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The war on ACORN

Conservatives are distorting and playing up the community organizing group's so-called scandals.

October 22, 2009 | Peter Dreier | Peter Dreier is a professor of politics at Occidental College. His study of media coverage of ACORN can be found at: [http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/acorn study/acornstudy.pdf](http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/acorn%20study/acornstudy.pdf)

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For 40 years, the community organizing group ACORN has been a strong and effective voice for low-income Americans. It has registered more than a million citizens to vote. It has provided counseling and other assistance to help Americans buy and keep homes. It has fought on behalf of working people for fair treatment by employers, banks, mortgage companies and payday lenders. It played a leading role in organizing the victims of Hurricane Katrina to gain a voice in the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast.

▶ But few Americans had heard of ACORN until last fall, when Sen. John McCain and then-Gov. Sarah Palin began attacking the organization for "voter fraud." Soon, more than 80% of Americans knew about the group, according to polls. In the last month, Fox News, and then the rest of the media, have broadcast videos of several ACORN staffers advising people posing as a pimp and prostitute to lie on their tax returns. Now people know ACORN for that too.

For The Record

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ACORN: An Oct. 22 Op-Ed article about the community group ACORN stated that, in two ACORN offices, staff members offered advice to a pair of videographers posing as proprietors of a prostitution ring. While tapes of all the offices visited by the pair have not been released, it is clear from those that have been that ACORN offered advice in more than two offices. The article also said that the pair were "kicked out" of most ACORN offices. Because unedited versions of the tapes have not been released, it is unclear how the encounters ended, but it is unlikely they were ordered to leave most offices.

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It was wrong that workers registering voters for ACORN submitted false names. And it was wrong for ACORN employees to offer the advice they did to the posing couple. But the organization took swift action in both cases, notifying election officials in the first instance and terminating employees in the second.

The attack on ACORN is not really about bogus names on voter forms or about staffers encouraging people to lie on their tax forms. Rather, it is part of a broader conservative effort to attack progressive organizations and discredit President Obama and his liberal agenda.

Over the years, ACORN has made powerful enemies. Many businesses oppose the group's efforts to raise wages for the working poor. Banks, mortgage companies and payday lenders have fought ACORN's campaigns to strengthen regulation of the financial industry. Business groups have funded anti-ACORN websites, such as rottenacorn.com, that aim to destroy the group's credibility. Republicans have long opposed ACORN's success at registering low-income, mostly minority voters, who are more likely to vote for Democrats.

Christopher Martin, a journalism professor at the University of Northern Iowa, and I recently analyzed media coverage of ACORN over the years. In our published report, "Manipulating the Public Agenda: Why ACORN Was in the News, and What the News Got Wrong," we found that, despite ACORN's effective community organizing work in more than 70 cities across the country, 55% of the stories about the organization during 2007 and 2008 dealt with voter fraud.

The coverage was largely driven by the GOP. In the third and final presidential debate last October, McCain charged that ACORN was "now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy." At rallies and media events, McCain and Palin repeated this charge and demanded that Obama disclose his ties with ACORN -- echoing attacks that first appeared in conservative publications.

After the election, the attacks on ACORN continued. Early this year, conservative California Republican Rep. Darrell Issa released a report calling ACORN a "corrupt" organization. Some right-wing bloggers, talk-show hosts and officials charged, wrongly, that Democrats had set aside billions of dollars in stimulus funding for ACORN. And a few weeks ago, virtually every major TV station and newspaper reported on the prostitute-and-pimp video.

But let's look at those incidents. Did ACORN engage in election fraud? Absolutely not. As part of its highly successful voter registration drive, the group -- like many others -- paid outside contractors to gather signatures. A few of them turned in bogus forms, registering names such as "Mickey Mouse" or "Donald Duck." ACORN's staff did what was required by law and promptly reported the questionable names to authorities. In some cities, those local officials -- mostly Republicans -- turned around and accused ACORN of voter fraud.

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Our study documented that many news outlets reported the voter fraud allegations without attempting to verify them. Had they done so, they would have discovered that not a single person who signed a phony name on a registration form ever actually voted. What occurred was voter registration fraud, not voter fraud, and it was ACORN that exposed the wrongdoing in the first place. Yet more than 80% of the stories about this controversy failed to mention that it was ACORN that found and reported the phony names.

Thanks to a recent congressional investigation, we now know that Karl Rove, President George W. Bush's top political advisor, tried to get several U.S. attorneys to prosecute ACORN for voter fraud. When one of them, David Iglesias, the U.S. attorney in New Mexico, discovered no evidence of fraud, he refused to prosecute ACORN. Iglesias was quickly fired.

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