

Advocacy Group Involvement in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primary: The New Generation Arrives

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Dave Karpf, PhD
Postdoctoral Research Associate
Taubman Center for Public Policy
Brown University
davekarpf@gmail.com
www.davidkarpf.com

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the advocacy group endorsements in the 2008 democratic primaries, with a particular focus on strategic decisions and membership-engagement practices. Gathering data on the 45 left-wing groups that took part in the high-profile “America Votes Coalition” in the 2004 election, it determines that endorsements made while the outcome of the Democratic primary was still in doubt were limited to labor unions, EMILY’s List, and MoveOn.org. It then investigates MoveOn in particular, examining the new media tools that this outlying organization used in making its early decision. Though inconclusive, the paper raises questions for further exploration about the impacts of new media platforms and the emerging membership regime for political action among advocacy groups.

Introduction

The 2008 Democratic Presidential Primary was arguably the most fiercely contested of the modern (post McGovern-Fraser commission) era. Early expectations that Hillary Clinton would sail to an easy victory were upset in the Iowa caucuses. The “Super Tuesday” set of primaries in early February produced no decisive winner, and as the candidate field narrowed to a competition between Clinton and Obama, it became apparent that the race would remain close enough that independent Superdelegates would have to play a decisive role in the final nomination process (Karpf 2009a). The historic nature of *both* candidacies, with Clinton representing a potential first female President and Obama representing a potential first African-American President, heightened

tensions between party activists, leading to substantial media speculation as to whether the internal party rifts could be healed prior to the November election.

Against this backdrop, I set out to study a question that is tangential to the outcome of the primaries themselves. My central research field concerns the impact of online communication platforms on the political advocacy groups that mobilize collective action in American politics. Building upon the work of Bruce Bimber (2003), Andrew Chadwick (2007) and others, I have argued elsewhere that the emergence of novel membership and fundraising regimes functions as a disruptive innovation of sorts (Christensen 1997)), leading to generational displacement in the interest group ecology of American politics (Karpf 2009b). Online communication platforms enable a new political economy of political association-building, leading to the emergence of new, multi-issue groups such as MoveOn, Democracy for America, and the DailyKos blogging community that feature minimal overhead costs, virtually-networked staffs, and massive lists of internet-based supporters who often take action with the organizations while never being asked to pay membership dues.

That these new organizations adopt *different* organizational forms is easily demonstrable. A further contention – that changing revenue streams are leading to the decline of older organizations with single-issue focuses and high overhead costs – is perhaps more controversial and is the subject of a larger researcher endeavor. This conference paper was initially designed to investigate a related normative question: what do these structural changes amount to, and should observers care? Are the *practices* of the new generation of advocacy groups noticeably different than the practices of the previous generation? If the onset of Internet communication has merely produced new

organizations playing an equivalent role to the ones they replace, then there is good reason to concur with the broader argument offered by scholars like Matthew Hindman that “digital democracy” is little more than a “myth.” (2008) If, on the other hand, the new generation of internet-mediated groups come armed with a different strategic incentives and tactical repertoires, that would make the organizational changing-of-the-guard more noteworthy.

That said, as will become clear, some formative assumptions of the research design were proven false in the course of data collection, and as such a present here a much more limited discussion and analysis. Based upon observation of MoveOn.org and the large blogging communities, combined with my own participant-observation on the Sierra Club Board of Directors (2004-present), it was my expectation that an analysis of organizational endorsements in the 2008 presidential primaries would provide a venue for such an analysis. Starting from a list of 45 large-scale organizations that participated in the 2004 “America Votes Coalition,” which organized the massive America Coming Together 527 effort, it was my intention to use the date-of-endorsement and endorsement-process decisions to investigate larger questions of strategic and tactical changes between the new and old generations of advocacy group. What I had not expected was just how few of the large advocacy groups actually make such decisions. Given the limited set of groups that make such endorsements, very little can be said with confidence about the differences between internet-mediated, “netroots” advocacy groups and the more longstanding set of progressive organizations. This conference paper thus reports a limited set of findings, explaining what I attempted, what I found, and the

describing a few further discoveries that occurred while interviewing organizational staffers for the project.

Why Study Endorsement Decisions?

My initial interest in this topic stems from experience as a participant-observer on the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club (2004-present), one of the nation's largest environmental advocacy organizations. The Sierra Club has made general election endorsements in every Presidential campaign since 1984, and also makes endorsements in thousands of contested political races at the national, state, and local level. As a non-partisan organization that is nonetheless strongly associated with the political left, the endorsement decision process serves as an arena for complex strategic discussion and argumentation. When should an advocacy group of this sort support a moderate Republican over a liberal Democratic challenger? What role should local volunteer leaders – who will provide valuable field support once an endorsement is made, but are also free to leave for a different organization if they are unhappy – play in the outcome? Should specific, high-profile issues serve as “litmus tests” for endorsement-consideration? Given the longstanding incumbency advantage, in what cases should the organization risk alienating incumbent elected officials by supporting a primary challenger?

All of these considerations are heightened in the case of a contested primary, where there often exists an outsider candidate with negligible chances of winning who nonetheless embraces many of the organization's ideals. Primary challenges are rarely

successful and can frequently create enemies, making an uncomfortable situation for an organization's lobbyists when meeting with the snubbed elected official. Likewise, while the left-leaning membership of the organization will likely be united in their general election choice (particularly at the level of presidential elections, although the Nader candidacy of 2000 serves as a noteworthy exception), contested primaries engender heightened passions among otherwise-unified ideologues. Primary endorsements not only risk alienating unselected candidates, but also risk alienating the volunteers/members/supporters within the organization who support those candidates.

This set of considerations was well summarized by a discussant of a 2009 APSA paper I presented on the dearth of "netroots" political associations in the American Right. (Karpf 2009c) Having mentioned MoveOn as an example of such associations, the discussant (a former Hillary Clinton supporter) raised the question "what I really want to know is why MoveOn would make an early primary endorsement of Obama, knowing that it would alienate so many of their members?"¹ The question, coming more than a year after the conclusion of the primaries and being tangential to the subject of that particular paper, is indicative of just how deeply partisan passions ran in the 2008 Democratic primary. It is also indicative of a puzzle for students of advocacy organizations such as myself: given all the costs and potential pitfalls associated with such endorsements, why would any such organization make them?

The Alternate Perspective: Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

¹ Paraphrased. Given the circumstances of this comment, I was not in a position to record it word-for-word.

The Sierra Club Board briefly discussed making a primary endorsement at their February 20-23, 2008 meeting. The Super Tuesday primaries had concluded at that point and it already appeared likely that, barring a dramatic reversal, Barack Obama would conclude the primary season with a majority of pledged delegate supporters (though not enough supporters to earn the nomination in the absence of superdelegates). Due to a combination of reasons, many of which are listed above, the organization decided it would be best not to make an endorsement at that time – the differences between Obama and Clinton on environmental issues were not particularly dramatic, and the potential costs of angering Clinton supporters appeared substantial. Instead, the organization waited to make a Presidential endorsement until mid-June, receiving some media coverage but little else. I argued for the alternate perspective at that February Board meeting, suggesting that whatever power an organization can yield through its endorsement is only present in the face of uncertain and contested outcomes. Specifically *because* the primaries were a period of such intense controversy amongst ideological progressives – specifically because the outcome of the primaries was in doubt – those organizations like MoveOn and several of the unions who did choose to send the costly signal of supporting one candidate over the other were more likely to earn the substantial goodwill of the supported candidate while persuading genuinely undecided member/supporters. This line of argumentation put me in the minority among my fellow Board members that particular day, but would appear to be in line with the subset of organizations that did make primary endorsements.

The two competing perspectives, particularly in light of the heightened stakes among party activists in the 2008 presidential primary, present a venue for a detailed look

at advocacy group involvement in elections. Organizations must both weigh the pros and cons of making a primary endorsement and also, at the procedural level, select what form of consultative process it wants to use in order to reach this controversial decision. On the later point the topic seems ripe for improving our empirical understanding of the internet's effect on participatory engagement. As several scholars have noted, the internet provides the capacity for large-scale deliberation and voting among communities-of-interest, and this capacity has long been a source of hope for theorists of deliberative democracy (Barber 1984, Ackerman and Fishkin 2005). This capacity has its drawbacks, however, both in the development of "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2002, Sunstein 2006, Adamic and Glance 2005, Perlmutter 2008) and in the dawning recognition that, although political associations now can foster wide membership deliberation, the evidence that such deliberative work is either popular or frequently requested is scant (Walker 2009). The intention of this study is to gain a better understanding of which organizations made a primary endorsement, which organizations didn't, and how did they reach these decisions?

Identifying the Relevant Organizational Population

Since Jack Walker's landmark work *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America* (Walker 1991), the challenge of identifying the baseline population of interest groups has been widely accepted as a core stumbling block. Simply answering how many interest groups there are out there is nearly impossible, and that in turn leaves us with no population to randomly sample from. The most recent effort by Baumgartner, Berry,

Hojnacki, Kimball, and Leech (2009) makes some progress in this direction, relying upon registration reports filed under the Lobby Disclosure Act, but this technique captures only those organizations which specialize in hiring professional lobbyists and thus is better-suited to the study of lobbying than the study of political advocacy more generally. The population-definition problem becomes even more difficult in the electoral arena, where the steady march of new election rules and legal interpretations lead to the division of organization-types, including nonpolitical 501c(3) issue groups, nonprofit-but-not-tax-deductible 501c(4) organizations that are free to take stances on legislation, Political Action Committees (PACs) that can donate directly to candidates, and 527 organizations that independently seek to affect the outcome of elections.² Many nonprofit organizations technically cannot make an electoral endorsement due to their tax status, however it is a common practice for 501c(3) or 501c(4) organizations to set up affiliated PACs, c(3)s, c(4)s, and 527s. The League of Conservation Voters (c4) also includes the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund (c3). MoveOn.org is divided into MoveOn Civic Action (c3), MoveOn Political Action (c4), and also includes 527 and PAC components. In order to comply with federal election law, which requires that 527 organizations be independent from and not coordinated with political campaigns, the Sierra Club sets up parallel internal structures, with one set of staffers serving on the “blue team” (527 expenditures) and another serving on the “green team” (c4 and PAC expenditures, including member education). These staff hierarchies are strictly forbidden from discussing strategy with one another, under threat of campaign finance complaints from rightwing opponents that can result in hefty fines.

² 501c(3), 501c(4), and 527 all refer to sections of the federal tax code

This creates a challenging research puzzle. On the one hand, many identifiable political organizations cannot make a primary endorsement, meaning they should be culled from any population under investigation. On the other hand, any of these organizations could set up an affiliated branch capable of making such an endorsement, so long as they felt there was enough value and donor support to make the substantial organizational costs worthwhile. Failure to make an endorsement decision is itself indicative of organizational philosophy, and this produces a skewed sample of advocacy groups set up to make endorsements within the overall population of interest groups.

For the purposes of this study, I sidestep the population definition problem through a simple workaround. The 2004 Presidential Election included the noteworthy participation of a major 527 initiative, the “America Votes” coalition, which included America Coming Together and the Media Fund and jointly spend over \$80 million in that election cycle, employing over 4,000 full-time staffers, 45,000 paid canvassers, and about 70,000 volunteers across seventeen “battleground” states. (Nielsen 2010) The America Coming Together field mobilization has been referenced as the “outsourcing” of Democratic Party field campaigning in that election cycle (Harvard 2006). All of the organizations who participated in the America Votes coalition share a few central characteristics: (1) they are left-leaning, at least to the point of being interested in opposing the reelection of George W. Bush, (2) they are politically-oriented and seek to influence the outcome of elections, (3) they are above some minimum threshold of size and respectability, as set by the Board and dominant donors of the America Votes coalition. What’s more, through their shared experience in 2004, all of these

organizations have network ties and working relationships with one another, suggesting that they are likely to discuss mobilization plans in the 2008 cycle with one another.

For the purposes of this study, I chose to allow participation in the major advocacy group activity of 2004 to set the parameters of this study. It is safe to assume that a lack of participation in the 2004 America Votes Coalition likely indicates that a group is either non-left, non-political, or insubstantial in size. It is also safe to assume that any group participating in America Coming Together – which was crafted in response to changing election laws – has empowered a set of internal actors to consider new opportunities to influence elections. Many groups that did not participate in the America Votes coalition perceive electoral politics as falling outside of their mission, or do not employ staff charged with pursuing political objectives, thus creating insitutional reasons for non-participation in the primaries. Focusing on this cluster of groups tailors my research question as follows: among the subset of substantial, politically-oriented, left-leaning advocacy groups, which groups chose to make a primary endorsement, wait until the general election, or make no endorsement at all? How did they go about arriving at these decisions?

Methodology

It should be noted once again that this conference paper reports what I consider to be a set of methodological choices that, in retrospect, failed. Limiting the study to the 45 America Votes Coalition member-organizations (listed in Appendix A) initially seemed to be a reasonable means of drawing a practical threshold of sorts, allowing me to

identify the large-scale “players” within the progressive interest group community with an interest in electoral politics by virtue of their previous actions. This was based on the faulty assumption that all (or nearly all) of these organizations would be engaging in the same sort of strategic discussion, and that this would produce a mid-sized set of groups for mid-sized/fuzzy-set analysis (Ragin 2000).

For each organization, I sought to obtain information on whether they had made an endorsement at any point in the 2008 election and, if so, the date of that decision. I intended to follow this up with a series of interviews to classify the type of decision-process used, along with clarifying other organizational attributes – self-described issue area (civil rights, labor, women’s rights, environmental, LGBT rights, general progressive, defense/international politics, other), year of founding, budget, total staff size, membership size, and membership type (no members, local chapters, small donor/supporters, or email/free membership).

I began with google and google-news searches for “[organization name] 2008 presidential endorsement,” adding the search term “primary” into the search if this generated no clearly relevant results. This was followed by visits to each organization’s web site, many of which included archived press releases or blog posts which provided a timeline of activity. In those cases where no clear endorsement decision could be identified, I then followed up with email requests and phone calls to the organizations offices. There are thus four potential entries for the dependent variable – Primary Endorsement-Obama, Primary Endorsement-Clinton, General Endorsement-Obama, and No Endorsement. It was in the course of this initial round of (what should have been) basic data-collection that I recognized an error in the research design: as reported below,

it would appear that Sierra and MoveOn represent exceptions to the rule, even among the large-scale progressive advocacy organizations with affiliated PACs and 527s. The cumbersome endorsement decision is heavily debated among unions, but appears to be avoided or excluded by a majority of other advocacy organizations. The next section reports these findings, based solely data collection of the dependent variable. Given the small number of organizations that made such choices, I provide a brief discussion of the groups that **did** make such a decision, but abandoned the attempt to interview large numbers of staff and classify groups based on their other characteristics. There simply were too few endorsing organizations to make such data collection worthwhile. I instead redoubled my efforts to understand the decision of MoveOn in particular, and include the results of interview and independent analysis of their own activities in the discussion section.

Findings

The most surprising finding was the limited use of formal endorsements in either the primaries or general election cycles. As figure 1 displays, only 20 of the 45 organizations included in this study chose to make an endorsement at any point in the electoral process. Many groups such as the NAACP do not develop the necessary infrastructure to engage in formal endorsements (Naymik 2008). Other groups, such as Women's Voices, Women Vote, were made up of longtime Clinton supporters and

engaged in pro-Clinton independent expenditures in the 2008 primary season without ever making a formal endorsement (Kiel 2008). Lacking a large membership base, many progressive advocacy groups appear to find more value in focusing on PAC and 527 expenditures than in making an official endorsement, particularly once the general election season has arrived and their candidate preference is already clear. The Young Democrats of America, for instance, has little need to officially endorse Obama in the general election cycle – their candidate preference between the Democratic and Republican nominee is clear enough. Making a formal endorsement carries organizational costs, particularly in the need to set up parallel staffing structures to keep “independent” and “coordinated” activities in line with legal requirements. In retrospect, it is not surprising that most advocacy groups choose not to incur those costs, instead participating through PAC donations and coordinated independent efforts like America Votes while never formally announcing to their membership which candidate should be supported on election day.

The total number of organizational endorsements is somewhat suppressed by technicalities of the structure of the labor movement. According to a study by Eric Appleman, 13 labor organizations endorsed Hillary Clinton during the primaries, while 11 endorsed Barack Obama (Appleman 2008). Many of these individual unions fall under the umbrella of the AFL-CIO, which announced in August 2007 that it would make no primary endorsement (leaving its individual member-unions free to make their own endorsements).³ Most of the AFL-CIO-affiliated unions are individually too small to have individually participated in the 2004 America Votes Coalition. The study thus

³ See <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheafclcio/ecouncil/ec08082007a.cfm>

undercounts union endorsements, which becomes important in retrospect, given how few non-union organizations chose to make an endorsement at all. Likewise, many of the larger unions permitted their local affiliates in early primary states to make their own endorsement decisions. The New York affiliate of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), for instance, sent out large pro-Clinton mailings prior to the national union's February 15th decision to endorse Obama. (Greenhouse 2008)

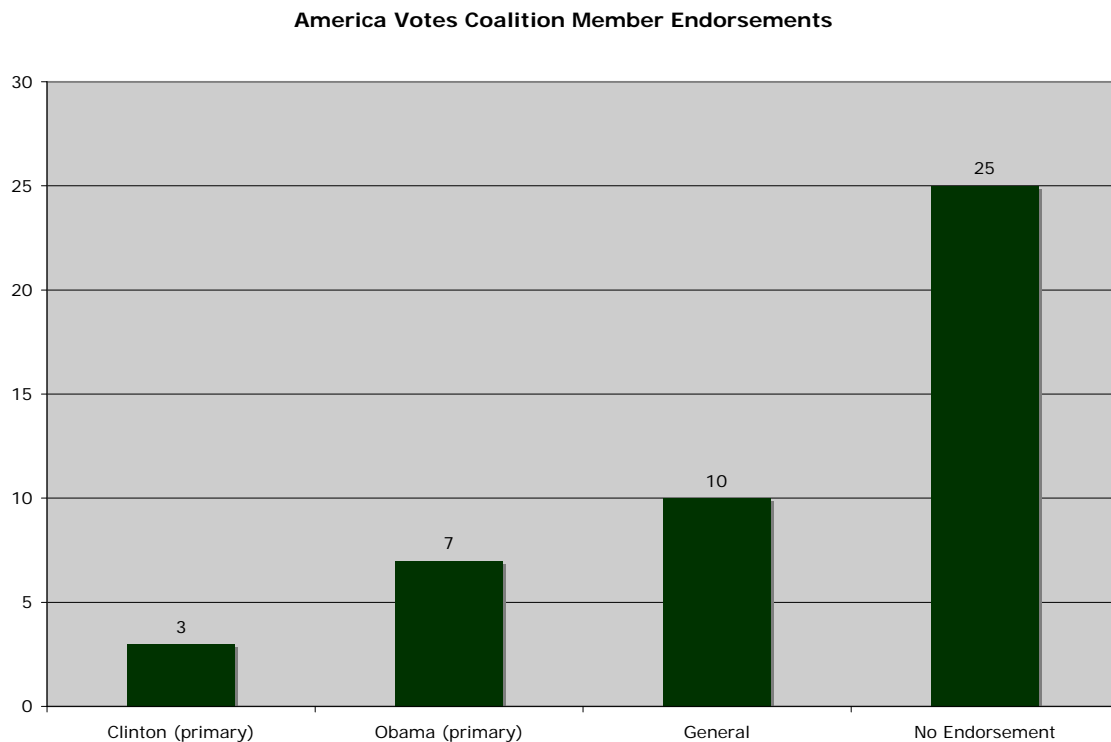


figure 1: organizational endorsements

Among the organizations that chose to make a primary endorsement, three endorsed Clinton (EMILY's List, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, American Federation of Teachers) while seven endorsed Obama (ACORN, American Hunters and Shooters Association, Change to Win Federation, the International

Brotherhood of Teamsters, NARAL, SEIU, and MoveOn). Table 1 provides the dates of these endorsement decisions. Note the wide gaps between primary endorsements, along with the temporal shift from Clinton endorsements to Obama endorsements. EMILY's List endorsed Clinton almost as soon as she had announced her candidacy, a non-controversial decision given the organization's stated goal of "electing pro-choice Democratic women to office."⁴ The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSME) decisions came roughly two months after the August national meeting of the AFL-CIO, at which it was determined that the parent union would make no endorsement. Each of these endorsements came well in advance of the Iowa Caucuses, meaning there was still a crowded field of Democratic candidates and Hillary Clinton remained the front-runner among them. MoveOn, by contrast, was the first large advocacy group to endorse Obama, just days prior to the "Super Tuesday" cluster of primaries. Several unions and ACORN announced support for him in the weeks following Super Tuesday, when he had emerged as the front-runner in the pledged delegate count. The American Hunters and Sportsmen Alliance (AHSA) and National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) were both latecomers, announcing their endorsements in April and May, respectively, when the likelihood of Obama's eventual nomination was nearly assured.

⁴ <http://www.emilyslist.org/about/>

| Organization | Date Announced | Supported |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------|
| EMILY's List | January 20, 2007 | Clinton |
| AFT | October 3, 2007 | Clinton |
| AFSCME | October 31, 2007 | Clinton |
| MoveOn | February 1, 2008 | Obama |
| SEIU | February 15, 2008 | Obama |
| Change to Win | February 20, 2008 | Obama |
| Teamsters | February 21, 2008 | Obama |
| ACORN | February 23, 2008 | Obama |
| AHSA | April 16, 2008 | Obama |
| NARAL | May 8, 2008 | Obama |

Table 1: Dates of Endorsement

After the conclusion of the lengthy primary season, an additional 10 organizations announced their endorsement of Barack Obama. These included several environmental groups (Sierra Club, Clean Water Action, League of Conservation Voters), reproductive rights (Planned Parenthood), handgun violence (Brady Campaign), human rights (Human Rights Campaign), labor (AFL-CIO), and general-progressive (Democracy for America and Progressive Future). The diversity of groups in this list underlines a simple point about the organizations in Table 1: with the exceptions of EMILY's List and MoveOn, the only organizations to make endorsements while the outcome of the primary election was still heavily in doubt were labor groups. In light of Appleman's study of unions, which records 12 of the 13 Clinton-supporting unions making an endorsement prior to February, 2008 and 8 of the 11 Obama-supporting unions making an endorsement prior to March, 2008, it seems likely that the difference between organizations that make primary endorsements and organizations that do not can be reduced to a simple union/non-union distinction in all but two exceptional circumstances. MoveOn's observed decision to endorse early, in comparison to Sierra's observed decision to endorse late, was an example of the new organization making a novel strategic choice

rather than an indicator of broader divisions amongst the progressive advocacy community. Given that the Democratic Party likely will not have another contested Presidential Primary until 2016, this outlier status signifies far less than I expected when initially proposing and designing this project.

Discussion: A Deeper Look at MoveOn's Endorsement Decision

Why exactly did MoveOn make the endorsement decision that it did, then? EMILY's List's endorsement decision is easy to understand by simple reference to its mission statement. The Labor community, with its lengthy history of electoral mobilization and deep ties to the Democratic Party, regularly makes presidential primary endorsements, whereas the rest of the progressive advocacy group population seems content to wait until a victorious candidate has emerged. MoveOn lacks the boots-on-the-ground found in the labor movement – since it has redefined organizational “membership” as simply being included on the email distribution list, many of its 3.2 million members are not aware that they are considered “MoveOn members.”⁵ For what reasons did the organization engage in this risky tactic, and what (if anything) does it suggest for the future of advocacy group involvement in elections.

Though MoveOn lacks the strong local presence of the union movement, it does have a history of engagement in Democratic presidential primaries. In June 2003, they held a “MoveOn primary,” allowing their membership to cast votes among the 9 presidential candidates to determine the organization's endorsement. The virtual primary drew over 300,000 online votes, with Howard Dean received a plurality of 44% of the

⁵ The organization grew from 3.2 million members to 5 million members over the course of its 2008 election campaigning.

vote, though the organization required a 50% majority vote to offer its endorsement. Occurring 6 months prior to the Iowa Caucuses, the MoveOn virtual primary drew significant media attention and helped fuel the narrative about Howard Dean's rise to front-runner status. Dean's subsequent decline perhaps dimmed public enthusiasm in the intervening years for such attention-getting votes among online communities-of-interest.

In April 2007, MoveOn modified their "virtual primary" tactic, instead engaging in a series of issue-based "virtual town halls" with the Democratic candidates. MoveOn members submitted questions for each of the candidates on issues such as the Iraq War and climate change. A subset of the questions recorded and submitted to each individual candidate. The candidates' responses to these questions were then broadcast to over 1,000 simultaneous house parties around the country, again an event that garnered substantial media attention.⁶ Members were then invited to vote on which candidates "won" those virtual town hall debates. Obama received the plurality of such votes in the Iraq War townhall, with 28% member support, but this was not intended as an organizational endorsement decision. (MoveOn 2008) Edwards, meanwhile, received the plurality of votes in the climate change/energy townhall.⁷

The decision-to-endorse itself occurred ten months later, on February 1st, 2008 (after the Iowa Caucus and New Hampshire Primary, and just before the "Super Tuesday" set of primaries). I spoke with Matt Ewing, MoveOn's Field Director at the time, to get a better understanding of how and why they took this action.⁸ Ewing noted that, as an internet-mediated organization, MoveOn conducts weekly membership

⁶ archived online at http://pol.moveon.org/townhall/iraq/report_back.html

⁷ e-mail correspondence with MoveOn staff, April 13, 2010.

⁸ interview conducted March 31, 2010

surveys of randomized sections of its list, in order to better understand the will of the membership. For a long time, these membership surveys showed even divisions within membership. With the suspension of John Edwards's campaign on January 30th, these surveys revealed a dramatic change in membership preferences, with a clear preference among survey respondents in favor of making an Obama endorsement. This pushed the organization to host a membership-wide vote on making an endorsement. Figure 2 provides a screenshot of the endorsement announcement email.

The organization had previously set a "general rule" of only making primary endorsements when a 60% supermajority of voting members support a candidate. After two days of email voting, the organization announced its results, with 70.4% of members favoring an Obama endorsement and 29.6% favoring a Clinton endorsement. Faced with this supermajority, the organization chose to throw its weight behind the Obama candidacy. MoveOn's post-election report notes that this led directly to \$500,000 in small-dollar donations to the Obama primary campaign, as well as nearly 700,000 e-mails sent by members to their friends in Super-Tuesday primary states, urging their support for the Obama candidacy. MoveOn also followed up on this decision by participating in the "Superdelegate Transparency Project," a coalition effort among internet-mediated groups to influence Superdelegates to not overturn the results of the primary delegate-selection process (Karpf 2009c).

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Eli Pariser, MoveOn.org Political Action** <moveon-help@list.moveon.org>
Date: Fri, Feb 1, 2008 at 12:10 PM
Subject: [Bounce] (3,074,336; IDab8b16; 12015) MoveOn Members Endorse Obama
To: Johnny Neumann <john.von.neumann@example.com>

Dear MoveOn member,

With hundreds of thousands of ballots cast across the country, for the first time in MoveOn's history, we've voted together to endorse a presidential candidate in the primary. **That candidate is Barack Obama.**

Something big is clearly happening. A few weeks ago, MoveOn members we surveyed were split. But with John Edwards bowing out, progressives are coming together. Obama won over 70% of the vote yesterday, and he's moving up in polls nationwide.¹ As comments poured in from MoveOn members across the country, the sense of hope was inspiring. Here's how Christine Y. in New Jersey put it:

"I've never felt so strongly about any one candidate in my entire life. He's truly an inspiration to all of us—especially the younger generation. I will stand by him 100% for as long as he's willing to stand up and fight for this country!"

What does MoveOn's endorsement mean? People-power. Together, we are 3.2 million Americans who care about our country and want change. Half of us live in states with primaries or caucuses this coming "Super Tuesday."

MoveOn members voted to endorse Barack Obama.

By volunteering these next four days before "Super Tuesday" we can help elect a progressive president for the next four years. **Can you volunteer to help Obama win?**

I want to help.

[Volunteer today!](#)

Vote results

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Obama: | 197,444 | 70.4% |
| Clinton: | 83,084 | 29.6% |

figure 2: MoveOn endorsement announcement email

Ewing noted to me that, at the time of their endorsement, “no one thought Obama was going to win,” and admitted that it was a “very scary moment” for the organization. Though the endorsement decision looked increasingly prescient in the aftermath of the Super Tuesday primaries, the impetus for it would appear to come less from elite-level calculation than from a commitment to follow the will of the membership. It appears to have paid off for the organization in two senses. First, one would expect that the early decision to support Obama must have earned the organization some measure of good will

with the candidate who would go on to become president. Though this is difficult to demonstrate in practice (and would require a much larger research project to do so), it is a widely-held belief among advocacy group leaders, who would otherwise choose not to engage at all in endorsements if they did not believe doing so accrued *some* goodwill among candidates. Second, Ewing noted that, though the decision did incur the some passionate Clinton-supporters to demand they be “removed from the list,” that dropoff was exceeded by list growth among excited Obama supporters. As MoveOn members sent emails to their friends, urging them to vote in Super Tuesday-primary states, many of those friends likewise took action through the MoveOn interface, in so doing becoming “members” of the organization.

Conclusion

This was not the study I initially intended to conduct. Beginning with what I believed to be a solid “hunch,” I expected to be able to compare MoveOn’s membership-engagement process, as discussed above, with the processes of several other organizations. In the course of the research, early assumptions about the universe of advocacy groups engaging in endorsement decision-deliberation were undermined. That universe proved to be much smaller and less diverse than I had believed. That said, the additional knowledge obtained through elite interview proved enlightening, reaffirming that there is a substantial puzzle here worthy of investigation.

The literature on the internet and politics is rife with hopeful proclamations and dismal pronouncements about deliberative democracy. These “e-government” debates often end up being run aground by the lack of mass citizen interest in democratic

participation. Indeed, even the MoveOn endorsement vote gives us reason for caution when considering the potential of online tools in facilitating mass plebiscites. 280,528 MoveOn members cast an online “ballot” in that major decision, amounting to roughly 8.7% of a membership base that has displayed an existing preference for online action and progressive politics. Yet what we see here is that MoveOn, with its redefinition of membership and its reliance on data-intensive membership tracking – including both the weekly surveys and frequent “A/B testing,” in which competing issue topics, issue frames, and action/donation requests are randomly assigned to segments of the member list and tested for clickthrough rate – makes *faster* and *different* decisions than the older organizations that still populate the American left. Organizations that rely on direct mail communication (and thus have a membership base of “armchair activist” check-writers) do not have the capacity to track the changing priorities of their membership in real-time. [particularly because those check-writers often do not provide their email addresses] The professionalization and concentration of political advocacy into DC-based organizations that Theda Skocpol decried in *Diminished Democracy* (2003) again appears to be in flux, returning not to the cross-class membership federations of old, but nonetheless changing in nature. MoveOn’s endorsement decision is indicative of changing membership-engagement processes that lead the group to take bold stances that, left to their own devices, the leadership itself might not choose.

This study is merely suggestive of these changing trends – I would not claim to have proven anything based on a review of publicly-available documents and a bit of elite interviewing around a single case. But it points the way to a broader topic on the use of “passive democratic tools” such as A/B testing, clickstream data, and membership

surveys, and their impact on the public sphere. Though this study may have failed to answer question, it hopefully has raised a some interesting ones for further analysis.

Appendix A – America Votes Coalition Members

21st Century Democrats

ACORN

AFL-CIO

AFSCME

Alliance for Retired Americans

American Association for Justice

American Federation of Teachers

American Hunters and Shooters Association

Americans United for Change

Ballot Initiative Strategy Center

Brady Campaign

Campaign for America's Future

Change to Win

Campaign for Community Change

Clean Water Action

Communities for Quality Education

Defenders of Wildlife Action Fund

DFA

EMILY's List

Human Rights Campaign

INDN's List

Teamsters

League of Conservation Voters

League of United Latin American Citizens

League of Young Voters

MoveOn

My Rural America

NAACP

NARAL

National Association of Social Workers

New Democrat Network

National Education Association

National Jewish Democratic Council

People for the American Way

Planned Parenthood

Progressive Majority

Progressive Future

ProgressNow Action

SEIU
Sierra Club
US Action
VoteVets
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