

Will Obama's grass roots stand tall?

By: [Amy Showalter](#)

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Obama for America is working to transform its storied campaign organization into a continuing and powerful lobbying force for the Democratic president's agenda. If all goes as planned, the new group — Organizing for America — will pressure members of Congress who fail to support President Barack Obama's agenda in a grass-roots fashion akin to the most influential special-interest groups.

The volunteers' enthusiasm for the political process and optimism about their ability to make a difference are wonderful to see. But as someone who has worked in the grass-roots-organizing field for two decades and researched the factors that help and hinder volunteer engagement, I know the challenges the organization faces.

Organizing for America will have a difficult time keeping volunteers engaged for the long haul, according to results from past surveys we conducted of more than 400 grass-roots rock stars — those who actually go to Capitol Hill or their statehouses to meet with lawmakers. The survey was conducted in 2002 and updated in 2007. The sample included a diverse group of politically engaged volunteer lobbyists — nurses, Realtors, small-business owners, hospital administrators, those affected by chronic diseases, and others.

The survey asked volunteers what caused them to lose interest and drop out. The overwhelming response: Volunteers disengaged because they were frustrated by the way legislators responded to them. They said legislators talked at them and not to them, sent them form letters and were inflexible about changing their positions. I call it "legislators behaving badly."

In reality, the volunteers had unrealistic expectations. Their air-brushed, civics-class picture of the legislative process simply doesn't reflect reality. Groups that deploy grass-roots volunteers have led them to believe their e-mails will change the world.

Another challenge for Organizing for America is that the audience has changed. During the presidential campaign, Obama volunteers were largely focused on influencing their peers. The main focus of Organizing for America will be the U.S. Congress, and that is a very, very different influence game. Will volunteers show the same perseverance when they have to win over a powerful member of Congress who, by the way, is also hearing from constituents on the other side who feel just as sincere about their position?

Organizing for America began in December, when the 13 million people whose e-mails were collected during the campaign received a survey. More than 500,000 people responded, and more than 4,200 held house parties to recruit others. President-elect Obama announced the campaign three days before his Inauguration.

That more than 500,000 of the 13 million people who received e-mails responded is fairly typical for campaigns like this. The response rate — about 3.8 percent — illustrates that a huge database doesn't necessarily translate into energetic volunteers who are willing to do the most effective part of grass-roots campaigning: meeting face to face with

legislators and their staff.

In the grass-roots world, signing up to receive e-mail updates is a sign of interest, but it's the lowest form of commitment. Veteran grass-roots organizers know there is a small cadre of True Believers who are going to make a difference, and they must be nurtured like orchids in a hot house. Big lists are impressive, but they don't tell the whole story, and they sometimes raise expectations inappropriately.

In many ways, grass-roots organizers are the victims of their own success. Just 20 years ago, corporate grass-roots organizations at Nationwide, which I helped build, and ARCO were in their infancy. In 1994, after the GOP takeover of Congress, special-interest groups began to recognize the power of their memberships. Since then, the number of grass-roots volunteers trying to influence their elected representatives has grown exponentially, and their efforts have had a huge impact on the way Congress functions.

The playing field has been leveled to some degree. But the growth in grass-roots advocacy has had a chilling effect on Congress. The more people elected officials hear from, the more difficult it is for them to make decisions. The grass-roots industry has become so good at getting people engaged that legislators are scared to do anything.

Will the Obama army have the fortitude to stick it out?

Perseverance wins in grass-roots organizing, so we'll see.

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