressure to elected officials, vigils are held on the first Thursday of every month in front of the District Attorney's office in Philadelphia and on the third Thursday of every month at the Governor's mansion. These are regularly occurring events with a fixed time, date, and location.

In addition to the organization's routine activities, *ABOLISH!* has periods of heightened activity or mobilization, usually in response to events in their communities. For example, the leadership sporadically sends out "action alerts" (distinct from the regular electronic newsletters) to notify members of important political developments that they may want to act on by gathering to petition or distribute literature. Also, at the time of the interviews the association was in the early stages of planning a conference on the

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<sup>28</sup> What I have previously referred to as "fundamental activities:" endeavors that facilitate the coordination of the group. They are typically undertaken by leaders or staff and are often unseen by the general participants.

<sup>29</sup> What I have previously referred to as "communal activities:" undertakings that are run by and for members of the group and are internally focused.

<sup>30</sup> What I have previously referred to as "demonstrative activities:" events that may or may not involve the majority of the membership and are directed at nonmembers.

death penalty to which all members would be invited. They decided to make a major effort to organize a conference, because the statewide structure of the group had made it difficult for members from the different chapters to assemble. *ABOLISH!* also has a history of mobilizing in more dramatic, externally-oriented ways. One member,<sup>31</sup> Isabelle, explained that the association had been very active six months before the convention in response to hearings on a bill to place a moratorium on the death penalty in Pennsylvania. She explained that the organization gathered about 250 people to have a presence at the hearings, which was highly out of the ordinary for an organization that typically has difficulty getting members to attend chapter meetings: generating that level of support required a good deal of effort from a special committee.

Overall, *ABOLISH!* employs a wide range of action alternatives as a part of their regular operations as well as deviations from their normal routines. This variety serves as critical background information, because in recognizing the diversity of action alternatives, we are reminded that associations have many choices in how they choose to engage, both internally and externally. This serves as an indication that unlike the social movements literature suggests (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), the operations of voluntary associations are not necessarily oriented around external agitation and preparation for such agitation. The internal life of the organization and relationships between those involved also play an important role. The varied types and levels of action present themselves as options from which associations may choose.

The events that *ABOLISH!* organized for the week of the Republican National Convention involved a combination of these options. Because the dates of the convention happened to coincide with the monthly vigil in front of the District Attorney's office, I

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<sup>31</sup> A master list of association names and members in the sample is presented in Table 3-1.



**TABLE 3-1  
ASSOCIATION REPRESENTATIVES MASTER CHART**

<b>Organization Name (Alias)</b>	<b>Core Member*</b>	<b>Typical Member*</b>	<b>Other*</b>
ABOLISH!	George	Isabelle	
American Adult Network	Robert	Sid	Rodney
Bootstraps	Ken	Ann	
Business Watch	Erin	Jeb	
Christians for Families	Leslie	Thomas	
Citizens' Campaign Watch	Marty	Millie	
DISRUPT	Rochelle	Loren	
EnviroLink	Karl	None Available	
Federation for the Freedom from Religion	Roy	Pedro	
Feminists for a Socialist Future	Kim, Victoria	None Available	
GenNext	Paige	Jerome	
Income Gap Attack	Sheila	Josh	
Inequality Forever	Rich	Brian	
Land and Life Protection League	Greg	Oliver	
MassCares	Haley	Max	
National Union of Creative Artists	Tricia	Joel	
NC Citizens for Smaller Government	Art	Craig	
NC Parents Against Gun Violence	Susan	Laurie	
Network for Peace	Charles	Elise	
Northeast Union of Professionals	Harry	Niles	
Pro-Choice and Paying Attention (PCPA)	Daniel	Mary	
Rights Now	Jake	Paul	
School Choice, Family Choice	Brandy	Steve	
Stand-Up St. Louis	Brenda	Zach	
Students for Change	Jan	Ajay	
The Freedom and Equality League	Lydia	Carla	
United for Change	Mark	Jill	
United Trades	Franklin	Liza	Wayne
Young Adult Voters Association	Cole	Suki	

\*All names are pseudonyms

was able to attend one of the organization's regular externally-focused activities. The vigil consisted of a circular picket line of about 30 people, with many carrying anti-death penalty signs and/or wearing anti-death penalty t-shirts and buttons, several of which bore the *ABOLISH!* logo. Participants passed a bullhorn, with which they made statements against the death penalty or prayers. Reverend Al Sharpton was in the picket line, which I was told was unusual<sup>32</sup> and had attracted some interest from the media. The mood and climate were somber, except at one point when the group became more aggressive, harassing a local public figure on her way into the building.

In dramatic contrast, two days prior to the vigil, *ABOLISH!* coordinated a large permitted rally on the death penalty in conjunction with anti-death penalty groups from the area and out of state. This event was of a much larger scale, involving numerous groups united by a shared opposition to the death penalty and an estimated 700 people in attendance. The rally attendees filled a plaza as speakers from various groups addressed the audience from an elaborate sound system set up on a platform in the center of the square. Toward the end of the rally, demonstrations began in the streets around the plaza and grew to sufficient size such that the police were called to disburse the crowds. This effort required heightened activity on the part of the association. George, the director of *ABOLISH!*, described the effort behind the rally as extensive, particularly on the part of the staff, because of the emphasis placed on communicating with other organizations to coordinate one unified message and visual presence. He described his personal investment as, "...a major focus of my time and work for several weeks leading up to the convention."

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<sup>32</sup> Sharpton was in town giving a press conference on police brutality, not to participate in the vigil per se.

The shifting activity level between the *ABOLISH!* vigil and their rally during the convention illustrates the difference between what I have referred to as the “typical” and “mobilized” levels of engagement. Both of these events were intended to communicate with people outside of their organization, yet one was a regularly occurring, routinized event that did not require an unusual commitment of organizational resources, and the other was a break from traditional organizational patterns in which the association worked at a heightened level, devoting substantial staff resources, and engaging a larger portion of their membership. The presidential campaign event sparked an unusual commitment of human and financial resources on the part of the association, which were used to construct a dramatic public event.

Because *ABOLISH!* chooses to engage in such a wide array of activities at tiered levels of intensity (as illustrated in the campaign event context), this association is a particularly useful illustration; however, all of the associations in my sample reported acting in varying degrees and forms of engagement. For example, *North Carolina Citizens for Smaller Government*, the statewide branch of a national conservative organization concerned with minimizing the intrusion of the government on citizen’s lives, regularly holds meetings and social events for members, has “precinct walks” where volunteers go door-to-door in different communities distributing literature, facilitates forums where invited public figures discuss issues of interest to the group (e.g., lower taxes, property rights, reducing regulations on the private sector), and applies pressure on state officials to support or resist particular pieces of legislation as they arise. They engage in a variety of activities, with varied goals and intended audiences. Similarly, *Feminists for a Socialist Future*, an international anti-capitalist organization

working on women's issues, is involved with a wide array of activities including: holding celebrations<sup>33</sup> of relevant holidays (e.g., International Women's Rights Day, May Day, etc.), organizing educational forums for members, hosting conferences, having regular meetings, and occasionally being involved in political protests. Most voluntary associations have a range of activities with which they are involved.

In addition to different types of activities, association members also reported varied levels of activity. During our interview, Karl, a core member of *EnviroLink*, a national nonpartisan environmental group, described the way his organization responded to the enthusiasm among its membership generated by the presidential campaign.

*"How would you describe the level of effort you've [EnviroLink] put in during this time of year compared to a year when there isn't a presidential election?"*

Oh, god, much more.

*How so?*

We just have - the public is - people want to get active and because our members want to be so active, it creates a lot of different opportunities for us to work. It creates a lot of different projects we can be involved with and a lot of different ways that people can be getting active in the political debate."

*EnviroLink* stepped up its efforts during the campaign year in order to capitalize on the interest expressed by their members. Mobilization is, of course, only one type of variation and I would be remiss to imply that changes in activity always comes in the form of *increases*. In addition to accelerating into moments of intense activity, many organizations also lapse into periods of relative inactivity. For example, Ian, from *Students for Change*, a local student organization formed to pursue the interests of the student body at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, indicated that his organization

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<sup>33</sup> These celebrations involve parties, poetry, performances, etc.

battled moments of apathy. “Well, in theory we are supposed to have meetings, but everybody has been so busy it’s hard.” Even though this group was capable of heightening its activity around the presidential debate in Boston, they were not immune to gaps in interest and energy. The main point from these stories is that while many voluntary associations may run as well-oiled machines and others may border on extinction, they should not be understood as incapable of change.

### **Pervasive Mobilization**

While I have alluded to a few associations that chose to heighten their level of activity in response to the entrance of a major campaign event into their communities, these groups were far from alone. Representatives from 27 of the 29 organizations explained that their activities during the campaign event(s) were breaks from the usual patterns of engagement for their groups, though certainly for some associations the break from their routine operations was more dramatic than for others. As Table 3-2 illustrates, the two organizations whose campaign events did not represent an unusually heightened level of activity were the *Young Adult Voters Association* and *GenNext*. While each group held striking events (an arena concert/debate watch and a large debate watch party), which required a tremendous amount of planning and expense, both associations are organized along the axis of youth voter turnout, and as a result organize around campaign events as part of their standard activities. In other words, though the events represented the largest of the year for each association, they were not indicative of “heightened activity” in the broader context of the organization.

**TABLE 3-2**  
**ASSOCIATION AND EVENT CATEGORIES**  
**(Fundamental Activities Not Included)**

<b>Organization Name (Alias)</b>	<b>New?</b>	<b>Event 1</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Event 2</b>	<b>Type</b>
ABOLISH!	No	large legal rally	M/D	picket line	T/D
American Adult Network	No	bus tour	M/D		
Bootstraps	No	ethics hour	M/D		
Business Watch	No	information table	M/D		
Christians for Families	No	large legal march	M/D		
Citizens' Campaign Watch	No	conferences	M/D		
DISRUPT	Yes	civil disobedience	M/D	participant trainings	M/C
EnviroLink	No	panel of speakers	M/D		
Federation for the Freedom from Religion	No	protest	M/D	dinner party	T/C
Feminists for a Socialist Future	No	legal march	M/D	educational forum	M/C
GenNext	No	concert / debate watch	T/D		
Income Gap Attack	No	trainings	M/C		
Inequality Forever	Yes	street theater / march	M/D	street theater	M/D
Land and Life Protection League	No	street theater	M/D	scaled building	M/D
MassCares	No	debate watch	M/D		
National Union of Creative Artists	No	flyering	M/D	picket line	T/D
NC Citizens for Smaller Government	No	information table	M/D		
NC Parents Against Gun Violence	No	protest	M/D		
Network for Peace	No	float in legal march	M/D	float and petitioning	M/D
Northeast Union of Professionals	No	co-sponsor legal rally	M/D		
Pro-Choice and Paying Attention (PCPA)	No	fundraiser	M/C		
Rights Now	No	large legal march	M/D	street theater party	M/D
School Choice, Family Choice	Yes	legal rally	M/D		
Stand-Up St. Louis	Yes	issues forum	M/D	rally / Nader speaking	M/D
Students for Change	No	teach-ins	M/D	co-sponsor legal rally	M/D
The Freedom and Equality League	No	panel of speakers	M/D		
United for Change	Yes	large legal march	M/D	dance / party	M/C
United Trades	No	flyering	M/D		
Young Adult Voters Association	No	debate watch party	T/D	participant trainings	T/C

M = Mobilized, T = Typical, D = Demonstrative, C = Communal

While I found the pervasive interest in mobilization unsurprising (the presumption of this propensity was, of course, what drew me to the site), I was more surprised by the degree to which mobilization in this context overwhelmingly took the form of highly visible, externally focused events (see Table 3-2). Of the 27 organizations that mobilized around the campaign events, 25 organizations held at least one event intended to be visible to nonmembers. In contrast, only six organizations drew upon the campaign context as an opportunity to coordinate a member-focused event.<sup>34</sup> I describe both the rationale behind these choices as well as the varied textures organizations' lent to their public events in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Mobilization from the Ground Up: The Emergence of New Organizations**

The intersection of the major campaign stops with the ephemeral character of contemporary civic engagement<sup>35</sup> proved to be a productive climate for a special form of mobilization: the creation of entirely new associations. Much to my surprise, five<sup>36</sup> of the organizations in my sample formed explicitly for the campaign year and/or these specific events. Mark, a core member of *United for Change*, a multi-issue progressive group, explained that his organization, formed expressly because the Republican National Convention was coming to Philadelphia,

“...I was watching television. I had television at the time, and the news came on and said the Republicans had announced that they were coming to Philadelphia, and I just couldn't believe it. I thought, how stupid. I said, “What a great organizing opportunity!”...”Here's the Republican Party

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<sup>34</sup> A breakdown of mobilized fundamental activities is not provided because all mobilized communal and demonstrative events require heightened fundamental activity, and by virtue of the sampling design, organizations that mobilized exclusively via fundamental action are not included in the sample.

<sup>35</sup> See discussion in Chapter I for more information.

<sup>36</sup> *DISRUPT, Inequality Forever, School Choice Family Choice, Stand-Up St. Louis, and United for Change*

coming to town. We can find some way to mobilize people." So, I, just on a whim, put together a website and that evening had a website and sent out an E-mail to my friends and some colleagues. The next morning, when they announced that the Republicans were coming, they also had an article in the newspaper that said - and we hadn't done any media work on this, I don't know how they got the story, but this story said, "How long do you think it will take before the first protests are organized about the Republicans? How about already?" They gave the website and then we, almost immediately, had a couple hundred people on an E-mail list who wanted to start working on things."

These sparks that ignited on impulse at the announcement of the convention, ultimately evolved into a large, hardworking coalition of organizations that organized a massive permitted march. Two other organizations formed for legal political activity: one to create awareness about the role of the elite in politics (*Inequality Forever*), and another to support the passage of a school voucher initiative (*School Choice, Family Choice*). The remaining two newly formed organizations (*Stand-Up St. Louis* and *DISRUPT*) emerged to coordinate direct action.

Two of the new organizations indicated that their groups hoped to endure as organizations beyond the campaign. The first of these, *United for Change*, has since dissolved. The second, *Inequality Forever*, has germinated over 40 fledgling chapters across the country focusing on a variety of targets. The presidential campaign led existing organizations to heighten their level of activity as anticipated, but it also prompted individuals to mobilize and form new organizations.

## **Conclusions**

Unlike the images of civil society implicitly communicated by existing theories (e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992; Habermas 1989 [1962]), these findings suggest that civil society is not continuously active or persistently disengaged, but rather that the



associations within this arena are agentic spaces that respond to the social world. These associations may be very active at times and at other moments they may lie close to dormant. *ABOLISH!* displays the full range of activity types in which organizations may engage, as well as the difference between regular and heightened activity levels. Their decision to mobilize in response to a major campaign event was not unique. Rather, the events held in response to the debates and conventions by nearly every organization I encountered represented heightened activity for the associations that coordinated them. Further, *ABOLISH!*'s decision to choose a demonstrative mode of engagement is indicative of the broader trend. For a variety of reasons that I highlight in the next section, the associations that mobilized overwhelmingly selected externally focused activities. In light of the broad range of engagement options available, this pronounced pattern is worthy of note.

### **Motives for Demonstrative Action**

The organizations had a variety of reasons for adopting an external focus during the campaign events. Attempting to influence the outcome of the election, which I anticipated would be a compelling incentive for choosing a publicist orientation, proved to be a primary motivation for very few organizations. Other objectives, such as providing alternative perspectives and capitalizing on the unique moment presented by the nominating conventions and televised debates, played more significant roles in the decision to reach beyond their memberships.

## **The Unexpected Lack of Interest in Influencing the Outcome of the Election**

Associations had various reasons for not endorsing candidates. For some, the Democratic and Republican candidates appeared equally unappealing in terms of the issues that concerned them. Roy, a core member of the *Federation for the Freedom from Religion*, a national association for nonreligious people, explained that while the Democratic candidates might seem a logical choice for his organization, they offered little hope for issues of separation of church and state.

“...people equate Republicans with the religious right, but they don’t stop to think about what goes on on the left which, you know, for every Reverend Pat Robertson on the right you got Reverend Jesse Jackson on the left. And people think that the Democrats or the left is automatically better on church and state separation issues when in fact they are not. We were really disappointed. As far as at least the two major candidates go, both are unacceptable from a separation of church and state point.”

For the *Federation for the Freedom from Religion*, swaying the election toward either of the dominant party candidates failed to offer an appropriate alternative, because the group perceived a high degree of similarity between the two candidates on religious issues. A popular slogan with groups sharing this sentiment was, “The lesser of two evils is still evil.”

A large contingent of organizations refrained from electioneering because it was the electoral process itself with which they were displeased. Millie, a member of *Citizen’s Campaign Watch*, a national organization advocating for responsible government, explained that her organization was active to critique the national nominating conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties, which their organizations understood as distortions of the democratic process.

“Well, we certainly wanted...not necessarily to influence the outcome of the election, no, but just to let people know what’s happening with

conventions. Everybody's being bought and sold, and this was just a good time to bring this out."

*Citizen's Campaign Watch* objected to the increasing influence of wealth in the electoral process because of the advantage that affluent citizens have over those with fewer economic resources if they choose to run for public office, as well as the perceived impact of sizable campaign contributions made to major party candidates by corporations. Since exposing the role of wealth in campaigns to others beyond the organization was the central objective of *Citizen's Campaign Watch*, the organization concerned itself with publicizing campaign contributions to the major candidates rather than endorsing a candidacy.

The *Land and Life Protection League*, a national environmental and anti-globalization group, also sought to critique the existing electoral process. Oliver, a member, explained his understanding of the demonstrations that the group supported during the Republican National Convention.

"It was more an act of community resistance...compared to the normal demonstrations outside the political process, they're [the demonstrations at the conventions] very different in the sense that they were not making demands upon any of the Democrats or the Republicans. They were saying, "This system, that our political system, does not work. It is a sham. We will not obey. We will not participate and we will not be silenced"...people are trying to challenge really the system itself and they see these opportunities with the conventions to do that."

The *Land and Life Protection League* had an interest in voicing disapproval of the basic terms of the political process in the United States, rather than promoting any individual politician embroiled in the system. The organization members could have resisted via boycott, but chose protest so that their frustrations would be visible to both the parties and to the public.

Other organizations visible around the debates gathered to protest the debate guidelines established by the Commission on Presidential Debates. These groups argued that requiring candidates to have a large following in order to enter the debates disadvantages minority candidates by depriving them of an opportunity to build a national following. In particular, “Let Ralph Debate” chants in support of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader rang through the streets of Boston, and a noticeable, though less prominent contingency of supporters of Libertarian Party candidate Harry Browne were present in Winston-Salem. At least rhetorically, these groups advocated more for open debates than for specific candidates; they protested the system rather than advocating for a particular political party. In sum, several organizations were opposed to electioneering because they viewed the electoral system as flawed at best and fundamentally corrupt at worst; yet rather than withdraw, they chose visibility in an attempt to lay bare existing inequities in hopes of instigating change.

Only four of the organizations<sup>37</sup> holding these externally-focused events actually wished to advocate for a particular candidate and ironically three of these four were legally prohibited from doing so. Representatives from three national organizations that had petitioned the federal government for charitable (501c3) nonprofit tax status, explained that they were prohibited from endorsing candidates by virtue of their tax category. In other words, they were required to be nonpartisan in order to retain their preferential tax status. Susan, from *NC Parents Against Gun Violence* explains the way her organization coped with this restriction.

“We cannot endorse candidates. We cannot actually come out and say we want you to vote for Al Gore. But what we can do is present both sides of

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<sup>37</sup> *ABOLISH!*, the Freedom and Equality League, NC Parents Against Gun Violence, and Network for Peace

their positions. Like we can pass out information and just say here are the positions of Gore and Bush so that you can make up your mind. It is kind of a sneaky way of endorsing, but we can't actually say, "vote for Al Gore." you can't actually say that."

Similarly, *Network for Peace*, a national organization supporting nuclear disarmament, focused on what they called "voter education," which allowed them to sidestep the federal restrictions placed on electioneering by indirectly steering voters toward the candidates sympathetic to issues of interest to the organization. As part of this voter education campaign, the organization produced and distributed "voter guides," which publicized each candidate's position and voting history on issues relevant to the organization (e.g., military spending). The less-than-subtle message in the voter guides was that those supporting the organization's issues, have a clear choice on Election Day. These guides were distributed to members, posted on the association's web site, and distributed to passersby outside of the Republican National Convention and the first televised presidential debate. The outreach approaches of both *Network for Peace* and *NC Parents Against Gun Violence* were attempts to reveal disparities between dominant party candidates on issues of importance to their organization and, consequently, to influence voter behavior. Though they may have wanted to, these organizations did not have the option to carry signs emblazoned with "Bush" or "Gore."

Overall, however, most organizations that hoped to impact the election intended to achieve these ends indirectly – not by advocating for a particular candidate, but rather by attempting to bring their issues into the consciousness of convention delegates or the candidates, or the general public. Karl, from *EnviroLink*, explained,

"We're just trying to make people think about the environment in the election. We want them to think about that, to think about who these people are, to think about why the environment matters, you know, to

weigh their different options. Everyone has an option in November, if they figure the environment into that choice. I'm happy, we're happy as an organization."

None of the associations in my sample chose demonstrative actions with the straightforward goal of working to get a particular candidate elected.<sup>38</sup> No members were out with fliers, or posters, or chants advocating for a particular candidate (though individual respondents often "divulged" that they had a strong personal preference for one particular candidate), and when I asked representatives if their organizations sought to influence the outcome of the election, only representatives of *ABOLISH!*, who hoped to publicize George W. Bush's record on the death penalty, expressed a concrete interest in doing so (the other three organizations revealing vested interests were careful to articulate only an interest in raising issues, rather than an interest in swaying the outcome of the election). For the overwhelming majority of organizations, other interests motivated the external focus.

### **Presenting Alternative Issues and Images**

Many groups chose to adopt an external orientation around the major campaign events because they felt that it was important to provide an alternative voice, a contrast to the televised debates and scripted convention proceedings. This contrast most frequently meant raising issues that were not being discussed by candidates or in the news media in hopes of making them relevant to the election.

Virtually every organization in the sample was concerned that their issues become salient public political issues. The organizations expressed concern that their issues were

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<sup>38</sup> Though *Pro Choice and Paying Attention* held a communal event that was intended to bring support to a series of candidates.

not being discussed in the campaign, and this absence helped to precipitate their response. Niles, a member of a regional labor union for professionals, explained,

“...our feeling is that labor isn’t adequately represented in the political process. The most you hear about labor is that—this or that union is backing the Democratic candidates. Very little is done to discuss either organized labor or just general labor issues, typically, the appeal is to the “working middle class”, which actually isn’t by and large the working population at all in the traditional sense. So...we thought it would be useful to have a voice of protest there to raise some of the issues that we knew wouldn’t be raised in the debate. They weren’t raised in the debate.”

Similarly, Suki, a core member of the *Young Adult Voter’s Association*,<sup>39</sup> explained that the group’s involvement around the debate was intended to encourage the candidates to address youth issues,

“The whole point is that our issues are not addressed. So, for example, the fact that we don’t have health care when we graduate from college. That’s not addressed. When they talk about health care, they talk about prescription drugs and that doesn’t apply to us as much. In order to get our issues addressed, we need the candidates to hear that we want to be part of things.”

For these two groups, and many others like them, the objective was to prompt response. In other words, the union and the youth group became involved not to influence the views of the public or the candidates one way or another on their issues, but simply to thrust their issues into public discourse, to render them germane to the election.

For other groups, offering an alternative voice involved offering a critique of the electoral process. This was certainly true of the aforementioned groups that protested the closed debate structure and/or the role of wealth in politics. One organization offered a somewhat different contrast, making a visual commentary about the exclusivity of electoral politics. Jill, a volunteer for *United for Change*, described this contrast,

“Down there [at the convention] they are surrounded by police, you can’t get in without a pass, it’s mostly white, middle aged people, wealthy people, and up here it’s like anybody can come, it’s free, there’s so much – I mean we had Tibetan monks signing, and had people from Haiti, it’s very diverse, we had native Americans, hip hop bands, all kinds of the real things that the country’s about, very diverse, very celebratory, very colorful, and fun and free. And that’s a contrast to the stuff on the floor. All rich people trying to keep things the way they are, you know. We had puppets and guys on stilts, I like that.”

*United for Change* intended to communicate the message that the convention was failing to represent the diversity of the nation by presenting a different image of democracy.

In sum, many groups were present to raise issues that they perceived to be absent from the dialogue, rather than to sway outsiders toward one side of a particular issue. Many had specific substantive issues such as nuclear arms, youth concerns, labor issues, and gun control that they wanted addressed by the candidates. In other words, they hoped that the debate moderator or a political reporter would hear their concerns and pose related questions to the candidates. Robert, from the *American Adult Network* serves as an illustration.

“We figured that this is the time to force our issues out there. If we make a big production that can’t be ignored, then someone is likely to say, “Hey, Governor Bush, what do you think about prescriptions in Medicare?” Then he has to answer. He has to respond and then maybe Al Gore responds to his answer. This is just the place to be if you have an issue that you think should be in the platform or at least near it.”

Other groups wished first and foremost that the system itself would be scrutinized, be it the presence of a two-party system, the need for campaign finance reform, or charges of elitism and exclusivity.

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<sup>39</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 2, these efforts did not represent mobilization for this particular organization. As a voter’s organization, they routinely have such events. Still, I point to them to address their interest in holding events that are publicist in nature.



## **Capture a Moment**

The other prominent theme that emerged in talking with representatives from the associations was the idea that the debates and conventions offered a unique opportunity for the organizations to capitalize upon. Interestingly, though many associations shared this interest in capturing the special moment created by the campaign events, they defined this "moment" in a variety of different ways. The moment that some organizations sought to seize was one of great local enthusiasm generated by the presence of a debate or convention. Other groups believed that the campaign events created a unique moment during which their regular organizational concerns were rendered uniquely timely. Meanwhile, other associations decided to reach out because they felt it would be an opportune moment to reach people who are politically active. Still other groups perceived the opportunity to be the potential for publicity created by the presence of innumerable representatives of the news media. Finally, some organizations tried to capture the momentum from the anti-globalization protests in the year preceding the election, rather than the momentum of the campaign context.

In Chapter 1, I suggested that the geographical dispersion of presidential campaigns provides a unique opportunity for sociopolitical participation by moving national politics into new locales and communities. Empirically, this entrance into new communities brought with it not only a perceived potential for interaction with political figures and access to the political process, but also a qualitative shift in the mood and interests of those living in the host cities that local and regional organizations, in particular, sought to capitalize upon. Haley, a core member of *MassCares*, a statewide campus-based environmental and consumer watchdog group, described the impact she

believes that the debate had on the mood in Boston and the opportunity presented by that excitement.

“I don’t know the last time that a presidential debate was in our state and I definitely think that that galvanized the activist community, not just *MassCares*, and I think that it had a huge effect...My god, we actually had the candidates in our state. And this is a state where Gore is just going to win, so there’s not really any campaigning going on here to begin with and suddenly we had two presidential candidates coming and there were huge protests planned – what a tremendous opportunity...it’s a huge event already, it was already there and we knew we could just piggyback off that...there’s nothing quite like having the presidential candidates in your state. I think that was wicked empowering.”

Similarly, representatives from *School Choice*, *Family Choice*, a regional organization supporting the passage of a proposition for school vouchers, explained that they had been attempting to get people in the community involved throughout the campaign season, but that they chose to organize a major demonstration during the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, because they knew people who otherwise might not have participated would do so because they would be excited to come out and be a part of the scene. Overall, local and regional organizations approached these campaign events as opportunities to reach out, in part, because of the great attention and dialogue surrounding them for area residents.

National organizations also approached these events as opportunities, not because they would help them motivate community residents, but because some of those organized around social and economic issues discussed in the campaign found that their concerns were rendered particularly timely and relevant. One of the ongoing concerns of the *American Adult Network* is health care for older Americans. The organization chose to be active during this campaign season because some related issues were being discussed in the election. Sid, a volunteer, explained,

“...these two key parties [Democrats and Republicans] have not been in harmony with social security, Medicare, long term care, and the patient’s bill of rights in managed care for several years and since they brought these up during the campaign as items that need attention, then I think it was timely for the association to jump in...”

The discussion of health care in the election coupled with the disagreement between the major party candidates over these issues, created an opportunity for the *American Adult Network* to enter the dialogue. Similarly, for *Citizen’s Campaign Watch*, the best possible moment to critique the role of wealth in politics was during a presidential campaign when major donations and sponsorships could be publicized. Millie explained, “...there was an unprecedented amount of money that was just going into these conventions. So, you bring that to light. It was just a very auspicious time to do it...” Timeliness, then, motivated many organizations to become active around the nominating conventions and the televised debates.

Some associations chose demonstrative actions because they saw this context as an opportunity to reach people who are predisposed to political activity or to prompt people into future political activity. The *Freedom and Equality League*, a national, multi-issue progressive organization, held a major panel on the impact that the new president would have on the future of the Supreme Court. The association decided to organize a major event during the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles based on the knowledge that the convention draws left-leaning delegates and donors from across the nation and the belief that this setting would be an efficient means to reach politically involved members of their target audience. Their goal was to motivate panel attendees (who they understood to have high degrees of political involvement already), to return to their communities and coordinate similar sessions. To further this goal, the league

distributed kits to all who attended (approximately 1,000 people) with information about how to organize forums of their own. In other words, the league sought not to reach the general public, but to reach people who are potential leaders, to take the association's message beyond the borders of the host city. *North Carolina Citizens for Smaller Government*, set up an information booth at a free concert held to encourage youth voter registration and education that had been organized by *GenNext* (a national group seeking to increase voter turnout among young voters). They participated in this event, because they hoped to draw members from the crowd. Art, a member who staffed the table that night, explained that the scene around the debate drew the type of people that his organization wants to reach. He explained,

“...these people were hopefully wanting to find out more about the candidates and get more active or aware of what's going on. It'd be more prime time, I guess, or prime type of people who want to get active in politics versus say in going to a sporting event, because you know, you'll have people there who are just apolitical or in the crowd, sure you might have a few of them there who just want to listen to the concert, because it's free, but you also have some people who will come by and ask questions about what the group does, what we stand for, what are the activities, you know, that we are doing across the state and all.”

As with the *Freedom and Equality League*, *North Carolina Citizens for Smaller Government* saw the campaign events as drawing out people likely to be receptive to their political messages.

The media was deeply enmeshed in the consciousness of many associations who chose to organize or participate in events that coincided with these major campaign stops. In other words, the moment that many sought to capture was the limelight created by the massive concentration of journalists. Mark, founder and leader of *United for Change*, perhaps said it most succinctly.

“We wanted to utilize the fact that there were going to be, what we found out later was going to be 15,000 accredited media in town, and they’re all going to be looking for stories. Not all of them are going to have face time with whoever the presidential nominee was going to be. So, they were all going to be looking for stories. Well, let’s create some stories for them.”

The sentiment that organizations wanting to raise political issues “ought to be where the action is” was common, and as I gradually came to understand, “action” referred more to the presence of the media drawn by the candidates, than to the presence of the candidates themselves.

Some organizations sought to capture a very different moment, not the moment created by the presidential debates or nominating conventions, but rather the moment created by the anti-globalization protests in Seattle, Washington during November 1999 and in Washington, DC in April 2000. Rich, from *Inequality Forever*, an organization focused on economic inequality and the role of the wealthy in politics, described the conventions as “the next gigs on the concert tour.” In other words, he understood the conventions as presenting the next apparent opportunity for a mass mobilization as well as an opportunity to keep the momentum of the anti-globalization protests alive. He explained,

“...it was Seattle, this new sort of global justice oriented movement around Seattle and sweatshops and this kind of stuff...what was sort of a white movement, a white student movement, linking up with more established, less white people and with a bigger chunk of the movement focused on bread and butter economics and political issues at home. It seemed like a very powerful, movement building moment”

Rich explained that the potential to take the power present in the crowds of Seattle and Washington, DC and bring it to electoral politics was a major pull factor for his organization. He believed that the conventions and debates provided a chance to use that

momentum. The Seattle protests, in particular, loomed large in the minds of many respondents; unsurprisingly, it was an especially common reference for those organizing civil disobedience. Perhaps more unexpected was the fact that the perception of a building movement also figured prominently in the minds of leaders of some liberal citizen groups engaging in more traditional, legal activities. Charles, from *Network for Peace*, explained,

“There were already going to be protests organized around the conventions because they were seen as kind of a follow up to the protests that had taken place in Seattle and Washington around the WTO and IMF, the World Bank and IMF, and that it was seen as kind of a momentum being grown by progressive groups to protest a lot of policies that were mainstream for this presidency and we felt like we had part of the message to lend to that...”

So, in summary, a few organizations understood the 2000 campaign events as an opportunity to contribute to growth of the anti-globalization movement first felt nationally in November 1999, rather than because an election was at stake or candidates were available in new locales.

Although the associations chose to mobilize for diverse reasons, their intended audience varied less. Representatives from *MassCares*, *NC Parents Against Gun Violence*, and the *Young Adult Voter's Association* expressed an interest in communicating with the candidates directly, and a few organizations, (*Christians for Families*, *School Choice*, *Family Choice*, the *Freedom and Equality League*, and the *National Union of Creative Artists*) mentioned an interest in having the ears of delegates and other political players on the scene, but the majority of organizations sought to wield political influence by reaching what was often referred to as “the general public.” Some wanted simply to communicate with the general public, because they believed a subset

would likely share their concerns, their views on particular issues, or their anger if they were better informed. This was understood as valuable for future organizing and/or instigating change outside of the campaign context. Others understood the general public as a tool by which they could reach candidates. Roy, from the *Federation for the Freedom From Religion* explained,

“Personally I am hoping that they [the general public] will tell the candidates to cool it. I mean you know these people they talk about how the Clinton administration uses focus groups and polling and all this stuff and basically it formulates the policy based on which direction the wind is blowing, well I'd like to see some more pressure put on politicians to stop pandering the way they are and to respect the laws. And maybe a few more people will call them on this and demand that they respect the constitution and maybe they will.”

Many organizations doubted that they could provoke response from the major candidates, but shared an implicit belief that politicians would respond (perhaps be forced to respond) to an outcry on the part of the citizenry. While incentives varied, most organizations shared an interest in reaching the same abstract population.

Overall, the perception of the nominating conventions and televised debates as a unique and temporary opportunity was a recurring theme in the interviews; however, the opportunities that different organizations saw embedded in these settings varied. Local and regional organizations often sought to tap into the enthusiasm and energy infused into their communities. National organizations were often drawn by political discourse that invited their input. And a variety of organizations were attracted by the increased access to the news media and politically minded members of the public. Finally, some organizations interpreted the campaign events as a chance to build or enter the growing anti-globalization movement.

## **Conclusions**

In all this, two themes emerge as particularly intriguing. First, in light of the fact that voluntary associations regularly engage in a broad array of action alternatives, it is puzzling that nearly every association I encountered approached the presidential campaign events as moments to adopt an external orientation: to design events specifically with nonmembers in mind. While demonstrative activity in a politically turbulent environment is certainly not an illogical choice, it would have been equally plausible for associations to respond to the campaign events by seeking to strengthen communication about, and understanding of, key political issues within their group, or to gather members to promote dialogue about candidates, political parties, or the electoral process. What is unexpected is the lack of variation and the disinterest in such internally-oriented forms of engagement. In virtually every instance the associations prioritized communication with outsiders: exhibiting a nearly universal desire to shape public opinion (whether they hoped to raise issues, provide contrast, critique the electoral process, or weigh in on issues already up for discussion) or to gain support for their respective agendas (either by furthering the burgeoning anti-globalization movement or by harnessing the interest of those politically active individuals already tuned in to the election).

In exploring the choices of voluntary associations in this context, the other unanticipated discovery is that this desire to communicate with others during the presidential campaign was not motivated by an interest in attempting to influence the outcome of the election. The pervasive external orientation that I encountered would be logical, completely unsurprising in fact, if the associations understood their efforts as



attempts to influence voter behavior. After all, it would be quite difficult to do so without communicating with voters. However, in actuality these politically oriented groups interpreted the conventions and debates as broad communicative opportunities, rather than as moments of electoral influence. The associational approaches to this external communication exhibited colorful variation, the topic to which I now turn.

### **The Many Faces of Publicity**

Regardless of motive, associations choosing to act in response to the major campaign events overwhelmingly shifted into a demonstrative mode of action – turning their attention toward nonmembers. The type of demonstrative action, however, was diverse. The wide variety of approaches to publicity produced a rich visual, auditory, and tactile terrain in the host cities for the major campaign events. This is the terrain in which I was submerged throughout the fieldwork portion of my data collection. I draw upon these field notes in an effort to describe the varied faces of publicity.

Publicity took many forms - from a national pro-life organization's<sup>40</sup> small clusters of anti-abortion protesters that lined the street heckling Democratic National Convention delegates with bullhorns and graphic images of aborted fetuses, to a street march made up of several thousand trade union personnel<sup>41</sup> supporting Al Gore outside of a debate site, to a large debate watch party held in a movie theater with free popcorn and soda organized by a national organization promoting voter turn out among young

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<sup>40</sup> While the activities of this organization were observed during my fieldwork and I received literature from them during my research, the organization is not in my sample because I was unable to conduct interviews with members as they failed to respond to any of my solicitations.

<sup>41</sup> The unions that coordinated this march are also not in my sample, as I had three unions represented by the time I came across this particular event and was in search of a diverse pool of organizations.

adults and a statewide campus-based organization (the *Young Adult Voters' Association* and *MassCares*). I have selected four externally focused events that help to illustrate the diverse ways in which the associations I encountered attempted to engage new audiences. While the size, location, scope, mood, and intent of the four events vary, they share a common interest in reaching an audience beyond existing group loyalists. In addition, I will describe a contrasting event held by one of only two groups in my sample that utilized member-focused (communal) action exclusively. While some other organizations in the sample held events intended expressly for their members, these groups also engaged in a demonstrative act of some sort in response to the campaign events.

### **Massive Civil Disobedience**

In Philadelphia, *DISRUPT*, a direct-action group focused on calling attention to the interconnection of a variety of social issues,<sup>42</sup> coordinated a massive civil disobedience effort. The group hoped to disrupt the Republican National Convention, which they felt was 1) tainted by the influence of wealthy individuals and corporate sponsors, and 2) uninterested in addressing what they felt were the most pressing domestic and foreign issues. In addition, *DISRUPT* hoped to communicate a growing resistance to existing political and economic arrangements in the country to those in power and potential sympathizers, who may not have made these connections or perhaps share similar views but are unaware that others are active around these issues.

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<sup>42</sup> Including dramatic economic inequality, racism, the criminal justice system, homelessness, campaign finance issues, and globalization.

*DISRUPT* organized their effort by serving as the coordinator of activists from all over Pennsylvania, as well as those who traveled from out of state. The organization coordinated outreach, registration of participants (pre-registration and onsite), and fundraising, handled various training workshops (direct-action, medical, legal, and media), maintained a website, arranged for local space for meetings, created a legal team and system for keeping track of participants, and managed countless logistical details including housing, communication, transportation, food, and volunteer coordination. Ultimately, *DISRUPT* gathered several thousand activists to coordinate a civil disobedience effort on the second day of the convention that blocked rush hour traffic at six points in and out of downtown Philadelphia for up to two hours at some locations and resulted in the arrest of over 400 people.

I interviewed Rochelle, a core member of the group a few hours prior to the traffic blockades. When I asked her about attending an event planned by *DISRUPT*, she was unable to reveal anything about what was planned (other than “disruption”) or about when or where the actions might occur because she was fearful of police intervention. Nonetheless, I stumbled upon the events. I was on my way to a rally for Mumia Abu-Jamal, which I had planned to attend in downtown Philadelphia, when I noticed police officers taking posts in front of retail establishments, many of which had lowered their metal security gates even though it was midafternoon. I watched as a couple additional shop keepers began to lock up and asked a police officer what was going on. “Just precautionary measures ma’am.” Not believing him – I headed quickly toward the direction of a siren and as I did so, several police vehicles raced past me, sirens on. As I walked toward the sirens the level of commotion increased: I was walking upstream as

pedestrians left the area toward which the police had headed. Police blockaded traffic and closed sidewalks, forcing me to take a detour to get to the scene of the protest.

When I reached the crux of the commotion, I saw a major intersection blocked by two lines of protesters seated back to back in the road. Most of the protesters had their arms linked with neighboring protesters and tied with bandanas (creating what is called a "soft blockade"), but some were connected to the people on either side of them by "sleeping dragons," large tubes made of PVC piping inside of which protesters' wrists were chained together to a metal pole (creating a "hard blockade"). In addition to the two lines of people physically blocking the road, the intersection was filled with three times as many supporters from *DISRUPT*, who milled freely in the street. Some of these folks wore red sashes and t-shirts with the word "medic" etched on them and carried mineral oil and rubbing alcohol (to remove pepper spray from the skin). Some wore yellow "legal observer" baseball hats. Many ran video cameras and snapped photos to document the event and to preserve evidence of any wrongdoing by the police. Other people played makeshift musical instruments, such as bottles filled with coins or pebbles. Some threw confetti. Several carried water bottles and candy, which they gave to those who were locked down in the street. Many carried handmade signs and banners. One read, "No More Lynching." Others said, "Abolish the Death Penalty," "Stop the War on Drugs," and "Human Need Not Corporate Greed."

The mood was light and spirited even as the police arrived. Those in the spectator part of the intersection led those in the blockade in many chants including: "Bush and Cheney, you can't hide, your policies are genocide," "No justice, No peace," and "Whose streets? Our streets!" Police emerged - some on foot, some on bicycles, then came a

school bus full of particularly stoic police officers in riot gear who contained the rambunctious crowd and closed off the intersection by creating a human boundary around both the seated protesters and the supporters in the road. Finally, the civil disobedience police officers arrived in a sport utility vehicle. They were tall, bulky men, wearing street clothes, with police armbands. The audio context was multi-textured. While the police remained quiet and most sirens were turned off, the block was filled with the sound of the helicopters that hovered above, the chanting and uneven percussion of the protesters, and later, with the sound of dancing goats. Amidst the rising tensions, a group of seven people wearing large cardboard animal heads, intended to be goats, entered the center of the surrounded intersection and began to dance and sing, to perform for those in the blockade, those present to support the blockade, and the large gathering of bystanders that had massed at the perimeter of the closed intersection. They performed an original song about economic inequality, with lyrics such as: "Who likes the boom, the economic boom? When you can't afford food there is no economic boom. Who likes the boom, the economic boom? For the majority of people there is no economic boom." They smiled and turned red as they sang, danced, walked on their hands, and accompanied themselves on kazoos and drums. The crowd responded with wild applause, percussion back up, cheers, and smiles. Even the press and some of the bystanders clapped and/or smiled as the goats lightened the atmosphere.

Mixed in with the police (at the perimeter) and the protesters (in the center), were members of the news media. In fact at the blockade line, a near perfect human terrine formed: a layer of police officers, a layer of protesters, and a layer of journalists questioning the protesters. The police admitted members of the press wearing red city

credentials when they arrived on the scene. I counted 48 members of the press, not including the freelancers struggling from the margins to retrieve marketable footage and the independent media center staff who were present in droves.

After close to an hour, the police began to separate the protesters, during which tension mounted and then eventually waned. It took about 45 minutes from start to finish for the officers to detach each protester from the line, attach plastic handcuffs to their wrists, and drag them (literally, as the protesters utilized passive resistance and refused to walk) one by one to the school bus. Throughout the process, the crowd of supporters watched vigilantly, periodically chanting, "We're nonviolent, how about you?" and "The whole world is watching" when a protester appeared to be in pain or handled too roughly.

When the last protester was carried away, I walked toward the location of the rally to which I had originally been en route. About six blocks from the intersection I left I found a similar scene, though with far more protesters more dispersed in a larger space with police on horses and tear gas trucks on standby. At this point I realized the blockade I had witnessed had been just one small part of a much larger civil disobedience effort.

Other groups utilized smaller illegal activities, integrating these tactics as tertiary efforts, placing greater emphasis and resources into legal endeavors. For example, a subset of activists from *Stand-Up St. Louis* engaged in some mild civil disobedience at the end of the debate when police tried to disburse the people on and around the Washington University-St. Louis campus. This action was part of the organization's master plan, but it was less rigorously planned than the scheduled issues forum, which they held during the day, and the rally featuring Ralph Nader, which they organized prior to the debate.

## **Theatrics and Comedy**

The *Land and Life Protection League* opted for a different approach from the massive civil disobedience of *DISRUPT*. I arrived uncertain of what that approach might be, having been told only that something was going on at 17<sup>th</sup> and Market at 10:00 a.m. When I arrived at 9:45 a.m., I was able to identify the precise location by the presence of the media. There were multiple camera crews and approximately 15 credentialed journalists visible outside of a downtown office building. The object of their gaze was a handful of people in their late 20s and early 30s who appeared to be setting up. There was one long folding table with a megaphone on it, a podium, and two people holding up a banner that read, "Citigroup – World's Most Destructive Bank."

A woman walked through the crowd distributing press releases to the journalists while a man wearing glasses made out of pipe cleaners and fake money offered pairs of these glasses to the bystanders that had begun to gather. He asked people if they wanted to see the world through the eyes of the rich and explained, "Everything they see is tainted by a desire for profit." The groups' members began to set up literature on the table as a supporter walked up with a large bouquet of multi-colored helium filled balloons. By 10:00 a.m., the number of media had grown so extensively that I estimated that six media professionals were present for every activist.

Throughout the set up, I noticed that something seemed "off." These folks were protesters of sort, but yet they were smiling, and appeared light-hearted, rather than antagonistic. As they began their event, I realized that they had decided to communicate their message in a unique way – through comedy. One of the participants approached the podium and microphone, pulled out a large trophy with fake money on it and announced

to the crowd that the *Land and Life Protection League* was there to present an award to Citigroup (whose offices were housed inside the office building) for being the world's most destructive bank. He listed Citigroup's "achievements" in predatory lending in third world countries, discrimination of African-Americans in the United States, and environmental damage. He congratulated private finance for operating with only profit in mind and not allowing values or conscience to intervene. The speaker also praised the business savvy of the corporation – for having had the forethought to buy both of the presidential candidates by giving over two million dollars to both the Democratic and Republican parties.

His speech was followed by representatives from other community organizations. One speaker argued that Citigroup had been denying African-Americans mortgages four times as often as they had denied mortgage applications by white people, even after controlling for income. He also provided information about Citigroup's role in detrimental structural adjustment programs in third world countries. This presentation was information-rich and compelling. The speaker included details, statistics, and supporting documentation. Two speakers followed, both of whom utilized a similar format. Each one raised a social issue, implicated Citigroup, and provided supporting evidence for their claims.

The last two speakers incorporated elements of art and interaction into their presentations. The first read a poem comprised of a series of statements, each beginning with, "In the name of greed, Citigroup has..." The participants from the various organizations called out the "In the name of greed..." portion, and the speaker responded to their call, finishing the statement with a different ending each time. The final speaker



lead a choir of activists in matching gay rights t-shirts as they sang two songs, one of which was entitled, "Shut down Citigroup." The lyrics were distributed to the crowd, who were asked to join in. As the last song ended, the original speaker approached the podium and said that these issues led the *Land and Life Protection League* and the activists of Philadelphia to present Citigroup with this award. At that point, representatives of the group tried to take the balloons and the trophy into the office building, as the audience chanted "Shame! Shame! Shame!" at the 44<sup>th</sup> floor where the Citigroup offices resided. They were stopped at the door by security guards and accepted the refusal without hassle. The event ended with an announcement that all speakers would be available for interviews.

The intent of the mock award ceremony had been to embarrass Citigroup by publicizing their activities and to present a sort of reverse advertising or negative branding of the corporate name. While the *Land and Life Protection League* had no interest in disrupting the operations of the bank, their intentions otherwise bore similarity to those of *DISRUPT*, in that both organizations hoped to reveal background stories about their targets (i.e., the conventions, Citigroup) to the general public and to prompt a response. What made the *Land and Life Protection League* stand out was their unique attempt to keep the media on message by creating clear slogans, photo opportunities, and by choosing not to create conflict with police or security that might get in the way of the message that they hoped to communicate.

The *Land and Life Protection League* was not the only organization that utilized irony in an effort to engage nonmembers during the campaign. *Rights Now*, an international human rights organization, held a "people's beach party" on a beach

adjacent to a party that was thrown for the conservative blue dog democrats. In addition to having a loud party with speakers and music, the group mimicked different politicians, used piggy banks covered with campaign finance reform slogans as noisemakers, had "For Sale" signs covered with pictures of different politicians, and listed human rights violations as "accomplishments" of corporations associated with them through campaign contributions. The group used a comedic approach to raise serious issues. In the words of Jake, a core member,

"It [the beach party] was really the mood of the prankster. Here we are throwing really what is an elaborate prank, with everything from weather balloons to a soundstage and so just as a prankster is very earnest in derobing her target, the people out there were very earnest about getting money out of politics."

*Inequality Forever* also used comedy as a primary strategy. For their various events, the members of the group dressed as caricatures of the excessively wealthy, with fake dollars falling out of their pockets, top hats, canes, pearls, spats, and fake furs and carried tongue in cheek signs with sayings such as, "Wealth Care Not Health Care" and "Save the Tax Loopholes."

Greg, from the *Land and Life Protection League* explained why they chose to use a comedic approach,

"It invites people in. You know, drama, humor...the action we did out here on October 17th for the international day of action was, we did a New Orleans funeral march through the city. And we had all these people dressed in black and we were carrying the coffin with a big globe in it, and the coffin said, "Murdered by Citibank." And we were all dressed in black, but we were walking with a loud sound system that was playing New Orleans funeral jazz music. You know, big brass band music. And it was so much fun, because, you know, it was a trip. The music was really good and it was like a spectacle and all these people were like, "what the hell is that." You know, and it was inviting. It wasn't like, "One, two, three, four, we don't need these fucking corporations anymore!" You know, it's like - you know, people are like, "oh my god, these people are

crazy". It was rather, "Well, that's pretty cool, that's pretty funny". And it just takes down that barrier, which is so often there for mainstream America and the people doing this work."

Greg sees the anger common in a lot of political activism as unpalatable for people on the streets, while understanding humor as welcoming. These remarks strike me as particularly insightful. During my fieldwork, I had a handful of experiences during which I watched bystanders pass activists and make a joke about them or roll their eyes. For example, the plaza surrounding the Philadelphia City Hall served as a meeting and demonstration space for several small protest groups. As I walked through the plaza I had one such experience:

"Two professionally dressed adults walk by [between a small group of activists silently protesting the criminal justice system and a man with signs indicating he is on a hunger strike]. One comments to the other about "so called federal conspiracies" and "government lies." The remarks are sarcastic. They are mocking the individuals with the protests signs set up."  
August 3, 2000

While not a huge affront, a collection of experiences like this left me with the sense that it wasn't so much that bystanders were frightened by traditional activist activities (though in the case of civil disobedience efforts involving large numbers of activists and police officers, fear would not be an unreasonable response), but rather that they were simply put off by them. Kara, a reporter with a secondary newspaper in a major metropolitan area was left with a similar impression.

"I think that, you know, the "Joe Schmo" public would agree that sometimes the cops are too brutal and overstep their bounds and stuff like that.... but when you have a bunch of protestors, you know, blocking your car from getting home to a 5 o'clock dinner and stuff. I don't think, you know, "Joe Schmo" public appreciates their message, you know, when they're personally inconvenienced or you know, their taxes are raised because of police overtime during the protest or whatever"

Not only does Kara point to the potential distaste that segments of the general public might have for more disruptive efforts, in reference to the antics of *Inequality Forever* she also described her own positive response to comedic approaches.

“I think that their message was the “rich are too rich and the poor just keep getting poorer, and we got to stop this and blah, blah, blah.” By pretending to be billionaires and having funny slogans and dressing in velvet and pearls and stuff, I think they, you know, it wasn't anything.... it wasn't what people were expecting to see at a protest march. So they got a lot of attention like that. Then, there were some other effective things, like they had some funny...funny.... maybe that's the key – humor, because there was one group during the *United for Change* march who had a mud wrestling pit set up and had the fake Al Gore and George W. Bush candidates mud wrestling. I mean, that was hilarious. Maybe that was the point being made, dirty politics. So maybe humor is the key.”

In Chapter 5, I elaborate about the degree to which comedy worked with the press. For now, it suffices to say that comedic social commentary was a popular strategy that appeared to be relatively effective at drawing in people on the street in comparison to some more traditional forms of political action.

### **Grass Roots Teach-Ins**

*Students for Change*, a local student organization formed to pursue the interests of the student body at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, decided to reach beyond their membership for less instrumental reasons. While the members did share a general commitment to progressive politics in the broadest sense and they recognized that the debate presented an opportunity to raise the profile of their group on campus, their primary goal was to improve the quality and depth of political dialogue around the campaign. They were particularly concerned about the absence of discussion in the campaign around issues on which the candidates agreed. As explained on their website,

they sought to, "proactively contribute to a more inclusive, democratic public discourse." This desire shaped the form of publicity pursued by the organization.

*Students for Change* worked in conjunction with a broader coalition, which had formed around the debate in the Boston area, to run a teach-in series in the month preceding the televised presidential debate. The group selected seven issues<sup>43</sup> that they felt were either absent from the candidate dialogue and media coverage, or around which they felt there was insufficient dissent, and created workshops on each of these seven topics. The workshops consisted of panels containing a wide array of people from the religious, labor, nonprofit, academic, and activist communities. Each teach-in lasted between two and a half and three hours each, depending upon the number of speakers.

These workshops, however, were not just opportunities for students on campus to hear lectures. They deviated from a lecture series in two ways. First, the series was open to the community; each session was widely advertised on other Boston area campuses, through activist networks, and in community centers and public spaces in the city. Attendance ultimately fluctuated from 25 (a great disappointment to the organizers) to 200 people. Further, in an effort to reach those who were unable to attend, each session was videotaped and posted on the Internet. The second difference between these sessions and a traditional lecture series was the highly interactive format of the panels. Ajay, a member of the group, elaborates,

"The idea was to get the audience involved in the discussion and the teach-in rather than just a few people giving a lecture...if it's just one or two people saying something and no one else gets a chance to talk, that's not really a democratic way of going about a debate and so with our teach-

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<sup>43</sup> The topics covered in the teach-ins were the structure of presidential debates in the United States, military spending and foreign intervention, contingent labor and a living wage, public education, health care and social security, the United States role in globalization, and the death penalty.

ins the point was to give the audience a chance to give their point of view and their perspective.”

Time was divided such that after each panelist gave a presentation, discussion occurred. In fact, the participatory discussion time outweighed the presentation time. Then, after the last speaker finished, a large group discussion ensued. Ian, a core member, told me that the ideal behind the session was realized, because virtually every member of the audience had raised a point or asked a question. He felt that a meaningful dialogue had been opened.

The tone of these sessions was far different from the rebellious nature of the civil disobedience or the tongue-in-cheek style of the mock award ceremony. *Students for Change* worked to create an instructive teaching environment where questions were welcome and dialogue encouraged. They strove for “meaningful debate over dogma.” Most panels deliberately provided multiple perspectives on the issue, though some involved a more consistent message as a voice of dissent in response to arguments and slogans of the mainstream dialogue. Further, these workshops were created with the needs of the attendees in mind, rather than strategies for media management, for soliciting donations, or for pushing the boundaries of legal limitations.

Two other organizations created similar environments for political dialogue. One of these was an “ethics hour” facilitated by *Bootstraps*, a small group focused on civic responsibility. The ethics hour took place before a debate watch party coordinated by the *Young Adult Voters Association* and *MassCares*, and involved groups of six to eight individuals clustering to discuss a particular issue that figured prominently in the campaign discourse. The small groups were provided with information packets and a facilitator. Each group read background information on their particular issue (e.g., social

security) and the stance of both presidential candidates on the issue (presented in narrative form and accompanied by quotes from the candidates) and then proceeded to have an open discussion on the topic. The goal was to help the participants gather adequate information to guide their political choices, rather than to sell the participants on a particular view. *Stand-Up St. Louis* also organized a learning and discussion session around the convention activities. They held an “issues forum,” which was similar in format to the one set up by *Students for Change*, except that the sessions on different topics were held consecutively for several hours on one day.

### **Motivating Leaders**

*The Freedom and Equality League*, a national, multi-issue, progressive advocacy group, also had a panel of speakers on an issue of concern, though with different objectives. The league organized a panel of high profile speakers for a session on the impact that the future president could have on the Supreme Court and the potential implications of these appointments for existing laws. In other words the issue at hand was the election and the potential repercussions of its various outcomes. This panel was free, open to the public (though geared toward delegates at the Democratic National Convention), and attracted approximately 1,000 people. The event was designed with two objectives in mind. First, the organization hoped to educate attendees about the various changes that could result if a sea change occurred in the Supreme Court as a result of the appointments likely to be made by the incoming president. Second, and perhaps more substantially, *The Freedom and Equality League* hoped to motivate these politically minded individuals to go and organize sessions in their own communities to

educate others about the impact that this election could have on the Supreme Court and ultimately on the legal landscape.

The organization utilized a few different strategies to accomplish their goals. In order to encourage attendance from their target audience, the event was held in the ballroom of one of the hotels housing convention delegates. As another pull factor, the league recruited several well-known political figures to deliver speeches including: James Carville, Senator Barney Frank, and Kweisi Mfume. These figures generated excitement from the audience. As people filed into the ballroom and began selecting seats from among those lined up in auditorium style rows facing a long fabric draped dais, people whispered and pointed as they recognized the political celebrities amongst the crowd. Two women wearing a multitude of political buttons on long vests approached James Carville and asked him to pose with them in a photo. When I located Barney Frank, he was similarly engaged, posing with a couple while a third person took a snapshot on a disposable camera. As Frank and Carville walked toward the podium, they were each stopped by additional attendees and asked for photos.

The speeches delivered by the speakers were intended to educate the audience on the issues at stake in the 2000 election, but they were heavier on motivation, sounding more like locker room pep talks than classroom lectures. Carville, the day's first speaker introduced by the president of *The Freedom and Equality League*, approached the podium to a standing ovation and set the tone of the speeches, creating a rally type environment by injecting humor, passion, and fear into a fire and brimstone depiction of the future should the Court shift toward the right. His speech drew cheers and applause easily from the supportive crowd. He argued that, in terms of potential impact, the 2000



election represented the most important election since 1932 and stressed the need to debunk the myth that the two mainstream parties are the same. The audience cheered most raucously when Carville exclaimed, "Anyone who votes for Ralph Nader is voting for Scalia and Thomas!" The message he passionately reiterated was that progressive values and the hard earned achievements of the civil rights and women's movements were on the line in the 2000 election. The speakers that followed Carville echoed this line of reasoning, albeit with less stage presence and color.

Attendees were verbally encouraged to organize subsequent educational forums in their hometowns, and they were provided with the tools to do so. Folders containing organizing information were distributed to those in attendance. In addition to a great deal of literature on the topic, the folders contained pledge cards asking the attendees to pledge to hold a Supreme Court educational event at their religious organization, community group, or home, and to volunteer to speak at an event coordinated by someone else. In addition, the card provided space for the bearer to contribute financially to the outreach effort. The folders also contained a step-by-step instructional book on throwing such an event, including information on finding a location, creating invitation letters, planning for food and logistics, informing the media, and writing a newsletter article after the event.

This "educational" panel was drastically different from the teach-ins held by *Students for Change* in both intent and texture. While *Students for Change* sought to open dialogue and increase communication, the *Freedom and Equality League* sought to construct commitment, manufacture passion, increase interest, and build intensity in a campaign many felt was swathed by disinterest. These different objectives lent the

events two different flavors. For those at the teach-ins, the experience was like a question and answer town meeting, while those who attended the panel on the Supreme Court had the experience of a commanding talk by a motivational speaker.

*Citizens' Campaign Watch* and *Envirolink* also held events in which panels of high profile speakers addressed topics of concern to the organization. These traditional educational sessions were information rich, though less interactive than the discursive sessions designed by *Students for Change*, *Bootstraps*, and *Stand-Up St. Louis*.

### **Varied Approaches, Varied Outcomes**

The commonality among these four diverse cases is their common shift toward demonstrative action - a turn away from member-focused activities. How successful were the various manifestations of publicity? In light of their varied intentions, it is most meaningful to assess their achievements based on the goals that the organizations set for themselves. Those associations who hoped to utilize the press as a vehicle for broader communication were the least successful. Interestingly, though *DISRUPT's* civil disobedience and the mock award ceremony thrown by the *Land and Life Protection League* both attracted substantial press turn out, neither organization received the media coverage that they sought. The civil disobedience generated multiple newspaper stories and local television coverage, but the message that the participants hoped to communicate was unclear. Often form rather than substance dominated the coverage; reporters addressed how many protesters were in which locations, police tactics, and how delegates at the convention and Philadelphia residents interpreted the protests, but did not

address the issues that motivated the protests except in the most dismissive way.<sup>44</sup> And in spite of the high journalist-to-participant ratio at the mock award ceremony, I was unable to locate a single story or even partial story on the event in the domestic press, though group members believe that CNN Russia ran a television segment about the demonstration. As a result, issues of emphasis and omission intervened in the efforts of *DISRUPT* and the *Land and Life Protection League* to disseminate their messages to the general public.<sup>45</sup>

The teach-in series coordinated by *Students for Change* and the panel on the Supreme Court organized by the *Freedom and Equality League* each sought to reach out in a more concrete way, by drawing interested parties to their events and communicating directly with those present, without relying on the press as an intermediary. These associations faced a dual challenge – to attract adequate attendance and to connect with the attendees. Representatives from *Students for Change* indicated that participation increased as the teach-in series progressed, but that initially the numbers were not as high as they had hoped. One member also indicated that he felt some frustration in their inability to attract more people from outside the campus community. He attributed this to the location of the campus as well as its status as one of the lower profile schools in the Boston area. However, the association members I spoke with felt that *Students for Change* had successfully accomplished their goal of broadening the political dialogue by creating an open, nonhierarchical environment where issues that they understood as neglected were addressed in an educational and discursive manner. In other words, they

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<sup>44</sup> The content of these stories and the responses to them by protesters will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>45</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

created a space for political talk for a group made up largely of nonmembers. The creation of such spaces will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

The *Freedom and Equality League* drew an excellent turnout of participants, who were also largely nonmembers. In fact, the seating in the ballroom was filled beyond capacity and several interested parties unable to find seats lingered at the doorway and stood along the back of the room. From an outsider's perspective, the organization put on a compelling event that seemed to lift the energy level of the room. Whether the session motivated those nonmembers in attendance to act in their own communities is difficult to assess, though the typical member I interviewed indicated that she looked forward to taking the literature back to her community where activists sharing her views are few and far between and easily become discouraged.

In summary, it appeared as though those organizations that reached out more personally to people outside of their association attained better results than those organizations that relied on the news media to transmit their message. Oliver and Myers (1999) further suggest that because the spaces in which people tend to congregate (e.g. malls, sports complexes) do not coincide with spaces that tend to be covered by journalists (e.g., downtown areas, government buildings), organizations are effectively forced to choose one target or the other. Organizations held five events that involved mobilizing in a communal, rather than a demonstrative manner. One of these events is discussed below to provide contrast to the four publicity-driven events, demonstrative events described above.

## **The Nondemonstrative Option – Fundraising as a Communal Activity**

Not all citizen groups selected a demonstrative mode of action. *Pro-Choice and Paying Attention (PCPA)*, a national organization that raises money to support pro-choice political candidates, took the presence of the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles as an opportunity to draw on star power to motivate existing members to make donations. They did so by holding a \$250 a plate fundraising luncheon in a lush Beverly Hills hotel at which several politicians, including Governor Gray Davis, Senator Barbara Boxer, and Senator Diane Feinstein mingled with the crowd. While the event was not restricted to members, it was directed toward them – intended to build social cohesion and attachment to the group in addition to the more instrumental goal of increasing funds available for the candidates supported by *PCPA*. As Daniel, a key organizer of the luncheon explained,

“We do our best to provide an ample amount of business combined with an ample amount of social time for people to – I don’t want to say network, but an opportunity to exchange information about what’s up in their communities and their states. We want people to have a sense of place, a sense of the challenges that each other faces... when they get together they have a lot to talk about because we [feminist political activists] are always going to be the underdogs.”

In deliberately attempting to create a “sense of place,” *PCPA* approaches this gathering as an opportunity to build community among their members. Unlike the four cases I have just described, *PCPA* is not, in this context, concerned with sharing their message with new people or with recruiting. This event is about giving members an opportunity to spend time together (and consequently foster their attachment to the association) and act collectively (through donations).

The luncheon drew approximately 1,000 attendees, who sat in a two-tiered gilded ballroom underneath elaborate chandeliers. The guests were seated (by assignment) at elaborately decorated round tables arranged to face a large stage. Gazpacho and crème brulee with fresh berries awaited guests at beautiful gold and beige colored place settings as they arrived at their tables. The overwhelming majority of the guests were women in their 40s and 50s dressed in business and cocktail suits. Most were white. Before lunch began, a great deal of socializing transpired and it became apparent that many of the attendees knew one another. Even as lunch was being served, women walking by still stopped to say, "nice to see you" and "how are you" to the women with whom I was seated.

It was impossible not to recognize this luncheon as an insider event. I was asked upon my arrival about my connection to the woman who sponsored the table. When I vaguely explained the circumstances of my attendance, the woman who inquired physically turned her back to me and ended our discussion without additional remark. Later, the same woman explained to a new arrival, "she is just a graduate student. I have no idea what she is doing here." I found this surprising as I believed my race, gender, dress, and presentation of self sufficiently approximated those around me that I would be welcomed, and if not welcomed, certainly not outcast. However, the only person at the table who spoke with me after the formal introductions was the woman to my left, the wife of a Governor. The rest of the women at the table avoided eye contact.

As the multi-course lunch served by tuxedoed waiters drew to a close, a video began on two large screens at each side of a podium on stage. Celebratory music played as images of people elected to office with the help of *PCPA* flashed across the screens.

The video was about three minutes long, had excellent production values, and elicited a very good audience response; people clapped and cheered at key points throughout the video. The on screen text highlighted *PCPA* as an important and effective political force. As the video wrapped up, the president and founder of the organization took the microphone and received a standing ovation from the attendees. She delivered a compelling introduction that highlighted the power that women have at the voting booth and stressed the crucial importance of taking back seats in the House and Senate from social conservatives and filling them with strong pro-choice candidates. The president received enthusiastic applause and was cheered from the audience at the conclusion of her talk. She then turned the microphone over to California Governor Gray Davis who was followed by Senator Barbara Boxer, Senator Diane Feinstein, and Representative Nancy Pelosi. The speakers emphasized the 2000 race as a "watershed election" and urged the audience to continue to "use their power" to support candidates willing to challenge the "right-wing agenda." The energy level remained high, creating a boisterous, supportive, rally-like atmosphere throughout the speeches.

When the event drew to a close, guests lingered in the ballroom. Some women exchanged embraces, others stood talking, and small clusters gathered around the politicians that remained. As the crowd spilled onto the sidewalk, groups of men and women in union t-shirts handed them flyers and asked them to wear yellow ribbons in support of their strike. Most of the fundraiser attendees walked by without eye contact, but I watched Ann Richards, former governor of Texas, accept a ribbon and pin it to her lapel.

Of the demonstrative activities described above, this fundraiser bore closest resemblance to the forum on the Supreme Court. Both were held in plush hotels, attracted similar numbers of attendees, and featured prominent public figures giving speeches. However, the luncheon's communal texture was punctuated with important differences that indicated an interest in intra-group concern including a more prominent focus on the accomplishments of the sponsoring organization, spatial arrangements that promoted participant interaction, and a distinction between members and guests. The other four mobilized communal events organized by groups in my sample<sup>46</sup> had characteristics similar to the *PCPA* luncheon, particularly the dance party held by *United for Change*. Though the latter party was far less plush, it was similar in that the accomplishments of the group and socialization among participants played an important role.

## **Conclusions**

The associations defined publicity in a multitude of ways that reflected the objectives of their group and contrasted in subtle, yet significant ways from organizations that held internally focused events. Overall, demonstrative actions took an array of shapes and tones. The size of the events ranged from a massive march (against sweatshop labor and U.S. immigration policy) that led several thousand participants through the garment district of Los Angeles where an equal number of pedestrians looked on, to the assembly of small informational tables in the proximity of larger events that attracted stray passersby, many of whom displayed little or no interest in the organization or their

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<sup>46</sup> *DISRUPT*'s extensive participant trainings, the educational forum held by *Feminists for a Socialist Future*, the educational trainings on economic inequality at *Income Gap Attack*, and the dance party thrown



materials. The mood of events also varied tremendously. Some events were vehement and aggressive, some were reflexive and discursive, others were energizing and robust, and still others were lighthearted and playful. The overall scene, particularly at the conventions and the first debate in Boston,<sup>47</sup> was nearly carnivalesque in many respects. Activities, many of which were colorful and visually compelling because they incorporated elaborate banners, costumes, and puppets, could literally be found around any corner. Chants and echoes of public soap box speeches could often be heard, even when the event was out of view. Indeed, for two-thirds of the associations, demonstrative acts were public in the purest sense, involving an entrance into public spaces including streets and street corners, parks, plazas, and public transportation junctures.

### **Chapter Conclusions**

The vast majority of associations held events during the campaign stops that involved heightened activity for the group. Even with a broad array of engagement options, these mobilizations which overwhelmingly took the form of demonstrative actions in which the organizations sought to engage a broader public. Their reasons for selecting a demonstrative mode of engagement centered around two key issues: a desire to provide an alternative voice and an interest in capturing the unique moment presented by the campaign. These demonstrative activities ultimately took many different shapes - varying in size, scope, and location, but also in their degree of formality, mood, and

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by *United for Change*.

<sup>47</sup> I believe the less pervasive visual presence in Winston-Salem can be explained by the city's dispersion and that the restraint in St. Louis was related to the tragic death of Governor Mel Carnahan the night before the debate.

openness. Regardless of the varying contours of these events, those engaged hoped to communicate with people outside of the auspices of their association.

If we understand these multiple formal and informal associations as partial public spheres – as spaces in which issues of common concern are addressed – that may or may not be involved with other similarly focused organizations, newspapers, bookstores, and spaces of dialogue, then because these efforts were *not* intended to influence the decisions made by the general public as they entered the voting booth, we see that the presidential campaign was interpreted as an opportunity to broaden discursive space, to expand the discussions circulating in these fragmented clusters. Abstractly speaking, the goal shared by these diverse organizations was to have voice, to influence public opinion, rather than to install a particular leader. This was an effort to influence politics by impacting the public, not by influencing who fills key leadership positions.

Perceived communicative opportunities, however, require an audience. Because media coverage failed to materialize for the *Land and Life Protection League*, *Students for Change*, and the *Freedom and Equality League*, and the coverage of the *DISRUPT* civil disobedience efforts excluded the central issues that the group had hoped to publicize, it appears as though the organizational events that proved most successful at reaching people outside of their already loyal participant base were those that transmitted their message directly to the intended recipients, rather than relying on the news media to transmit their message to a more remote audience. The next two chapters explore the positive and negative consequences of these forms of mobilization for civil society and, in turn, the degree to which the hyper activity of civil society had an impact in the mainstream public sphere.

## **CHAPTER 4 MOBILIZATION AND ITS LIMITS: WHAT THE CAMPAIGN REVEALS ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY**

This chapter explores the impact of heightened activity on the groups in my sample in order to develop an understanding of civil society that is more grounded than normative. Specifically, this chapter addresses: the ways that contemporary forms of civic engagement (as discussed in Chapter 1) manifest themselves in the mobilization process, the consequences of mobilization for the associations, and subsequently, an assessment of the ways in which these findings affirm and complicate existing visions of civil society.

Although politicians have latched onto Putnam's (1995; 2000) disheartening evaluations of civic engagement as an explanation for a variety of deeply entrenched social problems that plague the contemporary United States, the boisterous streets, campuses, community centers, and parks of Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Boston, Winston-Salem, and St. Louis during the presidential campaign ask us to reconsider. The intensive activity I find hardly disproves Putnam – this context is, after all, undeniably one in which political fervor is piqued, and (by virtue of my selection strategy) the organizations I studied are not necessarily representative of voluntary associations overall, even within this fiery moment; however, the behavior of these associations and the experiences of those working with and within them complicate Putnam's conclusions by revealing that new forms of civic engagement take different shapes, which while harder to locate and quantify, still provide for the development of social capital. Indeed, the social ties that Putnam holds dear appear to be the shining accomplishment of organizations active during the major campaign events. The atypical interactive

environment and the emotional energy that was often present in the implementation of these actions combined to give members unique shared experiences and a sense of accomplishment.

This point is both large and small. In a sense it is an important one to make: to highlight these pools of community that have perhaps in the past been invisible in research on civic engagement. At the same time, my primary interest is not debating whether American civic life is in decline, but rather to draw out the consequences of mobilization at the level of civil society by addressing the impact of heightened activity on voluntary associations and those involved with them. This chapter will further show that the campaign context troubles our understanding of why associations form, revealing that coalitions, which can be understood as *supra*-voluntary associations, form between groups with differing interests as well as between those with a shared commitment to a particular issue or ideal.

This chapter does not probe closely related questions regarding the impact of heightened activity on public discourse, as Chapter 5 is devoted completely to assessing the influence of mobilized associations on the public sphere.

### **New Modal Forms of Civic Engagement in Action**

While evidence of a decline in American civic life lies in dispute (Galston 1996; Lemann 1996; Portes and Landolt 1996; Putnam 1995a, 1995b, 2000; Schudson 1996; Skocpol 1996; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999b; Wuthnow 1998), it has become evident that substantial qualitative changes have transpired. As discussed in Chapter 1, three significant transitions have transpired in the modal forms of American civic engagement:

1) the decline of classical American voluntary associations and the increase of participation in geographically dispersed citizen groups (Berry 1997, 1999; Hall 1999; Skocpol 1999b), 2) the professionalization of civic engagement (Schudson 1998, Wuthnow 1998), and 3) the upsurge in fleeting involvements and decrease in the lifelong memberships that were popular in the civic groups of the 1950s (Skocpol 1996b; Wilson and Musick 1999; Wuthnow 1998). This chapter illustrates the complex ways in which national citizen groups, professionalized voluntarism, and short-term, fluid commitments manifested themselves in the campaign context in an effort to illuminate the concrete opportunities and limitations presented by contemporary civic life.

### **National Citizen Group Mobilization**

As suggested by critics of national citizen groups (e.g., Skocpol 1999b), I find that a disjuncture does exist between armchair members and the citizen groups to which they belong. When national citizen groups organized events around the major campaign stops, they announced the events to their members via newsletter, mailing, or listserv, but they were otherwise unconcerned with promoting member attendance. In some cases, organizers were unsure if members attended at all. Jake, a core member of *Rights Now*, an international human rights group, was at a loss when asked if he could refer me to a member who attended one of their campaign-related events.

“Ummm...I’ll send out a staff email. I just have no idea if any of the people who were there [at the party or march] were members, but, I mean, we get the word out, so in all likelihood there were some members who came. Let me see where the email gets us. If you don’t hear back from me, that’s because I couldn’t find someone. Okay?”

Similarly, Karl, a core member of *EnviroLink*, a national environmental group, was unable to tell me if any members attended their panel of speakers. He explained that the event had been announced to the membership, and suggested that I place an ad in their national newsletter, because he felt confident that at least a couple members were probably in the audience. Erin, a core member of *Business Watch*, an organization promoting better corporate practices internationally, described accidental member participation during the *Business Watch* event in Los Angeles.

“Yeah, there were members [present during the event]. We [the staff] had our signs out. It was just at the one point we had our signs out, and this guy came up to us. “Oh, *Business Watch*, I’m a member.” He came and helped us out for awhile.”

The core members that coordinated these events were concerned with general turnout, certainly, but turnout of members was not in the forefront of their minds. In the case of *Business Watch*, the typical member and the core member (in this case a staff person) were almost surprised to see one another, and in the other cases, the organizers seemed to think that members were likely among the attendees, almost by virtue of the size of each organization. By and large, professionals organized and implemented the events held by national citizen groups without concern for member attendance or involvement.

National citizen group activities coordinated with high-profile public events seem an opportune time to attempt to convene geographically dispersed members, to solidify member commitment by making these imagined communities more tangible, as well as a prudent time to call upon members to maximize their presence; however, national citizen groups did not utilize these moments to build ties between members or to draw upon their human resources. In spite of the fact that these organizations did not choose to hold mass meetings to bring their members in contact with one another, they facilitated face-to-face

interaction in two ways. First, national offices often called upon local chapters to provide assistance for these special events. In turn, the chapters often reached out to their active members for support. For example, the *American Adult Network*, which is based in Washington DC, relied heavily upon its volunteers in the Philadelphia area to help coordinate and staff their event during the week of the Republican National Convention. Similarly, *Network for Peace*, which is also based in Washington, turned to its staff and volunteers in the New England area to prepare and implement the organization's presence at the presidential debate in Boston. In other words, the national citizen groups did provide the face-to-face interaction that Habermas valued, if only for a small portion of their membership.

Rather than emphasizing member involvement, national citizen groups focused on generating public dialogue on issues of concern to their membership and facilitated face-to-face interaction among attendees through these efforts. Their events were open to the public, focused on voter education, and were designed to bring new people into a discussion about issues of concern to their membership. The aforementioned *American Adult Network* did a cross-country issue awareness tour, stopping in several key locations (including the convention sites, and the Boston debate) to hold public sessions addressing the four political issues that they felt were most important to their membership in the election. Chairs were set up in public places for passersby, speakers gave presentations, refreshments were provided, and staff and volunteers from the organization were present to answer questions. Similarly, *Citizens' Campaign Watch*, a well-known national campaign finance reform group, joined several other national organizations to sponsor large conferences that coincided with the national nominating conventions. These

conferences were designed to be inclusive and to allow all interested individuals to enter the discussion, in contrast to the nominating conventions, which did not allow public access. By creating these forums and opening their doors to outsiders, the national citizen groups created important interactive and discursive spaces around the major campaign events.

In most cases, these events were designed and implemented by staff and not directed at their membership. Rather, the events were directed at the general public or a subset of the general public who the organizers considered to be potential constituents. Critics, such as Skocpol (1999b), accurately point to the member-to-member connections that have withered with the onset of these groups, while proponents, such as Berry (1999), tend to tout their instrumental utility, but neither have highlighted what I see as perhaps their most vital contribution to the democratic process – their ability to create spaces for public political discussion. While membership itself may not involve face-to-face interaction, these organizations reveal that national citizen organizations should not be thought of as antithetical to meaningful civic engagement because they facilitated social interaction around community matters in multiple instances. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, which explores the role of associations in the public sphere.

### **An Array of Professionals**

Critics of the professionalization of the voluntary sector depict a world of top-down civic relationships (e.g., Skocpol 1999b), but the interaction between paid staff and members in this setting varied greatly. Certainly, for several organizations, paid staff set



the agenda and volunteers came forward to help. Millie, a member of *Citizens' Campaign Watch*, serves as an example,

"I've volunteered for other organizations and volunteers rarely – I don't know of any other organization where volunteers have the same status as they do in *Citizens' Campaign Watch*...It's very unique. You don't find that any place else. And as I say, it's largely due to the fact that most organizations don't know what to do with volunteers. They don't give them meaningful work and they don't value them really.

*But Citizens' Campaign Watch does provide meaningful work?*

Oh yeah. Very much so. And we have a briefing every Tuesday...our president is there and he conducts the briefing. And if not, lobbyists or the vice president will conduct the briefing. And it's for us, the volunteers. And they will let us know what's happening, legislatively, and within the organization.

*Who would you say sets the agenda for Citizens' Campaign Watch? The staff or the membership?*

Oh, the staff. And also they will consult with the governing board. And on certain kinds of things they have to make sure that the governing board is in agreement."

Millie participated in one of *Citizens' Campaign Watch's* conferences, but was not involved in the planning of the program. Though she fulfills the responsibilities assigned to her by professional volunteer coordinators, rather than serving in a leadership role herself, Millie feels that her work is meaningful and that she is a well-integrated part of the organization. Millie's experience illustrates the limited role that volunteers may serve in an era of nonprofit professionals (as highlighted by Wuthnow 1998), yet at the same time, demonstrates that this top-down structure is not necessarily alienating.

For some organizations, the difference between paid staff and members is much less well defined. *Inequality Forever*, a group organized around curbing the influence of wealth in politics, has a very small paid staff, and staff and members shared the substantive work that the organization performed during the campaign events. The paid

staff often served as leaders and facilitators, but the members were fully engaged in many of the choices and some took leadership roles. Brian, a member, explains his involvement with one event.

“I kind of basically stepped forward and said that I would plan that particular meeting. So I spoke to [a performer] —he has a following in New York. He was fairly recognizable...I wrote this speech about, it was a silly, it kind of took the tropes of how if you go to like an African-American Pentecostal Church, they have this very inspiring kind of community oriented type of thing, a lot of that kind of language, but basically making it about the very wealthy, which is kind of silly. That was the kind of turning it on its head. Then I wrote this speech and then I e-mailed it to [the performer] and he said he would meet us there that morning. Then I picked a spot. I did speak to police that were on the scene. I said, “Where can we set up? We’ve got about 40 people, including media. Where is a good spot?” They told us where they thought would be okay.”

Brian had a great degree of latitude and substantive involvement in the event that transpired, in spite of his nonprofessional status in the presence of paid staff.

A range of relationships exists between professional staff and organization members in this context. A third, less common model involved professionally run organizations treating members as clients, who have hired staff to act on priorities established at the grassroots level. This was true of *EnviroLink* whose activities and agenda are member driven. These diverse models indicate that professionalization and the related push for efficiency have not involved an across-the-board deskilling or disempowering of nonprofessionals involved with nonprofit organizations.

### **Fluidity I: Coalition Formation**

Wuthnow (1998) describes a world in which individuals commit to short-term endeavors, rather than forming tight, enduring, time-intensive relationships with a particular organization. These task-oriented relationships were paralleled at the

organizational level amidst the enthusiasm and urgency created by the campaign context. In many instances, existing organizations formed temporary coalitions as a response to the campaign events. For example, in Winston-Salem, a number of associations were involved with a rock concert and debate watch party that was held to encourage voter registration and turnout among young adults. A wide spectrum of civic organizations, including a national social group for young people, a national advocacy organization active in promoting smaller government, a well-known national charity for children, and collegiate Democratic and Republican clubs, set up tables in the arena where the concert was held. In Boston, existing groups interested in coordinating a response to the Presidential Debate also formed a coalition. Harry, a core member of a labor union for professionals explained,

“We [union representatives] began meeting regularly with *Students for Change* and we both jointly called a meeting of organizations interested in organizing around the debate...that brought in about 16 groups...The [new] larger umbrella organization was the *Democratic Debate Alliance*”

Temporary coalitions formed between national citizen groups as well as between local and regional groups. *Rights Now*<sup>48</sup> joined *Christians for Families*, a regional organization promoting universal human dignity, and several other organizations to coordinate an enormous rally and march in Los Angeles to support immigrant rights and protest sweatshop labor.

The prominent focus across the associational spectrum on reaching the public via the news media rendered strategy critical. Forming coalitions served to increase the number of attendees at a given event, the financial resources that could improve the quality of the presentations, and the amount of human capital available to create and

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<sup>48</sup> The international human rights organization that threw the beach party described in Chapter 3.

implement compelling activities. These three factors, turnout, funding, and talent, were valued across all of the different categories of organizations in my sample. These concerns were often best served by joining together with other groups in order to maximize their impact. Zach, a participant in *Stand-Up St. Louis*, a direct action group, explained,

“...all these protests [at the presidential debate sites] are small groups working together. They’re not individuals working together, it’s small groups working together, and that’s what makes us so strong, and it also makes it so national. Because you can get small groups from all over to converge, come together and form a big group...”

In spite of their divergent goals and organizational structures, Zach’s remarks are similar to those made by Karl, a core member of *Envirolink*, when he explained the benefits of coalition formation.

“More people. More hands to attack the work. The different backgrounds that people bring to the table. Different groups have been involved in different projects along the way, they can bring that experience and that knowledge and a huge benefit is – Well, a) you can’t win anything just on your own, so by bringing together disparate groups of people, you are going to be a lot more effective.”

With so many associations targeting the campaign events as moments for activity, participants explained that it was pragmatic to form temporary coalitions with organizations working on similar issues, so that their impact would not be diluted. For example, one large anti-death penalty event was understood to be more effective than three or four smaller disparate events. Later in this chapter the relationships between organizations are discussed in greater detail; I refer to the coalitions here only to highlight their ephemeral nature. These coalitions mirror the fleeting commitments, described by Wuthnow, that individuals have with the associations with which they are involved. The

associations work together to accomplish a specific task and then part ways, much like “one-shot-deal” forms of volunteering.

### **Fluidity II: “Participants” Rather Than “Members”**

Blurry boundaries appeared as another manifestation of the more removed, less enduring engagements pointed to by earlier research. The boundaries between association insiders and outsiders were often vague or of little significance in this setting. Individuals related to the organizations with which they associated in a variety of ways: some considered themselves members in the traditional sense, while others considered themselves participants or supporters.

While a given organization may have designed a rally, march, voter drive, or speaker’s forum, those who attended were often not association “members,” but rather were association affiliates, supporters, or interested parties. Often, even those who participated in the labor of organizing the event did not consider themselves to be a “member” of the association. They described their relationship to the associations in less concrete terms, frequently considering themselves “participants,” rather than “members.” Brian, earlier quoted about his leadership within *Inequality Forever*, explained,

“Membership requirements are kind of loose... I’d say we’re participants. It’s pretty loose. It’s designed to be kind of a grass-roots thing.”

Brian had traveled from out of state with the other participants and organizers, actively worked with the group on location for five days, and was instrumental in the planning of a key component of one of the organization’s events, yet still did not consider “member” to be an appropriate term to describe his relationship to the organization. “Grassroots,” for Brian, indicates that anyone is welcome; whereas membership necessarily implies that

the category of nonmember exists. Loren, a young man involved with *DISRUPT*, also came a great distance to participate and thought of his relationship to the coordinating organization as temporary and non-concrete, in spite of a formal pre-registration process (and accompanying fee).

“I’m not exactly a member...What happened was, you know, I got involved in activism here in Tampa through my friends and there is a similar organization in Tampa...I heard about the upcoming events in Philly and then that’s when I started checking out the website...I registered to come over and participate in the demonstrations with them.”

In some cases membership was not disputed, it was simply irrelevant. Members of different organizations with shared interests worked together with little concern over, or in some cases even knowledge of, which individuals were affiliated with which organizations. For example, Elise, a member of *Network for Peace*, a national anti-nuclear weapons group explained,

“I work with other groups, like the *Peace and Justice Brigade*...and a lot of the members there are also members of *Network for Peace*. We kind of overlap a lot. You just find the people that you need to work with. For me it doesn’t matter so much what group you belong to at some level. You know, you go with whatever critical mass that you have.”

The boundaries of many groups are best understood as porous and less salient than one might expect. Though it challenges many current understandings of voluntary association involvement, group openness was important for many associations in the sample.

The ways that politically active people define their relationships to the groups with which they associate are critical for understanding civic engagement. Much of the research on America’s declining civic involvement has been based on quantitative measures assessing the number of formal memberships held by individuals (Putnam 1995, 2000; Skocpol 1999a; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). As a result, a good

deal of meaningful participation has likely been missed by social scientists attempting to measure civic engagement in this manner.

It is easy to see how such involvement can be overlooked. For example, even though I consciously sought to understand civic participation in the campaign environment in the words of those I encountered, I initially made the error of inadvertently excluding people from my subsample because I was subconsciously wedded to the language and definitions that I personally utilized to conceptualize civic engagement. Looking back through the first days of my field notes, I noticed a couple of instances where I likely made inaccurate conclusions about the people I approached. For example,

“As I cross the street, a line of (mostly female) protesters link arms and sit down in front of oncoming traffic...police begin to form a circle around them...I ask one woman what group organized the sit-in. She says, ‘we are just concerned citizens.’ she says, ‘I can’t talk to you right now. We are only talking to each other.’” August 1, 2000

I accepted the woman’s verbal assertion that they were ‘just concerned citizens’ (i.e., individuals), in spite of the evidence to the contrary. In hindsight, I recognize that the statement, ‘we are just concerned citizens,’ in the context of illegal activity, was a group strategy in and of itself. Further, this roadblock was one of six that transpired at the same time in a well-coordinated civil disobedience effort. The organization that facilitated these blockades is part of my sample, and I found individuals to interview with little trouble, but my initial, limited view of civic engagement kept me from recognizing participation when I saw it during my first days in the field.

The respondents in this study employed broad notions of engagement: affiliating with voluntary associations in diverse ways, defining their participation loosely and occasionally choosing not to define it at all, and interacting with other participants as

individuals rather than as representatives of an organization. This is a new type of fluidity, a non-concretized involvement that does not imply that individual connections to the organizations and others in them are fleeting. On the contrary, this non-concretized participation appeared in instances where time commitments and face-to-face interaction were often extensive and intensive.

In contrast, the labor unions and most of the national citizen groups had clear, concrete understandings of membership. People at events coordinated by these organizations were able to answer definitively, and without disclaimer, when asked whether or not they were members of the organization in question. In addition, respondents often clarified that they were not *only* members, but also *active* members. Sid, a member of a the *American Adult Network*, and Liza, a member of *United Trades*, provide illustration.

“...when I retired from the industry I decided to be a volunteer at the regional level for Massachusetts...and now I’m a volunteer in New Hampshire...I am a volunteer besides just being a member...”

“If you work at a union shop, you are union. You don’t have to be really active. I am a shop leader, but I wanted to be involved. I like it. I’m very prounion.”

Interestingly, both Sid and Liza chose to highlight their level of involvement even though they were aware that I asked to interview them as a direct result of their participation. In addition to clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders, these organizations also exhibited important internal distinctions between types of insiders. While this was markedly more rigid than the other organizations in the sample, fluidity evinced itself in different ways. For both labor unions and national citizen groups, the aforementioned temporary coalitions with other organizations became important.



### **Fluidity III: Newly Forming Organizations**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the fluid nature of modern civic life created the possibility for new organizations to emerge swiftly and easily in response to external forces. The campaign events prompted the creation of entirely new organizations (See Chapter 3 for a complete listing). Rochelle, from *DISRUPT*, explained that her organization, along with other local groups and their overarching coalition, formed expressly because the Republican National Convention was coming to Philadelphia.

“...we [*DISRUPT*] weren't really a group prior. Many of us had worked together with other organizations, but we came together specifically for this action, this convention... people have been organizing around the convention for some time and originally there were people working around [the Republican National Convention], but they hadn't necessarily formed specific groups...now there is *DISRUPT*, then there was *United for Change*, there's the welfare rights group...so at a certain point, everyone had come together to talk about things, basically what became a...network.”

This particular example of fluidity at the organizational level is more than simply a mirror or parallel of the patterns that Wuthnow identified in individual engagement. The way that contemporary activists understand their political commitments as portable, what Lichterman (1996) refers to as personalized politics, allows new, often temporary organizations to form. In other words, it is precisely the protean character of contemporary civic engagement that makes the rapid formation of new collectives possible. This type of mobilization is facilitated by the trends that Wuthnow has identified.

### **Conclusions**

This section illustrates the complex ways in which national citizen groups, professionalized voluntarism, and more fluid commitments manifested themselves in the

campaign context, revealing that these contemporary civic engagements present new opportunities and limitations for fulfilling the ideals of American democracy.

Berry (1999) depicts membership in national citizen groups as a search for political community, and Calhoun (1991) argues that imagined communities are joined by individuals in search of identity. I anticipated that citizen groups might utilize the increased political interest that surrounds presidential elections and the ritual events that accompany the campaign as an opportunity to build community, to invite their geographically dispersed members to gather and take action in a way that might help concretize these imagined communities. None of the national citizen groups in my sample made a sincere effort to encourage their members to convene during the campaign events. This is particularly significant because, for many groups, the events that were organized around the major campaign stops represented one of their most extensive efforts of the year. If an organization's most substantial mobilization doesn't prompt an attempt to convene their members, it is unlikely that anything encourages them to do so. Aside from providing local volunteers with a chance to help out, national citizen groups appear predictably weak when it comes to building social solidarity among members.

However, it is essential to note that while these organizations may fail to create meaningful social relationships for the majority of their members, they actively sought to thrust issues of concern to their memberships onto the political agenda and to influence the opinions of those in power on these issues. The events held by many national citizen groups, while not directed toward their members per se, provided important alternative spaces for issues that the associations felt were inadequately addressed by the candidates in the official, campaign-related forums, such as those issues at the margins and those on

which the two major presidential candidates largely agreed. In doing so, national citizen groups fulfilled their promise to their members, the promise of advocacy, of voice, while simultaneously offering those present a setting for social interaction. The creation of public spaces for political dialogue is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Though professionalization has been seen as an unfortunate step away from community based “authentic” civic engagement, professionals played an important part in coordinating these substantive efforts. It is possible that some of these events might not have taken place or might not have been of the same quality if professionals had not taken responsibility for the numerous details, fundraising, and coordination of members, volunteers, and interested parties. Further, professionalization does not appear to preclude the possibility of meaningful nonprofessional involvement. Professionals and nonprofessionals engaged in civic pursuits relate to one another in a variety of ways, indicating that professionalization and the related push for efficiency has not involved a sweeping disempowerment of nonprofessionals involved with nonprofit organizations. It is possible that the presence of professional volunteer coordinators may serve to enhance the opportunities available to participants. Indeed, as Millie articulated, feeling useful and important can be very rewarding. Further, as Brian’s experience illustrated, the presence of professionals does not mean that nonprofessionals are unable to take a leadership role in the associations with which they are involved.

Though civic engagement has changed, the activity of the associations and their members around the campaign suggests that a vibrant civic life continues to thrive in the United States, accruing benefits both to society at large, by enhancing the legitimacy of representative democracy, and to active participants by providing opportunities to voice

their concerns and build social capital. The fluid structure of today's more transient engagements appears to provide new spaces for the development of norms of trust, respect for others, and attachment to community. The reduced importance of boundaries between insiders and outsiders may create a space where difference is more welcome than in moments past. Increased heterogeneity likely brings with it the advantage of promoting tolerance and connecting individuals to society in a fuller sense. Multiple, temporary, task-oriented coalitions formed in response to the conventions and televised debates that created opportunities for participants to work with other organizations and their members. As will be discussed in the subsequent section, this process increases awareness of others in the community and serves as the foundation of valuable social ties. While some may romanticize the lifetime commitments of the classic American voluntary associations, it is important to respect the vitality of these modern loose connections.

Much of social participation today has a new texture, requiring social scientists to recognize civic engagement in its diverse, often fleeting forms. Exploring voluntary associations during this window of heightened activity reveals that the new forms of civic engagement present challenges as well as opportunities. The voluntary associations active during the campaign season provided educational experiences, increased awareness of others in the community, and created spaces for substantive political dialogue. While these valuable pursuits and the thousands of people I witnessed engaging in them deserve acknowledgement, it is also essential to recognize the limitations of those national organizations that provide the majority of their members *exclusively* with political voice and of associations that transform so continuously that consistent, long-term internal and

external ties may fail to emerge. Though the heyday of the classic American voluntary association is often treated as the ideal for social participation, a less nostalgic look reminds us that the federated membership organizations of the 1950s, much like contemporary civic engagement, represent a valuable, yet only partial, realization of the American vision of the good society.

This section illustrated the ways in which changes in civic engagement manifested themselves in relationships between individuals and the associations with which they affiliate, as well as in the relationships between different associations during the campaign events. The following section examines the outcomes of mobilization for the organizations operating in this contemporary environment.

### **The Consequences of Mobilization at the Associational Level**

Though the process of mobilization took a toll on the resources of some associations, the heightened activity promoted organizational development in the symbolic and communicative ways that tend to interest scholars of civil society as well as the instrumental ways that tend to interest those studying social movements. Event orchestration and implementation presented an opportunity for members to develop what Putnam (2000) refers to as “bonding” social capital because staging events required participants to associate with one another in intensified ways, creating: 1) opportunities for those involved to build relationships with one another, and 2) a context in which many participants developed an increased sense of commitment to the group itself. Mobilization was also group building in a more tangible sense; the public activity

adopted by the overwhelming majority of associations helped them to increase their bases of support, promoting the literal expansion of the organization.

The multitude of organizations simultaneously entering the public arena during the conventions and debates also created numerous opportunities for organizations to interact with one another, fostering the development of “bridging” social capital (Putnam 2000) through the development of ties across groups. Formal and informal coalitions (and subsequent social networks) formed between organizations with shared interests and, more surprisingly, between organizations with virtually nothing in common. The ubiquitous activity also afforded organizations, which were not formally working together, opportunities to learn about one another and to build networks that representatives felt would lay the groundwork for future collaboration. Because individual organizations often had different goals, priorities, and approaches, this type of inter-organizational activity presented challenges, but the collaboration also permitted organizations to pool their resources and increase their chances of commanding attention.

In this section, I highlight the outcomes of mobilization at the level of civil society by exploring the impact of heightened activity on the associations in my sample. The discussion examines intra- and inter-organizational outcomes, the role that the different political contexts (debates versus conventions) played, and the interpretations of these outcomes by those involved.

### **Consequences of Mobilization Within Voluntary Associations**

The act of breaking routine to respond to the political rituals was transformative for many of the associations in my sample. While none of the organizations’

representatives indicated that building social solidarity within their groups had been a motive for mobilization. participant accounts reveal that the process engendered feelings of social solidarity in three ways: 1) by giving participants occasion to work together and develop interpersonal connections. 2) by facilitating the development (or reaffirmation) of group identity through shared experience and the often inadvertent, emotionally charged celebrations of groupness, and finally 3) by increasing group cohesiveness via exhibitions of organizational unity, salience, and potential. In terms of more concrete organizational changes, many of the associations were able to increase their support base as a direct result of their visibility. Rather than serving to deplete the organizations, these internal developments suggest that mobilization helps to fortify existing organizations and to bolster those in formation.

### **Interpersonal Connections**

Increased member interaction fostered internal social solidarity. The majority of those involved explained that through the campaign mobilization they were able to meet other members (or participants) and/or to deepen relationships with those they already knew. Victoria, from *Feminists for a Socialist Future*, an international anti-capitalist organization working on women's issues, described the social component that emerged during her work in Los Angeles.

“For me, I enjoyed spending time with the women from other chapters. All of us organizers [from different chapters] spent a great deal of time together, shared a hotel room and had fun. It wasn't just logistics and planning; it was fun. I got to meet a lot of people who I have heard of and who share my views. It was rejuvenating meeting all these women with similar ideas.”

The chapter leaders knew each other indirectly from email communication and newsletters, but had not had an opportunity to work together until the organization decided to plan a major response to the Democratic National Convention. Victoria shared her sense of accomplishment as she described the organization's efforts, but the personal connections were also an important part of her experience. Haley, from *MassCares*, describes the energizing impact that talking with other organization members had on her.

"...big activities give us a chance to meet and see each other and talk to each other and build relationships, networks among the students... Meeting other students just really makes a difference. There isn't anything quite like being in a room of *MassCares* members. It is just really empowering, because you forget sometimes when you are stuck at your own college just organizing. You can have tunnel vision and forget that you are part of a statewide organization with people working all across the state on the same issues and when we see each other, like at the October 3<sup>rd</sup> stuff [at the Boston presidential debate], we are like, "Oh wow! You are working on voter turn out too!" And I found out the problems they are having are similar to the problems I was having and the same for accomplishments too."

The mobilization for the presidential debate in Boston represented *MassCares*' biggest undertaking of the year. As Haley articulates, the magnitude of the challenge brought her organization together physically, as well as emotionally, because the pressures and achievements of their participation united them.

The impact of these emerging interpersonal connections was particularly pronounced for new organizations, for whom heightened activity served to galvanize their memberships. Laurie, from *NC Parents Against Gun Violence* explained,

"We were all really happy that we had been there [outside the Winston-Salem debate]... We are a new group and I think it was effective as far as pulling us all together. We were all different ages and it was just neat to share why we were there. It's so nice to see that different people share your same beliefs and have the same issues you have about what is going



on in our nation. It was really nice to have conversations with people about that and know that they validate what you say.”

Laurie indicated that she met the leader of a nearby chapter of the organization and that as a result, the two chapters were planning to begin working together to support one another’s future initiatives. As Laurie’s experience illustrates, in addition to providing interpersonal ties, these connections also have the potential to generate more instrumental achievements.

It is critical to note that while social interaction was the norm, not all organizations provided members with opportunities for involvement. As mentioned earlier, some organizations had minimal member involvement, including *Business Watch*, *Envirolink*, the *Freedom and Equality League*, and *Rights Now*. While all of those that failed to create an environment for member interaction were national<sup>49</sup> mailing list organizations, it is not the case that national mailing list organizations as a whole failed to generate member relationships as a byproduct of mobilization. The *American Adult Network* created opportunities for members in key locations to volunteer and work together during their campaign events, and certainly the *Pro-Choice and Paying Attention* luncheon in Los Angeles was designed to provide ample opportunity for attendees to socialize with old friends in the organization as well as to build relationships with members they were meeting for the first time.

### **Shared Experience and Collective Identity**

Action often inadvertently served to concretize the sense of group belonging and the development of a collective identity. Rich, from *Inequality Forever*, described the

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<sup>49</sup> *Rights Now* is an international mailing list organization.

ways in which the events brought those in his group together physically and symbolically,

“I don't think there is anything any more bonding than a collective challenge, you know? Especially when you meet it victoriously. Particularly, this is true when there is a lot of creativity involved and it's relatively democratic and participatory. It's like a team sport. We turned political expression into a team sport. There's confrontation, there's intensity, there's the magic moment of it all coming together, you know, when you are actually doing it and there's the whole idea brainstorming and planning and there's stress...it was just so exciting in Philadelphia. We were all staying in the same place, so it was very socially bonding that way. We all sort of camped out in this huge house...so there were 30 or 40 of us sleeping in like 4 or 5 rooms. It was like a big campout kind of thing at night and then you'd go into battle everyday. So, you never knew what was going to happen and it was very successful, so we had this great feeling of victory, just an incredible feeling and everyone had a hand in it. There was this strange identity that we all developed as Wealth Warriors [the group's name for its participants], you know? The rest of the movement recognized us as Wealth Warriors. People loved us.”

Through Rich's narrative, it is possible to sense the electricity of his experience, and it becomes apparent that a “we-ness” emerged from this cauldron of activity that came as much from the creation of a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders as from the development of relationships between insiders. Part of this likely stemmed from the constant, literal, rearticulation of group goals and values as representatives communicated with the media and nonmembers, but unlike other settings where goals and values of the membership are articulated, such as the process of revising a mission statement, the participants' campaign experiences were often intense and impassioned, calling to mind Durkheim's (1995 [1912]) descriptions of collective effervescence.

Participants often described their participation as emotional, repeatedly revealing an energy that emerged and contributed to what often amounted to a celebration of the

group. Robert, from *American Adult Network* was a sedate man with a rather flat affect, yet he bubbled with enthusiasm as he described his favorite part of their event.

“The whole thing. The whole day was a high point. Really, it's hard for me to say. I guess one best part were the speakers. There were a couple individuals who gave very personal accounts of their experiences and that was very powerful. Still, though, I hate to say that was the one highlight. Another big thing was simply seeing all of the *AAN* support and having such a great event. It felt good! People were smiling, talking, clapping, it was very alive, very, I don't know, maybe you had to be there. It was an event that we put together ourselves. We had support from people going by, there was a good energy that day. I felt energized when it was over, instead of let down like you might expect after all that planning and work.”

Similarly, references to energy and excitement pervade Brandy's assessment of the pre-rally scene as *School Choice, Family Choice* activists headed toward the Democratic National Convention site.

“Well, we had a large turnout from the churches that wanted to go and they were on the buses and they were chanting and you know talking about the fate of schools and you know how it is a shame that kids can't read blah blah blah. When we started getting closer to the location, they were looking out of the windows and they were saying, “Oh look! Look!” - that kind of thing. It was like taking kids to an amusement park or something. They could barely stay in their seats. They were excited just being a part of the process of voicing their concerns...they were actually doing it. They were excited about that...The energy was very very high. It also helped that we had a busload full of kids...[who were] hyped the whole time and you know, they were there holding up the signs and shouting, ‘It's all about the kids! It's all about the kids!’”

The environment, then, wedded elements of spectacle (as described in Chapter 3) with an emotionally charged reaffirmation of group beliefs, values, and commitments.

Liza, from *United Trades*, told me that the planning meetings for their activities around the Republican National Convention were great. When asked what made them great, she said,

“The camaraderie, the camaraderie. We were all there in order to fight for the shop workers. The people who don’t work in the shop were all there because they wanted to be and the people who are fighting for a contract were glad to see everyone out, so grateful. You can imagine how pumped up everyone was planning and realizing how big it was going to be. It was exciting. It may sound dumb, but it was a rush being with old friends who I worked with at my old job and meeting new people I had never worked with before. I had a great conversation with a man from California...we could relate to each other because we were both union and both out there doing the work on the same side of the issues. We were all in it together.”

Liza points to the sense of group that was present during the meetings in addition to the interaction between individual members.

### **The Role of Symbolic Representations of Group Life**

This sense of being part of a group was often enhanced through the use of chants, slogans, and identifying dress or adornments that created a sense of “us” for those that took part. For example, two of the three unions in my sample (*United Trades* and the *National Union of Creative Artists*) and many unions I encountered on location, particularly in Boston, where the union presence was strongest, wore brightly colored t-shirts bearing their group’s name. Visually, this highlighted the sheer number of participants brought out by a particular association and allowed members to identify one another. *Stand-Up St. Louis* sold bandanas for a \$1.00 donation that supporters and participants wore on their bodies. Some put them around their necks; others tied them to their upper arms or wrist. The effect, much like that of the t-shirts, was an indication of who was a part of the group.

Banners and signs were also used in some capacity by virtually every association I studied. In some cases these were wholly instrumental: hung on a table to identify the group represented there. In other cases signs and banners were used in more value-laden

ways: they were not merely labels, but also images to be rallied around (e.g., being held up, applauded, etc.), and in still other instances the banners themselves seemed to be symbols of the group. *United for Change* marched 8,000 people led by an enormous banner draped across the bodies of those at the front of the march. As the group approached, it was the banner that physically gave the group form. Because *United for Change* was a massive coalition, consisting of many subgroups carrying their own signs and/or wearing their own identifying clothing, this banner was an important symbol of the unity of the larger coalition. These visual elements served as tools of political communication, but also as celebrations of group life for many of the organizations, regardless of whether this outcome was anticipated.

### **Mobilization and Individual Commitment**

Through mobilization, many members I interviewed expressed an increased commitment to the groups with which they were affiliated. Sid, from the *American Adult Network*, described the impact that his participation had on him and his feelings toward the group.

“We had some experiences that I don’t believe would ever leave me. One woman in Los Angeles, she was a cashier in a restaurant...she came out to look at the bus [which the organization used to disseminate information] and started to fill up a little bit with tears and I said, “What’s wrong?” and she said, “Nobody’s ever done anything like this before” and I didn’t know what she was talking about. She said, “this thing on prescription drugs [in reference to the group’s efforts to secure a prescription drug plan for senior citizens]...The only reason I am working as a cashier in this restaurant is to pay for my prescription costs because I can’t afford my prescriptions”...It made me feel good. It made me feel like the *American Adult Network* was the most important organization I could volunteer for.”

Though Sid had been a member of the group for 17 years, his involvement and experiences with the touring health care program had a significant impact on how he felt about the organization. Laurie, from *NC Parents Against Gun Violence*, also described feeling a stronger sense of commitment.

“I think it [mobilizing for the debate] was momentum building...for the people who were there it was just such a good experience and really shed so much light on why we are doing this. It kind of helped, I think, make us realize that we really can make a difference...It kind of empowered me personally to continue on with the organization and try to achieve those goals. There was just such an energy to be out there in front of people and the press...It just really keeps the momentum going.”

Laurie was a new member of the group, and her involvement with the Winston-Salem presidential debate protest was her first active participation. This experience assured her that the organization was something with which she wanted to be involved.

Gary Alan Fine (1995) argues that social movement allegiance depends on narratives that bind participants: “horror stories” provide incentive or justification for social action, “war stories” that are told about challenging scenarios faced in the process of participation, and “happy ending stories” that remind members of their achievements and act to provide encouragement and motivation to continue the effort. Replacing the term “horror story” with the more neutral “motivational story” it becomes reasonable to assume that these stories are important for voluntary associations in general. If this is true, one would expect the collective experiences described by participants in the campaign related voluntary association activities to continue to support group cohesion in the future as they become fodder for “war stories” and “happy ending stories.”

Sid and Laurie are representative of many people I interviewed, but a few participants expressed reservations about their level of interest in their respective groups

after the mobilizations. Jerome, a volunteer for *GenNext*, a national organization working to increase youth voter turnout, had only positive things to say about his experience the night of their concert/debate watch party, but explained that the in-depth exposure to the organization left him wondering if he truly shared the goals of the group. Rochelle, from *DISRUPT*, expressed frustration with her efforts in Philadelphia. She felt that local organizers such as herself did a great deal of work, but were unappreciated by the people who came from out of town to participate. As a result, Rochelle expressed uncertainty about whether she would be willing to extend herself in the future. And Ajay, from *Students for Change*, expressed concern that the intensive organizing may have intimidated some existing members rather than integrating them.

“People don’t like to go to meetings a lot and to actually organize all the different teach-ins, there were a lot of meetings that were happening...And since we started organizing in the summer when most students are working full time or on vacation - it was actually pretty hard...So, because it was summer and because there were so many meetings, I think people were sort of turned off by working on it.”

Ajay expressed concern that the heightened activity may have driven away people uninterested in involvement with a demanding organization. However, these rare exceptions should not overshadow the more commonly expressed feelings of group attachment that emerged as an important byproduct of organizational efforts around the convention.

As Fine (1995) suggests, shared experiences engender shared narratives that etch out a collective identity, which in turn is likely to prompt future collective activity. Social solidarity, collective identity formation, and enhancements in group cohesiveness are particularly significant byproducts for contemporary organizations that must contend with the increasingly fleeting and distant nature of civic engagement. Since fewer

organizations regularly meet collectively with a consistent group of recurring participants, many are apt to find building social connections, developing shared meanings, and fostering loyalty increasingly challenging.

### **Instrumental Achievements**

These forms of symbolic growth were often accompanied by more tangible gains as well. Those associations engaging in demonstrative forms of action gained public exposure that helped to expand their base of support. I have already described the striking expansion of the young group *Inequality Forever*, which spawned 40 new chapters in the months following their debate and convention appearances.<sup>50</sup> Although this dramatic growth was atypical, many groups felt that they were able to garner support through their campaign event activities. When asked if the potential to recruit new members helped to motivate the *Northeast Union of Professionals'* campaign mobilization, Harry replied,

“Absolutely. We have. We attracted new members, whatever membership means, new activists. We’ve done that. The debate mobilization got our name out.”

Paige, a staff member of *GenNext*, was pleased because in addition to raising the profile of the organization and generating potential future support, their concert and debate watch party lured over 30 new volunteers. Similarly, Kim, from *Feminist for a Socialist Future*, described the impact of her organization’s visibility,

“We found that we really succeeded during the DNC protest week. We got hundreds of names for the mailing list. We talked to almost every single one of those names. We sold lots and lots of papers, so we know people have our politics to digest and we're getting calls...to find out more

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<sup>50</sup> *Inequality Forever* coordinated events at both conventions and participated in events organized by other organizations at all three of the televised debates.



about it. We have requests to be in press conferences, to do an educational [workshop] at several UC campuses - those kind of things. We knew that would happen and that's what we were hoping for - to be visible, for them to see us working hard, to see us being principled, to see us being passionate because it's real. So, then people see that and people are attracted to that and we are really excited."

Though Kim isn't describing a specific swelling of their enrollment list per se, the visibility of the group generated a groundswell of interest in their organization.

Some organizations found that they were able to garner public support for specific initiatives. *Network for Peace* collected approximately 5,000 signatures during their activities around the Republican National Convention and a significant number of signatures at campus demonstrations in the Boston area on the day of the first presidential debate. Art, from *NC Citizens for Smaller Government*, explained that the group was able to gather far more petition signatures at the Winston-Salem debate watch party and concert than they typically collect at other public appearances, even at large venues such as fairs and festivals. Other organizations (e.g., *Business Watch*, *Young Adult Voter's Association*, and *GenNext*) also utilized these public appearances as opportunities to accrue names for petitions and use in subsequent recruitment drives.

### **The Downside of Mobilization**

In spite of these positive interpersonal and instrumental outcomes, the intensive efforts invested in mobilizing took a toll on the resources of some of the organizations involved. Though the majority of participants experienced the flurry of mobilization as rejuvenating (as described earlier), Greg, from the *Land and Life Protection League*, described the ambivalence he felt about the costs of acting versus the benefits.

“We put a big chunk of money into the convergence space and just sort of the overall organizing. In Philly, in particular, the resource intensiveness was, you know, three or four of us [paid staff] there for a good solid at least a week and a half, focusing predominantly on Philly. So, that's quite a lot for an organization like ours to have three or four campaigners and organizers focused on one thing for a week and a half, almost two weeks. And it was just a lot of strategic kind of thoughts about - is it worth our time, is it worth our energy, you know, short-term, long-term, building relationships in the movement, supporting these kind of efforts and so on.

*Was it?*

The jury is still out, I think. There were definitely benefits for us and for others, no doubt, but there were a lot of costs for sure. We sort of haven't sat down and sort of really debriefed to the extent that we need to about, you know, what role would we play in this similar situation. I know it would be different. Let me put it that way.

*Oh really?*

Yes. You know, it totally destroyed us. I mean, the folks who went to Philly, man, we worked 18 - 19 hour days. We put our other work aside and you know, what were the real benefits of it? To what extent was it necessary for us as an organization that tends to be really effective when we are really focused, to sort of open up that focus as we did?”

While no one else indicated this degree of ambivalence about the value of their mobilizations, several core members<sup>51</sup> remarked on the degree to which these atypical investments of time and resources forced them to push other important personal and organizational priorities aside. When asked about the future of *Stand-Up St. Louis*, Brenda commented,

“I plan to stay involved and to support the events, but probably to be less active than I was in this mobilization. I really put my life on hold to do this. My family, my work, my community efforts, they just really were neglected.”

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<sup>51</sup>Representatives of the *American Adult Network*, *Rights Now*, *ABOLISH!*, and *United for Change* were among those commenting on the degree to which regular work had to be postponed in order to make room for campaign event planning.

Heightened activity, by definition involves an unusual organizational commitment. It would be foolhardy to assume that these demands do not involve costs at some level for every organization that chooses to mobilize. Individuals involved with these associations usually contributed more of their time and energy than they normally would to the organization, and time is a finite asset. When this time and energy is given at the expense of other organizational responsibilities, these efforts may come at a cost to the organization. Or, alternatively, when time and energy is withdrawn from other areas of the participants' lives (e.g., time normally allocated to work, family, personal interests), the participants may suffer. Similarly, mobilization often requires organizations to make careful decisions about the allocation of financial resources and staff time. In the final analysis, only the associations can assess the overall value of such intensive undertakings, and often the benefits can only be assessed in the aftermath. Without question, mobilization involves risk.

In spite of the risks involved and costs incurred, accounts from those involved were exceedingly positive. The mobilization process provided the associations with critical instrumental and communicative opportunities to build stronger organizations. Although national citizen groups did little to facilitate member involvement, mobilization helped participation-based organizations generate social solidarity by providing a context for members to develop relationships with one another. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these opportunities proved particularly critical for young organizations. Taking action also served to foster or reinforce a sense of collective identity, as organizations rearticulated shared goals and values through the creation of banners, chants, and press statements and as they celebrated the accomplishments of the group with post-event dinners, debriefing

meetings, and parties. The relationships and shared meanings developed through mobilization in turn helped to increase individuals' commitment to their respective groups. These different interpersonal and group experiences were an ideal environment for the development of Putnam's (2000) "bonding" social capital. In addition, the associations were able to increase their bases of support through the recruitment of new members and/or supporters. The only significant drawback for associations coordinating events around the major campaign stops was that the time, energy, and funding devoted to these nonroutine endeavors drew important resources away from other initiatives.

### **Consequences of Mobilization for Inter-Associational Relationships**

The influx of multiple associations into the public arena also supported the development of "bridging" social capital (Putnam 2000), in which relationships are established between organizations. In the campaign environment, coalitions formed on the basis of shared interests, as Habermas and Tocqueville would expect, but they also formed between organizations with quite different axes of association that merged to accomplish a specific task or out of mutual ideological commitments, however broadly defined. Even so, the specific social context emerged as an important determinant of the ability of diverging organizations to work together: inter-organizational bonds were more tenacious during the conventions than they were during the debates, which engendered a more diverse range of responses and opened the door for disagreements to surface. Regardless of setting, these inter-organizational relationships offered many benefits to the organizations involved, often acting as an important pull factor for organizational involvement, but coalition work also presented challenges as different groups struggled to

agree on shared goals and strategies. In many cases, enduring networks emerged out of the coalitions inspired by the campaign events, deemed by some as the “best part” of the mobilization process.

### **Coalition Formation**

The major campaign events acted as dedifferentiating moments, in which the associations mobilized around the conventions and debates frequently formed coalitions. Approximately two-thirds of the organizations worked with other groups in coalitions (often overlapping) or as co-sponsors for at least one campaign event activity.<sup>52</sup> Several of these alliances were logical groupings of organizations committed to similar social or political issues. For example, *Feminists for a Socialist Future* worked with a variety of women’s issues organizations to coordinate a march to promote the betterment of women’s lives globally.

When different organizations are individually interested in mobilizing around similar issues, as in the case of the women’s groups just described, alliances seem natural. However, there were several instances where coalitions formed between organizations with divergent axes of association, with coalition members sharing only a baseline ideological compatibility or a desire to meet a concrete objective, rather than specific substantive concerns. Niles, from *Northeast Union of Professionals*, an organization that worked in conjunction with several other groups (including *Students for Change*), described the dedifferentiation that he saw inspired by the debate in Boston.

“The thing is it’s [the debate] an event target that you could bring all sorts of groups together on. I just found incredible agreement, at least, despite all the disagreement in the left and the ideological disagreement and the

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<sup>52</sup> Several groups worked in coalitions for certain events, while also coordinating an independent effort.

like, there was clear agreement that some sort of debate protest was needed. You usually don't find that. Usually you find if it's, you know, you have a pro-feminist march and three-quarters of the left won't be interested and labor will be less interested. You have a labor march and whatever, feminists and African-American groups won't be interested and so on, right? So, it's really hard to bring all the different groups together and united on an issue. A political campaign is one of the few issues that'll do that.

*Why do you think that is?*

Well, the nature of American politics over the past - really since the end of the Vietnam War protest, which is again an issue that huge numbers would be mobilized around. It's just been a kind of-the left has turned into special interests organizing and still, to a large extent, that way. People are in groups because they have their specific interests and it's hard-it's a lot of effort to come out to go to meetings and come out to events and the like. So, if it doesn't look like your issue is specifically gonna be targeted, then probably you won't come.

*The debate provides a different setting?*

Yeah. Like I say, a whole vast range of groups say the debate is a target. If nothing else, it's a matter of wanting your issue raised and your voice heard...and it's not going to be heard in the debates..."

The groups Niles describes were united by abstract sentiments of collective dissatisfaction: they wanted their respective issues heard, yet did not have a unifying issue for the larger coalition that they formed. Breadth, then, drew out many groups organized around different issues, but it was incumbent upon the organizations that formed coalitions to work to identify their shared interests. The "incredible agreement" to which Niles referred was, in fact, only an agreement that "some sort of protest was needed" in response to the debate.

In contrast, *NC Citizens for Smaller Government* participated in a task-based coalition comprised of diverse organizations seeking to promote political participation in young adults; however, the unity of purpose shared by the alliance members belied the

vast ideological disagreements that existed between the co-sponsors. Art, from *NC Citizens for Smaller Government*, describes the unusual combination of allies working on the concert/debate watch party that *GenNext* coordinated.

“...there are the Farrakhan people there [at the event], you had the Nader people there, you had the Republicans, the Democrats, the Libertarians, us [a conservative group]...All these different elements, a lot of them that are totally opposed to each other in this building at one time.”

The philosophically diverse groups tolerated one another to accomplish a mutually desirable goal. During the planning process, the member organizations interacted individually with the initiating organization (*GenNext*) to coordinate logistical issues, but interacted very little with one another. The night of the event, the organizations largely afforded one another a wide berth, remaining voluntarily sequestered at their respective tables, interacting with attendees, but not with one another (beyond polite greetings and sharing masking tape). As this unique case illustrates, being organized around a common objective did not necessarily prompt coalition members to develop stronger ties than those forming coalitions for less well-defined intentions.

Other coalitions were also comprised of organizations with varied axes of association, but were less ideologically opposed. *United for Change* serves as an example of this form of dedifferentiation. This coalition, spearheaded by members of one activist group in Pennsylvania, was a conglomerate of groups organized around a variety of diverse issues. When I asked Jill, a volunteer for *United for Change*, what type of groups they solicited when assembling the coalition she explained.

“Um...anything that can be considered progressive. Women's groups, minority groups, the unions got real involved, which was good, really good. There were several unions that worked with us, so worker's rights. Some of the names were crazy, I didn't even know they existed...But, anyway, that's the hard thing. We are trying to define this group. The only

thing they all have in common, I guess is that they are raising issues that people are not talking about in the upper levels of government. I don't know how you describe it. It's environmental, women, minorities, workers, the elderly - the elderly is a big one. All the important stuff."

*United for Change* was a large coalition of organizations that shared a very loose identity as progressive and, according to Jill, an interest in raising issues - perhaps more accurately *views* on issues - not present in mainstream politics. This alliance shares characteristics of the previous two. Like the debate protest coalition described by Niles, these associations were from the same side of the political spectrum, if not organized around the same substantive issues, but unlike that group, *United for Change* sought to identify a goal that all member groups could agree upon, as with the coalition that came together to promote youth political participation. The *United for Change* strategy meetings were filled with difficult discussions about what issues or themes member organizations might be able to rally behind. In the final analysis, however, the only agreement the diverse constituents could reach consensus on was that political discourse was not inclusive of enough issues or points of view and an interest in progressive social change, broadly defined.

In terms of bridging relationships between organizations, the most meaningful connections formed when ideologically compatible constituent associations committed to the same social or political issues united for a specified task. For example, *ABOLISH!* worked with a variety of other anti-death penalty organizations to organize a day of anti-death penalty activities during the Republican National Convention. Similarly, *Rights Now* joined organizations<sup>53</sup> active against sweatshop labor and working for immigrant rights to organize a massive march through the garment district to the convention site in

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<sup>53</sup> *Christians for Change* targets sweatshop labor and was a member of this coalition.



Los Angeles in order to advocate for legislative changes in these areas. When ideological compatibility, shared substantive interest, and a clearly defined objective existed among the groups, coalitions were efficient, supportive, and inclined to yield enduring ties between the constituent organizations.

### **Social Context and Collaboration: Debates vs. Conventions**

While coalitions working together on the basis of shared interests in a particular social or political issue flourished in both the convention and the debate environments, the nature of a debate as a contest between opponents tested the thin commonalities that united more divergent organizations. For example, a thin agreement that existing political arrangements suffer from corrupting influences (e.g., the influence of corporations and the wealthy, the lack of openness to third party candidates) was enough to unite activists in the context of a convention, but the debate context divided those who adhered to these broad critiques from those who shared those criticisms but wanted to support one particular candidate in the debate. This happened in both Boston and St. Louis.

Prior to the debate in Boston, *Students for Change* and *Northeast Union of Professionals* along with a few other groups, splintered away from a larger coalition, which they had joined to coordinate a response to the debate, because they sensed an emerging conflict. Many organizations in the larger coalition wanted to employ civil disobedience to try to shut down the debate, while the representatives from labor unions wanted to come out in support of Al Gore. *Students for Change* and the *Northeast Union for Professionals* left the initial coalition because they felt that the pro-civil disobedience

organizations were failing to adequately pursue compromises with the labor contingent. Their choice was prescient; on the evening of the debate, the perimeter of the University of Massachusetts – Boston campus erupted with heated conflicts between the tremendous labor presence (estimated at 5,000 people) and those critical of the debate altogether who engaged in a largely unsuccessful effort to disrupt the event. In addition to the standard reports of police/protester conflict (or lack thereof, as the case may be), the Boston newspapers documented incidents of verbal altercations, physical skirmishes, and rock throwing between the union representatives and protesters (Richardson and Hanchett 10/04/00; Bombardieri 10/04/00). The issues forum organized by *Stand Up St. Louis* simmered with similar tensions, though not at the intensity level and without the conflagrations of the disconnect in Boston. In contrast, coalitions of diverse organizations, including the links between labor and non-labor activists, which were most volatile at the debates, did not exhibit these tensions in the context of the conventions where common enemies (e.g., the police, wealth in politics, a particular political party) were easier to identify.

While Dayan and Katz (1992) classify nominating conventions and presidential debates both as “contests,” which pit evenly matched players against one another under strict rules, I would argue that contemporary nominating conventions are more accurately understood as “coronations,” which display great individuals in a ritual role, requiring that past conflicts (i.e., the divisive primary elections) give way to unity and the celebration of shared symbols (e.g., the American flag, the Republican elephant). If the presidential debates are contests, but nominating conventions are in fact coronations, the impact of these settings on the coalitions parallels the demands on the audience that

Dayan and Katz attribute to these two scripts. Dayan and Katz argue that coronations need the approval of the audience as a whole. "The mass audience is invited to attend and answer "amen" at the crowning, or wedding, or funeral service of a national leader." (1992: 42), while contests ask the audience to accept the rules as well as to cheer on their favorite player. In response to a coronation, there are two possible responses: to reject the event in its entirety or to support it, meaning that those providing criticism (or support) at the conventions all likely shared the same response, to reject the event (or accept it), if not for the same reasons. Meanwhile, for a contest, rejecting or accepting the legitimacy of the match is only one possible response. There are multiple options including: accepting the contest and rooting for or against one of the contestants, rejecting the contest, but supporting one of the contestants, and rejecting the contest rules as well as the legitimacy of the participants. It was this potential for multiple planes of resistance and validation that produced discord among those active at the debates.

### **Benefits of Inter-Organizational Collaboration**

Coalition work overall, whether between analogous or disparate organizations, was popular because it afforded member organizations opportunities to increase their efficiency, financial power, and human resources. For the more affluent and institutionalized organizations, increasing human resources allowed them to claim to represent a larger constituency. The more groups that could unite on a particular issue, the greater the likelihood of attracting the attention they sought. Cole explains why the *Young Adult Voter's Association* sought a broad coalition.

"We have 75 partners and the reason we wanted to do a big coalition and why we focus on local coalition building is that we found that when

groups come together and share resources that they are able to hit wider. The scope of their work is able to broaden a lot. Instead of on one campus having *National Student Alliance* and *Future Focus* doing a voter reg drive at the university, they coordinate their volunteers to do one big voter reg drive and then they have volunteers left over to start one someplace else or to go downtown to a community center. This way they aren't putting all their money into making different materials of sending volunteers to the same places. Doing that kind of stuff makes things larger, increases the scope. Another thing is since we are trying to get [the presidential candidates to agree to do] youth debates, that is really hard unless you have a lot of groups, because the first thing that these candidates want to know is how many people am I going to be speaking to? If it's just one organization, then they assume it is a single-issue event and they don't want to say, just come talk to an environmental group, but if it's like 10 organizations all from different issue perspectives, some from the right and some from the left, then they are into it because it's promoting youth engagement. The candidates like this. That's why coalition building is what we focused on."

Not only did the coalition allow the groups to more efficiently use financial and human resources, it also empowered them to speak for a wider constituency. When asked why her organization worked with other groups on their speaker's panel in Los Angeles, Lydia, from the *Freedom and Equality League* commented on the increased legitimacy coalition work proffers.

"Well personally, I think it's always better to partner because you find people with whom you share values, and you agree to a common goal, and then you work together as a team or as a partnership to enhance the effort. It leverages people's constituencies and also sometimes helps different groups who have things in common connect the dots to a bigger more unified voice that will ultimately influence public policy."

For poorer, less institutionalized groups that did not have access to candidates via lobbyists or to the public via paid advertisements, increasing human resources was about having a physical presence that would command attention. Mark, from *United for Change*, describes their desire to have a substantial event.

"...we looked at previous conventions. One of the things that we saw that happened repeatedly was there were lots of demonstrations, but there was almost no media coverage. So as organizers, we said, "Well, how do you

get media coverage?" You have an event that can't be ignored or you create the media coverage yourself. So we came up with two major things...The two major things that we decided to do were to create an event that was so big that it couldn't be ignored by the media and to have our own media center."

Participant turnout was in the forefront of the minds of smaller or less institutionalized organizations, and coalition work brought with it the promise of greater numbers. In addition, these groups often took advantage of the skills and contacts that particular individuals or organizations possessed. For example, Ian, from *Students for Change* explained that their group of young activists benefited from working with more experienced labor organizers, and *DISRUPT* relied heavily on the paid staff from the *Land and Life Protection League* to help with public relations efforts. For more established groups, coalition work was attractive because it offered increased legitimacy by expanding the constituency for which they claimed to speak, rather than offering the concrete support of the individuals that comprise the memberships of the various associations.

### **Challenges of Inter-Organizational Collaboration**

Pooling resources was perceived to increase the ability of coalition partners to garner the attention of the media and political leaders, but multi-organization collaborations were not without their shortcomings. At the most banal level, there were logistical challenges. It was difficult to coordinate meeting times and places that were mutually agreeable to everyone and those individuals serving as liaisons between their organizations and the larger coalitions had to attend more meetings. Further, as I have already alluded, some coalitions struggled to define themselves and to cope with their

own growth. Brenda, from *Stand Up St. Louis* described the difficulty of forming a new coalition while constantly incorporating new representatives.

“the definition of the group would change a lot because a person would come and have really strong opinions on something and then it would change our process and then things would be different next week when more new people came in. So, that was a dynamic that was partly based on philosophical differences and also may have just been the inexperience of the group, our new group finding its feet. How do we make decisions? How open are we to new people coming in? There was a lot of that...some of the time we were just trying to find our way with that. Even how we would facilitate meetings and what does consensus really mean and how do those discussions happen and how do we run the meetings?”

Even more significant than the logistical challenges were the difficulties these disparate groups encountered when trying to make decisions that would please the various interests involved. This was a universal issue. Even organizations that came together out of a concern about the same issue had to face these challenges. Cole, from the *Young Adult Voter's Association* explains.

“It's a balancing act a lot. There have been times when we have had coalition members not happy with us [as the coordinating association] because they don't like the fact that one of our polls on youth issues shows things that mess with their objectives. So, they get mad at us for talking about it or we've had like the conservative groups mad at us and the liberal groups mad at us, because they don't feel like we're fair to their candidate. Trying to keep in mind the interests of every group and what their organizational development needs are and to make sure that they are getting those things, but at the same time staying true to our message, staying nonpartisan, all that kind of stuff. I wouldn't say it's a drawback. It's just a challenge.”

The challenge was naturally greater for coalitions consisting of organizations with different issues that sought to bridge differences rather than merely collaborate. Mark, from *United for Change*, described the difficulties involved.

“The biggest problem was trying to come to a consensus around an issue or the fact that we couldn't come up with one issue, and we should organize around progressive ideals and not come up with a single issue.

Everybody in the world who came to a meeting felt that their issue was most important and it was to them, but every time we had a new meeting, there would be new people who would come who hadn't been to the previous meetings and who felt that they had all the answers-and that while we may be fairly intelligent people, we obviously hadn't thought of these things. So, we went around and around and around and again with a name...We met literally probably twenty hours of meeting time just dealing with - and on top of that, E-mails going back and forth coming up with names. Every time we came up with a name, somebody had a serious problem with it. We thought we were really close and then one person would come up with it and say, "Well, no. To our people, this means such and such." So, taking those things seriously, we said, "Okay, let's not use that." That happened so many times...we came up with *United for Change* as a compromise, and nobody was really satisfied with it but...We weren't getting any other organizing done and we were fighting so much about a name that we weren't doing anything else."

While choosing a name may seem a minor decision, embedded in the process of choosing a name was the need to decide how the group would define itself, how member organizations would present themselves to the public. This was a Herculean task in light of the varied backgrounds that the participating groups brought to the coalition.

In spite of what seems a paralyzing inability to reach consensus, it would be ill-advised to consider the obstacles faced by *United for Change* somehow less desirable than the pat support for youth political participation shared by the Winston-Salem coalition members, whose consensus arrived without these grueling discussions. Lichterman (2002) differentiates "social membership" from Putnam's (2000) "bridging" social capital and privileges the former, explaining that when organizations work together to define their relation to society it is difficult, but ultimately more valuable for civic renewal than the shallow ties organizations sometimes form with one another to get things accomplished. The struggle for meaning, the challenge of stepping back to visualize a broad, encompassing vision, like that which complicated *United for Change's* meetings, is important and productive in itself.

In the final analysis, the challenges of coalition work seemed acceptable to those that participated, or at least were understood to be outweighed by the benefits of forming alliances. As Lydia, from the *Freedom and Equality League* said.

“Coalitions take a lot of time, because it’s about people and getting people to agree and consensus building, as opposed to if you just have to decide yourself you have more autonomy and can usually get it done quicker. But in the end coalitions are more effective because it brings more people to the table, which has a greater impact on the social changes you’re trying to make.”

### **Enduring Social Networks**

In addition to temporary coalitions, the enduring social networks that materialized from the formal and informal interactions were another outcome of mobilization at the inter-organizational level. George, from *ABOLISH!* explained that the chance to work together with other groups active on similar issues created networks that would last.

“It was a good event for us to connect with other anti-death penalty groups from outside of Pennsylvania...they were really good groups to work with, really good staff people...I worked very closely and got to know a number of people at *LIFE* who I hadn’t known before and got to work with. They are focused on much more of a national level and that helps for us to be presented on more of a national level. Afterwards we were like, ‘We will definitely have to work on stuff in the future planning major events like that.’”

While the *Young Adult Voter’s Association* was in a task-oriented coalition, rather than a coalition of groups initially working on the same substantive issue, Suki shared similar sentiments.

“I got to meet a lot of people and that was great and I got to learn about a lot of organizations in the Boston area and statewide and that was also great and that opened a lot of relationships for the future to possibly work together on different kinds of events and coordinate different things in the future.”



Enduring networks emerged out of the less focused, multi-issue coalitions as well. Brenda, from *Stand Up St. Louis* explained that many of the largely white, anti-corporate groups had hoped to link up with groups working on racial issues to create a broader based movement. She felt as though that goal was at least partially accomplished through their collaboration during the debate and that the connections these groups established would endure beyond the debate activity.

“There was a big demonstration the weekend after ours [at the debate] on police brutality and a lot of *Stand Up St. Louis* activists went to that and have started going to meetings of those folks and of the predominantly African-American coalitions. I think this will, I hope this will continue.”

For many organizations active around the campaign events, these emergent networks were an unintended side effect of participation, but for others the potential to establish these networks acted as a powerful incentive to participate. Victoria explained that it was precisely the anticipated presence of other organizations around the convention in Los Angeles that led *Feminists for a Socialist Future* to put forth extra effort.

“We gave a lot of time to organizing around the convention because we saw it as a prime opportunity to build coalitions with other organizations. I mean, *FFSF* is not going to bring a revolution all on our own. We need to build something larger than one organization and we knew this would be a chance to meet others who are unhappy with the current situation politically, socially, and economically in this country. We wanted to be heard, but really I'd say our primary goal was to develop relationships with other groups in LA and also with groups nationally.”

For her organization, the opportunity to network served as a significant pull factor for participation. When asked why the debate seemed an opportune time to become more vocal,

Harry, from the *Northeast Union of Professionals* shared similar sentiments.

“We felt that a national political focus was going to be on the campus, that created a venue for us to organize in such a way that we could develop allies, resources, strategies, experience, that we could then take into

organizing after the debate was over. And that in fact has happened. We have a ton of coalition partners now that we did not have before we started out - all as a result of this organizing.”

The conventions and debates provided an opportunity for associations to attempt to reach the candidates and/or delegates and the general public, but as a result of its ability to draw out politically concerned organizations, they also provided opportunities for associations to attempt to reach out to one another.

Members frequently indicated that these enduring networks were the greatest accomplishment of their mobilizations. While many shared this opinion, Greg, from the *Land and Life Protection League* perhaps explained most passionately.

“...This is where this stuff really happens with the networking and the allies and you know, like I said, you can't have 50 demonstrations around the country on a month's notice unless you have developed trust and relationships with the groups who are actually going to organize those demonstrations. So, that was worth its weight in gold for sure. Finding the - it's just sort of being in that kind of intense kind of crucible kind of situation where there is a lot going on and inevitably you are just deepening personal relationships with people and then to sort of have that as a foundation makes it a lot easier to kind of talk about specific campaigns and issues. So, groups that I knew we would want to be allies with - it helps when I am sitting with the guy who is the director for three days and you know we are leaning on each other's shoulders because we are exhausted. Once you have been through such a major effort and worked well together, you can call on that person. They trust you and you know that you are dealing with someone who will take you seriously and give you a listen because they now know you are a person of substance.”

The *Land and Life Protection League* is based in San Francisco, but came all the way to Philadelphia to participate in a variety of coalition-organized activities, as well as to coordinate their own event with the support of local activist organizations. Consequently, the convention provided an opportunity for meaningful collaboration with activists and organizations based in the East, rather than shallow surface networking. Greg valued these ties because he felt they would help his organization in the future.

## **Conclusions**

Mobilization provided the associations in my sample with critical instrumental and communicative opportunities to build stronger organizations. With the exception of most of the national citizen groups, the preparation and performance of campaign-related activities presented an occasion for members to develop relationships with one another and to acquire an increased sense of commitment to the group itself, rendering mobilization a potent force for generating internal social solidarity and group cohesion. The organizations benefited instrumentally as well, helping many organizations to increase their bases of support, promoting the literal expansion of the organization. Unfortunately, associations coordinating events around the major campaign stops often found that the resources devoted to these nonroutine endeavors often came at the expense of other organizational priorities.

Some coalitions formed between organizations active around the same social or political issues or to accomplish a shared goal, while other alliances emerged between organizations with wide-ranging axes of association and agendas. The tenacity of these relationships hinged not only upon the impetus for interaction, but also upon the type of campaign event targeted. In spite of the logistical and ideological challenges that arise out of coalition work, the potential for inter-organizational collaboration served to motivate involvement and helped associations maximize their effectiveness. Many saw the enduring networks that often emerged from the coalitions as the highlight of the mobilization process. The subsequent chapter explores the many ways in which other organizational goals were thwarted, and helps to illuminate why these connections stood out as the crowning achievement.

## **Chapter Conclusions: What the Campaign Reveals About Civil Society**

Based on the bleak assessments of Putnam (1995; 2000), Skocpol (1999b), and others concerned with the plight of contemporary civic life, one would expect to find little in the way of sociopolitical participation, even in the face of a presidential campaign (after all, as Putnam (2000) reminds us, voter turn out suggests a level of disaffection that is difficult to overlook), yet I am unable to reconcile the effervescent communities that hosted the major campaign events with these dour accounts. Even accepting this environment as uniquely provocative, the effort and commitment of these associations trouble Putnam's and Skocpol's conclusions by constructing a portrait of engagement so bold that we are beckoned to ask what part of the story remains untold and, upon deeper examination, revealing that new forms of civic engagement take different shapes, which while harder to quantify, are not without value.

Without question, contemporary civic engagement may be harder to see than the forms popular at mid-century. While national citizen groups and trade unions still create concrete boundaries between members and nonmembers, the other associations in my sample very often did not. This was, in part, a self-conscious effort to remain more open. Even when a strong sense of collective identity was present, many participants did not consider membership to be an accurate or relevant descriptor. The critics, of course, are still correct: memberships in voluntary associations *have* declined over the last 50 years, but the reduction in formal memberships may not necessarily correspond to a decline in real involvement. Certainly, I am not claiming here to be able to prove otherwise, but rather to suggest that we reserve judgment until more comprehensive research is carried out.

My personal assessment of the impact of the new trends in civic engagement is not overly pessimistic. The aforementioned reluctance to define individual relationships to voluntary associations as "membership" is one manifestation of the fluidity exhibited by contemporary civic involvements, as is fluidity in the form of freely forming temporary coalitions, and in the form of newly emerging associations (in response to the campaign). This multi-faceted fluidity brings with it new possibilities for civil society. Unlike fixed, insular groups of members, this fluidity provides new spaces for participants to interact with a variety of people, and thereby the potential to establish norms of reciprocity, trust, cooperation, and tolerance of difference.

The rise of national citizen groups appears to have more complex implications for civil society. These groups offer little in the way of palpable member involvement: members were often not present at the events coordinated by these groups or were present only incidentally. At the same time, these organizations created valuable spaces for political education and dialogue. As a result, it would be misguided to understand them as antithetical to civil society. National citizen groups live up to the Tocquevillian vision by countering the powerlessness of individuals that so deeply worried him. And while these groups are not factories of social solidarity and community for those who join, they provide venues for public dialogue and serve as a voice for aggregates of individuals concerned about specific issues.

Professionalization, like the rise of the national citizen group, need not be equated with the degradation of associational life. Professionals played an important part in coordinating the open, interactive forums created by the national citizen groups. The labor-intensive efforts required to plan and publicize such events might have intimidated

lay participants or volunteers holding down their own employment. More importantly, the presence of professionals did not preclude meaningful nonprofessional involvement. Professionals and nonprofessionals related to one another in a variety of ways, in many cases integrating nonprofessionals in important ways. This indicates that the presence of professionals does not necessitate the disempowerment of nonprofessionals. Professional volunteer coordinators may enhance the opportunities available to participants and provide them with valuable personal support.

In addition to exploring the ground level impact of these new contours of civic engagement, this chapter sought to pinpoint the outcomes of mobilization at the level of civil society. If mobilization offers one gift to associational life, without question this gift is social solidarity. Except for the national citizen groups, "members" had occasion to work with others who shared their values and political commitments. For some participants, this meant meeting new people, while for others this meant increased interaction with people they had met or worked with in the past. In addition, shared experiences, the repeated articulation of the group's values and beliefs, the concretization of the group through the use of shared symbols (clothing, buttons, signs etc.), and the recognition of the group by nonparticipants served to construct or reaffirm a sense of collective identity and social cohesion. These relationships and sense of belonging in turn left the majority participants feeling a greater sense of commitment to the association. Internal connections thrived in this context.

This cultural development was also accompanied by more concrete gains. The public nature of the demonstrative activities in which most groups participated helped them to increase their bases of support and to gather personal and organizational

endorsements for specific initiatives being championed by the associations. These symbolic and instrumental opportunities helped to foster the development of the groups in my sample.

Importantly, the campaign events created opportunities for relationships to evolve between organizations in addition to those that formed internally between individuals. The attempt to engage a broader audience, to adopt a publicist orientation, motivated organizations to form alliances with one another in order to maximize their effectiveness. While in some cases collaborations formed out of raw utilitarianism (e.g., the ideologically opposed groups that gathered but avoided meaningful interaction), in most cases these ties can be understood as attempts made by partial public spheres of civil society to broaden discursive space by connecting with other communities of interest.<sup>54</sup> This is not to say that these groups were seeking some sort of assimilation into a general civil society. Indeed the opposite was true: the associations I encountered were committed to maintaining their own particular identities and to stay true to their internal values and beliefs. In fact, a desire to meet the diverse needs of coalition members is *precisely* why coalition work was so challenging and *precisely* why internal tensions simmered so close to the surface in the context of the televised debates. This desire to remain true to their internal concerns also explains why most groups that entered a coalition also coordinated their own individual efforts. In spite of the logistical and ideological challenges that arose as these alliances were negotiated, the presence of multiple active associations encouraged mobilization of additional groups and helped the organizations maximize their effectiveness.

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<sup>54</sup> Nancy Fraser rightly points out that this wider public, of which these groups understand they are a part is in actuality, an “indeterminate, counterfactual body” (1992: 124).

These lessons reveal that the normative vision of civil society was realized in three key respects. First, at the base level, the associations were, in fact, overlapping groups that were autonomous from state and market, which were freely entered by the participants.<sup>55</sup> Second, the associations actively promoted feelings of social solidarity and those values thought to accompany such sentiments (e.g., trust, reciprocity, tolerance). This was fostered by the intensity of the efforts as well as the fluid nature that pervaded so many organizations and coalitions. Finally, snapshots taken around the campaign events in these five communities depict the presence of the active and engaged populace necessary to render civil society meaningful. Streets, parks, and community centers teemed with people responding to the debates and conventions in various ways. The mobilization of civil society supported myriad voluntary social connections with organizations that served as spaces for citizens to participate in the political process.

The campaign context complicates our understanding of why associations form. While Tocqueville envisioned groups of individual citizens coalescing around shared interests, this research shows that coalitions, which can be understood as *supra*-voluntary associations, can form between groups with differing interests as well as between those with a shared commitment to a particular issue or ideal. While Lichterman (2002) and Putnam (2000) both value these inter-organizational relationships, coalitions between organizations with differing interests pose new challenges. First, as *United for Change* illustrates, when disparate interests attempt to locate a common voice, through attempts to accommodate all and offend none, this process may yield little of substance and consequently disempower the participants by effectively silencing their concerns.

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<sup>55</sup> The only exceptions to this rule were the members of *United Trades* who are automatically enrolled if they become employed in a union shop.



Second, coalitions comprised of organizations with different interests may develop only thin commonalities that are vulnerable under pressure. Such was the case of the Boston coalition that formed around a need to have some sort of protest around the debate, but collapsed when this surface agreement was no longer able to conceal important ideological differences.

The presence of nonprofit professionals complicates another tenet of the normative vision of civil society – that of egalitarianism. Even where professionals and nonprofessionals worked together with mutual respect, these status differences color the relationship and the interactions that flow from those interactions. For example, while Brian from *Inequality Forever* had extensive autonomy, this autonomy was granted, albeit willingly, by a staff that actively strives to maintain nonhierarchical relations. Because I have argued that professionals serve an important role and can work collaboratively with nonprofessionals, I feel it is worth considering how current normative ideals might be restructured to allow a place for the many organizations that operate with such distinctions. In other words, rather than denying the contributions of these organizations to civil society, we must reconsider what qualities the institutions and organizations that fill this space must possess to further democracy and the development of community.

Interestingly, while the interpersonal and inter-organizational ties that these associations cultivated shine out as their most pronounced achievement, in most cases they were not the primary motivation for mobilization. The majority of groups sought to mobilize because they hoped to provide an alternative voice or to capture the campaign moment to either thrust their issues into the public eye or to reach people who are

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politically minded. Implicit in all these goals and ever-present in the interviews was an interest in reaching the “general public.” usually in hopes that the public would help them (ultimately) force politicians to address their concerns. This desire taps directly into an element of the ideal of civil society that I have yet to address; whether these associations were, in fact, able to act on behalf of their members as guardians against the state as they desired. This can only be addressed by exploring the complex relationship between voluntary associations and the public sphere.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**MOBILIZED CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE:**  
**WHAT THE CAMPAIGN REVEALS ABOUT THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

With a firmer understanding of the impact of mobilization on voluntary associations, I now push to look further, to consider the relationship between this unusual dynamism in civil society and the public sphere with which it is so deeply entwined. The term public sphere is used to describe the practice of public discussion of matters of common concern as well as the social spaces that generate (and are generated by) such discussion. The much-debated normative vision of the public sphere established by Habermas involves rational-critical debate over matters of common concern bearing the characteristics of symmetry, reciprocity, and reflexivity. In other words, all those impacted by the issues must be included in the discussion, the statements of all participants must bear equal weight regardless of the status of the speaker, and those participating must be open to allowing the weight of the strongest argument to influence their opinions. Although such discussions may emerge in many spaces, Habermas argues that disparate discussions on the same topic need to be integrated such that a broader communication can take place between all those affected.

As Chapter 3 illustrated, the vast majority of associations in this study sought to communicate with a broader audience through their action around the campaign events. This pursuit of publicity can be read as an attempt to connect their partial public spheres to a broader, mainstream public sphere or to connect with other partial publics coalescing around similar issues, in order to prompt and participate in a wider dialogue, as Habermas desires. Dayan and Katz (1992) argue that media events, such as presidential debates and conventions, focus public attention on a specific set of issues, activating debate. This

further suggests that the campaign events might facilitate an approximation of the improbable, all-encompassing dialogue that Habermas idealizes. Even if the idea of a public discussion between all those affected by an issue remains counterfactual, these moments, with their plethora of active voluntary associations creating spaces for public political talk and increased media attention to politics, may provide the closest approximation of such a vision.

This chapter explores the public sphere at this unique crossroads, paying particular attention to the often-overlooked relationship between voluntary associations and the public sphere. While the presidential campaign was ripe with potential for meaningful public discussion of matters of common concern, the discourse was severely limited by the associations' inability to garner meaningful publicity, the isolation of political figures, and, perhaps most surprisingly, by the organizations themselves.

### **Voluntary Association Contributions to Public Discourse in the Campaign Context**

Although the majority of this chapter illustrates that the public discourse that voluntary associations active around the major campaign events hoped to inspire was limited in several significant respects, I wish to begin by proposing that the heightened activity within civil society did successfully promote the creation of a public sphere in two important respects that mirror Habermas' definition of the term public sphere. Habermas argues that a public sphere is both a form of discourse and the physical spaces that facilitate such communication structures (Habermas 1989 [1962]). In terms of promoting the types of discussions that Habermas envisioned, many associations were able to create spaces for the public political talk that is so often absent from everyday life

(Eliasoph 1998) through the events they created. In terms of creating a public sphere in a more concrete sense, public spaces were often transformed into arenas of political interaction by virtue of the immense number of associations active and activities planned. These discursive opportunities and politicized arenas offered environments in which people had occasion to develop shared interests and to practice public mindedness.

### **Setting the Stage for Public Political Discussions**

Some of the organizations held events that deliberately sought to generate public discussions about matters of common concern amongst those in attendance. The forums for such dialogue came through the efforts of national citizen groups on the one hand and select grassroots organizations that prioritized attendee involvement on the other. The efforts of these groups made contributions to public sphere discourse that are worthy of recognition, but rarely explored (Jacobs 2002). Those who have investigated the role of voluntary associations in the public sphere, such as Watt (1991) have understood them as relatively impotent entities in terms of fostering public discourse, but the campaign setting reveals that many associations focused on developing precisely such interaction.

### **National Citizen Groups and Public Discourse**

National citizen groups made meaningful efforts to foster public dialogue. Some organizations, such as *The Freedom and Equity League* and *EnviroLink*, held information-rich panels of high profile speakers intended to prompt concern about, and interest in, issues important to their memberships. These environments generally promoted unidirectional communication from perceived experts to perceived lay people. This form

of communication, while undoubtedly tainted by lack of symmetry and reciprocity, the absence of which Habermas would likely deem fatal flaws, still serves a dual purpose: encouraging attendees to enter a state of public mindedness and creating a shared referent for future dialogue. This common stock of knowledge, much as the shared information provided by mainstream and alternative media products, is essential for a public sphere to form and maintain itself.

While Habermas envisioned conversations taking place amongst all those potentially affected by the issues, he conceived not of one grand, unmanageable conversation, but rather a series of conversations connected through an integrating mechanism (Habermas 1989 [1962]). Similarly, when Fraser describes the contemporary feminist public sphere in the United States as an example of a public co-existing with a mainstream public sphere, she points to the many component pieces of this sphere.

“...with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, and local meeting places. In this public sphere feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality...” (1992: 123).

In this example, we see that in addition to a public sphere having a particular form of discourse, it must have a means by which this discourse circulates. A regularly meeting feminist group may generate a term such as “sexual harassment,” but without journals, conferences, and public lectures, such language cannot propagate and become accepted, modified, or contested.

Habermas’ vision is one in which discourse remains open, so that all concerned can contribute and respond to the contributions of others. The forums established by these national citizen groups, then, serve as spaces in which the interests and desires of

the membership can be circulated, prompting further dialogue. While many other groups hoped to stimulate discussion about their issues, these forums were unique because they provided a great deal of information (verbally via speakers as well as in print through the distribution of literature packages) to interested parties who elected to attend the events.

Speaker panels may fall short of the ideal-speech situation, but other events were designed to provide precisely the form of communication that Habermas envisioned. Interestingly, the oft-disparaged national citizen groups organized two of the three events that fall most squarely into this category. In Chapter 4, I described the cross-country bus tour organized by the *American Adult Network* to promote discussion of the issues impacting senior citizens that had emerged as significant in the presidential election, most notably social security and select health care issues. This was an important effort that sought to incorporate many into the discussion by holding free, open sessions in the outdoors, and by providing seating, games, and refreshments to enhance the accessibility of the gatherings and engage those present. These sessions were information-rich, but also interactive and participatory. Furthermore, by holding these sessions in multiple communities across the nation, the *American Adult Network* did some of this connective work, attempting to reach as many people for whom these issues were relevant as possible.

Public political discussion was also facilitated by the two, large, multi-day, multi-issue conferences held by *Citizen's Campaign Watch* (in collaboration with a handful of other sponsors) to coincide with the national nominating conventions in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. These free, nonpartisan, public conferences focused on three domestic issues absent from mainstream political discourse (economic inequality, campaign

finance reform, and drug policy). Each conference had entertainment and speakers (high profile public figures as well as "ordinary" individuals whose lives had been impacted by the issues on the agenda), but in addition, they also incorporated special break out sessions each day that were designed to encourage attendees to share their views and to discuss ways to enact change in their communities. *Citizens' Campaign Watch* also broadcast the conferences on the Internet and established conference chat rooms so that the events would be accessible to those unable to attend. On their website, the conferences were described as "engaged in the politics of ideas" and as attempting to "revitalize what has become a superficial political debate in America." In other words, in intent and form these conferences sought to foster public discourse over matters of common concern. They attempted to be inclusive, to circulate the outcome of the events, and to elicit feedback from those unable to attend. In addition, rather than advocating for a particular outcome (e.g., by being partisan in nature) the conferences remained open to speakers from different perspectives and fostered unrestrained discussion on these issues.

The irony is that the efforts undertaken by national citizen groups (e.g., the *Freedom and Equality League*, *Citizens' Campaign Watch*, and the *American Adult Network*), so often referred to pejoratively as "special interests," were among the most robust in terms of fostering civic engagement. The organizations were not focused exclusively on lobbying and seemed more concerned with fostering meaningful dialogue around their issues than in attaining shallow symbolic representation. These participatory discursive environments are perhaps more often associated with the activities of local, grassroots community groups - those organizations that seem to be most distant from national member organizations on the associational spectrum.



## **Grassroots Organizations and Public Discourse**

Some local, grassroots organizations also made an effort to create such associational spaces, albeit on a much smaller scale. In Chapter 3, I described the teach-in series held by *Students for Change* and the issues forum facilitated by *Stand-Up St. Louis*, both of which were intended to generate dialogue around issues that organization affiliates felt were not receiving adequate attention from the presidential candidates or in the mainstream news media (much like *Citizens' Campaign Watch's* conferences). These educational settings were participatory in nature and gave many individuals from Boston and St. Louis, who were not powerful in the traditional sense, a chance to share their experiences and viewpoints as panelists.

But perhaps the best example of a grassroots organization seeking to foster public interest and dialogue came from a tiny local organization in Boston called *Bootstraps*, which facilitated what they referred to as an "ethics hour." As mentioned in Chapter 3, a core member of *Bootstraps* divided attendees into small groups so that each could discuss a particular issue that figured prominently in the campaign discourse. The groups were provided with background information on their particular issue (e.g., social security) and the stance of both presidential candidates on the issue (presented in narrative form and accompanied by quotes from the candidates). Each group read through their information packets and then proceeded to have a discussion on the topic that was facilitated by a moderator. The goal was to help the participants gather adequate information to guide their political choices, rather than to sell the participants on a particular view. Ken, a core member from *Bootstraps* explained their interest in holding this particular event.

"Civic participation is exactly the type of thing we like to promote and increasing awareness around that and trying to get people excited about

dialogue and discussing issues and diversity of perspective is exactly the type of thing that we aspire to. so it [the ethics hour prior to the debate] was a natural thing.”

Ken even uses the language that we associate with the public sphere. One of *Bootstraps*' primary organizational motives is to generate public mindedness and rational, egalitarian debate. As an association they engineered this type of communication context by using the presidential debate as a catalyst.

### **Acknowledging the Contributions of Voluntary Associations**

In total, many of the associations active during the campaign contributed to a vital public sphere. In the case of *Bootstraps* and the *American Adult Network*, we see an effort to engage the mainstream public sphere, to weigh in or connect to issues already up for discussion in the presidential campaign. In the case of *Citizen's Campaign Watch*, *Students for Change*, and *Stand-Up St. Louis*, we see fledgling counterpublics emerging to formulate oppositional interpretations of electoral politics and to articulate the interests and needs that they felt were excluded from mainstream political discourse.

In his 1991 essay, David Harrington Watt concludes that in the contemporary United States, voluntary associations are unlikely to promote a thriving public sphere because he feels that they are cast too far from the Tocquevillian vision. Acknowledging the diversity of the associational terrain, Watt argues that the reason that voluntary associations fail to contribute is because those voluntary associations most likely to generate meaningful discourse tend to be those organizations without power or prestige. In drawing this conclusion, Watt fails to understand the full range of efforts of the more

powerful voluntary associations and simultaneously discounts the work of those associations that are community based and/or economically disadvantaged.

In many significant ways voluntary associations are indeed crippled in their ability to act as a tour de force in the public arena (I spend a great deal of time exploring these constraints in the following section), but an understanding of contemporary associations as completely impotent belies the limited, but meaningful ways that they are able to contribute. In other words, I do not want to overstate their capabilities, yet at the same time, it would be reductionist to overlook them.

Watt assumes that large, influential organizations fail to support meaningful discourse, which, at least in the campaign context, is an inaccurate assumption. Many national membership groups displayed an interest in creating such an environment, and were in a better position in terms of financial and human resources to organize, publicize, and support high-profile events capable of drawing participants. Then, in acknowledging the potential for smaller, less powerful organizations to facilitate such discourse, while simultaneously concluding that voluntary associations as a whole fail to contribute to a thriving public sphere, Watt devalues the dialogue that does transpire within many of these groups. In one broad brushstroke he erases the contributions of both types of associations.

The campaign may have provided a setting so unique that the contributions made by voluntary associations in this context would not appear under other circumstances, but I am skeptical that this is true. Most association representatives indicated that their organizations heighten their activity levels for a variety of reasons. The campaign is unique in its ability to serve as a catalyst for such a large number of diverse collectives.

but voluntary association mobilizations inspired by other phenomena (e.g., a particular public policy, a commemorative event, a community incident) have the potential to spark similar initiatives, even if they appeal to a narrower segment of the associational landscape. In light of the fact that the research at hand focuses on an admittedly exceptional moment, and that Watt reaches his conclusions without the empirical research necessary to adequately assess the discursive contributions of these groups, further research is necessary to reconcile these contrasting images.

### **Politicizing Public Spaces**

In addition to facilitating public sphere communicative forms, the voluntary associations active during the presidential campaign also played a role in creating partial public spheres by transforming public spaces into political arenas. As organizations sought to open themselves to outsiders, garner attention from the press, and collaborate with other groups, the majority physically moved themselves into public spaces. The conventions and televised debate sites had “official” demonstration sites available that attracted a number of groups, and many wealthier groups threw lavish parties at local restaurants and hotels, but the entrance of national political events into the cities in question brought political response to many unplanned locations as well. Parks, town squares, and public transportation stops were often used as places to convene or hold meetings, spaces to paint signs, and very often as settings to conduct the events themselves (e.g., street theater, marches, civil disobedience).

In this context, many often innocuous parks, community centers, public transit stations, and streets temporarily teemed with political fervor and interaction, becoming

public spheres rather than simply spaces of social interaction (e.g., a place to play Frisbee), atomized individuals (a place where people sit to read the paper or have a cigarette), or raw functionality (e.g., thoroughfares for commuting). In Los Angeles, the designated space for protest was a parking lot outside of Staples Center, where the convention was held. A stage was set up at the end of the parking lot closest to Staples Center and many groups took advantage of this space to hold rallies (e.g., *School Choice*, *Family Choice*), so that it was regularly in use. More interesting, however, were the nearby streets that came to life as various associations, formal and informal, small and large, came out. The following series of field note excerpts provide a sense of the ways in which the streets and sidewalks in the area, which are normally used as thoroughfares, became public spaces of political interaction (though I have omitted some sections, all of the excerpts presented below were taken during approximately a 90 minute time span).

“Down by Staples Center there is a group of young, white people holding two large banners. Each one looks like a DC license plate [they have been professionally printed rather than hand painted] and the first reads ‘NO TAXATION’ while the second reads ‘WITHOUT REPRESENTATION.’ They chant this as they pose for pictures. This group, like several others, is not in the protest area, but lines the sidewalk where the delegates and press enter [the convention site]. This week along the sidewalk there have been people selling bottled water and soda out of wagons and a few anti-abortion activists with very large color photographs. Today the DC tax folks have added to the mix along with a small group of 4-5 anti-gay protesters. One has a sign that says ‘God Hates Fags,’ another has a picture of Al Gore in black and white with a big pink triangle on his forehead. Another has a photo of Matthew Shepard and says ‘Matthew burns in hell.’ Most of these people carry two posters. One man shouts at passersby, “If you vote for Gore Lieberman, you vote for homos!” A young man, about 22, sits at a lone picnic table...He has several Gore magazines – *A Time*, a *Newsweek* etc. all with his photo on the cover. He looks at me and says, “They are frightening, aren’t they?” I replied, “pardon?” [I was uncertain whether he was referring to the magazines or the anti-gay protesters.] and he says, “These look like the same freaks from Matthew Shepard’s funeral.” We exchange a comment on the cruelty of doing so...The young man then asks a man with an anti-abortion sign

and a megaphone why he is wearing a face shield. The man is wearing a welder's mask and is shirtless. He replies that he has to protect himself from "people like you."

"A [flatbed] truck goes by advocating for clean disposal of nuclear waste via megaphone. It has a large [dumbbell shaped] object on it painted to represent nuclear waste"

"I see a truck parked with a tutorial on its side made up of step-by-step drawn images of how a partial birth abortion is performed"

"Around 4:30 pm someone skywrites NADER over downtown Los Angeles in unbelievably large letters. Several people stand at the corner looking up trying to see what the driver is writing. Moments later at the corner of Hope Street [and Olympic] 6 police cars go by, sirens on, with 4 officers in each car dressed in riot gear. Sirens can also be heard coming from other areas. I ask a police officer what has happened. He tells me something "big is going off right now" and that I should avoid the area. [I walk back toward Staples Center to find] Figueroa Street is filled with protesters. They are at a standstill – the police have formed a [human] wall between the majority of the protesters and the Staples Center parking lot where the protesters have a permit to stand [and the remainder of the group is currently clustered]"<sup>56</sup>

"The protesters [I estimate that there are about 800-1000 total] include the largest group of black block members I've seen, probably over 20 of them. They hold some kind of huddle/meeting under their banner in the middle of the street."

"I see several police related t-shirts. One popular shirt is black with gold lettering that reads, 'Danger, Police in Area'"

"Two men...approach me with a portable tape recorder and a disposable camera...[one] lifts the tape recorder to my face and asks what I think of the situation. Before I can respond he asks my name. I tell him and ask what he's doing. He says he is making his own impromptu, unofficial report and he wants to interview me."

"Six young women hold two banners. The first is black with bold yellow letters and reads 'DON'T.' The second reads 'VOTE.'"

"On the sidewalk, a young man in his early 20's hollers, "Stop! Police! Don't Move!" to a passerby who doesn't respond. The next passerby gets greeted the same way. This one grabs his outstretched hand, that is in the

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<sup>56</sup> I have not included the extensive notes about this standoff and its subsequent negotiation between protesters and police.

shape of a gun [he made a gun symbol with his thumb and index finger] and hollers back. "No! Don't hurt me officer, I'm nonviolent!" With that, two other young men join the one who initiated the situation in fake punching the "nonviolent" passerby. The mock victim falls to the ground dramatically saying, "Help me! Someone call the police! Wait these *are* the police!" as the three mock officers [pretend to] kick him in the stomach. An audience circled the four actors and begins clapping. The "beaten" protester stands and all four take a bow. Then the initiator says to the [mock] victim, "Hey – gotta love spontaneous street theater."

"A young white man with a big black afro hands me a flyer...he says it's for a student organization against corporate control of politics and the economy." August 16, 2000

These excerpts are intended to convey the flurry and diversity of activity present. They reveal that the streets around the center were politically charged and that interaction often found me (and presumably others) even when I did not seek it out. Although many pedestrians may have opted not to engage the activists in the streets, it would have been impossible to utilize this public space – to walk to work or run an errand in this area - without being engulfed, willingly or unwillingly, by the political forces that had entered these otherwise ordinary streets and sidewalks. Small groups were out in the street, a large march came through (organized by a major Los Angeles coalition that formed in response to the convention), flatbed trucks were employed to raise political issues, and in this unusual case, even the sky was politicized as a skywriter captured the attention of those below – all in the span of an hour and a half.

Public spaces far from the event locations were also politicized. In Boston, even though the University of Massachusetts, which is located far from downtown, hosted the debate, common areas in the heart of the city were similarly vibrant. The day of the debate I took the "T" downtown in order to find a march that was scheduled to take place.

but even before locating the march, I found clusters of politically active people immediately outside of the T stop and on the adjacent grassy area.

"I exit at Park Street by the Boston Commons and at the top of the stairs I hear drumming. As I step out, I see a large gathering of (mostly young) people, about 100 or more standing around. some erecting large banners. others greeting friends. It is a brilliantly sunny day and the mood is high. There are about 6 people, some shirtless, playing drums of various shapes and sizes. A small crowd forms around them. I see a group of *Inequality Forever* "Wealth Warriors"...three guys...and then three additional women. all dressed in elaborate gowns. One woman in a red dress passes out buttons. There is a large red banner - probably 7 feet by 8 feet that says, "Socialist Alternative supports Nader for President." Another banner. reads, "Rutgers Greens." Two women walk by in the nonconformist garb - pink hair, glitter, ratty clothing. One has a large American flag with a McDonald's M painted across it. They both have the McDonald's logo painted on their faces. Many people carry pre-printed 11 x 14 signs that say 'LET RALPH DEBATE' in green capital letters. A grey haired man holds a chalkboard that says, 'FREE SPEECH? SOLD OUT' on it. There is a large elaborately painted banner - like a mural - with several images on it. There are two pig faces, each with dollar signs in their eyes, united under one large top hat that says "Corporate Greed" on the band. Another part has a picture of a fisted hand and says, "Rise Up. Resist." Another section says 'planet for sale.' Another has a rendering of Mumia [Abu-Jamal] and says 'FREE MUMIA Free Leonard Pelletier.' Finally, there is a marijuana leaf that says 'Dare to Legalize it.' It is a nicely done mural. Very colorful. People are cheering. "Let Ralph Debate."

"The people with the large banners (as well as several others) are up on a grassy slope, with the rest of the group – Wealth Warriors, drummers, etc. on the flat sidewalk area below them. I walk up on the slope and meander around. I see a giant wedding cake made out of cardboard sitting on the grass. Two men and three women struggle to unroll long, vertical banners about the [plight of the] U'Wa people. They are painted on a vellium-like paper and can be held by an individual. The bottom of the posters say *Land and Life Protection League*."

"There is a festival feeling. Everywhere I turn there are skits or the drummers or big pieces of artwork. People are chanting, talking, it is very stimulating."

"Green Party people are everywhere, and it seems like even those who aren't there as green party members are calling for Nader to be allowed to debate. The Nader chants are loud and frequent. Nader buttons adorn



many backpacks and t-shirts, and signs bear his name. I pick up a flyer from a young, white man from the Massachusetts Greens and buy a newspaper from a young woman.”

“A law professor in a navy suit and red tie takes the megaphone. He grabs everyone's attention. He is from American University. He says the CPD [the Commission on Presidential Debates] is run by the parties that want to exclude and says our election is being stolen from us. The crowd supports him. He says the constitution guarantees equal time to those with 5% of the vote. He asks, "Where did 15% come from? The stork? Santa?"”

“A young man in a red t-shirt approaches me and tries to sell me a socialist alternative newspaper [which I buy]...He says that they support Nader and gestures to the large red banner.”

“A skit begins at the base of the slope. A giant 2-headed monster appears - with a Bush face and a Gore face. The puppet is about 10 feet high - with cardboard heads and a fabric body. A man operates the puppet from below. Someone says - eek no! Bush and Gore - corporate puppets, go away! The puppet goes through the crowd pretending to attack people. A woman in a long blue dress with a megaphone says, "Oh No! Bush and Gore you're so scary!" as the puppet descends on her.” October 3, 2000

The T stop had been designated as a gathering place and as such became a playful space where clusters of people from different groups could mingle. In these excerpts it is apparent that those convening were not necessarily like-minded (e.g., Greens and Socialists), but that the clusters did have an outward orientation (e.g., performing skits, distributing niche newspapers, holding posters, etc.). People likely gather in this area on a regular basis - waiting to meet friends, reading a paper, eating lunch - what differed was that the people who gathered in these spaces on October 3, 2000 were talking about politics.

### **Bystanders**

I found that in these cases many professionals on their way to work continued walking, either giving no indication that they saw anything out of the ordinary, or perhaps

sharing a laugh or an exasperated eye roll with a friend, but others did stop and take notice. In Philadelphia during *DISRUPT*'s civil disobedience, a relatively sizeable audience stopped to watch, including a construction crew working on a nearby building. People expressed interest in these events, often to me directly. Perhaps because middle aged white women such as myself are not thought of as threatening or perhaps because my being alone rendered me approachable, I was often asked questions by those on the outside. For example, in Boston, during the gathering just described I had the following interaction.

“A young black woman in a t-shirt and jeans, drinking a coolatta comes up to me and asks me what is going on. I tell her that they are protesting corporate control over politics and the fact that Ralph Nader was excluded. She asks me if the election is today. I tell her that it is November 7, but that the debate is today. She asks me if anyone can go to it and I tell her no, there were only about 50 seats for the public and that they were given away by lottery, but that it will be on TV tonight. She says she thinks she'll check it out and walks away.” October 3, 2000

But for the external orientation of groups such as *Inequality Forever*, the *Land and Life Protection League*, and the *Massachusetts Greens*, these public arenas might not have become spaces where people raise political issues with their associates and with strangers. No, watching a protest from the sidelines or inquiring about debate seating does not qualify as rational-critical discourse, but in a social-historical context in which public political talk is increasingly rare, and politics is saved for private spaces (Eliasoph 1998), the conversion of a public transportation stop, parking lot, park, or street into an arena in which people talk to each other about political matters is an unusual and meaningful event worthy of note.

## Conclusions

Although Watt (1991) understands voluntary associations as unimportant players in the public arena, in the context of the major presidential campaign events, the organizations in my sample made great effort to create events that encouraged meaningful discussion of political issues and were able to create spaces for public political talk by transforming public spaces into political arenas. Although existing institutions of civil society may fail to flawlessly engender the pristine forms of communication upheld as normative ideals and, as I show below, prove to be limited in a number of significant aspects, acknowledging their discursive achievements provides an important indication of capacities that may be underutilized in these institutional contexts.

Eliasoph (1998) and Lichterman (1999) demonstrate that political discussions are increasingly reserved for intimate discussions and avoided in public settings, so it is important to recognize the significance of the discursive spaces designed by the national citizen groups and grassroots organizations. Interactions such as those created in the *Citizen's Campaign Watch* conference break out sessions and the *Bootstraps* ethics hour are also likely to help individuals build civic skills (e.g., communication skills, organizing strategies) and to help socialize people into civic participation by introducing them to new organizations and helping them to develop interpersonal networks (i.e., social capital).

Similarly, the politicization of public spaces should be understood as providing opportunities for participants in disparate groups to learn about other organizations and interact with other politically minded individuals. For pedestrians, the transformations of

public spaces into political arenas may have a wide variety of consequences. Many may have interpreted these gatherings as inconvenient disruptions of their daily lives, or as a visually interesting break from the usual scenery, but it seems likely that for at least a subset of those who are generally disconnected from politics, these physical reminders may bring politics onto their radar. It is even possible that some who feel a sense of inefficacy could be motivated to act on their own political interests when confronted with the political liveliness of those that are already engaged.

Regardless, the discursive opportunities and politicized public spaces offer environments in which people have occasions to recognize shared interests and to practice public mindedness, both of which are meaningful contributions to public life. However, as I indicated earlier, I acknowledge these achievements with an awareness that such mention runs the risk of overstating their significance in the grander scheme of political life. The vast majority of Americans were not in these five cities during the campaign events and, because the efforts tended to be site-specific, only a tiny fraction of those who were in the vicinity are likely to have been touched by these efforts. The voluntary association contributions to public discourse rarely extended beyond these bounded events and gatherings because the impact of the organizational efforts was limited by a variety of forces, to which I now turn.

### **The Role of the News Media in Public Discourse Initiated by Voluntary Associations**

If we understand the various formal and informal voluntary associations as partial public spheres and simultaneously share Habermas' normative vision whereby democracy is furthered to the degree that public discourse about matters of common

concern is inclusive, then the significance of the mass media in general, and the news media in particular, as entities that promote inclusion by connecting the diverse conversations transpiring in widely dispersed micro and/or partial publics becomes clear. Atomized dialogue within various groups on any given issue, no matter how egalitarian the discourse, means little until these conversations are united in a broader community of interest.

Many voluntary associations in the sample hoped to transmit their messages to a broader audience by capturing the attention of the news media on location to cover the nominating conventions and presidential debates. These efforts were largely unsuccessful for three main reasons. First, coverage of voluntary association activities was extremely light. Less than half of the events that I attended were picked up by mainstream media outlets, and the vast majority of those that were covered suffered from thin coverage that failed to communicate their message fully. Second, as a result of prevailing journalistic values (Patterson 1993), the select news items that were lengthier and had the potential to provide the reader with more substantive detail emphasized form over substance, communicating the “where,” “what,” “when,” and “how” while glossing over the “who” and frequently omitting the “why,” which was the most important component from the perspective of the associations. Finally, journalists and activists often encountered communicative impasses whereby the communicative strategies of activists failed to coalesce with the professional objectives of news workers. As a result of these struggles, the potential contributions that voluntary associations may have made to public discourse were limited by an inability to ascertain issue oriented news coverage.

The organizations consequently had great difficulty broadcasting their message to the nonparticipants (and in some cases the political figures) who they hoped to reach.

### **Thin Coverage**

While the majority of organizations in my sample sought to thrust their issues into public discourse, their ability to reach the general public was limited to the extent that they relied on the news media. Many organizations worked diligently to recruit media attention, but were unable to do so for a variety of reasons. Some organizations were unable to get members of the mainstream news media to attend their events. The *Young Adult Voters Association's* debate watch party at the movie theater in Boston serves as an example. When I arrived, a greeter asked if I was with the press, gesturing to a media relations table that was supplied with information folders and a sign-in sheet. When I said that I was not, the disappointment was visible. Ultimately, a representative from a campus news service was the only person able to make use of the media center established by the organization. Cole, a core member, expressed frustration with this failed attempt to garner publicity.

“We worked it pretty hard with the press, but none of the damn TV cameras wanted to leave the damn protests [near the debate site] and come over there. That's why we didn't get any TV cameras at our event...They weren't into debate watching events. I don't know why. They just weren't into them...We tried to get media in Boston, but basically they didn't come...They wanted to be at the protests. Sensationalism, right? They wanted to be there when the cops and the protesters started going at it...I mean, seriously, it's cynicism, but I totally blame the press for that one. We had this incredible event going on, but they had limited cameras and wanted to be there for the protests.”

The *Young Adult Voters Association* employed a public relations firm to help them obtain media coverage in Boston, but was still unsuccessful. *Students for Change*, *EnviroLink*,

*School Choice/Family Choice*, the *National Union of Creative Artists*, and *MassCares* were among the other organizations that encountered similar obstacles. All of these groups solicited the media, but received no mainstream media representation at their events.

Other organizations were able to successfully attract the press to their events, but in the final analysis still failed to secure placement in a story on the televised news broadcasts or in the newspapers. This was the case for the *Land and Life Protection League's* comic "world's most destructive bank" award ceremony in front of the Citigroup office building in downtown Philadelphia (described in Chapter 3). When I arrived at the location of the event 15 minutes before its scheduled start, news crews with roving microphones and police were already present, even though participants were just beginning to set up and many had not yet arrived. As the "ceremony" began, I noted,

"Local news and national news are present in droves. IMC [the independent media center] is also there. Huge numbers of media personnel are present. There are probably 6 newswriters to 1 participant." August 2, 2000

I also observed microphones being placed on the podium, three different one-on-one interviews (each with separate reporters and participants), some of the ceremony speakers spelling out their names for the media audience without being asked, and the final speaker announcing that all presenters would be available for interviews. In spite of an incredibly successful public relations effort, the event spawned only a two-sentence comment in one newspaper article and gathered no television coverage locally or nationally, though both members I interviewed indicated that a story on their demonstration ran on CNN in Russia. In other words, attracting the news media does not necessarily result in coverage.

## **Lack of Depth**

Even those organizations that did garner publicity often found little depth to the stories in which they were featured. A review<sup>57</sup> of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the most prominent local paper<sup>58</sup> in each city (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Winston-Salem Journal*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) could create an inaccurate assumption that press coverage was relatively easy to attain. The events of almost half of the associations (13 of 29) in the sample were referred to in some way in at least one article. This appears promising, but belies the fact that there were actually very few total articles on voluntary association activities, particularly at the debates. Though the events of 13 organizations were referenced, many of these references came in the form of one broad survey article on extra-debate (or convention) activities in which several events were fleetingly (and sometimes vaguely) referenced in an effort to depict a broad picture of the environment surrounding the campaign event. For example, one brief (675 word) article in the *Winston-Salem Journal* described a menu of protest and included quick references to the activities of two organizations from my sample in addition to referencing seven other organizations. Obviously, such a brief article cannot provide depth about the activities of nine different groups, and without attention to the catalyzing issues it is impossible for the associations to thrust their issues, arguments, or alternatives into mainstream political discourse.

These compound articles are likely a response to constraints on both time and space faced by journalists writing in these activity-laden environments. The multiple associations had to compete for coverage with one another as well as with the news

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<sup>57</sup> Papers were reviewed on the dates of the events as well as the two days prior and the two days following, as described in Chapter 2.



generated by the campaign event itself. Dick, a journalist from the premier paper in a major metropolitan area explained his predicament.

"...the newspaper has a finite amount of space and even on the website, somebody still has to write it and we have a finite number of reporters to do things and all week there were lots of fights over space and length of stories in the newsroom. It always goes on to a certain extent, but it was very acute during this convention...So, we were given -- On a story that deserved to go 35 inches, they only gave me 18 inches, but that's the reality of the news business anyway. Everyone knows that. It just became more acute during this week because we all thought -- well we all *had* good stories."

Similarly, Kara, a reporter with a secondary newspaper in a major metropolitan area, had to eliminate a large amount of information from her stories.

"I was writing the stories all week [while team reporters in the field filed them back to her]. We had six reporters. Well, every reporter might file me 20-25 inches worth of copy and my news hole for the story was only 20 inches or 25 inches. So I would have to wade through like a hundred or a hundred and twenty inches worth of copy or whatever to pick out the best stuff."

In other words, depending on the amount of space or time a given journalist had available to them, this lack of depth may have been unavoidable.

### **Small Triumphs**

Perhaps because news coverage is so challenging to attain, association members often expressed satisfaction with even meager references. Jake, from *Rights Now* expressed such satisfaction.

"*The Washington Post* described it as - I can tell you what *The Washington Post* described it as..."The group staged one of the most focused and clever demonstrations of the week. " One of the most focused and clever demonstrations of the week. *Washington Post!* I mean, you know, you can't complain about that..."

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<sup>58</sup> Based on circulation

Jake was very excited to be in the paper, even though the beach party thrown by *Rights Now* received only 2 sentences in a longer article on a variety of protests. While members may find it personally gratifying to have their association's name mentioned in the paper, a passing reference to a list of voluntary associations in an article that fails to probe their issues is highly unlikely to force their concerns onto a national political agenda or to impact public discourse. It is not that these small victories are worthless, certainly symbolic representation is validating and has benefits, but in light of the intensive effort expended and the degree of importance the organizations placed on media coverage, I was repeatedly surprised by the degree to which faint glimpses of coverage served as cause for celebration.

### **Breaking Through the Clutter: "Newsworthy" Organizations**

Overall, coverage of voluntary association efforts around the major campaign events was extremely thin. Many organizations failed to garner publicity and those who did make their way into the newspaper or onto the televised news rarely received more than a couple lines of text. However, the events of four organizations in my sample were able to attract more substantial attention from the press. These organizations were *DISRUPT*, *Citizens' Campaign Watch*, *United for Change*, and *Inequality Forever*. The key to the success of these particular organizations lies in the interests and objectives of news workers.

Journalists make constant assessments of what is newsworthy that are influenced by standards in the discipline.<sup>59</sup> Most aspiring journalists learn many elements can render

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<sup>59</sup> These are the prevailing journalistic values and standards. There are some within the industry who advocate for a different set of values. Proponents of "public journalism," also known as "civic journalism."

an occurrence newsworthy, in particular: *timeliness* (events that have just happened are generally more newsworthy than events that happened in the past), *proximity* (events that take place closer to home are generally more newsworthy than events that are remote), *impact* (events that impact a greater number of people are generally more newsworthy than events that touch fewer lives), *prominence* (the actions of celebrities are generally more newsworthy than the events of non-celebrities), *conflict* or *drama* (confrontation is generally more newsworthy than agreement), and *oddity* (the unusual is generally more newsworthy than the expected) (Gans 1980; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992; Potter 1996; Shoemaker and Reese 1991). Although all the events I attended were equally timely, and the proximity factor was removed from the analysis by including the local paper in each city, the remaining four indicators figured prominently in the minds of the journalists I interviewed.

Events perceived to have an impact on a large number of people were popular with journalists covering the major campaign events. In the campaign event context, impact was interpreted two ways. First, members of the news media sought to cover events that would impact people in the community. For example, Diane, a producer for the national news arm of one of the major television networks, shared her understanding of what the public wants in the news.

“The interest people have...and this has nothing to do with the news or my job, but I do feel that in America these days, there’s less sympathy for these protestors and there is less empathy with any of these people who have a cause. They’re very much marginalized by not only the news

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advocate for an approach to news in which journalists: 1) understand readers/viewers as participants in public affairs (rather than as passive spectators), 2) help citizens to act on social issues, even by investigating possible solutions that have yet to arise, 3) work to improve public discourse, and 4) act as liaisons between citizens and leaders, listening to community members and raising their concerns with those in positions of political power. For more information on public journalism see Haas and Steiner (2001), Lambeth, Meyer, and Thorson (1998), and Rosen (1999).

organizations but by the viewers. So, while there's interest, there's more interest like, "What's going on in the streets? Why is there traffic blocked? Why can't I get to work?"

Diane felt it was important to cover events that were going to impact the day-to-day lives of those watching. While the issues interested her personally, Diane did not perceive her viewers as interested in what the protesters had to say. Instead, she felt her audience would be more concerned with the effects of the protest on their personal lives.

Impact also came into play when journalists described their interest in covering events that involved a large number of people. Brooke, a reporter with the major paper in a small city explained,

"Unfortunately a group of 10 or 12 isn't necessarily newsworthy. It's not a large enough percent of the population; they don't really have enough mobilization. So, it is really hard for us to devote space to something like that when you may have an alderman meeting or something that is of more local interest to more people.

*What type of thing would you want to devote space to?*

The more people that are the more vocal – that is definitely something that newspapers look for. If you have 500 people taking over a local square, well, that's really hard to ignore. Five people taking over a local square is going to be forgotten in five minutes."

Brooke and several other journalists with whom I spoke differentiated between events in which only a few people were involved and events in which large numbers of people were involved, the latter of which was understood as having an impact (or the potential to have an impact) while the former was understood as insignificant. When I asked journalists how a citizen group could attract the attention of the news media, having a large number of people was often the first suggestion offered. This is consistent with the findings of Oliver and Myers (1999) and McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith (1996) who

compared permit applications and police reports to event coverage and found size to be an important predictor.

In terms of prominence, when high profile people and organizations were present at association events, this often compelled journalists to attend and, in some cases, to write stories. When asked what types of things attract his attention, Shane, a reporter for a national news magazine explained,

“It’s a tough call, but generally for me, and most journalists, they look for events that are going to involve a lot of people and that are going to have some sort of controversial edge to them or, sort of sadly, some sort of sex-appeal to them. So, if you have a bunch of Hollywood stars at a Ralph Nader rally [in reference to an event held in Boston that Shane attended], that’s going to draw folks.”

Similarly, when Amber, a journalist with a city paper for a mid-sized metropolitan area, explained what prompted her to attend a panel on the death penalty, she revealed an interest in the high profile public figures that were present,

“They were trying to expose journalists to different types of thinking about the death penalty instead of, “It’s just wrong.” Like, their topic was, it was very academic, but it was on why the death penalty is anti-democratic. So, they were looking at a different angle for exposing it. Jesse Jackson spoke and Jonathon Kozol, you know, big names.

*Do you think they accomplished what they were hoping to accomplish?*

I think so, although then later when other groups, you know, went out into the streets and things, that sort of detracted from their message. Like in the media, that whole night on TV, it was showing people lined on the streets instead of you know, were it a peaceful day that probably would have been the top news story, you know, Jesse Jackson.”

While her comments point to the power of drama, which I will address below, they also indicate that what she perceived to be newsworthy about the panel she attended was not the new way of thinking about the death penalty to which the handful of sponsoring

organizations sought to expose journalists, as much as the presence of Jesse Jackson. In “normal” times his presence alone would have been enough to be a top news story.

Certainly, the press is frequently critiqued for sensationalism, and many news organizations take these concerns seriously, but at the same time, conflict and drama are widely accepted in the profession as newsworthy. When Nick, a reporter for the public radio station in a major metropolitan area described the way he creates a news story, the importance of conflict and drama are apparent.

“You sort of start by setting up a story about a particular person and then somewhere close to the top [of the story] you start talking about what the story is about, sort of the broad themes, and then lay out conflicting lines of thought on a particular subject and bring them to some sort of particularly tense conflict where there really are contradictions and the contradictions are made apparent to people and you have to choose between one or the other and then sort of bring it to a resolution. That is the model we use, it’s a cliché, but it’s our model.”

Because he is speaking about his general approach to putting together a news story, it is apparent that, for Nick, conflict and its resolution is a fundamental component of any story.

In addition to creating tension in stories that may not be explicitly about conflict, many of the journalists I spoke with expressed an interest in covering more overt conflicts. Jim, a state level journalist for a major wire service described his interpretation of an afternoon of citizen activity that he observed prior to one of the debates.

“They [the coalition] did some like street theater where they said now we’re going to show a real democratic dialogue and everybody in the group, get somebody and sit down with them and talk about things. And then, we’ll give you 20 minutes to do that. Then get up and tell the whole group, you know, what agreement you came to. You know, like if you were an enviro, you know, grab somebody from another group. Well, the thing of it is, you know, they are all left wing. I mean I know that, they know that, so does everybody standing there. And so they go down and sit and talk for 20 minutes and then they get up and make little speeches.

And the impact of that? You know, nobody is going to hang around and listen to all of that. I stayed there only because I was on punch watch, you know, if anybody is throwing any punches or gotten out of hand or tried to burn the place, well then I had a story. Otherwise nobody cares what a bunch of folks, who are pretty much cut out of the same cloth, sit around and agree on.”

Jim expresses an interest in covering violence, but also a lack of interest in agreement. He clearly would be most interested in physical conflict of some sort, but implicit in his remarks is the idea that even verbal conflict would be more interesting than the theater and public dialogue he observed which failed to capture his interest. Jerry, a reporter with a secondary newspaper in a major metropolitan area shared similar feelings.

“...you have to judge what the story of the day is [during the convention] and the story was never, “What did this group say about freeing Mumia?” or corporate influence, because those were frankly, and my paper tends to agree with this, we don’t see that stuff as news, it’s not anything new, it doesn’t surprise anyone, we’ve heard most of these arguments, you either buy them or you don’t. So, the story was...are these protesters doing anything like what happened in Seattle and for the first Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, they were not. They were peaceful, relatively peaceful. And then I looked at and reported a little bit of what they were saying. You have to give some context for why these thousands of people were milling about the street, which is kind of hard to do...you kind of have to come up with two boiler plate paragraphs to say who these people are and that they are sort of a continuation of this movement, but the main story is are these people disrupting the city or the convention...”

So even though this is a case where activists with grievances were out to mount a challenge to existing circumstances, which can certainly be understood as a form of conflict, the issues or the motives of those protesting weren’t interpreted as news, because Jerry was looking for conflict in a more concrete sense.

Other journalists acknowledged the newsworthiness of conflict, but seemed more self-conscious of the ramifications of prioritizing the dramatic. When asked what she

would recommend to a citizen group trying to attract publicity. Kris, a reporter from a local paper in a moderately sized city responded.

“Shut down a highway, I don’t know...maybe having a forum and generally handing out information that is educational and really says “This is why we are here, this is why this is a concern. this is why it should be your concern.” That would maybe be effective at drawing media, but on the other hand we didn’t cover that type of stuff tonight [the night of a debate] and if someone shuts down a highway, that would definitely get your attention. The problem is then you are going to tick off a lot more people. I don’t know if the media would so much go for a forum, but it would be effective. I don’t know. It’s sort of a catch 22.”

Kris recognizes the way that less dramatic events get passed over, while simultaneously understanding the limitations that come with confrontational strategies. Franklin, from *United Trades*, shared the voluntary association point of view of this conundrum:

“If I’m giving an interview and something is happening down the street where somebody is sitting and blocking traffic, they [the news media] are more interested in that than what I had to say.

*Do you think there is a better strategy to get coverage?*

You can always get press coverage by creating civil disobedience or things like that but then again in these days the issue becomes convoluted and you’re made out to be nothing but a pain in the ass that ties up traffic for two hours. The issue sometimes never gets across...”

Both journalists and activists recognize an inherent challenge, though neither proffers a solution.

If these references seem one sided, talking exclusively about protest coverage, this is not a coincidence. Some action strategies were more effective than others, and conflict and drama were so highly prized that many of the journalists were unable to comment on the less dramatic events. This is consistent with the findings of Oliver and Myers (1999) who found an “enormous” contrast between coverage of conflictual and consensual issues. They elaborate, “At least by way of a public event, it appears



relatively difficult to obtain media coverage to promote good health, education, charity, or positive community relationships.” This explains, in part, the inability of voter associations and groups such as *School Choice*, *Family Choice* to attract media attention.

Journalists were not assigned to cover events that lacked conflict or drama and did not concern themselves with these type of activities. Juan, a journalist from the leading paper in a major metropolitan area explained,

“See—the indoor activities—panel discussions—we wouldn’t cover.

*Why?*

Because it’s not that interesting. It’s not a traditional story in a sense that something new is happening; something that involves a large group of people is happening; something that sort of interrupts the flow of daily life is happening. Panel discussions happen all the time. You know, universities have workshops, have conferences on different subjects and we don’t cover those. If something unusual comes out of them, we would; but we’re not just going to cover a conference to cover a conference. People don’t turn to the newspaper to get results of sort of the latest academic thought. That’s not why they pick up a paper.”

Juan recognizes that other publics operate that provide space for such dialogue (i.e., academic publics replete with their own journals, conferences, lecture series, etc.) and that the readers of mainstream newspapers are simply not in search of such information. In light of this, it becomes obvious why more intellectually oriented events such as the ethics hour held by *Bootstraps*, the teach-ins organized by *Students for Change*, and the issues forum facilitated by *Stand-Up St. Louis* failed to garner publicity. They were not interpreted as newsworthy according to modern journalistic standards.

Oddity, or those happenings that represent a break from the ordinary, is also considered an indicator of newsworthiness. The journalists I interviewed often referenced

amusing or surprising events as those that were among the most likely to capture their interest. Brooke described one such gimmick.

“I have seen some things -- at the rally [a large debate watch event] they [a voluntary association] had a guy who was dressed up like a shark. It makes you pause and ask why are you dressed like a shark? You can kind of catch attention with wacky costumes. It may sound trite, but anything that will get the reporter to stop and say, you know, “this is kind of odd looking, I’d better check into it.” and usually when our interest is piqued, that’s when a reporter will say, “well this is kind of weird and off the wall, but it’s a quirky little interest story.”

Similarly, when I asked Naomi, a journalist and an editor for a national political magazine, if she had encountered any groups that captured her attention, she said,

“Yeah, from the article you can see that I thought that the Goats with Votes [the dancing, singing, anti-economic inequality group referenced briefly in Chapter 3] were really amusing and also were really very effective at getting -- they had a couple of different messages -- but were really effective at getting their message out.

*What did you like about them?*

I mean they were very colorful. Very – I mean you immediately noticed when they were there and I think also because they were just having so much fun. I found in Los Angeles people were really angry and things like that, but in Philadelphia, particularly those puppeteers, were just having a whole lot of fun with it. They found really clever ways to get their message out, so I really liked that and they were musicians too, so it was good. People respond to music.”

For Naomi, this eccentric approach was captivating and warranted coverage; she included a description of them in her (magazine) article, along with a photo and some of their lyrics. In many arenas peculiarity is weak currency, but innovation and oddity are attractive to journalists and acted as an advantage to those who employed them in this competitive environment.

In the campaign event context, so many viable news stories are available that in order to obtain coverage, organizations active in this setting had to go above and beyond their traditional media efforts in order to stand out. Dick explained,

“...during a busy time like a convention, all the rules change somewhat, because you have so many people competing for attention. So, a citizen group in any normal time of the year – I mean I’m not going to tell them what their message should be, they have their cause and that’s great, but they simply need to frame it in a way that makes sense to people (and to a certain extent it is true that conflict or drama does help get someone’s attention and I think that is an issue of human nature, we pay attention to bad things or to drama or to crisis or something, and journalists are no different than anyone else) or there has to be some compelling part of it, something other than just standing up and saying, “We should save all greyhounds after the race track.” I mean, that by itself is different, but that by itself does not get attention and that’s just the way it is. During the convention that problem is just magnified tenfold because there are so many more groups vying for attention.”

In light of the stiff competition for limited “news holes,” making the media aware of an event or even getting journalists to attend was often not enough to generate publicity. The four organizations that successfully broke through the clutter and were most effective at securing coverage were organizations that journalists interpreted as newsworthy along several of the axes that I have just described (impact, prominence, conflict, oddity).

### **Success Stories**

*DISRUPT* was without question the voluntary association that attracted the most publicity. The preparations for civil disobedience, road blockades, arrests, and the subsequent fall out generated 14 print stories in the newspapers I analyzed (three of which were in the national publications), and local television news coverage on all 3 major networks in Philadelphia. The disruptive civil disobedience efforts were effective

at generating publicity because they had several characteristics that rendered them newsworthy. First, because *DISRUPT* had thousands of participants involved in blocking six important traffic arteries during rush hour, the civil disobedience had an impact on a large number of people. Convention delegates needed to know if and how they could get to the convention site, and the commute of uninvolved workers and residents of Philadelphia was also impacted, rendering the disturbance an important news story. In addition, the events offered drama because of the conflict between the protesters and the police who dismantled the blockades and arrested participants. A roadblock clearly necessitates police intervention, but even in peaceful legal marches and events journalists indicated that they kept a close eye on relations between protesters and police in case any flare-ups were to emerge.<sup>60</sup> Finally, these events were newsworthy because they were unusual. The disruptions themselves were, of course, uncommon, but the people who participated in them were also unusual. Many participants, though by no means all of them, had nose rings, tattered clothing, tattoos, brightly colored hair, elaborate signs, makeshift musical instruments, and so on.<sup>61</sup> In other words, the *DISRUPT* participants were unusual people doing unusual things. These three characteristics: impact, conflict, and oddity, made the event very attractive to the news media.

The conference in Los Angeles held by *Citizen's Campaign Watch* generated 6 news stories, paling in comparison to the 14 written about *DISRUPT*, yet surpassing all other associations in the sample. This conference was understood as newsworthy

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<sup>60</sup> While journalists awaited these "potential events" (Jacobs 1996), voluntary association members often struggled to prevent their emergence. Many organizations that held legal events in public spaces (e.g., *Rights Now* and *Feminists for a Socialist Future*) had "peace keepers," which were members of their organizations that created a buffer line between activists and police escorts. They were present to prevent conflict or tension between the two groups, because the organizations were aware that any police/protester tensions would appear in the news, potentially stealing their message and helping people to discredit them as violent or radical.

primarily because of the prominent people involved with the event. A few high profile individuals and national organizations were involved in its inception and did publicity work on behalf of the event and many important public figures (e.g., three prominent film actors, six elected officials, a well-known author, and three public intellectuals) spoke during the conference and attracted the interest of the press. While the fact that a high profile, well-organized and well-financed parallel forum of this kind had never been mounted also qualified the event as unusual, the focus of the articles suggests that it was the presence of celebrities that drove the news coverage.

The massive march and street festival rally coordinated by *United for Change* also managed to attract news coverage. Five detailed stories were written about the event in the three newspapers that I reviewed, and I was told that all three major television networks included footage from the event on the local evening news. The march was inherently dramatic, because the city of Philadelphia had been preparing for months for the protests that were expected around the convention. The unpreparedness of the Seattle police department seven months prior during the WTO protests in November 1999 placed the Philadelphia police on heightened guard. Their well-publicized preparation included undercover work during the April 2000 protests in Washington, DC, the opening of overflow prison space, intelligence gathering, the use of crowd-control consultants, and extensive officer training including role-playing and instruction on avoiding conflict. Because the *United for Change* march was expected to attract 10,000-20,000 participants (though this proved to be an overestimate) and was the first event in the week of protests that had long been awaited with trepidation, suspense had been building. The fact that the crowd was well behaved and festive did not take away from the story, which needed

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<sup>61</sup> This look was so prevalent that I came to refer to it as the “nonconformist uniform” in my fieldnotes.

resolution. *United for Change* also benefited from avoiding the intensive competition of other events by holding the march on the day before the convention started. As a result it was well covered in the local paper and one story appeared in a national paper as well.

*Inequality Forever* also managed to attract publicity. The theatrical march that the group held in Philadelphia was not mentioned in any articles or included in any local news coverage, but the *group itself* captivated the news workers and was described in four articles in Philadelphia alone. Because groups of “Wealth Warriors” were at all five of the campaign events, many news workers came in contact with them; they were far and away the group that journalists most frequently mentioned in the interviews. What made them so compelling? Shane a reporter with a national news magazine explained.

*“Can you remember the last time one specific organization really got your attention?”*

Sure. I think that *Inequality Forever* and the Wealth Warrior folks who go out and try to suggest that Bush and Gore are totally bought by the corporate powers. They are always noticeable. This whole campaign season they just hooked me.

*Why? What is it?*

Well, they dress up like rich people. They give themselves funny names and they hand out literature and they are actually very theatrical and challenging and their rallies and events are notable and interesting. I mean, I just think – they do all the things that you should do. They’re funny, they’re issue oriented, they’re challenging, and they’re memorable. I mean, it’s almost like the standard Hollywood situation. What do people go to see in the movies? A good movie, right? What do you go to see as a good event or an activity related to politics? Something that is interesting, that’s got a little flavor to it, a little bit of character. So, I think this year the Wealth Warriors...have been the best.”

Heather, a journalist for the leading newspaper in a major metropolitan area, was similarly attracted to their efforts.

“...the people who stood out were, and you know I thought a lot about their message and couldn’t decide if it worked or not, but it was really funny and that was the people who were the Wealth Warriors... You had to take the time to watch them for a minute and figure out who they were before you understood, but I thought that they were kind of humorous and I liked that with the Umass rally on Monday downtown, people were chanting something about open the campus or I don’t know what and then there were 3 guys dressed up as Wealth Warriors off to the side who were softly chanting to themselves, “one, two, three, four, we are rich and you are poor.” They just stayed in character and it was really goofy, but I thought it was cute. I liked it.

*Did you end up writing about them in your story?*

Yes. I mentioned them. Yeah, totally, I think more than once. I think I included that chant. They also had signs that said, ‘CORPORATIONS ARE PEOPLE TOO.’ I definitely mentioned that.”

Heather attended a rally that was not held by *Inequality Forever* and could not remember what the organizing group was chanting, but she incorporated the comic message of the Wealth Warriors into her story and it left a lasting impression on her. The Wealth Warriors protested poverty by advocating for the rights of the wealthy, making demands that made economic privilege seem ludicrous (e.g., “Save the Tax Loopholes”). They were interpreted as newsworthy because they were comic and unexpected. While a few other groups received more coverage, *Inequality Forever* became the sweetheart of the press.

What makes the *Inequality Forever* success story so interesting is that but for the use of irony, the group would have been otherwise unexceptional. They were small and poorly funded, held minor street theater events that were not particularly well publicized, and had no prominent participants. Still, they were unusual enough to hold the interest of the media and to warrant mention when many other groups failed to do so. It seems that even one newsworthy characteristic, if pronounced enough, is enough to elicit attention

from the press, but as *DISRUPT* demonstrates, being newsworthy in multiple respects was the most effective means of generating publicity. Unfortunately, even those organizations that were able to secure more extended news coverage often failed to thrust their issues into public discourse because the content of many news stories emphasized form rather than substance.

### **Form Over Substance**

In his influential analysis of presidential election coverage, Patterson (1993) argues that because the press operates on the basis of journalistic rather than political values, emphasizing storytelling and conflict, coverage regularly fails to impart critical political information. According to Patterson, the news media focuses on the presentational missteps and triumphs of the politicians, the who-is-ahead, horse-race aspects of elections, and the strategic choices of candidates. Meanwhile, political values suggest that coverage should emphasize the issues that are most important to the voters and the recurring policy priorities of the candidates.

The tendency for journalists to emphasize performance over political issues that Patterson and others (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1996; 1997, Schudson 1995) have identified in candidate coverage was mirrored in the coverage of voluntary association activities during the 2000 campaign. Even when associations were able to generate more than a fleeting reference in a news story, the substantive issues were difficult to find in the articles. Most articles written about voluntary association activities tended to focus on descriptions of the scene and the response of nonparticipants to the event, rather than to probe the motives of those participating or the issues being raised. In other words,



many articles focused on the “what,” “when,” “where,” and “how,” while spending less time on the “who” and very little time discussing the “why.”

The news stories I reviewed took a variety of angles on the activities of the voluntary associations that they covered, but none used an exploration of the issues raised by the associations as their point of entry or sought comment from the candidates on the issues. Instead, the stories tended to be framed as either tales about conflict between the police and the groups (or between competing groups), human-interest pieces that profiled one activist, or stories on the logistics of protesting. Both activists and journalists addressed these angles in the course of my interviews with them. For example, Susan, from *NC Parents Against Gun Violence* complained not about the lack of coverage, but on the thrust of the media interest.

“...the coverage that we did get was about the demonstration problems. Like we were constantly being asked by the media – I must have given twenty interviews that night – and the only thing that they were asking was, they weren’t asking, “Why are you here and what are your issues?” They were asking: “Have you been treated fairly by the police? Are you upset because you didn’t get here earlier and that the shuttle busses were late?” I mean they were talking about logistical questions and that’s what they decided to do as their feature story...”

“...I guess most editors felt that it wasn’t necessary to talk about why those demonstrators were there, or what their particular issues were. Which is very disappointing. I mean there should have been...it would have been nice to see a story that said: “Despite the fact that Governor Bush and Al Gore are playing down the gun issue for this campaign the *Parents Against Gun Violence* were still out there in force trying to get their issue into the platform.” That’s would I would have liked to see, but that didn’t happen.”

Susan felt the coverage missed what was most important. Several other respondents complained about the emphasis on police response that they identified in an abundance of articles. After hearing activists complain about having their message “stolen” by any

flicker of conflict, I found it amusing when Juan described a story he wrote that addressed.

“How the protesters tried to police themselves and control divisions and tensions within a group so that their message didn’t get kidnapped by sort of tension with police, because anytime there was a flare up between protestors and police, that became the story, and secondary was exactly what these people were protesting...It diminished all the thought and time they had put into what they were protesting as soon as there was a confrontation with police because that became the story. So, I worked on a story, and it got in, about how protestors control themselves and police themselves.”

The irony, of course, is that he elected to do a story on the ways in which protesters worked to avoid having stories written that fail to address their issues while simultaneously doing precisely that. On the whole, the articles that surfaced addressed issues fleetingly, if at all, in favor of probing other facets of the events.

Of the four associations highlighted in the previous section, *DISRUPT* was the most affected by the tendency for the news media to focus on logistics of activism rather than the motives for participation. One *New York Times* article about the activities of *DISRUPT* did not mention why the activists were in the streets until the fourth paragraph of the article, and even then left the incentive largely unexplained. The first three paragraphs of the story included descriptions of the protesters’ physical appearance, the impact of the road blockades on traffic, the lack of impact felt by the convention and its delegates, and the efforts made by police to maintain a positive environment in the face of their disruption. And, although the first sentence of the story indicated that “scores” of protesters sought to disrupt the convention, nowhere in the first three paragraphs of the article was there any indication why. Finally, in the last sentence of the fourth paragraph, the author wrote, “A score of demonstrators, chanting denunciations of capital

punishment, were arrested after blocking the westbound entrance to the interstate Vine Street Expressway north of City Hall.”<sup>62</sup> The article continued for nine additional paragraphs, in which the only other mention of motive was a reference to protesters “representing a score of causes.” The reader is not left with a clear idea about why the participants were upset enough to attempt to block the roads and be arrested.

Other articles in which the civil disobedience was discussed addressed the city’s response. For example, 3 of the 14 articles that referenced *DISRUPT*’s actions were about the police response to the protests. One article dealt with the use of officers on horseback, another covered a minor injury incurred by the police commissioner, and the third piece addressed the resolve and determination of the police. Similarly, 1 of the 14 articles was about the television stations hurried efforts to respond to the protests. So, while 14 articles that references the events were written, the majority failed to contribute to public awareness about the various social problems that emerge from structural inequality that concerned *DISRUPT*.

Three of the five articles written about the *United For Change* march were essentially passing references and the fourth was a selection of captioned photos accompanied by a paragraph (rather than an article) indicating that the protesters “represented an array of viewpoints.” Only one of the five articles gave substantial coverage to the march. However, even in this devoted piece, the issues remained heavily subordinated to logistics, typifying the emphasis on form over substance. The first four paragraphs of the article addressed police matters: the absence of arrests, two minor injuries that were treated, the fact that the protest was legally permitted, etc. It was not

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<sup>62</sup> Although I recognize that this is highly irregular, I have selected article excerpts to provide illustrations, but cannot include the citations to these articles, because they reveal the true names of the associations in

until the ninth paragraph that the motives of the protesters began to be discussed. Certainly, details are the province of the news, but this is taken to an extreme when the fact that “a woman, who wore new shoes to the protest, was treated for blistered feet” comes multiple paragraphs before an explanation for why approximately 8,000 people had gathered to protest the convention. The second half of the article described a few of the different causes that the coalition members supported, quoting signs if not including participant interviews, but the article did not explain *United for Change* or the interests that brought representatives of over 200 disparate organizations together.

*Inequality Forever* received fleeting, but colorful descriptions in three articles and extended treatment in a fourth. This fourth article, like those previously addressed, described *what* the group does (pretend to be advocates for the rights of the wealthy), rather than *why* the group is doing so (to raise awareness about the growing income gap and the role of wealth in electoral politics). However, because the message was embedded in the actions of the Wealth Warriors, in the act of describing what they do, journalists also communicated why they do so, even if this remained implicit. For example, the more detailed article reads, “The Wealth Warriors parody the wealthy and big corporate donors as fat cats who are influencing the electoral process. One of their “campaign slogans” reads: “We`re Bipartisan – We Buy Republicans and Democrats.”” When *United for Change`*s actions are described (a large legal march), the reader is not clear on the motivation, but the actions of *Inequality Forever* communicate the organization`s concerns (provided that the reader/viewer understands that the members of the group are being sarcastic). As a result, even though *Inequality Forever* received less

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the sample.

media coverage than *DISRUPT* and *United for Change*, each of the stories touched upon their central issues.

The five articles written about *Citizens' Campaign Watch* also emphasized form over substance, but in pointing to the presence of prominent individuals, the journalists often quoted them, which helped the issues central to the conferences find a space in the press. Even though three of the five articles took a semi-human interest type angle to the story (e.g., one article compared the participants and mood in the conference hall nostalgically to activism of the 1960s), and most emphasized the degree to which the presence of such a conference (or of elected Democratic officials participating in the conference) was perceived as threatening to the Democrats, they each incorporated the key conference issues into the story to some degree. Overall, the articles communicated that the conferences emerged to address issues absent from the Democratic and Republican agendas and all of them mentioned at least one of the three issues that were the focus of the conferences (the war on drugs, economic inequality, and campaign finance reform).

While these four organizations were successful in obtaining publicity, the media emphasis on describing the scene served to limit the ability of some voluntary associations to spark public dialogue about the issues that concerned them. Juan acknowledged this tendency in his paper's coverage of the activities surrounding one campaign event.

"I think a lot of our stories focused on the relation between the police and protesters...So, a lot of things that we reported -- if they didn't have to do with that, didn't get in. Other things that didn't get in, which probably should have, was a little bit about the type of people who were protesting: what they stood for, where they came from, and what it was like to be in a

group of thousands of people who were, sort of, expressing their freedom of speech and fired up about a cause...”

The journalists tended to focus on the elements that they understood as newsworthy. For *DISRUPT* and *United for Change*, the stories focused on police and protester interactions – the conflict or drama embedded in the events. This served to greatly restrict any discussion of the issues around which these two groups were organized. *Inequality Forever*, on the other hand, was covered because their use of humor, theatrics, and irony brought such a novel approach to their activism. As a result, in describing the irony to the reader, the issues that the organization hoped to raise received mention. *Citizens' Campaign Watch* was covered primarily because of the high profile people who were involved with their conference. As with *Inequality Forever*, the process of describing the involvement of these individuals led journalists to use quotes or to explain their connection to the event, thereby bringing issues to the fore. However, it is critical to note that while the latter two organizations had some degree of success because their issues were not excluded from the discussion, in no instance did the issues themselves receive extended treatment or become the focal point of an article. Marty, from *Citizens' Campaign Watch* shared his ambivalence.

“The press coverage was there, but it was disappointing in that they focused almost exclusively on [the celebrities]. I have to wonder if we would have attracted any attention at all without celebrity or if the presence of celebrities was a curse because nothing else was covered. Sadly, I think we needed the celebrity and have to take what we can get.”

Marty would have preferred that the press emphasize the way that the conference generated local enthusiasm among ordinary people concerned about the social issues addressed by the conference. The emphasis on presentation over issues that I found in my assessment of the print media's coverage of voluntary association activity is

consistent with Kellner's (2001) critique of the media's role in the 2000 presidential debates, in which he argues that pundits and commentators assessed the candidates more on their performance and personality than on substance. In conclusion, because of the propensity for members of the press to focus on logistical details rather than motivating issues, it would be difficult to make the case that any of the organizations in this study were successful in the media as a means of raising the profile of issues in the minds of the general public or the candidates, even when examining the achievements of those that fared best in this venture.

### **Communicative Impasses**

While some organizations simply had difficulty getting the press to cover their activities, voluntary associations that *did* secure media attention had difficulty connecting with a broader audience in part because journalists and activists found it challenging to communicate with one another. For example, members of the news media were less prepared to write about broad social structural critiques than they were to write about groups with more narrowly focused complaints and specific demands. Although this may appear to be a case in which the organizations making such critiques were simply not media savvy enough, journalists responded poorly to groups that appeared to be too focused on public relations issues, leaving voluntary associations and their members in somewhat of a catch-22. They were expected to be savvy, but not too savvy, to communicate in a clear manner that fit within the work routines of reporters, without sounding too rehearsed. In addition, some association members understood the mainstream media as a potentially damaging, yet simultaneously necessary entity and as

a result, were less than accommodating. In turn, members of the media occasionally experienced frustration in their interactions with voluntary association members, because they sensed this skepticism and felt they were constantly being criticized. The end result was a tenuous relationship that often left both parties unsatisfied.

### **Multiple Issues, Much Confusion**

It is possible that the substantive issues were superficially addressed or omitted in the mass media because they were not clearly communicated by the associations. In talking with journalists, it became apparent that the goals of some of the larger and/or coalition-based efforts around the campaign events were unclear. When asked about the message of the debate protesters she covered, Kris expressed some confusion.

“I don’t know. Maybe vote Nader or Corporate America Sucks. It was tough to know what they wanted in a lot of ways. The other reporter and I were talking about this. Everybody kind of had their little hodge podge of issues and people were just sort of out there to protest and protest what. I’m not exactly sure. I was kind of struck by the lack of focus, especially toward the end.”

Dick shared similar remarks about the convention march he observed.

“What was difficult for people to grasp was walking out onto the parkway that day and seeing every issue under the sun being shouted about. Everything from Say No to Breast Feeding to Free Mumia to, there was even a group in support of Americans who died defending the old dictatorial South Vietnamese government. There was just weird stuff and in a situation like that, the message that they are trying to put across comes across as just garbled. It becomes hard to report coherently, readers – most of the emails I got after those protests - were saying, “Well, what do they want?.” “Why didn’t you tell us what they were after?” Well, I would tell you if they would have told me. They just, they were all over the map.”

In some cases, multiple diverse organizations protested or marched in the same area, perhaps creating some confusion because the journalists may have inaccurately



assumed the groups to be working together. Brenda, from *Stand-Up St. Louis* felt that this happened to them.

“We had people trained [to talk with the media] who could say the things I just said to you about what our position was, what we’re doing, etc. They’re still going to write, “oh it looked like a varied group that didn’t really know what they were doing” although the Post did kind of list some of our points. They had our reason for being there, but at the very end though they just kind of talked about all the groups who were out there for anything and they didn’t really make a distinction between those and *Stand-Up St. Louis* - they just started describing protesters who they ran into. There were some across the way in the pen, the designated protest area that we didn’t participate in and they had people over there with all kinds of signs and they started talking about those protesters and didn’t distinguish them from our group and so they made it sound like people were just out there doing anything, but what can you do?”

Similarly, *United Trades* organized a massive leafleting in downtown Philadelphia with clusters of representatives in yellow t-shirts standing on more than 25 corners in a 1-mile radius, yet they felt they were lumped in with others who were out in the city streets. Franklin blamed the press for not taking more initiative.

“Many of the reports were that there were so many issues that nothing was defined. I mean that is not correct. You could have taken an interview with me or some other labor person and understood the labor reasons for being there. You could have taken the Buddhist monks and free Tibet folks and interviewed someone there, but what they did was they took the whole thing and said that there wasn’t one consolidated issue, but there are many issues in this country.”

In some cases, protesters offered complex social-structural critiques that seemingly failed to be understood. Loren, from *DISRUPT* expressed his intense frustration with the coverage that they received after their efforts at the Republican National Convention.

“So much of the coverage just said things like, “protesters gathered for a range of causes” or “protesting every issue under the sun.” Things like that give the impression that we are all out there talking about different things. They don’t get it - that these are all the same thing. It’s not fractured, you

know, these problems are interrelated and so yes, some people mention the prison-industrial complex, and others are talking about corporate welfare, and then there are people talking about the death penalty and poverty and health care and everything else, but they are all tied together and that's what the media can't take the time to get. It's like it's just easier for them just to say it makes no sense, what we're saying, than it is to explain or figure out why it makes sense. I - ugh - this just makes me so mad, that because the message is complex, the movement is made out as fractured. It would be totally wrong to point out one thing. This is a comprehensive movement. We don't just want some proposition passed; we are trying to show that something is seriously, seriously wrong here. Is it capitalism or a two-party system or globalization? I don't know, but what we are pissed off about is the fact that there is a ridiculous imbalance in economic resources in this country that is basically leading to injustice at every corner. How do you fit that into a sound bite? We have no message? The idea that we -- It's just not at all a reflection of what is being said, not by us. We aren't protesting just because it's fun or for no reason. Why would someone do that? I don't want to say it's like laziness on the part of the mainstream media, but it seems that way from here. Maybe we do, you know, need to learn to say it better, but they also- It's like they ask questions and don't bother to listen to the answer, they just look for the one line that they can use and trash the rest."

Loren felt that the legitimate concerns and extensive efforts of his organization, and of recent mass mobilizations more broadly, were thwarted by news media because they depicted the participants as disorganized rather than taking the time to understand the sophisticated critique.

It seems that these critiques may be new to journalists who expect demonstrators to have a focused complaint and to put forth specific demands. Juan's remarks are illustrative.

"A lot of these protests seem to be like sort of, general, ill-will demonstrations...."We're upset about corporate greed. We're upset about monotony in American politics. We're upset about people having too much money." When you start having like this sort of smorgasbord of issues, it gets confusing what you're standing for. So, I would have had like really issue-focused demonstrations, and I covered a few. Like, there's a Puerto Rican parade where people were really upset about the U.S. Navy in that island, Vieques, and that was very clear exactly what they were protesting. They were protesting the presence of the U.S. Navy

on an island 'cause they didn't think that was a good sort of example of American sovereignty. That was very clear where they were coming from and the Mumia march was very clear. People were upset about Mumia, but there were a lot of protests that weren't clear exactly what the problem was and what the solution was. I mean I think you've got to offer solutions to have a persuasive argument. Not just say, "It's bad that a lot of people in America are rich and a lot are poor." Well, "No Shit," but, you know, you have to say what the answer is. I mean, you know, the people in Washington and other places aren't idiots. You've gotta assume that they see that problem, and your role is to sort of provide an answer."

The broad social-structural critique is made, but is dismissed as illegitimate and unreasonable: the organizations making these arguments are read as doing things incorrectly. Interestingly, Jerry, a journalist with a secondary newspaper in a major city, said that he did not feel that the protesters successfully communicated their concerns, yet later in our interview, when I asked if he knew what their goals were, he mimicked the activists in a deep, mock-serious voice:

"To bring attention to the abuses of global capitalism..." I mean, I could be their spokesman I know all this stuff after hearing it so much. To bring attention to the -- what they say is the corrupting influence of corporate money on domestic politics and globalization in the global economy and I think there is a million other issues. The criminal injustice system, which is also the fault of the corporations running the criminal injustice system and you know, which is also a racist system, which is how freeing Mumia fits in..."

Jerry is able to provide a rather good synopsis of the concerns of the organization he was covering; yet at the same time, in his article he describes their efforts as fractured and confused. The journalists may hear the broad social-structural critiques, but have difficulty incorporating them into their stories because they are accustomed to opposition groups with more manageable complaints and specific demands.

## **Public Relations Efforts Backfire**

At the surface, it may seem as though the aforementioned organizations would benefit from an increased level of media savvy, but most organizations attempted to shape their public relations efforts so that they would be appealing to the news media. Many groups had full time public relations personnel or committees devoted to publicity work. They also made attempts to construct photo opportunities, issue press releases, hold press conferences, and to help their members communicate succinctly in an effort to shape their responses for the sound bites and quotes that they felt journalists would find desirable (media efforts within the organizations will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter). Further, the events themselves were usually intended to be activities which they felt would interest news organizations. In many instances these efforts either turned off journalists or worked against the organizations.

Journalists expressed skepticism of efforts that they felt were too highly polished, because they interpreted pre-planned events or statements intended for the press as inauthentic. Shelly, a reporter from the premier local paper in a mid-sized city illustrated this line of thinking.

“I was approaching people to ask them, you know, what brought them out [to the debate] and some of them would basically start to spew the mission statement for their organization like robots. I tried to get them to tell me what *they* think, to put down the canned script for a second, and some did, but some were just incredibly stubborn. Hello, I can read your press release myself. I don’t want that in my story. I want a real response.”

Shelly felt that the practiced sound bites were not what she wanted, however, in proffering these statements, associations sought to conform to what they perceived as the desires of the mainstream media. Sid, from the *American Adult Network*, was very

serious about his responsibility to be consistent with the official position of his organization.

“I am a volunteer and I don't get paid by the association. I like the issues that we work on and I learn as much as I can about them everyday, but let's say I were interviewed, like I am by you now, and decided to be additive to a policy that the association has approved of or has agreed that should be policy and that legislators should be aware of. I can't take off and add my own data to that because I would be off message, if you know what I mean. You know what I'm saying? I can't take off and represent the association as a volunteer and do some of my own stuff.”

Shelly's negative response to the efforts of people like Sid is somewhat ironic, because the intent of the participants who rehearsed media statements was to stay on message but also to create brief statements that they felt would be reporter-friendly. In addition to sensing a lack of spontaneity in the responses of the activists, some journalists were also familiar with the organizations' extensive behind-the-scenes efforts to control their representation in the media. Jerry explained,

“You ask somebody in the street why they just put their arm in a lock box and they'll give a very pat sound bite, “I'm here to put my body on the line and face damage because the environment can't stand up for itself.” or some kind of sound bite like that that will be nice on TV or as a pull out quote in the paper...There is a conscious effort of the part of organizers, telling people how to do this. They have workshops on how to deal with the corporate media and what to say and how to not get off message and how not to dodge issues. It's pretty savvy. They teach them how to dodge issues of violence and vandalism. They had whole workshops on this. So, I think they even train these people to sort of keep an eye out for the cameras and to almost perform. Sometimes, they'd be just sort of standing cause they'd all be pooped and the police would be all nice behind the barricades and whatever. Then a news camera rolls up – it doesn't matter if a print reporter comes – but if a news camera pulls up, they get out their little buckets and drum things and they start dancing around and chanting and trying to make it look as if there is all action, all the time.”

A few activists have apparently become sensitized to the media's distaste for association efforts for spin control. I had an impromptu, but revealing discussion with an activist

during my field research in Boston whose organization recognized that journalists were not responding well to planned responses and attempted to adapt:

“He [Kevin] also told me that now [his group]<sup>63</sup> is training protesters to try to sound less polished in response to media complaints that the answers are too pat and practiced. Now they teach them to try to be more spontaneously articulate and to be well versed on the issues, but not to give the impression that they have thought of these answers in advance. He joked, “Apparently they don't like succinct and articulate.” October 2, 2000

Kevin's group began rehearsing spontaneity in an effort to ensure that the participants remained on message without leaving those who sought to interview them unsatisfied. This tension is interesting because it reveals a sophisticated understanding of the underlying rules of news production on the part of the association. Just like the “staged back regions”<sup>64</sup> that MacCannell (1976) describes in the tourist industry, Kevin recognizes the importance of accomplishing an effective performance of authenticity in the course of an interview.

Some journalists were also reluctant to write about what they perceived as inauthentic news *stories*. George, from *ABOLISH!* described his frustration with this.

“...in some cases we'll do activities right here in Philadelphia, send out press releases -- there are 2 major newspapers in Philadelphia that are both owned by the same company -- and we'll get like no coverage...and we've talked with people there and they've said, “Well, we don't cover staged events.” Except like the Republican convention [said sarcastically], things like that.”

George suggests that the media is hypocritical, rejecting the press events of community groups on the one hand, while regularly and thoroughly covering the press events of

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<sup>63</sup> This was an organization that had a high profile in the Boston area but was not included in my sample.

<sup>64</sup> In Goffmanian (1959) terms these are front regions designed to look like back regions. MacCannell explains that these are created so that tourists feel they are having a “genuine” experience. The visitor feels they are seeing the way things really are, but in reality the things that the visitor sees are displays created for their perusal.

those in positions of power. In other words, "pseudo-events" (Boorstin 1961) as a class are not intolerable, rather their acceptability hinges largely on their sponsor. In the same vein, those reporters who had little tolerance for practiced comments of activists, likely accept planned statements from elected officials and other high profile individuals on a regular basis, which creates a situation in which those who are the most excluded from political influence have the least access to news coverage. The *Northeast Union of Professionals* was involved in two events during the Boston debate. Their primary event was a relatively large, mildly disruptive rally in downtown Boston, for which they received a reasonable amount of coverage (mostly news radio). The second event was the teach-in series spearheaded by *Students for Change*, which received no coverage. Harry commented on the fact that he saw the teach-ins as worthy of coverage and the position in which media resistance to such events placed groups without substantial financial resources:

"The Globe almost covered us [at the teach-ins], but decided not to. The Globe said, "When there's some conflict - call us." Typical journalist kind of thing. We did have press releases, but they didn't cover it. They don't want to cover political education, right? That's not a story! But, they [the teach-ins] were all of very, very high quality... It wasn't just a bunch of people who wanted to be idiots and run out into the street and make noise, or a ruckus, you know? We had a large group of students, and others, sitting around and talking seriously about how to confront these pressing social issues. The media doesn't want that. It's very sad really, that in order for the disenfranchised to get press they have to break the law. The story could have been, you know, "Youth not apathetic afterall" or "Progressive social issues still matter" or a dozen other things. I could come up with a list of angles."

He, like George, felt that associational options for garnering publicity are limited unless you have enough resources to purchase paid media (advertising), as some large voluntary

associations can do, or you have enough social status to attract the attention of the news media on your own terms.

These experiences and comments reveal that coverage depicting voluntary association efforts as disorganized cannot necessarily be attributed to a lack of media savvy on the part of the organizations involved. Many made sincere attempts to mold their public appearances into forms that would meet the needs of the news media, but often these concentrated efforts ultimately turned off those who sought to cover them because they were interpreted (accurately) as stylized rather than natural. Meanwhile, some association members recognized that pre-planned (legal) events and premeditated remarks are unappealing to the news media and grappled with this reality.

### **Distrust of the News Media**

Although the media efforts on the part of the voluntary associations were often extensive and intended to help journalists produce stories, sometimes participants were less than open in responding to press inquiries. Some journalists felt as though certain organization members they approached were highly skeptical of them. This distrust led to various situations in which participants withheld information from journalists and other cases in which activists were outright hostile. This uneasy rapport fostered misunderstanding rather than clarity and likely contributed to the inability of these groups to use the press in a meaningful way to spark public dialogue.

While most of the association representatives described themselves and their organizations as painstakingly forthcoming with representatives of the news media, some



depicted the news media as an adversary. Oliver, from the *Land and Life Protection League* said,

“There's a great deal of the people that are coming out in the streets that fully understand that the media are a tool of the very same multi-national corporations that are destroying the planet and are exploiting workers and are violating human rights. Unfortunately that sometimes results in a very anti-media perspective where people think they shouldn't worry about the corporate media...We try to teach activists to think of media work as information warfare, and that, therefore, the media is a tool to frame issues.”

Oliver's remarks indicate that he perceived a general skepticism of the mainstream news media on the part of the activists he worked with, but it also points to the way in which media work can be understood as a struggle for control. “Information warfare” is a colorful label that describes the often contentious, strategic efforts that many voluntary associations undertook in order to obtain and shape news coverage.

The understanding of public relations as a battle, refers not to the logistical challenge inherent in notifying multiple news outlets of organization events (at which most associations claimed to be relatively adept), but rather stems directly from the distrust of the news media to which Oliver referred. Brandy, from *School Choice, Family Choice*, shared her ominous sense of the news industry.

“I wasn't disappointed [in the lack of news coverage of their rally] because I knew that they would not cover the event in such a way that it would be good for, you know, the campaign, because, you've got to remember that those who have a vested interest in keeping the system the way it is...will make sure that they suppress it [positive stories about school vouchers].”

Brandy, like many I spoke with, shared an implicit understanding of news coverage as tainted. Brandy seemed to describe the involvement of people with political power: while many others expressed a concern that mainstream media outlets are biased because of major corporations own them. Regardless of the perceived source of the bias, many

association members, even those that worked actively to secure media representation, expressed wariness about the mainstream media.

In some instances, the journalists felt that the distrust of the media got in the way of their ability to cover the organizations in a responsible manner. Kara found the participants of one group in her area particularly evasive.

“They were one of those groups that was real suspicious...their director was great, but everybody else that I’ve tried to talk to in there -- like our electricity went out one time in the office here. I was bored and so I couldn’t do anything because the computers weren’t working, so I thought, “I haven’t seen their office—let me go over there.” I called them up and I’m, like, “Hey what are you guys doing? Why don’t I come over and see your office and talk about some of your issues,” thinking maybe I could get a story out of it, and they’re like, “Why?” “Well, you know, I just wanted to see what was going on and if you had any ideas.” “Well, you need to talk to Mark and he’s not here.” “Can’t I talk to anybody else there?” There’s like this hubbub in the background, so it sounded like there were a lot of people there. “No.” “Well, can’t I just stop by and see your place?” “No.” So, I mean there’s just -- I don’t know. It was just weird.”

Kara expected the group to be pleased to get the publicity, but instead encountered suspicion even though this was not a group that was planning to break the law, hence having little reason to be wary of outsiders. Similarly, Diane said she repeatedly sought information from one civil disobedience organization with little success.

“My fear was, and I voiced this concern to all of the people that I was talking to, that things were gonna go crazy on the street. We were gonna end up quoting some psycho person off the street who was screaming and raising hell and had no hair and nose rings and whatever and who is probably not an appropriate spokesperson for these causes, but I wouldn’t be able to get in touch with anybody who was. I felt like I kind of got stonewalled. “Oh, we don’t know where we’re gonna be.” “You have to come to this meeting point and it’s all very secret.” I said like, “You don’t understand that I’m not trying to report you. I’m trying to like cover you.” It didn’t matter. It didn’t make any difference. Then I got a phone call. I like lost my shit. I got a phone call from one of these groups at ten of six on the day that everything went crazy saying, “Hi, we’re concerned because we don’t have any of our spokespeople in front of the cameras.”

I've never yelled at anybody in my life. I was like: "You shit, who's in charge? I've been trying to talk to you people for two months and this is exactly what I said was gonna happen," like screaming at him on the phone. I called him back like five minutes later and I was like, "Okay, like let's talk. I'm sorry about that." You know, it's like I don't understand. What do these people think? Of course that's what's gonna happen and not only that, I had the same conversation with the same person who called me like two days earlier saying that exact thing, "I'm afraid that this is gonna happen. It's very important to me that I can get in touch with people who can speak for the movement, who can speak for the causes, who can be articulate, who can adequately represent what's going on here." So, I don't have any sympathy when they talk about how, "Oh, the mainstream media does this and they do that. They always pick the person who has blue hair and green nails and is breaking a Starbucks window," because "You, you people aren't accessible. Your mistrust of the media cripples you." So, I think they contribute - I'm sorry - I think that they are crippled by their own."

While the people she spoke with were not hostile to her, they were (perhaps understandably) unwilling to disclose any information about their civil disobedience plans until the final hour, even though Diane had been pursuing the story for an extended period. Apprehension on the part of organizations with illegal activities planned may be reasonable, but it remains important to note the way in which such secrecy may hinder the ability of members of the news media to create more in-depth portrayals. The anger Diane felt stemmed from the criticism that the mainstream media received if they failed to paint a complete and accurate portrait, which she believed was unjustified when the participants failed to cooperate.

In addition to elusiveness, some journalists reported running into hostility. Several reporters indicated that they were heckled by the demonstrators for being part of the "corporate media" or accused of being undercover police officers and/or CIA agents. In some cases, the behavior was more aggressive. Juan described the behavior of one faction of a protest group in Los Angeles,

**“This one group...seemed to be sort of especially incensed about media coverage. There were points where they were harassing reporters, mostly television reporters, that tried to photograph them. A couple guys had magic markers and would scribble on the lenses. Really obnoxious behavior.”**

**I witnessed a similar scene during *ABOLISH!*'s anti-death penalty rally in Philadelphia (alongside which a roadblock eventually formed, creating a chaotic scene of police, demonstrators, and public speakers),**

**“A man is videotaping some protesters jumping on a van. Two supporters see this, exchange a look, and then one reaches for the press ID tag around his neck. The video man says, “Get your hands off me!” Words are exchanged and one of the protesters spits on his face. After a minute I hear the cameraman say, “I’m just trying to do my job man.” August 1, 2000**

**Although accounts of mild heckling and distrust surfaced in my interviews with relative frequency, I believe higher tension episodes like these were extremely uncommon and instigated by a tiny fraction of the direct action adherents who did not oppose violence in the form of property destruction or what they termed self-defense. My account describes the behavior of two activists in a sea of thousands and none of the journalists who I interviewed reported this level of harassment. While the vast majority of organizations and participants were actively pursuing the attention of the news media, some were evasive (apprehension was common in a broad array of voluntary associations) and others aggressive (hostility tended to come exclusively from participants in groups engaged in civil disobedience) towards those who tried to cover their actions.**

**Keeping in mind that many organizations did not have the luxury of negotiating their interactions with members of the news media, because they were unable to elicit their attention, those organizations that did have an opportunity for interaction with**

journalists often formed tenuous relationships that left both parties unsatisfied. Naomi tapped into the difficult position, in which both parties found themselves.

“I did try quite hard to get the issues out that people were protesting, but there definitely – I felt like there was a double message because a lot of the protesters would say that they really wanted the press to cover these issues, but then they were also very clear that they were precipitating these events that were quote unquote newsworthy. So, I do need to write about the news they create, you know, and I do worry that what I write gets read. So, you sort of try to balance between the arrests and things like that which people really seek out and then the issues that people were getting arrested for and they chose to get arrested, so it’s wasn’t – They knew that that was newsworthy and got themselves into that bind.

*When you said that people seek out the arrests, did you mean the readers?*

Well, readers are definitely more interested in who got arrested and if anyone got hurt and things like that than they are in a dry story that just says the protesters were out and then goes straight into the details of the World Bank or something like that. But the protesters themselves know that and they were staging these very dramatic events to get publicity. So, they staged the event to get publicity and then they don’t want you to write about the event that they designed. I don’t know. They tie my hands and then blame me for it. It’s frustrating.”

Naomi argued that activist organizations need to take partial responsibility for the fact that journalists ultimately write about conflict when it has been utilized as a lure. At the same time, as Harry articulated earlier, for organizations with limited resources, there are few alternatives to breaking the law if publicity is a priority.

In sum, I found that the relationships between voluntary association representatives and journalists were plagued by a few significant communicative impasses. First, journalists had difficulty making sense of the broad social-structural critiques made by some organizations (e.g., *DISRUPT*, *United for Change*, *Land and Life Protection League*, *Stand-Up St. Louis*, *Income Gap Attack*), often interpreting the efforts as disorganized or unfocused, even when they were not. Second, in spite of journalist

criticisms that some associations needed to present their issues more clearly to nonparticipants, such as themselves, the journalists also resisted covering events that they felt were staged for the press and expressed frustration with association members who stuck to carefully planned statements. Finally, although most organization members were eager to speak with media representatives, a subset was highly distrustful of the journalists and few (drawn exclusively from civil disobedience groups) were even menacing. As a result of these communicative challenges, many of the resulting relationships were ones in which voluntary association members sought publicity while simultaneously fearing it, and journalists failed to truly understand or empathize with the concerns of many organizations. These incompatibilities, whether created by journalists or activists, contributed to the inability of voluntary associations to communicate with outsiders by limiting the quality of the association event coverage that materialized.

## **Conclusions**

Discussing coverage often seems to amount to a discussion of opposition. This is no coincidence. The journalists I spoke with, in every city, sought to cover (in most cases were assigned to cover) "protest." Gathering their thoughts on non-oppositional citizen group activity required more extensive probing and often turned up little, because I was often told that events like issues forums and debate watch gatherings are not the type of things that journalists write about, especially in a rich environment when there are a variety of stories that they perceive as newsworthy. I found, ultimately, that this leaves voluntary associations interested in communicating their political concerns to the public via the mass media in a predicament. In order to obtain more than a passing reference in

a mainstream newspaper, organization behavior must be so outrageous in some given respect that the news media is compelled to cover their actions. Less colorful, more straightforward activities simply fail to attract attention. The reason this raises a predicament is because the very act of choosing to be outrageous, (e.g., by closing down a street, gathering multiple thousands of diverse participants for a march, creating a celebrity showcase, or dressing in absurd costumes) works against the ability of the associations to raise their concerns because the very element of peculiarity, that characteristic that renders them newsworthy and demands attention, simultaneously overshadows their political interests.

This predicament was widely recognized by those on both sides of this relationship, but voluntary association members read the impasses as constructed in part by the dominant journalistic worldview, while journalists maintained a more reified understanding of newsworthiness. In his study of broadcast news, Jacobs (1996) points to the interpretive nature of news work, suggesting that it is the news workers themselves who construct events as newsworthy. In other words, rather than an event being objectively newsworthy or unremarkable, the way in which events are interpreted imbues them with this characteristic. Organization members were apt to present alternative readings of their events that recast them as newsworthy if they had been overlooked (e.g., Harry's remarks above) or to present alternate angles on the events that were covered whereby political issues would have figured more prominently than they did in the stories that were written (e.g., Susan's remarks above). In other words, the association members seemed to see the definitions of newsworthy as flexible (even while simultaneously seeing journalistic readings of newsworthiness as patterned and predictable), while

journalists were more likely to see events as either categorically newsworthy or un compelling.

It is important to note that even the well-established indicators of newsworthiness leave great room for interpretation, whereby many voluntary association events that may not have been understood as newsworthy (or which may have been seen as newsworthy in one particular facet) could be reinterpreted as newsworthy (or as newsworthy for different reasons). For example, *Young Adult Voter's Association's* debate watch event in Boston, which failed to attract journalists, can easily be understood as unusual because approximately 500 young people voluntarily gathered to watch the debate in a movie theater. This is unexpected because although this demographic is frequently thought to be apathetic, the event suggested exactly the opposite. The large, stadium-seating theater was tightly packed with young people interested in the presidential debate (many of whom arrived early for pre-debate information and to support the organization's efforts to get the presidential candidates to hold a debate on issues of concern to younger Americans), who watched the debate together and responded rambunctiously. Attendees cheered statements they supported and booed at those they found objectionable. I would argue that this event was no less unexpected than the efforts of *Inequality Forever's* small band of Wealth Warriors and could have easily been read as newsworthy according to the established standards, yet it did not attract any mainstream print or electronic coverage. Similarly, journalists understand things that impact a large number of people as newsworthy, but they tended to read impact very shallowly, reporting traffic delays, for example, but not showing interest in the future of the Supreme Court (the issue raised by the *Freedom and Equality League*), which will certainly also have an impact on a large



number of people. As Schudson (1995) suggests, news is produced by people who operate consciously, or subconsciously, within a culture with a set of assumptions about what is important and should be taken seriously. This culture operates along with more explicit and instructive professional conventions that it has shaped, but also by which it continues to be influenced.

Even in acknowledging that newsworthiness is socially constructed and culturally dependent, we must also acknowledge the consequences of the ways in which it is currently employed in the news production process. Existing arrangements of news production have two primary qualities that impact voluntary associations. First, there is an unequal relationship between voluntary associations and news organizations. Association members do not control the media, no matter how much they may like to do so. Habermas argues that members of the news media, "to a certain extent control the entry of topics, contributions, and authors into the mass-media-dominated public sphere...These selection processes become a new sort of power." (1998: 376). News workers, rather than news subjects, control coverage and those organizations that obtain coverage do not reserve the right to editorial changes. Consequently, in order to obtain publicity associations must respond to the conventions that are employed by journalists and the editors that direct them. This means that when organizations wish to be featured in the news media, they will need to be newsworthy in the eyes of the professionals that populate the industry. It also means that it is incumbent upon the organizations to see that existing communicative impasses are surmounted. The journalists may make efforts to improve their understanding, but in the final analysis, it is the organizations that must bear the burden of dismantling these barriers.

The conventions of journalism, as they are currently operationalized, not only create an imbalance between writers and subjects, they also reinforce an element of inequality that exists within associational landscape. This happens in a few ways. First, higher profile organizations, such as large national citizen groups, are more likely to be solicited by the press, more often have the support of public figures who may be willing to lend star power to their events, usually employ professional public relations personnel who are able to help them navigate the waters of public communication, and they are taken more seriously when they issue press releases or hold press conferences than are less prominent organizations. Second, wealthy organizations have the luxury of paying for access to the general public, by purchasing paid advertisements, whose content they are able to control (*Network for Peace*, *The Freedom and Equality League*, and the *American Adult Network* all utilized paid advertising during the presidential campaign). These organizations are also in a position to employ direct mail and telemarketing techniques to reach the general public. This access means that they are able to ensure that the issues they wish to raise are articulated, lessening the critical importance of garnering news coverage. Organizations that are less well funded must rely more exclusively on the news media as an intermediary and, consequently, must 1) comply with the shared journalistic understandings of newsworthiness, and 2) cope with contemporary conventions of reporting that prioritize outcomes over motivations.

Overall, the voluntary associations in my sample were not effective in reaching the general public via the news media. The vast majority of events organized by the associations did not receive coverage, at least in the major print media sources that I reviewed, and many groups that did make the newspaper received only a passing

reference. Even those few organizations that were given more extended attention failed to thrust their issues into public discourse because journalists emphasized the way in which the events happened and the response of others (e.g., police, pedestrians) rather than addressing the impetus for the activities. Finally, communicative impasses prevented the development of relationships that fostered understanding. The end result was symbolic representation for some voluntary associations, but impoverished explorations of the concerns that they hoped to move into the minds of the voting public.

### **Limited Access to Those in Positions of Power**

Voluntary association attempts to influence public discourse were severely limited by their lack of access to meaningful news coverage, but they were also restricted by their distance from those in positions of political power. In addition to attempting to secure media coverage of the issues, organizations that hoped to make their issues germane to the election often tried to catch the eye of the candidates as they drove by or the delegates as they made their way into the convention halls. These more direct attempts were more often futile than not, because convention delegates, campaign personnel, and the presidential candidates were physically secluded from the efforts of voluntary associations.

### **The Sequestering of Political Insiders**

Naomi Klein (2000) said that politics has increasingly become a gated community, in reference to the heightened security used to maintain separation of those engaged in political administration and the general public, whose input is unwelcome in

these endeavors. Indeed, in visiting the sites of the nominating conventions and presidential debates, I was struck by the careful measures employed to protect the authorized participants from harm and to ensure that those unauthorized not be admitted into secure areas. For all five of the events, tickets were required for admittance and careful security screening with metal detectors and bag searches was required of all those who entered. What differentiated these political events from concerts or sporting events that also require such procedures was the degree to which "tickets" for entry were essentially inaccessible to the public. No members of the general public were admitted to the conventions (though volunteer work created opportunities for interested parties to gain access). Passes were restricted to delegates, credentialed members of the media, campaign personnel, local dignitaries, sponsors, speakers, and invited guests.

Tickets for presidential debates are distributed in an almost secretive fashion. Nine months prior to the debates, the Commission on Presidential Debates' website<sup>65</sup> said, "The Commission on Presidential Debates will have no information regarding tickets for the upcoming presidential and vice presidential debates until late summer or early fall." but no information was ever made available on the site. Sponsoring universities generally receive tickets (which are typically distributed among high level administrators and then to the university community by lottery), though the number of tickets they are given is usually unknown until the week prior to the debate, and the Commission on Presidential Debates does not guarantee that tickets will in fact be available to the schools.

In addition to the fact that the events themselves were private, the event sites were carefully sequestered. Streets around both convention locations were closed for security

reasons, and even pedestrian traffic on the campuses where the debates were held was restricted to those with official university identification (and credentialed members of the press, campaign staff, secret service, etc.). In fact, at the University of Massachusetts – Boston, the campus community received a memo informing them.

“The debate preparations and security concerns necessitate that classes will not be held on either Monday, October 2 or Tuesday, October 3. The campus will be closed except for debate-related activities and other essential functions. The Healey Library will be closed on both Monday and Tuesday. **Students, faculty, and staff will not be authorized to be on campus on those two days** unless they are involved in specific debate-related activities or other essential functions.”

([www.umb.edu/news\\_and\\_events/newsreleases/0700tempclasscanc.html](http://www.umb.edu/news_and_events/newsreleases/0700tempclasscanc.html))

Individuals seeking access to the campus, such as faculty members wanting to work in their offices, were required to put in a written request in advance and obtain secret service security clearance. As Klein’s visual image suggests, the convention and debate spaces were highly restrictive.

### **Parallel Universes, Little Interaction**

For each of the five major campaign events, designated protest space was made available. As I indicated earlier, in Los Angeles, this protest space was directly outside of Staples Center, where the convention was held. The delegates could utilize private entrances that did not require them to pass the protest area, but many did, in fact, pass by the registered demonstrators and unregistered “bandit” activists in the area. This provided them with some exposure to opposition and issue-oriented groups. Yet even though this arrangement provided the *possibility* for convention attendees to come face to

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<sup>65</sup> [www.debates.org](http://www.debates.org)

face with voluntary association members and individuals who gathered outside of the convention hall, the *Los Angeles Times* reported,

“During these hot, heady days of marches and street battles, delegates and demonstrators have inhabited separate realities, kept apart by security measures that have sealed off Staples Center. The delegates sit in air-conditioned buses and are waved past checkpoints by police – they hear the voices of protesters as faint, muffled sounds in the distance. “I’ve only seen it on TV,” said Claude Baldree, a delegate from Livingston, Texas. In the first two days of the convention, he has not set eyes on a demonstrator, except for those he sees on the 11 o’clock news when he gets back to his hotel. What are they protesting? Baldree asks a reporter. “What’s all the ruckus about?”” (Tobar 2000).

And while this insulation depicts a situation in which it would be difficult for voluntary association members hoping to directly influence the minds of those inside politics, Los Angeles provided far and away the best opportunity for such communication. In the four other venues, activists and insiders were kept even further apart.

The debate at Wake Forest University was at the other end of the interactive spectrum. Wake Forest University created a protest pen, fenced on all sides in a soccer field on campus which was not only far removed from the chapel in which the debate was held, it was also out of the visual range of the news media, campaign staff, and candidates as they entered campus. Roy, from the *Federation for Freedom From Religion* describes his experience with this protest space.

“Okay, the actual protest accommodations after all of that work [the application and registration process to be allowed on campus] was the lamest thing I’ve ever seen in my life...you had to use paper signs that you didn’t have sticks or poles or things like that...They said no sound amplification of any kind, which later turned out to be important, because the actual space that they put us in was...probably more than a hundred feet away from the actual road that everybody was going down...it was far enough away that you couldn’t read signs and you couldn’t hear any voices...Each group was given a colored wrist band, you know one of these little plastic things that go on and each group was assigned a separate little area within the protest area and nobody could mix with each

other...They actually had that little ball field...divided [with fencing] into little color coded areas [coded to correspond to the wrist bands] that each group had to go to stand in and were separated from each other. Like little compartments. And there was another metal detector there that you had to go through to get into the little area. After all the dealing with the bureaucracy and then you are being treated more like an Islamic terrorist than an American citizen. And then you see this little field way off just far enough away that you can't be seen and heard effectively. Not totally completely out of sight, but just enough that you can barely see what's going on...The whole protest thing was supposed to start at six o'clock and most of the press was there between six and eight because at eight o'clock you know they went over to the chapel to set up for the debate itself. So, conveniently the vans [from the remote parking lot protesters were required to use] were an hour and a half late. They ended up taking us over there at about seven thirty. And most of the media -- I guess they had gone, except the ones that were able to find the well-hidden entrance to that protest area...It was an unmarked well-hidden spot along the street where you actually entered into that protest area. You had to get outside the university gate to get to it...the vast majority of the people that just took one look at it and -- it was just such an absolute joke. I mean a real slap in the face."

So, protesters in Winston-Salem who hoped to get near the candidates, their staff, and the press that followed them arrived on campus the evening of the debate only to find that they were out of visual range of the motorcades.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the organizations were prohibited from using sticks that could give their signs additional height or megaphones that could carry their requests, chants, and speeches. It is highly unlikely that those attending the debates knew that protesters were present that evening.

## **Conclusions**

The remaining three campaign events fell somewhere in between Los Angeles and Winston-Salem in terms of the activists' ability to access key people, meaning that

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<sup>66</sup> Incidentally, the personal security procedures employed by Wake Forest University were extremely extensive. Protesters underwent security screenings, were prohibited from bringing in a myriad of items including backpacks, cell phones, hairbrushes, coolers, cameras, camcorders, etc. They were required to

very few opportunities existed for voluntary associations to communicate with the delegates, the candidates and their staff, and other political insiders (e.g., state and local politicians) during their convention and debate mobilizations. Direct contact with such individuals was exceedingly rare. I point to this not to say that it is unexpected, or even to say that the security measures were unjustified, but rather to point to the inability of voluntary associations to make their views heard via this avenue. This inaccessibility further reinforces the importance of the mainstream news media for voluntary associations attempting to have an influence on issues raised in the political arena.

### **Self-Imposed Limitation on Public Discourse**

As I have discussed, the news media and the isolation of political figures limited the ability of voluntary associations to foster broad public discourse, but internal discourse within organizations was also limited in the mobilization context. This type of dialogue was restricted by the organizations themselves. Organizations are not themselves public spheres (Habermas 1998 pp. 360-361), but they are often able to create spaces where partial public spheres may form by serving as discursive arenas that can connect those involved to circulation mechanisms such as newspapers and bookstores, and to other communities of similar interest to form a more complete public. The organizations in this study might have been particularly apt to provide such communicative spaces, but the majority failed to do so because the act of mobilizing degraded their communication. Core members were often focused intently on ensuring that their mobilizations would be successful public relations efforts and, as a result, these

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carry photo identification, give the names of all individuals to security, pass through metal detectors at two



leaders often understood typical members (or participants) not as equals with valuable viewpoints, but as individuals in need of management. Secondly, discourse was suppressed in a more concrete way, through norms of confluence that privileged tolerance of difference so highly that debate over disagreements was deemed inappropriate. These factors created barriers to internal communication by rendering dialogue less egalitarian and inclusive and by suppressing opposing viewpoints.

### **Member Management**

Because the associations as a whole placed a high priority on reaching nonmembers, core members demonstrated extensive concern with monitoring and regulating the speech and actions of the general members, often treating them as potential liabilities in the public relations game. Charles, from *Network for Peace* described part of their media strategy on location.

“While we were at the event, we had people assigned who were media liaisons who helped to focus the media attention on the few people who were going to do interviews, which was the director and myself....”

The rationale behind this strategy reveals their concerns about member behavior.

*“And why not just let the press talk to anyone other than the organizer? Why not just let them talk to a member?”*

Another lesson we learned the hard way. If you let your members talk to the media, they may have all the best intentions and just really not be well informed, which would make the organization look terrible or, even if the media folks come up to someone who is well informed, that person might freeze up on camera. A video camera is a permanent record. You can't go back and proof read it before it goes out there to the world. That is why we don't just let anyone talk, you know, it's just too big a risk.”

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different locations, and be patted down.

These public moments are clearly interpreted as public relations opportunities and Charles is concerned that a member might embarrass the organization. Rochelle, from *DISRUPT*, shared similar concerns.

“There have been media trainings to address that. I think that it's scary to have a camera in your face, so I think that that is a major factor - people getting scared, and you always worry that someone is going to say something stupid and that's going to be the thing that makes it onto the news.”

These two strategies, media “trainings” and having specified media representatives, were popular attempts to control the organizations’ presentation of themselves in the media. Implicit in these strategies is recognition that while the organizations hoped to garner media attention, the color and the character of the publicity remain outside of their control. Unlike paid advertisements, organizations relying on news coverage relinquish the right to edit or to choose the context in which their organization will be discussed. Since they are unable to control the producers, the groups strive to control their participants.

The members seemed eager participants in these efforts. Sid, from the *American Adult Network* described his experience with media training.

“They teach us how to look on camera and how to look off camera and how to answer the questions. They talked to us about how to be comfortable, how to, you know, think of reporters as human, just like I am and that I shouldn't have anxiety because I'm speaking to a person who is knowledgeable as a journalist. I need to not worry about entrapment, because I don't think - if I thought a reporter was trying to do some entrapment, I'd walk away. They want us to stick in with the interviews you know, but to say what we're supposed to say. If we say what we're supposed to say, if we're on message, you can't get entrapped at all.”

Sid's training involved two important components: an effort to demystify the experience of communicating with journalists in hopes of calming the participants and training on

what to say. His double reference to saying what he is “supposed to say” indicates the presence of a party line to which he has been instructed to adhere and Sid experienced some anxiety that if he did not stick to that script that his words could be used against him by the press. Indeed, even his behaviors appear to have been guided as he reports being taught how to “look” on and off camera.

While Sid’s media training may sound extensive, it was common for organizations to train their members in this way. Some went even further. Liza, from *United Trades*, provided an example of how elaborate these trainings could get.

“...they talked to us about how to do a good job if we get approached on the street by a reporter, you know, making sure we had accurate information and making sure we could get it in a little sound bite. Just to make it sound okay. They showed us tapes of news shows and we talked about what the reporters want to have. We were focused a lot on making the job easy for the news and also on making ourselves look good. Then after we had the talk, we each got to practice getting interviewed and then we watched ourselves on TV so we could see how we did, you know, what we could do better. That was really fun. They asked us different questions and we could see how we did under pressure. We were laughing a lot, but we also learned a lot. I never thought so much about the news in my life.”

The union sought to help members understand the objectives and constraints of the news production process so that the members could give accounts that would fit into the model well. After doing this, members also practiced interacting with mock journalists, reviewed the tapes, and were given constructive criticism. This sophisticated preparation might be expected from political figures, but seems somewhat more surprising from a voluntary association.

The emphasis on member management, whether members were trained to direct journalists elsewhere or whether they were schooled in how to perform well for the news media, reveals a lopsided discourse. When participants are told “how to answer the

questions” or given information that they are encouraged to recite, conformity and support for existing philosophies are prioritized over open communication. The intensive handling of members by core members (who were in some cases professional staff and in other cases unpaid leaders) does not indicate an openness to multiple viewpoints and certainly fails to create a space for the egalitarian debate that Habermas values. Indeed, even those who are open to multiple forms of communication and are not wedded to rational-critical discourse (e.g., Young 1990) would likely agree that this type of dialogue is more indicative of indoctrination than debate.

While this critique begins by looking at communication internally, within organizations, it is important to note that this internal regimentation also distorts broader communication when those interviewed by the press enact a carefully orchestrated performance rather than communicating in a less restrained manner. Participants often focused so heavily on staying “on message” that even when they were interacting with nonmembers who were not with the news media, they seemed hampered by a rigid commitment to slogans and sound bites. As a result, participants tended to talk “at” those who attempted to engage them. For example, immediately prior to the *Land and Life Protection League*’s mock award ceremony I witnessed this interaction.

“A red headed woman, a bit younger (in her 20’s), is handing out materials [to bystanders and media personnel] when two women who are professionally dressed [appearing to work in the area] approach her, aggressively. One of them asks what she is protesting. The young woman says that they are concerned about, “private finance destroying the environment, hurting third world nations, and discriminating against African-Americans.” One woman is now smiling, the other says [sarcastically], “Okay, well that’s good to know” August 2, 2000

On several occasions I heard “ordinary” people (not with the media, the convention, or an active association) joke with one another about protesters, often expressing confusion or

amusement. But, in this case, the two professional women made an attempt to understand what was going on, yet they were unable to get an answer that was meaningful to them. When the inquiring woman said, "Okay, well that is good to know," she was expressing confusion. The participant's answer was "on message," but failed to give the questioner information that she could utilize to understand the organization's concerns. It was a conversation ending response.

### **Tolerance At Any Cost**

While stifling internal debate may have been an unintended consequence of encouraging members to adopt a pre-determined standardized position, some associations also stifled debate in a more deliberate way. Within individual organizations (as opposed to coalitions), I often found a political culture that placed such a high priority on tolerance and respect for difference that members often intentionally avoided discussing matters that involved disagreement. Ajay talked about this happening in *Students for Change*.

"...some people were pro Nader and others were about voting for Gore to avoid Bush, and others didn't see Nader as left enough and were in support of other candidates. We actually talked very little about voting, it was too sensitive, I guess. We could agree on all being left politically, though. That's how we kept our disagreement from being a problem: we talked about the things we did agree on, or the thing we agreed on, which was basically that the debates weren't democratic. We left our personal political views out of meetings and basically focused on talking about the problem, the fact that there wasn't real dialogue happening in the debate. The solution was what was messier, I mean, not the solution to the lack of dialogue, but the political solutions to the issues we were raising."

The members in many organizations, such as *Students for Change*, made efforts to talk about the matters upon which they already agreed, rather than engaging in debate over the issues where they sensed conflict might arise.

This premium on tolerance also produced hostile responses to those expressing criticism of other individuals or organizations not coded as "enemies" (e.g., criticism of the Christian Coalition was common in left leaning groups). I was in the middle of my interview with Rochelle when two young men interrupted us and my tape recorder captured the following interaction.

Young Man #1: Excuse me. Is there a local ordinance against infiltrating groups?

Rochelle: I don't know exactly what the story is.

Me: The police aren't allowed to do any intelligence gathering.

Young Man #1: Really? I just don't know what the jurisdiction is.

Rochelle: I don't know any of the legality of it, but there was a big thing when they admitted that they had been spying on us because previously they had said, "no, if we were doing that, it would be illegal."

Young Man #1: But I know there is a consent decree against some of the things they do. I'm just not sure exactly what the extent of it is. After they bombed the MOVE cult, they got an order, which they agreed to, so it's some kind of judicial order that prevents them from--

Rochelle: --Are you talking about MOVE? I don't really think it's appropriate to call them a cult.

Young Man #1: Well, okay, that just the way I read them--

Rochelle: --Well, I mean, yeah, that is the media depiction, but I think that, especially if you are here working on this kind of thing, you should be a little more aware of things.

Young Man #1: So what's the story on them?

Rochelle: They were just a radical group. They are still active in Philadelphia and they are still working. They do a lot of Mumia support: their organization is the center of it, and I think that they get a really bad rap and are misunderstood by the mainstream people. So people who are here, working on something like the convention...I definitely think should not be referring to them as a cult.

Young Man #1: Okay. I didn't know anything about them. Anyway (turning back toward young man #2), there is some sort of decree...

This conversation revolves around the 1985 police bombing of the house in West Philadelphia occupied by MOVE, a predominantly African-American anti-government organization.<sup>67</sup> MOVE was and remains perceived by many as a cult, because the members followed the teachings of its leader, John Africa, practiced a form of voluntary simplicity, and adopted the surname "Africa." In other words, the young man was sternly reprimanded not because he had a piece of misinformation, but because he failed to share the progressive understanding of this organization and his, more conservative, understanding was not welcome. By establishing parameters of acceptable speech, essentially somewhat of a tyranny of political correctness, room for dialogue around sensitive issues was constrained.

### **Political Discourse as Inefficient**

Rational deliberation was also often devalued because it was seen as inefficient. Participants in some organizations attempted to rope in philosophical discussions, which were perceived as frivolous and less important than strategic or logistical matters. Brian from *Inequality Forever*, shared his disdain for groups with a propensity to talk too much about such things.

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<sup>67</sup> The fire that ensued ultimately killed 5 children and 7 adults and destroyed 61 row houses, leaving 250 homeless.

"I think that we've already, you know, ideology has already been agreed upon [in advance]...because I think most organizing groups now a days don't like to discuss ideology because then you get into those stupid arguments - people that call themselves anarchists, people that call themselves communists. It's just a waste of time."

He sees such discussions as pointless. A similar sentiment was shared on the *United for Change* listserve: when the discussion turned away from logistics into political discussions about the ultimate goals of the group, the following email was posted.

Date: Wednesday, July 12, 2000 6:50 PM  
To: July 30 in Philly  
Subject: Re: [July30] Our Goals

Hello:  
I think we should get the word out and not waste SO much energy on political points amongst ourselves. Go download a poster, print copies and staple to phone poles. This will do more.  
- Aaron

This sense that political dialogue is a distraction inside politically oriented groups may seem unexpected, but it supports earlier findings by Lichterman (1999) and Eliasoph (1998), which indicate that people gathering in larger public spaces value action over discussion.

This is intriguing because it suggests that some involved with voluntary associations have the same working theory of politics that they have criticized in journalists. Journalists, as we have seen, tend to focus on strategy, on the horse race aspects of elections, and media critics quickly (and, I would argue, justifiably) criticize them for not focusing more on substantive issues. Yet, in these cases even those involved with associations preferred talking about strategy to talking about substantive issues. It seems contradictory that organizations so fervently focused on prompting others (e.g., the press, political figures, general public) to discuss "real" issues, but preferred to avoid becoming mired in such messiness themselves.



It is important to note that several group members reported engaging in long, intense discussions (some of which were made longer by use of the consensus method for reaching decisions<sup>68</sup>), however, I found time and again that these discussions centered on logistical and tactical issues. Even in organizations that privileged open communication, there was a desire to avoid ideological and political debates. Interestingly, even two of the groups that spent the most time in internal dialogue around political issues did so as a means to an end. As discussed in Chapter 4, in *United for Change*, the issue oriented discussions at their coalition meetings were plentiful, but a necessary obstacle on the way to finding a path of mutual agreement down which the involved member organizations could proceed. Similarly, *Stand-Up St. Louis* devoted time to deciding which issues they wanted to highlight in their issues forum. This was something that had to be discussed and renegotiated as new participants entered the group, but in Brenda's eyes these discussions were logistical details to be addressed. She explained this constant need to revisit these issues and reach consensus as her greatest frustration with the group, because she saw it as unfocused and inhibiting their progress.

## **Conclusions**

In sum, the organizations themselves often limited the public political dialogue of their members. This happened indirectly through an emphasis on public relations and the concomitant tendency to control the public expressions of their members. But rational-critical debate was also limited more purposefully in several ways. First, discourse was restrained by a political culture that prioritized tolerance so heavily that 1) those

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<sup>68</sup> The consensus method is notoriously time consuming. See Rothschild-Whitt (1979) for a thoughtful discussion of the practical challenges of egalitarian organizations.

differences thought to spark disagreement were submerged, and 2) social sanctions emerged for those expressing feelings that could be construed as intolerant. Second, the preference for action over discussion led political discussion to be devalued as frivolous and hence curtailed. The publicist orientation adopted by the majority of organizations ultimately stifled internal debate.

### **Chapter Conclusions**

What is perhaps most striking about the mobilization of civil society is the *lack* of impact that the intensive, effervescent energy generated by this myriad of outwardly-focused voluntary associations has on the public sphere. To be sure, the organizations in this study made some valuable contributions to public discourse by 1) creating events designed to promote rational-critical discourse about matters of common concern, and by 2) transforming benign public spaces into arenas of political expression and interaction. These discursive achievements suggest, contrary to the opinion of Watt (1991), that voluntary associations have the potential to play a meaningful role in the public sphere, at least in moments of heightened activity. However, the majority of associations also hoped to bring their issues and viewpoints to those that did not attend their events or appear in the public spaces, and these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

Attempts to make association concerns salient in the presidential election or to provide a criticism of the electoral process by generating discussion about these issues among the general public required an intermediary that would serve to circulate their ideas. The mainstream mass media failed to serve as this link. My review of key newspapers revealed very light coverage of voluntary association activities and articles

that focused on the logistics of the association events rather than the impetus for their existence. In interviews with association members, I sensed that mainstream broadcast journalism also offered little coverage, though a handful of more significant street marches and protests did receive local television coverage. This problem seems to stem from communicative impasses between journalists and association members and the grounding of news in journalistic, rather than political, values (Schudson 1995), which introduces a hierarchy between writers and subjects and reinforces the stratification of associations in the public sphere.

While Habermas (1998) celebrates the power of the press as an organ of communication that can serve as the foundation of public discourse, he is also critical of the domination of the public sphere by the mass media. He believes that collectives operating outside of large organizations have fewer opportunities to communicate their views via the news media, particularly those groups with ideas that fail to fit within the established bounds of debate. I found that while more powerful organizations were not necessarily more effective at obtaining coverage (indeed, only one of the four groups that obtained extended print coverage falls into this category), they do have a wider range of options for distributing their message. I do, however, believe that the discomfort of journalists with sweeping social-structural critiques does stem in part from the distance of these criticisms from more traditional opposition foci. I am not suggesting that the journalists are deliberately marginalizing anti-globalization and/or anti-corporate arguments, rather, I believe the dramatic nature of these objections and the seeming impossibility that they could be resolved rendered them difficult to translate for news workers accustomed to more "practical" or "reasonable" demands. Rather than accepting

the criticisms as the activists explained them, the journalists interpreted them as illegitimate or confused. I do not here hope to advocate for some normative theory of what modern journalism should be, but rather point to the realities of public discourse that is mass mediated.

Association contributions to public discourse were also limited by their physical separation from candidates, delegates, and other prominent political figures, which eliminated the possibility that these groups might directly communicate with these individuals through their actions around the major campaign events. This separation takes on heightened importance in the context of the lack of issue oriented news coverage received by these groups. Some associations were unconcerned with the candidates, but others hoped that they would be forced to address particular issues. If journalists will not ask candidates to respond to the concerns raised by voluntary associations (by asking them directly during a press conference or by writing in-depth issue focused pieces that prompt response from the candidates on these issues), and the organizations themselves are unable to communicate their concerns to them, it is unlikely that these issues will enter campaign discourse. Without media coverage of organizations' issues and in the absence of liaisons or direct connections to the politicians themselves, the efforts of these groups around the campaign have no avenue to enter mainstream political discourse. Without question there are other ways that these organizations can circulate their opinions and spark dialogue (e.g., through a newsletter, through alternative media sources, by sending letters to politicians or the public, etc.). The issue is that the heightened activity, the events themselves (e.g., marches, issues panels, debate watches,

protests, rallies), fail to successfully permeate mainstream political discourse. External forces hence limit their potential contribution.

I found that political discourse within associations was also unexpectedly limited in the mobilization context. The many organizations limited the public political dialogue of their members in indirect and direct ways. First, the emphasis on public relations, particularly media relations, created a tendency for core members to attempt to discipline the public expressions of their members. This indirectly curtailed dialogue, because relations between those involved were non-egalitarian and instructive rather than free and open. Even if the sentiments were those shared by members, a unified presentation was formed for the participants, rather than by the participants. This tainted discourse with nonmembers as well as between members, because dialogue that may have potentially engaged outsiders was degraded into slogans and chants. Rational-critical debate was also limited more directly in two ways. First, discourse was restrained by a political culture that prioritized tolerance so heavily that 1) differences and disagreement were submerged, and 2) social sanctions emerged for those expressing feelings that could be construed as intolerant. Second, the preference for action over discussion led political dialogue to be devalued as frivolous and hence curtailed. Concern with instrumental goals central to demonstrative action limited deliberation.

This chapter explores the public sphere at this period of intensive activity within civil society, and finds that although the myriad of active voluntary associations creating spaces for public political talk and increased media attention to politics has the potential to provide the closest approximation of the normative vision of the public sphere, public discourse was limited by the news media, the isolation of political figures, and by the

organizations themselves. While face-to-face political communication at association events and in streets, parks, and community centers in each of the five cities flourished, providing a uniquely politicized environment, the ideas and opinions formed in these venues had little means of circulating through mainstream channels.

## **CHAPTER 6 THE PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

The 2000 presidential campaign set in motion a period of heightened activity in civil society, and, by prompting voluntary associations to capitalize upon resources that often remain latent, laid bare the concrete strengths and weaknesses of the institutions that make up the arena, particularly in regard to their relationship to the mainstream public sphere. Ultimately, the picture with which we are left is one of flourishing organizations whose mobilization yields social currency for those involved, but that are relatively impotent in terms of their ability to impact mainstream political discourse or the mainstream political agenda in this context.

In terms of civil society, the campaign mobilizations reveal that while major changes in civic engagement (i.e., professionalization, the decline in classic American voluntary associations/increase in national citizen groups, and the increasingly fleeting nature of engagement) manifest themselves in the ways that participants define their relationships to the organizations with which they affiliate, these changes may not have impacted associational life or the development of social capital in the detrimental ways that others have suggested (e.g., Putnam 1995, 2000), at least not in this particular context. Indeed, the oft-disparaged national citizen groups appear to play a particularly important role in civic life. Generally speaking, the process of mobilization promoted the formation of social solidarity within the associations active around the major campaign events and often enhanced group commitment in a more abstract sense. Further, the campaign served as a dedifferentiating environment in which groups and individuals, by virtue of their emphasis on demonstrative action, temporarily entered a generalized public

arena, working together in formal and informal coalitions on the basis of differing interests as well as on the basis of shared concerns.

While these findings point to a rich associational milieu whose organizations benefit from mobilization, they obscure the extreme difficulty that many associations had in realizing their own objectives, particularly those that revolved around thrusting their issues and/or viewpoints into mainstream political discourse. Theorists such as Tocqueville and Habermas envision voluntary associations as serving a variety of positive purposes, including acting in a supervisory capacity as a counterweight to state power. Indeed, voluntary association potential in this regard remains largely unrealized, offering little evidence to support pluralist theories of democracy. The ability of voluntary associations to impact political discourse external to their immediate circles was severely limited by an over-reliance on the mainstream news media (which offered little coverage, paid minimal attention to the issues of the organizations they did cover, and prioritized the planned statements of those in positions of power), by modern political arrangements that have become increasingly impenetrable, and by the priorities and political cultures that operated within the associations themselves.

### **Mobilizing to Reach Out**

The mobilizing voluntary associations unexpectedly expressed very little interest in influencing the outcome of the election. Instead, a desire to communicate with people outside of the auspices of their associations prompted mobilization. The representatives expressed varied reasons for seeking to reach out, including (but not limited to): a desire to critique the existing electoral process in hopes of instigating change, an interest in



forcing issues that had not played a prominent role in the campaign into mainstream discourse, a perceived opportunity to weigh in on issues that had been central to the campaign, the hope of capturing the attention of politically inclined people who keep abreast of the campaign, and a general concern with obtaining media attention.

Because communicating with nonmembers motivated most groups, mobilizing associations overwhelmingly elected to employ demonstrative modes of activity that took diverse forms (e.g., civil disobedience, street theater, public forums) and ranged in tone from playful and light to passionate and aggressive. The organizational events that proved most successful at reaching people outside of their already loyal participant base were those that transmitted their message directly to the intended recipients, rather than relying on the news media to carry their message to a more remote audience.

In addition to strengthening the efforts of many associations already in existence, the intersection of the major campaign stops with the protean character of contemporary civic involvements proved to be a productive climate for emerging organizations. Five organizations in the sample formed in response to the presidential campaign (or in some cases directly in response to one particular campaign event). Three of these five organizations were intended to be temporary in nature and a fourth dissipated quickly, indicating that associations may share the fleeting, fluid nature that Wuthnow (1998) found characterized individual involvement in contemporary civic life.

Mobilization, then, is a useful concept for exploring voluntary associations more generally, in addition to exploring social movements and social movement organizations. In the context of voluntary associations and the 2000 presidential campaign, the answer to the central question, "What sparks collective action?" is, at its most abstract, a sense of

opportunity to be heard by outsiders. Mobilization overwhelmingly involved shifting into an outward orientation and organizations' chose the outward orientations that they felt would most realistically help them reach their goals.

The abundance of heightened activity concentrated in these five locales provided me with an opportunity to explore the consequences of such efforts for the organizations that engaged in them and the impact of these hyperactive organizations on the public sphere. I turn now to these two outcomes of mobilization.

### **Mobilization and Civil Society**

The response of the associations to the campaign events revealed that changes in civic engagement have not destroyed civil society or created an environment where social capital is unable to develop, that the process fostered social solidarity and enhanced group cohesion, and that the politically charged environment led to a dedifferentiation within civil society, facilitating the development of relationships between disparate groups. The empirical evidence further suggests that several aspects of the normative vision of civil society are, in fact, embodied in this context, while others are unquestionably complicated.

It would be unfair to look at a moment characterized by heightened involvement, such as a presidential campaign, and use this atypical energy to conclude that those who have argued that civic life is in decline are mistaken, but although this extraordinary moment says little about the degree of "regular" involvement, it does reveal that contemporary civic engagement may be harder to see than forms popular at mid-century. In other words, this setting, while unusual, still reveals the contours of modern civic life –

for individuals as well as for the organizations with which they are affiliated. Putnam (1995, 2000) is likely correct, that memberships in voluntary associations have declined over the last 50 years, but the reluctance of many to formalize their participation or to use a language of membership suggests that the reduction in formal memberships does not necessarily correspond to a decline in real involvement. While national citizen groups and trade unions still create concrete boundaries between members and nonmembers, the other associations in my sample very often did not. This was, in part, a self-conscious effort to eliminate barriers between insiders and outsiders. Even when extensive involvement and a strong sense of collective identity were present, many participants did not consider membership to be an accurate or relevant descriptor. This empirical evidence, then, suggests that those seeking to understand the changing tides of sociopolitical involvement more generally will be able to produce accurate assessments only if they relinquish the binary category of member/nonmember and incorporate the diverse modern relationships that exist between individuals and voluntary associations as well as the vocabulary that those involved use to describe their participation.

This looser attachment to specific organizations, what Lichterman (1996) refers to as personalized politics, can be understood as a manifestation of the fluidity exhibited by contemporary civic involvements, as described by Wuthnow (1998). In addition, the fluidity Wuthnow pinpoints also presented itself at the organizational level in the form of freely forming temporary coalitions, and in the form of completely new associations emerging in response to the campaign events. This versatility brings with it new possibilities for civil society. Unlike fixed, insular groups of (often homogeneous) members, this multi-faceted fluidity provides new spaces for participants to interact with

a variety of people, and thereby the potential to establish norms of reciprocity, trust, cooperation, and tolerance. In other words, rather than lamenting weak connections, this trend toward flexibility and openness should be understood as presenting valuable opportunities.

In contrast, the rise of national citizen groups has more complex implications for civil society. These groups offer little in the way of physical member participation; members were often not present at the events coordinated by these groups. Yet national citizen groups created valuable spaces for political education and dialogue. This might lead some to argue that these organizations provide a service to society, while failing to provide meaningful benefits for their members, but the efforts of these associations do provide a service to those who join – they champion the concerns critical to their members. While national citizen groups may not be as adept at building social solidarity and community between their members as more intimate groups, in this context they provided venues for public dialogue and served as a voice for aggregates of individuals concerned about specific issues.

Professionalization, like national citizen groups, appears less dire in practice than many have assumed. Professionals were critically important for coordinating the open, interactive forums created by the national citizen groups. The labor-intensive efforts required to plan and publicize such events might have overwhelmed lay participants or volunteers occupied by their own professional commitments. More importantly, the presence of paid staff members did not preclude meaningful nonprofessional involvement. Professionals and nonprofessionals related to one another in a variety of ways, in many cases nonprofessionals were integrated deeply into the fabric of the

organizations. In other words, the presence of a paid staff does not necessitate the disempowerment of nonprofessionals. In fact, professional volunteer coordinators may enhance the opportunities available to participants and provide them with valuable personal support.

Looking at the broader picture rather than at any individual trend, it is apparent that the process of intensive activity strengthened social solidarity within the organizations. With the exception of most national citizen groups, participants had occasion to work with others that shared their values and political concerns. For some participants, working with others involved meeting new people, while for others it involved increased interaction with people they had met or worked with in the past. In addition to helping participants develop connections to one another, the shared experiences, repeated articulation of group values and beliefs, concretization of the group through the use of shared symbols (clothing, banners, etc.), and the recognition of the group by nonparticipants all served to establish or reinforce a sense of collective identity. These relationships and sense of belonging in turn left most of those with whom I spoke feeling a greater sense of commitment to their respective associations.

This community building was accompanied by more tangible gains as well. The public nature of the demonstrative activities in which most groups participated helped them increase their bases of support, by providing them with an opportunity to increase the profile of their organizations among the politically active who were in the vicinity or who chose to attend their events. In addition, this external orientation helped some groups gather personal and organizational endorsements for specific initiatives they championed. These symbolic and instrumental opportunities helped to foster the

development of the groups in my sample.

In addition to this internal growth, the campaign events served as opportunities for relationships to develop between different groups, at the organizational level. The desire to engage a broader audience motivated organizations to form alliances with one another in order to maximize their effectiveness. Although these purposive connections can be understood as attempts made by partial-public spheres of civil society to enter the mainstream public arena, this is not to say that these groups were hoping to assimilate into some sort of abstract civil society. Indeed the opposite was true: the associations I encountered were committed to maintaining their particular identities and to remaining faithful to their pre-established beliefs and priorities. In fact, the desire to meet the diverse needs of coalition members is precisely why coalition work proved so challenging and explains why internal tensions simmered so close to the surface in the context of the televised debates, where a broader array of options made sustaining agreement more challenging. Because the individual organizations were committed to remaining true to their central concerns, most associations that entered coalitions also coordinated independent efforts. In spite of the logistical and ideological challenges that arose as the disparate groups negotiated their alliance objectives and strategies, the anticipated presence of a variety of active associations encouraged the mobilization of many groups and helped the organizations to maximize their effectiveness.

Stepping back, how do the images and experiences of actually existing voluntary associations compare to the normative visions of civil society? At least in the context of the presidential campaign, this idealized vision is partially realized. The associations I encountered were relatively autonomous overlapping groups that participants entered

without coercion. The associations also fostered feelings of social solidarity and likely engendered the values that are often thought to accompany such sentiments (e.g., trust, reciprocity, tolerance) as a result of the intensity of the interactions and the fluid character. Finally, the idealized vision of this arena came to mind as I lingered in the five communities, witnessing at every turn the presence of the active and engaged populace necessary to render civil society meaningful. Streets, parks, and community centers swarmed with people responding to the debates and conventions in various ways. The mobilization of civil society supported myriad voluntary social connections with organizations that served as spaces for citizens to participate in the political process.

Tocqueville envisioned groups of citizens working together to further their shared interests, but the activity around the presidential campaign complicates this understanding. During these events, coalitions, or *supra*-voluntary associations, formed between groups with differing interests as well as between those with mutual concerns. These unusual allegiances posed new challenges. Attempting to articulate shared ideals proved particularly difficult for constituents coming from different backgrounds and/or holding varied viewpoints. As *United for Change* sought to avoid areas of disagreement and accommodate all involved, their agenda became increasingly vague and ultimately communicated very little. Furthermore, coalitions based upon such light commonalities may find that these weak agreements become compromised under pressure. This was the case of the Boston coalition that formed around a need to protest the debate, but ultimately found that this surface agreement belied important ideological differences and was unable to endure.

Professionals introduced a challenge to the vision of voluntary associations as

egalitarian. Status differences between paid staff and nonprofessionals color their interactions, even in cases where those involved hold one another in high esteem and value equality. Even when nonprofessionals have great leeway and act in leadership capacities, these forms of autonomy must be granted, even if professionals who view their unpaid counterparts as partners willingly extend this responsibility. In the context of the presidential campaign, most of the professionals figured prominently in the activities of many associations, helping the groups organize and implement polished, well-publicized events with attention to production values. In light of this and the many cases in which professionals and nonprofessionals worked collaboratively in mutually beneficial ways, it is worth reconsidering how current normative ideals might be restructured to allow a place for the many organizations that operate with these distinctions. In other words, rather than assuming that the introduction of unequal participants degrades associational life, we would be well served to lay out a roadmap to the best possible arrangements in associations supported by both professionals and nonprofessionals. It is unreasonable to assume that such organizations are unable to enhance democracy and support the development of community.

Although interpersonal and inter-organizational ties flourished in the process of mobilizing, these relationships were generally not the initial impetus for involvement. Instead associations were inspired to influence public opinion (and ultimately public policy) by providing an alternative voice, capturing the unique moment the campaign event presented to either force their issues out into the public, or reaching politically minded people. Embedded in these goals was an interest in communicating with an abstract community (usually referred to as the "general public") in hopes that the public



would force politicians to respond. The difficulties these associations had in encountered in reaching the general public are revealed in the exploration of the relationship between these groups and the public sphere.

### **Active Associations and the Mainstream Public Sphere**

What was perhaps most striking about the mobilization of civil society is the lack of impact that the often outrageous and outwardly oriented efforts had on the public sphere. Select associations in this study made valuable contributions to public discourse by promoting rational-critical discourse about matters of common concern through the structure of their events (e.g., ethics hour, teach-in series, break-out sessions at the conferences), and by transforming benign public spaces into arenas of political expression. These accomplishments, while noteworthy, should not be overstated, in light of the tremendous difficulty that the associations had communicating with those outside of the physical boundaries of their events.

For associations to circulate their ideas and concerns among the general public or to force them onto the radar of the candidates, an intermediary is required. The mainstream news media did not serve this connective capacity during the presidential campaign events. Voluntary association activities received exceedingly light newspaper coverage, and extended articles exhibited a preoccupation with the logistics of the events rather than the issues that motivated their coordination. Interviews with association representatives suggest that broadcast journalism also offered little coverage, though a handful of more significant street marches and protests received local television coverage. This problem seemed to stem from communicative impasses between

journalists and association members and the grounding of news in journalistic, rather than political, values (Schudson 1995). The relationships between association representatives and journalists involved complicated negotiations in which activists strived to control the shape of the news coverage and journalists fought public relations efforts in hopes of obtaining unadulterated accounts. Ultimately however, the journalists control this relationship, creating an imbalance between writers and subjects and ultimately serving to reinforce the stratification of associations by inadvertently forcing under-resourced organizations to stage "newsworthy" events that tend to subvert their communicative goals.

Habermas (1998) paints a janus-faced image of the mass media: celebrating its power as a communicative apparatus that can serve as the foundation of public discourse, while simultaneously criticizing the way the mass media has come to dominate the public sphere. Habermas expresses concern that small associations have fewer opportunities to communicate via the news media, and that groups with views that fall outside of the mainstream have particular difficulty. In the campaign event context more powerful organizations were not necessarily more effective at obtaining coverage, but undoubtedly they do have a wider range of options for distributing their message (e.g., direct mail, paid advertisements, telemarketing etc.) than poorer organizations. However, the communicative impasses between journalists and protest groups support the proposition that more radical views have more difficulty obtaining coverage; I believe the journalists had difficulty understanding the goals of organizations making broad social-structural critiques, in part, because the criticisms were unfamiliar. This is not to imply that these views were deliberately suppressed; less mainstream views are certainly open to

discrimination, but in this case marginalization may have surfaced inadvertently because the arguments were unfamiliar. Calls for an end to legalized abortion or the death penalty are commonplace, and consequently easily interpreted, while protests against say, electoral politics, may be more difficult to decode. Of course, the consequence (exclusion) is the same regardless of intent.

The spatial segregation of candidates, delegates, and other prominent political personnel eliminated the possibility for association members to communicate directly with political figures. In light of the difficulty associations had in finding a mainstream medium for their voices, this isolation takes on heightened importance. If journalists do not ask candidates to respond to the concerns raised by voluntary associations (by asking them directly during a press conference or by writing in-depth issue articles that prompt response), and the organizations themselves are unable to reach them directly, it is unlikely that these issues will enter campaign discourse, at least via the demonstrative activities utilized in the campaign event context. There are, of course, other mechanisms for circulating ideas and sparking debate (e.g., through specialized media sources, via petitions, by using conventional marketing techniques, etc.). My point is simply to highlight that the events themselves were ineffective points of entry into mainstream political dialogue as a result of these external constraints.

Intriguingly, however, I found that the associations also bear some responsibility for limiting their impact in the public sphere. The many associations thwarted public political dialogue within their own organizations in both indirect and direct ways. In terms of indirect subversion, the near obsession with public relations led some core members to attempt to control the speech of their members in an effort to avoid potential

embarrassment. As a result, members were often asked to adhere to an official platform, and/or encouraged to perform, rather than to converse naturally and freely share their personal thoughts. Obviously, this inhibits the possibility of reflexivity, because participants are encouraged to regurgitate canned responses rather than to listen, think, and remain open to alternative viewpoints. This distorted intra-group relations because communication between those involved were instructive (i.e., hierarchical) rather than egalitarian and open. Even if the sentiments practiced were genuinely shared by those who practiced them, this unified presentation was formed for the participants, rather than emerging out of group dialogue. In addition to coloring discourse within the associations, dialogue between participants and nonmembers was also stifled because the speech of participants was often degraded into slogans and sound bites. Rational-critical debate was also limited more directly by a political culture that submerged disagreement in the name of tolerance and penalized views that were interpreted as politically incorrect. Finally, because of the strategic environment, political discussion was often devalued as inefficient and therefore submerged in favor of more pragmatic undertakings.

Although voluntary associations created numerous (new) spaces for public political talk and the media focused extra attention on politics during presidential campaigns, public discourse failed to live up to the promise created by these opportunities. Discourse was limited by the news media, the sequestering of key political figures, and by the organizations themselves. Face-to-face political communication at association events and in public spaces flourished, providing a uniquely politicized environment, but the ideas and opinions formed in these venues had little opportunity to circulate amongst those not physically present.

It is important to note of course that most (though not all) of the associations did not seek discourse for discourse's sake. Most sought to expand dialogue in hopes of influencing public opinion in order to initiate (or inhibit) social change. Put more plainly, these associations were interested primarily in speaking rather than listening. They generally sought to advocate a firmly fixed viewpoint (e.g., abolish the death penalty, pass gun control laws, initiate a school voucher system) rather than to brainstorm with others in hopes of reaching consensus. Organizations operating with this objective were not reflexive (open to allowing the best argument to prevail). Some associations did, however, seek to revitalize or enlarge public discussion. Groups such as *EnviroLink* and *Young Adult Voter's Association* hoped only to have issues put on the table for discussion, rather than to advocate for a particular policy or viewpoint. And a select few groups had an even broader agenda – that of encouraging public dialogue about political issues (e.g., *Students for Change* and *Bootstraps*). My point is that while most associations sought to enter the public sphere, many were focused on pragmatic, instrumental objectives, rather than on more romantic notions of raising the caliber of American political dialogue.

In total, the picture is a complex and at times contradictory one. Voluntary associations are revealed as responsive collectives of people concerned about political issues and interested in playing a role in the authorship of their society. Yet, when these partial publics attempt to influence the political direction of the country by expanding the discussion of the issues that concern them, they face severe difficulties in doing the connective work that Habermas (1989) sees as essential for public sphere communication. In order to approximate symmetry, or the inclusion of all those

potentially affected, dialogue that transpires in disparate collectives must be connected to one another and further opened to all those who may want to contribute or respond in the debate; creating a feedback loop whereby communication involves reaction, question, and challenge rather than simple, repeated broadcasts to which no one is able to respond. This type of circular, open communication proved impossible to generate.

### **Is Alternative Media Truly An Alternative?**

Regardless of motive, the intent to communicate with outsiders was at the forefront of the minds of most associations active in this context and, as I have indicated, forces both external and internal to the organizations limited these efforts. I have devoted substantial time to exploring the ways in which the relationship between voluntary associations and the mainstream news media failed to generate this much sought after publicity. One of the intervening issues is that journalists for mainstream newspapers (and news programs, for that matter) do not have political education and argumentation as a primary objective. They are in no way obligated to provide an open microphone to whomever wants to speak their mind. Instead journalists concern themselves with reporting new happenings and developments<sup>69</sup> of importance to their readers and the broader world (or community in the case of local news outlets or metro stories). In light of this, it might make sense that these associations turn to alternative media outlets that opt to focus on facilitating political dialogue, or strive to create and distribute their own publications. Indeed, research has demonstrated that alternative publications are valuable instruments for circulating oppositional views and interpretations and raising issues for nonmainstream groups (e.g., Jacobs 2000).

The Independent Media Center (IMC), which was established in November 1999 to cover World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, had a prominent presence at many of the association events in Philadelphia and Los Angeles and a spottier presence in the debate cities. The IMC is a web-based cooperative of grassroots journalists who write stories, collect audio tapes, and produce videos to post on IMC websites (over 50 local, independently operated centers exist).<sup>70</sup> It is an active communicative arena that is constantly updated by countless geographically dispersed journalists who post stories and video/audio clips. Though the IMC journalists paid particular attention to covering protests and marches around the campaign events, they also produced stories on some theatrical events and interactions in public spaces. The IMC websites provided extended coverage of the events, very often offering an open platform by featuring in-depth interviews with activists, and providing a place for organizations to post their own accounts.

In spite of the cutting edge character of this Internet-based open forum, the IMC serves as an excellent illustration of the rewards and confines of alternative media sources. The primary advantage is one of voice. As discussed throughout this research mainstream coverage is difficult to attain: generally speaking, alternative media sources have more (relative) space available because they are narrower in scope and/or may be more likely to cover the activities of organizations active around issues they support. The IMC exaggerates the access to coverage by virtue of the unrestricted space available and its openness to stories from unlimited parties. The other benefit that emerges in alternative media spaces is the opportunity to hear from, and respond to, others with

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<sup>69</sup> As the well-known journalism adage goes, "the first three letters of news are N-E-W."

<sup>70</sup> The main website is [www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org) on which there are links to the other branches.

similar interests. This attribute is particularly pronounced by the inclusive nature of the IMC: interested writers need to have a moderate degree of technological skill, but there are otherwise no costs to posting and no screening mechanisms. In addition, with every story there is an option to "add your own comments" where readers have the option to post additional information and comment on/criticize accounts that they believe are inaccurate. By creating a forum for those with shared concerns, alternative media help to cultivate communities of interest.

Even with the benefits that come with alternative media, they cannot substitute for mainstream media coverage. These spaces can allow for the formation of strategies to better engage a mainstream audience, but they cannot bridge this gap themselves. Alternative media products are often difficult to locate: they may populate the shelves of select large newsstands in major metropolitan areas, but they are not in supermarkets, at airports, or in libraries. Many alternative publications have subscription services, but low circulation numbers and fewer advertisers ratchet up the prices of such publications significantly. This creates a barrier for those who are financially disadvantaged, and a less formal deterrent for those who can afford to subscribe, but who think the cost too high. Similarly, while many alternative publications have content-rich websites, Internet access is also unevenly distributed. Even putting aside the important class issues raised by these constraints, alternative publications cannot effectively reach a mass audience because in order to read alternative media, they must be sought out. Mainstream news circles around us – on the radio, on television, and in newspapers (even if we do not subscribe they appear outside hotel doors and lounge around coffee shops, bus seats, and waiting rooms). We may have little interest in natural disasters, playoff game winners, or



political scandals, but this information often finds us – if not by landing in our line of vision, then by way of small talk with strangers, family dinner conversation, or obliquely through late night comedian monologues. In contrast, smaller nonmainstream publications rarely confront us unexpectedly. Consequently, those who wish to read *The Washington Blade*, *Latin News Network*, or *Sojourner* must seek them out. This results in a readership of interested parties, which can connect those already interested in a given set of issues, but cannot recruit, force marginalized issues into the consciousness of others, or open the discussion. Therefore, while alternative media are critical to maintain and nurture the development of subaltern counterpublics, they are not the solution to the conundrum that emerged in the campaign context in which associations first and foremost strived to communicate with outsiders. They serve as spaces where alternative publics can connect and prepare for engagement with the mainstream, but they cannot provide the vehicle.

### **Voluntary Associations and the Opportunities Lost**

Simultaneously recognizing the associations' need for a circulating mechanism (in order to reach the general public and political figures) and the priorities of mainstream journalists, it is understandable that the associations targeted the press, and that they were limited by them. Yet it would be wrong to hold this disjuncture solely responsible for the inability of the public sphere to reach its full potential. The associations themselves must be held accountable. In addition to "managing" members and displaying an intolerance in the face of (inefficient) political debates, the groups that I studied suffered from a misrecognition of the opportunities presented by the campaign context. To the degree that

the organizations' public events were performative displays staged with the news media in mind. the groups failed to recognize the true potential before them – the prospect of having meaningful interactions with the “audiences” in their presence. While many of the shows put on for the news media were engaging to bystanders (as opposed to attendees) in certain respects (e.g., comedic, dramatic, visually compelling, musical), association members rarely turned to them in an effort to communicate in a meaningful way. In other words, when presented with a chance to speak to small slices of the abstract general public that figured so prominently in their planning, they remained focused on performing for members of the news media who would ultimately fail to serve as their conduit.

The associations that held publicized events that drew attendees were much more focused on the people in their midst and made efforts to provide a stimulating environment for them. For example, groups such as *Citizens' Campaign Watch* (conferences), *Freedom and Equality League* (Supreme Court panel), *GenNext* (concert/debate watch), and *Stand Up St. Louis* (issues forum) oriented their events around those who attended, provided stimulating presentations, time for interaction, comfortable seating, and information for guests to take home. This is in stark contrast to, for example, the march organized by *Rights Now* and *Christians for Families*, the *School Choice*, *Family Choice* rally, and the protests held by *Federation for the Freedom of Religion* and *NC Parents Against Gun Violence* whose efforts involved no meaningful dialogue with those in the vicinity. Marches, in particular, lend themselves well to communicating with a large number of people, because of the area covered, yet communication in these cases generally involved bullhorn lead chants and slogan covered

posters that do little to draw people in. People selling bumper stickers or newspapers approached me from time to time in such contexts, but they were very brief interactions.

In other words, organizations' often passed up communicative opportunities by shifting into a particular form of demonstrative action that focused on potential message carriers rather than potential listeners. The one group that avoided this pitfall was the *American Adult Network*, who held events in public spaces that were intended to engage those who passed by. The organization set up chairs, offered refreshments, and had two interactive games set up. The people working the games would talk to people passing by and encourage them to play. The game was issue oriented and informative and participants handed out token prizes to the players. In addition, volunteers were around to offer information and encourage people to sit down for a while to talk about health care issues for seniors. Those who decided to stop were also encouraged to sign a massive red, white, and blue visual statement of support that already had hundreds of signatures on it. Interestingly, in addition to providing an information-rich and welcoming environment, *American Adult Network* took this event on a cross-country tour to a number of locations, including the campaign events, but also including stops in other communities. So in addition to recognizing an opportunity that most organizations failed to see, the organization made efforts to do its own connective work by circulating their message themselves.

### **The Presidential Campaign and Mobilization**

The majority of the voluntary associations understood the presidential campaign as a chance to connect with nonmembers and in this regard they had only modest success.

but the very act of mobilizing, which was facilitated by the perception of an opportunity, generated important, if serendipitous, outcomes. Participants formed relationships with one another and often developed a greater sense of connection to their groups as a whole. Equally important, many associations built connections with other organizations that provided support, interaction with people with differing interests and backgrounds, and the exchange of ideas. Looking through the lens of social movements, voluntary association mobilization could be read as fruitless in the campaign context, because such relationships would be rendered invisible, but from the civic engagement vantage point these ties to community emerge as a notable accomplishment.

Ultimately, the presidential campaign climate helped organizations in some respects, but inhibited them in others, turning civil society into an affective rather than an effective arena. The emotional intensity, heightened sense of efficacy, and increased time commitments lent themselves to creating meaningful interpersonal ties. Indeed, in this setting, Putnam (1995; 2000) need not worry about the development of social capital. On the other hand, although major campaign events *appeared* to be opportunities for political impact, mobilizing in this particular context may have, ironically, limited the ability of the associations to have an effect. The conventions and debates were dynamic environments where associations found themselves competing with other associations for publicity, as well as with huge electoral events that generate a flurry of news in their own right. Newspapers and news broadcasts have relatively fixed time and space constraints and on high volume days news must be prioritized. In addition, political figures who may have been read as more accessible proved to be shrouded with exceptional security. Those organizations that lined the street with banners and signs, hoping to make an

impression as the motorcade passed (e.g., *NC Parents Against Gun Violence, Stand Up St. Louis*) found their presence heavily monitored and constrained. This was compounded by the unexpected routes to the venues often utilized to usher candidates, delegates, and staff in and out with minimal chaos. So, although the events served as an intense draw for journalists and political figures and staff, the setting created challenges as well as opportunities for associations hoping to have an impact.

The presidential campaign, as a ritual of civic engagement, drew both individuals and organizations to increase their activity and led to the formation of a handful of completely new associations. It is difficult to make the case that these civic rituals are either conservative or transformative for the associations that choose to respond, primarily because it is beyond the scope of this research to assess the longer-term effects of this activity. On one hand, it seems as though the campaign efforts were transformative – the excitement, commitment, and coalition work certainly has the power to build momentum and fundamentally alter the culture and power of a given association. Yet, if it is plausible that the energy could crescendo, it is equally possible that it could wane. Emotional intensity and extended personal commitment are not easy to sustain. In the end, the associations may find that they have exhausted their resources, and for very little reward if they focus too narrowly on gaining the political influence that proved elusive.

### **Empirical Grounding: What Can Civil Society and the Public Sphere Do?**

In the final analysis, the mobilization of civil society revealed an associational terrain with distinct characteristics. First and foremost, the dynamics served as a stark

reminder that the relationship between civil society and the state is one in which true decision making power resides far from associational control. Habermas (1998) explains that in the public sphere actors can acquire influence, but not political power. The influence of public opinion can make a difference politically, but this influence only converts into power once it enters legislative arenas. Interestingly, in the campaign context, associations even seem to have failed to influence public opinion. But civil society also emerges as an arena in which groups can work together for mutual benefit and differences can be bridged. Coalitions between organizations with differing interests suggest that relationships may form in ways overlooked in the past. Some of these ties proved to be vulnerable (e.g., the Boston debate alliance that crumbled), while other working relationships helped to build trust and norms of reciprocity (e.g., *Land and Life Protection League's* ties to *DISRUPT*). Many alliances, including those between groups with shared interests, produced networks that participants felt would endure beyond the campaign context (e.g., between *ABOLISH* and the other anti-death penalty groups).

The voluntary association events entered the public sphere and in doing so altered its landscape. In these cities the public sphere looked less like a calm setting of thoughtful deliberation and more like a vaudevillian stage. It is an emotional space in two regards. First, many association participants described and displayed intense personal sentiments: anger, playfulness, bitterness, revelry, indignation, excitement, laughter, and fear were all expressed in this context, often passionately. In other words, emotion flowed for many people in the course of action, and in its aftermath (e.g., exhilaration, frustration). The public sphere is also aptly referred to as an emotional space as a result of the ways in which associations often attempted to elicit emotional responses from

those they encountered (e.g., *Freedom and Equality League* forum with motivational tone). This emotionally-charged state is antithetical to the rational, reserved participants that the Habermas' ideal conjures.

The public sphere, as constructed by the associations in my sample, was also distinctly performative in nature. Though not the rule, public arenas more often appeared to be spaces of one-way information broadcasts than of reciprocal exchange. The associations had messages that they felt were extremely important, which they wanted to convey to others. I have already addressed the extent to which I understand this choice as a costly one in terms of strategy, but wish here to reiterate the textural quality this lent to the setting. At times the effect was flat: speeches delivered by bullhorn (e.g., *ABOLISH*) and well-placed information tables (e.g. *Business Watch*) involved unmemorable one-way communication flows. But there were compelling performances as well, such as comic skits and musical performance pieces. I described the dancing singing goats earlier, but other groups offered similar displays. One group of women in makeshift cheerleading uniforms played on the unexpected by performing choreographed high school style cheers with subversive content. The Wealth Warriors from *Inequality Forever* opted for a satirical approach, staying in character as wildly wealthy individuals lobbying to see that their rights stay protected. In contrast, impassioned civil disobedience efforts, bloody photos and religious directives of pro-life advocates, traditional "power to the people" marches, and other sober gatherings punctuated these more whimsical displays.

I take from this research a firm belief that voluntary associations, even in their contemporary manifestations, have the potential to act as bulwarks of community and

purveyors of political energy in public spaces. The mobilizations prompted by the presidential campaign events have illustrated what can be, but also what barriers exist. In terms of the news media, associations must recognize it as an entity to which they can appeal, but also one that they cannot necessarily control, even at moments when they invest great energy in attempts to do so (e.g., media trainings, press releases, dramatic events). Of course, I do not mean to imply that it is an impenetrable medium, only that it is elusive and idiosyncratic. With slightly different efforts at other moments, associations might certainly break through, but meaningful mainstream coverage rests upon a long series of contingencies that minimize the likelihood of success. In light of this, associations would be best served to emphasize less ambitious, more direct approaches or to reconsider their priorities.

What is to be made of these disempowered associations and the emotional, performance-based events that dominated the landscape surrounding the nominating conventions and televised debate sites? The shortage of rational-critical discourse would doubtlessly disturb Habermas, yet I leave this project heartened. To the extent that such events foster political education, serve to raise awareness about existing communities of interest, remind public officials that a vocal, politically engaged populace exists, model an ethic of engagement to those who may be disconnected from civic life, and help people to envision other possibilities, the relationship between voluntary associations, electoral politics, and the public sphere is a meaningful one. In light of Lichterman (1999) and Eliasoph's (1998) findings that political conversations tend to be reserved for intimate settings, the politicization of public space in this context is particularly noteworthy. In other words, even in light of the associations' ineffective attempts to



reach the “general public.” something very special happened in the awnings of the campaign events that can only be understood as enhancing the setting in a way that we are unlikely to find outside of this context. Further, the solidaristic qualities that evolved through the mobilization process suggests that civil society benefits from the public participation that the campaign compelled.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Interview Guide – Members/Core Members**

*Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research project. I am interested in the activities and experiences of members of different groups during this presidential campaign. I want to remind you that everything we discuss today will be kept confidential. Also, please remember that if you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions, you are under no obligation to answer them. Do you mind if I tape record this interview? Taping frees me from having to take notes, so that I can focus on our conversation. During this interview I would like to ask you about two things – first, about the background, day to day operations and activities that your organization participates in and second, about the organization's efforts for the convention/debate.*

**I'll start by asking you about the day-to-day operations and activities of your group...**

How would you describe the overall goals of your organization?

Social? Political? Spiritual? How so?

What would you say that the primary purpose is? What makes you say this?

What does being a member entail?

Attending meetings?

Paying dues?

Do members serve as officers? On committees?

How many members would you estimate there are?

How are members recruited?

How were you recruited?

Is increasing membership important to your organization? Why/Why not?

Does your organization have paid employees?

How would you describe the difference between the paid employees and the members?

Do the members and staff interact much?

Under what circumstances?

Are they peers?

Who do you feel sets the agenda for the organization the staff or the members?

Does your organization hold regular meetings?

How often? Where?

Do most members attend regularly? Do you attend regularly?

Would you tell me about what the group did at the last meeting you attended?

How many members would you say attended that meeting?

Outside of meetings, could you describe the activities that your organization participates in?

Fundraisers? Parties? Workshops? Protests?

Do you ever work with other groups?

When was the last time this happened? What prompted that?

Do the groups have a long-term relationship or shorter involvements?

What do you think are the benefits of co-sponsoring? Drawbacks?

How about competition? Would you say your organization competes with any other groups?

Which ones? What are their objectives?

Over what?

How about conflict? Does your organization have any "enemies" whom you butt heads with?

Over what issues?

Speaking of news, how often does your organization interact with the media?

Has your organization been in the newspaper or on TV news?

What prompted that?

How did you feel about the coverage?

Would you say that getting publicity is important to your organization?

What makes you say this?

Does it come up at meetings?

Why do you think it is or isn't important?

Do you have a public relations person/committee? Distribute press releases?

When? Why?

Do you notice any pattern between what releases get picked up and which do not?

**Now I'd like to talk specifically about your organization's efforts surrounding this convention/debate...**

What made your organization decide to coordinate an event during the convention/debate?

Why was it important for your organization to be here?

Is this something the organization has done before/does regularly?

Why the convention/debate instead of some other venue?

What were the organization's objectives for this particular event?

What did the group want to accomplish?

Were you hoping to influence the outcome of the election? To sway voters?

Were you hoping to influence the candidates? On what issues?

Were you hoping to get your organization into the public eye?

Did the presence of the media influence the decision to hold the event?

How so?



How did your organization hope to benefit from having an event during the convention/debate?

Did you think it might increase membership?

Increase contributions? Why?

Exercise influence?

Did your organization hold meetings to talk about ways to accomplish these goals?

What were those like?

What were the issues that you spent a long time talking about?

How was attendance at these meetings? Higher than normal? Lower?

Were more meetings than normal necessary to plan?

Did you have "strategy" meetings?

I'd love to hear about the group's strategies...would you tell me about them?

What was the organization most concerned about/preoccupied with?

How did you decide on this type of event?

Why was this particular event the best choice for your organization?

(e.g., why a fundraiser instead of a protest?)

How has planning for this event impacted your organization?

Were any special committees established? How did that happen?

Have you noticed an increase or decrease in member activity/contributions?

Why do you think this is the case?

Have you increased/decreased your activity/contributions?

How would you describe the mood at these meetings/gatherings?

Is this atypical or is this the way things usually are?

Have people been more intense? More enthusiastic?

Why do you think this is?

Did you work with any other organizations during this planning process?

Was the event co-sponsored? With what group(s)?

Why? How did that come about?

What were the benefits/drawbacks to co-sponsoring?

How do you think co-sponsoring would have impacted the event if you had done so?

Did you have any conflicts with other groups during this process?

What prompted those?

Did the involvement of a different organization prompt your organization's participation here?

Did the idea to participate in the convention/debate come from a different organization?

Could you explain?

Did you participate to counter the presence of an organization that you oppose?

Could you explain?

**Do you think your organization's involvement prompted the participation of other group(s)? How so?**

**Would you describe the actual event for me?**

**What transpired?**

**Who participated?**

**Did you have an "audience"?**

**Do you have a sense of who was in the audience?**

**Media? Other organization members? Delegates? Individual people?**

**Did they appear supportive? Critical? Mixed? Hard to read?**

**What was the best part? Why?**

**What was the worst part? Why?**

**Did things go the way you expected them to? In what way? Why/why not?**

**What did you personally do today?**

**Were any new slogans, logos, or flags etc. created for this event?**

**What are they/do they look like?**

**Who worked on putting them together/designing them?**

**Where did they come into play?**

**Are they on flyers? Posters?**

**Why was it necessary to create something new?**

**Did the organization hope to have media attention at this event?**

**Why? To reach who?**

**Voters? Candidates? Delegates? Public at large?**

**Before this event, did you plan how best to deal with the media?**

**Why was this necessary?**

**What decisions were made?**

**Do you think that the media was interested in your event?**

**What leads you to say this?**

**What do you think that journalists look to cover?**

**Were any stories written about this event that you are aware of? Where did they appear?**

**Why do you think they were or weren't written?**

**Did you read the story(ies)?**

**What did you think of it/them?**

**Do you feel like the journalists understood your goals and objectives?**

**Did you feel that the organization was portrayed accurately?**

**Did you feel the article portrayed your organization in a positive or negative light?**

**Why do you think this is so?**

**Do you know how the media became aware of your event?**

**Did anyone in your organization contact them?**

Were press releases sent out?  
Would you say that the journalists were more interested in your activities than they usually are, under regular circumstances?  
What leads you to say this?

Did your organization have to apply for a permit or for other public approval for your event?

What was that process like? Was there a fee?  
How do you feel the city handled this process?  
What do you think of the permitting system?  
Do you think it is reasonable? Restrictive?

Before the event, did your organization discuss the potential for police involvement?  
Were any strategies discussed?  
What were they?

Did the police have a presence during your event? Before? After?  
Why do you think this is?  
How would you describe their involvement?

Did your organization break the law?  
In what ways?

Why did the organization decide to do this?  
Have they done so before? Could you elaborate?

Have you had encounters with/assistance from the police before?  
Could you tell me about that? Under what circumstances?  
How did your experiences with the police this time compare to your experiences in the past?

Would you say the event was a success?  
Was the organization's effort "worth it?" Why/Why not?  
In what ways was it successful?  
Did you accomplish your goals as an organization?  
How do you think the membership will be impacted?  
How was the turnout?  
Of members? Of non-members?  
What were the barriers to success?  
How could it have been better?

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**Insert these questions only for members of groups who do NOT hold regular meetings/ mailing list organizations (skip for others):**

If this is not a group that meets regularly for activities, how did you become involved with this event?  
How did you find out about it?  
What made you decide to come?

Had you met many of the participants/members prior to today?

How did that happen?  
Why not?

How many other members/participants would you say you got to know by participating in this event?

What was that like?

How did you get to know them?

Were there any activities to help participants get to know one another?

What were those like?

How compatible do you feel you are to the others in the group?

Has meeting other members made you feel more attached to the group?

How so?

Why? Why Not?

Was this "bonding"? Why do you think that is?

Do you think your level of involvement will change (increase? decrease?)

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Overall, in terms of importance or scope, how does this event compare to other things your group has done this year?

What leads you to say this?

Is this a significant event for you as a group? In what ways?

Before we wrap up, I'd like to know if you personally feel that a major campaign stop is a good time for citizen groups to become more vocal.

*Well, I'd like to thank you very much for your time. I have asked most of the questions that I had for you today. Would you like to share any additional information with me before we wrap up?*

**APPENDIX B**  
**Interview Guide for Journalists**

*Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research project. I am interested in the opinions and experiences of different people during this presidential campaign. I want to remind you that everything we discuss today will be kept confidential. Also, please remember that if you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions, you are under no obligation to answer them. Do you mind if I tape record this interview? **During the course of this interview, I would like to talk about three different topics: your typical work, your work during this campaign, and your experiences with and opinions about the groups that have scheduled events that coincide with this convention/debate.***

**I'd like to begin by hearing about what you do on an average day...**

What type of news organization do you work for?

How would you describe your role in the organization?

What stories do you usually cover?

Local politics, national politics, local news, national news?

How many stories would you say you write in an average week?

How do you choose what to write about on a given day?

How much latitude do you have in choosing the topic of the story?

Could you elaborate?

When you are assigned to cover a particular event, how do you choose your "angle" on the story?

Could you walk me through that process using today as an example?

Are there ever stories that you would like to write, but don't?

Could you give me an example?

What prevented you from writing the story?

**Okay, great. Now, I would like to talk more specifically about your work during this presidential campaign.**

How would you describe the changes in your job during this presidential campaign?

Have you been assigned to cover a candidate?

Are you traveling with the press pool?

Do you choose your stories in a different manner or approach the material differently?

Using today as an example, would you walk me through the way in which you approached your stories?

Were there any stories that you wrote that you didn't expect to write?

How did they come about?

Were there any stories that you would've liked to write, but didn't?

What happened?

In terms of major campaign events, such as conventions and debates, what are the first things that happen when the candidate and the press arrives on location?

Would you walk me through this using this convention/debate as an example?

What did the journalists do?

Is there any down time?

Is this typical for a major campaign event?

How do you acclimate yourself to a new setting or event?

How would you describe the response of the local community?

How were the press/candidates greeted?

**Great, this is very helpful context for me. Now, I'd like to hear your thoughts on some of the groups, other than political parties, that are participating in the campaign...**

On a major stop like this, whom do you usually find seeking publicity – outside of the candidates and parties?

How can you tell that they want your attention?

Do you get invitations to events?

How many?

From what groups?

National? Local?

How do you choose which to attend?

Could you tell me about the last time an organization really got your attention?

What did they do?

What do you think they were hoping to accomplish?

Is anyone with your employer assigned to cover the activities of these groups?

Has this traditionally been the case?

What do you think prompted the change?

Which types of group events get your attention, or the attention of your editors?

What was the last such event?

What made it stand out?

How did it capture your interest?

Did you write a story on it?

How did you approach the story?

How could an organization improve their chances of getting publicity?

During this campaign, have you initiated contact with a citizen group?

What prompted you to do so?

How did they respond?

Do you think that you will (or will do so again)?

Why or why not?

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**Insert these questions for those describing a specific event or met at a specific event**

How did you come to cover X?

Were you assigned to cover this? Why?

How did you approach the story?

Did you need to do any research before attending?

What do you think was the most interesting thing that happened there?

What do you think were the goals of the organizers?

What would you say was the main message?

Who do you think that message was intended to reach?

Do you think this event was a success?

Why/why not?

How was "turn out"?

Was there an audience?

Are events like X common?

How did this one compare to others?

What do you see as the benefits for an organization to hold such an event?

The limitations?

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Have you covered the activities of groups like these outside of the campaign season?

Fundraisers? Protests?

How did these differ from those you covered during the campaign?

Number of attendees?

Intensity?

Goals?

Would you say that they relate to the press differently in non-campaign settings?

How so?

Do you think publicity makes a difference in the success of these organizations?

In your opinion, is the campaign a good time for groups to become more vocal?

*Well, I'd like to thank you very much for your time. I have asked most of the questions that I had for you today. Would you like to share any additional information with me before we wrap up?*