What If the Whole World Isn’t Watching?

Activism, Presidential Campaigns, and the Thorny Struggle for Visibility

During the 2000 Republican National Convention (RNC) in Philadelphia, a network of activists from across the country used human blockades reinforced with PVC piping and steel to close down five major traffic arteries for nearly two hours during rush hour. As I observed, a school bus filled with police officers in combat gear arrived, a gas truck rolled in, and loud, low-flying news helicopters hovered overhead while officers worked to dismantle the human roadblock. Activists who were not part of the blockade filled the streets and faced the barricade of protesters, dancing, drumming, and playing makeshift musical instruments in the hot, late afternoon sun. Some entertained the crowd with offbeat political street theater. Still others threw confetti and lent exuberant voices to familiar protest chants. The classic activist refrain, “The whole world is watching! The whole world is watching!,” was imbued with a new layer of meaning as it came from the mouths of activists brandishing camcorders, indicating to the police that any brutality would be documented. Amid the revelry, some participants were designated to provide medical care (one offered me sunscreen), and others disbursed bottled water to those embroiled in the lockdown. A handful of reporters crouched in front of the conjoined activists, posing questions and taking notes. Others watched from the sidelines, updating editors via cell phone, as they peered around the bystanders who filtered through, despite police efforts to disperse the crowd and secure the surrounding area.

Riot-gear-clad police, marching rhythmically in long lines with military precision and demeanor, worked to contain the boisterous crowd. The marching officers transitioned seamlessly into four rows, took the shape of a square around the intersection, and then turned to stand shoulder to shoulder, physically enclosing the protesters and supporters in the intersection. If this confinement bothered the activists they certainly didn’t show it, but I felt trapped. The once-celebratory
political expression seemed distant, as the delicate boundary between well-mannered standoff and adrenaline-propelled conflict began to feel increasingly vulnerable. I wandered inside the square constructed by the rigid lines of stoic police officers with shielded chests and faces, moving through a crowd dense with clusters of emboldened activists, many marked by piercings, tattered shorts, and surplus-store messenger bags embellished with political buttons, patches, and pithy slogans rendered in uneven ballpoint ink. A smattering of notebook-wielding journalists, wearing running shoes and sporting layers of credentials around their necks like Mardi Gras beads, lingered within and beyond the square, watching and waiting. Over the course of a tense hour and a half, police detached the activists one at a time, binding their wrists with plastic handcuffs and dragging them to the school bus despite passive resistance. By the end of the long, disruptive standoff, more than 400 people had been arrested.

Amid the turbulence, I was certain this was a historic moment. I envisioned my family watching CNN as the events unfolded and feared they would worry. Yet I soon discovered that the drama in which I was immersed had slipped almost completely under the radar. The New York Times gave the event a single 640-word story that was buried in the paper’s late edition. The account was descriptive and accurate but never mentioned what had compelled so many people to do something so dramatic. A group named Disrupt had planned and carried out this complex, illegal action because its members felt they had something exceptionally important to say that was relevant to the election. That “something” went unheard.

This book works to reconcile this puzzle, showing how activism erupts around the perimeter of presidential elections, unraveling why activists’ efforts remain largely invisible, and looking at what activist groups lose in the process. Early in my research, I thought this would be a book about how activist groups use presidential elections as moments of political opening, but as I spent time with activists engaged in campaign-related work I came to realize that first and foremost this is a story about activists and the news media.

Nearly six months before Disrupt’s civil disobedience, during the presidential primary season, a minor story in the Metro section of the New
York Times caught my eye. The two leading Democratic candidates, Al Gore and Bill Bradley, were scheduled to appear at Harlem’s Apollo Theater, in the only face-to-face debate prior to the New York primary. Two days before the debate, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the union representing the Apollo Theater stagehands, threatened a walkout if management would not give them a signed contract. With representatives from both campaigns vowing that their respective candidates would not cross a picket line, the union’s demands were met the next day. IATSE alleged that theater management had been refusing to negotiate in good faith, and they approached the high-profile debate as an opportunity to end an uncomfortable five-month standoff. It worked.

IATSE’s ingenuity in using the debate as leverage on an issue unrelated to the election led me to wonder if other groups approach key campaign events as windows of opportunity. What opportunities do activists see in election years, how do they choose to respond to them, and what transpires as a result of their efforts?

This book emerges out of these questions and the search for answers that ensued in their wake. I immersed myself in activism around presidential debates and nominating conventions in 2000 and 2004. After following the work of 50 groups engaged in campaign-related activism and talking at length with their members, I resurfaced with paradoxical answers. Although I was propelled into the research by IATSE’s instrumental use of the debate, not one of the groups I studied enjoyed this level of success. In fact, in the final analysis, the brief, politically impoverished news coverage of Disrupt was one of the most noteworthy outcomes for any of the groups I studied. How do we make sense of IATSE’s success as we compare it to the challenges faced by Disrupt and its peers? If Disrupt is the most successful organization with which I worked over the course of two campaign cycles, what does this say about political activism? How do we reconcile Disrupt’s quite sizable mobilization with its inability to influence (or even enter) campaign-related discourse?

I will show that a tremendous amount of robust political activism emerges around presidential campaigns, but the story beneath the rallies, teach-ins, protests, and petitions is considerably less encouraging. We will see that unlike IATSE, whose action made targeted demands of its management, most groups drawn to major campaign events focus
on more nebulous goals. In particular, they are mobilized by a perceived opportunity to shape mainstream political discourse via the news media, and they channel their energies accordingly. This rampant media-centrism proves ineffective and in some ways even destructive. Activists’ often-outrageous attempts to lure journalists politicize public spaces in memorable ways, but for most groups the pursuit of media attention is largely futile, brings with it important organizational costs (including missed opportunities to connect with one another and with the people they encounter in the course of their work), and comes at the expense of other political activities.

These outcomes are problematic for the groups I study, but they also signal larger issues that require attention. Because the mass media serve as the “master forum” in which political debates are waged, the activists’ inability to become news is about more than fifteen minutes of fame; it is fundamentally about who is able to participate in discussions about social and political issues. The proliferation of media-centered activism, then, reveals a chasm between civil society and the public sphere—concepts I will explore in this chapter—that both limits associations’ ability to live up to normative visions proffered by existing theories of civil society and raises troubling questions about the inclusivity of American democracy.

Media-centrism was not limited to civil disobedience collectives like Disrupt. Indeed, there was a range of groups active around key campaign events. Some were social movement organizations, but there were also religious organizations, large national citizen groups, and nonpartisan civic organizations. The organizations examined in this book reflect the diversity of the associational universe. In light of this, the umbrella term “voluntary association” and its sibling “voluntary organization” most accurately honor these groups’ varied forms and uniting principles. I use these terms frequently throughout this book, but in the interest of readability I also take the liberty of using quasi-synonyms that are overly broad (e.g., “groups”) and overly narrow (e.g., “activist organizations”). In all cases, I use these varied and imperfect terms to refer to collectives that are nonfamilial, intentional, and freely entered, and which do not exist as a result of state coercion or for the purpose of generating profit. The breadth and diversity of the associational universe was visible when I stepped into the field. Presidential campaigns serve as catalysts for much of civil society, including, but by no means limited to, social movements.
What’s So Special About Presidential Campaigns?

Presidential campaigns provide an inviting atmosphere for activism. The campaign context is viewed by scholars of both civil society and social movements as presenting a special opportunity for voluntary organizations. There is research in the social movements literature that addresses elections as political opportunities, such as the work done by Blee and Currier (2006), Earl and Schussman (2004), Goldstone (2003), Meyer (1993, 2005, 2007), Meyer and Minkoff (2004), and Van Dyke (2003). In the civil society literature, Tocqueville ([1835] 2000) viewed elections as politically mobilizing, and Habermas (1996) clings to elections as moments that heighten the level of influence civil society has in the public sphere. Elections create opportunities for groups that are explicitly organized around political issues, as well as for organizations for whom political interests are secondary, and even those that normally focus their efforts elsewhere (e.g., the Apollo Theater stagehands union). Presidential campaigns are compelling to these groups because of their unique clustering of attributes: breadth, significance, liminality, geographic dispersion, periodicity, and publicity.3

**Breadth** refers to the multiplicity of issues that are open for debate during presidential campaigns. As an ever-increasing number of issues once understood as private (e.g., sexual behavior or domestic violence) have been thrust into the public sphere, presidential campaigns have become venues for open discussion of virtually all matters of common concern. It is difficult to imagine another arena in which immigration, environmental issues, the death penalty, public education, same-sex marriage, health care, trade agreements, tax policy, and stem cell research are all deemed relevant. This abundance of potentially salient issues renders the campaign context pertinent for an overwhelming number of voluntary associations. Some mobilize because candidates raise an issue central to their organization, while others attempt to force politicians to address an issue that is not on the agenda.

With respect to **significance,** presidential elections are consequential; the winner will be imbued with arguably more power than the victor in any other election in the world. The outcome will have local, national, and global effects. Thus, pro-choice and pro-life groups may be more active during a presidential campaign than a local campaign, because of the president’s control over Supreme Court nominations. The weight of these
elections serves to increase the perceived importance of participation and heightens the incentive for association involvement.

The uncertain outcome of a presidential election confers campaigns with a liminality that presents a political opportunity. By empowering a new set of leaders or re-sanctioning the incumbents, elections present political apertures during which activists can attempt to assert influence through a variety of mechanisms, including, but not limited to, offering candidate endorsements, making campaign contributions, protesting, publicizing candidate records or proclivities that please or displease them, and working to shape party platforms. In some instances liminality may prove mobilizing because it produces a sense of anxiety (as opposed to efficacy), leading groups to seek control of the outcome. Either way, this vulnerability, this political openness, prompts engagement.

Presidential campaigns are also geographically dispersed, moving politics outside Washington. Nominating conventions and televised debates take place beyond the Beltway, and candidates make countless stops across the country to give stump speeches, patronize neighborhood eateries, visit classrooms, and make themselves available to civic organizations. Hart (2000) argues that the campaign process brings candidates in closer contact with the public than they are likely to experience again once they enter the White House. The presence of candidates in local communities is an attractive opportunity for organizations hoping to have their political concerns addressed.

Presidential campaigns are also periodic. That is, they happen every four years. This regularity enables associations to anticipate and prepare interventions in a way that other major national events with the aforementioned characteristics do not. Natural and man-made disasters (e.g., Three Mile Island or Hurricane Katrina) and other crises (e.g., 9/11) bring politicians out of Washington, present moments of great uncertainty, and render many issues salient, but they occur without warning. The predictable lead time offered by presidential campaign events (e.g., conventions, debates, inaugurations) gives activists ample opportunity to mobilize, choose tactics, and make necessary preparations, such as securing permits, renting equipment, soliciting donations, and publicizing their efforts.

Finally, presidential campaigns bring with them publicity. The national press pool that follows each candidate, and the throng of local news personnel that joins them at each stop, create myriad perceived opportunities for associations to garner publicity. In addition to responding to journalists’ questions and distributing unsolicited press releases, activists can
stage events designed to capture the attention of the news media. Dayan and Katz (1992) explain that the prospect of sending a message to a national or international audience makes media events vulnerable to “hijacking” by outsiders in search of publicity. The belief that they will be able to attract coverage is compelling to activists who hope such attention will help them reach candidates, voters, and political parties as well as potential new members, contributors, and supporters.

This uncommon clustering of qualities inspires activists but does little to explain the unsatisfying outcomes experienced by the groups I will introduce in the pages of this book. Turning to the literature on civil society and the public sphere, we are left scratching our heads. While some argue that civil society is dead and others see it as vital, none really explains this peculiarity. What if we have a civil society that is robust and participatory but also invisible and inefficacious? And if this is true, why is this happening?

Civil Society, the Public Sphere, and Mobilization

Civil society is the arena of public group life, the terrain of voluntary associations. Although the term civil society has a long history in political and social theory, I use it in the contemporary sense, to refer to that sector of society that is analytically distinct from the state, the market, and the realm of the family. In their myriad formal and informal incarnations, the groups that populate civil society connect people to one another and channel individual energies, interests, and talents. They are the skeletal underpinnings of civil society and serve as a locus for civic engagement in both its episodic and enduring forms. In association, participants may discover common interests, develop community, attempt to influence public opinion, and seek to initiate or maintain public policies consistent with their definitions of a good society.

In many ways, voluntary associations can be understood as the infrastructure of civil society. As such, they are indispensable but not infallible. Many have romanticized voluntary associations and the civic engagement that they facilitate, but a growing body of research suggests that the results of involvement are contingent on context and may fail to live up to, or may even subvert, normative ideals.

While Habermas argues that at least temporary consensus can be reached in healthy civil societies through rational-critical discourse, this
process of articulating and asserting the public will is complicated by frequent conflicts over what constitutes the good society and how it should be approximated. Thus, while the will of the people theoretically emerges through the development of shared interests and unconstrained communication, in reality the public interest is defined in innumerable ways. In addition to political interests and group identities, cultural meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions are often created, negotiated, and challenged within civil society. The coexistence of competing concerns, views, and objectives manifest themselves in constant pressure for and resistance to political and cultural change on an array of fronts, from minor community disputes to issues of international significance. The ebb and flow of these struggles contribute to the ever-changing dynamics within and between voluntary associations, as well as those between civil society and non-civil sectors. As a result, civil society is best understood not only as a stable and homogeneous space characterized by consensus and solidarity, but also as a fluid and heterogeneous space of contest and conflict.

The term public sphere refers simultaneously to the practice of open discussion about matters of common concern and the public spaces that serve as settings for such dialogue, such as parks, e-mail lists, community centers, newspapers, and plazas. The public sphere thus refers both to public dialogue about matters of general concern and to the places where these discussions transpire. This incarnation of the concept stems largely from Habermas's (1989) The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. For Habermas (1996), publics can range from the episodic, accidental gatherings found in coffeehouses or taverns, to prearranged events such as conferences and church congregations, to abstract publics of dispersed readers, viewers, and listeners connected through mass media. Particularly relevant here is the argument made by Hallin and Mancini (1984, 2004) that as local publics deteriorate, mass-mediated publics take on increasing importance.

Habermas (1996) argues that the networks of associations, organizations, and social movements serve as barometers for how private individuals experience social problems because they filter and present these experiences in the public sphere. While he makes clear that these associations are not the most visible bodies in a public sphere dominated by mass media and professional public relations entities, he sees them as the critical organizational foundation for citizen-generated public discourse on matters of common concern. Thus, while the sphere of group life and the practice of public discourse should not be conflated, civil society and the public
sphere are deeply entwined concepts, with associations often serving as micro public spheres that foster dialogue among those with shared interests and influence public discourse beyond their borders.

As I explored the relationship between presidential campaigns and voluntary associations, I looked to the civil society literature for insights into potential opportunities and obstacles encountered by mobilizing organizations. Instead, I found a literature ill-equipped to address such questions. Contemporary theories that address the relationships within civil society, and between civil society and other sectors, bring a variety of issues to the fore, including those of boundary formation and social solidarity, discourse ethics and new social movements, visions of community and equality, and questions about what constitutes a political community. Some of this work explores the relationships internal to civil society, those that take place within and between its multiple, overlapping publics, while other research explores the relations among civil society, the state, and the economy. What remains unproblematized is the prevalent notion that these varied relationships, both internal and external, are consistent and continuous. The stagehands union and the many associations introduced in this book suggest otherwise.

While none of these scholars explicitly argue that action and engagement are staid, there is a silence around issues of differential mobilization. Cohen and Arato’s rich theoretical work on civil society serves as an excellent example of this silence. For these scholars, agency abounds and is utilized; civil society is an active terrain. Indeed, much of their work examines new social movements and the role of civil disobedience in democratic societies. They explain that “civil society, beyond all functionalist and pluralist models, should be seen not only passively as a network of institutions, but also actively as the context and product of self-constituting collective actors” (1992, xviii). The institutions of civil society are molded by the efforts of the multiple formal and informal organizations that inhabit this space. The reader is left with the image of a vibrant, contest-filled, and productive sphere of group action.

This image evokes the energy implied by the term mobilization, but variation in energy level—the shifting between different levels of activity—is unaccounted for. In Civil Society and Political Theory, Cohen and Arato explain that civil societies may vary in character: “There can be different types of civil society: more or less institutionalized, more or less democratic, more or less active” (1992, 17). But the implication is that this level of activity varies from society to society, rather than from time to time.
within a given society. In other words, they argue that civil societies of different natures exist, and that one civil society may be more active overall than another. Their argument is strengthened by attentiveness to the ever-changing, historically specific, social context. They posit that the nature of a given civil society is neither intrinsic nor fixed, but rather is fluid and expected to change in character over time.

We must extend this historical specificity to a more finely grained discussion of the ways in which the engagement and activity levels of a particular civil society may fluctuate on a smaller scale—not just with long-term historical transitions, but also from day to day and month to month. Further, it is critical to look not only at variation between different civil societies across time, but also at variation within any specific civil society at any given historical moment. A cross-sectional snapshot taken at any particular moment would reveal that the diverse associations within a society’s civil sector are not simultaneously at an equal level of activity (or institutionalization or democratization for that matter), but rather that each association has a unique composition that may at one moment be very active and at others lie close to dormant. Even in unusually thriving and particularly repressed civil societies, the diverse coexisting groups are unlikely to sustain equivalent levels of (in)activity. Conceptualizing the associational landscape in this way, then, provides a useful analytic tool as we work to understand voluntary association activity around presidential campaigns.

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas (1989) depicts an image of civil society that stands in stark contrast to the vibrant realm of activity described by Cohen and Arato. He describes the contemporary public sphere as bleak and depoliticized. Habermas argues that the once-vital public sphere was re-feudalized by the development of a mass consumer culture, the intrusion of bureaucratic associations, the development of the welfare state, and the withdrawal of individuals into isolated worlds of work and leisure. The consequence, he argues, is that contemporary civil society has been reduced to an apolitical realm: it is devoid of the critical activities of public discourse, and has deteriorated to the point that groups associate purely for social reasons. Habermas’s depiction of a public sphere dominated by advertising and consumption does not assume that these degraded associations and passive individual actors can be stimulated into increasing dialogue or activity. The lasting impression is one of non-reflexive individuals who have retreated into family and occupational life and of bureaucratic organizations that seek nothing more than
symbolic representation. We see no rise and fall of meaningful interaction in civil society. Instead, Habermas paints the nineteenth- and twentieth-century public sphere as one free of the sparks of life that ignited the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century.

These visions of civil society diverge along one axis and merge along another. The divergence is striking: where Cohen and Arato find energy and agency, Habermas finds passivity and inefficaciousness. Yet both theories foreground consistency. Cohen and Arato describe a civil society that remains in motion, while Habermas describes a civil society mired in inertia. The activity around a presidential election cannot be explained by either of these accounts. Civil society needs mobilization as a key concept if we are to understand voluntary association activity as something more than weekly meetings at the Moose Lodge or monthly newsletters circulated to geographically dispersed issue adherents. In his more recent work, Habermas (1996) is more optimistic about the role of civil society; in fact, he points toward the presence of textural variations, arguing that crises and elections can alter the social landscape such that the relationship between civil society and the state changes. In the end, however, he describes variation in the balance of power rather than changes in associational activity itself.

In order to understand how it is that an activist group like Disrupt can bring a city to its knees and yet go virtually unnoticed beyond the local paper, it is critical that we think about mobilization and its constraints. But mobilization as a concept has been applied almost exclusively to social movements, rather than to the broader spectrum of groups that engage in activism. This is an oversight, as even anecdotal reflections on voluntary organizations quickly reveal that associations are not static entities. Events that produce great excitement and concern can generate new groups and increase the activity and membership levels of existing organizations. For example, new organizations arose in response to both the Iraq war (e.g., Iraq Veterans Against the War or Code Pink: Women for Peace) and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina (e.g., Katrina’s Angels or Katrina InfoShare Collective). For associations already in existence, activity can be intensified by such events. For example, the National Rifle Association increased its activity and attracted numerous new members after the backlash against the private ownership of guns instigated by the spate of school shootings in 1998 and 1999. These examples suggest that civil society is a fluid and responsive arena rather than a smoothly operating assembly line.
Existing theories of civil society overlook these fluctuations in association activity, implicitly depicting the arena as either persistently engaged or disengaged. This oversight is puzzling since the literature on social movements is grounded fundamentally on the notion that collective action—which most often takes place in the realm of civil society, even if this is not explicitly stated—is not continuous. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996, 7) highlight this point as follows: “Understanding the mix of factors that give rise to a movement is the oldest, and arguably the most important, question in the field. Moreover, virtually all ‘theories’ in the field are first, and foremost, theories of movement emergence.” Though social movement theories differ considerably and I make no claim to be a social movements scholar, it is clear that they share a central concern with a core question: what sparks collective action? The understanding that group action ebbs and flows is implicit. Those interested in civil society and the public sphere need to ask this question as well.

Transferring the knowledge about mobilization gleaned from the study of social movements to civil society is helpful, though it is limited for two reasons. First, while civil society is the terrain of social movements, social movement organizations are only one of many types of associations existing in this arena. In other words, knowing why social movement organizations mobilize and what their outcomes are may not translate to our stagehands union, a cultural organization, or a religious group. It would be reductive to collapse the diversity of the associational spectrum into one type of organization.

A second challenge is that social movement researchers have traditionally addressed mobilization primarily in regard to instrumental actions aimed at attaining economic, political, or cultural goals, which directs them away from asking some of the questions most salient to those interested in civil society. Debates in the social movements literature explore which types of mobilizations are likely to generate political gains—particularly with regard to policymaking, but also in the acquisition of rights and the impact on electoral processes—focusing on whether and under what conditions social movements have political consequences. This is a critical question, of course, but it means that this research is less concerned with asking questions such as: What does the act of engaging or participating do for group life? What are the outcomes of mobilization, not in its political or economic impact, but in terms of social solidarity, democracy, and civic engagement? Certainly there is attention paid to culture in social movements. Indeed, it has been incorporated into most aspects of social
movement studies through explorations of phenomena such as collective identity, framing, cultural repertoires, and cultural innovations, but as Kurzman (2009) argues, meaning making has primarily been assimilated into a cause-and-effect-based analytic framework rather than treated as foundational.20

Mobilization has important consequences for voluntary associations, separate from goal attainment. This is not to say that exploring effective strategies for goal attainment is unimportant to those studying civil society, but rather that the act of associating, in and of itself, is a lesser-order question for those researching in the social movements tradition. Exploring activism from a civil society framework involves the assumption that associational life exists and persists, not necessarily because there is an issue that needs to be addressed, but as a direct result of the shape of modern democratic society. As a result, I borrow questions about mobilization from the social movements research and broaden them in order to introduce this vital concept into the literature on civil society, which stands to gain considerably. In mobilization, we can expect to see civil society’s greatest strengths but also its limitations. Said another way, voluntary associations’ concerted efforts to engage tell us a great deal about what such groups—so often romanticized—can (and cannot) accomplish and how this work shapes group life.

For the concept of mobilization to be meaningful in the broader realm of associations, it must capture not only the level or intensity of activity (which is perhaps what first comes to mind with the term mobilization), but also the shape that the activity takes, the mode of action. A distinction is often made between those social movement efforts that are visible to outsiders, such as rallies or protests, and those that transpire in preparation for this external engagement. These behind-the-scenes activities, such as creating websites and securing meeting space, are often invisible to both the public and most participants. This is a useful distinction, but a third analytic category is necessary to highlight the myriad activities created by and for members, without external engagement, such as conferences, workshops, and social gatherings. Without this third category, these communal efforts are rendered invisible at worst and residual at best, as the default presumption is that behind-the-scenes activity is secondary, mere preparation for external engagement. While this would be an accurate assessment of the way behind-the-scenes activities are viewed by some organizations, it would be a gross misunderstanding of the standpoint of others. Imagine, for example, a religious organization that serves primarily as a space for
socializing, discussing shared values, and pursuing charitable goals. Such an organization may rarely be concerned with engaging a broader audience, yet it could conceivably choose to do so if it perceived it as relevant (e.g., if a salient community issue arose). It would be inaccurate to interpret most of this group’s activities simply as preparation for public engagement.

These activity types are arrayed along the horizontal axis in table 1.1. On one end of the spectrum are fundamental activities, which include behind-the-scenes endeavors that the majority of the members do not see, but that facilitate the coordination of the organization and its membership. At the center of the spectrum are communal activities, those run by and for members without the intent of reaching a broader audience. At the other end are demonstrative activities, which are highly visible, externally focused endeavors that may or may not involve the majority of members and are directed toward non-members.

The terms demonstrative, communal, and fundamental refer to distinctive modes or types of action rather than to distinctive levels of action (e.g., mobilized vs. typical). Looking at the vertical axis, typical activities are those that organizations engage in routinely. In contrast, events that involve a notable break from routine and an atypical investment of resources are considered mobilized activities; such activities are a “big deal”
and require explanation even for regular participants. The distinction between these two levels of activity is relevant for all three modes of action. For example, communal activities may be designed for mobilization (e.g., a special party to celebrate an accomplishment) or be part of a standard mode of operation (e.g., a monthly potluck dinner). Certainly many group activities have dual foci; this heuristic device is simply intended to facilitate thinking about the variety of potential choices available. Considering the range of alternatives, and the options that exist within each category (activities within each of these six broad categories can take many forms), helps to place media-centricity in context as one particular variant of demonstrative mobilization.

The Research

This book is based on my ethnographic fieldwork at voluntary association events during the 2000 and 2004 Democratic and Republican nominating conventions in their host cities: Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City, as well as during the three televised presidential debates of 2000 in their respective host cities: Boston, Winston-Salem, and St. Louis. I observed civil disobedience collectives, local single-issue groups, large national citizen groups, labor unions, social movement organizations, religious organizations, and broad, multi-issue coalitions, among others. These groups focused their energies on a wide array of issues, ranging from the environment and global justice to abortion and war opposition. Most of the organizations I encountered identified as progressive or nonpartisan, with a smaller number identifying as conservative, libertarian, or anarchist. The rich palette of organizations whose colorful stories grace these pages reflects my assessment of diverse activities in these environments and my earnest interest in attempting to represent them as fairly as possible.

Other researchers have spent months and years immersed in voluntary associations and produced exceptional ethnographic accounts of association life, or used extensive interviews to create rich case studies of individual organizations. This book is different; I provide a wide-angle lens to capture the breadth of activity around a handful of mobilizing events. My mural of 50 groups brings to life the extraordinary range of organizations active in this environment, and also highlights their various interests, tactics, and outcomes. For example, large national mailing list organizations differ significantly from anarchist collectives in their campaign activism.
This broad view enables me to draw out commonalities and (sometimes counterintuitive) patterned differences that emerge among these organizations as they mobilize. Seeking this breadth made traditional ethnography logistically impossible. Instead, I use my ethnographic work as a foundation on which to build snapshots of these 50 associations, as well as to develop an intimate understanding of the social context in which their events transpired.

The groups in this book transform the cities that host national nominating conventions and televised debates into political festivals quite rare in the United States. Because these circumstances are fleeting and the mobilizations are circumscribed in time and space, I augment my ethnographic explorations with more than 125 in-depth interviews with association representatives (at least one “lay member” or “participant” and one “key member” or “leader” from each group) and political reporters who covered the events. Their stories and my relatively brief ethnographic excursions are complemented by news coverage of key events, association literature, website archives, and a small selection of association e-mail list discussions. It was a fascinating challenge to weave together these threads, to assemble the pieces of the puzzle in a way that captures the hopes, experiences, and consequences of association activity in the context of presidential campaigns. The picture that emerged revealed a great deal about the relationship between activist groups and presidential campaigns, but it revealed even more the relationship between activism and the media.

Media-Centered Activism

As it turns out, the activism that originally piqued my interest was remarkably unique. The Apollo Theater stagehands leveraged the Gore/Bradley debate to negotiate a contract by pressuring their management. In contrast, most groups that mobilized around the campaign events had broader objectives and a considerably larger target audience; they approached these events as opportunities to participate in or shape mainstream political discourse.

This emphasis on shaping public discourse led them to adopt a demonstrative, outward-looking orientation that generated activities intended to communicate with or be visible to nonmembers. What is even more interesting is that this desire to intervene in public discourse almost always translated into a dogged pursuit of mainstream media attention at the
expense of other approaches, such as canvassing or holding open meetings. Despite a range of available action alternatives, the groups narrowed their range of action twice: once by focusing exclusively on visibility, and again by treating the mainstream news media as the best or sole means of becoming visible.25

As a result of this narrow interpretation, activism in the presidential campaign milieu is dominated by media-centric efforts that require extraordinary effort be devoted to public relations preparation and strategy. Organizations held elaborate media trainings, designed eye-catching photo opportunities, wrangled over the perfect slogan, sent press releases, held press conferences, and even broke the law with the hope of garnering media attention. One group even had members practice being interviewed aggressively on camera and then had the group review and critique their performances. Media training was not taken lightly. Yet success eluded them: the vast majority of associations received no meaningful mainstream news coverage.

In the worst-case scenarios, the publicity work not only fails, but also has deleterious effects on the organizations. The tireless pursuit of media attention hurts associations’ ability to reach laypeople in several ways. Some association members appear unable to relinquish the marketing model designed for the news media, even when they talk directly with outsiders, face-to-face. I repeatedly heard activists respond to earnest inquiries posed by bystanders with sound bites, pithy slogans, and canned answers that sounded insincere, evasive, and, in some instances, dishonest. In other cases, I watched association members give interested bystanders the brush-off in order to follow a journalist or to make themselves available for interviews. Media-centrism created a barrier between association participants and potential supporters.

In addition, I found that the focus on publicity often shaped the internal cultures of mobilizing associations, transforming them into performance-oriented spaces designed for journalists. This transition stifled internal dialogue and led to the creation of rigid rules for members. Rather than the egalitarian spaces of community building and political discussion described by public sphere theorists, I found organizations with leaders who approached their members as potential liabilities, in that these individuals could potentially embarrass the group on camera if left to their own devices. In response, these groups worked to discipline their members’ speech and behavior. Ultimately, for many associations, this public relations approach is not only ineffective, but also damaging to group life.
It is useful to juxtapose this research to Gitlin’s (1980) classic study of the relationship between the radical student group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the news media during the antiwar movement of the 1960s. Gitlin artfully shows that the creation of news is a complex and mutually dependent social process. We take away from his text the knowledge that those who are covered in the news are not powerless, but also that the balance of power between journalists and activist groups is imbalanced. He demonstrates, for example, that news coverage of the student movement often trivialized its efforts, distorted the activities of the organization, and created celebrities out of members (which proved more divisive than galvanizing). The Whole World Is Watching chronicles the unraveling of SDS under the media spotlight. But the media environment today is not the media environment of the 1960s. In many ways, this book tells a story that is the inverse of Gitlin’s: where he lays bare the organizational costs of media attention, I find associations derailed by their often-herculean attempts to attract that gaze.

Reaching the Public:
Does It Matter If the Whole World Isn’t Watching?

Disrupt’s dramatic efforts to shape political discussion around the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia culminated in a remarkably low level of visibility, but most groups that I studied, even those that aggressively pursued news coverage, received even less media attention. Despite the crescendo of activity in civil society around key presidential campaign events, the impact of association attempts to influence broader political discourse is minimal. How do we make sense of the disjuncture between these groups and the mainstream public sphere? Does it even matter that there is a disjuncture?

Although Habermas’s early work depicts a single public arena and prioritizes rational-critical discussion of general rather than particular interests, scholars have since challenged this conception for its historical accuracy as well as its normative desirability. Historical evidence demonstrates that the bourgeois public sphere Habermas described was indeed a public sphere, but it was one of many. Competing publics taking different forms (e.g., non-rational, non-liberal, particularistic) or those comprising participants formally and informally excluded by the bourgeois public sphere (e.g., women, the illiterate, non-whites, the lower class) are absent from
Habermas’s account (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Ryan 1991). Further, although he believed a single, communal public sphere to be the ideal, this single-public model has been criticized as a step away from democracy in stratified societies, since the majority may oppress those of subordinate status because participatory parity is unachievable (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1992; Mouffe 1999; Young 1990).26

Fraser (1992) and others point toward and value the existence of multiple public spheres, suggesting that they provide spaces for articulating marginalized interests and viewpoints, building group solidarity, and establishing alternative interpretations of existing arrangements, and act as staging grounds for the development of strategies to inject these interests and views into mainstream public discourse.27 The coexistence of multiple public spheres is understood as a step toward building more inclusive democracies, broadening public discourse, and facilitating participatory parity. This is grounded in the notion that smaller publics enable group members to experience solidarity as they share interests with like-minded individuals and develop strategies to amplify their voices when they enter mainstream public arenas. In other words, to the extent that voluntary associations serve as micro public spheres, they are vital because they provide safe havens and support for marginalized groups or viewpoints, and also because they allow participants to work together to expand mainstream discursive space to create room for their issues and concerns. These micro publics, then, serve both as valuable enclaves and as incubators for engagement with nonmembers.

Since writing The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas (1989, 1996) has acknowledged the presence of multiple public spheres in no uncertain terms, making clear that multiple associations, organizations, and movements can provide spaces for public discourse. He seems to conceptualize the role of these publics in much the same way that Fraser (1992) envisions them, as spaces in which marginalized groups build community and work to engage the mainstream public. The experiences of the voluntary associations explored in this book complicate this optimistic vision by demonstrating that while such strategizing does indeed transpire, attempts to expand mainstream dialogue are profoundly limited. Most associations are narrowly focused on wooing or shocking the news media; when coverage does not materialize or fails to circulate their preferred message, the groups find themselves stranded in the margins, as spectators to, rather than participants in, discussions about political issues and choices that will shape their lives.
This involuntary enclaving has obvious consequences for the associations that flounder, but it also has consequences for society at large. In 2000, for example, with candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush largely aligned in their support of the continued expansion of free trade, news readers and viewers heard little about the potential costs of free-trade agreements. Meanwhile, groups organized around global justice in general and fair trade in particular were quite active in the broader campaign environment, offering radically different interpretations and arguments than those delivered by the candidates. For many, their arguments may have been unpersuasive, but for others they may have shaped their viewpoints, priorities, or behavior in the voting booth or in the marketplace.

If a disjuncture exists between voluntary associations and broader publics, it is a consequential one. Although seen as a vital element of democracy, civil society does not directly wield power in the political arena. Cohen and Arato (1992) explain that those in the civil terrain can acquire political influence but not political power. Because this influence is not institutionalized and remains outside the political decision-making process, they argue that civil society can directly transform itself but can affect the political system only indirectly (e.g., by pressuring elected officials or voting to change officeholders). Cohen and Arato take the possibility of “self” transformation for granted, but the ability to transform even civil society relies on the communicative structures of the public sphere, which are dominated by the mass media.

What is perhaps most perplexing about the gap between civil society and the public sphere is that theory suggests such gaps may actually be narrowed by elections. Habermas (1996, 373) states that “under certain circumstances civil society can acquire influence in the public sphere, and have an effect on the parliamentary complex (and the courts) through its own public opinions.” Given this vision of elections as crescendos of inclusivity, we might expect that marginalized groups working to shape political discourse would have better access to discursive arenas then they would in other circumstances.

The groups profiled in this book challenge this presumption, demonstrating that the realities of a public sphere dominated by the mass media and, equally important, the associations’ mindfulness of this domination, render striving to acquire influence in civil society and the political arena a daunting challenge. It might be tempting to interpret the disjuncture between associations and broader audiences as a simple function of media gatekeeping. Indeed, this is part of the story, but another part of this story
is the association response to the presence of a public sphere dominated by mass media. Gitlin (1980) reminds us that the struggle over news is a lopsided negotiation between news organizations and news workers, on the one hand, and voluntary associations and members on the other. The struggles to define what will become news reveal a great deal about why association coverage is thin and ultimately favors logistical reports rather than considerations of substantive issues. This is an important negotiation that I will address in detail, but equally important is the recognition that other association responses to campaign events, including circumvention of the mainstream media, may prove more effective politically and less toxic to group life.

While the literatures on voluntary associations and the public sphere remain largely separate (see Jacobs 2003), I hope to narrow the gap by unraveling their relationship, telling the story of the creative fashion in which voluntary associations attempt to enter political dialogue, the paradoxical way their approaches often undermine their success, and the deeply limited accomplishments they accrue. These complexities highlight the associations’ limited ability to live up to normative visions, such as those articulated by Fraser and Habermas, and cast shadows on the legitimacy of American democracy. Many have romanticized voluntary associations, but without access to circles of discussion they are dispossessed of their most vital strength (the ability to shape public opinion and transform civil society) and their potential indirect influence over the political system. Even more fundamentally, a meaningful democratic process requires that citizens have adequate information to make informed decisions on their own behalf. If the voices of many are rendered inaudible in mainstream political discourse, despite strenuous efforts to be included, and if alternative views on political issues or new ideas about what is defined as political are not deemed legitimate, then the presumption of an informed citizenry is untenable. It is also critical to consider the implications of a civil society that is debased by the frenzied pursuit of such inclusion.

Plan of the Book

In the chapters that follow, I explore the process of mobilization, particularly media-centered demonstrative mobilization, in the campaign context and lay bare its consequences for the associations under consideration. Chapter 2 describes the rarely seen political carnivals that emerge in the
cities that host national nominating conventions and debates. It explores why the associations choose to heighten their activity surrounding these events, and the remarkable consistency with which associations opt for mainstream media outreach as their focal mobilization strategy. Chapter 3 offers three extended case studies that illustrate the tactics most often used by associations trying to lure journalists, as well as an example of what a communal mobilization might look like. Chapter 4 shows how infrequently these elaborate tactics bear fruit, looking at the amount and character of subsequent news coverage. The remainder of the chapter documents the complex negotiation between journalists and activists over what will become news. Drawing this struggle out, I show that association members fail because they work strenuously to conform to the set of professional practices that are in place for political insiders, which run counter to a second, invisible set of standards in place for activists. Chapter 5 demonstrates that in addition to losing the publicity game, associations’ quest for mainstream media attention derails their efforts with real live people. I show that while media trainings abound, activist groups invest virtually no effort in training their members to engage pedestrians in productive conversations. In chapter 6, I show that campaign mobilizations are more than simply lost opportunities: they are association-altering experiences. While some changes are positive, such as the enhancement of members’ feelings of efficacy, others, including the suppression of members’ political speech, are disconcerting. I further use this chapter to examine what the association mobilizations offer our understanding of civil society, the news media, and presidential elections. Finally, I close the book with an epilogue that reflects on the 2008 election and examines the resilience of mainstream news media-centrism in the face of new platforms provided by web 2.0.