

# Virtual Power Plays: Social Movements, Internet Communication Technology, and Political Parties

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**Abstract** Drawing on interview data, participant observation, and archival research of the progressive group MoveOn.org and the conservative Tea Party Movement groups in Tallahassee, FL, this research examines how social movements use Internet Communication Technology (ICT) to affect political parties and political change in the United States. The paper consists of two analytical sections. In the first section, we examine how these groups use ICT to effectively market issues, mobilize consensus, and get citizens involved in the political process. In the second section, we outline how activist groups' use of ICT changes the relationship between social movement groups and political parties. While we do not suggest that ICT equalizes the relationship between social movements and political parties, we do show that savvy movement groups can use ICT in ways that can help activists transform a party. Additionally, we illustrate the potential for synergy between social movement and political parties in the digital age. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of how scholars might further assess the changing relationship between social movements and political parties.

*By the time Election Day arrives, millions of Americans will have contributed to a presidential candidate this year. Hundreds of political organizations—from the Sierra Club to the NRA, from MoveOn.org to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth—will have taken an active part in the campaign, supported by Americans from every part of the political spectrum. All of this is democracy in action, and it is so commonplace that we take it for granted. Yet, this kind of mass*

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*citizen involvement in the political process is a relatively recent phenomenon, spanning less than a half-century of our nation's history. How did it happen? And what does it suggest for this election, and for presidential elections to come? The answers can be found in the rise of what we conservatives call the "alternative" media—beginning with the conservative movement's development of political direct mail in the 1960s, followed by the growth of talk radio and cable TV news in the 1990s and, since then, by the remarkable role of the Internet in the political process. In this year's presidential election, it is the alternative media that are largely framing the issues, engaging the public, raising money, and getting out the vote. Whatever the outcome on Nov. 2, this election will be remembered as the year when these alternative media all came together to change how politics in America is practiced.*

From an article published in *The Washington Post* by Richard A. Viguerie and David Franke. Published October 4, 2004

Activists, by nature, are generally optimistic. They believe that even a relatively small group of people can band together and, quite literally, change the world for the better. The relatively widespread availability of Internet Communication Technology (ICT) in the United States has fueled optimism among activists, who argue that their efforts to educate, organize, and mobilize are easier, and just as effective, in the digital age. More importantly, activists believe that they can use ICT to shape party politics and elections in the U.S. The extent to which their enthusiasm is warranted, however, is up for debate. While social scientists have investigated, and disagree over, the potential of ICT to reinvigorate political parties and engage individuals in activism beyond the armchair (Bimber 1998; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Rash 1997), the extent to which a social movement group's use of ICT might influence political parties remains largely unexplored.

There are a number of reasons that the relationship between social movement organizations and political parties in the digital age has not been analyzed. First, disciplinary differences cause scholars to examine how ICT affects different aspects of both the relationship between ICT and politics and the outcomes. Political scientists have done excellent work analyzing how political parties use ICT to grow support for issues and candidates and whether websites, e-mail, and the use of e-tactics can successfully alter electoral outcomes (Chadwick 2006; Dulio et al. 1999; Gainous and Wagner 2011; Gibson et al. 2003). Scholars, for instance, have found that political parties can use ICT to connect with social movement groups and amplify their campaign messages across the virtual landscape, which helps them get voters to the polls (Foot and Schneider 2002; Foot et al. 2003; Gibson and Ward 1998; Gibson and Ward 2000; Margolis et al.

1997).<sup>1</sup> Social movement scholars, in contrast, unpack how ICT is used to mobilize and challenge authorities and institutions (Carroll and Hackett 2006; Earl and Kimport 2008; Fisher et al. 2005). Activists, for example, can use ICT for everything from surreptitiously mobilizing workers to advocate changes in corporate policy to protesting television programs for canceling a much-loved (but unprofitable) program (Earl 2006; Raeburn 2004).<sup>2</sup> As a result of these different foci, very little work has been done on the interstices between the two disciplines or on how ICT affects the relationship between social movements and political parties.<sup>3</sup>

Second, because getting data on how activists use ICT “on the ground” in their political efforts is rife with methodological obstacles, social scientists have been slow to conduct such studies. In the best of circumstances, finding a relatively diverse pool of activists to interview about their campaigns and goals can be difficult. These challenges become more difficult still when scholars want to assess how activists in the virtual and real worlds use ICT to affect change within political institutions and party structures, particularly since some self-identified activists never get involved beyond their armchairs. Finally, it is extraordinarily difficult to assess the impacts of a social movement because they can extend beyond the policy realm. For example, social movements can affect public opinion and cultural norms (Rochon 1998; Dyke et al. 2004), induce authorities to (avoid) compliance with existing public policies (Andrews 2004; McVeigh et al. 2003), and even spillover and shape the course and content of other movements (Meyer and Whittier 1994).

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, political scientists do not agree that ICT will reinvigorate party politics or even democratize party structures. Some scholars, for instance, argue that ICT makes it easier for political parties to circulate information and engage new and existing members in decision-making processes (Bonchek 1995). Others disagree noting that in the “post-modern” era of campaigning, parties are run by consultants, who shape politicians and platforms to suit the public preference of the day but not to engage party members (Farrell and Webb 2000; Norris 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Here again there is not agreement regarding the ability of ICT to mobilize people to social movements. While some movement scholars argue that ICT is changing who and how citizens get involved (Earl and Kimport 2011; Rohlinger and Brown 2009), others note that ICT does little more than make communication among and coordination of activists easier (Diani 2000; Tarrow 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The research that does exist examines the strategic voting movement in the 2000 presidential election. In an effort to help Green Party candidate, Ralph Nader, get 5 % of the national popular vote, the benchmark for federal campaign funds, citizens decided to “swap” their votes. Nader supporters pledged their votes to Al Gore in states where the democratic candidate had a chance of beating Bush. In exchange, Gore supporters cast a vote for Nader in noncompetitive states like CA. Although the effort was unsuccessful, this e-movement serves as an important example of how activists can employ ICT to try and shape the political system Earl, Jennifer, and Alan Schussman. 2003. “The New Site of Activism: On-Line Organizations, Movement Entrepreneurs, and the Changing Locations of Social Movement Decision Making.” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 24:155–187, Foot and Schneider (2002). “Online Action in Campaign 2000: An Exploratory Analysis of the U.S. Political Web Sphere.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 46:222–244, Schussman and Earl (2004). “From Barricades to Firewalls? Strategic Voting and Social Movement Leadership in the Internet Age.” *Sociological Inquiry* 74:439–463.

Thus, assessing how social movement groups and activists use ICT to affect party politics is a difficult task indeed.

Drawing on interview data, participant observation and archival research of the progressive group MoveOn.org (MoveOn) and conservative Tea Party Movement (TPM) groups in Tallahassee, FL, this research takes a first step at exploring how social movements use ICT to affect political parties and political change in the United States. As we outline below, MoveOn and TPM groups are ideal for examining how ICT changes the relationship between social movements and political parties because both explicitly challenge (and seek to change) the U.S. political system and the Democratic and Republican Parties respectively. This paper is organized into two analytical sections. In Section “[Social Movement Organizations and ICT](#)” of the chapter, we examine how these groups use ICT to effectively market issues, mobilize consensus, and get citizens involved in the political process. The Section “[Implications for Political Parties](#)” of the chapter discusses how activist groups’ use of ICT changes the relationship between social movement organizations and political parties. While we do not argue that ICT equalizes the relationship between social movements and political parties, we do show that savvy organizations can use ICT in ways that can ultimately help activists transform a party. Additionally, we illustrate the potential for synergy between social movements and political parties in the digital age.

## **MoveOn and the Tea Party Movement in Tallahassee, Florida**

In order to illuminate how social movement organizations use ICT to change party structures, we analyze activist groups that share the goal of making the political system more responsive to ordinary citizens, but vary in terms of their targets, organizational form, and ideological orientation. While this research is by no means comprehensive, it arguably represents a broad range of ways that activists use ICT in their political efforts and, therefore, constitutes an important first step in analyzing the movement-party relationship. Here, we briefly introduce each of the groups included in the study and provide an overview of our data and methods.

MoveOn.org is one of the “largest and most forceful voices in digital era politics” (Fouhy 2004).<sup>4</sup> The organization was founded in 1998 by Wes Boyd and Joan

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<sup>4</sup> MoveOn opponents agree that the group is extraordinarily effective. Republican pollster, Allan Hoffenblum, noted that in addition to organizing liberals, MoveOn is very adept at raising money, applying political pressure, and putting forward a consistent message to the public (Bernhard 2004). More colorful conservative pundits, such as Sean Hannity, argue that the organization is too successful and instead of revitalizing democracy the MoveOn “blog nuts” have taken over the Democratic Party and “control democrats with fear and intimidation” (The complete segment of “Hannity’s America,” which addresses the role of the Internet in progressive politics aired on April 29, 2007 and is available via You Tube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROBDpaxYxT0>).

Blades, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, who sent an e-mail petition to about 100 friends calling on Congress to censure President Clinton for his indiscretion with Monica Lewinsky and “move on” to more pressing political issues. Their e-mail petition generated more than 400,000 replies and the couple formed MoveOn.org, a political action committee designed to affect congressional elections and, according to Boyd, bring “as much diversity to the power structure as possible. That is, ordinary citizens who can provide the countervailing influence against the notion that some kind of inside-the-beltway elite can make all our decisions” (Bernhard 2004).<sup>5</sup> MoveOn is specifically designed to mobilize progressives and moderate independents around a range of issues including global warming, the war in Iraq, healthcare reform, and voting rights. The organization primarily employs a top-down approach to do so. Although the day-to-day operations of MoveOn are managed entirely online, the organization is hierarchically structured with a handful of leaders and issue experts disseminating information and opportunities for involvement to its 7 million plus supporters.<sup>6</sup> As a result, MoveOn activities and events primarily originate at the national level and, using ICT, group leaders solicit local activists to “host” events that they manage from afar.

In contrast, the Tea Party Movement (TPM) in Tallahassee, FL is decentralized, which has resulted in the formation of several local groups. The TPM, in part, was a response to Rick Santelli’s now famous rant against President Obama’s mortgage rescue plan. In Tallahassee, the first TPM event took place in March 2009. Anthony, a 32-year-old conservative activist, participated in a Tea Party organized by his friend, Brendan Steinhauser (the Director of Federal and State Campaigns for FreedomWorks) outside of the White House and decided to spearhead a similar event in Florida’s capital. He began by setting up a Facebook page and invited conservatives to join the group. Within a week, the page had over 500 members. The first Tea Party in Tallahassee was a success with nearly 300 in attendance and a keynote address by Dick Armey. Anthony capitalized on the “event buzz” and, using Facebook, grew the number of supporters for the movement and organized another Tea Party the following month on tax day, April 15, 2009.<sup>7</sup>

Although this event was also well attended and included short speeches from several state legislators, Anthony, who also works full-time, found he could not maintain the movement alone. He turned to other local conservative activists for assistance. The result was the creation of three additional local groups that support

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<sup>5</sup> MoveOn also has a civic action committee, which addresses issues such as net neutrality and funding for public television and radio.

<sup>6</sup> According to the organizational website, MoveOn grew leaps and bounds after September 11, 2001 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The group reported an increase in membership from 500,000 in September 2001 to 3 million in December 2005 in the U.S. alone. In January 2013, MoveOn reported it had seven million supporters in the U.S.

<sup>7</sup> According to Anthony, the number of members for the Tallahassee Tea Party Facebook page has fluctuated some. At its height, there were nearly 1,500 followers. Since we have been monitoring the page, the number of members has fluctuated between 920 (in April 2010) and 830 (March 2011).

the TPM banner, but adopt different orientations to politics.<sup>8</sup> The first group, which we call Citizens Holding Government Accountable, is a fiscally conservative, non-partisan organization that works to “promote good conservative elected representatives to ALL levels of government.” The group supports the TPM and specifically focuses on limiting government, fiscal responsibility, state’s rights, and individual rights. The second organization, Christians for Responsible Government, also strongly supports the TPM platform but regards Judeo-Christian doctrine as critical to “uniting Americans” and “defending our country.” The third group, Working for the American Way, integrates religious doctrine into its mission, which is to preserve “the rights and freedoms endowed by our Creator and guaranteed by our Constitution.” Unlike the other groups, the primary goal of Working for the American Way is to provide a “bridge” between the TPM groups in order to increase the overall effectiveness of the movement’s efforts in Florida.

In order to assess how MoveOn and the TPM groups use ICT to affect change, we employ several methods. First, we monitored organizational websites, public forums, and e-mails for all of the groups on a daily basis.<sup>9</sup> Second, we collected all of the media coverage on organizations. Using LexisNexis, we conducted regional and national searches as well as searches of radio, newspaper, and television transcripts for coverage including the terms “MoveOn” and “Tea Party Movement.” Third, we attended dozens of meetings, rallies, and events hosted by MoveOn and local TPM groups.<sup>10</sup> Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with supporters of MoveOn and the Tallahassee TPM groups. We used a variety of methods to locate respondent including e-mail, listservs, online surveys, giving presentations at meetings, handing out flyers at events, and posting flyers in local coffee shops, on TPM Facebook sites, on campus, and in the local progressive and conservative centers. This strategy yielded a total of 19 MoveOn supporters, who were interviewed between October 2006 and April 2007 and again between December 2008 and June 2009, and 32 TPM supporters, who were interviewed between August 2010 and March 2011 and again between May 2012 and January 2013.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> By local, we are referring to the immediate Tallahassee area. There are additional groups that have formed in adjacent communities. While we have monitored these groups online, seen their members at events, and conducted interviews with their members, we have not attended their meetings.

<sup>9</sup> The posts on public forms and Facebook were copied and pasted in a word document. This information is organized chronologically so that we can see changes over time. Since e-mails are dated and are stand alone texts, they were archived and sorted by thematic topic.

<sup>10</sup> We attended all MoveOn events between 2004 and 2006 and have attended all TPM group events and meetings (monthly) since April 2010. In total, we have attended 42 events, rallies, and meetings. All public meetings and events were either tape recorded or video taped so that they could be analyzed at a later date.

<sup>11</sup> We had some difficulty getting respondents for MoveOn because many individuals were worried about discussing the organization and their politics in the post-9/11 climate. Since the state is the largest employer in Tallahassee, FL and Jeb Bush was the governor at the time of the first interview, many individuals were concerned that their progressive politics would be “discovered” and they would lose their jobs. For a more detailed discussion see Rohlinger and Brown (2009).

Respondents were asked about their range of political experience (petitions, canvassing, protests, and so on), membership in other organizations, when and why they joined a social movement group, the kinds of activities and events (on and offline) in which they have participated, their impressions of how the group has affected their participation, and their feelings about activism and politics in the U.S. more generally. The interviews ranged in length from 25 min to 3 h. During the second interview, MoveOn and TPM supporters were asked about their current involvement in the respective organizations as well as other social movement groups and causes, reasons for their current level of involvement in various groups, their impressions of MoveOn/TPM and how it changed their participation and their feelings about activism in the U.S. more generally. We re-interviewed 13 of the 19 initial respondents from MoveOn and 24 of the 32 initial respondents from TPM groups. The follow-up interviews ranged in length from 15 to 75 min.<sup>12</sup> All respondents are identified with pseudonyms.

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the respondents. This table only includes the demographics of those individuals whom we formally interviewed, rather than people we spoke to and informally interviewed at events and rallies. Overall, there are not remarkable differences between the supporters of MoveOn and the TPM. Supporters are diverse in terms of their age, gender, relationship, parental, and employment status but relatively homogenous in terms of their race and ethnicity. The racial and ethnic demographics are not completely representative of the Tallahassee area in which 60.42 % of the population is white, 34.24 % is African-American, 4.19 % is Latino, and 2.4 % is Asian.

## **Social Movement Organizations and ICT**

### ***Marketing Issues and Framing the Debate***

While social movement organizations may not have direct access to policy processes, they can help shape the broader political environment in which policy debates occur through framing, or producing and mobilizing meaning on a mass scale (Benford and Snow 2000). Mass media play an important role in this regard. Social movement organizations use mass media to expand the debate around an issue, energize a movement by mobilizing a population to action, and build (and then leverage) their legitimacy in the political sphere (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Walgrave and Manssens 2000). The opportunities for social movement organizations to promote themselves and their causes in the contemporary media environment seem endless. Social movement organizations

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<sup>12</sup> Since individuals move, we were not able to locate all of the respondents 2 years after the initial interview. If an individual's contact information was no longer correct, we conducted local and national searches in an effort to locate the respondent.

**Table 1** Overview of respondent demographics

	MoveOn (%)	TPM Groups (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	47	68
Female	53	32
<i>Age</i>		
18–35	37	32
36–50	21	32
51 and up	42	26
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
White	89	81
Asian	11	0
Middle-Eastern	0	3
Latino	0	9
Multiracial	0	8
<i>Relationship status</i>		
Single	47	25
Partnered	0	6
Married	32	45
Divorced	21	19
Widowed	0	3
<i>Employment status</i>		
Student	21	6
Employed	74	68
Unemployed	5	6
Retired	0	22
<i>Parental status</i>		
No children	47	38
One child	16	22
Two or more children	37	38

Due to rounding the categories may not add up to 100 %

can target “traditional” media outlets such as print, radio, and electronic news outlets or go “virtual” and disseminate information about their causes and goals through blogs, YouTube, twitter, online radio, online news outlets, social media, or their own group websites (Atton 2007; Carroll and Hackett 2006; Gamson 1990; Rohlinger and Brown 2013; Thörn 2007). Likewise, the proliferation of venues online has dramatically changed the speed of the news cycle and the way in which information spreads across the media system (Ayres 1999; Kahn and Kellner 2004). Media venues are connected through a network of relationships (Benson and Neveu 2005; Bourdieu 1998), which allows ideas and events introduced in relatively obscure, alternative news venues online to “crossover” into mainstream venues (Bennett 2003). Savvy social movement organizations can take advantage of these linkages and move their events from sympathetic alternative news outlets to mainstream venues (Rohlinger 2007). In short, social movement organizations with a technologically and media savvy staff, can “leverage the affordances”



(Earl and Kimport 2011) of ICT and find new ways to promote their ideas across a complex, interconnected media system (Rohlinger and Brown 2013).

The changes in the media industry have altered how citizens approach politics and affect political change. Technologically savvy and politically minded individuals brought the “entrepreneurial spirit” online and into the American political system. Rather than promoting causes or platforms, these political entrepreneurs focus on selling “ideas that change the world;” a prospect that resonates with citizens across ideologies and income brackets. To be sure, the financially well-heeled (from the progressive George Soros and Steve Bing to the conservative Koch brothers) sink millions into groups like MoveOn and the TPM. However, what supporters share is the belief that political parties are dominated by “elite Washington insiders” who lack vision and are not held accountable to ordinary citizens.

For example, Andy Rappaport, a venture capitalist, felt like his donations to the Democratic Party were not being well spent. He notes:

There is a growing realization among people who take very seriously the importance of progressive politics that the Democratic Party has kind of failed to create a vision for the country that is strongly resonant.... And our numbers—meaning Democrats as a whole—are decreasing. Our political power has been diminishing, and it’s become common knowledge that the conservative movement has established a very strong, long-term foundation, whereas we’ve basically allowed our foundation, if not to crumble, to at least fall into a state of disrepair. So there are a lot of people thinking, What can we do about this? (Bai 2004).

The answer was to raise money (100 million) to help mobilize people to effectively advocate for progressive causes within their communities and outside of the party system. Clearly, individuals beyond the beltway and those whose income places them squarely in the middle class are willing to financially support these social movement groups. In January 2003, for instance, MoveOn asked supporters for \$27,000 to fund an anti-war commercial and received \$400,000 in donations (Huck 2004). Likewise, when, in 2004, MoveOn asked its supporters to hold bake sales across the U.S. and the organization raised \$750,000 (Bai 2004). In short, ICT has helped alter the business model of activism. Rather than selling goals, contemporary social movement organizations market ideas to supporters and see which ones move people to action.

Some of MoveOn’s and the TPM’s success, then, is due to the cultural resonance of the ideas they sell. Rather than advocating a radical transformation of the political structure, the groups couch their opposition to political parties and an unresponsive government in democratic ideals and principles of the U.S. Constitution. The cultural and institutional resonance of movement ideas is important because resonant ideas appeal to broad swaths of the citizenry and are more likely to get amplified via mainstream media attention (Ferree 2003; Gitlin 1980; McAdam 1996; Snow and Benford 1988). For instance, TPM supporters blame the Republican Party for abandoning their core fiscally conservative ideals. At a Tallahassee luncheon featuring the Tea Party Patriot founders, Jenny Beth Martin

(co-founder of the group) noted that she was tired of trusting the Republican Party. Instead of fiscal responsibility, she noted that Republicans:

Abandoned the free markets, they raised taxes, they increased spending. They've done so much to infringe to influence and on our lives and take our liberty away. And, we cannot sit back and trust them to do the right thing any longer. We have to hold them accountable. We have to hold their feet to the fire.... We'll do what it takes to hold them accountable. And if they're not willing to do that, then we'll be back here in 2012 doing the same thing all over again. We'll get a new Congress who can get it right and who will keep working until they can get it right! [Audience applause].

Casting politicians and political parties as out-of-touch elites puts institutional actors on the defensive and gives social movement groups an opportunity to shape debates and set electoral agendas. To be sure, those with institutional power have a big edge in how politics are framed, particularly in mainstream media outlets (Edelman 1964; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Mainstream media, however, is drawn to conflict. Social movement organizations that can create conflict where none previously existed—and then leverage their ideas across the media industry—can benefit from the glare of the media spotlight.

Of course, social movement groups have more flexibility in terms of how they promote themselves and their issues than political parties. MoveOn, for example, is known for harnessing cultural icons to spread its political messages far and wide. MoveOn recruited movie directors (Richard Linklater, Michael Moore, and Rob Reiner), screen writers (Aaron Sorkin), actors (Scarlett Johansson and Matt Damon), and musicians (Moby, Bruce Springsteen, Pearl Jam, Dave Matthews Band, Bonnie Raitt, R.E.M., the Dixie Chicks, John Mellencamp, and a variety of punk rock bands) to promote its ideas across the media landscape before the 2004 election, generating millions in the process.<sup>13</sup> The Vote for Change tour, which featured many of the musicians listed above, raised several million dollars that were used to educate and mobilize progressive voters (Cornwell 2004; DeLuca 2004; Guzman 2004; Rubin and Fitzgerald 2004). Similarly, a number of conservative celebrities have embraced and promoted the ideals of the TPM including Michelle Bachman, Sarah Palin, and Glenn Beck. While the use of celebrities, political or otherwise, has its drawbacks (Meyer and Gamson 1995), using cultural elites to promote movement ideas is an effective way to leverage mass media, grow the coffers and membership of an organization, and, ultimately, affect political debates.

In sum, changes in the media industry and how movement entrepreneurs work to affect political change have happened simultaneously and as a result of the proliferation of ICT in American society. These new social movement organizations use ICT to leverage themselves across the media system and sell their ideas to the margins and the mainstream simultaneously. While this allows the activist groups to attract politically diverse supporters, MoveOn and TPM groups must find ways to mobilize consensus and action in order to engage supporters beyond their checkbooks.

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<sup>13</sup> This is a partial list of the celebrities who have been involved in MoveOn.

## *Mobilizing Consensus*

Social movement organizations also use ICT to mobilize consensus or generate support for its ideas and goals (Klandermans 1984; Klandermans 1992). This is not an easy task under the best of circumstances. Activists rarely agree on organizational priorities and conflict, left unchecked, can have disastrous results (Barasko 2004; Whittier 1995). While most federated social movement organizations adopt procedures (like voting for leadership) that allow members to participate in decision-making processes (McCarthy and Zald 1973), ICT eases the burdens of such participation and allows supporters to weigh in on organizational decisions on a more regular basis. Such participation, we find, is important because it prevents supporters from exiting the organization even when they are not completely satisfied with its course or campaigns.

MoveOn and TPM groups use ICT to engage supporters in democratic processes, which allows them to dictate the direction of the organization on a limited scale. When joining MoveOn, for example, the website asks supporters to identify those issues with which they are most interested and want to receive regular updates on.<sup>14</sup> Then, at least four times a year, MoveOn asks its supporters to complete a survey that is used to determine the political priorities of the organization and to participate in a virtual town hall meeting, where supporters can discuss issues and voice concerns. While local TPM groups have not used online surveys yet, ICT still plays an important role in consensus mobilization. TPM groups primarily rely on virtual democratic forums such as listservs, chat rooms, and Facebook pages to determine whether they should support a candidate and in what kind of activities the groups should sponsor (Rohlinger and Klein Forthcoming-b). For example, Anthony decided not to throw the organization's support behind Marco Rubio, who was actively seeking Tea Party support in his early bid for Florida senator, because supporters had expressed concern over Rubio's views as well as the implications of endorsing candidates during the primary on the Facebook page. Anthony described his decision not to support Rubio on the TPM Facebook site:

I had actually put the thought [of endorsing Rubio] out there [on the Facebook page] because I thought Marco Rubio was probably the most legitimate candidate and deserved our endorsement. But even when I put the question out for the Tea Party Facebook group, "Should we endorse Marco Rubio?" I got a bunch of people saying "yeah, yeah definitely." Then, I got a lot of people saying, "I love him, but no. We should stay away from endorsing." And I had others who said, "I'm not really sure if I would endorse him." So it was kind of mixed and I thought well we're going to split this movement if we start endorsing candidates.

In short, MoveOn and TPM groups build consensus by engaging their supporters in familiar democratic processes, such as voting and debate, and giving them a voice in organizational decision-making.

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<sup>14</sup> This is no longer the case. MoveOn simply asks supporters to enter their e-mail address for updates.

While these consensus-building activities may seem trivial, they enable MoveOn and the TPM groups to effectively avoid “hot button” issues, like abortion and gay rights, which have the potential to undermine the political diversity and, ultimately, the political power of the group.<sup>15</sup> This is an important point. Organizational supporters are cognizant of this issue avoidance, but even ardent opponents and supporters of these issues set aside their personal passion in order to maintain overall strength of the group. For example, the vast majority of respondents, and all of the local leaders, noted that it was critical for Florida TPM groups to avoid issues like gay rights and abortion. Logan, a leader of a TPM group in rural Florida, expressed personal distaste for both issues but argued that it was important for him to “set these opinions aside” so that the movement could grow its strength and influence over local and state politics. Likewise, Deborah, a 55-year-old conservative activist who has picketed as part of pro-life groups outside of abortion clinics, argued that controversial issues “could derail the central message... and take down the Tea Party Movement.” She added:

I don't know that strategically it would be the best. I think that we should concentrate more on the process... [of how] a judge becomes a judge. I think that instead of having an activist judge, you should have a judge that would adhere to the Constitution. I think that's more... it's not more important, I just think that hopefully, that would be the emphasis [of the TPM].

MoveOn supporters similarly understood the group's avoidance of controversial issues. However, respondents also noted that the organization's position could change and, more importantly, that this change would occur if it was demanded by MoveOn supporters. Marcia, a 60-year-old geologist whom we first interviewed in 2005, described the misalignment between her and MoveOn's political agenda:

I wish the environment was at the top [of their list] but they went around all the MoveOn people and had them submit this poll about what their priorities are, and the environment wasn't really all that high...I've written to them about particular issues I've got and they do respond, so that's good. I think probably right now, the big issue is Iraq, and that's what they're focused on more than anything.

Marcia was still involved in the organization in 2008, when we interviewed her the second time, even though the environment remained low on MoveOn's list of political priorities. Her involvement was even more surprising after she expressed distaste over MoveOn's attack on General Petraeus and disappointment over the group's decision to support Barack Obama, rather than her preference Hillary Clinton, for the Democratic presidential nomination. When asked about her continued involvement in the organization, Marcia cited the democratic process through which the decision was derived, voting, made the decision “fair” and, therefore,

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the success of the TPM has forced MoveOn to take up controversial issues like abortion. By changing the composition of Congress, the TPM ushered in an era of social conservative policy as well, which has included additional restrictions on abortion access through the defunding of Planned Parenthood. MoveOn attacked the proposed legislation and vigorously defended a woman's right to an abortion.

“okay.” Marcia explained, “They [the MoveOn membership] took a vote, I voted. Most of the group voted. [And the group voted] to support Obama in the primaries. So I was okay with that.” In a similar exchange, James, a 56-year-old psychiatrist, expressed some annoyance over MoveOn’s avoidance of the abortion issue and healthcare reform as it relates to psychiatric problems. When asked why he stayed involved with the group, he cited the potential to change the agenda through their votes, e-mails, and town hall meetings. James joked, “I’m trying to persuade the MoveOn group on healthcare reform and they are trying to persuade me on other issues. So, I guess they’re working on me and I’m working on them.”

ICT makes it easier for social movement organizations to involve supporters in decision-making processes regarding group priorities. This is important because it allows movement groups to represent and mobilize around multiple issues and policy domains while avoiding those that are likely to fracture organizational support. Additionally, giving supporters a regular voice in the organization keeps people involved even when they are not particularly happy with the campaigns or actions of the group. Thus, rather than “exit” the group (Hirschmann 1970), supporters set aside their personal passions and support the group as a vehicle of political change.

### *Mobilizing Support*

Some scholars are very skeptical about the ability of activist organizations to use ICT for action mobilization, or to involve supporters in group activities and events (Diani 2000; Tarrow 1998). The typical criticism of ICT-based activism is that it is “easy” and, therefore, less meaningful than protesting, for instance, which requires people to leave the safety of their living rooms. To be sure, some kinds of activism, such as challenging armed state officials, are high risk. However, what activists themselves consider high risk varies according to their personal circumstances and the political environment. Some individuals, for instance, consider online activism risky because their activities can be monitored by the government officials they work for and politically oppose. Yet, they engage online despite perceived risks (Rohlinger and Brown 2009).

Additionally, ICT helps individuals overcome barriers to activism by reducing the information and participation costs for those juggling work and family demands.<sup>16</sup> Signing petitions, donating money, writing letters to politicians, and calling legislators may all be relatively easy to do, but require time; a resource that is not distributed equally across the population. By offering supporters a range of activities on- and off-line in which they can engage, social movement organizations allow supporters to get involved beyond their checkbooks. For example,

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion on how “biographical availability” affects activism and political participation more generally see (Klatch 1999; McAdam 1988; Verba et al. 1995).

Janet, a 49-year-old business owner and mother of four, noted that the TPM's use of ICT made it easy for her to stay involved, "I've never physically met with any of the Tea Party Members but I can still be a part of the movement.... I can stay informed and connected... [and] I know where to contribute my money." Samantha, a 34-year-old market researcher, agreed adding that MoveOn's use of ICT made it easy for her stay involved after the birth of her daughter.

If people just knew something they would do something...if you make it easy for them, and if you give them an action, they'll do it. And I think MoveOn has been a really good vehicle for me to do that because post child, once you have jobs...sometimes it's hard...to figure out what to do. And I...really appreciate that MoveOn takes the time... Most of what I did, pre-election, going right up to the election and post election...I probably wouldn't have done [without MoveOn]...I think it's really super that they've done things and they've used the internet positively and to let me decide that I want to still be active in politics and my community.

While Janet and Samantha had previous activist experience, the vast majority of our respondents did not. For these individuals, ICT provided a training ground for activism. A number of respondents noted that MoveOn's and the TPM's use of ICT allowed them to find their political voice and take a hand at expressing it. Deborah attributed her now regular attendance at meetings and events to the TPM community online:

[Tea party websites, listservs and Facebook forums] provide a platform for unity and more organized communication [and action]. Being informed alone, being aware of things has increased [my] response.... If I don't know, I can't respond.... It gives me a way to fight for my country. [Respondent chokes up] To stand up for values that are really important...I was really worried...I've lost a country, because people didn't really know what was going on, and I think it's really important to educate people.

Kenneth, a 69-year-old ROTC instructor at a local high school with no experience in activism, also attributed his involvement in a local TPM group to finding his political voice online.

I grew up in a different country than we're living in now. [I got involved because] I was really, really upset with the way we were being forced to go by people who just don't understand what makes this country great. When all this legislation started about forcing people to buy things [reference to health insurance and Obama's universal health care bill] literally I mean I could read the paper and almost get physically ill thinking about which way we were going and what's happening to this country. And, so just out of sheer frustration and anger I started dabbling in e-mails and stuff like that with people who were involved in the Tea Party.

This was no less true of MoveOn members, who attributed the group's online prodding for their attendance at seminars and house events as well as participation in rallies, lobbying, and canvassing efforts. For example, John, a 32-year-old graduate student, noted that his involvement in the "real" world increased as a result of all the information and opportunities MoveOn provided him online:

MoveOn made me more interested in getting out there, like when John Edwards came to town. I actually made the effort to go to FAMU's campus, tracked up the hill and all around just to listen to this guy talk. It [MoveOn] made me want to go and help out on

Election Day 2004. I sat out in front of the polls and passed out little John Kerry stickers to people.... I'm pretty convinced it [MoveOn] prodded me to go and participate on election day when I could have just sat at home and not done anything. But, I wanted to see a change and [MoveOn] showed how I could do it. Honestly, I've never ever gone to volunteer for a democratic campaign in my life. [But there] I was, walking in [to headquarters] the day before the election asking, "What can I do?"

It is worth noting that the structural differences between MoveOn and TPM groups affect the ease with which individuals can learn new political skills. Event organizers, for example, receive a great deal of assistance from MoveOn, which makes it easy for novice activists to organize and host events. One respondent explained that when she planned a house event, there were "reminder e-mails," clearly indicating all of the tasks that needed to be completed. As she describes it, "it's like having your own personal assistant. It makes it very easy." Likewise, Amanda, a 52-year-old social worker, noted that when you volunteer, "it's all done for you pretty much...the paperwork, the reports, the printouts, flyers... They e-mail it to you and you print it out on your own printer and you're set to go..." She adds that the process is made simple and clear, which is important because "they make it easy for the people who don't know what they're doing and have never done this before." MoveOn also asks its more active members to take on leadership roles in their communities. Amanda described how MoveOn encouraged her to be a precinct captain.

I said "no" when they asked me [to be precinct captain]. I mean, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I had never done any kind of door to door thing before. But, they kept asking. They said they needed another one, so I finally did it. So, I was going in blind, but they were helpful. I might do it again depending on what the issue was and how important I thought it was.

When asked to describe her experience as precinct captain in more detail, Amanda added:

My job was to keep all the paperwork- all the reports. When you went out knocking on people's doors, you'd ask them questions and then report what their response was such as "Yes. I'm going to vote." If they told you how they were going to vote, you could document that. We were supposed to ask them that [how they were going to vote]. We weren't there to tell them how to vote.... It was interesting [the experience]. I didn't know what the response was going to be [like]. It was just so new. It was foreign to me and so it was a little scary. But, actually it [the experience] was mostly positive.

The fact that social movement organizations use ICT to mobilize support by making activism "easy" is not negative. Easy participation, in fact, may help organizations maintain themselves over time because it makes activism available to people who are otherwise obligated, provides a training ground for neophyte activists, and engages some segment of its supporters beyond the armchair. Moreover, social movement organizations that can effectively use ICT may fare better than traditional movement groups that primarily rely on a paper constituency alone because individuals can choose when and how to get involved in the group. Richard, a 53-year-old government contract analyst, summarized it best.

He explained, “Not everybody is going to go March in Washington... [MoveOn] tells people it’s okay to participate at whatever level you’re comfortable with.”

## Implications for Political Parties

The ability of activist groups to effectively leverage ICT and mobilize money and people around an array of policy issues has implications for the relationship between social movements and political parties. Typically, political parties are regarded as the arbiters of power in the political system (Schumpeter 1976). While the Republican and Democratic Parties compete for a majority at the federal and state level and woo social movement organizations in their efforts to do so, activists rarely have any real influence in party decision-making. This is particularly true in the U.S., where there are thousands of activist organizations and only two parties with which to bargain (Schattschneider 1960). Thus, while social movement organizations may shape political parties on the margin, they are far more likely to receive recognition or symbolic benefits or to have their ideas co-opted by political elites altogether than to affect policy change (Amenta et al. 1992; Gamson 1990; Piven and Cloward 1977). ICT, however, changes this strategic relationship and, specifically, makes the playing field a bit more level (albeit not entirely). Here, we outline three possible relational dynamics between social movements and political parties—competition, appropriation, and synergy—and discuss the role of ICT in each. These relational dynamics are not mutually exclusive, nor are they completely new in all cases.<sup>17</sup> The point here is that savvy social movement groups can use ICT to directly challenge (or change) political parties.

### *Competition*

Although social movement organizations are not generally regarded as serious competitors by political parties, activist groups can compete with parties for members and support in the digital age. They can effectively represent issues from multiple policy domains while maintaining broad support, mobilize millions, and get supporters involved beyond the checkbook; something that political parties have struggled with for the past several decades (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). For the reasons outlined above, political parties are most likely to feel the competitive pinch in their pocketbook as small and big donors alike turn to activist groups that they believe can quickly and effectively launch a challenge against a policy or politician.

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, not all social movement organizations using ICT necessarily be in the position to engage a political party. As Earl and Kimport (2011) aptly note, like access to ICT, technological and political skill are not equally distributed across society. As a result, some movements will be better positioned than others to challenge and work with political parties on a more equal footing.



However, social movement organizations can do more than take money away from traditional party structures. They also can force parties to take up issues and offer alternative candidates. By effectively selling their ideas to a substantial segment of the voting public, activist groups can induce candidates and parties to adopt some of their frames in their efforts to win elections. While this is not new, the relative ease with which movement organizations can force candidates to take their ideas seriously is. Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry, for instance, quickly adopted a strong anti-war stance after MoveOn and its 2.5 million supporters made it clear that ending the war in Iraq was a priority. Similarly, the Republican Party issued a “Contract with America” in September 2010 that integrated TPM ideals into sample legislation, including a “Fiscal Responsibility Act,” which would require the federal government to have a balanced budget and limit taxation, and a “Citizen Legislature Act,” which would impose term limits on politicians.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, social movement groups can use ICT to effectively vet and support candidates, who more closely represent their values and are not approved by the party establishment. Again, while the emergence of alternative candidates is not a new phenomenon, the relative ease with which these alternative candidates can access financial resources from supporters, launch effective campaigns, and win elections is new. This was indeed the case in Florida where TP backed candidates swept the 2010 national elections (Marcio Rubio was elected to the Senate and Steve Southerland, Allen West, and Sandra Adams were elected to the House). Likewise, the TPM groups achieved astounding success at the local level.<sup>19</sup> In Leon County, Florida, which is predominantly Democratic, Nick Maddox, a business man and former Florida State University football player,

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<sup>18</sup> The Contract with America is available at [www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html](http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html). It is worth noting that TPM supporters are very suspicious of these appeals. Almost all of our respondents viewed Republicans as pandering for votes. For example, Joseph, a 61-year-old unemployed electronics technician, noted, “The fact that the Republican Party has tried to more or less commandeer the [TPM] platform tells me that really what they’re doing is damage control.... It’s basically just the same old tactics they’ve used all along. They know that they can’t ignore their really conservative, constitutional base, but they’re trying to water it [the ideas] down as much as possible. And the evidence of that is the fact that some of the new candidates who just went to Washington, they’re already being thwarted and stymied and manipulated and you know just rendered impotent [by the Republican establishment].”

<sup>19</sup> Not all of the TPM candidates won. For example, TPM groups cultivated and promoted Steve Stewart, a business man and father of six, for Tallahassee Mayor. TPM groups and a local conservative radio host helped Stewart sell his message to the broader public, which won over many. His opponent, incumbent John Marks, however, challenged Stewart primarily using race-based arguments (Marks is African-American and Stewart is White). Marks noted that Stewart lived on the north side of town (which is sometimes referred to as FFW—Fancy, Fancy Whiteville) and accused Stewart of “being out of touch” with the average Tallahassee citizen. Stewart tried to counter these attacks by winning an endorsement by a prominent African-American politician in town (County Commissioner Bill Proctor) and speaking before an audience on the south side of town, which is predominantly African-American, to no avail. Stewart lost the election. Despite this loss, Stewart has remained active in local politics and recently revealed an “ethical violation” made by Marks. Currently, Stewart successfully pushed for a formal investigation of the Mayor.

ousted Cliff Thaeil, a liberal Democrat who served on the County Commission for 16 years. Maddox, who was discussed and promoted at TPM group meetings and events, parroted the political solutions favored by the TPM. For instance, Maddox argued that the financial success of the county would result through an investment in the private sector, “We have to work to make sure that we can help our private sector, our local small businesses. I think economic development incentives would be a good way to help those small businesses take in more employees and help our unemployment rate decrease.” Of course, Florida was not the only state in which TPM groups sponsored alternative Republican candidates for various offices and won. In fact, 32 % of all TP candidates who ran for a federal office won in 2010.<sup>20</sup>

### *Appropriation*

Generally speaking, social movement organizations have fewer resources available to them than institutional actors. While social movement organizations can use ICT to level the playing field a bit in terms of the financial and human resources mobilized, political parties—not activist groups—have representatives at the policy table. This fact is not lost on groups like MoveOn and the TPM, which seek to appropriate party structures as a means to achieve their goals. Supporters of MoveOn and TPM groups believe that attempts to establish a third party will fail and, instead, seek to wrest control of the existing parties from political insiders. This goal is very prominent in the Florida TPM groups, where supporters generally view career politicians unfavorably and regard a goal of the TPM as appropriating the Republican Party for their own purposes. Logan, a 68-year-old retired salesman, noted that it was time to “take over” the Republican Party. He argued that the only way to keep the party structure honest was to make sure that politicians did not get “too comfortable” in office. Logan quipped, “Politicians are like milk. They should come with an expiration date.” Diane, a 56-year-old sales representative agreed, adding that the ultimate goal of the movement is “...to replace many of the long term candidates in Washington, D.C. with more conservatives.” A local leader, however, summarized it best in a post on the group’s website:

All third party attempts fail, be it Whig or Tea Party. We can look at numerous examples in history where a third party has skewed the vote and allowed someone to win who shouldn’t have. Real grassroots political change happens when people join one of the major parties and influence it en mass. Why re-invent the wheel when there is a vehicle just waiting to be used?

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<sup>20</sup> While some see this rate as low and, consequently, write off the TPM, we argue that these numbers reflect the variability of the movement’s strength. In Florida, for example, the movement is fairly large and well organized in spite of its decentralization. This undoubtedly contributed to some of the electoral successes.

One way for a social movement organization to appropriate a political party for its own purposes is to challenge and, then, change its leadership. This is something that both MoveOn and TPM groups have done with some success. MoveOn, for instance, mobilized its supporters after the loss of the presidential election to let the Democratic Party know that the group had no intention of going quietly into the night. MoveOn leaders argued that although Kerry did not win the election, the organization was very successful at engaging progressives in the political process. More importantly, MoveOn noted that political organizing needed to move beyond pleas for campaign cash and “the boom-bust cycle of campaigns—where you build up all this grass-roots energy and then it dissipates” (Faler 2004). One way to do this, the group argued, was for the Democrats to get new leadership. Eli Pariser, the executive director of MoveOn at the time, noted that “There’s a vacuum at the heart of the [Democratic] party and it’s time to fill it with new energy, with people who have passion and who don’t come from inside the Beltway” (Balz 2004b). MoveOn leaders specifically argued that burgeoning grassroots organizations like itself gave more than \$300 million to the Kerry campaign and the Democratic National Committee, proving that the party did not need corporate cash—but needed its increasingly disaffected base—to compete with Republicans (Balz 2004b). Pariser and another MoveOn leader, Justin Ruben, publicly attacked the current DNC chairman, Terry Mc Auliffe, for his:

Watered down, play-it-safe politics that kept the money flowing but alienated traditional Democrats as well as reform-minded independents in search of vision and integrity.... It’s absolutely time for a change at the DNC. The party run by D.C. insiders with losing track records, who haven’t been able to put forward a compelling vision for where the Democratic Party needs to go, isn’t gonna cut it anymore (Horriagan 2004).

Pariser added that progressives were posed to wrest control of the Democratic Party from career politicians, “Now it’s our party: we bought it, we own it, and we’re going to take it back” (Hananel 2004).

MoveOn’s message of progressive political empowerment and structural change was championed by former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004. Dean insisted that Democrats take MoveOn seriously and sow the seeds of a grassroots revival. “We’re going to build this message... from the ground up.... We have a better message, and our principles and moral values are closer to the American people than Republicans are, and now we’ve got to go out and run on that” (Balz 2004a). Dean won the chairmanship handily. While there were other dynamics at play in this election (e.g., the other serious contender, Tim Roemer, was pro-life and Dean publicly said that he would not run for president in 2008 if elected DNC chairman), MoveOn’s presence mattered as well. With its growing membership and ability to mobilize people and money on a day’s notice, MoveOn’s dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party simply could not be ignored.

Arguably, the TPM has done a better job of changing the Republican Party because it has taken over local units of the state party as well as affected leadership decisions at the top. In states like Florida and Virginia, TPM groups successfully

won chairmanships of the state Republican Party. Additionally, the Florida state leadership, who won using the smaller government mantra, made a point of meeting with organizational leaders and joining the TPM caucus. For example, Governor Rick Scott, who rode the small government mantra into office, broke tradition and unveiled his first state budget at a Tea Party luncheon in rural Eustis, Florida rather than the state capital.<sup>21</sup> According to reports, Scott began his invitation only speech by saying, “Today we present Florida’s first job budget, it is designed to reduce state spending, to lower taxes and hold your state government accountable. This is the budget you asked for.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Scott agreed to join the Tea Party Caucus and made a “surprise” appearance at a TPM rally on the opening day of the legislative session (March 8, 2011). In his short speech, Scott thanked the TPM for their support and urged activists to keep the pressure on politicians and the Republican Party.

Showing up at things like this, you are changing the country because people are listening to what you’re doing whether it’s in Wisconsin or New Jersey or Ohio or Texas, you’re changing the country. So thank you from the bottom of my heart because your showing up is making sure everybody in Tallahassee does what you elected them to do. Less government, right? [the crowd applauds and yells “yeah!”] Lower taxes? [the crowd applauds and yells “yeah!”] No high speed rail? [the crowd applauds and yells “yeah!”] It’s your money. We’re going to follow the Constitution. We’re going to watch spending like a hawk, it’s your money!... Let’s get to work!

Florida Senate President, Mike Haridopolis, also spoke at the rally and discussed how he wanted to make Florida politicians subject to the same cuts (in benefits and salary) that were being proposed for other state workers. There have been leadership changes at the national level as well. Reince Priebus, a vocal Tea Party supporter who also had a lot of grassroots support, wrested control of the Republican National Committee chairmanship from an admittedly beleaguered, but far more moderate, Michael Steele.

Of course, it is possible that these appropriations of the party by social movement groups are temporary and, ultimately, the parties will find ways to co-opt MoveOn and the TPM, respectively. To some extent, this seems to have happened to the Florida TPM. In the follow-up interviews, half of our respondents, all of whom identified as Libertarians, noted that they no longer supported the TPM. All of these respondents argued that the TPM had embraced social issues like abortion, immigration, and gay marriage, and consequently become an “arm of the Republican Party.” Adrian, for example, explained:

As I predicted in the previous interview, there was a struggle between the Libertarians and the social conservatives. And, it was pretty evident that the Tea Party Movement was co-opted into the Republican Party and became an arm of it. This goes back to that CATO study I was telling you about. I was watching the results and I was like, “Wow! That’s

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<sup>21</sup> He repeated this move the following year as well, unveiling his budget to Tea Party Movement supporters in South Florida.

<sup>22</sup> Posted by reporter Irene Christou on the Phoenix Network. Available at <http://phoenixnetwork.us/2011/02/08/>.

exactly what happened!” [The study] basically said that Libertarians have no loyalties. They don’t get along with others very well and when...when the social conservatives latched on to the Tea Party Movement, the Libertarians basically took their balls and they went home.... I took my ball and went home. I was not making this about social issues—we [Libertarians] had one issue and that was basically spending.

Nancy echoed this criticism:

Well, I feel like what is coming out of the Tea Party movement now isn’t consistent with my personal philosophy, which is more Libertarian. I think that as mainstream politicians co-opted [the movement] it became xenophobic and just...the only thing that it really has in common I think with my political viewpoint at this point is its anti-tax stand—and even that has gone extreme and doesn’t make sense.

The perceived co-optation of the TPM, however, should not be understood as a result of the Republican Party’s political skill. As we outline elsewhere, the decentralized structure of the movement and changes in the political environment (such as the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street Movement) forced the TPM to constrict its ideological boundaries and align the movement with a Republican-friendly, socially conservative agenda (Rohlinger and Klein Forthcoming-a; Rohlinger and Klein Forthcoming-b). The Florida TPM, in short, was easy to co-opt.<sup>23</sup>

## *Synergy*

Social movement organizations and political parties may also decide to cooperate and, at times, develop synergy. Here, we purposefully use the term synergy, rather than cooperation, in order to more fully capture how ICT may alter the relationship between social movement groups and political parties, particularly in the contemporary political and communications environment. Synergy, which generally refers to the dynamic where two or more agents work together and successfully produce a result that would be impossible for a single, separately operated agent to achieve on its own, can be critical during election cycles. Thus, unlike cooperation, synergy is not the result of explicit coordination but a product of a mutually beneficial relationship. Synergy is typically associated with corporations that through either vertical or horizontal integration derive new opportunities to promote a product and grow profits. However, this dynamic may be on the rise in the political world as well. Social movement organizations use ICT to mobilize money and with these funds launch campaigns that are designed, among other things, to affect election outcomes. These campaigns are not coordinated with political

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<sup>23</sup> This conclusion is based on our analysis of the Florida TPM. We are not generalizing about the entire movement, nor are we arguing that all of our Republican-minded respondents agree with this interpretation. Respondents working with the Republican Party through TPM committees regard their dealings as mutually beneficial “partnerships.”

parties because there is not always agreement on targets and strategy and because activist groups do not want to be subject to FEC campaign finance restrictions. Synergy, however, still can occur because social movement organizations will take up issues or launch campaigns that political parties will not and still influence elections.

This kind of synergy was visible between MoveOn and the Democratic Party in 2004. First, MoveOn sponsored ads that strategists for the Kerry campaign would not even consider. The Kerry campaign wanted to appeal to centrist swing voters “with a moderate message of strength and optimism while depicting Bush as an extremist renegade, out of step with the mainstream conservatism of the Republican base” (Lippert 2004). As a result, the campaign passed on attack ads and did so without even looking at them so that a 527 group would be free to run them; something that MoveOn did. Additionally, MoveOn sponsored an online advertising competition called “Bush in Thirty Seconds.” The competition was open to all MoveOn supporters and the prize for the winning advertisement was a massive national audience for the contestant’s work. MoveOn would pay to air the spot during the SuperBowl. The winning ad, titled “Child’s Play,” which showed children toiling at menial jobs to pay off the Bush deficit, became an Internet favorite when CBS refused to broadcast it during the Super Bowl (Gourevitch 2004). In short, while the use of creative advertising to affect election outcomes is not new (Jamieson 1996), the ability of social movement organizations to cheaply craft and effectively circulate ads throughout a culture is. Social movement organizations can draw on the talents of their supporters and potentially sink more money into circulating attack ads as a result. Likewise, the network of relationships that dominate the media industry insure that spots rejected by mainstream media outlets are circulated on the nightly news, spread virally via e-mail, and leveraged across the spectrum of sympathetic outlets.

Synergy, however, is not limited to advertising alone. Social movement organizations can also fill critical gaps left unfilled by political parties during election cycles. For example, during the 2004 election cycle, MoveOn used ICT to raise money and, then, launched a \$5 million dollar “Leave No Voter Behind” campaign. The goal of the campaign was to turn out thousands of additional progressives from targeted neighborhoods in battleground states like Florida. MoveOn’s efforts in this regard were critical in places like Tallahassee, where individuals interested in getting involved found the local Democratic Party structure in disrepair. A surprising number of respondents mentioned that they had contacted the Democratic Party in order to volunteer and, after not getting a response, got involved in MoveOn instead. MoveOn, in other words, provided a progressive grassroots structure that the Democratic Party was unable to supply. Marcia, who had contacted the Democratic Party directly and did not get a response, reflected:

I don’t think they [the Democratic Party] have their act together.... I wish MoveOn would take over for them, they’re so organized. With MoveOn, we called for eastern Pennsylvania and Virginia and Ohio, Missouri, New Jersey. Every single one, it turns out, that the democrats won. So, I felt really positive about it...I have contacted ... the Democratic

Party and never gotten much of a response from them about volunteering and helping. So, to me, MoveOn has been very proactive and well organized.

Liam, a 37-year-old communications director, agreed noting that MoveOn really made it easy for people to get involved in the get out the vote efforts.

[T]here was a respectable, sizable group of people that got involved going door to door, participating in the election that would not have had that avenue to participate in. Either they're not involved in a union or they are put off by the politics of their local democratic executive committee or what have you. So MoveOn was there. Now a lot of those people that were out there on the street wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for MoveOn.

The Democratic Party bridged this gap by the 2008 presidential election. In fact, the Obama campaign dedicated \$9.1 million to Florida alone in its efforts to mobilize progressive voters (Kenski et al. 2010). Marcia, who is now highly involved in the Democratic Party, explained that the party had finally caught up:

MoveOn did what the Democratic Party was supposed to do, and now the Democratic Party seems to be kicking in, and doing more of the MoveOn type of stuff...[The Democratic Party is now] informing you about things. I'm getting e-mails about things..., do you want this or that..., just questions about things. And of course asking for money but, talking about various races and what the issues are...I just didn't get that from the Democratic Party before. So MoveOn has served a wonderful purpose.

## Next Step?

ICT makes it easier for social movement organizations to frame political debates, mobilize consensus and support, and affect party politics in the United States. Savvy activist groups can leverage the affordances of ICT in ways that allow citizens to easily mobilize around multiple issues and give supporters voice on an organization's priorities and campaigns. With the influx of money by both big donors and small and a media system bursting with opportunity, contemporary social movement groups like MoveOn and TPM offer an alternative to the traditional party system—as well as a means through which to change it, albeit sometimes temporarily. In short, savvy movement groups can use ICT in ways that make them difficult to ignore.

This research, however, is a first attempt to empirically understand how ICT can be used to affect elections and political parties more generally. Scholars need to assess whether various organizational forms can affect parties and elections differently. Our analysis suggests, for instance, that an important strength of localized movement groups is that they can change politics and policy from the bottom up. This kind of change could have important implications over the long haul because localized vetting processes could cultivate new party leaders at the state and national level. We are not suggesting that change from the top-down is unimportant. Social movement organizations that can affect the field of candidates can alter how a political party views its constituents and role in the political system for

the foreseeable future. The point here is that different kinds of social movement organizations have different advantages and that these advantages (and what groups do with them) may have long-term implications for the party. Likewise, social scientists will need to parse out how money affects the course of social movement organization, its goals, and its role in elections. MoveOn and TPM groups benefit at various points in time from an influx of financial and other resources, which may influence the agenda in more or less subtle ways.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, scholars will want to pay attention to party politics and the role of enterprising political neophytes who ride the wave of political dissent into office on the organizations that helped them get elected (although sometimes inadvertently). The role of money may indeed shape a social movement organization in the short and long term, and, perhaps, reveal its influence in these virtual power plays.

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<sup>24</sup> To my knowledge, the local TPM groups are not funded by national groups such as the Tea Party Patriots or FreedomWorks. However, outside groups occasionally help with mobilization efforts. For example, one of the rallies during the opening week of the legislature was sponsored by Americans for Prosperity, which brought TPM supporters from other parts of the state to the capital. In fact, according to our video documentation of the event, more than 90 % of the attendees were bused from other parts of Florida for the event (the FL representative from the group asked attendees to raise their hand if they had taken the free bus to Tallahassee).



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