Forging Unity Across the Class Divide:
The Techniques of Congregation-Based Community Organizing

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Seminar Abstract:

Many know that a significant influence on Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama was his experience as a community organizer in Chicago. Fewer know that he has applied its ideas to training campaign activists in “Camp Obama” and in building effective field operations on the ground. Obama was trained in congregation-based community organizing. While this approach teaches instrumentally effective skills, Heidi Swarts argues that its uniqueness lies in an innovative cultural strategy that uses distinctive ideas and practices to build broad-based organizations that cross racial, class, and religious divides. In this talk, she analyzes the practices that help cross the class divide. Swarts argues that these ideas and practices are not narrowly religious and are adaptable by secular social movement organizations.
Religion and Progressive Politics:

Church-Based Community Organizing's Innovative Cultural Strategy

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People just expected us to come and pray . . . they forgot: Social change happened because of churches. Prohibition. Child labor laws. Things happened because the churches said so.

Church member and activist, St. Louis

Church-based community organizing (CBCO) is a growing form of civic engagement. In this chapter I show that CBCO has contributed a unique mobilizing culture to the repertoire of American social movements. While this culture is made up of sincerely held beliefs, it is also a strategy. I use the term “cultural strategy” in two ways. The original choice by the Industrial Areas Foundation to organize a broad-based social change movement through churches was a cultural as well as structural strategy; that is, besides pursuing the sheer structural availability of resources and social networks, CBCOs sought their powerful cultural resources. These include its authority and legitimacy; its role in family life; its history as the primary domain of ritual, symbol, meanings, and values; and the Jewish and Christian prophetic traditions of social criticism. Also, it is a “cultural” strategy more narrowly understood as a set of specific ideas and practices. This distinct mobilizing culture uniquely combines religious ideas with practical organizing principles in a way that brings together cultural oppositions from the two ideal types of American social movements (see chapter 1). CBCO combines the expressive and instrumental, virtue and the strategic pursuit of power, inclusive democratic process and efficiency and practicality. Because church culture lends itself to Ideal Type A, organizers usually must work harder to introduce the stern realpolitik of Type B to members (see table in appendix). This chapter analyzes how CBCO ideas and practices manage these oppositions to produce a mobilizing culture that can attract the broadest possible constituency.

An Introduction To Church-Based Community Organizing

CBCO is known variously as “congregation-based,” “faith-based,” “broad-based,” and “institution-based” organizing. There are perhaps 200 church-based community organizations (CBCOs), each of which may include as few as ten or fifteen congregations, or as many as 80-100. Some have broadened their base by adding labor unions, community development corporations, and other groups, but their staple still is religious congregations. CBCO traces its roots to the work of Saul Alinsky, who began organizing in Chicago in the 1930s. He founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940 to support his organizing. After he died in 1972 and senior staff member
Ed Chambers took over as director, the IAF thoroughly redeveloped and systematized their organizing practices. In 1973 IAF organizer Ernesto Cortes first developed the current CBCO method in San Antonio, Texas. The organization as it was reorganized after 1972 is sometimes called the “new IAF.” Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) was founded in 1974, and is probably still the best-known CBCO.\(^1\) COPS battled the city over regular flooding in the Hispanic barrio, and won a major city bond issue and massive infrastructure improvements. These campaigns eventually brought together middle-class whites and poor Hispanics. COPS won over a billion dollars in improvements, and played a decisive role in winning district elections which, combined with the city’s 53% Hispanic population, helped shift the balance of power in San Antonio.\(^2\) The success of COPS spawned the first CBCO statewide federation, the eleven-organization Texas Interfaith Network. Texas Interfaith covers almost all populated areas of Texas and has won numerous achievements and become a force in Texas state politics. The IAF has six regional clusters of a total of 56 U.S. CBCO groups, and several international groups.

By the mid 1980s, thousands of community organizations had sprung up in response to the loss of urban resources from industrial abandonment, middle-class flight, and federal funding cuts. However, organizing neighborhoods house by house was labor-intensive and usually did not produce the mass base that organizing through institutions could. One of the few institutions remaining in the inner city was the church. Organizing entrepreneurs began to adopt the church-based structure and the IAF’s distinctive ideology and practices. The four largest national CBCO organizations, known as “networks” because they consist of separate but allied organizations, are the IAF; the PICO National Network (People Improving Communities Through Organizing, formerly named Pacific Institute for Community Organization); the Gamaliel Foundation; and DART (Direct Action Research and Training).\(^3\) PICO operates a nineteen-federation California Project, similar to the IAF’s Texas Interfaith, and another state consortium of locals, Louisiana Interfaith Together (LIFT). Gamaliel emphasizes metropolitan region-wide organizing, with the greatest concentration of locals in the midwest and east. DART, concentrated in Florida, has twenty-three affiliates. All the CBCO networks recruit and train community organizers, assist clergy and other leaders in building new

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1 For the fullest treatment of the Texas IAF, see Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*.  
2 Reitzes and Reitzes, *The Alinsky Legacy*, 149; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*.  
3 Jesuit priest John Baumann, who began organizing in Oakland, California in 1971, founded the PICO National Network of organizations, which adopted the CBCO model during the 1980s. Greg Galluzzo, a former Jesuit priest, reorganized the Gamaliel Foundation as church-based. DART was founded in 1982 and is the smallest network, with about 20 organizations.

Swarts, *Invisible Actors*, Chapter 3
organizations, supervise organizing staff, and conduct national training sessions for members of their affiliates.

CBCO attempts to build a majority, cross-class constituency from a population fragmented by race and class. Scholars have documented a decline in ongoing face-to-face civic engagement. In its place more episodic volunteering has grown, along with small self-help groups, public interest groups without an active membership base, and internet-based advocacy.\(^4\) In an altered civic universe, American religion looms large as a source of civic engagement. Few other institutions feature powerful unifying symbols that reach such a wide cross-section of Americans. Religious participation is strongly correlated with other civic engagement. Churches are also the most stable American voluntary associations.\(^5\) They have access to the private sphere of emotion, vulnerability, and family ties, and can link them to the public sphere of political action. For better or worse, no domain has such a widespread and socially legitimate claim to individuals' private and emotional lives as religion does. Rites of passage—birth, adulthood, marriage, death—are celebrated in church, temple, and mosque; entire families participate; people light candles for their hopes, griefs and joys, and turn to clergy with their most personal problems. And yet, problematic as it sometimes is in a liberal polity, religion has a public face as well.

In this chapter I analyze how CBCO’s cultural strategy addresses tensions in American political culture that have foiled other attempts to build unified constituencies for reform. I argue that its mobilizing culture provisionally resolves, for its own purposes, five tensions in American political culture:

1) **Bridging class and racial fault lines.** CBCO brings together racially diverse middle class, working-class, and low-income Americans, an elusive goal for many movements.

2) **Combining participatory democracy and efficiency.** CBCO encourages the democratic deliberation emphasized in movement Ideal Type A, but combines it with the instrumental effectiveness valued in Ideal Type B.

3) **Bridging the liberal-conservative fault line.** CBCO can attract church members with somewhat divergent political views, including moderates, some moderate conservatives, and social

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conservatives (the latter usually from conservative African-American denominations). They accomplish this partly with broad universal appeals, but more specifically by combining liberal demands for redistributive policies with an emphasis on personal accountability that is usually associated with conservatives.

4) **Bridging altruism and self-interest.** CBCO motivates participants by a counterintuitive but successful melding of two familiar ideas: “self-interest” and the religious “values” of human needs and community well-being.

5) **Integrating private life with public action.** The church has always had one face turned toward the private sphere and the other toward the public sphere. American Christianity, especially Protestantism, is historically the space of confessional narratives of sin and redemption, or pain and deliverance—from alcoholism, poverty, disease, or failure. Individual confessional narratives, whether couched in religious or secular terms, are ubiquitous in popular culture, but they are depoliticized.\(^6\) Church-based organizing, however, can draw on the emotional power of confession and conversion, but it is conversion from isolation and powerlessness to empowered community action.

I argue that part of the reason reformers have had difficulty building unified constituencies, in the face of longstanding barriers that divide Americans, is inadequate cultural strategies to unify them.\(^7\) Religion by itself it is not responsible for the cultural innovations of CBCO. Only combined with a specific set of ideas about organizing, power, and politics do shared religious ideas produce CBCO’s innovative cultural strategy.

**Bridging Class And Racial Fault Lines**

The first tension I examine is a familiar one: the difficulty working Americans have had in transcending barriers of race, ethnicity, and religion to win class-based redistributive reforms. In the past, region (especially north-south), national origin (WASP vs. Irish and southern and eastern European) and religion (Protestant nativist vs. Catholic immigrant) were more divisive. Since the 1960s, progressives have often divided between those who insisted that racial, gender, or sexual

\(^6\) For example, see Rapping, Culture of Recovery, Kaminer, *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional.*

identities must not be subordinated to class and those who argued that economic redistribution should take precedence.  

The divide between white middle-class and working-class activism is at least as stark. The gradual decline of local party organizations and civic associations reduced opportunities for citizens to come together across class lines. In the sixties, the Democratic New Deal coalition of urban white ethnics, blacks, middle-class liberals, and others "ran headlong into a conflict of interest between blacks and middle-income [blue-collar] whites." Urban working-class whites felt their property values were threatened by white flight and rapid racial turnover, their neighborhood schools by busing, and their economic interests by affirmative action based on race but not class. Meanwhile, the middle-class liberals who advocated these policies remained unaffected by them. This class-based cleavage among white Democrats was exploited and widened by conservative political entrepreneurs in Nixon’s 1968 campaign and subsequent Republican presidential campaigns, and reshaped American electoral coalitions. Republican political strategy has encouraged white workers to view themselves as victimized by minorities and “welfare cheats,” and have used differences in middle- and working-class white cultures to attack liberals as affluent cultural elitists, framing elites as cultural rather than economic. 

Not only do working-class Americans not participate much in cross-class movements, they often do not participate at all. This is partly due to the decline in working-class mobilizers such as local party organizations, unionized workplaces, and urban machines. These have been replaced as sources of political clout by money, experts, and media. Heightened voter mobilization in the 2004 election, the union renewal movement, including the breakaway Change to Win coalition, and

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8 For example, see Gitlin, Twilight of Common Dreams. A debate of this type has simmered within the small world of community organizing entrepreneurs. On one side are those who argue for traditional community organizing that emphasizes shared class position (though not in that language) and bread-and-butter issues, and avoids issues that divide by race, gender, or sexuality. Mike Miller expresses the traditionalist view in Miller, “A Critical Review.” On the other side are those who insist that class-based community organizing must make room for race, gender, and sexuality issues. Representative statements of this view include Delgado, “Beyond the Politics of Place,” and Fellner and Colpatura, “Square Pegs Find Their Groove.”

9 Dionne, Why Americans Hate Politics.

10 For analyses and examples of working-class cultures and ideology, see Croteau, Politics and the Class Divide; Gamson, Talking Politics, Halle, America’s Working Man; Lamont, Dignity of Working Men; Rose, Coalitions Across the Class Divide; Lichterman, Search for Political Community; Eliasoph, Avoiding Politics. On attitudes toward cultural elites and the middle class, see Dionne, Why Americans Hate Politics; Croteau, Politics and the Class Divide, 78; Frank, What's the Matter with Kansas? On American electoral coalitions, see, for example, Dionne, Why Americans Hate Politics; Ginsberg and Shefter, Politics by Other Means; Katznelson, City Trenches; Lipset and Marks, It Didn’t Happen Here.

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newly-awakened immigrant mobilization are recent exceptions to the trend, although it is too soon to judge their potential. Yet, defined as those without a college degree, working-class Americans are in the majority. Even with the decline of traditional manufacturing, almost nineteen million white men are employed in manual blue-collar jobs in the U.S. today, compared with sixteen million in managerial and professional jobs and nine million in lower-level white collar jobs. Not only are they a principal constituency that community organizers seek to empower, they are essential for a broad-based majoritarian movement.

Differences In Class Cultures

Class is more complex and confusing for Americans than race or gender, and American activists are comparatively less aware of how it affects social movement organizational cultures. Different experiences of education and work fundamentally influence class-related attitudes and values. For example, working class jobs are characterized by “physical labor, a relatively dangerous or dirty environment, boring or routine tasks, close supervision and limited opportunities for upward mobility.” There is usually little autonomy or recognition. Therefore, instead of goals and values of individual achievement and career ambition, central working-class values to be work, family, friends, and character. (Some argue that in 2000, George W. Bush’s self-presentation as “common man” using simple statements that appealed to these values won the votes of white male working-class voters, whereas Gore’s argument style based on data and expertise appealed to middle-class sources of authority.) Scholars of working-class activism characterize it as more rooted to concrete local communities—their neighborhoods, the black community, and the church—than more mobile, individualistic, middle-class activists. In contrast, middle-class people are typically college graduates, who are on average less likely to be religious than other Americans. Higher education teaches

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11 On the decline of leaders and organizations to mobilize working-class Americans, see Rosenstone and Hansen, Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy, and Ginsberg and Shefter, Politics by Other Means; The coalition of unions that broke with the AFL-CIO in 2005 included the Teamsters, Laborers Union (LIUNA), UNITE-HERE, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, and United Farm Workers. The new federation, which represents 5.4 million workers, pledged to devote 75% of its resources to organizing. See “New Labor Federation Pledges to Carry Out Most Aggressive Organizing Campaign in 50 Years,” press release.

12 On the working-class majority, see Teixeira and Rogers, America’s Forgotten and Zweig, Working-Class Majority.

13 Levison, Who Lost the Working Class?”:26, citing Halle, America’s Working Man.

14 Lamont, Dignity of Working Men; Willis, "Masculinity and Factory Labor." On the appeal of Bush versus Gore, see Levison, “Who Lost the Working Class?”

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people to place a premium on autonomy, independent thinking, and self-expression, which their jobs require. Relative to working-class people, they have a greater sense of efficacy and personal mobility. The self-directed attitude that higher education imparts is evident in the plans of one PACT leader, a teacher, to interview members of her church:

   HS: What is a "quality one-to-one" versus another kind of one-to-one?
   Rosemary: Where I really thought about how I'm going to structure exactly what I want to try to get out of it. I want to definitely hear concerns, okay? I don't want to be the one doing most of the talking. I definitely want to give the credential\(^\text{15}\) and do it well. I definitely want to be knowledgeable enough to update them by answering their questions, because if I can't answer those things, what is going to encourage them to come back?

Different class-related experiences of individual efficacy towards politics and efforts at social change. Blue-collar Americans may feel an overwhelming lack of efficacy in politics, partly because they view technical expertise or skills they lack, such as public speaking, as prerequisites to political involvement. Reinforcing this sense of resignation is a deep alienation from politics, the view that politicians are both incompetent and corrupt. Labor unions often fare no better: many see them as remote bureaucracies little different from business. Conservatives have helped promote this view and the notion that "big government" is overwhelmingly hostile to citizens' interests and primarily constrains individual rights. Experiences of impenetrable bureaucracies, ever more incompetent partly due to slashed resources, reinforce this view of government\(^\text{16}\).

Members of the peace, environmental, feminist, and other liberal movements are predominantly college-educated and middle-class. Movement activists are often mystified by their inability to recruit working-class participants\(^\text{17}\). They sometimes assume that working-class

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\(^\text{15}\) The "credential" for PACT and other PICO organizations means a short prepared statement that identifies the organization, its membership base of churches, number of families in those churches, and relation to the larger PICO network. This is meant to convey its legitimacy as a representative of local citizens. It goes something like "PACT is a federation of 17 local churches which together include 35,000 families . . . and as part of PICO is part of a network of 40 organizations . . . ."

\(^\text{16}\) Suzanne Mettler argues that broad public-serving policies such as the GI Bill produce feedbacks in the form of civic engagement and positive attitudes toward government. See Mettler. *Soldiers to Citizens*. Today, GI Bill benefits have radically shrunk and their eligibility is governed by a bureaucratic maze of regulation, which would reinforce the common working-class view that government does not support us, but takes from us in the form of taxes.

\(^\text{17}\) "New social movement" participants have high educational status, experienced economic security in their formative years, have relative economic security, and work in personal-service occupations; see Swarts, *Invisible Actors*, Chapter 3
Americans are prevented from joining by a lack of time or money, or that they do not participate because they are unaware of social problems. However, such explanations of working-class citizens’ nonparticipation often deny their agency and responsibility in a way that they would not deny themselves. Many working-class people have a clear sense of what is wrong in society, and feel patronized when well-educated activists seek to educate them. However, while they may feel keenly that things are wrong, they may see the technical or policy aspects of governance as bewildering and “experts” as the only people qualified to advocate specific solutions. Yet they also tend to mistrust middle-class experts—who, after all, are the professionals who have authority over them on the job. David Croteau writes,

The professional middle class has served as a buffer between labor and capital. Workers can see benefits they get from capital, namely jobs, and they do not see capitalist exploitation very clearly (unless a factory closes). Working people see managers and professionals enforcing the mental/manual divide but do not see benefits coming from this professional middle class. Thus, working-class resentment and anger—at least in the short run—gets channeled towards the [professional middle class]. The Right has effectively capitalized on this resentment.

Their base in diverse congregations allows CBCOs to recruit an unusually racially and economically diverse group of Americans. (While about 12% of working people belong to a union today, according to one study, 67% belong to a church.) Their class diversity is suggested by occupational data on the San Jose PACT citywide steering committee members. Their jobs fell into the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Job</th>
<th>Number of committee members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unskilled labor</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Claus Offe, "New Social Movements,": 833; Croteau, Politics and the Class Divide, 31; Rucht 1988; Kriesi et al., New Social Movements.

Organizer Linda Stout gives the example of a middle-class activist who changed a flyer directed at a low-income community. The original read “Something has got to be wrong when the government spends so much money on the military and nothing on me.” It was changed to “I don’t understand why the government spends so much money on the military and nothing on me.” Members of her organization were indignant, and said, “Of course we understand! Do you think we’re stupid or something?” Stout, Bridging the Class Divide, 119.

Croteau, Politics and the Class Divide; Eliasoph, Avoiding Politics; Rose, Coalitions Across the Class Divide.

Croteau, Politics and the Class Divide, 183.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, Voice and Equality.

Data was available for only 32 of the 40 steering committee members.
skilled labor 14
requires college degree 4
requires master's degree 5

Ten of the thirty-two individuals were retired, underscoring the importance of free time for civic participation.

It is challenging to bring together such an educationally diverse group without intimidating the less educated, boring the most educated, or allowing the latter to dominate the group. Several ideological tactics help bring together racially diverse middle class and working-class Americans. CBCOs forge a common collective identity by framing themselves as not diletantish, radical, elite, or ideological. Positively, CBCOs build solidarity through shared religious culture combined with a challenging yet accessible set of organizing principles.

*We’re Not “Activists” In A “Movement”*

Chapter 2 showed that participants are taught who they are *not*: either “movements” with “activists,” or paternalistic “agencies” with “clients.” Instead, they are “people’s organizations” of “citizens,” “families and children.” One might wonder why CBCOs are so eager to distance themselves from social movements with whom they share such interests as peace, clean air, and social programs. This distinction makes more sense when one considers that Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation always sought to build a majority coalition that would include large numbers of the “moderate middle” of the political spectrum. Today Edward Chambers, Alinsky’s successor at the IAF, still decries the tendency of movements to alienate moderates and conservatives, arguing that an “effective broad-based organization” must include them.23 The IAF reacted against social movements of the sixties and seventies that frequently came across as strident, extreme, and unrepresentative of the “silent majority” of Americans.

This “silent majority” includes the white working class, many of whom view social movements as alien. New social movement norms are influenced by the experiences of their educated middle-class members, such as belief in the power of information to “convert” others, the value of individual expression, and importance of egalitarian process.24 In their language, self-presentation, and ideas CBCOs both tacitly and explicitly distinguish themselves from such

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movements, and reassure working-class church members that they belong. CBCOs do not speak of the “working class”; unlike many movements, the groups I observed seldom used such terms as “racism, sexism, classism, homophobia,” “oppression,” or “multiple oppressions.” Staff frequently allude to racism and use other terms among themselves, and occasionally with members. However, these are not terms they typically use to frame members’ problems and proposed solutions, because for CBCOs this language connotes ideological movements beyond the experience of most of their members.

Table 7 below lists some common working-class perceptions of liberal social movements, and how CBCO presents itself in contrast.25

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25 Material on working-class attitudes toward social movements is taken from Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, and Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*, and from fieldwork and training sessions.

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Some white working-class views of liberal social movements | Church-based community organizing features
---|---
• Social movement participants are “hippies” left over the the sixties, “weirdos” on the “fringe,” not “regular people”; dress and theatrical tactics seem bizarre, or too radical (property damage) | • Organizers and participants wear conventional clothing, often business attire. Tactics – research, meetings, accountability sessions-- are formal, dignified, appear conventional
• Social movements seen as transitory | • Emphasize building a stable, ongoing organization
• Social movements seen as naïve, idealistic | • Presents itself as practical, pragmatic
• Social movements seen as ineffective | • Emphasis on concrete and realizable campaigns
• Social movement issues seem distant, unrelated to working-class life issues; middle-class activists’ motivations may be more ideological, expressive, or solidaristic as opposed to protection of immediate interests | • Issues identified by based on importance to constituents; concrete and immediate concerns
• Language may be unfamiliar or alienating: may use sophisticated terms or technical policy-related language; may use unfamiliar terms from identity politics such as “sexism,” “classism,” homophobia,” “oppression,” “multiple oppressions” | • Use common-sense terms of identification like “people of faith, “children and families’ needs,” “ordinary people,” “neighborhood needs,” “working families”

Table 7. Features of Church-based Community Organizing that Address Working-Class Attitudes Toward Activism

The CBCO emphasis on leadership training assumes many participants (especially women, poor and working people, and immigrants) are inexperienced, intimidated by politics, and feel
inadequate to lead. Table 8 below summarizes research on working-class attitudes and traits that affect political efficacy, and how CBCO training addresses them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working-class people often bring these assets to organizing:</th>
<th>CBCO responds by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• awareness of injustice</td>
<td>• Heightening awareness of injustice and skepticism of authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• skepticism toward authorities</td>
<td>• Basing organizing on developing relationships and mobilizing social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• relational and other individual leadership skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• social networks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working-class people often bring these challenges:</th>
<th>CBCO participation includes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Feelings of powerlessness; difficulty envisioning alternative futures</td>
<td>• Exercises in envisioning a just society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lack of confidence in ability to lead</td>
<td>• Extensive leadership training that addresses both emotional and cognitive dimensions (fear and shame, as well as lack of skills); imparts common sense ideas and principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lack of “civic skills” or experience speaking in public, chairing meetings, etc.</td>
<td>• Organizers coach members to speak in public, run meetings, plan strategy; members experience their power in small victories; organizers reinforce these experiences in one-to-one meetings after public actions with officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Challenging”, whether aggressive or nurturing, to break down defenses against participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                                                          |                              |
|                                                          | • no feeling of entitlement   |
|                                                          | • “agitation,” attempts to provoke anger at status quo |
|                                                          | • no specialized technical knowledge (e.g. of public policy); the belief that expertise is a prerequisite for participation; tendency to defer to experts |
|                                                          | • Experience of conducting down-to-earth research, such as interviewing officials about issues, to demystify the process of knowledge-gathering |

Table 8. Features of Church-based Community Organizing that Help Empower Working-Class Participants

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CBCO explicitly appeals to the working-class values that undergird organizing. They appeal to personal integrity and character when they hold leaders accountable to take risks as leaders, challenge themselves, and do things they have never done before. Many educated members’ sense of political inefficacy was transformed along with their working-class counterparts. Middle-class Americans who may vote and feel comfortable chairing a meeting or leading a volunteer cleanup may still feel far less competent as citizens pursuing urban policy reforms. College graduates from PACT and MCU, including ministers, reported that before joining their CBCO they felt “very remote from the city mothers and fathers...that there was no real way of making a change,” “ineffective,” or that they “hardly had a clue.” One member reported having “not much ability on the community level; I became probation officer partly so as to make a difference, and later realized I can't really make that much of a difference.”

CBCOs also builds shared identity and solidarity among diverse participants through shared religious culture.

We Are “People Of Faith”

It may seem that shared liberal Christianity is enough to overcome other differences and exclude extremists. Yet among church members allied in CBCOs, major differences remain. CBCOs may include Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians. CBCOs perform cultural work to unify their members. One way activists link religion with organizing is to explicitly draw on religious social justice traditions. These include the Protestant realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, the social justice teachings of the Catholic church, and liberation theology originally developed by Latin American Catholics.26 Along with a shared commitment to social justice, shared personal faith and rituals produce a collective identity.

Typically, CBCOs open their meetings with a prayer or “reflection” that expresses values that undergird the organizing work. Other rituals include the prayer walk described in chapter 2, prayer breakfasts, and the like. One of MCU’s three component neighborhood organizations held a twenty-four-hour prayer vigil outside a U.S. senator’s St. Louis office to urge him to oppose pending legislation.27 Unifying rituals may also include secular texts and symbols. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, a Chicago-area CBCO affiliated with the IAF held a gathering for religious

26 Hart, Cultural Dilemmas.
27 The banking industry sought to weaken the Community Reinvestment Act. MCU was targeting Missouri Senator Christopher Bond, who sat on the Finance Committee and had a swing vote.

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tolerance and unity that began with a member reading from the Declaration of Independence. The meeting ended in a ritual enactment of unity, with all 4,000 participants reading the same passage in unison.  

Religiously divisive issues such as abortion and gay rights are off most organizations’ agendas. Although CBCO includes few conservative white Protestant congregations, Catholic churches are a mainstay, and some black Protestant churches are conservative on issues of gender and sexuality. Instead, participants unite around broad issues of public safety, housing, education, health care, jobs, and increasingly, immigrants’ rights. If an issue is specific to one congregation, it can be accommodated as a local church campaign. Only when an issue is a widely expressed priority or can be made one will it land on a group’s citywide agenda.

Race And CBCO Mobilizing Culture

Race is problematic for those seeking to build majority coalitions because addressing it directly has the potential to produce backlash among whites. Politicians avoid it: of the 2004 Democratic presidential nominees, only Al Sharpton talked regularly about race. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, black politicians resisted identifying racism as a cause of the disastrous government performance in rescuing black citizens of New Orleans. They understood that “talking race begs being labeled a racist, an agitator, or a troublemaker.”

CBCOs acknowledge race as a major American issue, but they do not frame racism as the fundamental social problem to address because that would highlight a cleavage among their members. Instead they acknowledge race is one category of political and economic domination. Because black pastors often distrust multi-racial or majority-white CBCOs, they often form caucuses of African-American clergy and organizers. For example, the Gamaliel Foundation’s

28 The IAF is now building unusually broad federations; This CBCO, United Power for Action and Justice, includes 300 organizations—not just congregations, but also labor unions, civic organizations, neighborhood groups, hospitals, and health centers.
29 How CBCOs address immigration will bode watching, since this issue is often a liberal-conservative fault-line. Immigration has emerged as a major priority for the major community organizing networks, and to my knowledge, campaigns have always focused on expanding immigrants’ rights and protections.
30 Neal, “Race, Class Re-Enter Politics After Katrina.”
31 See Wood’s comparative study of CBCO and the race-based approach to community organizing practiced by the Center for Third World Organizing in Oakland, California. Wood, Faith in Action.
African-American Leadership Commission includes pastors and organizers within that network and aims to “train and agitate African American clergy, top leadership and their allies.”

Because they seek to build majority coalitions, CBCOs typically frame their goals universally as good education, jobs, housing, health care, and the like. The populist universalism imparted during national trainings highlights shared interests; the personal narratives activists hear in one-to-one interviews and the interaction with people different from themselves help produce sympathetic identification with members of different backgrounds. On the final day of a PICO national training, an African-American female participant expressed the “high” of solidarity that the training had produced for her as “a glimpse of heaven. This is God.” A Filipino man became emotional about experiencing “so many religions come together: To see black, Hispanic, Asian, Filipino all together—if we can do it here, up on this hill, why can’t we do it down there?”

In summary, CBCOs partially bridge faultlines of class and race by making their organizations culturally hospitable to both working class and middle-class members. They reinforce a common identity as people of faith who seek what is right and just for their families, neighborhoods, and city. Section II below, explains how CBCO mobilizing culture places a high value on deliberation and democratic process as well as instrumental productivity. This combination has cross-class appeal. It helps satisfy educated members’ desires for individual expression, deliberation, and professionalism, but also offers working-class members a voice as well as opportunities for leadership.

Combining Participatory Democracy And Efficiency

*Freedom is an endless meeting.*

SNCC member quoted in book of the same title by Francesca Polletta

Every democratically-run SMO that seeks to influence society has to balance attention to members' interactions and deliberative processes with getting things done in the world. Polletta has convincingly argued that the two goals are not necessarily at odds: open and thorough deliberation often serves instrumental purposes essential to an organization’s mission, such as building trust and

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solidarity in high risk activism, or hearing the greatest number of ideas and proposals. However, the groups she studied in the civil rights movement and the New Left drew heavily on students and youth, a population known for its activism and predilection for “endless meetings” made possible by the lack of family and work responsibilities. In her book *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* she includes church-based community organizing as an example of participatory democracy.

For busy parents and workers, freedom is not likely to be an endless meeting. One white middle class leader of MCU was “intrigued” and motivated to stay involved with her organization “because they kept meetings to one hour.” A middle-class PACT member commented,

“Our meetings are very timely planned. I’m not a big meeting person, I want to get things done and out of there. And that’s another thing, when you know you have a time frame, and everyone is busy, then you make decisions a lot faster and you’re more productive that way.”

Yet, as Polletta and others have observed, CBCO’s decision-making norms are both participatory and democratic. One way this is accomplished is that extensive communication occurs and consensus is forged informally outside of the formal venues where decisions are made by majority vote. Local congregation organizing committees talk through issues, and organizers meet extensively with activists individually to deliberate strategy as well as develop leaders’ skills. Throughout the organization, leaders from different congregations who have worked together on major campaigns can sound each other out. While to SMOs close to Ideal Type A this may smack of back-room politicking, CBCO participants view this as a normal part of the democratic process, just as a city council or legislature operates. Substantive deliberation also occurs in formal meetings, but for a fixed amount of time. If there is a pressing issue that calls for more discussion, participants may ask for the group’s consent to add ten or fifteen minutes to the agenda. This norm communicates respect for members’ private time and family responsibilities.

This style of participatory democracy with efficiency is well-suited for both working-class and middle-class participants. While it is straightforward and hardly original, it places an unusual emphasis on discipline, that is, remaining faithful to a pre-planned agenda and staying within allotted time limits. This differs from movement organizations more like Ideal Type A, which often feature alternative or less formal modes of conducting business. They feature a cultural style sociologist Paul Lichterman

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33 Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*. Including a wide range of contributors in deliberation is part of Marshall Ganz’s notion of strategic capacity; see Ganz, “Resources and Resourcefulness.”

34 Verba, Schlozman, and Brady found that Americans of all income levels had a scarcity of time.

35 Warren discusses this in *Dry Bones Rattling*.
calls "personalist," which I understand as egalitarian individualism. Its egalitarianism may hold that "the intrinsic worth of all contributions and all contributors" preempts any "standard for judging between them." This is not an issue for ACORN, which seeks mainly to organize the poor and working class and effectively acculturates middle-class staff members into its norms. However, congregation-based organizing seeks to build a multi-class movement and this cultural style can inhibit cross-class coalition building. CBCO norms and practices partially accommodate personalism while avoiding some of its pitfalls.

**Personalism**

Personalist organizations have been part of the more countercultural wing of the feminist, “peace and justice,” anti-nuclear, environmental, and other movements. Often they emphasize participatory democracy, understood narrowly as decision by consensus, the priority of deliberation over expediency, and sometimes internal process over external impact. In some cases the hostility to hierarchical roles, even when rotated democratically, is so hostile that leadership is discouraged. Lichterman’s study of local environmental groups suggests that these cultural traits can undermine successful campaigns. Weir and Ganz argue that “an organizational culture suspicious of authority, leadership, and orderly democratic process” makes “collaboration across groups and levels of governance and coordination very difficult.” These organizations may privilege what Katzenstein refers to as “discursive politics”—internal discussion and education through community forums and the media—because tangible gains are not realizable at a given time. A “prefigurative” goal of embodying a just society, such as egalitarian decision-making, may become more salient when avenues for effective political action close. Alternatively, activists may lack experience in running campaigns with realizable goals. The tools in their repertoires of contention may be limited to politicized personal choices (recycling or socially-conscious investing), educational events, and

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36 On personalism, see Lichterman, *Search for Political Community*, 91. Also see Rose, *Politics and the Class Divide*.
38 When the mass base of the women's movement declined in both its first and second waves, some feminists withdrew and built alternative feminist or lesbian subcultures in lieu of claims-making. Katzenstein has shown how institutions that offer few avenues for internal reform, such as the Catholic church, produce a feminist subculture that emphasizes radical discourse and cultural expression. Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrum*; Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; Katzenstein, *Faithful and Fearless*.
symbolic protest. Members’ value as distinct individuals can overshadow the collective good of the organization.

A related feature of movements influenced by feminism is an anxiety over power. Because power was associated with oppression, leadership was often seen as domination. Participants challenged leaders' authority, and activists took pains to avoid the appearance of leadership, since leaders were taboo.\footnote{“No leadership, no spokeswoman, no votes, action by consensus. It sounded so good. But what started out as a utopian vision has ended in a nightmare . . . The no leadership/total equality line had damaging effects on the women's liberation movement . . . Based on the dogma of exact equality among women, it denied the reality that some people are the first to dare and do, to provide clarity and insight, to teach others, to speak for themselves and for others who are not yet speaking for themselves directly.” Carol Hanisch, " Liberal Takeover of Women's Liberation," 164-165. Jo Freeman’s famous tract entitled “The Tyranny of Structurelessness” challenged this refusal to designate leaders and build a decision-making structure. See also Baker, “Authority in radical movement groups,” and Purkis, “Leaderless cultures,” from Barker, Johnson, Lavalette, \textit{Leadership in Social Movements}.} Since groups need leaders to help them focus, make decisions, and act, and leaders usually emerge whether they are acknowledged or not, a cultural style in which leadership is taboo can damage organizational effectiveness.

Many MCU and PACT members who are social/cultural specialists, such as teachers and social workers, may share aspects of the personalist ethos. To these kinds of participants, CBCOs need to communicate respect for democratic process and the value of all individual contributions. CBCOs accomplish this through several norms. First, the CBCO emphasis on listening and building relationships through one-to-one interviews allows participants to “translate” their concern for individual development into CBCO terms. Graciela, a teacher and PACT member, could interpret her school district’s diversity training program this way:

That black person who is sharing their story and their struggle--I have an appreciation for that person and it’s the one-on-one relationship. So it goes right along with the PICO training and the one-on-one relationships.

The difference between diversity training and church-based organizing is that in the latter, listening and relationship building are undertaken to build social capital for political mobilization. In San Jose PACT, for example, organizers give painstaking attention to individual development, but in the context of goal-directed political work. Individuals’ right to express themselves becomes subordinate to the group; since group goals are chosen democratically, individuals who seek to dominate discussions are seen as anti-democratic. The hierarchy of leaders and followers is democratic as well, since leadership is open to all who show the ability and commitment to lead, by doing the work...
and mobilizing members. The ideal is to develop everyone’s leadership capacity to the maximum possible, which harmonizes personal growth with organizational potential. Accountability norms are mutual and seen to serve the organization as a whole.

Thus, CBCOs recruit a wide variety of members, some of whom may bring highly-educated personalist norms to their activism, and others who cannot speak English or have no organizational experience whatsoever. For the uneducated, CBCOs offer a set of easy-to-grasp concepts that explain the inner workings of politics. For the well educated, they offer a high standard of productivity and efficiency, norms that are familiar to those with professional training. Their emphasis on building relationships, orderly democratic decision-making, and the process of learning through action, evaluations, and individual reflection with organizers all give individual attention to activists. But meetings and actions are tightly planned and efficient, which gratifies busy family members of all classes.

The next section examines how CBCO attempts to bridge the divide between liberals and conservatives.

Bridging The Liberal-Conservative Fault Line: Conservative “Individual Responsibility” Meets Liberal “Government Programs”

Never, never do for others what they can do for themselves.
Industrial Areas Foundation’s “Iron Rule”

"We're here to bring new religious voices to the public debate," said Bishop Roy Dixon, an African American leader with the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ in Southern California. "We're conservatives, moderates, Democrats, liberals. I'm a Republican."

San Francisco Chronicle41

In addition to bridging divides of race, gender, and class, CBCO also seeks to bring members together across the faultline of political ideology. One ideological tactic conservatives have used since the 1970s to divide the Democratic Party coalition has been to counterpose virtuous self-sufficient individuals against others—the poor, the unemployed, criminals, welfare recipients—and their apologists, “big government liberals.” These liberals purportedly want to “throw money at

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41 Lattin, “Multifaith group puts own spin on values.”

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government programs” rather than hold individuals accountable for their condition. Section I, “Bridging class and racial fault lines”, noted how conservative entrepreneurs racialized the ideology of individual responsibility versus liberal “big government” during the 1960s and skillfully exploited class division among whites. The Republican party then recruited disaffected working class Democrats. While this conflict among white Democrats was real, liberals exacerbated it by dismissing working-class white concerns as "racist" or "redneck" and allowing conservatives to hijack the language of "values" and "responsibility." Working-class whites became cynical about the liberal silence on crime, and conservatives denounced liberals’ preference for state intervention as a love of big government. They accused liberals of “blaming the system” for individual failures, while individual responsibility, character, and virtue, became increasingly associated with the right.

Movements such as CBCO that attempt to cross race and class lines also, then, cross political faultlines. To appeal to the constituencies they seek they must avoid racial scapegoating and victim-blaming; present problems and solutions not as personal and private, but as public and social; and frame their issues as broadly shared and their policy proposals as common sense. This poses a challenge: as Stephen Hart notes, the public has responded to the conservative resurgence despite the fact that polls show no significant move to the right in public opinion. Despite political positions that collided head-on with white working-class voters’ material interests, 62% of voters with a high school education voted for George W. Bush in the 2004 election. In 2000, more than 60 percent of white male voters supported Bush even though Democrat Al Gore’s positions on major issues such as healthcare, education, and tax policy were significantly more popular with them than Bush’s positions. With Hart, I argue that part of the reason is the failure of American liberals to

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42 Dionne, Why Americans Hate Politics. When the Kerner Commission concluded that unemployment, crime, drug addiction, and white racism were responsible for the riots, Nixon found a ready audience for his claim that the commission blamed "everybody for the riots except the perpetrators of the riots." Dionne, p. 88.
43 For example, see Bennett, Book of Virtues.
44 Hart, Cultural Dilemmas.
46 Halle distinguished multiple sources of identity for working-class men: an occupational identity as workers, another identity as homeowners and therefore “middle-class,” and a national-populist identity as “ordinary citizens” as opposed to elites. In What’s the Matter with Kansas? Frank argues that conservatives have

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frame themselves and their political positions in terms of deeply held American values such as independence, freedom, patriotism, equality, and the work ethic.

CBCO mobilizes these traditional American political values to help reach moderates and some conservatives. As church-based groups, they symbolize tradition. A church-based organization can, for example, hold a candlelight peace vigil that also “honors the 28 soldiers from Louisiana and 1,500 nationally who lost their lives in Iraq” without being seen as unpatriotic. It draws on the ritual of the memorial service, which honors soldiers killed in the line of duty.47

CBCO also draws on more general ideas and norms to link traditional values to redistributive goals. The norms of challenging and accountability emphasize individual responsibility. The IAF “Iron Rule”—“Never, never do for others what they can do for themselves”—expresses classic American self-reliance, except it is collective, not individual. Its larger purpose is empowerment of the disempowered. The PICO National Network organizes in areas with many working-class Republicans, such as San Diego, with its huge military population. PICO organizing director Scott Reed argues,

The suggestion of individual responsibility runs pretty deep in most of us, and the Republicans tap into that framework more successfully than Democrats do . . . a lot of folks that we would end up organizing with resonate with a more moderate Republican agenda. They’re concerned about entrepreneurship, they don’t like a lot of paperwork and regulations, they feel strongly about individual responsibility, so they are comfortable with . . . a Republican moderate position.

People learn to be responsible and accountable in settings like families, schools, and workplaces. This ethos is less common in liberal churches, the backbone of CBCO, and social movement organizations. Their very liberalism suggests tolerance for varying degrees of commitment and responsibility.48 Unlike liberal churches, strict churches with high demands of members are the fastest-growing denominations in America.49 This is why a liberal church-based movement that imposes high expectations on participants is unusual. Institutionalizing norms of “agitating,”

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47 “Service in Louisiana honors soldiers”, “Bayou Interfaith Sponsoring Community Organization (BISCO) held a Candlelight Peace Vigil.”
48 The historically mainline Protestant churches (Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian) as well as Catholicism are frequently liberal.
49 According to some scholars, because their high demands generate high value for members Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*. 

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“challenging” and “holding one another accountable”—demanding high commitment and responsibility—is innovative for a progressive redistributive movement.

However, unlike social conservatives, for CBCOs individual morality is not the basis of an adequate public policy. What makes CBCO ideology liberal rather than conservative is that it advocates not private or voluntarist solutions but collective and public programs. They seek action from the state: social welfare programs, redistribution, or regulation. Within an organization staff and members challenge one another, but publicly CBCOs usually emphasize individual responsibility on the part of authorities. Because they apply the same ethic of responsibility to themselves as well, they seem fair and evenhanded.

One St. Louis activist illustrates this ideology:

I feel that we the people who say we're represented by the people that we elect have held them not accountable, so if we want to hold them accountable we need to change the political system so that we have power—either throwing out or backing up the people we've elected. Making them accountable: “This is what you said you'd do and you haven't done it.” We allow them to be as corrupt as we are . . . lackadaisical; apathetic.

A San Jose activist echoes this idea: “They're only as good as the pressure put upon them from outside. And they have to be held accountable.”

Another strategy that the PICO Network uses to transcend competing ideologies is framing issues neutrally as practical problems rather than ideological issues. One PICO organizer stated, When communities come into contact with one another and race and class begin to break down, and there’s a common set of concerns about youth or after school programming, quality of schools, access to health care—Republican or Democratic ideology really doesn’t matter too much. Then it’s a question of how do we fix this problem.

This practical, problem-solving tone designed to appeal to a broad majority is evident in PICO publicity (emphases are mine):

In urban, rural and suburban communities PICO federations are discovering and refining strategies that address the most important social issues facing America. Beginning with the concrete problems faced by working families and then doing careful research, PICO leaders create policy innovations from the ground up. These
solutions come out of specific places and problems, but offer models for communities and states across the United States. These are solutions that *unify rather than divide*...[including:] Provide parents with high quality public school *choices*; Help people *have a say in* local, state and national decisions.50

Related to the “neutral problem” framing is the theme that the proposed solutions “unify rather than divide.” This is especially important for issues that do, in fact, have potentially strong opposition, such as immigrants’ rights. PICO presents its campaign to provide driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants as “efforts to find common ground on legislation . . .” The PICO New Voices national campaign is “challenging our nation’s leaders to find common ground on domestic policies that support families and strengthen communities.”

In summary, CBCO addresses potential ideological conflict among its constituents over its policy agenda in several ways. It applies the “bootstraps” morality of responsibility beloved by conservatives, but in the service of collective empowerment and liberal redistributive policies. It applies the same ethic of accountability to its members and to authorities outside the group. It selects issues that have wide support in order to achieve broad legitimacy. Finally, it presents its goals as noncontroversial, pragmatic common-sense proposals based on wide research. If the issue is controversial, it seeks reasonable goals that “find common ground.” These tactics, along with the fact that CBCO stays strictly away from the “third rail” of the culture wars—abortion and homosexuality—help CBCO surmount liberal-conservative divides among its church members.

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Swarts, *Invisible Actors*, Chapter 3
Bridging Altruism And Self-Interest Through “Values”

Self interest is embedded in the very existence of relationship, of being true to the relationship. It stems from the Latin root interess, to be involved, among, between, engaged.

PICO organizer, national five-day training

One can discern two broad tendencies in the history of early American Protestantism: an optimistic and a pessimistic stance toward society and prospects for reform. CBCO rather ingeniously, if not consistently, draws on both. One tendency, known as Christian perfectionism, was based on the optimistic vision that human beings could so radically improve themselves and society as to bring about Christ’s thousand year reign of peace on earth. This expansive vision, developed in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening (1780-1830), drove nineteenth century moral reform movements such as temperance and abolition, created the American voluntary association as we know it and later informed the Social Gospel movement. The more pessimistic tendency, drawing on Augustine and Calvin, holds that original sin sharply limits human potential for goodness in human society. This view may call for different responses: to withdraw entirely from society, as some Protestant fundamentalist sects have done, or to strive for God’s justice in flawed human institutions.

Christian perfectionists such as abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison believed in social change by moral suasion and individual conversion. Abolitionists only reluctantly entered the corrupting world of politics and parties. A similar struggle unfolded among maternalist reformers and Progressives, who shared the optimistic assumption of progress informed by reason and science. However, the suffering of workers under industrial capitalism, the Great Depression, two world wars, and the atom bomb savaged the optimistic hopes of reformers—none more than the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971).

52 Giele, Two Paths to Women’s Equality.
53 Since the 1960s, Niebuhr has been so neglected that it is easy to forget his enormous influence not only on American religion, but on social scientists, scholars, and politicians. Niebuhr was not only a preacher, scholar, and public intellectual, but a political activist who helped found the Americans for Democratic Action. On his death in 1971, Niebuhr’s close friend Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote to Niebuhr’s widow, “He had more intellectual influence on me than anyone I have ever known.” “Up Front,” New York Times Book Review.

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Twentieth-century history convinced Niebuhr that human sinfulness greatly constrained efforts for societal reform. Niebuhr’s ideas are evident in Saul Alinsky’s writing and in CBCO mobilizing culture. Niebuhr’s Christian Realism aimed for an achievable moral standard: “a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non violent to prevent [the] common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster.” Justice requires either coercion, or the resistance to coercion. The Christian Realist must acknowledge the reality of power, and must not flee from it but engage it with skill. Hence, CBCO relentlessly pressures members to acknowledge that those with the power, not the better moral claim, will win. To play the political game they need political and tactical skills.

This view resonates with those who have been on the losing end of American politics. Although Christian realism draws on the concept of original sin, non-believers like Alinsky could interpret sin as flawed human nature, humans as tainted by the will to power that produces domination. This implies a certain moral humility and an openness to compromise, which is reflected in the title of Alinsky’s second guide to organizing. Directed at student radicals that he felt were dogmatic and ineffective (the most hostile view of Ideal Type A), it was subtitled “A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals” (emphasis mine). Alinsky thought this was the basis on which to design campaigns in which large numbers of people would participate, not just the minority of idealists who will get involved on the basis of principle or solidary incentives rather than results.

Although “self-interest” was a pragmatic basis for “realistic radicalism,” Alinsky and his followers believed that as participants gained wider experience, they would eventually identify with other ordinary Americans’ concerns across the barriers that kept them apart. But when Ed Chambers and Ernie Cortes reorganized the IAF after Alinsky’s death, they sought to more explicitly link pragmatic self-interest to a moral vision—in a sense, recovering the guiding vision of Christian perfectionism. This moral vision is a touchstone that can help prevent activists from becoming just like the self-seeking politicians they target. This shared moral vision was one of many resources for which CBCO entrepreneurs turned to the church. They began to define their members’ self interest in terms of their religious values.

One PICO organizer distinguished self-interest from selfishness by defining it as inherently relational, because selves are embedded in relationships. Values are what people "believe in, act on

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55 Hart, Cultural Dilemmas.

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with regularity, and defend publicly.\textsuperscript{56} Another organizer linked self-interest to values this way: “Spiritual life is values, social life is self-interest. We have to put flesh on the word: the word has to become flesh.” CBCO thus links pragmatic self-interest and the common good. Organizers teach activists that, while politicians are sure of their self-interest, church people often are not. Organizers use values as a standard with which to challenge activists: If values guide action, and members claim to value their families’ well-being, then surely they must act to ensure it.

In personal interviews, organizers and activists discern the interests of both authorities and potential activists. CBCO participants learn to think in terms of the self-interest of prospective participants, churches, politicians, potential allies, and other stakeholders. One Gamaliel Foundation memo reads, “Senator Feingold found it in his self-interest to use Gamaliel Comprehensive Immigration Reform Principles.”\textsuperscript{57} A PICO organizer wrote in her weekly staff report that she “didn’t know how to get to the self-interest of comfortable middle-class people who are busy at their jobs.”

In practice, the concept of self-interest becomes broadened to include “motivation” and “values.” While it retains its hard-nosed realist associations, activists use it more broadly to include public-spirited, even altruistic work. One CBCO member, Jenn, was known for tirelessly identifying and working for broad community needs. She framed her public-spiritedness in terms of self-interest:

\begin{quote}
I mean, face it, I'm in it for my self-interest. I see things that need to be done. So I go out and find people around me who feel the same way, or who I can convince to feel the same way. And then get them to come to these meetings and support this.
\end{quote}

Jenn’s comment illustrates how her own public-spiritedness—

“seeing things that need to be done,” but which do not directly affect her family—gets folded into the tough-minded realism of “self-interest” which, “let’s face it,” is what Jenna is “in it for.” She has learned to diagnose the interests of elected officials and corporations. However, she also understands self-interest so broadly that it is ultimately a placeholder for the “values,” selfish or social, that drive public-spirited civic engagement.

The final section examines how CBCO ideology and norms combine the feminine-coded private with the masculine-coded public realms.

\textsuperscript{56} Observation of the Gamaliel Foundation weeklong training, March 1998, Chicago.

Swarts, \textit{Invisible Actors}, Chapter 3
Integrating Private Life With Public Action

The use of "family" as a metaphor and catalyst for cultural conservatism is now being rivaled by a newly popular catchword: "faith."

Ellen Willis

Although the distinction between the public and private spheres is enduring, the exact border between them is a site of struggle. While totalitarian societies subordinate the private to the public, in western societies capital and its political allies divert matters of public concern into the private sphere of personal consumption. David Croteau argues that for working-class Americans in particular, private life and family—not the workplace and the vibrant urban social life of the past—loom large as domains of security, control, autonomy, creativity, and love. Suburbanization, television, “cocooning” and watching movies at home rather than collectively in theaters have helped speed the decline of neighborhoods and social institutions. Corporations and real estate developers have found it profitable to replace the public sphere with private malls, and urban neighborhoods with gated developments.

Other forces reduce the scope of the public and political by framing common problems as personal and individual. Following the model of Alcoholics Anonymous, this framing draws on a secularized version of the individual confession of sin and conversion. Support groups for individual self-help make up a large proportion of Americans’ voluntary activity. Often their framing of problems as personal, private, and psychological obscures the dimensions that are collective, public, and structural. The culture of personal self-help, deeply rooted in American Protestantism, can be seen negatively as a distraction from social change, or positively as a quest for community and social capital. However, without a framework that links personal experiences and social systems, participants are likely to experience these small groups as communities of individuals who share a personal problem with private solutions.

58 Willis, “Freedom From Religion.”
59 Croteau, Politics and the Class Divide, 187-190.
60 On neighborhood decline, see Putnam, Bowling Alone; Croteau, Class Divide, chapter 10. On the privatization of public spaces, see Davis, City of Quartz, and Kohn, Brave New Neighborhoods.
61 On the proliferation of small groups, see Wuthnow, I Come Away Stronger. On the historic Protestant roots of American self-help, see Anker, Self-Help and Popular Religion.
62 For example, from among many possible ways to address the problem of drunk driving, the American solution is not increasing mass transit and reducing reliance on cars, but preventing individuals from drinking. See McCarthy, “The Interaction of Grass-roots Activists and State Actors.” Trial lawyers provide a
As noted earlier, churches straddle the boundary between public and private. CBCOs reach into congregations to mobilize the concerns of American families into public action. In talking so much about “families” and “values” CBCOs offer an alternative notion of “family values” that mandates public provision for broad-based social needs.

Moving From Private To Public

Church-based community organizing integrates the public and private spheres by harnessing three discourses to the goal of redistributive politics: liberal Christianity, emotion, and family. It draws on Christian discourse for political action; applies the language of private emotion to public problems; and harnesses "family" and "values" to a progressive rather than a conservative politics. Its innovation is to intertwine the discourses of liberal Christianity, emotion, and “family values” with the discourses of politics and policy so that they seem naturally bound to each other. The fusion of these realms of meaning channels private concerns about family life and private emotions of vulnerability, pain, and anger into the public realm of policy-making.

One Filipina CBCO activist named Elena was grief stricken by her daughter’s involvement with drugs and gangs. Elena thought she knew how to get resources for her daughter, but she could not. She learned that her daughter had to be arrested in order to enter a public drug rehabilitation program. Elena and her husband sold their house, their life savings, to pay the $18,000 for a 28-day rehabilitation program. Elena began two decades of leadership in her CBCO that expanded to include work with city and county government. She spearheaded a campaign for a city- and county-funded drug treatment center. When asked to explain the source of her commitment, Elena said,

I think it's my belief that God and love are one and the same. That and I still have a mission to say thank you, I think. I’ve been given a very good life both for my daughter and my family and I can't lose. He won't let me.

Elena’s family, religious, and political lives are highly interwoven. Her spiritual advisor is not her own parish priest, but a priest she met in her CBCO. Her personal religious concerns are inseparable from her public political work.

Christian Emotional Discourse And Gender

counterweight to this trend with such precedents as the successful framing of tobacco companies as responsible for promoting the individual behavior of smoking.
Part of what characterizes the private sphere is emotional expression. Because religion addresses joyful and sorrowful rites of passage, emotional expression that is suppressed in public settings such as work, school, or clubs is accepted in church life. CBCO’s basis in churches means that its organizational culture exhibits some traits, such as expression of emotions, that have female-gendered associations. In 1955, Talcott Parsons and R. F. Bales identified cultural traits associated with male and female roles: the male role was *instrumental*, representing the family to the outside world as breadwinner, while the female role was *expressive*, expressing and managing emotions within the family. American church pews have long been dominated by women, and churches reflect cultural features associated today with women. Chapter 2 discussed how churches include some features culturally coded in the U.S. as feminine, such as a focus on emotional expression, relationships, and community-building, and attention to interactive processes and expressive activities such as rituals. However, CBCOs link these expressive features to instrumental goals. CBCO believes in celebrating accomplishments, which takes valuable staff time without instrumentally advancing issue campaigns, because the psychological benefit is seen as critical to long-term commitment. At the same time, CBCOs help broaden the definition of “being church” to include mass-based policy advocacy. This entails venturing into the masculine-valenced world of politics, a challenging but invigorating experience for church members unaccustomed to wielding power. CBCO confronts the timidity and politeness of church culture with a self-consciously hard-nosed political realism, while attempting to retain the female-coded strengths of emotional awareness and relationship-building. This balancing act is expressed concisely in the PICO National Network’s slogan “The power is in the relationship.”

Determination and anger are permissible public emotions for activists in many organizations. However, uncovering more vulnerable private emotions, like fear, shame, and hurt, in a group setting is typically the domain of the self-help group. But finding that they are shared, becoming angry and

63 In fact, religious congregations are not clearly public OR private, but incorporate aspects of both. They are legally and politically private non-profit corporations like any other private associations, but their domain includes the most private and personal aspects of life and addresses them publicly in worship.

64 Bales and Parsons, *Family, Socialization, and Interaction*. Scholars have traced how American Christianity was feminized in the nineteenth century as the church lost cultural dominance. See Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, Welter, “Feminization of American Religion.” Various religious movements reacted against this cultural shift, including stern, Calvinist neo-Orthodoxy and Reinhold Niebuhr’s Protestant Realism. Niebuhr confronted optimistic Christians who sought to perfect society with the reality of intransigent power. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr reinforced the familiar domains of men and women in his distinction between home, women’s arena of love and care, and the corrupt outside world, men’s domain of struggle against power and injustice.
determined, and recasting personal failure as social injustice is the dynamic of consciousness raising. The experience of risking exposure, gaining trust, and reframing the personal as political binds the sharers more closely together, and broadens the range of experiences on which political work can explicitly draw. It is a sort of conversion experience to a new collective identity and political understanding.

In interviews with CBCO activists, common themes included "community," "faith," and “love.” churches easily wove these themes into their neighborhood organizing. Staff at one Catholic church expressed their goal for the next year as “continue the work of building a community of faith and love . . . we need to get in touch with where people are--what are their dreams, concerns, their pain?”

Naming the emotional dimension of participants' experiences is organizationally valuable for several reasons. First, emotions that members express provide information about the organizing. After meetings and collective actions, CBCOs conduct an evaluation so that participants learn from their mistakes and successes. The initial question a Gamaliel Foundation organizer asks is "How do you feel?" Second, explicitly naming ignoble emotions that members might wish to hide domesticates these emotions and incorporates them into the group's identity. Being encouraged to reveal emotions and beliefs that participants think are taboo, and finding them acceptable helps participants feel accepted, included, approved of. Feeling that they belong builds solidarity and loyalty. Staff members model this understanding of organizing as emotion-laden in their language. Typical "emotion statements" during one CBCO training session included:

You are dealing with an activity [organizing] that is uncomfortable.
When we walk into someone's home we're not going to hear the values, we're going to hear the pain.
Where is the pain of the community?
[Members’ testimony at a mass meeting] "got really down to the pain."
You don't have to be wealthy to be comfortable in your pain.

*Trainer:* You have a lot of work to do! Now you'll see if you are fighters or wilters! It's anxiety producing, but it's exciting, isn't it!

*Member:* Yeah!
Anger can be used to provoke ("agitate") members to action, as one organizer did when he pounded a table and exclaimed, "The conditions of our community are unacceptable and they're not going to change unless you make them change!"

Resignifying “Family Values” As Liberal

Family is still seen as the private sphere, framed as unsullied by the dirty, rough-and-tumble world of politics. For example, in one organization studied by Nina Eliasoph, "good" citizens were concerned about their families, not "flaky" or "radical" causes. When a local anti-toxics group proposed a parade float protesting a nearby toxic waste incinerator, officials forbade the float because the parade was a "family" event, not a "political" one. "Families” and “children” are politically impossible to oppose, so groups on the left and right compete to appropriate these frames. The Christian Right has largely appropriated the discourse of family for socially conservative goals. Political issues inherently concern families, but that is no guarantee that organizations frame them this way or participants understand their goals in these terms.

CBCO participants in interviews mentioned families, children, and youth repeatedly as their motivations for organizing. Activists from both CBCOs and ACORN framed their problems in terms of “family,” “children,” “kids”, and “youth” far more than in other terms such as “rights” or “justice.” This suggests not that activists were unconcerned about rights or justice, but that they articulated their reasons for organizing concretely and personally rather than abstractly. Members worried about unsafe parks, dangerous abandoned buildings (in St. Louis), and gangs that might recruit youth.

Churches are respected advocates for families and children because family life has historically been their province. CBCOs frame their issues frequently in these terms. For example, one CBCO worked to implement its “youth agenda” and build “safe and healthy communities for our youth and families.” Framing issues this way names one of members' greatest concerns, frames public expenditures as protecting families, and helps progressive organizing recapture the discourse of family and children.

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65 Eliasoph, Avoiding Politics. Activists made their way into the parade by the absurd argument that the local toxic incinerator wasn't "political" (confictual) since "everyone in town agrees" about it except its owner.
66 But labor unions and other organizations have harnessed this family discourse. The AFL-CIO’s Internet mobilization vehicle is called the Working Families e-Activist Network, and a labor-community coalition third party in New York state is called the Working Families Party.
67 From PACT flyer and meeting agenda, in author’s possession.
The mobilization of family and emotional discourse carries risks. When women in Eliasoph’s study presented themselves as “concerned moms” with personal agendas, they were seen as passionate and emotional, not rational advocates for policy change. In contrast, scientific “experts” were given great authority. These citizens made a distinction between emotion and reason in public discourse, and devalued emotionalism, which they associated with women. One CBCO presentational tactic combines the emotional appeal of “moms” and families with the authority of researchers. PICO organizations research issues among their own members and also with experts and officials. When they present an issue to officials at a mass meeting, a few members with personal experience present the grievance in emotional personal narratives. Immediately thereafter, other activists present a formal “research report” that provides evidence that the speaker’s problem is widespread, and frames them as grassroots “experts.” Men and women both present personal testimony and objective research.

Conclusion

There are numerous studies of Christian conservatives.68 However, there is very little scholarship on the ideological strategies of the Christian left. This is not because there is no liberal religious activism; however, its liveliest presence is felt locally in urban community organizing, which is far less visible nationally than the right. Scholars of American politics interested in religion or civic engagement would do well to consider, in John C. Green’s wording, not just the “traditionalists” (theological conservatives) but the larger number of “centrists” and “modernists” among evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics.69

The 2004 presidential election and the disjuncture between voters’ issue preferences and their votes for president demonstrate that scholars, politicians, and civic entrepreneurs need more research on what political ideas, identities, and symbols mean to various groups of Americans. I have argued that church-based community organizing as an American social movement is a significant cultural innovation. Like all strategies, it is flawed. Because CBCO is made up of organizations, each of which makes decisions more or less democratically, uniting member churches behind an issue campaign can take time. This can frustrate coalition partners that have more centralized control and faster decision-making. Churchgoers accustomed to being “nice” can

68 For example, see Ginsburg, Contested Lives; Harding, Book of Jerry Falwell, Maxwell, Pro-Life Activists., Ferree et al. Shaping Abortion Discourse.
69 Green, American Religious Landscape and Politics.

Swarts, Invisible Actors, Chapter 3
restrict CBCO’s range of tactics, ruling out militant direct action. Finally, CBCOs must leave divisive issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, off the table because Catholic and black evangelical churches are often at loggerheads with liberal congregations on these issues. Like all coalitions, CBCO acts only on the issues its members share.

However, CBCO’s advantages—access to congregational resources, social networks, pastoral and lay leaders, legitimacy, and religious social justice traditions—have helped it sustain organizations with unusually diverse memberships, and win concrete improvements. The most original contribution of church-based community organizing, I argue, is the ideas and practices that allow it to reconcile values and ideas that have frequently been irreconcilable in the logic of American political culture. Through various ideological tactics CBCO has surmounted tensions that challenge other American social movements. It constructs various unities (“people of faith,” “families,” residents of San Jose, CBCO members) and oppositions (“organization” versus “movement,” “leaders” that deliver a following, not gadfly “activists”) that help forge a strong collective identity across lines of race, class, and gender. CBCO validates a concern with individual responsibility while calling for generous social programs. It pushes church members to engage in the messy world of power politics, but bases the quest for power on morally defensible values. It draws on the long American tradition of participatory democracy but combines it with orderly and efficient decision-making. Finally, it links narratives of private pain with public action. Church-based community organizing is just one way to address these tensions creatively, but its base in American religion lends it wide appeal and cultural resonance.
## APPENDIX

### Ideal Types of American Social Movements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDEAL TYPE A</th>
<th>IDEAL TYPE B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modal movements:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Modal movements:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“new”/ “postmaterialist” social movements</td>
<td>labor and community organizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>protest</td>
<td>organizing</td>
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<td>reactive</td>
<td>proactive</td>
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<td>power</td>
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<td>like religion</td>
<td>like politics or economics</td>
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<td>middle-class</td>
<td>working-class</td>
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<td>countercultural</td>
<td>culturally mainstream</td>
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<td>decision by consensus</td>
<td>decision by majority vote</td>
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<tr>
<td>emphasis on inclusive process</td>
<td>emphasis on political or policy outcomes</td>
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<td>hierarchical; traditional representative democracy</td>
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<td>ongoing</td>
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Swarts, *Invisible Actors*, Chapter 3