

## Learning from the Obama Movement

### By Wade Lee Hudson

Barack Obama's presidential campaigns showed we can create a large national movement based on local teams focused on achievable goals. Instead of relying solely on top-down leadership, these campaigns enabled ordinary citizens to collaborate as equals. We can learn from these efforts to build a movement to transform the world with compassion and justice one demand at a time.

Democracy concerns more than the government. It's also about creating a society without unfair privileges based on class or background — what [Elizabeth Anderson](#) calls "[democratic equality](#)," and Philip Wood calls "[holistic democracy](#)." As Albert Camus [said](#), "Put politics back in its true place, a secondary one." Compassionate, egalitarian community is primary.

During his campaigns, Obama proposed a transformative movement. He inspired people with messages like, "Our time has come. Our movement is real. And change is coming to America." He suggested a vision that enabled Washington to govern from the bottom up. On October 30, 2008, he said, "We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America."

His election was especially transformative for Black Americans. As Orlando Patterson [wrote](#), "It marked the transition to a wholly new conception of themselves as citizens of America, one that shattered the centuries of ingrained pessimism." Obama himself foretold this as his greatest achievement. Early on, he told his wife, "Kids all around this country — Black kids, Hispanic kids, kids who don't fit in — they'll see themselves differently, too, their horizons lifted, their possibilities expanded." Immediately prior to the election, he told his Chicago staff, "If we win, we will have transformed America." Perhaps the impact on Black America is what he had in mind.

However, the movement didn't continue after the election. Obama didn't keep the local teams together. This left a void.

We could fill that vacuum with a massive flexible national movement. This movement could focus on timely demands for winnable improvements in national policies. We could build momentum with victories and move on to the next demand.

Based on shared values, a participatory decision-making process, and centralized coordination, members could support each other's self-improvement and back the movement's demand while working on other personal and political concerns. By energizing people, the movement could increase participation in political organizations.

The Obama movement dedicated itself to personal change. Obama affirmed the need to "submerge egos" and other forms of self-development. With its small, well-organized, self-governing teams that delegated responsibilities, the movement empowered people. These efforts transformed many of them into life-long political activists.

As reported by Elizabeth McKenna and Hahrie Han in *Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America*, organizers learned about their members to some degree but didn't prioritize close personal relationships. House meetings were "meetings, not parties." Hosts weren't encouraged to invite participants to stay and socialize informally.

If a new movement set aside time for open-ended mutual support, with individuals defining their own goals and reporting on their self-improvement efforts — such as unlearning oppressive, divisive social conditioning that leads to problems such as arrogance, power struggles, and harsh judgments — it could strengthen itself, build deep friendships, and boost unity.

In addition to building support for its national policy demand, the movement could arrange social and educational activities that enrich lives, nurture friendships, cultivate a sense of community, and attract new members with contagious enthusiasm. These events would provide opportunities for free-flowing conversations where people connect, practice listening, and learn from each other without trying to persuade.

If and when a diverse organizing committee adapts methods such as [those suggested](#) by the [Compassionate Humanity Community](#) and builds a

transformative grassroots movement to advance justice, compassion, and mutual support for self-development, my associates and I will support it.