

How peace activists help to elect a president

Excerpt from David Cortright, *Protest and Policy in the Iraq, Nuclear Freeze and Vietnam Peace Movements* (Cambridge University Press Elements), May 2025, pp. 23-25.

From the very beginning of the 2008 presidential race, Barack Obama won the support of many antiwar activists. The principal distinction of his candidacy was his forthright stance against the war. Obama writes in his memoir that the Iraq war was the biggest issue for his campaign.ⁱ Hilary Clinton was heavily favored going into the Democratic primaries, with substantial financial backing and the support of many Democratic Party leaders, but she waffled on ending the war and was burdened by her Senate vote in 2002. Obama by contrast had spoken against the invasion as an Illinois state senator at an October 2002 antiwar rally in Chicago, and he remained unequivocally opposed to the war, vowing to end it. His campaign expressed “an unapologetic antiwar boldness,” writes journalist Spencer Ackerman.ⁱⁱ

The Obama candidacy was a political opportunity for the movement, and many activists embraced it. When MoveOn conducted an internal poll of its online members to determine which candidate the organization should support in the primaries, 70 percent of respondents endorsed Obama.ⁱⁱⁱ This brought with it a massive wave of volunteer and financial support from antiwar activists.

Obama’s electoral strategy played to the strengths of this activist constituency. His campaign created an extensive field presence in dozens of states, built on the foundations of already existing activist networks—principally the antiwar movement, but also labor, women’s, environmentalist, African American, Latino, and other established organizing networks.

Obama’s victories were concentrated in caucus states, where success is determined by the strength of local activist support rather than big name endorsements and large television advertising budgets. In the state of

Washington, for example, Obama won two-thirds of the caucus delegates but only 51 percent of the popular vote and came away with two-thirds of the state's delegates. In Texas, Clinton won the popular vote, but Obama won more of the caucuses and ended up with the majority of the state's delegates. The national popular vote was extremely close, but Obama held a significant margin in the thirteen caucus contests, enough to win the nomination. Obama's victory was the result of his superior ability to mobilize tens of thousands of strongly committed loyalists from the antiwar movement and other activist networks.^{iv}

That activist support base also propelled Obama to victory in the general election. According to David Karpf, during the course of the 2008 election, MoveOn channeled almost \$100 million in campaign contributions and one million volunteers to the Obama campaign.^v It was one of the most influential organizations supporting the Democratic Party in the election that year. The Obama campaign pioneered the use of social media to harness volunteer and donor support, building a network of 13 million people on its various email and Facebook lists. Many of these names were drawn from the MoveOn list (which had grown to 5 million) and other pre-existing activist networks. With 8 million visitors a month, the Obama website was used to create 35,000 volunteer groups and organize 200,000 offline events. The campaign had 3 million online donors and received a total of 6.5 million contributions, with an average gift size of \$80. Obama raised twice as much money as Republican candidate John McCain, a record \$750 million, two-thirds of which came from small contributions.^{vi}

Many activists supported Obama because of his opposition to the war, but they had few illusions about his views on other foreign policy issues. In his 2002 speech at the antiwar rally in Chicago, he declared, "I don't oppose all wars. What I am opposed to is a dumb war."^{vii} During his 2008 campaign, he reiterated his commitment to withdraw troops from Iraq, but he was equally clear in pledging to increase military involvement in Afghanistan. He vowed to use force wherever he deemed necessary to counter terrorist threats. As president he ordered a surge of troops to Afghanistan and launched hundreds

of drone strikes in Pakistan, much to the chagrin of many antiwar activists who supported him. He launched airstrikes against Libya in 2011, leading to the collapse of the state, civil war, and widespread regional destabilization, a decision he later regretted.^{viii} Yet on the issue that mattered most, withdrawing troops and ending the occupation of Iraq, Obama fulfilled his promise to voters. The pressure and support of the antiwar movement helped to make that possible.

In July 2008, after winning the Democratic nomination, Obama visited the troops in Iraq. He was under pressure from diplomats and many in the Pentagon to maintain a sizable troop presence in Iraq. Commanding general David Petraeus hosted Obama's visit and tried to convince him against setting a deadline for withdrawal and in favor of maintaining a residual force in Iraq. Obama listened respectfully but disagreed with the general, as he recounts in his memoir. He refused to back off on the commitment to withdraw US forces.^{ix}

After taking office, Obama delayed and hesitated about setting a withdrawal schedule, as pressure for a residual force persisted. Members of the Iraqi government remained adamant in demanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces, however.^x In December 2011, the White House announced that the last troops had left the country. Obama's decision was made easier by the fact that he was following the timeline originally established by the Bush administration.

The results of the antiwar movement's electoral and lobbying efforts were a disappointment for many activists. The movement was successful in the 2006 elections and won major congressional votes in favor of withdrawing troops in 2007, but those measures did not become law, and the war continued. Opponents of the war played a role in helping Obama become president in 2008 on an antiwar platform, but many were impatient with the slow pace of his withdrawal timeline and were frustrated by his hesitation and waffling.

Activists sometimes conflate conventional politics and the role of social movements. They tend to project their own values and goals onto politicians and become disillusioned when their demands are not met in the manner they want. In the process, Tom Hayden observed, they “run the danger of underestimating the impact they are actually achieving.”^{xi} They fail to recognize incremental or limited policy changes as a sign of the movement’s success. The Iraq antiwar movement did not accomplish all that activists wanted, but it achieved political successes that are of historic importance, and that deserve to be acknowledged by activists, and by scholars.

ⁱ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 158.

ⁱⁱ Ackerman, *Reign of Terror*, 114.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hayes, “MoveOn.Org is Not as Radical as Conservatives Think.”

^{iv} “2008 Democratic Primary Election Results,” <http://uselectionatlas.org>; see also Jeralyn, “Caucuses vs. Primaries: A Report,” Talk Left, 27 May 2008, www.talkleft.com.

^v Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect*, 29.

^{vi} Martin Walker, “The Year of the Insurgents: The 2008 US Presidential Campaign,” *International Affairs* 84 (2008): 1095–1107. See also Jose Antonio Vargas, “Obama Raised Half a Billion Online,” *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2008, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html; see also list of candidate fundraising at “2008 Presidential Election,” www.opensecrets.org; and Monte Lutz, “The Social Pulpit: Barack Obama’s Social Media Toolkit,” (Washington, DC: Edelman.com 2009).

^{vii} Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, 47.

^{viii} Dominic Tierney, “The Legacy of Obama’s ‘Worse Mistake,’” *The Atlantic*, 15 April 2016, www.theatlantic.com.

^{ix} Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, 157–159.

^x Colin H. Kahl, “No, Obama Didn’t Lose Iraq,” *Politico Magazine*, 15 June 2014, www.politico.com.

^{xi} Hayden, *Ending the War in Iraq*, 170–71.