

ACT

industry-driven

ISNM

by edward walker

Sociologists who study social movements know that grassroots organizing tactics, as social change tools, tend to be favored by institutional outsiders. But recent scholarship and developments in the health care debate suggest that these “weapons of the weak” are increasingly used by powerful insiders.

The contentious summer of 2009 raised questions about what we really mean by “grassroots” political advocacy. Many pundits asked aloud whether a number of ostensibly spontaneous, citizen-driven protest events were instead mere “Astroturf”—top-down, industry-funded events. As late summer set in, legislators were met with furious outbursts as they convened town hall meetings on health reform. Activists shouted about government takeovers of healthcare and the dangers of socialism, and politicians stared down an angry and apparently motivated cadre of voters. But, as *The New York Times* reported, some of these seemingly self-motivated citizens were, in fact, called to action by well-heeled groups like former House Majority Leader Dick Arme’s FreedomWorks.

While direct industry support for the most vocal of the town hall protestors is uncertain, health industries—insurers, in particular—were galvanized by the healthcare reform efforts of the Obama Administration to activate their employees and other stakeholders as issue advocates or “citizen lobbyists.” It’s no surprise that these companies would come out strongly against ideas like a public option, but it’s noteworthy that they’ve used innovative means and advanced communications technologies to encourage individuals and community groups at the grassroots level to supplement the industry’s clout.

As an illustration, consider how America’s Health Insurance Plans (AHIP), the leading trade association for nearly 1,300 insurance firms (covering more than 200 million Americans), took action during the reform debates last year. On the one hand, they distributed a “Town Hall Tips” memo to health plan employees, encouraging their attendance at the meetings and asking them to make their message as personal as possible. (“Personal anecdotes are a very compelling way to make your point. In addition... speak to the positive impact your company has on the local community.”) But, according to Beth Leonard, the AHIP’s director of grassroots outreach efforts, these meetings, even during their peak, accounted for a mere 10% of the orga-



Photo by Ivy Dawne via Creative Commons

nization’s efforts to mobilize resistance to the public option and support for mandated individual coverage. The remaining 90 percent of AHIP’s grassroots mobilization efforts (and others like them) was made up of a large arsenal of tactics for mobilizing stakeholder groups: from television advertisements that encourage calls to representatives to spinning off semi-autonomous citizen groups that help build support for their cause.

Campaigns like these are lowering the costs of participation for many citizens and should make us reconsider the way we think about the relationships among corporations, citizens, and government.

mobilizing strategies

Elite advocates use a number of overlapping strategies to activate targeted citizens in the political process, depending upon which groups or citizens are targeted and what the ultimate goal is. In the recent health reform debate, there’s evidence of a diverse set of strategies at work, and each comes with its own set of advantages and limitations.

Activate consumers. Efforts to mobilize consumers are hardly unprecedented in corporate mobilization. Pharmaceutical companies have been particularly active in this arena, given that for many of their consumers, access to their products may literally be a matter of life and death. But even when it’s not, drug manufacturers and trade groups like PhRMA are busy getting the public to join their cause. PhRMA has developed state-level patient coalitions as part of a long-term political strategy. They take what many call a “grasstops” strategy, in which they work with the leaders of existing voluntary associations in order to build upon those groups’ infrastructure and legitimacy. As management scholar Michael Lord reports, pharmaceuticals have also become active in tapping into pre-existing patient and medical advocacy networks. “Who better,” Lord asks, “to help defend pharmaceutical companies’ need to protect their

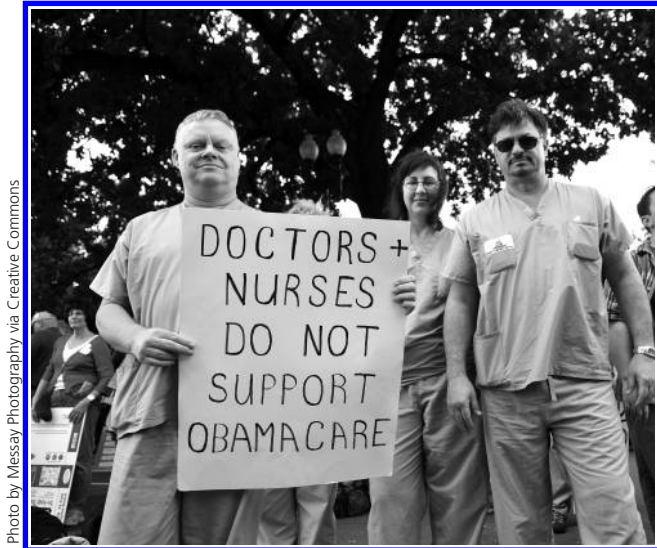


Photo by Messay Photography via Creative Commons

A Tea Party rally in Washington, D.C., 2009.

patents and pricing so that they can afford to invest in R&D to generate the next round of useful therapies and (hopefully) cures?”

Pharmaceuticals aren't the only ones taking a consumer-based strategy. In response to proposed reforms, an association of employer benefits programs recently started the website Savemyflexplan.org, which encourages flex plan enrollees to write their representatives in opposition. Insurance firm Humana

Elite organizations often possess superior resources for influencing public debate, meaning that grassroots methods can, ironically, increase political inequalities.

contacted their senior Medicare Advantage enrollees with mailings warning them that if reform legislation is enacted, “millions of seniors and disabled individuals could lose many of [their] benefits and services.” And AHIP sounded the alarm that these new regulations could cause seniors to face increases in premiums, reduced benefits, or even the loss of their plan altogether, despite evidence that reductions in Advantage plan overpayments are not likely to jeopardize seniors' access to quality care.

Activate employees. There's a growing sentiment in the public affairs offices of many prominent businesses that employees can be a company's strongest advocates. They also represent a large and often well-informed constituency, although the interests of management and employees may not always line up perfectly. When they do, it's a fine line to walk between encouraging employees to voice their independent concerns to their representatives and paying employees to lobby, which is against the law in states like California. Like other sorts of elite

public affairs campaigns, there are advantages to lowering the perceived costs of participation, but drawbacks to crafting an overly standardized message. This subject became the topic of considerable debate when insurers Wellpoint and UnitedHealth Group were accused of helping employees call or write their representatives on company time. As business scholar Gerry Keim puts it, even employees with “different ideological lenses will see common ground when discussing issues that affect job growth and business opportunities.”

Build a third party organization. If the goal is to activate broad-based groups beyond those who produce or consume an industry's goods and services, organizations may find it effective to build a coalition or third party organization that invites citizen participation. These are often targeted at those who hold ideological beliefs congruent with an industry's political position. Although certain groups hide their industry ties (or have only indirect ties), there's a trend toward increasing disclosure of industry support in order to mitigate potential criticisms.

AHIP's Campaign for the American Solution represents a prominent example. They invite citizens to write their representatives to express support for mandatory coverage and the preservation of the employer-based insurance system. Similarly, the Coalition to Protect Patients' Rights supports the participation of citizens who share their forceful opposition to the public insurance option, arguing that it could “drive health

insurance companies out of business.”

These campaigns in the health arena follow similar efforts by non-health organizations like America's Power Army (coal), the National Smokers' Alliance (tobacco), and, more recently, Hands Off the Internet (telecom).

Advertise. Advocacy advertisements are another prominent way to gain public and legislative support. AHIP's predecessor, the Health Insurance Association of America, gained notoriety for their influential “Harry & Louise” ad campaign in 1994, which played a role in turning public sentiment against then-President Clinton's health reform proposal. Ads today often provide a web link or a toll-free number (like AHIP's) that will patch callers directly through to their representative, typically after suggesting a set of talking points. (A drawback of this method is that, research shows, Congressional staffers find phone calls much less effective in shaping legislation than in-person visits.)

These efforts are often tied to other forms of lobbying facilitated by professional firms that assist in building broader public support. My own research on these paid public affairs or “grassroots lobbying” firms shows that health-related interests in multiple industries represent a significant share of lobbyists' clients and that the firms help build community coalitions, collect signatures for petitions, target particular



demographic groups for activism, and coordinate public events like demonstrations.

Astroturf. This term is often used broadly to refer to any sort of mobilization that supports an industry's issue position, but those involved in public affairs typically restrict this label to legal or ethical violations like forging or doctoring letters to representatives or willfully deceiving participants. Because this strategy is risky—beyond its legal ramifications, it is considered unacceptable by the major professional associations for public affairs—it's exceedingly rare for organizations to take this route. On the other hand, there's evidence that, when stakes are high, certain groups can't resist the temptation. In the fall of 2009, in fact, Reps. Waxman (D-Calif.) and Markey (D-Mass.) held hearings to evaluate the influence of Astroturf campaigns on energy and health policy after forged letters to a Congressional representative from community groups supporting "clean coal" were discovered.

Such allegations are at the root of the cynicism about industry mobilization. But protest events nearly always have outside sponsors or patrons that help organizers get things off the ground. So, despite appearances, there may not be much difference between what groups like FreedomWorks do and what organizers of all stripes do every day. Indeed, a spokesman for Arney's group pointed out to the press, "We hold up this concept that grassroots needs to be 100 percent spontaneous: 50 people showing up spontaneously at the same place at the same time. But there always needs to be some kind of organization... we provide the organizational backbone."

The dividing line between "grassroots" and "Astroturf" may be more of a political Rorschach test than a precisely measurable concept. But, in any case, changing relationships between companies and the public—especially in the health domain—are leading more and more industries to institute grassroots mobilization programs.

why go grassroots?

Imagining how health interests like pharmaceuticals, insurance firms, hospitals, and producers of medical products try to pressure lawmakers conjures up images of Washington lobbyists in expensive suits making lavish contributions to politicians' re-election campaigns. Indeed, the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics estimates that these industries have contributed nearly \$5 million to federal representatives since 2007 alone, with influential representative and Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus receiving an estimated \$450,000. As sizable as these donations are, however, they aren't the whole story.

What are all too often overlooked, once again, are those indirect tactics that go beyond contributions and insider lobbying. We tend to think of grassroots tactics like canvassing, mass letter-writing, building community coalitions, and protest as weapons of the weak, in that those who are kept out of a government or organization's decision-making processes are forced to adopt strategies that fall outside of traditional avenues of influence. Why, then, would powerful interests like health insurers and pharmaceuticals find it worthwhile to go grassroots?

Part of the answer speaks directly to questions of power and influence. In certain situations or for certain debates, these seemingly powerful organizations are, in fact, relatively weak or poorly positioned. Evidence suggests that organized advocates resort to these techniques when the existing political configuration advantages their opponents and can only be offset by expanding the audience of supporters will help correct that imbalance. Given the stakes in health care reform and the fact that the initial energy seemed to be on the side of reformers,

Industry-driven activism is lowering the costs of participation for many citizens. It should make us reconsider the relationships among citizens, corporations, and the government.

the mobilization efforts of the industry are thus not surprising. (Conversely, if a corporation or industry can get what it wants without mobilizing the public, it's more likely to keep things under wraps.)

As institutions without voluntary "members," health insurers, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, and medical device manufacturers face challenges in influencing public opinion and shaping public policy. Organizational research shows that these tactics not only build public support for certain approaches, they help companies "put a human face" on issues, personalizing matters for elite decision-makers.

Edward Grefe, a guru of the field who teaches courses in lobbying the public, proudly cites the work of famed community organizer Saul Alinsky as a source of inspiration for "the

new corporate activism.” He writes, “in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the activists who established grassroots movements for the promotion of laws affecting civil rights, women’s rights, environmental protections, and consumers’ rights. Now, activists are paving the way for corporate and association grassroots movements to follow.”

impacts of industry-driven activism

We still don’t know if all of this investment really pays off. While public affairs campaigns represent only one of many factors influencing any political decision-maker, political scientist Kenneth Goldstein found that during President Clinton’s effort to overhaul health care in 1993-4, health interests were highly effective in micro-targeting influential citizens within particu-

Despite appearances, there may be similarities between groups like FreedomWorks and organizers of all stripes.

lar legislative districts (especially those thought to be swayable votes), shaping legislators’ perceptions of public attitudes. People who take the time to contact their representative are showing how serious they are about the issue, even if they’re only repeating a set of talking points.

But a further challenge is a well-known chicken-or-egg problem: it’s unclear whether mass contacting efforts lead a representative to vote a certain way, or if letters and emails are more likely to be sent to legislators who already agree with the cause (canceling out the apparent “effect” of citizen letter-writing). A field experiment by communications researcher Daniel Bergan supports the former. Bergan found that, other things being equal, those New Hampshire legislators randomly assigned for contact by two advocacy groups supporting tobacco-free workplace legislation were significantly more likely to support the legislation. However, given the state’s citizen legislature, it’s hard to know whether the same effect could be expected in more professionalized legislatures or on issues other than tobacco.

Researchers are only beginning to scratch the surface in identifying and quantifying the influence of top-down grassroots campaigns, so it is difficult to know how they will ultimately shape health reform. Political recruiters don’t like to waste time or money, so they

target their efforts at would-be activists who they know are most likely to say “yes” to their participation request (these tend to be the more educated, wealthy, and politically active, according to work by political scientist Henry Brady and colleagues). And, although they can generate a lot of noise, representatives may see right through stacks of boilerplate form letters. Despite these uncertainties, what *is* clear is that corporations and trade groups have learned how to harness the power of public input, and they’re doing it in increasingly sophisticated ways.

broader implications and questions

Industry-driven mobilization occurred on a broad scale during the health reform debate and helped those with a financial or professional stake in reform to voice their opinions in the political sphere. While we tend not to think of grassroots recruitment as well-suited to powerful institutional actors, evidence suggests that it is widespread and is encouraging greater civic and political participation—despite the use of selective targeting—while also expanding the influence of elite organizations.

Professional public affairs campaigns are, under current law, regulated neither by lobbying restrictions nor rules about campaign finance. There may be valid reasons for this: industry and civic groups tend to share the belief that required disclosures of grassroots spending would be a violation of their rights under the First Amendment. In fact, it isn’t only corporate interests that object to new regulation; resistance to mandated grassroots spending disclosure has brought together surprising bedfellows, from the Traditional Values Coalition to the ACLU, the Sierra Club, and the National Right to Life Committee.

First Amendment concerns also swelled after 2009 calls from Democrats to investigate insurer Humana for allegedly violating federal restrictions on the use of Medicare dollars to distribute political messages. Republicans responded by denouncing this as a gag order and suggested that the restriction “threatens the integrity of our democracy.” In mid-October Medicare administrators eased off, claiming that the original message was merely a legal reminder to insurers. This debate reinforces a major point. As a society, we haven’t yet come to terms with the rightful place of industry efforts to use the public as a mediator in political battles. There



Photo by Ryan J. Reilly via Creative Commons

Reston, VA’s August 2009 Town Hall meeting which featured Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA) and Howard Dean.

are two main two reasons. First, citizens participate in these campaigns through their own free will, not due to coercion, and are generally (although not always) well-informed and in full agreement with the issue position of the sponsoring organization. But second, elite organizations often possess superior resources for influencing public debate, meaning that grassroots methods can be used, ironically, to increase political inequalities.

Reformers are thinking long and hard about whether paid public mobilization should be regulated in the same fashion as traditional lobbying. Some note that such regulations would face serious legal hurdles related to freedom of speech protections for advocates both large and small, for- and non-profit. They also worry, justifiably, that increased disclosure will hardly be a panacea, as resources devoted to subsidizing citizen activism may simply be reallocated to other means of cultivating influence. On the other side, leaders of non-partisan advocacy groups (such as the president of the American League of Lobbyists) have said that such efforts represent a form of paid lobbying and should be regulated in the same fashion. Those in favor of regulation contend that the additional paperwork required of advocacy organizations would be a small price to pay for knowing the extent to which industries are shaping participation and policy.

Despite these political uncertainties, industry-driven grassroots campaigns are deeply entwined with broader changes in American civic and political life. Civil society underwent considerable changes in the 1970s and 80s, as the field of political and civic organizations in the U.S. experienced staggering growth. My own research has shown that this expansion had a significant influence on the founding of firms that provide grassroots mobilization services to elite clients, suggesting that professionalized civic and business groups turned to these firms for help in generating activism. It appears that the expansion of industry-driven public participation reflects a society in which civic and political ties are increasingly indirect and, perhaps as importantly, mediated by communications technologies like email, texting, and social networking websites.

These realities must be tempered by the understanding that much of our civic landscape remains unchanged. Even though it's tempting to conclude that face-to-face recruitment into political activity has been replaced by televised advocacy



Reporters cover a “clean coal” rally at the Michigan State Capitol.

Photo by americaspower via Creative Commons

advertisements, targeted phone calls to likely activists, or mass-emailed “action alerts,” there's little evidence to date that such campaigns are displacing the efforts of traditional community organizations or civic groups. In fact, many of these industry campaigns cooperate with community groups when it makes strategic sense to do so, and many public affairs professionals have career or personal ties to local civic organizations.

In the end, the growth of industry efforts to mobilize public participation—whether on health reform or on any other issue—is both shaping and shaped by our changing civic life and

Corporations and trade groups have learned how to harness the power of public input, and they're doing it in increasingly sophisticated ways.

the social capital that sustains it. It also reminds us that sometimes even established insiders benefit by taking an outsider strategy.

recommended resources

Kenneth M. Goldstein. *Interest Groups, Lobbying, and Participation in America* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Examines techniques used to mobilize the public, including those intended to derail Clinton's 1993-94 health reform effort.

Philip N. Howard. *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). A study of how new capacities and technologies for building top-down participation are reconfiguring electoral and non-electoral campaigns.

Jill Quadagno. *One Nation, Uninsured: Why the U.S. Has No National Health Insurance* (Oxford University Press, 2005). A sociological history of the many failed attempts to reform our nation's health system, highlighting the role of stakeholder mobilization.

Edward T. Walker. “Privatizing Participation: Civic Change and the Organizational Dynamics of Grassroots Lobbying Firms.” *American Sociological Review* (2009) 74: 83-105. Describes the origins and practices of consulting firms that specialize in incentivizing grassroots participation.

Edward Walker is in the sociology department at the University of Vermont and is currently a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation fellow at the University of Michigan. He studies how organizations shape public participation.