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Activism, Inc.: How the Outsourcing of Grassroots Campaigns Is Strangling Progressive Politics in America

By Dana R. Fisher

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Enticed by the idea that they could "be part of the solution" and take "their conscience to work," thousands of young people spend their summers each year going door-to-door or standing on street corners, canvassing for organizations that promote progressive causes. Most people assume that these activists are passionate idealists, working for the individual organizations whose causes they support. Dana R. Fisher's new book, *Activism, Inc.* shows why this is far from the case.

Connecting local canvassers on the streets throughout America to national organizations and political campaigns, *Activism, Inc.* presents a comprehensive investigation of political canvassing in progressive politics. The book offers a chilling review of the consequences of what the author calls the "outsourcing of political activism by the left in the United States." Fisher chronicles the experiences of young activists outsourced to the People's Project.¹ She conducted interviews and surveys with canvassers in offices across the country over the course of summer 2003, with follow-up interviews conducted a year later.

In the 1990s, as the funding for progressive causes waned, several national progressive groups decided to hire the People's Project to run their own campaigning and fundraising on the assumption that it is more cost-effective (following the model of customer service and technical assistance for many corporations). Although the People's Project is one of the largest, there are a handful of other groups running outsourced canvasses. "Together these canvasses maintain a grassroots base for approximately 25 percent of the largest membership organizations in the United States. ...In the summer of 2003, they ran campaigns for the national offices of Greenpeace USA, Save the Children, the Human Rights Campaign, and the Sierra Club." This kind of standardized canvassing model seems to make economic sense for national organizations that don't have a built-in membership to tap into for fundraising. But what are the implications for the involvement of America's youth in politics?

Using a regimented and top-down structure, the Project trains its canvassers with scripted messages where the emphasis is on memorizing a script and not understanding the issues. The focus is on fundraising and setting monetary targets, where everyone—canvassers and staff members—is expected meet weekly quotas.

¹ The author has anonymized the organization throughout the book. Therefore, the organization is referred to as 'the People's Project' or the 'Project'.

More important, instead of taking advantage of preexisting local progressive institutions and staff in local communities, the People's Project chooses to ignore these networks by moving its campaign directors regularly. Fisher wonders, "How can the People's Project run effective grassroots campaigns that are coordinated by rootless workaholics? By hiring geoflexible young people who are not grounded in the localities and places where they are working this strategy can be counterproductive."

The book paints a grim and ironic picture of the day-to-day work of campaigners, who work long hours and for minimum pay—all the while supporting progressive organizations that are supposed to stand up for the little guy. It is not surprising that Fisher found high burnout rates among staff (claiming to have left "for good") after spending one summer on the campaign. These findings are important, "Because so few national groups now run local offices that provide paid opportunities for idealistic young people, the People's Project has become the gatekeeper for many entry-level positions within national progressive groups. But many, perhaps, too many, young people are being chewed up and spit out by this standardized model of activism that treats idealistic young people as interchangeable cogs in the machine of grassroots politics in America."

In a final chapter, Fisher compares the grassroots activism on the Left with that of the Right, which has not adopted this model of consolidation and outsourcing. Instead the Republicans work through pre-existing civic associations formed by churches and other locally grounded networks ("a volunteer army"), which they have successfully mobilized in the last two national elections.

Activism, Inc offers compelling insights into the downfall of the Left in recent years and the increasing disenchantment of young people with the political process. The book also makes an urgent case for what progressive groups need to do to reverse this trend, i.e., take control of their own campaigns, and, in effect, bridge the gap between local issues, fundraising and activism.

Dana R. Fisher is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. Her research focuses on political decision-making. She has published extensively on issues related to civil society, activism, protest, and environmental policy-making. Her first book, *National Governance and the Global Climate Change Regime*, was published in 2004. Fisher has been featured in The New Yorker, The Wall Street Journal, and The Today Show.

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