

Color of Change

ColorofChange.org is a grassroots political action organization founded by California activists James Rucker and Van Jones in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005. The organization's stated goals are threefold: To make government more responsive to the concerns of African Americans, to amplify and strengthen their political voices as well as to bring about political and social change. The organization took advantage of a perceived vacuum in black political leadership to take on a variety of issues. It focuses on such concerns as racial disparities in education, the criminal justice system and in health care, as well as the growing gaps in economic resources, voter intimidation, police brutality and media accountability.

Sometimes called a black Moveon.org, Color of Change draws its influences from that digital activist group, which has nearly 7 million members. MoveOn.org was founded in 1998 during the President Bill Clinton sex scandal when the group circulated a petition to censure the president and "move on." The response to that effort helped launch the organization, which has served as a model for the political efforts of similar groups nationally and internationally. Rucker, a former director of grass-roots mobilization for MoveOn.org, called the Color of Change a civil rights movement for the social media age that seeks to move beyond traditional methods of organizing.

Color of Change is often contrasted with the historic civil rights organization, the NAACP. The NAACP has about 250,000 dues-paying members, while the Color of Change reports 800,000 mostly middle class, online members, ages 35 to 55, about half of whom are white. Its members pay no dues but contributed about \$250,000 through online donations and tripled its membership during a three-month period in 2007 to pay the legal fees of the defendants in Jena 6, a civil rights case in Louisiana.

In fact, NAACP President Ben Jealous has said organizations like the Color of Change are replacing the black press's historic role in "publicizing injustices and rallying public sentiment." Although Color of Change has been critical of the NAACP for its perceived failure to attract and encourage political advocacy among younger African Americans, the two groups worked together to coordinate efforts in the Jena 6 case, in which six black teenage boys were charged with attempted murder in schoolyard fight with a white boy. A protest of 20,000 people in the small town of Jena, La., demonstrated the Color of Change's ability to mobilize people around a cause using new technology. And the grassroots actions put pressure on the governor and the district attorney to subsequently reduce the charges against the teens to a misdemeanor.

The organization has been involved in other events, including raising more than \$10,000 in an Internet campaign to help Donna Edwards's best incumbent Rep. Albert Wynn. Color of Change has also been cited in the grassroots effort to force conservative commentator Glenn Beck off the air after its members undertook an email writing campaign to pressure advertisers to drop his television show. Not all of its efforts are successful, however. The organization was not able to influence the outcome in the case of Troy Davis, a black Georgia man executed for a murder that supporters said he did not commit.

Still, Color of Change appears to have tapped into a narrowing of the digital divide as access to cell phones fill the technology gap between haves and have-nots. Significantly, in the past decade, the number of blacks or Latinos who use the Internet

has nearly doubled from 11 percent to 21 percent. The organization has been successful in engaging younger African-American voters, a group is more likely to use mobile technology, according to the Pew Center for the People and the Press. Pew reported that about 36 percent of African Americans used their cell phones to participate in the 2010 midterm elections, by far, the largest group of youthful voters, as compared to white and Hispanic voters. In addition, the Pew Internet & Family Life Project has found that minority Internet users are more than twice as likely to use social media tools such as Twitter as are white Internet users.

As more African-Americans access the digital realm, Color of Change joins a coalition of bloggers, black radio hosts and activists known as the “Afrosphere,” a group focused on black political, cultural, economic self-determination that is not often reported in mainstream media. However, the organization’s political strategy is not only online; it uses a multi-pronged effort that includes nationally coordinated events, ad placements in TV and print outlets, coordination with affinity groups to magnify its impact. Online efforts include the use of social media, email lists and phone calls to accumulate data about members, which allows it to better track the interests of members and to target receptive audiences. As a result, the organization has learned what issues will mobilize its constituents.

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Cross References

MoveOn.org, NAACP, Civil Rights, Digital Activism

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