

Obama Camp Relying Heavily on Ground Effort

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Sunday, October 12, 2008; Page A04

In 2004, Democrats watched as any chance of defeating [President Bush](#) slipped away in a wave of Republican turnout that exceeded even the goal-beating numbers that their own side had produced.

Four years later, [Sen. Barack Obama](#)'s campaign intends to avoid a repeat by building an organization modeled in part on what [Karl Rove](#) used to engineer Bush's victory: a heavy reliance on local volunteers to pitch to their own neighbors, micro-targeting techniques to identify persuadable independents and Republicans using consumer data, and a focus on exurban and rural areas.

But in scale and ambition, the Obama organization goes beyond even what Rove built. The campaign has used its record-breaking fundraising to open more than 700 offices in more than a dozen battleground states, pay several thousand organizers and manage tens of thousands more volunteers.

In many states, the Democratic candidate is hewing more closely to the Rove organizational model than is rival [Sen. John McCain](#), whose emphasis on ground operations has been less intensive and clinical than that of his Republican predecessor.

"They've invested in a civic infrastructure on a scale that has never happened," said Marshall Ganz, a labor organizer who worked with [César Chávez](#)'s farmworker movement and has led training sessions for Obama staff members and volunteers. "It's been an investment in the development of thousands of young people equipped with the skills and leadership ability to mobilize people and in the development of leadership at the local level. It's profound."

But sheer size and scope guarantee little, especially for an operation that is untested on this scale, and the next three weeks will determine whether Obama's approach will become a model for future campaigns or yet another example of how not to do it.

The campaign faces no shortage of challenges. It must meet its ambitious goals for voter contacts -- with repeat visits to undecided and first-time voters -- while being careful not to turn people off by being overly persistent. Though it relies on homegrown backers, it must still incorporate thousands of out-of-state volunteers. And above all, its foot soldiers must make the case for a candidate who remains an unknown to many would-be supporters.

Jane Goodman, a city council member in South Euclid, Ohio, who is leading the Obama effort in her ward, said she has never seen such a grass-roots push in her Cleveland suburb of Jewish voters, Russian immigrants and African Americans. But she has also never seen such a need for it.

"We haven't had much Democratic outreach here before because it was assumed the Democrats are going to win," she said. "This year, we can't make that assumption."

For all the talk of the Obama campaign's use of the Internet and other technology, the success of its organization over the final weeks will depend in large part on individual efforts on the ground. Unlike past campaigns, those have been structured around "neighborhood team leaders." The

leaders control eight to 12 precincts around their own neighborhoods, buttressed by four "coordinators" who help oversee team members, usually numbering in the dozens.

The neighborhood leaders typically have been coaxed into action by paid field organizers, attended at least one training session, and spent the past few months registering voters and recruiting volunteers for this month's turnout push. All know exactly how many votes their territory must produce.

It is a big responsibility to place on volunteers who, in many cases, have not worked on other campaigns. But it is a model that was built through trial and error in the primaries and suits the unique challenges that face the Obama campaign, said Steve Rosenthal, former political director for the [AFL-CIO](#).

For this election, neighbor-to-neighbor outreach "is more important than in any recent one, because of, without mincing words, the race factor," he said. "Having white validators, people working these neighborhoods who live in those neighborhoods and are of those neighborhoods, who are saying, 'Get out and vote for this guy,' is really important."

After several decades in which campaigns spent mostly on television ads and direct mail, recognition in the power of person-to-person contact has increased over the past dozen years. Rove seized on this notion after the 2000 election, when strong Democratic turnout led by organized labor racked up a popular-vote edge for Democrat [Al Gore](#). For Bush's reelection, he oversaw the construction of a network in key states such as Ohio made of evangelical Christians, gun-rights supporters and other activists, with a clear hierarchy and individual goals for recruitment and contacts.

By contrast, Democrats in 2004 relied on a hybrid turnout effort -- volunteers and staff mustered by [Sen. John F. Kerry](#)'s campaign, plus paid canvassers and union members overseen by an outside group led by Rosenthal that was able to accept larger donations. The group helped Kerry win several key states, but had downsides: Its canvassers could not advocate explicitly for Kerry, and it could not coordinate efforts with the campaign.

There were other lessons from 2004: Kerry won the Iowa caucus after building an organization that was stronger than that of former Vermont governor [Howard Dean](#), who relied on mostly younger supporters from out of state.

"The basic concept is not a new or revolutionary one," said Jon Carson, Obama's national field director. "Campaigns have always wanted to have a grass-roots, volunteer-driven effort. The two pieces that came together for us . . . was the sheer volume of the people who wanted to get involved and the technology making it easier than ever before to find us. It wasn't that Democrats didn't get it" in past campaigns. "It was that . . . they weren't able to make it work on this scale."

Though the Obama campaign is modeled after previous incarnations, it was shaped and reshaped during the long primary season, as the team adopted what worked and shed what didn't. The operation took months building a network of support in Iowa that paid off with a crucial caucus win, and its belief in that sort of organization hardened when it lost a week later in New Hampshire, where it had done less organizing.

A breakthrough came with the turn to the neighborhood teams. Ganz had been testing the model for the [Sierra Club](#), and the campaign tried it in South Carolina, to great success, as team members held one another accountable and boosted morale.

The team structure also proved effective in California as a way to absorb the waves of volunteer interest building there. When it came time to organize for the general election, the Obama campaign applied the structure everywhere.

In training sessions for volunteers and organizers, Ganz offered instruction on how to recruit volunteers and persuade voters. The gist was that volunteers needed to motivate others by speaking about their experiences and reasons for supporting Obama -- their "story" -- instead of just parroting the candidate's biography or message.

As Ganz sees it, this is a "values-based" approach like that of the conservative movement, rallying around core beliefs instead of individual issues. "Democrats lost the language of moral commitment and became very wonky and policy-oriented. One of Obama's big breakthroughs was to bring values back into it -- Democratic values," Ganz said. "The Republicans have been eating our lunch on this for a long time."

Volunteers are encouraged to take more initiative than those in Rove's network to come up with their own ways to recruit others and approach voters. But they are hardly freelancers. Field organizers in their areas and those higher up the ranks closely track volunteers' contact with voters, which is entered into a central database, to make sure they are meeting weekly goals. Volunteers receive instructions on which basic message of the month to deliver, beyond the sharing of personal motivations, and on how to respond to questions about some of the false rumors about Obama's religion and patriotism.

"You have to have really good message discipline so that the whole organization down to the local level is echoing the central message, which for us now is all about the economy," said Jeff Blodgett, the Minnesota director. "It's decentralized, but that there's a control point around the message and around data and accountability."

Technology plays a major role. Supporters receive campaign updates via text message and e-mail, and can easily sign up online for Obama groups or any of the dozens of daily volunteer events on each state's campaign Web site. With the organization's "Neighbor to Neighbor" computer program, volunteers can pull up an online list of neighbors to call from home, a particularly useful option for rural supporters.

But the campaign's technological prowess has obscured somewhat the old-fashioned element that lies at its heart: the power of volunteers working together. That is one reason the organization invested so heavily in field offices -- spending \$4.3 million on rent and utilities through August -- so backers could have a real entry to the campaign. Some volunteers say it's because of the way that television and the Internet have fragmented daily life that they have taken such satisfaction in the campaign, and gotten such good results from their face-to-face outreach.

Candice Reed sees it in her section of [Jefferson County](#), a former [GOP](#) stronghold outside Denver. "Just to say, 'I'm your neighbor, and I live down the hill on Bucks Hill Lane,' right away they have to be nicer to you," said Reed, 37, who supported [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) in the Democratic primary but decided to volunteer for Obama after a women's event at the party's national convention. "It's easier when you look someone in the eye, when you get in front of people, and they see you're smiling and are super-excited and are spending Sunday afternoon for the campaign with a friend with you."

The McCain campaign said that in many states, it has exceeded the number of calls the Bush campaign made in 2004, and that it saw a surge in volunteers after Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) became the Republican vice presidential pick. But with many fewer offices, it has a lower profile, and experienced workers say the activity is more muted than in other campaigns. Mary Buestrin, who was the Bush campaign's statewide volunteer coordinator in Wisconsin in 2004, said the McCain campaign has adopted a less formal volunteer structure.

"We're not really doing all those kind of things this time around," she said. "We're all just . . . chipping in where we can."

[Yale](#) political scientist Donald Green, who co-wrote the book "Get Out the Vote," says research has shown that face-to-face talk increases a voter's chances of turning out by 7 to 10 percent. If a campaign talks to a third of its hoped-for voters, it can expect to see a 3 percent boost at the polls, he said.

In many states, a final statewide training session was held last week for Obama field organizers, to be followed by get-out-the-vote training for team leaders. In Missouri, about 400 neighborhood teams are set up around the state, each with a goal of getting about 4,000 votes in their area. The hope, said Missouri director Buffy Wicks, is as get-out-the-vote efforts intensify in the campaign's final weeks, the teams will have established themselves enough to deliver the backing that Obama will need.

"If those relationships are strong and those conversations are strong, then we'll weather any negative campaigning that's happening," she said. "That's why this part of the campaign is our strength."

At a training session in Ohio that Obama attended Friday night, the candidate wondered just how much of a strength all the campaign's efforts would prove to be.

"We've been designing and we've been engineering and we've been at the drawing board and we've been tinkering," he said. "Now it's time to just take it for a drive. Let's see how this baby runs."