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Community Organizers: Thank You, Sarah Palin

Peter Dreier and David Moberg

When Republican leaders at their St. Paul convention belittled Senator Barack Obama's early work as a community organizer, they probably expected a modest push back on behalf of organizers, not a figurative fish in the face from a wildlife journalist.

But [in a column on September 14](#), titled "Community Organizing Changed Fishery," John Corrigan, the fishing writer for the Concord Monitor, explained that "anybody who has caught a fish at Sewalls Falls over the last two decades has witnessed the value of community organizing. Without the efforts of members of Trout Unlimited (TU), the New Hampshire Wildlife Federation and other grassroots recreational and conservation organizations, one of Concord's most prized assets would be a flatwater reservoir backed up behind a hydroelectric dam."

Fisher's essay was one of many columns, articles, blog comments, editorials, letters-to-the-editor and other reactions to the Republican Party's attack on community organizing. Thanks to the Republicans, for the first time in memory, America is having a national conversation about community organizing. Actress Laura Linney even injected the controversy into the Emmy Awards ceremony on September 21. Accepting her Best Actress award for her role in the HBO biopic "John Adams," Linney said that the miniseries made her "so grateful and thankful for the community organizers that helped form our country."

The Republicans had expected that their orchestrated attack on Barack Obama's community organizing efforts in Chicago would link the Democratic candidate in Americans' minds with inner cities, the poor, racial minorities, troublemakers and radicals. At the same time, they wanted to demean -- and portray as strange and exotic -- Obama's decision to work on behalf of American working families facing tough times, a choice at odds with the GOP portrayal of Obama as part of an elite insensitive to the concerns of most voters.

Unwittingly, however, the Republican attacks have helped to introduce Americans to the relatively invisible work of the organizers who get paid to help millions of people improve their

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families and communities through grassroots activism. Community organizers around the country felt belittled by the Republicans' attacks, but also, paradoxically, emboldened by increased media visibility that their efforts have earned. The media, which routinely ignores community organizing except when groups engage in dramatic protest, suddenly recognized the organizers in their midst.

At the St. Paul confab on September 3, former New York Gov. George Pataki had sneered, "[Obama] was a community organizer. What in God's name is a community organizer? I don't even know if that's a job." Former NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani's mocked, "He worked as a community organizer. What? Maybe this is the first problem on the résumé." In her speech accepting the VP nomination, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin said, "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities."

The following Sunday (September 14), on "Meet the Press," Giuliani added to the attack by claiming -- wrongly -- that "the group that recruited [Obama] was a Saul Alinsky group that has all kinds of questions with regard to their outlook on the economy, their outlook on capitalism." Giuliani, utilizing what used to be called "red-baiting" tactics in the McCarthy era, then [tried to link Obama](#) to what he called "a very core Saul Alinsky kind of almost socialist notion that [government] should be used for redistribution of wealth." [Note: Many consider Alinsky (1909-1972) a founder of modern community organizing. The group that recruited Obama, the Developing Communities Project on Chicago's south side, was not affiliated with the Alinsky-founded [Industrial Areas Foundation](#), but with the [Gamaliel Foundation](#), a network of church-based groups.]

Within hours after the GOP convention, Obama released a statement and a fund-raising appeal, challenging the Republicans who "mocked, dismissed, and actually laughed out loud at Americans who engage in community service and organizing." His campaign manager David Plouffe sent another fundraising e-mail, saying, "Let's clarify something for them right now. Community organizing is how ordinary people respond to out-of-touch politicians and their failed policies." Following the GOP convention, contributions to the Obama campaign spiraled.

Obama often refers to the valuable lessons he learned working "in the streets" of Chicago. "I've won some good fights and I've also lost some fights," he said in a speech during the primary season, "because good intentions are not enough, when not fortified with political will and political power."

Until the brouhaha following the GOP convention, only a handful of newspapers and magazines, including the Los Angeles Times, the New Republic, and the Nation, had seriously examined Obama's three years as a community organizer other than to mention it as part of his resume and his frequent references to that experience during the presidential campaign. Despite the fact that community organizing groups exist in every American city -- and in some cities there are dozens of such groups -- not one daily newspaper has a community organizing beat. Few reporters or editors know much about the history of organizing or its influence in both urban and national politics.

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Reporters know how to cover rallies, demonstrations, and other confrontations, where protesters disrupt business-as-usual and get into the media's line of vision. But, contrary to stereotypes, effective community organizing is rarely dramatic. It typically involves lots of one-on-one meetings, strategy discussions, phone calls, and training sessions. Protests are the public theater of community organizing, but most of the results come from private negotiations between community activists and public officials or business groups. As a result, much of the best community organizing work during the last decade has been unheralded in the mainstream media.

But the Republicans' nasty remarks triggered a blizzard of newspaper articles and editorials, radio talk show discussions, emails and blogosphere commentary. Stories about and columns by community organizers have multiplied--describing, explaining, defending and criticizing what organizers do and the role of community organizing in American life. Activists with various community organizing networks -- including the [Center for Community Change](#), [DART](#), [PICO](#), [ACORN](#), and [U.S. Action](#) -- issued statements explaining the importance of community organizing, reminding Giuliani that he was often the target of organizing groups, and chastising Palin, a former PTA volunteer, for denigrating the millions of community volunteers in urban, rural and suburban areas of the country.

Among the many reactions was an [op-ed column by Deepak Bhargava](#), head of the Center for Community Change, that appeared in the September 13 The New York Times under the headline "Organizing Principles." Bhargava focused on the work of Hugh Espey, an organizer with Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement. Bhargava wrote: "On a typical day, he might help low-income residents of Des Moines organize to keep a neighborhood grocery store open or work with family farmers to persuade a state agency to deny a permit for a proposed factory farm, or meet with Mexican families in Marshalltown about ways to advance immigration reform. He brings various constituencies together to find common ground, build relationships and support each others causes."

Other organizers and their supporters have recently contributed op-ed columns in papers across the country. These included Boston organizer [Lew Finfer](#) ("Community Organizers are a Staple of Democracy") in Newsday, Seattle Urban League CEO [James Kelly and organizer Tony Lee](#) ("No Call to Belittle Community Work") in The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, [Syracuse organizer Andres Dae Keun Kwon](#) ("Community Organizing Defines U.S.") in the Syracuse Post-Standard, [Little Rock organizer Bill Kopsky](#) ("Community Organizing's Long History") in the Arkansas Times, University of Minnesota professor and activist Harry Boyte ("The Peculiar Attack on Community Organizing," in the [Minneapolis Star-Tribune](#); labor lawyer and writer Tom Geoghegan, ("[Hey Sarah - Organize This](#)" in Slate.Com; Savannah writer Geveryl Robinson ("[A Palin Punch That Missed](#)") in the Savannah Morning News; Activist Kathy Olguin ("[Community Organizing Preps Leaders](#)") in the San Bernadino Sun, El Paso attorney Ouisa D. Davis ("[Community Organizing is No Threat to American Society](#)") in the El Paso Times, San Diego activists Danyrea Hassan-Hall and Rosa Gutierrez ("[Yikes! A Community Organizer](#)") in the Union Tribune; Texas union activist Ed Sills ("[GOP Mockery of Community Organizers is Tone Deaf](#)") in the Sept. 10 Houston Chronicle, and Michael Rosenfeld, who works with a faith-based coalition ("[Don 't bash community organizers; they epitomize our democracy](#)") in the Desert Sun in Palm Springs, California.

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In an op-ed column ("[An Unashamed Community Organizer](#)") in the Wilmington (Delaware) News-Journal, Sally McBride wrote: "I am a wife, mother, and a community organizer...Over the past 20 years, I have co-chaired the Highlands Community Playground project, helped establish the Cab Calloway School of the Artst, co-chaired the '88 Heart Ball, served as PTA President at AI DuPont Middle School and McKean High School, served on the boards of Delaware Guidance Services, the Junior League of Wilmington, the central branch of the YMCA, and am currently on the board of the Cab Calloway School of the Arts."

Regular newspaper columnists from around the nation weighed in, too, among them Jill Lawrence ("[Community Organizer Slams Attract Support for Obama](#) ") in USA Today, Courtland Milloy ("[Fired Up About Community Service](#)") in the Washington Post, Daren Garnick ("[Organizers Just Small-Time to GOP](#)") in The Boston Herald, Rex Huppke ("[Organizing a response to the GOP](#)") in the Chicago Tribune, Stan Simpson ("[Community Organizers More Valuable Than Palin Thinks](#)") in the Hartford Courant, Ann Fisher ("[This Work is Nothing to Sneer At](#)") in Ohio's Columbus Dispatch, Cathy McKittrick ("[Quips Sting Utah Activists](#)") in the Salt Lake Tribune; Clive McFarlane ("[Community Transformed by Organizers](#) ") in the Worcester Telegram; and Bill Vogrin ("[Community Organizers Deserve Praise, Not Mockery](#)") in the Colorado Springs Gazette.

The Republican remarks so offended Time magazine columnist Joe Klein, author of several books on American politics but no fan of grassroots activism, that he penned "[What a Community Organizer Does](#)" on Sept. 4, which generated hundreds of reader comments.

Conservative writers and publications joined the GOP chorus. Michael Barone wrote a column "[Why Should Palin and Voters Be Reverent Toward Obama's Community Organizing?](#)" for the September 8 issue of U.S. News & World Report. The Weekly Standard's [Dean Barnett wrote on September 5](#), that "the community organizer barb isn't aimed at the vast population of hard-working and dedicated community organizers who are bravely organizing communities even as we speak. The barbs are aimed at Barack Obama himself." The National Review's Bryan York devoted his September 8 column to the question "[What Did Obama Do as a Community Organizer? And is it Really a Qualification to be President?](#)"

To help readers understand the controversy, many publications interviewed organizers and their critics. Newsweek published an interview with Jerry Kellman, who recruited Obama to his organizing job in Chicago in the early 1980s. The piece, called "[Service Changes People's Character](#)," ran on September 5. The Boston Globe reporter Irene Sege interviewed local organizers for her Sept. 6 article, "[Community Organizers Fault Comments at GOP Gathering](#)"; New York Times reporter David Gonzales interviewed organizers for an article ("[Bronx Organizers React to G.O.P. Punch Lines](#)") on September 4. His Times colleague Tobin Harshaw wrote a piece ("[Parsing 'Community Organizer'](#)") the next day examining the Republicans' political motives for their orchestrated put-downs of grassroots activism. New York Daily News reporter Michael Saul's Sept. 5 article, "[Community Goups Hammer Rudy Giuliani & Slam Sarah Palin](#)," included quotes from several organizers as well as one from Marvin Olasky, a former adviser to President Bush and provost at Christian-oriented King's College, located in the Empire State Building, who said that community organizing is "somewhat of a euphemism for leftist change."

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USA Today's Marilyn Elias interviewed organizers, funders, and academics for her September 10 article, "[Community Organizing Can Span the Ideological Spectrum](#)." An AP story on September 4 quoted John Baumann, executive director of the PICO network of community groups, suggesting that "If people in office were doing their jobs, perhaps we wouldn't need community organizers." The AP also interviewed Joshua Hoyt, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, who said, "I don't like seeing the really hard work that goes on in really poor communities being demeaned by cheap politicians." In "[GOP Joke, But an All-American Job](#)," published September 18, Los Angeles Times reporter Richard Faussett profiled 60-year old Bill O'Brien, a veteran community organizer in Detroit.

Several newspapers published editorials chastising the Republicans for their mocking attacks on community organizing. Among them were the Boston Globe ("[Urban Organizer, Ha Ha Ha!](#)," September 7); the Selma Times-Herald ("[Organizing is Honorable Work](#)", September 5); and the Las Vegas Sun ("Heart of a Country," September 12), which reminded readers that "[community organizers give of themselves every day to improve peoples lives](#)."

Blogger Geoffrey Dickens wrote an interesting piece, "Matthews: Is 'Community Organizer' The New 'Welfare Queen?'" on the NewsBusters.org Web site on Sept. 9. Michael Metzger, a writer for MinnPost.Com, interviewed Twin Cities organizers for his "[Community First: Organizers Explain What They Do](#)" piece on September 5. These and many other columns, articles and editorials--as well as many radio and TV stories--sparked thousands of letters to the editor and blog comments.

The storm of articles, columns and protest forced John McCain to backpedal -- but only after his GOP colleagues had already launched their grenades. "Of course I respect community organizers," McCain, said at a forum at Columbia University on September 11, in response to a question about whether he agreed with the attacks on organizers at the convention. "Of course I respect people who serve their communities. Senator Obama's service in that area is outstanding."

Modern community organizing began with Jane Addams, who founded Hull House in Chicago in the late 1800s and inspired the settlement house movement. These activists--upper-class philanthropists, middle-class reformers and working-class radicals--organized immigrants to clean up sweatshops and tenement slums, improve sanitation and public health and battle against child labor and crime.

In the 1930s, Alinsky, another Chicagoan, sought to organize residents the way unions organized workers. Drawing on existing groups--particularly churches, block clubs, sports leagues, and unions--he formed the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council to get the city to improve services to a working-class neighborhood adjacent to meatpacking factories. (Sanford Horwitt's biography, "Let Them Call Me Rebel," is the best source on Alinsky). Alinsky's ideas influenced the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and many other reformers.

In 1985, the 23-year-old Obama moved to Chicago to work for the Developing Communities Project, a coalition of churches on the city's South Side. His job was to help empower residents to win improved playgrounds, after-school programs, job training, housing, and other concerns

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affecting a neighborhood hurt by large-scale layoffs from the nearby steel mills and neglect by banks, retail stores and the local government. For three years, he knocked on doors and talked to people in their kitchens, living rooms and churches about the problems they faced and why they needed to get involved to improve their communities.

Obama was one of many idealistic young people who joined the upsurge of neighborhood activism sweeping America. In fact, the past three decades has seen an explosion of community organizing in every American city. There are now thousands of local groups that mobilize people around a wide variety of problems. There are at least 20,000 paid organizers in the United States, according to Walter Davis, executive director of the [National Organizers Alliance](#). They work for community groups, environmental organizations, unions, women's and civil rights groups, tenants organizations, churches and school reform groups -- touching the lives of millions of Americans every day. They work long hours, usually for low pay.

Organizers identify people with leadership potential, recruit and train them and help them build grassroots organizations that can win victories that improve their communities and workplaces. They pressure local governments to install stop signs at dangerous intersections, force slumlords to fix up their properties, challenge banks to end mortgage discrimination (redlining) and predatory lending, improve conditions in local parks and playgrounds, increase funding for public schools, clean up toxic sites, stop police harassment, open community health clinics, and even protect rivers from development so that anglers can go fishing.

Although most community organizing groups are rooted in local neighborhoods, often drawing on religious congregations and block clubs, there are now several national organizing networks with local affiliates, enabling groups to address problems at the local, state, and national level, sometimes even simultaneously. In the 1970s, community organizing groups from around the country worked together to get Congress to adopt the Community Reinvestment Act, which outlawed racial discrimination in mortgage lending ("redlining") and led banks to make more loans to blacks, Hispanics, and residents of working class neighborhoods.

In the past decade, community organizing groups, often working with churches and labor unions, have pressured more than 150 cities and counties, and one state (Maryland) to adopt laws requiring companies that have government contracts and subsidies to pay employees a "living wage" -- typically a few dollars above the federal minimum wage. The [Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy](#) (LAANE) has created a powerful coalition of unions, environmental groups, community groups, churches, and immigrant rights groups to change business practices in the nation's second-largest city. As a result, developers now sign "community development agreements" that include affordable housing, job training, and other benefits to local residents, as a condition of getting city subsidies and approvals. LAANE has spearheaded a successful coalition of unions (including the Teamsters) and community groups to clean up the pollution at the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports, the nation's largest and dirtiest, by forcing the trucking companies to switch to clean trucks. At the national level, the [Apollo Alliance](#) -- a coalition of unions, community groups, and environmental groups like the Sierra Club -- is pushing for a major federal investment in "green" jobs and energy-efficient technologies.

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A growing number of universities and colleges now offer courses, and even graduate degrees, in community organizing. Budding organizers can also attend the more than one dozen training centers that offer serious "how to" programs for activists, including the Midwest Academy in Chicago, the Highlander Center in Tennessee, the Organizing and Leadership Training Center in Boston, and others. In the past decade, at least 20 books about community organizing groups, written by academics and freelance writers, have been published. The University of Wisconsin hosts a website for community organizing practitioners and teachers to [exchange tips, articles, and syllabi](#).

As mayor of New York City, Giuliani had many confrontations with community organizations. One was East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC), an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation network of community groups. In the 1990s, EBC, comprised primarily of religious congregations and their working-class members, pressured Giuliani to provide city-owned land so the group could expand its nonprofit Nehemiah housing development of affordable single-family homes.

Giuliani agreed to provide a large swath of vacant public land in a neglected part of Brooklyn. At the groundbreaking ceremony for the Nehemiah homes (depicted in the documentary film "The Democratic Promise") Giuliani, surrounded by hundreds of EBC activists, lavished praise on the group. "Most of the political establishment in this city opposed them [and] tried to undercut them," he said. Then he lauded EBC because "they do not pay homage to political figures.... They require you to answer their questions. They remind you that you are a public servant."

Giuliani may have since forgotten those earlier words of praise, but he was correct. Community organizers make democracy work by mobilizing people to inject long-ignored issues onto the public agenda and hold politicians accountable. When he visited the United States in the 1930s, to write his now-classic *Democracy in America*, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed by the outpouring of local voluntary organizations that brought Americans together to solve problems, provide a sense of community and public purpose and tame the hyper-individualism that Tocqueville considered a threat to democracy. Today, community organizations help give people the confidence they need to use the tools of democracy. In a society where wealth and income is concentrated in a few hands, grassroots organizations make it possible for ordinary Americans to find their civic voice and exercise influence in politics.

The Republicans' recent attacks on community organizing reflect another longstanding tradition in American politics -- the conservative elite's fear of "the people." Some of the founding fathers worried that ordinary people-- people without property, indentured servants, slaves, women and others -- might challenge the economic and political status quo. In *The Federalist Papers* and other documents, they debated how to restrain the masses from gaining too much influence. To maintain their privilege, the elite has denied them the vote, limited their ability to protest, censored their publications, threw them in jail and ridiculed their ideas to expand democracy.

Every fight for social reform since colonial times -- including battles to abolish slavery, promote workers' rights, fix up slum housing, strengthen civil rights, clean up the environment, expand women's rights and protect consumers -- has reflected the tensions between the self-help and elite traditions. Those same tensions are now on display in the contest between Obama and

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McCain. The Republicans' mocking dismissal of community organizing, and the defense of that work by Obama and many activists, sparked a "teaching moment" that lifted the often-unheralded work of community organizer into the public's consciousness.

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