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Internet-Based Activist Group Puts Powerful Spin on Politics

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Howard Dean's surge toward the front of the Democratic presidential pack has put the spotlight on one of the groups that helped make it happen: MoveOn.org .

The Web-based activist group has gained the attention of the political establishment - and not just because of its connections to Dean. Democrats on Capitol Hill are looking at MoveOn not only as a possible ally but also as a model for galvanizing voters around an agenda - something the party has struggled to do through its own, more traditional devices.

MoveOn was not Dean's first connection to the Web as a political organizing tool: When he first entered the race for the 2004 Democratic nomination, he quickly caught on to the potential of Meetup.com, an online clearinghouse for affinity groups.

Dean, who was best known during the initial stages of his candidacy for his opposition to the war in Iraq, used Meetup to organize supporters in numerous communities and became a grass-roots phenomenon.

But it was MoveOn's June "virtual primary" conducted over the Internet that enabled Dean - the first-place finisher, with 44 percent of the "vote" - to start establishing himself among the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination.

The online poll also is believed to have boosted Dean's fundraising, as MoveOn provided links to all of the candidates' Web sites for participants who wanted to contribute.

More recently, MoveOn introduced software called the "meeting tool" to help online activists spread their message. The Dean campaign has adopted the software with MoveOn's blessings.

MoveOn is "an amazing grass-roots effort," said Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, who as assistant Democratic floor leader is his party's chief message-maker in the Senate. "I think that what they've done is discovered an untapped source of energy for progressive causes."

This pioneer in the Internet-meets-the-grass-roots concept has been shaking up politics since its founding in 1998. Organizers resist labels for their group, calling it "common sense" and "centrist." But positions it has taken on the war in Iraq and other issues have marked MoveOn as a left-leaning entity.

The site began life as a reaction to efforts by the Republican-controlled Congress to impeach President Bill Clinton and remove him from office. Founders Wes Boyd and

Joan Blades - who had made money as software developers in California's Silicon Valley - waged a Web-based petition drive urging Congress to censure Clinton and then "move on." (1999 Almanac, p, 13-3)

Democrats Take Note

Their efforts long ago broadened into a variety of issues, taking on particular momentum this year with the opposition to the war in Iraq. The debate over Iraq also gave MoveOn an important opportunity to display its muscle to Capitol Hill.

In March, the group raised money for a full-page advertisement in the New York Times that printed the text of a speech by Sen. Robert C. Byrd criticizing the United States' push toward war. The ad helped to make the 85-year-old West Virginia Democrat a worldwide icon of the anti-war movement - and it took Byrd and his staff utterly by surprise.

Capitol Hill again took note when MoveOn got behind a campaign to roll back new Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules to relax media ownership limits. In three days, the group collected 351,600 signatures on petitions opposing the rules, which organizers delivered to the leaders of the Senate effort to reverse the regulations, Byron L. Dorgan , D-N.D., and Trent Lott , R-Miss.

Dorgan and Lott were happy to use the stacks of petitions as a prop at a news conference Sept. 11, piling them shoulder-high on each side of a lectern. The image reinforced their point that the rule change - far from an esoteric issue important only to industry insiders - matters to a wide swath of the American public. And five days later the Senate passed a measure (S J Res 17) to block the FCC rules. (CQ Weekly, p. 2303)

Dorgan and Lott, like Byrd, did not anticipate MoveOn's appeal and the boost it gave them. "It was a pleasant surprise," Dorgan said.

During the FCC debate, political scientist Burdett Loomis of the University of Kansas observed that it is only a matter of time before "some skillful policy entrepreneurs on Capitol Hill" reach out to MoveOn and proactively seek to harness its energy.

"We're just beginning to explore the possibilities here," said Loomis, who has studied interest groups.

A day or so later, Senate Democrats announced that they had invited Boyd to lunch on Capitol Hill on Sept. 18. Hurricane Isabel forced them to cancel the date, but they intend to reschedule.

Political Tools

House Democrats also have taken note - particularly since Dean's surge in fundraising and MoveOn's strong efforts in the FCC debate, said Rep. Robert T. Matsui of California, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Matsui and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California were among several House Democrats who met with MoveOn in June.

What they see is a potential ally that could help them move votes and frame issues - as well as a template for the party's own organizing activities. "They can move immediately, within hours, and have an impact on Capitol Hill with phones or letters," Matsui said. "And of course, we've seen that they can raise money quickly."

MoveOn says it raised \$3.5 million for congressional candidates in 2002 through its Web site. The figure cannot be independently verified, since all but about \$127,000 of the contributions were reported to the Federal Election Commission by the name of the contributor, not by MoveOn.

But MoveOn has built a reputation in Washington as an effective fundraiser. This month it joined a campaign against Republican efforts to redraw the congressional districts of Texas, raising \$1 million in a week for an ad campaign. (CQ Weekly, p. 2145)

MoveOn also has spawned a second Web site - called MisLeader.org - to track what it views as Bush's "false statements."

And MoveOn has shown it can convert e-mail into action on the ground. The means is the "meeting tool" software, first put into action this year to mobilize opposition to the Iraq war. Activists can link from e-mails to the meeting tool in order to locate and sign up for rallies and meetings in their area.

Subscribers, Not Members

Boyd and Blades draw no income from the organization. Besides them, MoveOn has four paid staff members. There is no headquarters; all six work from their homes around the country. The heads of the group say there is no interest in opening a Washington office, hiring a lobbyist or otherwise getting deeply involved in the Capitol scene. Organizing Director Zack Exley is based in Washington, but works out of his home.

MoveOn's strength is in its list of e-mail subscribers, which it says has nearly 1.7 million names in the United States and another 600,000 outside the United States.

They are not members in the true sense of the word. They are people who have signed up to receive e-mail alerts about issues and calls to action. They pay no dues. They exist as e-mail addresses, faceless and not readily pinned down by state or congressional district.

Whether they are predominantly male or female, white or black, rich or poor is anyone's guess. MoveOn collects no demographic data.

Unlike a labor union, the group is not organized around a particular industry or common economic interest. Unlike the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association, the group has no clearly delineated set of issues.

Exactly what motivates participants in the MoveOn network to give money or rally behind a cause, no one can really say for certain.

Besides Iraq, Texas redistricting and the FCC rules, MoveOn has become involved in the bid to stop some Bush judicial nominations and the California gubernatorial recall election.

MoveOn, in fact, presents a conundrum to a political establishment that has to rely on finely tailoring its messages to sway narrow slices of the electorate. And despite the boost it has given Dean, the group's loose organization would appear to be a questionable foundation on which any politician or party could build a long-term power base - the way many lawmakers, for example, have relied on labor's support.

But in terms of its power and influence, MoveOn is poised to become the "Christian Coalition of the left," said Michael Cornfield, a political scientist at George Washington University. "Clearly something is happening out there," he said. "The numbers are just too big."

Boyd says MoveOn is a means for ordinary people to express their views on whatever issues move them. Although sometimes the staff puts an issue on the group's agenda, most issues have been taken up in response to the volume of e-mail traffic among the members.

In February, MoveOn leaders suggested a "virtual march on Washington," using telephones and the Internet to bombard the Senate with messages protesting war in Iraq. On Feb. 26, Senate offices were swamped with hundreds of thousands of telephone calls, faxes and e-mails. The group also organized a call-in campaign the week of Sept. 28, as the Senate prepared to vote on \$87 billion in supplemental spending for Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We can't do anything that doesn't resonate" on the group's e-mail network, Boyd said. "I can take a particular issue and if doesn't resonate, nothing happens."

Dean has adopted a similar "bottom-up," decentralized strategy, letting supporters at the grass roots organize their own efforts.

Boyd said he is happy to talk about the MoveOn model to any politician or group who wants to hear about it and learn from it. The group also would consider joining forces with any lawmaker who shares its views, he said.

But MoveOn intends to stay focused on broad issues and themes, not the fine details of bills, Boyd said.

"Whenever we begin to get drawn into the inside machinations, we get repelled and go back to our knitting," Boyd said. "We see ourselves as a means for people to create the context for good legislation to happen, rather than drafting legislation or parsing it."