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Manipulating the Public Agenda: Why ACORN Was in the News, and What the News Got Wrong

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Executive Summary

Highlights.

- The activities of the community organizing group ACORN became a high profile news story in 2008, particularly toward the end of the presidential election campaign, when the Republican candidates and other conservatives attacked ACORN. More than 60% of all stories about ACORN during 2007 and 2008 appeared in the single month of October 2008, creating a well-orchestrated “October Surprise.”
- Although the 2008 presidential election is long over, conservative opinion entrepreneurs and the conservative media echo chamber remain fixated on ACORN, and poised to inject their frame about ACORN as an issue in the 2010 and 2012 national elections.
- Since Obama took office in January 2009, conservatives have continued to attack ACORN and tried to link ACORN to Obama and the Democrats. Criticism of ACORN has been a consistent story on Fox News and conservative talk shows, and in conservative publications, websites, and columns in mainstream newspapers. For example:
 - In early 2009, GOP allegations that the Democrats in Congress specifically targeted billions of stimulus funds for ACORN became news stories despite the fact that it was not true
 - In July 2009, U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, ranking Republican on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, released a report, “Is ACORN Intentionally Structured as a Criminal Enterprise?” that repeated many of the allegations made during the 2008 campaign and that generated media attention
 - On August 11, 2009, the House Judiciary Committee released over 5,000 pages of White House and Republican National Committee e-mails, along with transcripts of closed-door testimony by Karl Rove, former Bush senior advisor and deputy chief of staff, and Harriet Miers, former White House counsel. The documents revealed that Rove played a central role in the firing of David C. Iglesias, the U.S. Attorney in New Mexico, for failing to help Republican election prospects by prosecuting alleged instances of voter fraud by ACORN.² Nearly every major news organization reported on the Judiciary Committee’s unveiling of the e-mails and transcripts, but none of them—including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*—mentioned that Rove was specifically focused on attacking ACORN for its voter registration efforts in New Mexico and other states,³ even though ACORN is mentioned frequently as a Republican target in the investigative documents.⁴

- Using the controversy over the community group ACORN, this study illustrates the way that the media help **set the agenda** for public debate, and **frame** the way that debate is shaped. We describe how **opinion entrepreneurs** (primarily business and conservative groups and individuals) set the story in motion as early as 2006, the conservative echo chamber orchestrated its anti-ACORN campaign in 2008, the McCain-Palin campaign picked it up, and the mainstream media reported its allegations without investigating their truth or falsity. As a result, the relatively little-known community organization became the subject of a major news story in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, to the point where 82% of the respondents in an October 2008 national survey reported they had heard about ACORN.
- Although ACORN is involved in many community activities around the country, including efforts to improve housing, wages, access to credit, and public education, the dominant story frame about ACORN was “voter fraud.” The “voter fraud” frame appeared in 55% of the 647 news stories about the community organization in 15 mainstream news organizations during 2007 and 2008. The news media stories about ACORN were overwhelmingly negative, reporting allegations by Republicans and conservatives.
- In October 2008, at the peak of the campaign season, negative attacks dominated the news about ACORN:
 - 76% of the stories focused on allegations of *voter fraud*
 - 8.7% involved accusations that *public funds* were being funneled to ACORN
 - 7.9% of the stories involved charges that ACORN is a *front* for registering Democrats
 - 3.1% involved blaming ACORN for the *mortgage scandal*
- The mainstream news media failed to fact-check persistent allegations of “voter fraud” despite the existence of easily available countervailing evidence. The media also failed to distinguish allegations of voter *registration* problems from allegations of actual *voting* irregularities. They also failed to distinguish between allegations of wrongdoing and actual wrongdoing. For example:
 - 82.8% of the stories about ACORN’s alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to mention that actual voter fraud is very rare (only 17.2% did mention it)
 - 80.3% of the stories about ACORN’s alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to mention that ACORN was reporting registration irregularities to authorities, as required to do by law
 - 85.1% of the stories about ACORN’s alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to note that ACORN was acting to stop incidents of registration problems by its (mostly temporary) employees when it became aware of these problems
 - 95.8% of the stories about ACORN’s alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to provide deeper context, especially efforts by Republican Party officials to use allegations of “voter fraud” to dampen voting by low-income and minority Americans, including the firing of U.S. Attorneys who refused to cooperate with the politicization of voter fraud accusations – firings that ultimately led to the

resignation of U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales

- 61.4% of the stories about ACORN’s alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to acknowledge that Republicans were trying to discredit Obama with an ACORN “scandal”
- 47.8% of the news stories about ACORN in October 2008 linked the organization to candidate Barack Obama, most of them seeking to discredit him and his campaign through guilt-by-association.
- The media bias against ACORN was evident not only in its focus on allegations of voter fraud but also in the language used to describe ACORN, such as *leftist*, *left-wing*, *front* (for Democrats), *radical*, *activist*, *political*, *militant*, and *socialist*.
- The attacks on ACORN originated with business groups and political groups that opposed ACORN’s organizing work around living wages, predatory lending, and registration of low-income and minority voters. These groups created frames to discredit ACORN that were utilized by conservative “opinion entrepreneurs” within the conservative “echo chamber” – publications, TV and radio talk shows, blogs and websites, think tanks, and columnists – to test, refine, and circulate narrative frames about ACORN. These conservative “opinion entrepreneurs” were successful in injecting their perspective on ACORN into the mainstream media.
- Perhaps the peak moment in the attack on ACORN occurred at the presidential debate between Obama and McCain on Oct. 15, 2008. Although not asked a question about ACORN, McCain injected the issue on his own, saying: “We need to know the full extent of Senator Obama’s relationship with ACORN, who is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.” Clearly this statement was newsworthy. This study reveals, however, that opinion entrepreneurs, the conservative echo chamber, and the mainstream media had laid the groundwork for McCain’s attack on ACORN.
- Local newspapers, which were more likely to verify the *actual* voting conditions of county election boards, were much less susceptible to the politicized “voter fraud” frame than the national news media.

The ACORN Story. One of the biggest stories of the 2008 election, outside of the unprecedented number of “firsts” with the figures involved—including the first woman Republican vice-presidential candidate, and the potential for the first woman or African-American man as the Democratic presidential candidate—concerned an otherwise little-known community organization called ACORN.

Prior to 2008, few Americans had heard about ACORN (an acronym for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), although it is the nation’s largest community organizing group. Then, during the presidential campaign, ACORN was thrust on center

stage, the subject of many national stories in newspapers and magazines, on TV and radio news and talk shows, and on blogs and websites. The spotlight on ACORN reached a peak when Republican candidates John McCain and Sarah Palin charged ACORN with undermining the nation's economy and electoral process.

An Independent Study. This study, which received no outside funding from any organization, analyzed the complete 2007-2008 coverage of ACORN by 15 major news media organizations, and the narrative frames of their 647 stories during that period. The news media analyzed include the four the highest circulation national newspapers—*USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*—and an analysis of the transcripts of reports from leading broadcast news organizations: ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio (NPR), and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (PBS). We also analyzed stories from three local newspapers representing cities in which ACORN has a long-time presence: the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Putting ACORN on the News Agenda. The study reveals a classic case of the **agenda-setting effect** of the news media: how a little-known community organization became the subject of a major news story in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, to the point where 82% of the respondents in an October 2008 national survey reported they had heard about ACORN.

Making “Voter Fraud” the Dominant News Frame. The news not only told us to think *about* ACORN, as the agenda-setting effect suggests, but also told us *how* we should think about ACORN, as our **framing analysis** confirms. Most of the news media coverage about ACORN carried one-sided frames, repeating the conservative and Republican criticisms of the group without seeking to verify them or provide ACORN or its supporters with a reasonable opportunity to respond to the allegations. **Voter fraud** was the dominant story frame in news about ACORN for 2007-08, with 55% of the 647 stories analyzed using it. Coverage of the voter fraud frame was even more intense in the broadcast and cable media, with 68.7% of those stories using the frame. Given the comparatively low number of other frames about ACORN in all media analyzed, allegations of voter fraud may have been the *only* story frame about ACORN that most news consumers experienced.

Creating the “October Surprise” of the 2008 Campaign. Across all news media, October 2008 was the most intense month for stories with the voter fraud frame, with more than three-quarters (76%) of all stories in that month using the frame. Because there was little national news media coverage of ACORN prior to October 2008 (more than 60% of all ACORN stories over the two-year study period appeared in the single month of October 2008), the news media frames of that important month before the national election carried extra weight, as most citizens had little prior knowledge of ACORN against which to evaluate the reports. Although the conservative media slowly built their case against ACORN over many years, when the full force of the Republican anti-ACORN campaign hit in October 2008 it came as a classic “**October Surprise**”—an element added in the final days of the campaign with little time for citizens to gain an accurate understanding of the

issue.

The Origins of the ACORN Story. How did the ACORN story emerge on the news media’s agenda? Of the various ways to frame the controversy, how did the news media choose the “voter fraud” frame? This report examines how different interest groups – we call them **opinion entrepreneurs** – were able to place their views in the media, and how they used the network of conservative media organizations (the so-called “echo chamber”) to test and promote their frames and channel the stories into mainstream media agenda. The seamlessness of the campaign against ACORN was startling: in the 2008, almost everything that the McCain-Palin campaign said about ACORN duplicated, sometimes almost word-for-word, what the conservative media and opinion entrepreneurs had already uttered.⁵

The seeds of the story began years earlier among conservative business groups and Republican officials upset with ACORN’s community organizing efforts to help poor Americans improve economic conditions and gain a stronger political voice. The beginning of the narrative framing for this particular ACORN news story began in 2006, when Republican candidates and operatives began accusing ACORN of a variety of economic and political wrongdoings, including widespread “voter fraud,” and later, triggering the housing meltdown and economic crisis because of its support for mortgages for working class homebuyers and the Community Reinvestment Act. These criticisms of ACORN were then repeated by what has been called the conservative “echo chamber” – publications like the *Weekly Standard*, *American Spectator*, and *National Review*, radio talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh, newspaper columnists like John Fund of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News Channel pundits like Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, as well as conservative websites and bloggers. The conservative echo chamber also linked Democratic candidate Barack Obama and his campaign to ACORN and, more broadly, attacked Obama’s experiences as a community organizer and, by implication, his ties with “radical,” even “socialist,” community organizing groups. These criticisms, too, were picked up by mainstream news organizations.

An Ongoing Saga, and the Shortcomings of Journalism. Were this simply an isolated example of media complicity (witting or unwitting) with political organizations, the attack on ACORN would be of interest only to ACORN, its allies and detractors. But this case has wider implications.

Our analysis of the narrative framing of the ACORN stories demonstrates that—despite long-standing charges from conservatives that the news media are determinedly liberal and ignore conservative ideas⁶--the news media agenda is easily permeated by a persistent media campaign, even when there is little or no truth to the story. In the instance of the 2008 presidential election, the conservative echo chamber’s allegations about ACORN, mostly unfounded, became one of the news media’s major stories of the campaign.

Journalism is essentially a discipline of verification, and verification is what separates it

from propaganda, as Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach note in *The Elements of Journalism*.⁷ In the case of ACORN, the story continued—and still continues—to serve as misinformation because it has largely been reported without transparency and accuracy.

If other stories of the campaign hadn't garnered more attention, particularly the nosediving economy (despite efforts of the conservative echo chamber to blame this on ACORN, too), it is likely that this story could have become a determining factor in the 2008 presidential race. (In fact, Republicans and conservative news media continued to insist in 2009 that the *New York Times* intentionally killed a bombshell story linking ACORN, Obama, and election fraud.⁸) It still may be a factor in the 2010 mid-term elections and in the 2012 presidential race. Moreover, the attacks on ACORN in the conservative echo chamber persisted into 2009. These included false statements—made by Republican officials, repeated by the conservative echo chamber, and reported by the mainstream media—that the economic stimulus plan sponsored by Obama and the Democrats had billions of dollars set aside specifically targeted for ACORN.⁹

While other stories of the campaign (such as the level of Michelle Obama's patriotism, the meaning of the Obamas' fist bump, and the comments of Rev. Jeremiah Wright¹⁰) have faded after Obama's election, ACORN continues to be a target of conservative media and the Republican Party, which, for example, launched the stopacorn.gop.org Web site in May 2009.¹¹

Our goal in this study is not to get bogged down in charging various news media with left-wing or right-wing bias, but to instead demonstrate that there are indeed intensive political efforts to influence the national news agenda and to frame news stories by special interest groups, or **opinion entrepreneurs**. Moreover, when journalism organizations take a disinterested stance of "objectivity," passing along the day's political talking points, and failing to verify allegations before they report (or, just passing along the political talking points because they have 24 hours of programming or news holes in their op-ed pages to fill), they do a great disservice to citizens, the electorate, and their own profession.



Complete Results and Discussion

I. Agenda-Setting and Framing

In recent decades, media scholars have identified two ways that the media influence public opinion and even policymaking – agenda-setting and framing.

The concept of the “agenda-setting effect”¹² was initially documented by media researchers at the University of North Carolina in 1972. The effect suggests that the news media, by virtue of their ability to determine what will be in the news, create an agenda. According to a popular summary of the agenda-setting effect, the media don’t tell people what to think, but what to think *about*.

The collective effect of the news media’s coverage of a certain issue increases the public salience of that issue. Thus, the media agenda “sets” the public agenda. Public concern about issues – war, crime, political scandal, homelessness, and others – is shaped in large measure by what the media covers. Such was the case with the 1975 hit movie “Jaws” and the subsequent rise in coverage about shark attacks. The actual cases of shark attacks hadn’t risen, but public salience had, and people were much more likely to cite shark attacks as a real concern.¹³ Similarly, media coverage of crime shapes how safe people feel, regardless of the actual crime rate in an area. The public’s beliefs about crime are based less on personal experience and more on what they see and read in the news media. Americans are bombarded with news about crime, particularly violent crime. Crime news accounts for a significant share of daily news coverage. The phrase “if it bleeds, it leads” characterizes the disproportionate attention paid to crime and other threats to public safety on television news and in daily newspapers. A study of news programming in 56 U.S. cities found that violent crime accounted for two-thirds of all local news.¹⁴ Another study found that although murder accounted for less than 1% of all crime in Los Angeles, it made up 20% of all local news reports on crime.¹⁵ The extent of news coverage of crime typically has little to do with actual crime rates. For example, the decline in urban violent crime rates in the 1990s did not result in a proportional decline in news coverage of violent crime.¹⁶

A second way that media analysts examine media influence is by examining “frames.”¹⁷ The frame of a news story gives meaning to the individual events reported. Sociologist Todd Gitlin defines frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.”¹⁸ In other words, the way in which a journalist tells the story is the story frame. If the agenda-setting function of the media shapes what readers and views think *about*, the way the media frames a story shapes *what, or how*, they think. It influences readers’ and viewers’ perspectives about a problem or issue – whether a politician, a food product, a company, an institution, or an organization is good or bad. For example, news framing of the 1993-94 debate over health care characterized reform in cynical terms of a “big government” takeover that would interfere in the relationship between doctors and patients.¹⁹ In foreign policy, a dominant news frame, supported by the Bush administration, emerged after the

September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., which endorsed invading Afghanistan and Iraq in a so-called “war on terror, based in part on the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.”²⁰ In the realm of labor union coverage, news frames tend to focus on the consumer impact of strikes and protests, and not their relevance to all citizens.²¹

Together, the media’s agenda-setting role and the way it frames stories and issues play an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing political debate. In fact, agenda setting effects have been found to be even stronger when framed as part of a political campaign.²²

But neither agenda-setting nor framing theory says much about *why* some issues wind up on the agenda and *why* some frames dominate media. In both cases, the activities of interest groups, or what we call “opinion entrepreneurs,” play an important role.²³

The news media (reporters and editors) seek out, respond to, and rely on some sources more than others, and those sources routinely become news. Organizations with more resources, or that have more credibility in the eyes of journalists, are more likely to become regular news sources, and thus shape which issues (agenda-setting) and which perspectives (frames) dominate the news. For example, businesses-backed organizations (such as the chamber of commerce, foundations, think tanks or policy groups²⁴) have the resources (staff, reports, blue-ribbon task forces, social connections) to get their concerns into the media’s line of vision, while low-income groups often have to resort to protest. During a political campaign, candidates and their staffs become major sources of news, but some candidates receive more coverage (agenda-setting) and more favorable coverage (frames) than others. The role of opinion entrepreneurs in influencing media coverage – agendas and frames – has not received the attention it deserves. We examine this phenomenon in excavating the media coverage of ACORN.

When reporters can’t immediately verify the facts of a statement from a legitimate source, they simply report the “truth claim,” as sociologist Gaye Tuchman explained in her book, *Making News*. The statement may or may not be true, but it *is* true that the source said it. Sometimes the reporter may report an opposing truth claim, enabling the reporter to “claim to have been fair by presenting ‘both sides of the story’.”²⁵ But, it isn’t simply a neutral balancing act; the media gives more or less credence to certain truth claims by way of narrative framing. Over time, some sources gain credibility by having their truth claims regularly repeated, but not evaluated for their validity. As Trudy Lieberman noted in her study of the conservative news media, repetition creates a truth of its own: “If the public hears the same message multiple times, soon people will believe its veracity.”²⁶

Thus, this study investigates series of questions: Do the conservative media repeat certain truth claims over and over? Do they frame stories with few or no opposing truth claims? Do these narratives influence the news agenda at mainstream media? Do these stories influence the public agenda?

II. A Brief History of ACORN

ACORN is the largest community organizing group in the United States. It has chapters in 110 cities in 40 states. ACORN and its affiliates have an annual budget of over \$100 million, over 1,000 employees, and nearly 500,000 dues-paying families.

ACORN emerged out of the anti-poverty activism of the 1960s. By the late 1960s, one of those groups, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), had built an organization with affiliates in 60 cities across the country. But because it focused exclusively on welfare recipients, its narrow constituency base guaranteed that it would remain a marginal force in the nation's politics. George Wiley, NWRO's leader, and Wade Rathke, one of NWRO's best organizers, believed that the time was ripe to build a broader multi-racial movement for economic justice, with a membership base of low-income people, including the working poor, but with support from middle-class allies. In 1970, Rathke agreed to go to Little Rock, Arkansas and try a different approach. He started a new group called ACORN (it initially stood for Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now). At first it organized welfare recipients and low-income working families around issues that could unite them, including free school lunches, Vietnam veterans' rights, hospital emergency room care, and unemployment.

ACORN soon expanded in Arkansas and started building chapters in other cities throughout the South and later throughout the country. By 1975, it was organizing in eight cities in three states. Five years later, ACORN had chapters in 35 cities in 24 states. By 1990, ACORN counted 40 chapters in 27 states. Its growth continued in the 1990s, so by 2000 it had 46 affiliates in 29 states. After 2000, ACORN rapidly accelerated its expansion effort, growing to 92 cities in 35 states by 2005, then to 103 cities in 37 states two years later. As a result of its expansion outside Arkansas, the group kept its name but soon revised the acronym to stand for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Most people, however, simply know the group as ACORN.

ACORN has focused on issues that improve living and working conditions for low-income Americans, including housing, mortgage discrimination, schools, wages, welfare, health care, and voting rights. ACORN identifies issues by knocking on doors in low-income neighborhoods and bringing people together in local chapters. There are thousands of local groups around the country engaged in community organizing around similar issues. What makes ACORN unusual, and what accounts for its significant growth and success, is its "federated" structure. ACORN is a national organization with state offices and local chapters. This allows ACORN to conduct organizing campaigns simultaneously at the neighborhood, local, state and federal levels. As a result, its chapter members are often "in motion" on a variety of issues, so that its local organizations can link up with their counterparts around the country to change national policy on key issues that can't be solved at the neighborhood or municipal level. (See Appendix for more on ACORN's history.)

III: The Beginnings of an Anti-ACORN News Frame

Uncovering the manipulation of the public agenda about ACORN requires analysis of a

chain of influence that involves several sectors: business-sponsored groups that oppose ACORN's organizing work on wages, lending and other issues; Republican Party officials and candidates; conservative websites and blogs, publications, columnists, and TV and radio talk shows; and mainstream media organizations.

During its three decades of community organizing, ACORN has made enemies among some politicians, business groups, and conservatives. Many politicians, especially Republicans, haven't appreciated ACORN's efforts to register and mobilize low-income minority voters, who tend to vote for Democratic candidates. The banking industry hasn't appreciated ACORN's campaigns against redlining and predatory lending. Firms involved in predatory lending and credit card abuses created a front group, the Consumer Rights League, to attack ACORN, not only on lending issues but also on ACORN's other activities, including its voter registration work. Similarly, the restaurant, hotel, alcoholic beverage, and tobacco industries, who oppose ACORN's work to raise wages through campaigns to adopt local "living wage" laws and to increase minimum wages at the state and federal levels, created a front group, the Employment Policies Institute, that has issued reports and created a website to discredit ACORN and thwart ACORN-led efforts.

For years prior to 2008, these organizations had some success in generating anti-ACORN stories, particularly among the conservative echo chamber, but also in the mainstream media. But during the 2008 political season, the issues and frames promoted by ACORN's opponents received more attention. A measure of their success is that the names of the business-backed groups that started the anti-ACORN crusade – the Consumers Rights League and the Employment Policies Institute – rarely appeared in the media. Their fingerprints were missing, but their influence was significant.

One of the veteran opponents of ACORN has been the *Wall Street Journal*. As the *Journal* noted in an Oct. 14, 2008 editorial, "We've written about them for years, but Acorn is now getting more attention as John McCain's campaign makes an issue of the fraud reports and Acorn's ties to Mr. Obama. It's about time someone exposed this shady outfit that uses government dollars to lobby for larger government."²⁷

The *Journal's* language reveals much about efforts to frame ACORN. First, "make an issue" about ACORN. Facts are not presented, only allegations that there is something troublesome or controversial going on with ACORN. Second, repeat the notion that ACORN has "ties" to Obama. (The ultimate goal is to damage the Obama campaign.) Finally, stigmatize ACORN with negative language—such as "shady outfit"—and keep suggesting "it's about time someone exposed" ACORN despite the fact that after years of politically motivated state and federal charges and investigations there was no serious wrongdoing by ACORN to expose. (The Bush Administration's Justice Department mounted several fruitless criminal cases and fired several U.S. Attorneys who wouldn't keep filing the frivolous but politically beneficial cases against ACORN. The well-known scandal ultimately brought down Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.)²⁸

In 2006, during President George W. Bush's second term, conservatives and Republicans

renewed their efforts against ACORN. Although there was growing dissatisfaction in public opinion polls with President Bush and the Republican Party, if they could make their political opponents look worse by linking them to a controversial, even “radical,” group, they still might win in 2008.

The seeds of conservative efforts against ACORN were planted first on the Web, an example of the process of opinion entrepreneurship. Hundreds of blog sites echoed the same unsubstantiated allegations and charges about ACORN. The sites, some well known, others not, included Townhall, NewsBusters, The Foundry, Chicagoans Against Obama, Let Liberty Ring, Sharp Right Turn, LaRouchePAC, Wake Up America, Red Stater, Audacity of Truth, Audacity of Hypocrisy, Christian Coalition of America, Christian Action League, SarahPalin4VP, Judicial Watch, and Accuracy in Media.

Many of the initial allegations originated with industry-funded campaigns, or conservative commentators and operatives – opinion entrepreneurs. What follows is a review of some of the Internet-based campaigns against ACORN that began prior to it becoming a major presidential campaign issue in 2008.

One of the earliest Web efforts against ACORN is a website called rottenacorn.com, sponsored by the Employment Policies Institute. It represents a common business-funded attack on ACORN, with familiar charges:

ACORN’s practices have corrupted our political process as well. It has engaged in questionable election activities for years—stretching back even to the organization’s founding years in Arkansas. In recent years, as its political power has increased, so have instances of fraud. In the past few years, it has been investigated for election fraud in at least a dozen states.

Like the approach noted above, the modus operandi is to taint ACORN with charges of systemic corruption (“questionable activities,” “investigated for election fraud”), yet the site and its 30-page report from July 2006, titled “Rotten ACORN: America’s Bad Seed,” did not produce any evidence of convictions against ACORN.²⁹

The Employment Policies Institute (EPI) is actually a front group created by Washington, D.C.-based Berman & Co., which specializes in “Astroturf lobbying”—phony grassroots organizations for corporate clients. According to the reporting of SourceWatch.org, “EPI’s mission is to keep the minimum wage low so Berman’s clients can continue to pay their workers as little as possible.”³⁰ Thus, part of EPI’s job is to churn an ever-present information campaign against ACORN for its clients in the restaurant and bar industry, like Outback Steakhouse.

Berman & Co. continued its campaign against ACORN through LaborPains.org, a web site sponsored by two other Astroturf lobbying organizations—the Center for Union Facts, and the Employee Freedom Action Committee. Both groups are opposed to labor union

activities. A March 19, 2007 posting titled “Prosecutors Eye Union-Backed ACORN (Again)” on LaborPains.org took a familiar swipe at ACORN:

We’ve discussed before the union-backed group ACORN, which has been tied to voter fraud in more than a dozen states in recent years...News from this weekend suggests that systematic voter fraud is fact, not myth. The [New York] Times reports that one of the federal prosecutors mired in a political mess failed to investigate ACORN in an a (sic) meaningful way for its repeated (and galling) shenanigans in New Mexico.³¹

Again, a conservative web site recycled allegations (“tied to voter fraud” and “shenanigans”). Yet the posting misinterpreted the *New York Times* story it referenced. In fact, the *Times* story was about the emerging U.S. Attorney General firing scandal. David Iglesias, the federal prosecutor in New Mexico who didn’t find merit in charges of voter fraud against ACORN despite the urgings of his state’s Republican Party officials, was one of the federal attorneys fired. “I thought I was insulated from politics,” Iglesias said. “But now I find out that main Justice was up to its eyeballs in partisan political maneuvering.”³² Still, the effect of the LaborPains posting was to keep repeating misinformation about ACORN to make a controversy seem legitimate.

Later in 2007, *Investor’s Business Daily*, a conservative business newspaper, rehashed more accusations and misrepresentations. “ACORN has been accused of voter fraud in 13 states since 2004 and was convicted of falsifying signatures in a voter registration drive last July, drawing a fine of \$25,000 in Washington state,” the newspaper wrote in an editorial that was often repeated around the conservative blogosphere as evidence of evil at ACORN.³³

But accusations don’t amount to wrongdoing (no matter how often they are repeated), and, as the *Seattle Times* more truthfully reported, it was rogue ACORN employees who falsified voter registrations, not an ACORN conspiracy. The defendants “concocted the scheme as an easy way to get paid, not as an attempt to influence the outcome of elections, King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg said,” the newspaper stated. ACORN agreed to pay \$25,000 to King County for investigative costs.³⁴

Conservative publicist and Republican strategist David Horowitz added to the efforts to stigmatize ACORN with his “DiscoverTheNetworks.org: A Guide to the Political Left” web site that he launched in early 2005. The profile for ACORN included this description:

- “Largest radical group in America, with more than 400,000 dues-paying member families, and more than 1,200 chapters in 110 U.S. cities”
- “Was implicated in numerous reports of fraudulent voter registration, vote-rigging, voter intimidation, and vote-for-pay scams during recent election cycles”³⁵

Again, the crimes and misdemeanors of a “radical” community organization are in fact just “implicated.” The evidence offered by DiscoverTheNetworks.org comes from the same swirl of allegations already published in conservative and Republican Internet sites, plus conservative periodicals and news organizations like Fox News, the *National Review*, the *American Spectator*, and the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. This is the classic modus operandi of an “echo chamber.”

Included in the list of resources on DiscoverTheNetworks.org were anti-ACORN pieces by Michele Malkin, the self-described “blogger, conservative syndicated columnist, author, and Fox News Channel contributor.” In her July 26, 2007 post, Malkin also misrepresents the Washington state case:

Guess which left-wing group is at the center of the worst case of voter-registration fraud in Washington state history? Yep, you guessed it: ACORN. The same ACORN tied to massive voter fraud in Missouri. And Ohio. And 12 other states.³⁶

“At the center” and “tied to” are the same stigmatizing language used in the other conservative blog posts, adding to the resonating theme. In fact, this single Malkin post was quoted and hypertext linked to at least 55 other web sites. Malkin’s post also revealed the second step of the conservative strategy: link the sullied name of ACORN to the leading Democratic candidate. In mid-2007, the Democrat leading in the polls in Iowa (the first state in the nominating process) was featured in the title of Malkin’s post: “John Edwards & ACORN, perfect together.”

Also included as a resource in the DiscoverTheNetworks.org list on ACORN was HumanEvents.com, which bills itself as “The Headquarters for the Conservative Underground,” and whose editorial staff includes Ann Coulter, one of the conservative movement’s most omnipresent commentators. HumanEvents.com describes ACORN with the same talking points: “... a radical activist group ... implicated in a number of fraudulent voter-registration schemes.”³⁷

By 2008, the conservatives and Republicans, as they attempted to bring the campaign against ACORN to a much wider audience, had laid a solid trail for the mainstream news media to follow. Perhaps the greatest evidence of the intentions of conservatives/Republicans was the transformation of John Fund’s book, *Stealing Elections: How Voter Fraud Threatens Our Democracy*. Fund, an editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and ghostwriter of Rush Limbaugh’s 1993 book *The Way Things Ought to Be*, made absolutely no mention of ACORN in his first edition of the book in 2004.³⁸ But, by the release of the revised edition of *Stealing Elections* in July 2008,³⁹ the target had changed. Fund included two new chapters demonizing ACORN, including one whose title reflected Malkin’s approach a year earlier and foreshadowed the Republican’s new campaign strategy: “Barack Obama and ACORN: Perfect Together.”

Along with Fund, Stanley Kurtz was the conservative echo chamber’s most important

opinion entrepreneur in terms of circulating the charges against ACORN. Kurtz, who is affiliated with the conservative think tank Ethics and Public Policy Center, frequently wrote about ACORN for conservative publications such as *National Review*⁴⁰, as well as daily newspapers such as the *New York Post*⁴¹ and *Wall Street Journal*.⁴² He also frequently appeared on conservative TV and radio shows, and was cited as an expert on ACORN by other conservative columnists and by talk show hosts. His articles were frequently reprinted and cited by websites and blogs and other parts of the conservative echo chamber.

By October 2008, conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, already deeply immersed in the accusations of the conservative echo chamber, came to this conclusion on his national radio program:

I actually think, after studying all this ACORN stuff, and reading what Stanley Kurtz [a contributor to *National Review* magazine] has written about this...you find that it has been part of an entire movement that has been going on for two, maybe three decades, right under our noses.

We thought that it was just liberal welfare policies and all that that kept blacks from progressing while other minorities grew and prospered. But no, it is these wackos from Bill Ayers to Jeremiah Wright to other anti-American, Afrocentric black liberation theologians, working with ACORN, and Barack Obama is smack dab in the middle of it. They have been training young black kids to hate, hate, hate this country. And they have trained their parents before that to hate, hate, hate this country. It was a movement! It was a Bill Ayers, anti-capitalist, anti-American educational movement. ACORN is how it was implemented, right under our noses. They're doing far more, folks, than just cheating when it comes to elections and registration. They're deep in this mortgage crisis. ACORN and Obama and Barney Frank and Chris Dodd—the Democrat (sic) Party—have their fingerprints all over the subprime mortgage crisis. It has been a movement. It has been a religion. And Obama and Jeremiah Wright and William Ayers were all up to their big ears in it.⁴³

Limbaugh's crescendo nicely fit into the conservative media's party-line on ACORN, repeated so many times, hyped with so many allegations, and ramped up with great ferocity in October 2008 in an attempt to put ACORN on the national public agenda in the final month of the presidential election.

IV. Putting ACORN on the National Public Agenda

The ACORN case is a perfect example of the agenda-setting effect. Opinion entrepreneurs set the story in motion as early as 2006, the conservative echo chamber orchestrated its anti-ACORN campaign in 2008, the McCain campaign picked it up, and the mainstream media reported its allegations without investigating their truth or falsity.

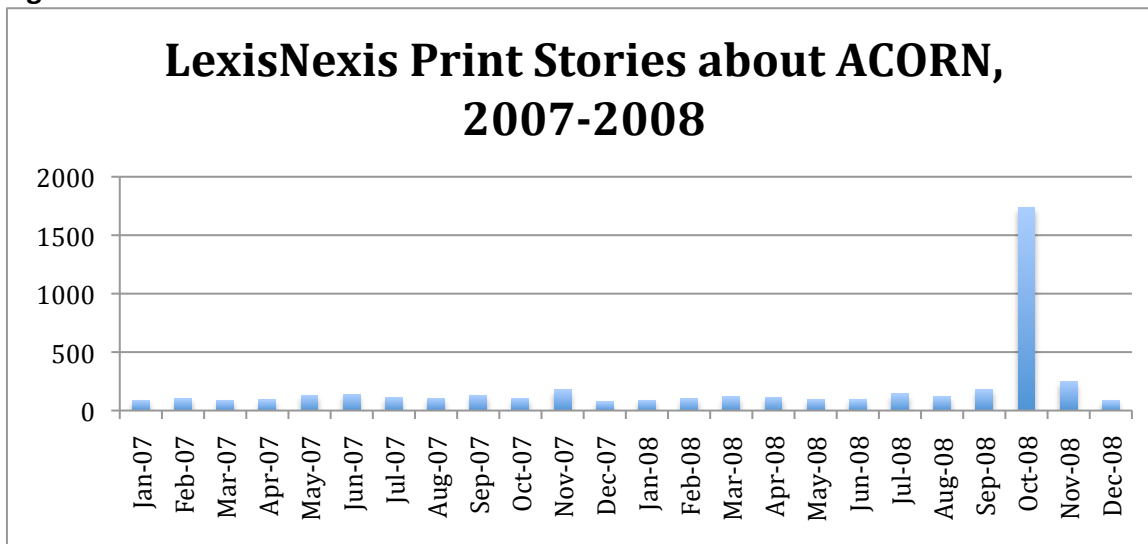
On October 15, 2008, Republican candidate Sen. John McCain said in a televised presidential debate with candidate Barack Obama at Hofstra University that ACORN “is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.”⁴⁴

Before October 2008, most people didn’t know about ACORN, and its news coverage was generally limited to the metropolitan areas where the community organization conducted its activities. But, particularly with unprecedented numbers of news stories mentioning ACORN in the month before the presidential election, ACORN had vaulted onto the entire nation’s public agenda.

As a count of stories in the LexisNexis “U.S. Newspaper and Wire” database from 2007 to 2008 indicates, there were 4,468 total stories mentioning ACORN over 2007-08, but for most of the period news coverage was relatively steady, with not more than 200 stories in any month. Then, there was a spike of 1,737 stories in October 2008, that one month accounting for 39% of all ACORN stories over the 24-month period. Thus, ACORN was clearly on the national news agenda. (See Figure 1.)

By October 2008, ACORN was clearly on the public’s agenda as well. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, in a survey conducted Oct. 17-20, asked a national sample of about 1,000 voters “How much if anything have you heard about... Barack Obama’s connection to the community organizing group ACORN, which has been accused of voter registration fraud?” Nearly half of the country (48%) heard “a lot,” 34% heard “a little,” and only 18% of respondents had heard nothing at all. It is a testament to the high level of attention given to ACORN at Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the rest of the conservative media echo chamber that the same survey found “A solid majority of Republicans (60%) have heard a lot about ACORN, compared with fewer than half of Democrats (46%) and independents (43%).”

Figure 1



Of course, agenda-setting theory only means the public is thinking about a topic: ACORN. A second step in analysis looks at how the news media frame a story; that is, in its stories, how the news media suggest *what* we think about ACORN.⁴⁵ **This question is the major focus of our study.**

V. Methodology

As noted earlier, LexisNexis contained 4,468 stories about ACORN from 2007 to 2008 in its “U.S. Newspaper and Wire” database alone. We tapped into part of that database, plus utilized their broadcast transcript database as well. For our framing analysis, we looked at the complete 2007-2008 coverage of ACORN by 15 major news media organizations. Four are among the nation’s top five highest circulation newspapers: *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. (*The Los Angeles Times*, number 4 in U.S. circulation, is more of a local newspaper and was not included in our study.)⁴⁶ We also analyzed the transcripts of reports from leading broadcast news organizations: ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio (NPR), and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (PBS). Finally, we analyzed stories from three local newspapers representing cities in which ACORN has a long-time presence: *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Our complete list of 647 stories⁴⁷ was accessed through the LexisNexis database, except for the *Wall Street Journal* stories, which were accessed through the ProQuest database.

The researchers developed a coding scheme to analyze story frames⁴⁸ and other story components and refined the scheme after a pilot test. Two independent coders were trained and tested in a pilot study. Both coded all 647 stories. A 10% sample of all variables was evaluated, with coder interreliability on all variables ranging from 87.5 to 100%, generally accepted as a high rate of coder agreement.⁴⁹

VI. Framing ACORN for Voter Fraud

We identified 11 potentially positive frames about ACORN, which derive from ACORN’s own description of its activities, ranging from working to enact living wage policies and eliminating predatory lending practices to doing mortgage counseling for first-time homeowners and assisting in voter registration.⁵⁰ Based on earlier research of long-running ACORN criticisms in conservative websites, blogs, and conservative authors and broadcast pundits, we identified five potentially negative frames that might appear in the mainstream news media. These criticisms included voter fraud (which typically meant voter *registration* fraud), ACORN as a front for registering Democrats, ACORN as the source of the national mortgage scandal, ACORN’s admission of its own internal embezzlement scandal, and disapproval of ACORN receiving public funds. (See Table 1.) Each of the 647 stories had at least one frame; stories could have more than one frame, and could have both positive and negative frames. The percentages in Table 1 represent the percentage of the stories that had that narrative frame. For example, of the 55 stories about ACORN in the *Washington Post* over 2007-2008, 47.3% had a “voter fraud” frame, 16.4% used an “assist voter registration” frame, 14.5% carried an “eliminate predatory lending” frame, etc.

As Table 1 indicates, **voter fraud** was the dominant story frame in news about ACORN for 2007-08, with 55% of the total 647 stories analyzed using it. In fact, given the comparatively low number of alternate frames about ACORN, allegations of voter fraud may have been the *only* story frame about ACORN that many news consumers experienced.

Coverage of the voter fraud frame was even more intense in the broadcast and cable media, with 68.7% of those stories using the frame. Other than “assisting voter registration” (in 16.7% of broadcast stories)—a frame that gets instantly tainted by the much more common “voter fraud” frame—uses of any other frames were extremely low among all broadcast news media. Thus, among broadcast media, ACORN was plainly linked to voter fraud, with no major competing frames.

Table 1

FRAMING OF ACORN STORIES	ALL NEWS MEDIA	BROADCAST & CABLE	PRINT	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	NPR	TV NETWORKS	WALL STREET JOURNAL	WASH POST	NY TIMES	USA TODAY	LOCAL PRINT	PEAK - OCT 2008
NUMBER OF STORIES	647	335	312	132	122	22	36	23	75	55	32	16	134	391
POSITIVE FRAMES (%)														
living wage policies	2.9	2.4	3.5	2.3	0.8	4.5	8.3	0.0	2.7	1.8	9.4	0.0	3.7	1.8
eliminate predatory lending	11.3	3.0	20.2	3.8	0.8	0.0	8.3	4.3	20.0	14.5	12.5	12.5	25.4	1.8
affordable housing	6.3	4.2	8.7	2.3	3.3	4.5	11.1	8.7	8.0	5.5	31.3	12.5	4.5	2.3
improve schools	1.7	0.6	2.9	0.8	0.0	0.0	2.8	0.0	5.3	5.5	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.0
rebuild New Orleans	1.2	0.6	1.9	0.8	0.0	0.0	2.8	0.0	2.7	3.6	0.0	12.5	0.0	0.0
pass Working Families agenda	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.7	0.3
free tax prep	0.5	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.3
screen for benefit eligibility	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.3
counsel homeowner	11.4	1.5	22.1	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.0	25.3	12.7	3.1	18.8	29.1	1.5
ballot-initiative campaigns	0.3	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
assist voter registration	15.3	16.7	13.8	20.5	10.7	9.1	30.6	13.0	13.3	16.4	6.3	6.3	15.7	19.9
other	6.3	3.9	9.0	3.8	1.6	4.5	13.9	0.0	2.7	10.9	9.4	0.0	12.7	4.3
NEGATIVE FRAMES (%)														
voter fraud	55.0	68.7	40.4	78.0	63.1	54.5	72.2	52.2	38.7	47.3	34.4	37.5	40	76.0
front for registering Democrats	5.6	8.7	2.2	7.6	8.2	0.0	25.0	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	7.9
mortgage scandal	2.9	3.0	2.9	2.3	4.9	4.5	0.0	0.0	6.7	3.6	0.0	0.0	1.5	3.1
embezzlement	4.0	3.6	4.5	6.8	1.6	0.0	2.8	0.0	2.7	7.3	21.9	0.0	0.7	4.1
receives public funds	8.7	12.5	4.5	9.8	18.0	9.1	2.8	17.4	12.0	1.8	6.3	0.0	1.5	8.7
other	8.2	14.6	1.3	9.8	22.1	9.1	8.3	17.4	1.3	0.0	3.1	0.0	1.5	10.5

This negative broadcast news coverage—negative in the sense that competing claims about fraud were rarely included, as noted in Table 2 below—is compounded by the fact that TV news was the dominant news medium for Americans during the election season. The Pew Center’s national survey in Oct. 17-20, 2008 found that 73% of respondents said they got most of their news about the presidential campaign from TV, more than double the percentage who got their news from other media.⁵¹

Across all news media, October 2008 was the most intense month for stories with the voter fraud frame, with more than three-quarters (76%) of all stories about ACORN in that

month using the frame. The news media frames of that important month before the national election carried extra weight, since most citizens had little prior knowledge of ACORN against which to evaluate the reports. Thus, although the conservative media slowly built their assertions against ACORN over many years, when the full force of the Republican anti-ACORN campaign hit in October 2008, it came as a classic “October Surprise”—an element added in the final days of the campaign with little time for citizens to gain an accurate understanding of the issue.

Cable News. CNN (132 stories) and Fox News (122 stories) were the two news organizations with the greatest number of stories about ACORN in 2007 and 2008. Fox’s alignment with the Republican Party (despite their marketing lines of “Fair and Balanced” and “We Report, You Decide”) is well documented, and Fox did not disappoint their fans.⁵²

For example, one of Fox’s greatest partisan efforts in the October push was a special edition of *Hannity’s America*, a one-hour show at 9 p.m. on Sunday, October 5, 2008. Host Sean Hannity introduced the program, which amounted to a primetime summary of the same misinformation, with the same unsubstantiated allegations, that had been circulated in the conservative media for years.

SEAN HANNITY: Good evening. Welcome to a special edition of *Hannity’s America*, “Obama and Friends: The History of Radicalism.” Now, tonight, we are bringing you an entire hour of Barack Obama's questionable relationships. Now, we’ll have exclusive information, never revealed before, about his ties to controversial people and radical groups.

The program featured several conservative sources, including

- David Bossie, executive producer of the anti-Obama movie *Hype the Obama Effect* (featuring a cast of conservative and Republican critics)
- David Freddoso, author of *The Case Against Barack Obama* (published by the conservative Regnery press), a *National Review* reporter, and cast member of *Hype the Obama Effect*
- Andy Martin (identified by Fox News as “author and journalist,” but now known as the opinion entrepreneur who first publicized the lie that Obama is a Muslim⁵³)
- Larry Grathwohl, a “former FBI informant”
- Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum, a conservative think tank
- John Fund, author of *Stealing Elections*, and
- Stanley Kurtz of the conservative magazine *National Review* and the conservative think tank, Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Hannity jabbed at ACORN as “a highly controversial group” and “a grassroots organization considered by some to be the largest radical group in America.” He added, “Under the guise of helping low-income families and neighborhoods, ACORN uses shady tactics and intimidation to get what they want. Right now, this ultra-liberal political machine is under

investigation on charges of voter fraud.” Fund rehashed the same implications of fraud, then Hannity and Kurtz broadened the attack by implying (again, with no evidence) that ACORN was responsible for the subprime mortgage crisis. “ACORN uses a militant tactic. They call it direct action,” Kurtz said. “Sometimes ACORN will actually send people to a bank official’s home. They will scare him and they will scare his kids, again, all in the effort to get the banks to make these bad loans.”

Echoing Rush Limbaugh’s allegations of a radical left conspiracy, Hannity concluded the Oct. 5 program with: “ACORN, Ayers, Jeremiah Wright—Obama’s list of friends reads like a history of radicalism.” Two weeks later on Hannity’s Sunday night program came “Obama and Friends: History of Radicalism, Volume II.” The Oct. 19 program again featured Freddoso, and Grathwohl, and added David Horowitz and reporters from Fox News and the *Washington Examiner* to the mix of conservative sources. Again came the same allegations about ACORN, with Hannity concluding “It’s easier for [Obama] to sever ties with radicals like the Rev. Wright and Bill Ayers, but can he afford to cut off a group [ACORN] that is willing to do anything to help him win this presidential election?”

CNN didn’t always march to the same conservative/Republican drumbeat as Fox News, but their coverage of ACORN seemed more driven by the need to fill a 24/7 news hole and find a scoop than the desire to be wholly accurate and proportionate. In fact, CNN had the highest percentage (78%) of stories with the “voter fraud” frame than any other news organization studied. The voice behind most of this coverage was CNN investigative correspondent Drew Griffin, who filed more than 30 reports for CNN on ACORN and fraudulent voter registrations during the month of October. (Often the news wasn’t breaking: many times Griffin would go on live several times a day to introduce the same recorded news package report for different CNN news programs.)

Griffin’s first stories aired on Oct. 9, three days after the voter registration deadline in Indiana. The major point of concern were several thousand fraudulent registrations turned in by ACORN workers in Lake County, Indiana – registrations that ACORN delivered and flagged as potentially fraudulent for the county election board. State laws require ACORN to file all voter registration forms they collect, even those they know to be bogus. ACORN alerted officials when they suspected bogus signatures on voter registration forms. But ACORN’s critics then used the notification information to demonstrate that ACORN was engaged in voter fraud.

The earliest reports excessively hyped the story, and frequently missed the distinction between fraudulent voter registrations and the actual voter fraud that can happen at the time of casting a ballot. In fact, casting fraudulent ballots is quite rare.⁵⁴

In his first report on the story, on the afternoon CNN Newsroom program, Griffin accurately described the situation: “They’re calling it serious, serious voter registration fraud. That is from the bipartisan election board workers in Lake County, Indiana. Now, this is a heavily Democratic County – Gary, Indiana, shuttered steel mills. It has a heavy minority population in its northern end. And that’s where ACORN, the community

organization group, went in there with the intent of registering 45,000 brand new voters.” From that modest and accurate beginning, CNN’s take on the story soon grew into something much further from the truth.

By the time Griffin appeared a few hours later on “The Situation Room,” he exaggerated the impact of the story, and conveniently left the subject out of his sentence structure so there was no one to which he had to attribute “concerns”: “Big concerns that this voter registration fraud could lead to actual voter fraud come November.” Of course, the likelihood of a “Jimmy Johns” (one of the phony names used in Indiana; Griffin in fact went to the local Jimmy John’s sandwich shop to ask on camera “is there anybody here that’s actually named Jimmy Johns?”) illegally voting in the Indiana election was slim; an award-winning investigative reporter like Griffin should have reported early and often that Indiana requires a photo identification from voters. Instead, Griffin said that the phony registrations “certainly sets up a potential” for fraudulent voting.

The same day (Oct. 9), after “The Situation Room,” CNN anchor Lou Dobbs engaged in even greater sensationalism and hyperbole, teasing the story with: “Tonight, the left-wing activist group ACORN, charged with widespread election fraud.” Later in the show, his tease raised the ante: “A left-wing activist group linked to Senator Obama. Are they trying to steal the election outright? We’ll have that special report on widening investigations into an outfit called ACORN.” After Griffin’s report, Dobbs’s conclusions parroted conservative conspiracy theory about ACORN: “Listen, you’ve been looking into this story for days and days now. We’re seeing it from Vegas to Ohio to Pennsylvania to Indiana, all over the country, and these investigations are opening up. How can there be any doubt about what’s at work here?”

CNN began giving major coverage to ACORN and voter registration fraud. Yet, to generate interest in the story required more exaggeration to broaden its presumed news value.

Following Dobbs on Oct. 9, anchor Campbell Brown (whose show is titled *No Bias, No Bull*) called the story “a developing scandal” and previewed Griffin’s report as follows: “Up next, an important investigation into allegations of massive voter fraud by a group with ties to Barack Obama. Listen to what Drew Griffin found. It’s pretty unbelievable.” Later in the program, though, Brown did get the fraud part straight by referring to it as “allegedly phony voter registration.”

Griffin’s coverage continued for the next two weeks, but with little additional concrete information. Still, he was encouraged to keep telling the story. Anchor Wolf Blitzer told Griffin on air after his Oct. 13 report to “Stay on top of this story for us. I suspect it’s growing.” The story was helped by the “truth claims” of Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who called in to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show on Oct. 14 to say “Given the ties between Obama and ACORN and the money that his campaign has sent them and the job that he had with them in the past, Obama has a responsibility to rein in ACORN and prove that he’s willing to fight voter fraud.”⁵⁵

Griffin didn't always disabuse his CNN colleagues of the unsubstantiated notion that ACORN was mounting a massive fraud to steal the election. On Oct. 15, he told anchor Heidi Collins, "Heidi, ever since the registration closed for this election cycle, I feel like we've been on a national tour looking into voter registration fraud and today in Philadelphia officials are saying, look, it's the same here as it's everywhere else, and it's also the same group."

On Oct. 15, in the third and final presidential debate, Republican candidate John McCain—reflecting the years of groundwork by conservatives and Republicans in demonizing ACORN, charged that ACORN "is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy."

The next day, CNN—perhaps forced to fact-check someone else's allegations about ACORN—seemed to back off its own hype for the story. Moreover, despite McCain's comments, the voter registration fraud story, with no formal charges or investigations, was running out of steam. Griffin and CNN anchor Rick Sanchez appeared to be trying to convince themselves that this was a story worth talking about.

GRIFFIN: Rick, I just don't know. Voter registration is a gateway to voter fraud. Now, some of it has happened in the past, not by huge margins, but what it does...

SANCHEZ: Yes. But in a tight election, right, right.

GRIFFIN: In a tight election, in an extremely partisan environment, where you have a very left-leaning group that has endorsed Barack Obama, that supporters wear Barack Obama T-shirts, it opens up the door for Republicans to speculate this is a much bigger deal. It's probably not, but...

(CROSSTALK)

SANCHEZ: And that he represented once as a lawyer, right?

GRIFFIN: I mean, it is fair to say what Barack Obama said last night, that the Obama campaign has nothing to do with this current registration drive with ACORN.

On Oct. 17, CNN reported Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's comments on the campaign trail in Ohio:

PALIN: As for ACORN and voter fraud, now they're under federal investigation, and John and I are calling on the Obama campaign to release communications it has had with this group and to do so immediately. And we are asking for this, not picking on someone or someone's campaign. We're asking this in fairness to all of you, the American voters.

CNN anchor Kyra Phillips then turned to Griffin for comment.

PHILLIPS: Now as I mentioned, our Drew Griffin, who works with the special investigations unit, is the one that broke that story on ACORN and the concerns over voting.

Drew, appreciate you coming in at just the last minute here, but you heard what Sarah Palin had said at that rally. What do you make of her pointing the finger at ACORN, at the Obama camp? And how does this fold into what's happening right now less than two weeks away from voting?

Griffin “owned” this story for CNN, but his response to Kyra Phillips seemed to disavow the very same charges about the possibilities of voter fraud he had been leveling at ACORN since Oct. 9:

GRIFFIN: Yes, I think ACORN has done a very bad job registering voters. Sloppy registration, and that's opened the door on the campaign trail for this charge.

But let's be very clear, Kyra. Voter registration fraud has not led to voter fraud, at least as far as anybody could – can say at this time. We have a sloppy job going on of registering voters, but it's a big stretch to say that voter registration fraud is – or has – going to lead to voter fraud. Certainly in any kind of big numbers anywhere across the country.

So I think that this is a big stretch being said on the campaign trail. But, again, it is ACORN that has opened the door in this nasty campaign, if you will, to have statements like Sarah Palin made today.

Despite the fact that CNN hyped an ACORN voter fraud conspiracy persistently for days, it washed its hands of any connection to the “nasty” campaign charges of the Republicans. Griffin's reports on ACORN and alleged voter fraud tailed off after that day, and he filed his last live report on the matter on Oct. 28. On Oct. 31, CNN ran a corrective report by Carol Costello that explained the politics behind the charges of fraud and concluded “phony registration forms does not mean that phony voters will actually cast a ballot.” CNN had no follow-up on the allegations of voter fraud after the election through the end of the year.

Fox gave up on the ACORN voter fraud allegations by the end of October, too, as McCain-Palin's chances of winning slipped. But, as we note below, Fox News soon brought back ACORN as its bogeyman in the contested Coleman-Franken Senate recount in Minnesota, as a target of blame in the global financial meltdown, and with new untruthful allegations that ACORN was targeted to receive billions of dollars in the economic stimulus plan.

Compared to its cable news competitors CNN and Fox, MSNBC spent much less time covering ACORN (only 22 stories), but still more than half of those stories (54.5%) carried the “voter fraud” frame. Yet, as we'll explain in the “Subjects” section below, MSNBC's

approach to its stories was unique, as its anchors directly disputed allegations of fraud themselves rather than using a traditional news source to respond with an opposing truth claim.

Network Television and NPR

On the broadcast TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS), the voter fraud frame was in more than half (52.2%) of their combined 23 stories about ACORN. Again, reporting competing truth claims – rather than investigating whether the truth claims were accurate or reliable -- characterized many of the stories. For example, on NBC's broadcast on Oct. 10, 2008 correspondent Kelly O'Donnell reported this back to anchor Brian Williams:

O'DONNELL: "Brian, usually when we're counting down to the election, we see allegations of voter registration fraud and voter suppression, and we are seeing that this year, too. And some of it, of course, is going between both parties, but a lot of attention's been focused on a group called ACORN that has some ties to Senator Obama, and there are investigations under way in quite a number of states."⁵⁶

O'Donnell's comments illustrate how the mainstream media picked up, perhaps unwittingly, on the anti-ACORN frames initiated by conservative opinion entrepreneurs. Her statement that allegations of wrongdoing was "going between both parties" appears even-handed, but is misleading, since in fact the vast number of allegations were made by Republicans. Her statement that "ACORN has some ties to Senator Obama" lacks any context, suggesting that the allegations of wrongdoing are somehow connected to the Democratic candidates. The statement that "there are investigations under way in quite a number of states" fails to include any contextual information, including the fact that almost all of the investigations were initiated by Republicans.

On NPR, 72.2% of the stories had the voter fraud frame, a percentage higher than all news organizations except CNN. Ken Rudin, NPR's political editor, summarized the "voter fraud" story with competing truth claims on the Oct. 15, 2008 edition of *Talk of the Nation*:

ACORN is a community organizing group that has worked to help raise - increase the minimum wage, to address voter fraud, voter registration, but Republicans claim that ACORN has made a lot of fictitious names of dead people, has them registering their vote, and they blame ACORN for this massive voter fraud. But Democrats say, look, they're having some problems but it's hardly the magnitude that Republicans say it is.⁵⁷

Although NPR gave a lot of coverage to the voter fraud frame, it also had a higher percentage of story frames on ACORN's voter registration work (30.6%) than any other new organization examined in this study. This provided valuable context for at least some of NPR's stories. NPR spent a lot of time on the voter fraud story, sometimes providing

important background on the story's history. (NPR's "Fresh Air" host Terry Gross's Oct. 9, 2008 interview with former federal prosecutor David Iglesias of New Mexico was notable for its length and detail on the subject.⁵⁸)

National Newspapers

The work of opinion entrepreneurs and the conservative echo chamber pushed the "voter fraud" frame to mainstream newspapers as well. During the 2007-2008 period, the *New York Times* had several stories on ACORN's work in the New York metropolitan area supporting living wage policies (9.4% of its ACORN stories), eliminating predatory lending (12.5%), and advocating affordable housing (31.3%). Affordable housing was an especially big story, due to ACORN's involvement with large redevelopment projects at Willets Point in Queens, Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, and Hempstead Village in Long Island.⁵⁹ Yet, the "voter fraud" frame—originating with partisan opinion entrepreneurs and nurtured by the conservative echo chamber—prevailed over all other frames at the *New York Times*, accounting for 34.4% of its ACORN stories over the two-year period.

The same thing happened at other leading mainstream newspapers. The voter fraud frame (37.5%) dominated ACORN stories at *USA Today*, which didn't verify the facts of the story so much as carry competing truth claims. For example, an Oct. 15 story began with this sentence:

Less than three weeks before the November election, the Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns are trading accusations of voter fraud and voter suppression and gearing up for possible court battles over the outcome.⁶⁰

The rest of the story carried the competing accusations.

On Oct. 22, *USA Today* offered competing opinion pieces on alleged voter registration fraud, one by the chairman of the Wisconsin Republican Party and one by the editorial board, leaving it up to the reader again to try to sort out the truth claims.⁶¹

The accretion of ACORN disinformation made an error in *USA Today's* coverage sound almost plausible. An Oct. 30 page 1A story stated: "Nearly one-third of ACORN's 1.3 million voter registrations in about a dozen states have turned out to be fraudulent."⁶² The statement was wrong, and the next day's newspaper corrected it: "Thursday's cover story about mobilizing voters misstated the share of voter registrations gathered by ACORN that are fraudulent. Of the one-third found to be faulty, an estimated 1.5% are fraudulent."⁶³ But, what *USA Today's* correction still did not clarify was that a faulty registration may involve just a small error whereas fraud, much more rare, involves deliberate deception.

The voter fraud frame at the other mainstream news media was even more prevalent, perhaps due to their predilection to covering the "inside baseball" of national politics, which includes any and all political allegations.⁶⁴ (But, as Table 2 indicates, while they covered the so-called inside story, they did not always identifying that Republicans were

trying to discredit Obama with allegations of a voter fraud “scandal”.)

The voter fraud frame accounted for 47.3% of the *Washington Post*’s 55 stories, with the “legs” of the story sustained by competing truth claims. An Oct. 21 *Post* story offers a typical lead paragraph for the *Post*:

Ohio Democrats and Republicans traded accusations yesterday as they continue to battle over absentee ballots and other voting issues.⁶⁵

The *Wall Street Journal* was very attentive to the work of ACORN, with 75 stories over two years. But, the *Journal*’s location in the American journalism landscape differs from the other leading newspapers. Because the *Journal* is a business newspaper, many of those stories covered ACORN from a business perspective. For example 20% of the paper’s stories about ACORN were framed around its work to eliminate predatory lending and 25.3% of its stories about ACORN were framed about the group’s counseling of homeowners. Yet, because the *Journal* also has a strongly conservative editorial side, the greatest number of its stories (38.7%) covered the voter fraud frame, including commentary from conservative media figures like John Fund.

Local Newspapers

The three local newspapers representing cities in which ACORN has a long-time presence—the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*—were the least likely to latch onto the “voter fraud” story bandwagon. This is because the focus of the disinformation campaign was largely a national battle, with the hopes of influencing those who knew little or nothing about ACORN. But, in these three metropolitan areas, alternative (and better verified) positive frames dominated the ACORN story, especially the organization’s efforts to eliminate predatory lending (25.4%), counsel low-income homeowners (29.1%), and register voters (15.7%). (See Table 1.)

Although 40% of the stories at the three metropolitan area newspapers contained the voter fraud frame, they had a different tone and approach to the story than the national news media. In fact, front-page stories at newspapers in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Cleveland all suggest that the voter fraud fears being stirred at the national level didn’t connect to local experiences. For example, in a story on Nov. 3, 2008, the day before the election, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* seemed unworried by the potential for voter fraud, as did its source Mark Wolosik, the Director of the Allegheny County Bureau of Elections:

Mr. Wolosik said concerns nationally about ACORN producing thousands of improper voter registration cards barely caused a blip here. The court ruled neither ACORN nor elections officials had to take any special steps to stop improperly registered people from voting.⁶⁶

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* took a similar tack, acknowledging the hype, but actually verifying the local voting situation:

More than 43,000 Minnesotans have registered to vote this year through ACORN, the group that has come under Republican attack over voter registration irregularities around the nation.

But despite calls by state and national GOP groups to investigate ACORN, election officials in Hennepin and Ramsey counties say there is scant evidence of fraud, other than a few hundred late registration filings.⁶⁷

In Ohio, one of the hardest-fought swing states, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* distinguished between allegations and actual wrongdoing in its Oct. 12 story:

Even as Cuyahoga County digs deeper into possible fraud by a voter-registration group, election board members from both political parties maintain that any problems uncovered will not compromise the presidential election.

Board members say proof of voter-registration fraud does not mean illegal ballots will be cast on Nov. 4.⁶⁸

Nine days later, the *Plain Dealer* put the allegations of voter fraud in their larger political context. It reported “Ohio Republican leaders on Monday kept the pressure on the state’s elections process, while Democratic leaders led by the governor again urged them to stop it.” It noted that Republicans had filed challenges in federal and state court over allegations of voter registration misconduct. The story quoted Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland, saying, “In the last few days the Republicans have tried to instill fear in Ohio voters about whether their registrations to vote will be challenged and whether they will be able to cast a ballot. . . We condemn these attacks, which we find despicable.” The paper also reported that Strickland’s press conference was interrupted by “someone in a squirrel costume drawing attention to the alleged widespread voter registration fraud in Ohio at the hands of ACORN.” The same story quoted Kevin DeWine, deputy chairman of the Ohio Republican Party, saying that Strickland “can’t tear himself away from the worn-out Democrat talking points that have about as much validity as an ACORN registration.”⁶⁹

Thus, instead of competing truth claims, the local newspapers went directly to county election officials and verified the most essential fact of the story.

As W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston explain in their book *When the Press Fails*, “By its own self-defined rules, the mainstream press ordinarily does not foreground sources that fall outside of the scope of the Washington power calculus.”⁷⁰ However, the Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Minneapolis newspapers, using sources outside of the D.C. Beltway and in their community to verify the story, were much less susceptible than the national news media to the “panic” about voter fraud.

VII. Fact-Checking Claims of “Voter Fraud”

Table 2

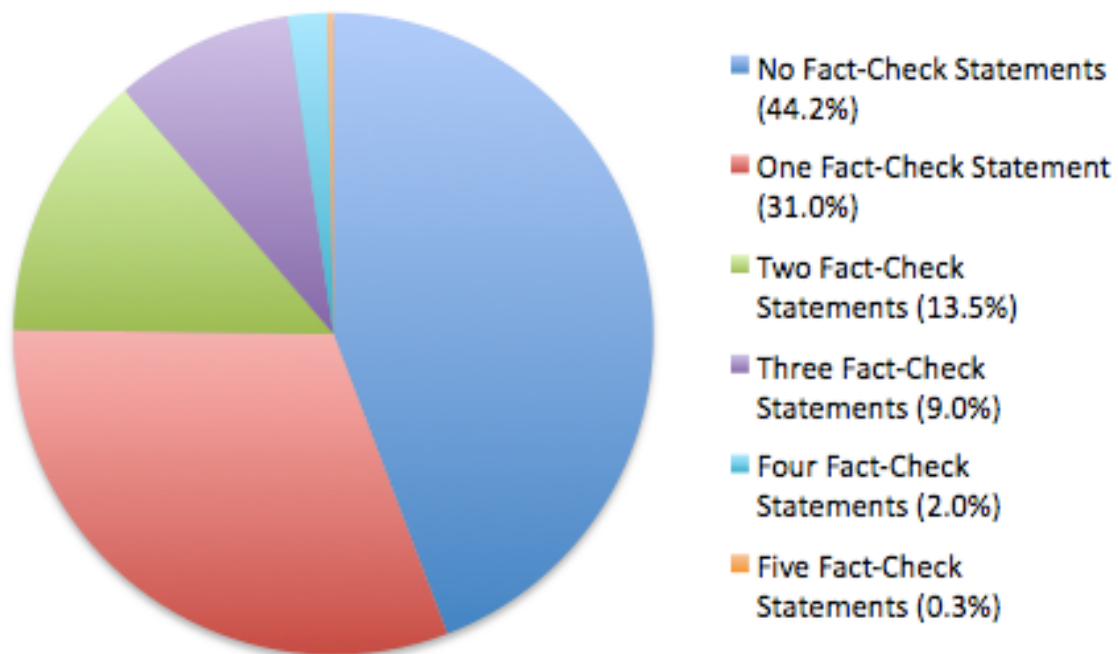
Accuracy Check: What % of "voter fraud" stories...	ALL NEWS MEDIA	BROADCAST & CABLE	PRINT	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	NPR	TV NETWORKS	WALL STREET JRNL	WASH POST	NY TIMES	USA TODAY	LOCAL PRINT	PEAK - OCT 2008
note ACORN already reporting irregularities	19.7	19.2	20.6	24.3	10.4	9.1	26.9	25.0	20.7	19.2	27.3	0.0	22.2	22.0
note ACORN acting to stop incidents	14.9	15.7	13.5	24.3	5.2	0.0	15.4	25.0	13.8	11.5	27.3	0.0	13.0	16.6
actual voter fraud minimal	17.2	19.2	13.5	22.3	11.7	27.3	23.1	25.0	6.9	3.8	9.1	33.3	20.4	19.3
acknowledge Republicans trying to discredit Obama with "scandal"	38.6	33.2	48.4	35.9	20.8	63.6	38.5	50.0	27.6	69.2	63.6	33.3	48.1	42.2
link investigations of "voter fraud" to U.S. Attorney firings	4.2	3.9	4.8	1.9	1.3	27.3	7.7	8.3	6.9	3.8	9.1	0.0	3.7	4.1

In general, the news media reported but failed to thoroughly fact-check claims of “voter fraud.” In total, in more than two-fifths (44.2%) of the 355 stories reporting allegations of “voter fraud,” the media failed to include at least one of five countervailing arguments listed in Table 2, even though these countervailing arguments were readily available at the time. Moreover, when stories did include fact-check statements in stories that alleged “voter fraud,” rarely did they include the full context of multiple fact-check statements:

- that ACORN was reporting registration irregularities to authorities, as required to do by law;
- that ACORN was acting to stop incidents of registration problems by its (mostly temporary) employees when it became aware of these problems;
- that actual voter fraud is very rare;
- that Republicans were trying to discredit Obama with an ACORN “scandal”;
- and that allegations of “voter fraud” in 2007 and 2008 related to the earlier case of the firing of U.S. Attorneys who refused to cooperate with Republican efforts to politicize voter fraud accusations – firings that ultimately led to the resignation of U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

Just 31% of “voter fraud” frame stories included one of the five fact-check statements; only 13.5% of the stories carried two of the fact-check statements; 9% contained three; 2% had four, and a mere 0.3% -- *exactly one story in the 355 that used the voter fraud frame* (an Oct. 14, 2008 report from NPR) – provided full context with all five fact-check statements.⁷¹ (See Figure 2.) The incomplete fact checking resulted in the “voter fraud” frame being sustained for much longer than it merited.

Figure 2



Cable News

Although CNN carried more voter fraud stories, Fox News was much less likely to fact-check allegations of voter fraud with some kind of countervailing argument. Of particular note is how infrequently Fox News acknowledged that Republicans were trying to discredit Obama with the “scandal” of voter fraud. In 79.2% of its stories about ACORN’s alleged voter fraud, Fox News failed to mention that these allegations were an aspect of the GOP’s effort to discredit the Democratic candidate. It mentioned this political angle in only 20.8% of the stories —the lowest of any news organization. CNN failed to acknowledge Republican motives in 64.1% of its “vote fraud” stories. In other words, CNN mentioned Republican motives in only 35.9% of its “voter fraud” stories.

MSNBC fact checked allegations of voter fraud better than its cable news counterparts. In 63.6% of its voter fraud stories it acknowledged that Republicans were trying to discredit Obama with a voter fraud scandal. MSNBC tied its fact checking to a larger narrative. In 27.3% of its voter fraud stories, MSNBC linked the allegations against ACORN to the earlier U.S. attorney firings scandal that led to the resignation of U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. But in 80.9% of its stories, MSNBC failed to note that ACORN was already reporting registration irregularities. Not one of its stories noted that ACORN was already acting to stop such incidents. This is likely due to MSNBC’s anchor-as-respondent approach, which resulted in the channel not having any ACORN representatives as sources in its newscasts (see Table 3). Only *USA Today* had a worse track record of acknowledging that ACORN was reporting registration irregularities to the authorities.

Network Television and NPR

In 50% of their stories, the television network (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS) newscasts

acknowledged that Republicans were attempting to discredit Obama with the allegations of voter fraud. NPR made the same acknowledgement in 38% of its voter fraud stories. But NPR and the television network news lacked persistent fact checking, noting that ACORN was already reporting registration irregularities, that ACORN was already acting to stop such incidents, and that actual voter fraud is minimal, in only about one-quarter or less of their voter fraud stories. One of the best verified reports was on Oct. 19 from ABC, in which legal correspondent Jim Avila interviewed a former ACORN worker convicted of registration fraud and noted that “according to the Department of Justice, since 2002, only 150 people have been charged with actual voter fraud and 115 convicted.”⁷²

National Newspapers

The *New York Times* (63.6%) and *Washington Post* (69.2%) noted that partisan politics were involved in the voter fraud narrative in roughly two-thirds of their reports. But, even stories that acknowledged the partisan nature of the attacks on ACORN and allowed ACORN to rebut the allegations – such as the *New York Times*’ Oct. 10, 2008 story, “On Obama, ACORN, and Voter Registration” and its Oct. 27, 2008 story, “McCain’s Warning About Voter Fraud Stokes a Fiery Campaign Even Further” – reflected the conservative frame. For example, the lead paragraph of the Oct. 10 story read:

Senator John McCain’s presidential campaign on Friday stepped up its efforts to tie Senator Barack Obama to a community organizing group that has been accused of involvement in problematic voter registrations in several hotly contested states, including Colorado, Indiana, Nevada and North Carolina.⁷³

The rest of the article was a balancing act between truth claims from the McCain campaign, the Obama campaign, and ACORN, but the story was oriented around the accusation of voter fraud, thus putting ACORN and the Obama campaign on the defensive.

Only a handful of the stories in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* mentioned that actual cases of voter fraud were very rare.

USA Today published only 16 stories about ACORN over 2007-08. Of those stories, 37.5% -- 6 stories -- used the “voter fraud” frame. Although one-third of the stories noted that actual voter fraud is minimal and that Republicans were trying to tag Obama with a voter fraud scandal, fact-checking didn’t otherwise figure heavily into the stories. As Table 2 indicates, none of those 6 *USA Today* stories noted that ACORN was already reporting registration irregularities, that ACORN was responding to registration problems by its workers, and that investigations of “voter fraud” may be linked to U.S. attorney firings.

After Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal* was the least likely (27.6% of their “voter fraud” stories) of any news organization to acknowledge that Republicans were trying to discredit Obama with the “scandal” of voter fraud. Only Fox News, the Journal’s fellow conservative news organization, mentioned it at a lower rate. (Rupert Murdoch’s News

Corporation owns both Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*.)

Local Newspapers

The three local newspapers—the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*—had some of the same fact-checking problems as the national mainstream news media. In fact, the local newspapers were at their worst (from a fact-checking point of view) when they carried syndicated material from national newspapers, wire services, or columnists, or when they covered the alleged voter fraud with the same official or opinion entrepreneur sources.⁷⁴ As noted earlier, the best fact-checking by the local newspapers is when they opted out of the national news narrative frame (and its competing truth claims) and talked to their own local election officials to verify the extent of any voting problems.

VIII. Other Frames in ACORN stories

The “voter fraud” narrative frame dominated the two years of coverage (and particularly October 2008). But there were two other frames that emerged from the conservative echo chamber during the campaign that also got some traction in the mainstream news media.⁷⁵ As the U.S. and world economy began to fall even further in 2008 due, in part to risky loans made by financial institutions, opinion entrepreneurs and the conservative echo chamber alleged that a) ACORN was the source of the entire mortgage scandal—and thus the world financial crisis—and, b) that ACORN was being rewarded for its election work by getting millions in government bail-out funds.

These frames tread on rather shaky ground, since in reality it was ACORN that sounded the alarm about predatory lending practices that led to mortgage meltdown and financial crisis. As early as 1999, ACORN members visited Citigroup offices in 20 cities to protest “discriminatory and predatory lending” and to demand a meeting with the corporation’s top officials.⁷⁶ Indeed, in the time before the presidential campaign the *Wall Street Journal* covered ACORN’s work in this area accurately, and led (20% of its ACORN stories) all but the local newspapers in frames about ACORN’s work to stop exploitative lending practices.⁷⁷ By September 2008, though, the *Wall Street Journal* was becoming the leading progenitor of untruthful frames blaming the economic crisis on ACORN and suggesting Democrats are funneling government money directly to ACORN:

Acorn has promoted laws like the Community Reinvestment Act, which laid the foundation for the house of cards built out of subprime loans. Thus, we'd be funneling more cash to the groups that helped create the lending mess in the first place.

This isn't the first time this year that Democrats have tried to route money for fixing the housing crisis into the bank accounts of these community activist groups.⁷⁸

Contrary to the *Journal*'s interpretation, the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) was enacted in 1977 to *stop* discriminatory redlining in bank loans. The CRA regulates loans by

depository institutions, like commercial and savings banks. Thanks to deregulation, private, nonbank mortgage companies sprang up, grabbed the majority of the mortgage business away from the regulated deposit institutions. Then, with more deregulation, Wall Street investment firms purchased the subprime mortgages from the lenders, bundled them into "mortgage-backed securities" and sold them to wealthy investors worldwide, typically without scrutiny.⁷⁹

Still, there was some persistence to sell this frame in the echo chamber. On Fox's Oct. 5 "Obama and Friends: The History of Radicalism" program, Stanley Kurtz shifted from ACORN's support of the CRA to community-oriented bullying as the method for ACORN's destruction of the economy. "Sometimes ACORN will actually send people to a bank official's home," Kurtz said. "They will scare him and they will scare his kids, again, all in an effort to get the banks to make these bad loans."

Fox and the *Wall Street Journal* led on these frames, and some of the other mainstream media gladly took the bait. Lisa Sylvester reported for *Lou Dobbs Tonight* on CNN on Sept. 29, 2008 reported that "critics say this community activist group shares the blame" on the financial meltdown with Wall Street.

Most of the mainstream news media didn't follow the conservative echo chamber on these stories. *USA Today* carried neither of the two frames. It was a minor blip in the three local newspapers, in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and NPR. On MSNBC's Countdown with Keith Olbermann on Oct. 14, 2008, guest Allen Raymond, author of *How to Rig an Election: Confessions of a Republican Operative*, called the story "a diversion" and "racial politicking." The four television networks unbundled the two frames, with no coverage of ACORN's contribution to the mortgage scandal, but some coverage (17.4% of stories) of ACORN possibly receiving public funds.

IX. Subjects in ACORN stories

Another way to investigate how a story is framed is by looking at the subjects included in the stories (measured as people quoted or mentioned as a source in the story). One of the most interesting points of analysis here is the likelihood of news organizations to actually use an ACORN representative as a news source versus quoting Republican elected officials and other Republican operatives (Table 3).

ACORN representatives were quoted in only 28.4% of all stories about ACORN. In other words, 71.6% of the stories that mentioned ACORN failed to quote anyone from the organization, including stories that attacked the organization, even though ACORN was sending out press releases giving its side of the story and had staff people and volunteer leaders prepared to respond to reporters. But as Table 3 indicates, there was a big difference in subjects used by print media and broadcast and cable media. An ACORN representative was quoted in 34% of all newspaper stories but in only 23% in broadcast and cable stories. Similarly, there was a gulf between print and broadcast/cable stories in using political figures to speak about ACORN. For example, a Republican elected official was used as a source in only 6.7% of newspaper stories, but in 26% of broadcast and

cable stories. Democratic elected officials were cited in just 5.8% of print stories, but 11% of broadcast and cable stories. Thus, the broadcast and cable news networks were much more likely than newspapers to frame their ACORN stories as political stories, and to use political sources – usually Republicans – as experts to help tell their stories.

Table 3

SUBJECTS	ALL NEWS MEDIA	BROADCAST & CABLE	PRINT	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	NPR	TV NETWORKS	WALL STREET JRNL	WASH POST	NY TIMES	USA TODAY	LOCAL PRINT	PEAK - OCT 2008
NUMBER OF STORIES	647	335	312	132	122	22	36	23	75	55	32	16	134	391
FBI	1.4	2.4	0.3	3.8	0.8	0.0	2.8	4.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	2.3
U.S. Attorney General	1.2	2.1	0.3	4.5	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8
State Attorney General	0.8	0.6	1.0	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.0
Other Republican Elected Official(s)	16.7	26	6.7	25.8	26.2	40.9	13.9	30.4	5.3	16.4	3.1	18.8	3.0	25.1
Other Democratic Elected Official(s)	8.7	11	5.8	15.9	6.6	13.6	8.3	13.0	2.7	9.1	6.3	6.3	6.0	13.8
Other Elected Official (no party)	4.0	7.2	0.6	12.1	4.1	0.0	8.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	5.4
Republican Operatives	6.6	8.1	5.1	3.8	14.8	4.5	5.6	4.3	5.3	10.9	3.1	0.0	3.7	8.4
Conservative Think Tank	0.9	1.5	0.3	0.8	2.5	0.0	2.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.3
National Campaign for Fair Elections	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
ACORN Representative	28.4	23	34.0	34.8	13.1	0.0	27.8	26.1	28.0	23.6	46.9	37.5	38.1	26.1
Academic/Prof	3.9	6.9	0.6	0.8	11.5	4.5	16.7	4.3	1.3	0.0	0.0	6.3	0.0	5.6
Former U.S. District Attorney	0.8	0.6	1.0	0.0	0.0	4.5	2.8	0.0	1.3	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.7	0.5
Unnamed Source	3.1	4.2	1.9	4.5	6.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	4.6
Employment Policies Institute	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
Consumer Rights League	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

For all news organizations, the stories—most of which contained the voter fraud frame—carried a disappointing percentage of primary sources who could address any alleged criminality of voter registration fraud: the FBI, a U.S. Attorney General, or a State Attorney General. Thus, the primary subjects of the ACORN stories were political figures, who weren't the best-informed sources about the status of any actual criminal investigation of voter registration fraud. This problem only intensified during October 2008, the crucial month of fraud allegations, when ACORN representatives (the other primary subjects) were actually *slightly less likely* to be included in stories. Overall, all of the news organizations were long on opinion, but short on presenting the primary sources who were needed to verify the facts of the story.

Cable News

More than any other news organization, Fox tilted the most toward anti-ACORN subjects, with the highest percentage of stories citing Republican elected officials, Republican Party operatives, and conservative think tank representatives, with the least inclusion of quotes or soundbites or interviews with ACORN representatives (besides MSNBC), and the highest rate of unnamed sources.

MSNBC (22 stories overall), which notably did not use *any* ACORN representatives in its newscasts, tended to dispute allegations of fraud against ACORN by doing it on its own

rather than have ACORN representatives respond to it. For example, on his October 21, 2008 *Countdown* program, host Keith Olbermann countered with allegations of a Republican voter registration problems:

McCain's charge was that the national grassroots group ACORN was committing widespread voter fraud, disenfranchising voters by registering fictional voters and that Barack Obama had helped fund ACORN. As we have explained previously, some part-time workers have been accused of ripping off ACORN because fictional voters do not vote. But there may be other reasons why McCain has dropped the voting fraud rhetoric, namely new reports that McCain himself has funded not one but two Republican owners of voter registration firms, both of whom are embroiled in very real charges or very real and concerted efforts to disenfranchise real voters.

Olbermann's colleague, Rachel Maddow, also responded to the allegations against ACORN by herself on *The Rachel Maddow Show* on October 17:

...the McCain camp and Republicans in Congress and the right-wing media have hammered away on the issue of voter fraud -- particularly the role of the community group, ACORN.

The Bush administration has long been fixated on alleging voter fraud. Remember the U.S. attorneys getting fired scandal? Why do those U.S. attorneys get fired?

What's being investigated by the special prosecutor right now is if those attorneys were fired for resisting partisan pressure to bring voter fraud investigations and prosecutions in places where such actions would provide an excuse to suppress the vote, which would be really handy for beating Democrats in elections.

The whole torture thing was not enough to hoist Alberto Gonzales out of office as attorney general. It took the U.S. attorneys gin up the fake voter fraud scandal for us to see the south side of him. And now the outcome of another election may hinge as much on the aggressive practice of law as on the voters' view of the candidates. I hate this.

Network Television and NPR

Network television news (ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS) was just as likely as cable news to refer to the same brand of political party officials and operatives to define the ACORN story. NPR was less reliant on political subjects and more likely than any other news organization to use academics/professors as sources (16.7%).

National Newspapers

All print newspapers in general were less partisan than cable and network television news in their use of sources, although of the newspapers the *Washington Post* drew most heavily on inside-the-Beltway political sources. The Table 3 data for the *New York Times*

and the *Wall Street Journal* indicate they used fewer partisan sources than the *Post*. But, the source data for the *Wall Street Journal* obscures the fact that nearly half (49.3%) of the journal's 75 ACORN stories (far more stories than any of the other national newspapers) were not straight news reports but instead opinion-based editorials, columns, commentary pieces, and letters to the editor featuring conservatives such as John Fund, Karl Rove (former senior advisor to President George W. Bush), and Dick Armey (former Republican House Majority Leader). The *Wall Street Journal* didn't need to quote partisan sources because the stories themselves were often written *by* partisan sources. (As a point of comparison, the *New York Times*' 32 stories on ACORN included one column, one editorial and one letter to the editor, but those three opinion pieces had to do with ACORN's role in the redevelopment of Hempstead, New York, not voter registration fraud.)

Local Newspapers

The three local newspapers (the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*), which were among the least likely to latch onto the national "voter fraud" story, carried far fewer partisan sources in their stories, with less than 6% of their sources representing any single political party.

X. Linking ACORN to Obama

Over the course of 2007-2008, one-third of the ACORN news stories (33.7%) noted some kind of link between the community organization and Obama. Again, it was the television and cable broadcasters who were most likely to make this dramatic connection (43.6% of the stories), compared to print (23.1%) and NPR (13.9%).

More than one-third of all the stories linked ACORN to Obama in some way and 11.3% of them said that Obama had once worked for ACORN. In fact, Obama never worked for ACORN. While working as a lawyer for a civil rights law firm in Chicago in the early 1990s, Obama accepted two invitations to be an unpaid guest speaker at trainings for volunteer community leaders organized by Chicago ACORN. He was one of the firm's attorneys who successfully represented a coalition of groups, which included ACORN, in a legal case that won better enforcement of the National Voter Registration Act in Illinois. (It is also worth noting that ACORN's voter registration efforts were nonpartisan and not connected to any political party or campaign. Republicans knew, however, that ACORN focused its voter registration efforts among low-income and minority voters who tend to vote for Democratic candidates, hence the GOP sought to challenge ACORN's efforts in various ways, including accusations of voter fraud.)

Although opinion entrepreneurs had been promoting this link once Obama became the Democratic presidential nominee, the Republicans set the stage for this frame at their September 2008 Republican National Convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul. It was here that the GOP sought to discredit Obama by referring to and mocking his experience as a community organizer in Chicago. The GOP expected that belittling Obama's organizing experience would associate him, in the minds of voters, with inner cities, the poor, racial minorities, troublemakers and radicals. Once this frame was established, the GOP's

efforts to link Obama to ACORN seemed plausible.

In his convention speech, former New York Gov. George Pataki said, “[Obama] was a community organizer. What in God’s name is a community organizer? I don’t even know if that’s a job.” In his speech, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani mocked, “He worked as a community organizer. What? Maybe this is the first problem on the résumé.” In her speech accepting the VP nomination, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin said, “I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities.” The following Sunday (September 14), on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Giuliani added to the attack by claiming -- wrongly -- that “the group that recruited [Obama] was a Saul Alinsky group that has all kinds of questions with regard to their outlook on the economy, their outlook on capitalism.” Giuliani then linked Obama to what he called “a very core Saul Alinsky kind of almost socialist notion that [government] should be used for redistribution of wealth.”

The speeches all made clear that there was party strategy to link Obama to community organizing and to socialism and presumptive radicals like Bill Ayers and Saul Alinsky.⁸⁰ (Many consider Alinsky (1909-1972) a founder of modern community organizing. The group that recruited Obama, the Developing Communities Project on Chicago's south side, was not affiliated with the Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation, or with ACORN, but with the Gamaliel Foundation, a network of church-based groups.)

The ramp-up at the Republican convention and the long-running media campaign enabled John McCain to cite ACORN a month later at the final presidential debate on Oct. 15, 2008 with some level of certainty that at least part of America would understand what ACORN was. With McCain’s invocation (which also included a charge linking Obama to 1960s bomber Bill Ayers), the ACORN voter fraud story reached its greatest national audience.

The debate moderator, Bob Schieffer of CBS News, asked both candidates about the negative terms they had been using to describe their opponent. Schieffer’s question never mentioned ACORN, but concluded “Are each of you tonight willing to sit at this table and say to each other’s face what your campaigns and the people in your campaigns have said about each other?” McCain said “I have repudiated every time someone’s been out of line, whether they’ve been part of my campaign or not,” but eventually added this about ACORN:

McCain: “We need to know the full extent of Senator Obama’s relationship with ACORN, who is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.

Obama later responded in this manner:

Obama: Now, with respect to ACORN, ACORN is a community organization. Apparently what they've done is they were paying people to

go out and register folks, and apparently some of the people who were out there didn't really register people, they just filled out a bunch of names.

It had nothing to do with us. We were not involved. The only involvement I've had with ACORN was I represented them alongside the U.S. Justice Department in making Illinois implement a motor voter law that helped people get registered at DMVs [Department of Motor Vehicles]."⁸¹

McCain responded:

McCAIN: Well, again, while you were on the board of the Woods Foundation, you and Mr. Ayers, together, you sent \$230,000 to ACORN. So – and you launched your political campaign in Mr. Ayers' living room.

OBAMA: That's absolutely not true.

McCAIN: And the facts are facts and records are records.

OBAMA: And that's not the facts.

McCAIN: And it's not the fact – it's not the fact that Senator Obama chooses to associate with a guy who in 2001 said that he wished he had have bombed more, and he had a long association with him. It's the fact that all the – all of the details need to be known about Senator Obama's relationship with them and with ACORN and the American people will make a judgment.

McCain's suggestions of some kind of an Obama-ACORN conspiracy mimicked what conservative opinion entrepreneurs had been intimating for more than a year.

Before McCain let loose on Obama and ACORN in the debate, his campaign had already blazed a path. The McCain-Palin efforts linking Obama to alleged ACORN voter fraud and Bill Ayers began as early as the first week of October, with multiple media advisories and several press phone calls by McCain campaign manager Rick Davis, and automated robo-calls to households in several battleground states saying that "Barack Obama has worked closely with domestic terrorist Bill Ayers."⁸² On Oct. 10, the McCain-Palin campaign released a one-and-a-half minute Web advertisement promoting an Obama-ACORN link, and leveling the same accusations of "massive voter fraud" plus "pressuring backs to issue risky loans" —a suggestion that ACORN was responsible for the wave of subprime loans that toppled the world financial system, another charge being leveled against ACORN.⁸³

McCain's questions about ACORN at the Oct. 15 debate helped to ensure that ACORN would be known by most Americans, as a national survey later indicated. The *Washington Post's* main story the next day said McCain "brought to the table Obama's association with 1960s radical William Ayers and a little-known group called ACORN that has been accused of voter fraud in several states."⁸⁴

Cable News

Fox News (49.2%) and CNN (42.7%) were the most likely to link Obama to ACORN in their stories, and they were already doing it well before McCain's performance at the third presidential debate (and with much less acknowledgement that McCain's campaign was against ACORN). Programs on the two channels made similar charges, even before McCain raised the issue at the debate. For example, Dick Morris, Fox News analyst, on the Oct. 10 *Hannity & Colmes*, said, "[Obama] is going to run the Justice Department, and his campaign is giving \$800,000 to an organization [Guest host Michael Steele interjects 'To ACORN. Right.')] dedicated to the perpetuation of voter fraud." CNN's Lou Dobbs on his Oct. 14, 2008 program (the night before the final presidential debate) opened with "Tonight ACORN, the left wing radical group with ties to Senator Obama sparing no effort to sign up new voters, even trying to register Mickey Mouse."

Table 4

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN LINKS	ALL NEWS MEDIA	BROADCAST & CABLE	PRINT	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	NPR	TV NETWORKS	WALL STREET JRNL	WASH POST	NY TIMES	USA TODAY	LOCAL PRINT	PEAK - OCT 2008
NUMBER OF STORIES	647	335	312	132	122	22	36	23	75	55	32	16	134	391
ACORN linked to Obama	33.7	43.6	23.1	44.7	49.2	59.1	13.9	39.1	22.7	34.5	18.8	18.8	20.1	47.8
Obama once worked for ACORN	11.3	14.9	7.4	9.8	23.8	13.6	8.3	8.7	12.0	5.5	12.5	0.0	5.2	15.1
McCain against ACORN	11.9	17.9	5.4	18.9	13.1	45.5	13.9	17.4	2.7	14.5	9.4	6.3	2.2	19.2
McCain once supported ACORN	2.2	3.3	1.0	2.3	1.6	4.5	11.1	4.3	1.3	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.7	3.6

Fox also led all other news organizations in suggesting Obama once worked for ACORN, and characterized the relationship as very close.

MSNBC most often made the ACORN-Obama connection in its stories, but in most cases just to critique the alleged connection. In fact, MSNBC was far more likely than other news organizations to include the point that McCain's campaign was against ACORN (45.5% of their stories), a necessary element if the report is to discuss the political nature of the charges against ACORN.

Network Television and NPR

The television news networks seemed to take their cues from campaign sources, and included the ACORN-Obama frame in almost 40% of their stories. ABC News followed up the presidential debate with a fact-checking story that faulted McCain for exaggerating the extent of Obama's political relationship with Bill Ayers, and blamed Obama for not also mentioning that his presidential campaign paid money to an affiliate of ACORN.⁸⁵

NPR broke with the pack, and included an ACORN-Obama frame in only 13.9% of its stories, which matched the number of stories that NPR included that McCain was against

ACORN. Hardly any of the organizations, except for NPR (11.1% of their stories), noted with any frequency that John McCain was the keynote speaker at a 2006 ACORN event, and also worked with ACORN in the mid-1990s.⁸⁶

National Newspapers

Although they gave less emphasis to the story, *USA Today* and the *New York Times* were still compelled to cover the story frame churned by the conservative echo chamber. The two newspapers made the ACORN-Obama connection in 18.8% of their stories, although the *New York Times* was one of the few organizations to attempt to clarify the facts of the Obama's links to ACORN early, in an Oct. 10, 2008 story (although the story ultimately got bogged down in competing truth claims).⁸⁷

The *Wall Street Journal* actively reported the ACORN-Obama link in 22.7% of its stories. Moreover, in 12% of its stories the *Journal* also reported that Obama once worked for ACORN but didn't get the facts straight.

The *Washington Post*, which is much more attuned to reporting the strategy of campaigns, covered the ACORN-Obama link in 34.5% of its 55 stories. The *Post's* editorial the day after the debate takes McCain to task not to fact-check his statements, but to evaluate McCain's unfortunate timing: "[McCain's] attacks, under the present unhappy economic circumstances, including yesterday's 733-point drop in the Dow, seemed petty and unconvincing."⁸⁸ It wasn't until an Oct. 22 column by Harold Myerson and an Oct. 25 editorial that the *Post* interrogated the veracity of McCain's allegations.⁸⁹

Local Newspapers

The newspapers of Cleveland, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Pittsburgh all reported on the pressure they received from state and national Republican officials and operatives to write more anti-ACORN stories. At least one local newspaper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, was quite transparent about the pressure and its greater loyalty to the truth. *Plain Dealer* Reader Representative Ted Diadiun responded to several complaints that a reporter's story on the elections board investigation of ACORN's registration practices didn't include any references to Obama. Concluding his substantial discussion, Diadiun wrote, "it would be no more than conjecture, and irresponsible journalism to boot, to automatically equate Obama with every allegation of voter registration fraud."⁹⁰

XI: Linking ACORN to Radicalism

The link between ACORN and radicalism traces back to the early allegations in the web of conservative organizations, including the blogosphere, that tried to tie these together. This has been a consistent theme for many years among the anti-ACORN opinion entrepreneurs. For example, in its Spring 2003 issue, *City Journal*, a magazine sponsored by the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank that had close ties to Rudolph Giuliani when he was New York City mayor, published "ACORN's Nutty Regime for Cities" by conservative writer Sol Stern. Stern called ACORN "The largest radical group in the country" and claimed that ACORN "opts for undisguised authoritarian socialism."⁹¹

Cable News

Overall, broadcast and cable outlets (20.6% of stories) were much more likely than newspapers (6.7%) to mention “radical” Bill Ayers. The same pattern persisted for mentions of former Obama pastor Jeremiah Wright, who was noted in 9.6% of broadcast and cable stories and 2.9% of print stories.

Fox was the most aggressive (26.2% of its stories) in linking ACORN to Ayers (except for MSNBC, which again raised the issue rhetorically, then critiqued it), and for associating ACORN with Wright (20.5%). A few news organizations attempted to associate ACORN with the Black Panthers, the 1960s-era black power movement organization, and Saul Alinsky, the late (1909-1972) Chicago-based community organizer and writer.

The attempt to tie all “radical” elements together was more of an effort by Fox (especially in its two “A History of Radicalism” specials) than any other news organization, with CNN again second in terms of number of stories. Such allegations reflect the approach of Rush Limbaugh (as noted earlier), who stated that Obama was “smack dab in the middle of” a conspiracy of “wackos from Bill Ayers to Jeremiah Wright to other anti-American, Afrocentric black liberation theologians.”

In a media criticism story in the *Washington Post* in the days after the election, Fox New anchor Brit Hume referred to his own network’s reports on Obama-radical links not as news stories, but as “attacks” on Obama:

Fox News pounded Obama in recent weeks over his past contacts with onetime terrorist William Ayers, former preacher Jeremiah Wright and the community group ACORN. But anchor Brit Hume told viewers that Obama’s winning personality had blunted the criticism.

“One reason the attacks on him didn't stick, despite some radical elements in his background,” Hume says, “is that it just didn’t fit with a man who is extremely charming and appealing, who resounded with reasonableness and a certain eloquent mildness.”⁹²

Table 5

RADICALISM LINKS	ALL NEWS MEDIA	BROADCAST & CABLE	PRINT	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	NPR	TV NETWORKS	WALL STREET JRNL	WASH POST	NY TIMES	USA TODAY	LOCAL PRINT	PEAK - OCT 2008
NUMBER OF STORIES	647	335	312	132	122	22	36	23	75	55	32	16	134	391
William Ayers	13.9	20.6	6.7	15.2	26.2	40.9	8.3	21.7	2.7	14.5	3.1	12.5	6.0	20.7
Saul Alinsky	0.8	0.9	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.0	2.8	0.0	0.0	1.8	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.8
Black Panthers	0.2	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.3
Rev. Jeremiah Wright	6.3	9.6	2.9	4.5	20.5	4.5	0.0	0.0	1.3	5.5	3.1	0.0	3.0	9.2

MSNBC mentioned Ayers in about 40% of its 22 reports, but usually in the course of again critiquing the allegations. For example, on the Oct. 16 *Hardball* program, host Chris Matthews debated at length with Brian Jones, a McCain campaign senior advisor, about

McCain and Palin’s statements questioning Obama’s patriotism and linking him with Ayers and ACORN.⁹³

Network Television and NPR

Television networks didn’t initiate stories linking Obama to “radicals,” but repeated and discussed allegations linking Obama and Ayers in 21.7% of their ACORN stories. NPR made the links less often, but did cover the radicalism allegations from the presidential debate in an Oct. 16 *Morning Edition* fact-check report.⁹⁴

National Newspapers

Aside from the three local newspapers, the *New York Times* was the news organization that was least likely to link Obama to Ayers, Alinsky, the Black Panthers, and Rev. Wright. The *Washington Post*, attuned to official political sources of the Beltway, and *USA Today*, although less Washington-centric, repeated and discussed the links in their stories.

The *Wall Street Journal* had relatively few stories linking Obama to Bill Ayers (2.7%) and Jeremiah Wright (1.3%). But, in terms of potency, these stories were early and complete expositions that helped to initiate (along with Fox News) the frames that were repeated elsewhere. For example, a Sept. 23 piece by opinion entrepreneur Stanley Kurtz titled “Obama and Ayers Pushed Radicalism on Schools” criticized their work on the Chicago Annenberg Challenge education reform board (during which their terms briefly overlapped) for funding things like radical “programs designed to promote ‘leadership’ among parents.”⁹⁵ An Oct. 16, 2008 commentary titled “Ayers Is No Education ‘Reformer’” by conservative writer Sol Stern also played up the radicalism link.

Local Newspapers

Of the three local newspapers’ 134 stories, only a handful covered the Obama-radical frame, usually in coverage of the national story. However, local newspaper columnists for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* did write a few highly critical columns mirroring conservative echo chamber arguments that alleged Obama consorted with radicals and terrorists and conspired to steal the election with ACORN.⁹⁶

XII. News Discourse—Finding Words to Describe ACORN

Another way to frame stories about ACORN involves the use of adjectives to describe and thus define the organization. What’s important to note is how the news organizations describe ACORN: Should they do it with ACORN’s own terms, or other terms (the terms of the conservative echo chamber)? Table 6 reveals the top seven descriptors – socialist, radical, leftist/left-wing, militant, front (for Democrats), political, and activist. These are words chosen by others to describe ACORN, not how ACORN describes itself. The bottom five descriptors derive from how ACORN describes itself as “a non-profit, non-partisan social justice organization,” and “the nation’s largest grassroots community organization of low- and moderate-income people.”

Cable News

CNN and Fox were most likely to define ACORN with these controversial and

inflammatory terms. Lou Dobbs at CNN was a serial user of such terms, alternately referring to ACORN as a “left-wing group”, “left-wing activist group”, “left-wing radical group”, and finally, “left-wing radical activist group.”⁹⁷ Never once over the two years did Dobbs call ACORN a community organization. As a network, Fox seemed especially loathe (only 13.1% of its stories) to call ACORN a community organization, even though it is part of ACORN’s name and an accurate description of what it actually does. Of course, by persistently referring to ACORN in political terms, and not in the terms of its actual work or structure, the meaning of ACORN begins to shift from an organization whose purpose is local community work to a group whose goal is national political manipulation.

MSNBC tended to dispense with most descriptive terms, not calling ACORN a community organization often, but also not often referring to it with the conservative echo chamber. For MSNBC, ACORN was usually just referred to as ACORN, with no extra descriptors.

Network Television and NPR

The four television networks used “community organization” in 26.1% of their stories, twice as often as the next descriptor, “activist” (13%). NPR used “community organization” in 36.1% of its stories, and was better than any other news organizations analyzed at balancing out the conservative descriptors of ACORN with ACORN’s other terms like “grassroots”, “nonprofit”, and “social justice.”

National Newspapers

The *New York Times* was most likely (in 40.6% of its ACORN stories) to refer to ACORN as a community organization. Like NPR and the TV networks, the *Times* did use terms like “leftist/left-wing” occasionally to describe ACORN (in 9.4% of its reports) in the context of Republican opposition. For example, in an Oct. 30, 2008 story noting that Republicans called ACORN a “quasi-criminal organization” (a term not imagined when the researchers developed the list of possible discourse terms), the *Times* referred to ACORN as “the left-leaning community organizing group.”⁹⁸ *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* were more likely to have stories using some variation of “leftist/left-wing” (about 18% each) or “activist” describing ACORN, which suggests their greater acceptance of reporting on ACORN with the politicized terminology inherited from the conservative echo chamber. The *Wall Street Journal* used “leftist/left-wing” about 18% of the time as well, but also dipped further into politicized discourse, using “front (for Democrats)” 8% of the time, and “activist” in 21.3% of its stories. Although the *Journal* did use the “nonprofit” descriptor more than any other news organization studied (10.7% of stories), the *Journal* ranked low (24% of stories) in identifying ACORN as a community organization.

Local Newspapers

While some terms to describe ACORN may be dramatic, others may be more accurate. Most notable is the fact that the local newspapers from Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Minneapolis-St. Paul were not likely to use any kind of stigmatizing discourse, referring to ACORN first as a community organization, and second as nonprofit organization. These terms reflected more of these cities’ local experiences and stories with ACORN, and also reflect that the politicized ACORN stories were circulated on a more national level.

Table 6

DISCOURSE	ALL NEWS MEDIA	BROADCAST & CABLE	PRINT	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	NPR	TV NETWORKS	WALL STREET JRNL	WASH POST	NY TIMES	USA TODAY	LOCAL PRINT	PEAK - OCT 2008
NUMBER OF STORIES	647	335	312	132	122	22	36	23	75	55	32	16	134	391
Socialist	0.3	0.6	0.0	0.8	0.0	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Radical	4.2	6.0	2.2	6.8	9.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	2.2	5.4
Leftist/Left-wing	14.8	19.4	9.9	25.8	20.5	4.5	8.3	8.7	18.7	18.2	9.4	18.8	0.7	16.9
Militant	0.5	0.9	0.0	0.0	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8
Front (for Democrats)	6.6	10.7	2.2	10.6	13.1	0.0	11.1	8.7	8.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	7.9
Political	4.0	7.2	0.6	3.8	10.7	9.1	5.6	8.7	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.6
Activist	13.6	17.6	9.3	28.0	11.5	0.0	13.9	13.0	21.3	9.1	3.1	12.5	3.7	13.8
Nonprofit	4.2	2.1	6.4	3.0	0.0	0.0	5.6	4.3	10.7	5.5	0.0	0.0	6.7	1.0
Nonpartisan	1.4	1.8	1.0	2.3	1.6	0.0	2.8	0.0	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.5
Grassroots	3.6	4.5	2.6	6.8	2.5	4.5	5.6	0.0	1.3	5.5	0.0	0.0	3.0	4.9
Social Justice	1.9	2.1	1.6	2.3	0.0	4.5	8.3	0.0	2.7	1.8	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.5
Community Organization	25.0	20.9	29.5	24.2	13.1	13.6	36.1	26.1	24.0	34.5	40.6	37.5	26.9	25.3

XIII. Conclusion

This study of ACORN reveals the **agenda-setting effect** of the news (the news tells us what to think *about*), and **news framing** (the news tells us *how* to think about it). These two phenomena vaulted poorly-verified stories into the news agenda, and created narratives of a national voter fraud scandal and conspiracy from what were essentially localized problems of workers registering voters and of ACORN flagging examples of questionable applications to the appropriate officials, as required by law. Of course, those kinds of stories and narrative framing didn't make it into the news media all by themselves. Conservative **opinion entrepreneurs**, along with the Republican Party, maintained a steady barrage of words and images to get their anti-ACORN ideas into the media and influence the agenda-setting and news-framing activities of the media.

The most responsible journalism hews to a discipline of verification, independently investigating allegations instead of hosting a cross-fire of repeated, unsubstantiated charges. A real "developing story" deserves some actual development for its next publication, airing, or posting, and shouldn't be empty hype to fill a news hole or a program slot in a 24/7 broadcast schedule.

For the *New York Times* Public Editor Clark Hoyt, who investigated charges that the *Times* had dropped the "game changer" story on ACORN's alleged voter registration fraud right before the election, there was no such story.⁹⁹ Hoyt wrote on May 16, 2009 that "I have spent several weeks looking into this issue — interviewing and e-mailing those involved, reading transcripts, looking at campaign finance records and conferring with legal experts. In a nutshell, I think the charge is nonsense."

Such transparent fact-checking is refreshing. But that sort of journalism still isn't the practice at most of the news media analyzed in this study, at least when it comes to ACORN. During the six months after Obama took office there was still a drumbeat of ACORN stories in the news, and the pattern of how they get on the news agenda and how

they are framed looked familiar. Behind the scenes, the Republican National Committee was operating its anti-ACORN web site, alleging “the Democrats are about to make \$8.5 billion more in taxpayer money available to this radical group.” Meanwhile, blogger and opinion entrepreneur Michelle Malkin kept up her persistent campaign against ACORN, decrying any federal contracts for “OBAMACORN” (as her site cleverly put it) and circulating a petition to support the Republican legislation targeting ACORN.¹⁰⁰

In several news outlets, those same talking points appeared with little evidence of journalistic intervention. For example, in April 2009, Lou Dobbs again returned to the ACORN story, rehashing old myths as an introduction to a debate over a Republican bill that would disqualify federal funding from any group *indicted* (not convicted) for voter fraud. “The tactics of the left wing activist and advocacy group ACORN under investigation in states all across the country. The group has close ties to President Obama. We've covered the actions of ACORN extensively here on this broadcast. And a new controversy over whether groups like ACORN should continue to receive federal funding.”¹⁰¹

The echo continued. In May 2009, conservative writer Phyllis Schlafly wrote in her syndicated column that Barack Obama “has for years had a close working relationship with ACORN” and that the organization should be specifically prohibited from ever receiving any federal contracts (again, several Republicans in Congress sponsored such a bill to cut ACORN out of federal contract work using economic stimulus funds).¹⁰² In the same month, Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck of Fox News agreed on air that ACORN is a “shell game.”¹⁰³ A few days earlier, O'Reilly referred to ACORN as “what might be the biggest financial political con in history.”¹⁰⁴ On Fox News, O'Reilly, Beck, and Hannity persisted in their attacks on ACORN throughout the first half of 2009. At the *Wall Street Journal*, six months after the presidential election, editorial writer John Fund continued to level the same charges at ACORN, and added a note of conspiracy: “Washington Democrats are still sweeping Acorn abuses under a rug.”¹⁰⁵

In the June 22, 2009 issue of the conservative magazine *Human Events*, U.S. Rep. Michele Bachman (R-MN) wrote that “it was reported recently that they [ACORN] could be eligible for up to another \$8.5 billion between the so-called stimulus and the 2010 federal budget. All the while Congress has been funneling tax dollars to ACORN, it has been linked to voter-registration fraud and related violations of the law in more than a dozen states directly, through its employees or both.”¹⁰⁶

The next wave of anti-ACORN attacks focused on Republican concerns that ACORN would be participating in the 2010 Census count. The Census identified ACORN as one of several thousand organizations that would serve, without compensation and on a voluntary basis, as a “partner” in the 2010 Census, which involved identifying job candidates, encouraging its members to participate in the count and distributing literature explaining the importance of the census. On May 15, House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-OH) issued a statement, saying, “I am also greatly concerned that the Census would enter into a national partnership with ACORN, an organization rife with internal corruption and that

was responsible for multiple instances of vote fraud in the 2008 presidential election. Asking an organization like ACORN to help recruit the 1.4 million temporary workers that will go door-to-door is akin to inviting the fox into the henhouse. Corrupt organizations like ACORN should have no part in this process and, if Mr. [Robert] Groves [Obama’s nominee for Census Director] is confirmed, he should sever all ties between the Census and ACORN and its affiliated organizations.” On June 29, 2009, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “Some Republican members of Congress want the U.S. Census Bureau to end a 2010 Census partnership with Acorn, the community organizing group that was hit by accusations of voter-registration fraud in the 2006 and 2008 elections.” U.S. Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) told the *Wall Street Journal* that “he plans to introduce a bill that would require mail carriers to count the population as a way of keeping Acorn out of the process.”¹⁰⁷ Several Republican Senators threatened to block a confirmation vote on Obama’s nominee for Census Director, indicating, according to the *Associated Press*, that they wanted “a guarantee from President Obama that the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or Acorn, which has been accused of voter fraud, would not participate in the count.”¹⁰⁸

In July 2009, U. S. Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA), ranking Republican on the House Government Oversight Committee, released a report titled, “Is ACORN Intentionally Structured as a Criminal Enterprise?” that repeated many of the allegations made during the 2008 campaign and that generated media attention.¹⁰⁹ The report generated considerable attention in the conservative media, including stories on Fox News, the Lou Dobbs and Glenn Beck shows, a report in conservative writer Michele Malkin’s syndicated column, an article in the *American Spectator*, as well as stories in *The Hill*, the Capitol Hill newspaper. The report was quickly spread through the conservative blogosphere.

If the message of the conservative echo chamber could be reduced to an image, it would be the cover illustration of the March 23, 2009 issue of the *National Review*. The illustration—in the dramatic style of Soviet expressionist propaganda posters—depicts a



vigorous Obama in a white shirt, sleeves rolled up past the elbows, collar open, carrying an American flag on a pole resting against his right shoulder. Drifting off in the distant background are shadowy silhouettes of windmills. On the cover of another magazine, this image might be interpreted as a reform-minded Obama, ready to fix the nation. But on the *National Review*, America’s leading journal of conservative/Republican politics, the cover story title in the bottom third of the frame tells the reader what to think: “Our Socialist Future.”

On Obama’s shirt, where a polo horse or

alligator logo might be situation, is the logo for ACORN. Ironically, the cover article by Mark Steyn doesn't even mention ACORN, but it doesn't matter: the conservative echo chamber's representation of ACORN is literally "pinned" on Obama.

A half-year after the 2008 presidential election, the community organization ACORN is still on the national news agenda, and the news is still telling people what to think about it.

What's most needed now—finally—is journalistic verification of the story's elements by *all* news media. The outcome of the story doesn't matter as much as the news getting the story right. But without the essential work of verification, the repeated charges and inflammatory discourse by several news organizations that seek to keep this story on the news agenda amount to just political propaganda.

Appendix: Who and What is ACORN?

ACORN is the largest community organizing group in the United States. It has chapters in 110 cities in 40 states. ACORN and its affiliates have an annual budget of over \$100 million, over 1,000 employees, and nearly 500,000 dues-paying families.

ACORN emerged out of the anti-poverty activism of the 1960s. By the late 1960s, one of those groups, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), had built an organization with affiliates in 60 cities across the country. But because it focused exclusively on welfare recipients, its narrow constituency base guaranteed that it would remain a marginal force in the nation's politics. George Wiley, NWRO's leader, and Wade Rathke, one of NWRO's best organizers, believed that the time was ripe to build a broader multi-racial movement for economic justice, with a membership base of low-income people, including the working poor, but with support from middle-class allies. In 1970, Rathke agreed to go to Little Rock, Arkansas and try a different approach. He started a new group called ACORN (it initially stood for Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now). At first it organized welfare recipients and low-income working families around issues that could unite them, including free school lunches, Vietnam veterans' rights, hospital emergency room care, and unemployment.

ACORN soon expanded in Arkansas and started building chapters in other cities throughout the South, then later in other parts of the country. By 1975, it was organizing in eight cities in three states. Five years later, ACORN had chapters in 35 cities in 24 states. By 1990, ACORN counted 40 chapters in 27 states. Its growth continued in the 1990s, so by 2000 it had 46 affiliates in 29 states. After 2000, ACORN rapidly accelerated its expansion effort, growing to 92 cities in 35 states by 2005, then to 103 cities in 37 states two years later. As a result of its expansion outside Arkansas, the group kept its name but soon revised the acronym to stand for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Most people, however, simply know the group as ACORN.

ACORN has focused on issues that improve living and working conditions for low-income Americans, including housing, mortgage discrimination, schools, wages, welfare, health care, and voting rights. ACORN identifies issues by knocking on doors in low-income neighborhoods and bringing people together in local chapters. There are thousands of local groups around the country engaged in community organizing around similar issues. What makes ACORN unusual, and what accounts for its significant growth, is its "federated" structure. ACORN is a national organization with state offices and local chapters. This allows ACORN to conduct organizing campaigns simultaneously at the neighborhood, local, state and federal levels. As a result, its chapter members are often "in motion" on a variety of issues, and so that its local organizations can link up with their counterparts around the country to change national policy on key issues that can't be solved at the neighborhood or municipal level.

ACORN organizers recruit leaders and identify issues by regularly knocking on doors in low-income neighborhoods. People tell ACORN organizers about the problems they face in their communities. These conversations became the basis of local organizing campaigns to improve conditions. Its organizing staff works to build strong local organizations and local leaders that can influence municipal and county governments, and local corporations or other employers and institutions (such as hospitals) to address the needs of the poor and their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood organizing defines ACORN's core issues. At the local level, ACORN members can be organizing to close down a crack house, clean up vacant lots and turn them into parks, put up stop signs to prevent children from getting killed at a dangerous intersection, or counsel people on how to negotiate with their bank to stop a foreclosure. But when national leaders and staff recognize problems that are energizing members in several cities, they can consider whether the issue can also be effectively addressed by changes in state or federal policy. Because many problems cannot be solved solely at the neighborhood or city level, ACORN also educates its members about the importance of mobilizing at the state and national levels. ACORN employs a staff of researchers and lobbyists in its national offices in Brooklyn, New York and Washington, DC to serve the needs of local chapters.

So at the same time that ACORN is tackling local issues, its members may also be mobilizing voters to approve a referendum to raise the state minimum wage, or push Congress to pass a federal law tightening rules against mortgage abuse by banks or to enact universal health insurance, or meeting with top executives of major banks to push them to change their business practices to be more consumer friendly.

For example, during one week in July 2008, the *New York Times* reported on ACORN's successful campaign to save 5,881 rental units of working class housing in Brooklyn. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and the Orlando (Florida) *Sentinel* reported on ACORN's local voter registration drives. The Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* recounted an ACORN demonstration at a local bank, with members blowing whistles and chanting "Criminal offenders, predatory lenders." The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* described ACORN's ongoing work to rebuild homes in the Lower 9th Ward neighborhood battered by Hurricane Katrina. A Connecticut paper described ACORN's counseling program that helped homeowners save their houses, and local media in Tucson, Arizona reported ACORN's campaign to pressure local officials to adopt a law to prevent unfair lending practice. The San Francisco *Chronicle* reported that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill pushed by ACORN that will help desperate California homeowners avoid foreclosure. The Dallas *Morning News* reported on ACORN's campaign to expand health insurance in Texas, while dozens of papers highlighted ACORN's key role in a national coalition of unions, consumer and religious groups to fight for universal health care.

Most of ACORN's members are low-income, predominantly black and Latino residents of urban neighborhoods, although there are also white and Asian members in some of its chapters. ACORN members pay dues, but these don't provide sufficient resources to pay for the group's operations, so it also depends on local fundraising (such as bake

sales, raffles, and annual dinners) and grants from philanthropic foundations and wealthy donors. In its earliest years, most ACORN organizers and researchers were drawn from idealistic college graduates. Increasingly, ACORN has sought to recruit organizers from among its volunteer leaders, in order to employ a staff that is more like its members.

Since its founding in 1970, ACORN has mobilized low-income and working class Americans to challenge powerful banks, corporations, and government officials around such issues as wages for the working poor, predatory lending and foreclosures, welfare reform, public education, affordable housing, and voting rights. It has registered millions of Americans, mostly poor people, to vote. ACORN's success has depended on staking out progressive stances, mobilizing poor people, especially its dues-paying members, on issue campaigns, and enlisting allies among foundations, unions, religious groups, and politicians.

ACORN is often called a "protest" group because it often organizes rallies, demonstrations, and pickets to draw attention to its campaigns – public events that generate media attention. But much of ACORN's success is due to its less visible activities. ACORN staff conduct research that help frame issues and become reliable sources of information for reporters – for example, research on the discriminatory lending patterns of specific banks. ACORN engages in quiet negotiations and lobbying with politicians and other government officials as well as top executives of corporations. ACORN organizers spend much of their time canvassing neighborhoods, talking to residents about their problems and recruiting them to attend meetings with their neighbors. Once ACORN staffers have identified potential leaders, they spend many hours talking with them in their kitchens, church basements, and other meeting places, helping them talk about their frustrations and training them in such leadership skills as chairing meetings, negotiating with people in powerful positions, and public speaking. At the same time, ACORN recognizes the limits of protest as a tactic as well as the limits of community organizing as a strategy. One of ACORN's strengths is its combination of "inside" and "outside" tactics and strategies. ACORN's activists and leaders often work both inside the system (organizing the poor to participate in politics) and outside the system (recognizing the need for protest and confrontation).

ACORN has also learned to forge partnerships with some corporations, banks, and politicians whom it at one time opposed, recognizing that successful organizing campaigns involve negotiation, compromise, and winning over new allies.

ACORN's signature issues deal with banking practices, housing, the wages of the working poor, and voting rights.

Banking Practices: In the mid-1970s, ACORN's St. Louis chapter began a campaign against "redlining," the banking practice of denying mortgage loans to predominantly minority neighborhoods, even to potential borrowers with sufficient income to pay back the loan. After Congress passed two laws – the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act in 1975 and the Community Reinvestment Act in 1977 – ACORN was one of many community

groups that documented widespread redlining and protested against banks and government regulators who failed to challenge lenders' discriminatory lending practices. As ACORN grew, it waged these "community reinvestment" campaigns in cities around the country, often targeting the same larger regional and national banks. ACORN conducted anti-redlining campaigns in many different cities in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing on its national staff to conduct research, issue reports on lending disparities, provide legal assistance for mounting CRA challenges against lenders, and offer strategic lessons. ACORN organizers who led successful community reinvestment campaigns helped train their counterparts in other cities. ACORN used these local campaigns to develop national campaigns around federal banking and housing legislation. It targeted several major national banks and mortgage companies, waged campaigns against them, brought them to the bargaining table, and got them to change their lending practices. By the mid-1980s, ACORN had a substantial track record of forging "community reinvestment agreements" with banks that led to substantial changes in their lending activities, including more mortgage loans in neighborhoods that they had previously ignored.

ACORN's success in this arena gave it the credibility and know-how to play a role in getting Congress to amend the Community Reinvestment Act in the 1980s to give regulators stronger tools to identify and punish banks that continued to redline. In the 1990s, ACORN began to identify a different kind of questionable banking practice and coined the term "predatory lending." ACORN discovered that many banks and private mortgage companies were soliciting vulnerable borrowers in low-income areas – often elderly and minority residents – and charging them exorbitant interest rates and fees. ACORN conducted studies and wages campaigns to warn the public, and public officials, about the banking industry's irresponsible, risky and predatory practices ACORN persistently called for stronger state and federal regulations on banks, private mortgage companies, mortgage brokers and rating agencies to protect consumers. Years before the "mortgage meltdown" made headlines, ACORN alerted public officials that the financial services industry was hoodwinking many families into taking out risky loans they couldn't afford and whose fine print they couldn't understand. ACORN also used both protest and litigation to draw attention to these practices and bring major lenders to the negotiating table.

ACORN has mounted successful campaigns that got predatory lenders to change their practices and helped homeowners save an estimated \$6.2 billion in fees and interest. ACORN focused on Ameriquest, The Money Store, NationsCredit, American SkyCorp, New Century, Wells Fargo, First Franklin, Citifinancial and Household Beneficial. In 2001, Citigroup agreed to stop selling single-premium credit insurance in response to pressure by ACORN and others. Citifinancial later agreed to cap points and fees at 3% for loans made through its branches and to limit prepayment penalties. From 1999 to 2002, ACORN utilized protests, shareholder resolutions, lawsuits, and pressure on regulators to hold Household accountable for its predatory practices. Attorneys general in several states joined ACORN's lawsuit, leading to a settlement that got Household to change its practices and also pay \$484 million in all 50 states, plus an additional \$150 million for borrowers through a Foreclosure Avoidance Program.

In addition to campaigns against specific lenders, ACORN has helped pass important legislation on predatory lending. In 2001, ACORN led campaigns that led to local laws outlawing predatory practices in Philadelphia, Oakland, New York City, and Los Angeles, and in subsequent years helped pass statewide consumer-oriented predatory lending bills in California, Illinois, Minnesota, Illinois, Minnesota, Connecticut, New York, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Washington.

ACORN not only served early warnings to government officials about predatory lending but also has played a leading role in preventing unnecessary foreclosures. As part of its settlement with Household Finance, ACORN created the Foreclosure Avoidance Program which provided relief to borrowers starting in 2003. HSBC, Household's parent company, began applying this program to its entire mortgage servicing portfolio, helping over 50,000 borrowers. ACORN has pushed for local, state and federal legislation, organized homeowners and tenants facing eviction, and challenged lenders directly to renegotiate mortgage loans. ACORN sponsored a bill in Minnesota that outlawed foreclosure rescue scams. The Connecticut legislator adopted an, ACORN-initiated bill giving homeowners the right to a face-to-face mediation session. ACORN won a legislative victory in Maryland extending the foreclosure process from 14 to 90 days, and in 2009 got the Colorado legislature to pass legislation to slow its foreclosure process and institute fair notice requirements. ACORN won legislation in California that minimum code standards for foreclosed properties, and instituted new notice requirements to protect tenants from unfair evictions. In 2008, ACORN Housing Corporation ran a foreclosure prevention counseling programs around the country that assisted 44,000 people. ACORN has worked with Congress and the Obama administration to make it harder for lenders to foreclose on homeowners.

ACORN's Financial Justice Center has negotiated settlements with several large private corporations—including Citigroup, Household Finance and H&R Block—that had a history of discrimination or predatory lending. The settlements resulted in borrowers saving several billion dollars a year and benefitting from \$636 million in one-time payouts.

Affordable Housing: ACORN has organized tenants as well as homeowners to address the housing crisis facing the poor. ACORN was a key part of the Housing LA coalition, which in 2001 got LA City Council and mayor to create a \$100 million annual affordable housing trust fund to support development of affordable housing. In 2003, ACORN wrote and led a campaign in California to pass a bill to help renters combat severe slum housing conditions. Among other provisions, this law blocks rent increases or evictions for non-payment of rent when landlords have not met minimum health and safety standards. In Oakland, ACORN led a campaign to establish the Oakland Community Land Trust, which has city funding to acquire vacant foreclosed homes, rehab them, and create a pool of permanently affordable housing in several low-income communities of Oakland. In New York, a multi-year ACORN campaign prevented the largest rent-stabilized apartment complex in the country—Starrett City with over 5,000 apartments—from being sold to developers who would have eliminated rent

protections, and won new state regulations that would prevent such conversions from ever happening again. ACORN also successfully pushed for a New York City law prohibiting landlords from discriminating against Section 8 recipients.

The nonprofit ACORN Housing Corporation builds and rehabilitates housing for low-income residents. It also provides homeownership counseling for prospective buyers to help them through the process of getting a mortgage, and avoid getting ripped off, as well as learning how to manage household finances so they can maintain their property. ACORN Housing Corporation has counseled 350,000 people on first-time homebuyer and refinance issues since 1992, closed over 110,000 mortgages worth over \$16 billion, and educated over 320,000 prospective homeowners in workshops. These accomplishments are due in large part to Community Reinvestment Act agreements that ACORN negotiated with Bank of America, Citibank, Chase, PNC Bank, M&T Bank, and HSBC in response to ACORN's grassroots organizing campaigns.

Wages of the Working Poor: ACORN has played a leading role in building the “living wage” movement, working with unions, faith-based groups, and other community and civil rights organizations to help lift the working poor out of poverty. Two decades ago, the concept of a living wage was a radical idea. Today, it is part of the mainstream public debate. The movement was spurred by Congress's failure to raise the national minimum wage for almost ten years (after raising it to \$5.15 an hour in 1997). The momentum for change was also catalyzed by the proliferation of low-wage jobs, and by city governments' efforts to contract public services to private firms paying lower wages and benefits than prevail in the public sector. Most Americans now agree that people working full-time should not be trapped in poverty.

There are now close to 200 cities and counties with these ordinances, despite the opposition of the local and national business groups. These laws set a minimum wage—one to five dollars an hour higher than the federal threshold—for businesses that receive city contracts, tax abatements or subsidies. In Chicago, for example, ACORN had to overcome Mayor Richard Daley's opposition to pass a living-wage law that now applies to firms that receive \$50,000 or more in city subsidies. ACORN created a Living Wage Resource Center to help local groups forge similar campaigns.

ACORN has used local living wage battles to test organizing strategies that can be utilized in broader campaigns with more significant consequences. In 2002, for example, ACORN mounted a successful grassroots campaign in New Orleans to enact a citywide minimum wage pegged at a dollar above the federal wage level. After the surprise victory, the city's business leaders sued, and the wage law was overturned by the state's conservative Supreme Court. But ACORN had made a name for itself as a grassroots David willing to take on powerful Goliaths.

In November 2004, ACORN and labor unions led a successful battle in Florida to pass a statewide referendum to raise the minimum wage by one dollar to \$6.15 an hour and to increase it annually based on the consumer price index. In a state where George W. Bush beat John Kerry by 381,000 votes, voters favored the minimum wage increase by

3.1 million votes—or 71.3 % to 28.7 %— winning in every county, despite the opposition of the state’s business community and Governor Jeb Bush. This overwhelming victory in Florida inspired minimum wage ballot initiatives in 2006 that raised the minimum wage in six other states, with ACORN taking the lead in Ohio, Arizona, Colorado, and Missouri. In each state, they forged broad coalitions between community groups, clergy and churches, unions, and other constituencies. They mobilized effective voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns. All six measures prevailed, most by wide margins, and included provisions for annual increases based on the cost of living. Indirectly, these grassroots minimum-wage campaigns, by increasing voter turnout among low-income Americans, helped Democrats Claire McCaskill in Missouri, John Tester in Montana, and Sherrod Brown in Ohio defeat incumbent Republicans and cement the Democrats’ majority in the U.S. Senate in 2006. ACORN also played in key role in raising the minimum wage through state legislatures in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New York, California, and Michigan.

These local living wage and state minimum campaigns laid the groundwork for raising the federal minimum wage. After the Democrats regained their majority in Congress in November 2006, both the House (by a 280 to 142 margin) and Senate (80 to 14) voted to increase the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour over three years. President Bush signed the bill in May 2007, giving almost six million minimum wage workers a pay raise.

Another ACORN strategy to lift the working poor focuses on the Earned Income Tax Credit, a federal wage supplement for families earning under \$40,000. ACORN has also led campaigns to create state-level Earned Income Tax Credits in several states. In 2008, for example, ACORN led a successful campaign in Washington to create the state’s “Working Families Credit”—a state matching grant for households eligible for the federal EITC. ACORN also sponsors outreach efforts—at community centers, churches and schools—to inform low-wage families about the EITC and provides eligible families with help preparing their tax forms so they can receive the EITC benefits, which reach up to \$4,000 a year for the lowest-paid employees. Over the past three years, ACORN helped over 152,000 tax filers claim over \$177 million in tax refunds, including \$87.2 million in Earned Income Tax Credits.

ACORN has also helped bring to light the abusive practices of large for-profit tax preparation corporations that charge exorbitant fees and interest rates to low-income consumers. ACORN negotiated agreements with three large firms—H&R Block, Jackson Hewitt, and Liberty—to increase disclosure of fees and ending predatory sales tactics.

Hurricane Katrina: After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in September 2005, ACORN played a key role in mobilizing New Orleans residents—scattered in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Little Rock, Atlanta, Birmingham and as far away as Seattle, Vancouver and New York—to demand that the federal, state and local government rebuild the predominantly black neighborhoods hardest hit by the storm. ACORN had a large chapter in New Orleans, with over 9,000 members, but it was also able to draw on its chapters around the country to raise money, recruit volunteers, and lobby Congress for funding to restore the city’s economy and repair and rebuild its homes. For example,

many of the “sub-prime” lenders that had targeted low-income consumers in New Orleans with predatory loans were threatening to foreclose on homeowners if they were a month late in paying their mortgages, while giving middle class owners much longer. On September 22, ACORN released a report, “How the sub-prime mortgage industry is sandbagging Katrina-affected homeowners,” to expose the industry’s double standard. After *The Wall Street Journal* and other major media publicized the report, ACORN demanded meeting lenders and successfully negotiated plans to prevent foreclosures. ACORN also helped clean up and repair homes in the troubled Ninth Ward neighborhood, organized residents to demand a voice in shaping the recovery plans that Mayor Ray Nagin and his business allies had hatched without broad community input. Enlisting the experience of its home-building nonprofit affiliate, ACORN was the first group to rebuild homes in the Lower Ninth ward. ACORN’s “home clean-out” program gutted and cleaned over 6000 homes in New Orleans’ devastated low-income neighborhoods. In 2006, led a campaign win a city ordinance that created a due process for homeowners seeking to rebuild and also mobilized voters to win a city referendum to stop eminent domain from being used to prevent redevelopment of flooded communities. In 2006, ACORN sued FEMA for curtailing housing benefits for Katrina victims; in a landmark victory, a federal judge ruled that FEMA had to immediately resume providing housing benefits to an estimated 4,200 families.

Voter Rights: Since 2003, ACORN says it has collected and submitted nearly 3 million voter registration applications. It estimates that more than 2 million of these applications resulted in a successfully registered new voter or a necessary address change to keep a voter on the rolls. In addition, ACORN sponsors Election Day get-out-the-vote efforts, typically targeting its efforts in low-income areas, focusing on African American and Latino voters. It estimates that in 2008 alone it reached more than 470,000 contacts with voters on Election Day, with particular strength in North Carolina, Ohio, New Mexico, and Minnesota.

ACORN has worked to improve enforcement of voters’ rights, particularly the federal law requiring some public agencies (like state departments of motor vehicles) to provide opportunities for voter registration. In Missouri, for example, ACORN and Project Vote discovered that the state was not implementing the law and successfully sued to force the state Department of Social Services to help register low-income residents.

During the 2008 election season ACORN played a key role in protecting voting rights in Ohio, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico. It issued reports to identify ways that state agencies and the Republican Party sought to restrict voting and intimate minority voters.

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- ³ We reviewed reports and transcripts from August 10 to August 18, 2009 in major news outlets, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio (NPR), and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (PBS).
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- ⁴⁷ Because they are all part of the news flow and feature "frames" that interpret the news, "stories" are defined to include print news reports, editorials, columns, letters to the editor, broadcast news reports, discussions, and interviews. Although newspapers may often distinguish between "news", "analysis" and "opinion," those categories are less clear than they were decades ago. In the broadcast and cable media, the distinctions between news and opinion are even more fluid.
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