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*Tracing Virtual Advocacy Approaches for Welfare Policy
over Two Decades**

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the virtual efforts of several nonprofits to preserve “safety net” programs in the struggle with groups that view these programs as unnecessary or as dependency forming. E-mail messages received by the third author fell into 20 broad categories, of which four are analyzed here, messages often revolving around such programs as unemployment insurance, medical care and insurance, Food Stamp and other nutrition programs, and the Violence Against Women Act. The tone and content of the messages often varied with presidential administrations, the structure of Congress, and economic events, such as the crash of 2008. In all areas, attempts were made to frame the issues in broad terms related to economic needs and benefits to the country as a whole, health and welfare, and social justice or fairness. Our data illustrate the tremendous effort being extended by advocacy groups toward preserving the safety net.

KEY WORDS Virtual Advocacy; Welfare Reform; TANF; Welfare; Social Media

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This paper focuses on the efforts of various social organizations and advocacy groups to use e-mail and websites to coordinate the distribution of information designed to shape social welfare policies. The specific areas examined center on public policies designed to preserve aspects of state and federal legislation associated with “safety net” programs and policies related to the passage of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Act, a significant change in welfare policy that occurred during the Clinton administration. A collaborative research project with women in the poverty community during that time, directed by the third author and participated in by the first author, generated a network of e-mail connections and messages from advocacy groups that illustrate the efforts being made through the present. These e-mail messages fell into 20 broad categories, but this paper focuses on four of the categories: Food/Hunger, Access to Medical/Healthcare, Unemployment Insurance, and Violence. Topics of these e-mail messages focused on specific aspects of the safety net: access to unemployment insurance (UI), medical insurance [often Medicaid, Medicare, Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and the Affordable Care Act], funding for Food Stamp and other nutrition programs, and reauthorizing of the Violence Against Women Act, the latter ensuring that women who left abusive relationships would have access to safety-net programs. We follow a tradition within sociology (Burawoy 2005; Opatrny and Statham 2014), as well as in gender studies (Harding 1991; Naples and Boyjean 2002), of lending one’s expertise to such applied policy efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual Advocacy

Various researchers have used the term “virtual advocacy” in different ways. Some refer to “virtual advocacy organizations,” as those that operate without the constraints of brick-and-mortar obligations (Rosenblatt 2014). These advocacy efforts were, at the end of the 1990s, cutting-edge methods of reaching out to a wide base of individuals and groups. First utilized by Project Impact in 1995, which transformed into the 1997 Virtual Volunteering Project, and MoveOn.org in 1998, these organizations harnessed the power of the internet to propel their messages and the messages of other like-minded groups and individuals into a digital means of organizing political responses in the most expedient means possible (Cravens and Ellis 2014; Rosenblatt 2014). Since 1995, a multitude of social media platforms—such as Twitter, Facebook, Google groups, and LinkedIn—have emerged, with great potential (Leavey 2013). Other examples include the virtual advocacy methods used by protesters around the World Trade Organization meetings in 1999. Across all of these situations, the advantages of virtual advocacy that have been stressed include the ease of reaching diverse groups and coordinating responses, and the ability to hone messages with consistent content, receive immediate feedback about impacts, and respond to new developments.

Our study focuses on the use of the internet by advocacy groups to advance certain types of governmental policy, in many cases to maintain policies or programs that are in place, not direct action per se, but more often an attempt to influence

presidential administrations or members of Congress. Most of the communications came from nationwide policy advocacy groups aimed at local policy advocates. Our examination of the virtual advocacy efforts of this middle level of nonprofit action groups appears to be unique.

In following these trends, we define virtual advocacy as the use of internet resources such as e-lists, e-newsletters, and websites as a means to advocate policy positions by educating about issues, organizing responses, and providing tools related to “how to organize.”

Content of the Messages

The ideological struggle over safety-net policy and programs was brought into relief by Mead (1986, 1992) in his efforts to change perceptions about those receiving public assistance. In this time of the TANF legislation (and still today), there were great debates between those who believed the poor suffered from personal failings often involving “dependency” and those who believed that the causes of poverty were structural barriers that prevented individuals from acquiring adequate resources for themselves and their families. Many of the messages we analyzed were designed to bolster the belief that structural barriers were at play and to counter the belief that individual failings were to blame.

Studies of advocacy efforts more generally suggest that these efforts can affect public policy (Johnson and Frickel 2011) and that the qualitative approach we use here can provide useful insights into this process (Bair and Palpacuer 2012; Barberena, Jimenez, and Young 2014). Several studies have considered the framing involved in the welfare-reform debate, focusing on media advocacy and the changes that took place among elites, in sources such as the *New York Times* (Steensland 2008) or contrasting the frames preferred by grassroots activists as opposed to allies (Ernst 2009). Others stress that choices about frames are dependent upon power and identity politics (Ernst 2009) and upon the articulation of interests with political parties (Bohn 2015). Steensland (2008) argues that ideational rather than more actor-centered themes are more effective, and the FrameWorks Institute (2002) argues that thematic rather than individualistic framing strategies help a group carry out its agenda and combat the frames of its opposition more effectively by making it easier for the group to fully assimilate new information.

Another consideration is the extent to which a process incorporates the often marginalized views of those most directly affected by advocated policies and that efforts that do so are likely to be more successful in moving individuals to truly sustainable economic situations (Gibson 2012; Miller 2011, Rosenblatt 2014). Similar findings emerge from various participatory research models with foci that range from empowerment evaluation to the practitioner as researcher (for example, Bensimon et al. 2004). Our own research suggests the efficacy of giving voice to one’s experience and feeling it will be listened to for a woman’s journey out of poverty (Schleiter, Rhoades, and Statham 2004; Schleiter, Statham, and Reinders 2005).

Our analysis of the thousands of e-mail messages we received explores many of these themes and demonstrates the consistency of effort required for continual action and

reauthorization of safety-net programs. Without data such as those presented here, this story can be forgotten and the efforts required to shore up the foundations of our welfare state, if not supported, in time will fade away. The following questions guided our data analysis: (1) What strategies and themes do the participating organizations use to influence policy about components of the nation's safety net? (2) Which themes and strategies seem to be the most effective? (3) How are the efforts on behalf of the various safety-net programs connected?

METHODS

In this study, we analyze 3,572 e-mail messages that the third author received from the late 1990s through the present. We include messages focused on the four safety-net issues identified for this paper: 349 on the topic of unemployment insurance, 91 on the topic of violence, 1548 on the topic of food/hunger, and 1584 on the topic of access to medical care/health insurance. Before 2011, messages were saved in paper form and then scanned and saved as .pdfs. Messages received after 2010 were saved in an Outlook e-mail folder system, then saved as individual .pdfs. All messages about these four topics were then entered into the NVIVO analysis program for qualitative analysis. We developed codes for each topic. Additionally, an attribute for the year was added to each message that allowed us to arrange the coded material on each topic chronically, to establish a timeline that could be compared across topics. Based on our preliminary analysis, we divided our timeline into periods dominated by presidential administrations. Some of our messages arrived during the end of the Clinton administration, but most arrived during the two Bush and Obama terms, with the leadership of Congress changing between Democratic and Republican several times. That, in conjunction with the corresponding economic crash of 2008, seemed to have a great deal of impact on advocacy efforts reflected in the messages that arrived. Our timeline illustrates the interconnections of policies advocated with political party priorities and situations.

We anticipate that our findings will contribute to our understanding about how virtual communication is influencing the development of public policy, for the benefit of several potential audiences—in particular, those using a participatory research approach, and those engaged in the type of policy advocacy examined here.

RESULTS

Clinton Administration

Our timeline across issues shows that the efforts represented in these e-mail messages often began with a concern about the impact of TANF on low-income families, especially those headed by women. Efforts about UI initially focused on encouraging individual states to increase access for those who had formerly cycled on and off of welfare as they found and lost low-income jobs. This group of women was not then eligible for UI, and several groups and coalitions had started to work on modifications to the system that would make them eligible. A key player in this effort, sometimes behind the scenes, was

the National Employment Law Project, which was connected with the Program on Gender, Work and Family at American University. This nonprofit had laid out a strategy and then delegated the work to groups in states, offering technical support to them, because it was up to individual states to make the necessary changes to their UI systems. This activity occurred mostly during the first Bush administration, as efforts to reform the system came to fruition, but the activity began before 2000.

Another effort was to reinstate this group in the Food Stamp program, as many of them had erroneously received the impression that they were no longer eligible for any benefits when they had lost their cash assistance. The process of welfare reform had trimmed \$27 billion from the Food Stamps program over six years. Only those with incomes less than 130 percent of the poverty line (less than \$1,450 per year for a family of three) were eligible, and legal immigrants and able-bodied adults under 50 with no dependents could receive Food Stamps for only three months in any three-year period. There was a struggle in the following years to fully reinstate these populations and to increase overall enrollment, as participation by eligible persons had dropped precipitously. Advocates monitoring the participation in various states noted that once TANF was enacted, Texas had the worst participation rate in 2000, dropping from 72 percent of those eligible in 1994 to only 54 percent by 1997.

The impact of TANF was also raised in the area of violence, as advocates worked toward the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which was first passed in 1994. During the first reauthorization effort in 2000, changes were advocated that would better address all forms of violent assault, and concerns were raised that victims would find it difficult to access financial support and Food Stamps as they were leaving domestic-violence situations. Advocates focused on having access to these resources for such women written into the new version of the act—provisions that were also written into TANF legislation and implementation policies. Advocates focused on the inclusion of access to these resources in the new version of the act. In addition to cuts to the Food Stamp program, part of the welfare-reform bill also eliminated federal healthcare assistance to states for children and pregnant women who were legal immigrants. Advocates expressed concerns that the most vulnerable populations would be exposed to unnecessary hardship when denied access to Food Stamps and adequate healthcare.

Early Bush Years

The effort to ensure that former welfare recipients would be eligible for UI continued into the first term of the Bush administration. Because the work had to be done state by state, specific changes were advocated across quite a few states. Many of these “new” workers were low-wage, part-time, female single heads of families. Eligibility requirements were for specific levels of earnings over a fairly long time (a requirement that these workers did not meet because they were relatively new entrants to the labor force) and commitment to search for full-time work when many had family commitments that precluded that. In addition, some women lost or had to quit jobs

when domestic violence spilled over into the workplace, creating unsafe situations, or when mandatory shift changes (employers requiring them to work the night shift) meant child care was no longer available. Specific changes advocated included the counting of base employment period (alternative base period and the “look back” rule), expanding acceptable reasons for leaving a job to include domestic violence or employer actions that made child care unavailable, and coverage of part-time workers, and/or allowing covered individuals to search for part-time work rather than requiring everyone to search for full-time work. The coverage of part-time workers was contentious and was still debated in later years.

There were also a few beginning efforts aimed at ensuring an extension of 13 weeks of the federal coverage when state benefits were exhausted, in response to the recession that developed after 9/11. Rationales for this included messages stressing that many workers had become discouraged and had given up looking for work. Messages estimated nearly 3 million “missing workers.” The messages stressed that it was the Bush administration’s policy of giving tax cuts to the rich that had resulted in the shrinking of jobs, that the recession involved the largest loss of jobs since the Great Depression to that point. Many messages noted that 2003 was the worst year for wage growth and that 2.4 million jobs disappeared during this period. Messages continued to cite issues that were more relevant for women—for example, moving for a partner’s job, domestic violence, and care commitments (dependents, including the elderly). Other issues included moving to call-in rather than in-person centers, and requiring English-language proficiency to access UI.

During this period, advocates focused on the reinstatement of Food Stamp participation among excluded populations (intentionally or erroneously) and on the connection between reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, needed during this period, and the incidence of poverty among women leaving abusive relationships.

Advocate activity around access to healthcare in the early 2000s focused on the reduction in federal funding that contributed to financial shortages in state Medicaid and Medicare programs. Less federal funding reduced the flexibility that states had with administering their Medicaid and Medicare programs, “forcing the states to use uniform, less generous income and asset testing” to determine eligibility. The fear was that cuts to Medicaid would reduce services for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled, and mentally ill. This concern was addressed by supporting the Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003. The wraparound coverage of Medicaid and Medicare drug coverage, as well as the Immigrant Children’s Health Improvement Act of 2003, proposed in the Senate, sought to restore the federal funding to states to address at-risk populations. Advocates expressed concern that legal immigrants and the elderly would be unduly impacted, a claim that came to reality during the 2005 aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. During 2004, advocates focused on restoring federal support to the states’ Medicaid and Medicare programs via the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage program.

Table 1. Abbreviated Timeline of Pivotal Events in Four Areas by Presidential Administrations

	Violence	Food and Hunger	Unemployment Insurance	Medicaid/Medicare/ACA
Clinton Administration Pre-2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Violence Against Women Act ● Reauthorizing Violence Against Women Act ● Publicity around police response to violations of protective orders ● Connections to poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No direct-topic e-mail messages during this time ● Loss of enrollments—former AFDC recipients thought no longer eligible ● Health impact of no access to food, monitoring states with low participation ● Arguments pit interests of wealthy, cost of wars/lower local revenues, against the vulnerable ● Beginning attempts to increase participation, relax limits, raise asset limits ● Issues with participation rates and aid during disasters such as Katrina ● President and Congress at odds over funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reacting to TANF, cover those who lost benefits ● Beginning of advocacy of federal extension of coverage ● States depleting funds, suggestions for increasing UI revenues ● Stress on lower percentages of workers covered than in the past ● Efforts to cover TANF recipients continue ● Proposal to require English-language proficiency, moving to call-in centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No direct-topic e-mail messages during this time ● Support full funding of Federal Medical Assistance Percentage/State Medicaid ● Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003—“wrap-around” Medicaid and Medicare coverage ● Fill gaps in coverage/services for disabled/elderly ● Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003 ● Citizenship-documentation requirements cause foster children/homeless/victims of disasters to lose Medicaid ● Federal and state deficits cause lack of access to affordable health insurance
Bush Administration 2001–2009				
Obama Administration (First Term) 2009–2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No messages from 2009–2010 ● Focusing on withdrawal from the wars in the Middle East ● Gun control ● Reauthorizing Violence Against Women Act 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Republicans push for TANF non-cash elimination ● Food Stamps/nutrition in stimulus package ● Renaming the program ● Improving/expanding Food Stamp program ● Healthy food emphasis ● Advocating for Farm Bill ● Conflicts over Farm Bill—president and Congress ● Expand/improve program ● Healthy food efforts ● States fill gaps left by Congress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extending components of Emergency Unemployment Compensation Act ● Federal extension of benefits and states expanding coverage ● Rationales pointed to new aspects of unemployment ● Focus on extending benefits ● Modernizing UI ● Obama takes action on the long-term unemployment problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA, PL 111-148) signed into law ● Supreme Court rules on constitutionality of ACA
Obama Administration (Second Term) 2013–Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focusing on withdrawal from wars ● Reauthorizing Violence Against Women Act ● Sexual assault on college campuses 			

Notes: ACA = Affordable Care Act; ADFC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children; TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; UI = unemployment insurance.

Several messages targeted efforts to weaken estate tax and to institute budget reforms, including giving the president the line-item veto that “would provide windfalls to millionaires and billionaires who are already benefitting from huge tax cuts and leave a debt to be borne by generations to come” while cutting vital programs for the vulnerable, such as Food Stamps.

Discussions about funding for the Farm Bill became increasingly contentious. There was a pattern of following the budget-resolution process, from markup to reconciliation, with progress reports and calls for advocacy for certain points. Contrasts between the two parts of the Farm Bill (farm vs. nutrition programs) were drawn. Messages noted that both farm and nutrition stakeholders shared common interests and should work together to fend off cuts.

The administration proposed then, and repeatedly in the following years, not to allow states to treat as “categorically eligible” TANF individuals who were not receiving cash grants. Advocates asserted that this would cut Food Stamp spending by \$1 billion over 10 years. The Food Research Action Center (FRAC) President Jim Weill considered this and other proposed cuts, constructing a comprehensive system of monitoring a complex array of concerns:

The President’s budget proposal for human services ... and the ... cuts ... discussed by Congressional leaders ... would harm many programs vital to America’s families and children, leaving many children, parents and seniors hungrier and sicker ... cap discretionary program spending ... [that] would adversely affect the ability of the WIC Program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), meals programs funded through the Administration on Aging, and other nutrition programs, to serve vulnerable people ... eliminate the Community Food and Nutrition Program (CFNP), which funds community-based services that help needy families obtain nutrition benefits they need. ... Larger cuts in other parts of the USDA budget ... are likely to put nutrition program funding at risk if the Congressional Budget Resolution imposes “budget reconciliation.”

The Fiscal Year 2006 budget resolution gave both House and Senate Agricultural Committees instructions to cut \$5 billion in five-year spending from their programs. A sign-on letter offered for advocates urged Congress to protect the Food Stamps program from cuts and structural changes during the reconciliation process, and more than 1,000 national, state, and local organizations signed. They urged elimination of all cuts to the program such as those that the Republican-controlled House proposed (\$50 billion in cuts) as well as those the that Republican-controlled Senate proposed (\$35 billion in cuts). Advocates also urged the rejection of extending immigrants’ waiting period from 5 to 10 years and of maintaining categorical eligibility for noncash TANF individuals. Several messages reported that Republicans were exploring new fees for veterans enrolling in health programs, as well as reductions in Food Stamp programs, to avoid hitting farmers with program cuts. Messages still referenced the cuts to the programs that had happened when TANF had been enacted.

In 2007, FRAC registered dismay at the Farm Bill nutrition title proposals, and advocates capitalized on pronouncements that hunger did not exist in our country:

Last month, hunger was eliminated in America. It wasn’t ended by getting more help to families in need, or by launching a major anti-

hunger initiative. Rather, the word “hunger” was simply deleted from the federal government’s annual report tracking the number of people unable to afford enough healthy food.

Near the end of this time, the Bush administration organized talking sessions about the Food Stamp program around the country. Advocates received 10 talking points for these sessions, one of which included a new name for the program that would reflect modernization and reforms. The name Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was eventually chosen.

Efforts also began in 2007 to raise the minimum benefit from \$10/month, increase standard deductions, and exclude combat pay in calculating eligibility for those in the military. The House had passed a bill with these provisions and thought they had found the funding for them—a change in tax law affecting companies operating in other countries—but it was then seen as a new tax, so they were back to the drawing board to find the funding.

In much of 2008, there was increasing conflict between the administration and advocates, who were then dealing with a Democratically controlled Congress and had become more vocal in their criticism of the administration:.

The President’s budget erodes the ability to help those in most need ... with inadequate funding. ... It is the fourth budget in a row that does this ... proposes TANF non-cash elimination ... fails to include key elements of the new Farm Bill ... a missed opportunity. ... It ignores advice in the current stimulus debate. ... With a weak economy and economic downturn, we need WIC and Food Stamps more than ever. ... Overall cuts also proposed to Low Income Home Energy Assistance, child care assistance, housing assistance, etc. ... What will low income people do? They have no flexibility.

Congress actually provided more funding for the programs involved than requested and refused to eliminate programs targeted by the administration.

Advocates continuously provided targeted publicity. Food Stamp challenges (eating on monthly Food Stamp budgets) provided positive publicity. The CEO of Costco completed a Food Stamp challenge, resulting in Costco accepting Food Stamps. Advocates were asked to encourage passage of the Farm Bill “extend[ing] the current Farm Bill that expires on May 2” with many increases, and the Economic Recovery Act package, which would increase benefit levels for the first time in 30 years. Strategies included talking points. There was the final Farm Bill, then the version of the Senate bill. The Bush administration threatened to veto the bill, as nearly three-quarters of total spending concentrated on nutrition. Efforts to increase participation in the Food Stamp program pointed toward a strong performance in the wake of several natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina.

Access to medical care became a challenge during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Earlier concerns of advocates centered on legal immigrants, pregnant women, and children played out through the requirement of citizenship or of legal-resident status to receive medical care. The chaos that ensued after the hurricane left many individuals without access to documentation proving legal status or citizenship, and they were thus unable to receive medical treatment or medications. Advocates expressed concerns that foster children, the homeless and disabled, and victims of natural disasters were in danger of losing their medical

coverage. Legislators and advocates focused on federal and state deficits as barriers to affordable healthcare coverage.

Medicaid had reached the 40-year anniversary mark, and in 2006, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) reached over 6 million enrolled. Still, given the economic concerns and eventual downturn, many were without coverage. The 2007 national conversation focused on evaluating healthcare affordability: "Ensure that families can afford to use, and not simply buy, coverage. Coverage that does not pay for many services, such as high-deductible plans, exposes families to financial risk and discourages them from accessing necessary healthcare."

First Obama Term

In 2009 and 2010, activity picked up considerably around UI. In early 2009, messages focused on the successful efforts to incorporate the Unemployment Insurance Act into the Stimulus Package Recovery Act enacted by Congress. Provisions included a 13-week federal extension of benefits after state benefits expired, and incentives (federal funds) for some states to adopt changes that other states had already made to their individual UI systems in the wake of the TANF legislation. Advocacy efforts picked up with a special focus on the federal extension of benefits as these provisions were due to expire. These messages stressed that these were special circumstances, that the number of unemployed was the highest since 1985, that more workers were jobless at that point than at any time since the Great Depression, and that 1 out of 4 had been unemployed for more than a year and 2 out of 5 for more than half a year. They reported unemployment rates in California at over 12 percent and in Oregon at over 11 percent. One headline noted "a grim picture" of the economy. Another argued that it was too soon to end benefits, that in all previous recessions, administrations had continued extending UI benefits until the economy had shown signs of recovery, which had not happened yet. One message stressed that the unemployed were jobless through no fault of their own; others that there were too few jobs for the number of job seekers, that even the highly educated were out of work. One tag line used was "Not your grandfather's Unemployment Insurance."

New issues with the UI system itself had also surfaced. Ten additional states had not qualified for incentives written into the stimulus package because they had not had a "significant increase" in unemployment rates; the recession had lasted so long that their unemployment rates had remained consistently high—in the range of 9.5 percent, in a situation of slowing job growth, with fewer jobs available than 10 years before. More states were also running out of their UI funds.

The rationale used for extending benefits was that these long-term unemployed people had earned and were now counting on these benefits and doing otherwise would reward states for their failures to adopt responsible UI funding policies in the first place. This change then would give companies another tax break at workers' expense, thus breaking a promise Congress had made to workers, fewer than five months after making the promise in December 2010. The bill proposing this change, called the Jobs Act, was dubbed the No Jobs Act.

The stabilizer and stimulus impact of the multiplier effect of UI was noted, arguing that it helps prop up the economy, mitigate job losses, and sustain tax revenues in economic downturns, drawing on Mark Mullen's Moody's Analytics estimates that for every \$1 spent on UI, the state's GDP goes up \$1.56. UI was touted as a well-targeted stimulus, better than almost any other policy aimed at improving a poor economic climate. The Recession Waste Calculator was developed to assess the impact of the spending generated by UI benefits in terms of numbers of jobs created, as well as the impact of the money typically spent immediately for basics. Larry

Mishel of the Economic Policy Institute cited Moody's Mark Zandi, who argued that recipients of these funds tend to spend the money immediately, putting it back into the economy, and that this spending had already created 1.5 million jobs to offset some of the 8 million that had been lost since the economic crash of 2008:

We are working to ensure that Congress continues federal EUC; if it doesn't, 2 million Americans who lost jobs through no fault of their own and are struggling to find work will lose benefits. It takes an average of just \$300 a week to sustain them. Failure to reauthorize or extend these benefits is bad for them and for the economy. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that continuing the program will add 300,000 jobs to the economy next year. If we don't reauthorize, economic growth will be reduced by \$48 million next year; it will cost retailers alone \$16 million. Unemployment Insurance keeps families out of poverty, yet only 25% of unemployed workers have this or some other kind of income protection.

Many of these same arguments also applied for investing in the Food Stamp program, also incorporated into the stimulus program and lauded by Mark Zandi as a good stimulus:

Each Food Stamp dollar would generate an increase of \$1.73 in spending, higher than \$1.64 for unemployment insurance, \$1.26 for a tax rebate and \$.27 for accelerated business depreciation tax cuts. The Congressional Budget Office rated a temporary increase in Food Stamp benefits a highly cost-effective way to inject money into local economies, with a short lag time and relative certainty. Others who concur include Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke, House Ways and Means Committee Chair Charlie Rangel, former Treasury Secretaries Lawrence Summers, and Robert Rubin.

The Coalition on Human Need and the Emergency Campaign for America's Future suggested also investing in the Emergency Food Assistance Program, state fiscal relief, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), child support enforcement assistance, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Child Tax Credit as ways to stimulate the economy and help more vulnerable people. It was announced that the stimulus package did include a 10 percent increase in Food Stamp allotments, funds for the programs mentioned above, and for the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, senior meals program, senior Farmer's Market, and WIC.

At the beginning of 2009, an invitation was extended to advocates to send short-term and long-term goals to the Obama-Biden transition team. The president responded to the growing caseload because of the recession, targeted boosts to program participation and benefits, and included new investments in food and income security in his proposals. A bill cleared the House and Senate on a party-line vote March 25 and 26. Obama was asking for a \$5 billion boost over five years to Child Nutrition Reauthorization, but FRAC argued that an even greater investment was needed to reach the president's goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015, a top priority for Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, Jill. The Anti-Hunger Coalition hosted a "non-lunch" luncheon on Capitol Hill, where Jill Biden explained the importance of their effort.

Strong arguments were made against tax cuts for the wealthy (waste of resources) in exchange for extending benefits, stating these were the people who should be paying for the mess they created, not being rewarded, that those involved were “morally bankrupt hypocrites,” that they were “capitalizing on [the] backs of the most vulnerable,” and that we should be helping preserve the middle class. Messages noted that some of the big players, such as Goldman Sachs, were now paying huge bonuses. One message stated, “If the America we love is to survive, [we] need to find a way to restore balance, fight harder and louder.” Several new strategies were developed in 2011, including those below.

1. Advocacy groups began bringing the jobless to DC to talk to their representatives, organized rallies related to these efforts, wrote press releases telling the stories of the long-term unemployed, flooded phone lines with calls, organized Twitter campaigns, and so on.
2. The Economic Policy Institute organized a letter with signatures of 33 prominent economists urging extension of unemployment benefits

Over Thanksgiving recess, advocates were asked to call congressional representatives to support the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Bill that was coming to a vote. The president signed the reauthorization—the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Advocates urged the lame-duck session to work on a stimulus package that included Food Stamps. Several publicity campaigns carried out by advocates during this period urged others to use letters to the editor to focus media attention on the hunger issue in general. Various facts were provided, including the fact that half of all children in the United States will be served by SNAP at some point in their lives. Messages also stressed a large number of people who were hungry: “One in four children are unable to eat. ... One in 7 households were said to be unable to afford food at some point in the month.” Perhaps more significantly, new polling data from Hart and Associates showed that 74 percent of respondents said that SNAP was important or fairly important, 71 percent said cutting SNAP was the wrong way to reduce spending the next year, and 73 percent said Congress should reduce other kinds of spending to pay for school lunches. There was also an emphasis on the new name (SNAP) and the branding “Get ready for the increase”: publicity about increases that were coming in the stimulus package.

During the presidential campaign in 2008, a group of welfare-rights advocates made the connection between Obama’s proposals to wind down the wars in the Middle East and the possibility that more funds would be available for domestic-violence prevention. Authorization for the Violence Against Women Act was expiring, and reauthorization became the subject of advocacy messages once again.

In 2010, after numerous iterations, Congress approved the Affordable Care Act.

Second Obama Term

The struggle for extension of UI coverage for the long-term unemployed continued through 2013. One message noted that the Emergency Unemployment Compensation (EUC) program had been extended or amended 11 times since passage in June 2008 and that this extension was

not a partisan issue, stating that George Bush had signed the EUC program into law in 2008, when the unemployment rate had been 5.6 percent.

We continue to recover from the worst economic crisis since the Depression; despite 10 consecutive quarters of GDP growth and good job growth, with 7.8 million private sector jobs added since early 2010, the unemployment rate is still too high at 7.3% and the average spell of unemployment is 36 weeks.

Messages noted that 4.1 million, or 36.1 percent of all unemployed, had been unemployed for six months or more and the average job search was still more than 20 weeks; that those receiving assistance were receiving it for fewer weeks at reduced rates; and that benefits by then were reported to be less than \$250 a week. The problem of long-term unemployment was still growing because the job market was so bad; there were still three unemployed workers for every job opening, and “we still needed to replace 8 million jobs lost” in the Great Recession. “Struggling workers and their families are being walloped.” The National Employment Law Project released a report arguing against allowing the Emergency Unemployment Compensation Act to expire because the expiration of EUC would be (1) harmful to the millions of workers and their families, (2) counterproductive to economic recovery, and (3) unprecedented in the context of previous extensions to earlier UI programs in other economic recessions, in which extensions had been granted until the unemployment rate had fallen further. The report advocated for a gradual phase-out of the extensions. Messages also cited the 69 million people who had received benefits, with 17 million children in these families. Forty percent of the unemployed had made \$30,000 to \$75,000 before losing their jobs, and 20 percent were college graduates. Collaboration increased as 35 organizations launch a coordinated campaign to reauthorize the EUC program.

By the end of the period, the language became increasingly emotional and accusatory. Messages reported advocates “being “deeply angered” that 1 million long-term unemployed were “callously disregarded in budget agreement announced last night—some fought valiantly, but House Republicans either don’t know or don’t care about the catastrophic consequences” and those opposing the extension of federal benefits as “scurrying off on a long holiday vacation break. ... It was unconscionable to leave for the holidays without ensuring hard-hit Americans get help. ... Most American are focusing on Dec. 25, but these unemployed were focused on Dec. 28 when their benefits end.”

A message offered a toll-free number, asking people to talk to John Boehner, Eric Cantor, Dave Camp, and Paul Ryan, to urge them to renew the EUC and not turn their backs on America’s struggling job seekers and to not leave town for Christmas until they renewed the program. Quotes were used from stories of different types of long-term unemployed, reporting “gut-wrenching stories” about utilities being turned off, foreclosures, people having no gas money to go to job interviews, and a disabled veteran who lost his home. Advocates organized Twitter Storm Tuesdays in June and July, targeting different Congresspeople each Tuesday. Hart Research reported that 55 percent of Americans favored the extension of benefits. Other

policies were also being pushed that would be helpful, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and minimum wage.

Efforts to improve the system continued, with the offer of a webinar and a toolkit containing specific information on further “modernization” of the UI system in terms of duration of benefits, reductions in weekly benefit amounts, restrictions in eligibility, barriers to filing claims, misconduct and work, drug testing, work search, and business climate. The issue of covering part-time workers was being discussed again because that had become more prevalent, with 20 percent of unemployed workers having worked part time.

The president was active this year, focusing in particular on the problem of the long-term unemployed, pressing for an extension of benefits in his State of the Union address and calling for it in his budget. He began searching for ways to assist the long-term unemployed other than extending UI coverage. He convened top business leaders at the White House to discuss how they could improve job opportunities for the nation’s long-term unemployed. A new report from the National Employment Law Project outlined nine concrete actions that business leaders, Congress, and the administration could take to help put these job seekers to work. They argued that the discriminatory practice against hiring the long-term unemployed is debilitating to workers, lazy and counterproductive as a human-resource policy, and bad for our economy, especially because long-term joblessness is one of toughest problems facing our economy today: “Do you have to have a job to get a job?”

Earlier, Obama had hosted a round table to discuss how employers could help the long-term unemployed get back to work. He committed to allocating \$150 million to a “Ready to Work” partnership for funding programs that prepare and place the long-term unemployed into good jobs. More than 30 National Skills Coalition (NSC) members and allies attended the event, including employers from Business Leaders United for Workforce Partnerships and members of NSC’s Leadership Council. Vice President Biden was charged with overseeing a cross-agency review of workforce programs to ensure that they align with employer needs, and the White House released a report with examples about the long-term unemployed.

Six months into Obama’s second term, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which the National Federation of Independent Businesses had challenged. The court was divided, but upheld as constitutional the provision of the individual mandate, which required most individuals to obtain a minimum level of health insurance by 2014, while at the same time ruling the ACA’s Medicaid expansion unconstitutional because states had not been given appropriate notification or time to comply (Musumeci 2012).

Regarding food and hunger, things became even more contentious between Congress and the president when Republicans gained control of the Senate. Obama began 2013 attempting to restore cuts to SNAP, suspend time limits, increase access to underserved populations (e.g., the elderly, Hispanics, low-income adults without dependents), and increase funds for child nutrition programs (anticipating increasing demand/need, new standards for nutrition, and the like) and WIC and commodity programs. Cantor and others in the House brought a partial Farm Bill without nutrition programs to the floor trying to weaken the nutrition part of the Department of Agriculture; it passed.

The House also approved \$40 billion in SNAP cuts; the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities said 6 million American would lose benefits as a result. The rhetoric heated up in response:

The reason people say [hunger] is an “invisible” epidemic ... is that chronic hunger is reaching record rates (46 million rely on Food

Stamps to feed themselves and their families) ... but we can't or won't talk about it. ... Yet many Americans say they don't know anyone receiving federal assistance. ... When it stays invisible, people don't think about it very much. ... Tell your story.

In the months leading up to this vote, advocates in our sample reported that “right-wing outlets such as Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, RedState, and the rest of the far-right propaganda machine” had invented a number of justifications for cutting the program. These same advocacy groups then provided these talking points for others to use as strategies to combat those justifications:

Myth #1—food stamps are “growing exponentially” because of waste and fraud—error rate actually very low, less than 1%, and has fallen significantly

Myth #2—Cutting Food Stamps will make people get jobs because able-bodied people are getting Food Stamps instead of working—In fact, 76% of families receiving Food Stamps include children, elderly, disabled; they receive 83% of benefits.

Myth #3—The demand for Food Stamps is fading as the economy recovers—With 4.3 million out of work for 27 weeks or more, 7.9 million people working part-time but looking [for] full-time work and another 2.3 million marginally attached, what the country needs is even more hungry people!!!

Myth #4—Food Stamps are about politicians “buying votes” with other people’s money—conservatives say politicians “buy” votes by providing food to hungry people—Signing Up Seniors for Food Stamps Is Called “Buying Voters for Obama.”

Myth #5—Food Stamp recipients take drugs—drug tests piloted—very slight increased risk—very negligible when correct for population differences

Myth #6—People use Food Stamps to buy cigarettes and alcohol—no liquor or tobacco products allowed!—or pet food, soap, paper products, vitamins, and medicines, etc.

After the House approved \$40 billion in SNAP cuts, the House Appropriations Chair, Hal Rogers (R-KY), stated that he represented the poorest county in the country and he would not support those kinds of cuts to a program that many in his district relied on. James McGovern said hunger is a political condition, that they had time to mend it or make it worse, and that he was “not prepared to throw poor people under the bus.” Tom Vilsack, Agriculture Secretary, urged lawmakers to reject “hatchet” cuts, arguing that the House version “takes a hatchet to SNAP.” Then, in February 2014, after a three-year delay, Congress passed the Agricultural Act of 2014 (the Farm Bill) with wide bipartisan support. It included \$125 million for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and addressed the lack of access to healthy food for nearly 30 million Americans. Policy Link said, “The Reinvestment Fund and The Food Trust have been working

for years to expand healthy food access. Unfortunately, the bill includes \$8.6 million in cuts to SNAP over 10 years, affecting 85,000 households, 1.7 million people, reducing benefits by \$90/month.” FRAC thanked all who had spoken out against the cuts but noted that SNAP benefits and nutrition education spending had been cut four times in the past three and a half years, resulting in harm to health, early childhood development, productivity, and learning.

Several states stepped up to fill some of the funding gaps left by the cuts. In the state of Washington, Governor Jay Inslee issued a press release announcing steps to preserve SNAP benefits for 200,000 state households, to prevent the loss of nearly \$70 million in federal SNAP funds resulting from policy changes in the new Farm Bill passed by Congress. In New York, Andrew Cuomo announced that the state, through the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, would provide about \$6 million to increase LIHEAP to offset some of the cuts, to ensure that “SNAP households can continue to receive their benefits and put food on the table.” Without the additional LIHEAP funds, SNAP benefits in the state would decrease by about \$457 million and affected households would lose an average of \$127 in SNAP benefits each month. About 300,000 households would benefit from the additional funding.

There was also an effort to educate the public about the unhealthy American diet of processed foods that is “killing us”: “More than 725,000 die from heart disease and stroke each year, but the government is working against us, not for us. ... [A] new report shows that our food policy favors cheap, processed, foods over fresh fruits and veggies. ... Healthy food and sustainable agricultural programs would suffer the most.”

The Violence Against Women Act also came up for reauthorization during this period. The act was credited with providing critical resources for victims of domestic violence and reducing the overall rates of domestic abuse. Strategies for reauthorization had a more emotional appeal than in earlier years, including more personal accounts. Groups urged action, noting that the bill was currently being “held hostage.” They asked supporters to write and call representatives, saying, “Your representative needs to hear from you now. Call Rep. Boehner: Tell him to stand up for the Senate’s version of the Violence Against Women Act. Click here for a sample script and the number to call.” The Act was reauthorized later in 2013.

During this period, there were also several messages concerning sexual assault on college campuses, with reports that on many campuses, rape cases were not being prosecuted and in some cases were being covered up. Advocacy groups began to push for full prosecution of these cases and fair treatment for the victims.

DISCUSSION

Strategies and Themes

Our findings show the continual struggle engaged in by various advocacy groups to preserve aspects of the safety net. Many of the groups we report on used their internet connection to frame issues and to structure messages aimed specifically at protecting those who had lost a consistent source of cash assistance because of the welfare reform of the late 1990s, at least initially, but overall at protecting “the vulnerable” more generally.

Several common themes emerged from our analysis of these e-mail messages. The groups attempted to present broad frames for the issues that would draw in many types of individuals. Messages spent considerable time describing the extent of the problems, often in some contrasting historical terms—the state of the economy, the numbers of workers affected, the length of spells of unemployment, the numbers of citizens who used Food Stamps at some

point in their lives, and the numbers affected by changes in Medicaid and the implications of that, to name a few. The arguments made were that, counter to Mead's (1986, 1992) assertion, individuals were in these positions "through no fault of their own." Contrasts were drawn between tax cuts for the wealthy (which Congress often readily approved) or deficit reduction and funds needed to serve the "vulnerable" (often extracted from Congress more reluctantly). A specific instance was the contrast drawn between funds in the Farm Bill for relatively better off farmers and funds for food and nutrition programs that served vulnerable families. Several times, members of Congress were scolded for leaving for lengthy holiday vacations while funds were being cut or programs eliminated, often around the holidays: "Most American are focusing on Dec. 25 but these unemployed were focused on Dec. 28 when their benefits end."

The economic crash of 2008 played an important role in all of these areas of concern. Issues are often framed in economic terms, with benefits being cast as economic stimulants. Dire pictures of the economy and the job market countered dependency arguments. Presidential and Congressional elections seem to have the most impact in setting these agendas, along with fluctuations in the economy.

The need to respond to disasters, with their economic consequences, was another theme that ran through many of these areas of concern. The argument was made that these programs are beneficial not only for individuals receiving assistance but also for the community more generally. The Food Stamps and Unemployment Insurance programs, in particular, were said to produce strong multiplier effects that are beneficial, particularly during economic downturns. Arguments were also made about the importance of those programs when communities are faced with disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina. Evidence was presented about the broad public support that exists for some of these programs, and broad goals, such as that of the Obamas and Bidens to end hunger, were used as positive frames. There were also many arguments made about the importance of making these programs fair and accessible to all in need. Concerns were expressed in all of these areas about vulnerable groups that might be excluded—immigrants, single adults, those with short work histories, those who lacked benefits on their jobs, victims of domestic violence—and for some programs, such as Food Stamps, considerable efforts were reflected in attempting to enroll those who are eligible. Arguments about countering poverty and providing for the welfare of children (and sometimes the elderly) also entered into advocacy arguments in all of these areas at some point, as did the need for safety and security, and individualistic stories were also woven into the appeals. Issues related to unemployment were perhaps the most complex, as efforts were required on the national level related to the extension of benefits and state by state in relation to coverage. The arguments made with respect to food and hunger were the broadest, as advocates appealed to notions of economic stimulation, wellness and nutrition, fairness and social justice, and the importance of reaching all of those who were eligible.

Various strategies also emerged consistently. Strategies employed by activists in our data set followed a generally accepted standard of good e-communication practices relating to the design flow of websites related to message placement, educational materials, and resources designed to construct action to specific regions and issues (see Bhagat 2003). Embedded within websites, e-newsletters, and e-mail messages are invitations to join larger-scaled events, instructional tips on lobbying and on writing letters supporting your position to an elected official, research facts and figures with links to original sources, and, lastly, opportunities to donate to the senders' organizations and causes.

Activist organizations repeatedly called for action from local-level activists to join national-, state-, or local-level publicity campaigns or to create local campaigns using petitions

and letters to the editor. The organizations provided hyperlinks to research sites, as well as scientific and academic studies for economic, financial, and program usage rates. They also provided sample letters, scripts for phone calls, and responses to counterpoints that those with opposing views may present.

By 2011, new strategies emerged and the emphasis shifted toward individual voices via first-person testimonials to legislators and other policy makers of how cuts in various government programs had affected various individuals. Stories relating loss of job because of a downshift in the local economy were used, as were stories about the impact of losing Food Stamps, but usually in combination with some broader framing information, to show the overall trend as well. Thus, our findings suggest that it is not either ideational/thematic frameworks or individualistic/actor-oriented frames that are most effective [contrasts proposed by Steensland (2008) and the FrameWorks Institute (2002) but perhaps a combination of the two types of frames are the most effective. Additionally, heavy reliance on the types of messages that stress the structural causes for the problems being addressed and benefits for the entire community that are provided suggest that these are the types of messages most effective in moving those not likely to use the programs but likely to have some influence with policy makers and members of Congress.

There is evidence within our data of collaboration of more than one advocacy organization in these action strategies. Summer activities often involved groups collaborating to bring those affected by the policies they advocated for to Washington, DC, to meet with congressional representatives and/or to participate in specific programs. There is also evidence that these organizations shared ideas in some ways. For example, those working on Food Stamps and UI both framed messages in terms of the multiplier effects that those programs had in the community, a commonality possibly facilitated by the Economic Policy Institute, an organization that works with many of these advocacy organizations and cited in some of their messages.

Although our data amount to a convenience sample of e-mail messages from specific organizations, we believe our findings offer valuable insight into the passion of advocates and the means they will go to to provide voices on issues they deem to be important. In this study, we witness the intricate web of social networking designed to maintain some level of safety net for populations vulnerable and exposed to various economic, political and environmental cycles.

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