

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE:

THIN AND THICK IDENTITIES IN MOVEON.ORG AND THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

We argue that social scientists need to adopt a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) and collective identity. Here, we identify four factors that interact and make collective identity “thick” or “thin”—An organization’s structure of communication, the breadth of its mobilization efforts, its goals (which may or may not include collective identity), and supporters’ interest in cultivating a political community. Drawing on interviews with and participation observation data on supporters in MoveOn.org and the Florida Tea Party Movement (FTPM), We find that MoveOn, which focuses on curating donors, cultivates a thin collective identity and the FTPM, which initially focused on mobilizing citizens across political lines, nurtures a thick collective identity. In our analysis, we illustrate how the four factors interact and outline the consequences of collective identity over time. We conclude the paper with a call for additional research on collective identity.

Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) challenge how scholars think about collective action.¹ This is no less true of collective identity processes.² Current scholarship includes the role of communication in collective identity formation. Scholars, however, reach very different conclusions regarding what constitutes collective identity and its importance in the digital age. For example, some scholars suggest that collective identity plays a peripheral role in contemporary mobilizations. In the hashtag era, mobilization results from individuals' connections to issues rather than their affinity for a collective or group (Bennett 2003, Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Thus, collective identity plays a diminished role in contemporary social movements and can be understood by analyzing the connections among loosely-linked supporters who presumably share a common cognitive framework (Ackland and O'Neil 2011, Gerbaudo 2015, Monterde, Calleja-Lopez, Auilera, Barandiaran, and Postill 2015). Other scholars disagree with this assessment, arguing that while communication protocols shape how movement supporters interact, ICTs provide spaces where adherents can form and maintain a collective identity (Coretti and Pica 2015, Crossley 2015, Kavada 2015, Nip 2004). While it's not always clear what mechanisms make collective identity processes more or less successful, scholars contend that the evidence regarding the use of ICTs to cultivate commitment to a cause and organization is unambiguous (Caren, Gaby and Bond 2012, Gal, Shifman and Kampf 2016, MacKay and Dallaire 2014, Soon and Kluver 2014).

We make sense of these diverse perspectives, and argue that scholars need a more nuanced understanding of how communication potentially facilitates (and undermines) collective identity in the digital age. We argue that the relationship between collective identity and ICTs is best understood as multidimensional and relational. Here, we identify four factors that interact and make collective identity "thick" or "thin" – A group's structure of communication, the

breadth of its mobilization efforts, its goals (which may or may not include collective identity), and supporters' interest in cultivating a political community. Thick identity results when an organization makes cultivating a collective identity a priority and structures communication in ways that facilitate interaction on- and off-line. These organizations allow supporters, who are interested in doing so, to interact freely and weigh in on organizational decisions. Interaction is critical because it enables supporters to build trust, commitment, and solidarity, and can facilitate in-person encounters that help collectivities define who they are and why participation matters. Activist groups trying to mobilize local (rather than national) constituencies may find it easier to create spaces on- and off-line that encourage ongoing interaction and engagement in organizational decision-making. Thin identity results when an organization does not make collective identity a priority and adopts a hierarchical structure of communication that allows leaders to control what and how information is disseminated to supporters as well as determine the organization's issues, campaigns, and goals. This structure of communication, which is more likely to be adopted by organizations mobilizing national constituencies, makes interaction, among those who desire it, more difficult. This, in turn, makes it harder for supporters to build trust, commitment, and solidarity. Consequently, individuals are only superficially connected to one another and participation is primarily driven by their personal political priorities.

In this paper we explore how these four factors – the structure of communication, breadth of mobilization, organizational goals, and individual interest – interact and affect collective identity in two contemporary movement organizations. Drawing on interviews with and participation observation data on supporters of MoveOn.org (MoveOn) and the Florida Tea Party Movement (FTPM), we find that MoveOn cultivated a thin collective identity and FTPM nurtured a thick collective identity. MoveOn, which works to raise money for professionally-

executed, political campaigns across the country, adopts a hierarchical structure of communication that uses “hot cognition” to mobilize supporters to engage in relatively easy actions such as calling legislators and signing petitions. Consequently, supporters have limited interactions with one another on- and off-line, which minimizes the solidarity, trust, and commitment they feel for one another. Individuals with a history of political experience who were unhappy with MoveOn’s “big tent” style of progressive activism, left the group and joined other organizations. Individuals who were new to activism, however, stayed and hoped that MoveOn would do more to cultivate a grassroots infrastructure.

In contrast, cultivating a collective identity is more central to the FTPM, in large part because the organization seeks to mobilize individuals across party lines around electoral politics. FTPM’s leader, Anthony, adopted a horizontal structure of communication in order to encourage interaction among supporters around political issues. Anthony specifically drew on emotions such as pride and love as well as patriotism to cultivate a collective identity that created a sense of “we-ness” and allowed political diversity and disagreement. FTPM’s horizontal structure of communication also facilitated face-to-face encounters among supporters and built local organizations on the ground. This created a grassroots infrastructure, which supported the movement once Anthony shifted his energy to institutional politics. These on-the-ground organizations also had more particularized collective identities – ones that were explicitly hostile to Democrats, people of color, and Islam. Once Anthony was gone, these collective identities dominated on- and off-line, forcing some individuals out of the FTPM.

ASSESSING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Social movement organizations play an important role in the cultivation and maintenance of collective identity, or the feeling of “we-ness” that provides a sense of shared agency (Polletta

and Jasper 2001, Reger 2002b, Valocchi 2009). Of course, not all movement groups make cultivating a collective identity an organization goal, and to some extent this is reflected in their organizational forms (Lichterman 1996). Activists adopt organizational forms that reflect their goals and how best to achieve them (Clemens 1996, Reger 2002a). In doing so, activists define who the organization represents and how they will achieve goals (Clemens 1996, Rohlinger 2002).

If cultivating a collective identity is a priority, the organization will adopt a form that gives supporters a variety of ways to influence organizational agendas, actions, and goals (Staggenborg 1988). For example, an organization may adopt a decentralized and informal structure so that interaction is central to its decision-making processes. Ongoing interaction among group supporters not only nurtures collective identity, but also ensures that it is more representative of members' particular political interests (Lichterman 1996, Polletta 2002, Valocchi 2001).

If cultivating a collective identity is not a priority, an organization is far more likely to adopt a structure that minimizes supporters' influence on organizational agendas, actions, and goals. In this case, a group's structure may emphasize the role of leaders in group decision-making and the importance of a professional staff in "doing activism" effectively. Members' interactions with one another are minimized (Staggenborg 1988), and, if members come together at all, it is typically on an annual basis so that they can vote on a group's leadership and staff. Consequently, while supporters may share a general political orientation (e.g., feminist or environmentalist), they do not necessarily have a collective identity that reflects a shared sense of solidarity and commitment to a cause or group (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Reger 2012).

Assessing the role of organizational structure on collective identity is more complex in the digital age. Communication often provides the foundation for an organizational structure (Flanagin, Stohl and Bimber 2006), which means the form an activist group might take can range dramatically. For example, an organization may be completely online or have a hybrid structure insofar as it facilitates communication and collective action both on- and off-line (Chadwick 2006). Consequently, how a group chooses to structure communication – or the flow of information as well as when and how supporters interact with leaders and one another – is very important (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, Earl and Schussman 2003). While the flow of information is somewhat shaped by the technological platforms activists choose, organizational leaders determine when, what, and how information is shared (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, Lüders, Følstad and Waldal 2013, Segerberg and Bennett 2011). For instance, Facebook groups often have organizers who set out the goals of the group and determine what topics are up for discussion as well as how supporters may discuss them. These decisions ultimately influence who engages in the group and the kinds of actions (if any) that result from the conversations (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005, Mercea 2013).

How movement groups use ICTs can affect whether supporters meet up and engage offline. The Occupy Wall Street movement is an excellent example in this regard. Some local Occupy chapters used social media platforms, such as Facebook, as an information clearinghouse and discussion board that allowed individuals who could not attend meetings to stay abreast of the chapter's decision-making as well as weigh in on the group's priorities. More importantly, their use of Facebook encouraged ongoing interactions among supporters, which cultivated solidarity and commitment to the movement and sometimes facilitated encounters offline (Castells 2012, Costanza-Chock 2012, Gitlin 2012). In short, the structure of communication has

implications for collective identity (Bennett 2003, Kavada 2015). As discussed above, this leads to scholarly disagreement regarding the relative importance of collective identity in the digital age.

This does not suggest that individuals lack agency. Indeed, individuals can select in (and out) of movement groups and their relative interest in connecting with other supporters can affect group affiliations. Individuals who are primarily interested in contributing money to an organization forwarding a particular cause may be less concerned with how an organization cultivates a sense of “we-ness” and more focused on a group’s political track record. The opposite is true of individuals who wish to create a political community around a cause. These individuals will be very interested in an organization’s decision-making practices and their ability to participate in them (Lichterman 1996, Reger 2012). Likewise, individuals can always work within an organization’s boundaries to craft a collective identity that reflects their more particularized preferences and provides a foundation for collective action (Johnston, Larana and Gusfield 1994, Reger 2002b). The point here is that some kinds of organizational structures and practices make it easier for supporters to cultivate a collective identity than others (Guenther, Mulligan and Papp 2013).

We argue that the relationship between collective identity and organizational structure in the digital age is best understood as multidimensional and relational. Table 1 identifies four factors that interact and make collective identity “thick” or “thin”: The structure of communication, breadth of mobilization, organizational goals, and individual interest.³ Thick identity results when an organization makes cultivating collective identity a priority and structures communication in ways that facilitate interaction on- and off-line. These organizations flatten information hierarchies, allowing supporters to interact freely and weigh in on

organizational decisions. Interaction is critical because it enables supporters to build trust, commitment, and solidarity over time. These emotional connections foster a thick identity because they provide a foundation for friendships and romantic relationships (Goodwin 1997, Polletta 2002) – both of which can facilitate the in-person encounters that help collectivities define who they are and why collective action matters. Of course, the ability of a group to do this effectively may vary according to whom it's trying to mobilize. Activist organizations with a local, rather than national, focus may find it easier to create spaces on- and off-line that encourage ongoing interaction and engagement in organizational decision-making. Likewise, it may also attract individuals who are interested in community efforts to cultivate political engagement around a set of shared interests.

Thin identity results when an organization does not make collective identity central and adopts a hierarchical structure of communication that allows leaders to control what and how information is disseminated to supporters and determine the organization's issues, campaigns, and goals (Fominaya 2015, Mercea 2013). This structure of communication hinders the cultivation of collective identity because it does not provide “free spaces” (Evans and Boyte 1986) where supporters can interact and forge emotional connections with one another (Fominaya 2010, Hirsch 1990, Hunt and Benford 2004, Nepstad 2004). Instead, the organization relies heavily on “hot cognition” and “moral shocks” to induce participation (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001), which may primarily take the form of easy tasks such as signing petitions and contributing money. This fosters a thin collective identity because individuals may connect to an issue or cause emotionally (e.g., experience a moral shock), but they can maintain their social distance from a collectivity (Polletta 1999). Consequently, individuals are only superficially connected to other group supporters and individual participation is driven primarily by their

personalized political priorities (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Again, this may be related to both individual interest in collective identity as well as the breath of an organization's mobilization efforts. A group that is primarily focused on national politics may find it difficult to engage individuals in communities, especially when local engagement is sporadic.⁴

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

It is worth noting that we understand thin and thick identity as the extremes of a continuum and, consequently, contemporary organizations are unlikely to mirror exactly the configuration of factors discussed above. We also understand that organizations may “move” along the collective identity continuum as their communication practices shift. Organizations can always make changes that flatten information hierarchies and increase interaction among their supporters, which could thicken collective identity. Likewise, groups can tighten the reins on communication, potentially decreasing interaction as well as thinning collective identity. Moreover, activist groups may move along the continuum as their goals change. Organizations can always make cultivating collective identity more or less central. Finally, we are not arguing that thick collective identity is “good” and thin collective identity is “bad.” Each have (dis)advantages. Movement groups may intentionally cultivate a thin identity in order to maintain a connection with their supporters so that they will donate money year after year. This is not unlike the “paper constituency” described by McCarthy and Zald (1977). Here, the purpose of occasional local events may simply be a way to get people feeling connected enough to become long term donors to help organizations raise money for their campaigns. Similarly, groups that make collective identity central may find it difficult to maintain their flexibility over time and, ultimately, constrict the boundaries around who and what claims an organization represents (Gamson 1997).

CASE STUDIES

In order to examine collective identity in the digital age, we analyze two organizations – MoveOn.org (MoveOn) and the Florida Tea Party Movement (FTPM) – that generally share the goal of making the political system more responsive to ordinary citizens and encourage engagement offline, but vary in terms of their ideological orientation, their structure of communication, the breadth of their mobilization, and the extent to which cultivating collective identity is an organizational goal.

MoveOn was founded in 1998 by two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who sent an e-mail petition to about 100 friends calling on Congress to censure President Clinton for his indiscretion with Monica Lewinsky and “move on” to more pressing political issues.⁵ After the petition generated more than 400,000 replies, the couple formed MoveOn.org a political action organization designed to bring “as much diversity to the power structure as possible” (Bernhard 2004). MoveOn mobilizes “average citizens” around “campaigns for progressive change,” which include issues like global warming, peace in the Middle East, and voting rights. MoveOn initially appealed to progressives and moderate independents by largely avoiding controversial issues such as abortion and gay marriage and focusing on progressive causes around which there is a great deal of consensus. The organization became more explicitly progressive after the emergence of the Tea Party Movement in 2009, which forced MoveOn to take up more politically divisive issues (such as abortion rights and gay rights).

MoveOn’s key goal is to raise money for professionally-executed, political campaigns (Karpf 2012). Consequently, while it does want supporters to feel connected enough to the organization that they continue to donate funds to its campaigns, MoveOn does not make cultivating collective identity an organizational priority. Generally speaking, professional

activists design campaigns and come up with easy actions (e.g., donating money and signing petitions) that individual supporters can perform. As a function of its orientation to political change, MoveOn structures communication hierarchically, meaning communication generally flows one-way from the organization's leaders to its supporters via email and social media. MoveOn leaders provide supporters a consistent flow of information on progressive issues, and offer them specific opportunities to get politically involved by signing petitions, donating money to campaigns, canvassing neighborhoods, calling voters and politicians, and attending local meetings and events.⁶ For example, in an August 2007 email with the subject line "fighting back," MoveOn leaders asked supporters to donate \$25 to combat pro-war advertisements "sponsored by a "White House front group," pushing "for us to stay in Iraq for years or decades more." More recently, MoveOn urged supporters to call key senators and ask them to vote against Trump's pick for secretary of state, Rex Tillerson. Supporters simply had to text "swamp" to be connected automatically to the relevant senators. While these actions are designed to be easy access points for citizens looking to get politically engaged (Karpf 2012), it also means that MoveOn leaders largely control what issues the organization takes up, how the issues are framed, and what tactics are used to forward group goals.⁷

The largely unidirectional flow of information is no less true online, where MoveOn uses social media to reinforce the information it sent via email. MoveOn uses Twitter and Facebook to share videos, fact sheets, and politicians' contact information, which may not have been visible in an email, and to ask supporters to engage in an action. In other words, social media is used to supplement MoveOn's emails, rather than to foster dialogue among supporters. Their Facebook site is an excellent example in this regard. MoveOn reinforces the organization's hierarchy by controlling how supporters engage on the page (Mercea 2013). A MoveOn leader

posts content and supporters can respond to the post as well as have conversations with one another. However, supporters spend as much time engaging trolls as they do one another. For example, on the day the Foreign Relations Committee was set to vote on Rex Tillerson's nomination, MoveOn urged supporters to call key senators on the committee immediately. Over a period of four hours (between the time the content was posted and the vote occurred), forty three individuals responded to MoveOn's post. Of those responses, eighteen percent were comments by individuals who were not supportive of MoveOn's goals, and some were there to troll the group. MoveOn supporters argued with the trolls, but did not engage one another directly, and MoveOn's administrators were silent. While there were instances where supporters engaged one another on Facebook, particularly over the potential effectiveness of MoveOn's tactics and campaigns, MoveOn's leaders use social media to augment its email messages with images and videos, rather than to engage its supporters (or opponents) in the kind of dialogue associated with refining or deepening individuals' commitment to a cause (Ayers 2003, Crossley 2015, Hunt and Benford 1994).

MoveOn's hierarchical structure of communication also shapes grassroots participation. MoveOn carefully structures its gatherings so that organizers and attendees understand the purpose of the gathering, their responsibilities, and the political activity to be completed. For example, the lead researcher attended a meeting at a MoveOn supporter's home, where a group of 15 individuals watched and discussed a film (using MoveOn's discussion questions) about the substandard health care received by veterans. After the discussion and snacks, the organizer read a letter written by a MoveOn leader, asking participants to take the "next step" and "write their representatives" in an effort to pressure them to do more for the soldiers returning from Iraq. The lead researcher received several emails in advance of the event, which noted that veteran care

was a pressing issue in the U.S. as well as a friendly reminder that she was responsible for bringing a three-bean dip to the event. The email reminded her that a fellow supporter had generously donated her home for MoveOn use and that she needed to show up, bring a dish, and help clean up after the event. This level of detail and direction is typical of a MoveOn event.

In contrast, cultivating a collective identity is more central to the goals of the Florida Tea Party Movement (FTPM), which works to hold elected officials responsible for their fiscal decision-making, particularly those that affect taxpayers. The FPTM was founded by Anthony, a 32 year old conservative activist, who participated in a Tea Party organized by his friend, Brendan Steinhauser (the Director of Federal and State Campaigns for FreedomWorks) outside of the White House and decided to spearhead a similar event in Florida's capital. Anthony launched the movement by setting up a Facebook page and inviting his conservative Facebook "friends" to join the group. Within a week, the page had over 500 members. Anthony then asked supporters to attend a "tea party" in front of the state capitol building. The successful event drew nearly 300 in attendance and featured a keynote address by Dick Armey. Anthony capitalized on the "event buzz" and, using Facebook, grew the number of supporters and organized another Tea Party the following month on tax day, April 15, 2009.

While Anthony identified as conservative and focused his initial mobilization efforts on conservatives, he recognized that political dissatisfaction extended across the aisle. In an effort to capitalize on this dissatisfaction, Anthony made the Facebook page explicitly non-partisan. In the group description, Anthony noted, "This isn't a conservative or liberal thing. This is about government forking over billions of dollars to businesses that should have failed. This is about taking money from responsible people and handing it over to CEOs who squandered their own." During an interview, Anthony reaffirmed this position, adding that he worked hard to ensure that

the FTPM represented the concerns of “most Americans.” He used the movement’s avoidance of “hot button” issues as an example:

The [Florida] Tea Party has not been focused on social issues or the cultural issues that divide America, but has been focused more on the issues that 70 to 80% of the people agree with a responsible government, accountable elected officials, and balancing the budget. Most people agree with that.

Anthony reasoned that the best way to increase the size and influence of the FTPM was to give Floridians a voice in the organization’s agenda and campaigns. In order to do so, he structured the group’s Facebook page to maximize communication among leaders and supporters. Anthony made the page open to supporters and visitors alike, allowed them to create original posts on the page, and engage one another through post replies, moderating content only when individuals pushed political parties and candidates (discussed in more detail below). Consequently, there was no shortage of events advertised and discussed online. For example, one woman started an “open mic night” at a local restaurant where, “Anyone can speak for one minute. People are WANTING to speak, because many of us are so troubled by what is happening in our country. It is an excellent venue for networking, gathering, and keeping one another educated and supported in our fight to take back the country.” Additionally, supporters used the page to coordinate transportation to Glenn Beck’s 9/12 rally (as well as organize a sister rally in Florida’s capital) and to share guidelines for “appropriate behavior” at Democrat Alan Boyd’s town hall meetings on the Affordable Care Act. One supporter, for instance, asked Tea Partiers to “Arrive early [to the town hall], be polite and respectful.... Thanks.” As we discuss in more detail below, this horizontal structure of communication also made it easier for on-the-ground groups supporting the FTPM platform to build their memberships and direct the course of the movement.

In short, MoveOn and FTPM vary in a number of significant ways which, as we detail below, affect collective identity. MoveOn primarily focuses on raising money for professionally-executed, political campaigns and does not prioritize collective identity. Instead, it seeks to cultivate long-term donors, who occasionally participate in a campaign effort. To do this effectively, MoveOn adopts a hierarchical structure of communication and works to maintain control over its agenda, campaigns, and messages. Supporter input is limited, as is interaction. FTPM is interested in engaging the citizenry in local politics and thus puts more emphasis on the importance of cultivating a common collective identity, particularly among individuals who may agree on very little politically. In order to do so, the FTPM adopts a horizontal structure of communication, allowing supporters and leaders to interact and directly determine the course of the movement as well as facilitating the development of groups and events that support, but are separate from, the FTPM.

DATA AND METHODS

We employed three methods to collect data on collective identity in MoveOn and FTPM. First, we monitored organizational websites, public forums, and e-mails for all of the groups on a daily basis. Second, we attended dozens of meetings, rallies and events hosted by MoveOn and FTPM groups.⁸ Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with supporters of MoveOn and the FTPM. We used a variety of methods to locate respondents including e-mail, listservs, online surveys, giving meeting presentations, distributing flyers at events, and posting flyers in local coffee shops, on TPM Facebook sites, on campus, and in the local progressive and conservative centers. This strategy yielded formal and informal conversations with fifty MoveOn supporters, nineteen of whom were formally interviewed between October 2006 and April 2007, and 51 conversations with FPTM, thirty three of whom were formally interviewed between

August 2010 and April 2011. We conducted follow up interviews with individuals formally interviewed approximately two years later. We conducted thirteen follow up interviews with MoveOn supporters between December 2008 and June 2009 and twenty five with FTPM supporters between August 2010 and April 2011.⁹

Respondents were asked how they learned about the group, their range of political experience, their membership in other organizations, when and why they joined the group, the kinds of activities and events in which they have participated, their impressions of how the group has affected their participation, their feelings about and experiences with the group, and their feelings about activism and politics in the U.S. more generally. In the follow up interviews, we asked questions regarding whether (and how) their feelings about and participation in the group had changed and whether (and how) their support for the organization had changed and why. Additionally, we used details from their first interviews to create probes so that we could better assess whether their enthusiasm for and participation in the group had changed over time as well as potential causes for these shifts. The interviews ranged in length from twenty five minutes to three hours. All respondents are identified with pseudonyms.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 provides an overview of the demographics of the respondents who we formally interviewed twice. Overall, there are not remarkable differences between the supporters of MoveOn and the TPM. Supporters are diverse in terms of their age, gender, relationship, parental and employment status but relatively homogenous in terms of their race and ethnicity. The racial and ethnic demographics are not completely representative of the area in which 60 percent of the population is white, thirty four percent is African-American, four percent is Latinx, and two percent is Asian.

THIN COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF MOVEON

Cultivating a collective identity is not one of MoveOn's organizational priorities.

MoveOn primarily seeks to raise money for professionally-executed campaigns and occasionally mobilize its supporters to engage in relatively easy actions such as calling legislators and signing petitions. In order to raise money on an ongoing basis, MoveOn takes up an array of progressive issues and allows supporters to pick and choose on which issues they give and engage.

Consequently, when asked why they got involved with MoveOn, respondents focused less on shared grievances with a progressive community and more on the emotions that moved them to action. As we illustrate below, MoveOn's ability to use emotional pleas to mobilize a large constituency to action may help the organization raise money and make some supporters "feel good" about their participation. However, it does not cultivate trust, solidarity, or build relationships among local activists. While those who lack political experience are hopeful that MoveOn will do more to cultivate a grassroots infrastructure, seasoned activists adopt cynical views of the organization and often leave the group altogether.

All of the respondents mentioned the ability of MoveOn to use effective emotional appeals, particularly "hot cognitions" and "moral shocks" (Jasper 1997, Jasper 1998), to spur them to action. Respondents cited "outrage," "frustration," "anger," and "joy" for signing MoveOn petitions, sharing pictures and stories, donating money to MoveOn campaigns, and attending the occasional MoveOn events. Liam (a thirty seven year-old Communication Director) explained the emotional effects of MoveOn's email appeals best:

They [MoveOn] know their audience! It's [MoveOn's emails] written in a way that can anger you, make you feel disheartened, or uplift you.... Then, [MoveOn] just makes it so easy to contribute. You just click here, enter your credit card number, and there you go. It's so convenient. [Pause] I think convenience is very important.

As Liam's response suggests, convenience also played an important role in respondents' willingness to get involved in MoveOn and its campaigns. MoveOn makes participation of all kinds very easy (Karpf 2012). John (a thirty two year-old graduate student), who periodically attended MoveOn events, saw the group as a "way to structure [his] volunteerism." Amanda (a fifty two year-old Social Worker), who had held several events at her home, compared MoveOn to a "party planner," noting that the organization made putting together an event "easy" and "fun." Kendra (a twenty nine year-old Outreach Coordinator) agreed, noting:

They make it easy. Just a click of a link and the petition's already made. You can add your extra comments. You can email it on. They spell it all out. It helps to make my individual involvement in the political process a little bit easier. If I was going to express support or dissent about an issue by myself, I would have to research the email address or the contact information for my appropriate legislator or representative. I'd have to compose the letter. I'd have to manually forward it on to friends and family. They [MoveOn] have all of the steps already taken care of.

Convenience, however, extended beyond the ease with which respondents could engage in MoveOn actions. Several respondents noted that MoveOn was structured in a way that allowed them to engage in easy action that made them feel "good" about being politically involved. For example, Ava (a forty one year-old Interior designer) described her participation in the occasional event as "stimulating and enjoyable," noting that it was "very positive" to "interact with others who have been frustrated and looking online like you have." Marcia (a 60 year-old Geologist) agreed, adding "It's given me a positive feeling to meet other people in the community with similar beliefs. Sometimes you can feel like you're [politically] all alone out there." Linda (a thirty nine year-old Masseuse), explained it best, noting:

Its [MoveOn] helped me to realize that I'm not alone and there's a lot of other people out there that have the same opinions as I do. I'm not as distorted as I thought I might have been in my opinions. [Pause] It gives... me that feeling that I can make a difference, and I can go out and do something.... It's nice to know that a person from down the street actually shares my opinion.

Interestingly, respondents also appreciated that MoveOn enabled them to avoid political conflict with other supporters. Lyndon (a 60 year-old librarian) observed that MoveOn, at least until the emergence of the Tea Party in 2009, “embraced” a range of “middle-of-the-road” progressive causes to ensure it did not drive moderates away on “wedge” issues like abortion rights and gay marriage. Janice agreed, explaining that she appreciated MoveOn’s ability to “focus” supporters on a single issue. In her view, it brought people who share more political differences than similarities together in a non-confrontational way. She explained:

You know, a lot of organizations ask you to take everything and buy in. MoveOn doesn’t. It lets you just get in on the issue you want. It gets rid of a lot of conflict. The Internet makes that [progressive politics] much easier that way. You don’t have to look someone in the face and say, ‘I don’t agree with you about everything. I only agree with you about one thing.’ The online structure [pause] minimizes that awkwardness.

Using emotionally-laden arguments to spur mobilization and minimize political differences among supporters have strategic and political benefits (Bernstein 1997, Bernstein 2008, Gamson 1997) and likely helps MoveOn keep its campaigns funded. However, conflict helps build relationships among supporters and can provide the necessary groundwork for trust, solidarity, and the cultivation of a thick collective identity (Ghaziani 2011, Guenther and Mulligan 2013). Absent interactions that required supporters to think about (or defend) their understanding of an issue or MoveOn’s goals, respondents largely regarded their involvement in the organization as “easy” and “enjoyable,” but little more. In short, MoveOn’s reliance on hot cognition or moral shocks to move individuals to action as well as its easy, non-conflictual engagement, make it likely for supporters to maintain their social distance and not connect to the cause or one another - all of which are important to developing a collective identity that can sustain movements over time (Polletta 1999).

MoveOn's tight control over the structure of communication also makes it very difficult for activists to build connections with one another, particularly for those new to activism. For example, MoveOn does not provide ways for individuals to keep in touch after they participate in an event. Marcia, who is quoted above, described how much she enjoyed hosting MoveOn activities. She told us that she "loves having the meetings" because they are "always fun." She talked at length about how she enjoyed feeling connected to other progressives, particularly when performing more challenging political tasks such as calling voters during election time – activities with which she did not have previous experience. She recalled:

I just had this person say these terrible things to me and you know, everybody else would, could say, yeah I just had a call like that myself and it just made you feel better.... We could share our negative and positive experiences and discuss them together. If I were at home alone, it would have gotten me down that people treat you like that on the phone. But it's okay in a group. We can give each other pointers, like try to be not sound like a recording, but very personal caller, and that I think helps. And that's what being in a group does. It connects you because in a group you have the background support, you can go talk with somebody and feel they understand.

Marcia went on to explain how, noticing that different people came to the events, she asked MoveOn to share attendee emails. She argued that this was particularly important because MoveOn determined who would attend the event at her house as opposed to that of a different volunteer in town. She explained that MoveOn divvied up attendees according to the number of hosts in town, which made it less likely that she would see the same person more than once or twice.

I did write them [MoveOn]. I said that I would like it very much if they could reveal to the host the email addresses [of attendees] so I could keep a record and invite people personally. You know, if I had things I was doing locally I could notify everybody who might be interested. They haven't responded yet. They do ask for your opinions, but a lot of times you get this recorded thing back when you do send in your ideas. It says, you know, can your question be answered by looking at our webpage, which is all comments

to questions and answers. And, of course, it doesn't. I think they try, but it's a small group [of people] running it [MoveOn]. It's hard for them to get back to everybody.

Richard (a 53 year-old Government Contract Analyst) agreed that MoveOn's structure prevented meaningful on-going, in-person interactions and, ultimately, cooperation in the community. He observed:

MoveOn is doing its MoveOn thing, and United for Peace and Justice is doing its thing, and "Oh God! We can't all be doing the same thing because we're competing for money!" It undermines the cohesiveness among groups. So, I guess I would like to see MoveOn interact with and work with more local groups that have the same agenda. [MoveOn] should build the strength [of the grassroots so] that it can enact some sort of meaningful social change. We're all out there saying and doing the same things, but there's no cohesiveness.

Several other respondents were less charitable in their assessments of MoveOn's "big tent" progressive activism, arguing that the group's desire for "control" and "credit," as well as its obsession with "making activism easy" made it impossible for progressive activists to build a grassroots infrastructure and community. Brent (a twenty seven year-old non-profit coordinator) explained that involvement in MoveOn's decision-making was critical to local community building and political success.

I think Internet organizing has its limits, even though they [MoveOn] do a great job kind of tapping their base and getting a lot of letters and emails out quickly.... For me, there's no substitute for the face to face democratic process. So, I think emails are good and all, but I think that all politics are local. I feel like the Internet is obviously a good strategy, but it can't be the whole act.

Jeff (a 55 year-old househusband) agreed, adding that MoveOn had done progressives a disservice by becoming the "place for activism" without cultivating a community of progressive activists.

I don't like that everything is decided from the top down. They like to get input, they say, but I don't think that they really listen to it a lot of the time.... They don't have much connection with the local scene.... I think it's like Ebay. The group reaches a critical

mass and everybody goes to it. It's hard to compete with Ebay because that's where the action is.

Lyndon said it best, noting:

The problem is they're [MoveOn's] into.... (Pause) It's all about MoveOn. And, frankly, nobody else gets any credit. It's all top down. And I'll say something else about it being top down. If you sign up for lots of stuff and sponsor lots of stuff, you can't find out who's getting your emails. Not before, during, or after. The day after the action, the email list is gone. Gone! As an example, with the American Friends Service Committee you get a week or two weeks before that email system is torn down. You know, they say, "You sponsored it. People signed up for it. You make it happen and make that network work while you can." And, with MoveOn, its [the network] dead the day after. With everybody else it's live. It's still alive. Some of the groups even let you look at the email addresses too.... It's [MoveOn] all top down. MoveOn's not putting people in touch with each other. It's putting people into MoveOn.

In short, many respondents commented on MoveOn's unwillingness or inability to help communities facilitate the kinds of in-person interactions necessary for the cultivation of a collective identity around which various local groups could organize.

Certainly, individuals can do things that will facilitate the cultivation of collective identity and build a grassroots infrastructure on their own. Marcia, for example, could collect the emails herself and follow up with the supporters who attended events in her home. There are at least three reasons why she may not have done so. First, Marcia may not really want to help create (or be a part of) a larger community. Second, Marcia may regard mobilizing supporters outside of MoveOn as inappropriate. Individuals connect to MoveOn with the understanding that their information is used for sanctioned communications and events. Consequently, some individuals, even those who want to build political community, may regard mobilizing supporters outside of the organization a violation of MoveOn's trust. Finally, Marcia may feel that she lacks the political skills necessary to turn a list of contacts into a budding political community.

While we cannot rule out the former potential explanations, we have evidence regarding the latter. Marcia, as well as other respondents, noted that they had limited political experience. From their perspective, a key benefit of supporting MoveOn was that it helped them acquire on-the-ground political skills such as phone banking and canvassing. Marcia and supporters like her would not necessarily have known what to do with a list of emails and thus did nothing at all. It is also worth noting that some individuals with political experience did leave MoveOn. As their quotes indicate above, Richard and Lyndon expected MoveOn to facilitate in-person interactions and help grow a progressive grassroots community. When it failed to do so, these (and other) respondents abandoned MoveOn and supported local organizations that took collective identity and political community more seriously.

In sum, MoveOn cultivates a thin collective identity among its supporters. This is, in part, because cultivating a collective identity is not an organizational goal. Thin collective identity, however, also is a function of its focus on mobilizing people and money quickly as well as its unwillingness to create free spaces on- and off-line where individuals can interact and form a collective identity on their own. Instead, MoveOn uses emotion to mobilize individuals to action without necessarily connecting them to the organization or to one another. Interactions among supporters on- and off-line are relatively rare, and when they do occur, devoid of conflict. Respondents, as a result, feel affinity for a generically progressive community in which they periodically engage via ICTs, and mostly this makes them feel good. To be sure, this approach to political mobilization has value, particularly for an organization that wants to curate a list of donors who will continue to support their campaigns. Absent ongoing interaction, however, MoveOn has difficulty cultivating trust, commitment, and solidarity among those who support the group over time – unless their commitment is to the ease with which MoveOn makes

activism. Certainly, this problem is not specific to MoveOn. Movement groups that are generally oriented to national politics and only sporadically target states and communities rely heavily on a paper membership to foot the bills of their campaigns (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The problem here is that, despite MoveOn's use of new technology, it may be more difficult for individual supporters to work within the organization and create a sense of "we-ness" on- and off-line. Those who have political experience may leave MoveOn and take their skills to an existing grassroots organization and work to build the community they seek. However, those who lack political skills and find activism intimidating may stay with MoveOn in hopes that they will have opportunities to learn more or that the organization will respond to their feedback.

THICK COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES:

THE CASE OF THE FLORIDA TEA PARTY MOVEMENT

Cultivating a collective identity is more central to the Florida Tea Party Movement (FTPM), largely because it seeks to mobilize individuals across party lines around electoral politics. To this end, Anthony (the FTPM founder) structured communication horizontally, meaning that communication generally flowed between leaders and supporters primarily through social media. This horizontal communication structure diversified the collective identity of the FTPM in important ways. First, it allowed Anthony to cultivate a "mainstream message" and an inclusive collective identity online and offline in the FTPM's early years (2009-2010). As discussed above, Anthony focused the movement on the size, scope, and accountability of government to American citizens. More importantly, he cast political participation as the "patriotic duty" of Americans who felt the government was reeling out of control. This collective identity was effective in so far as it provided affective emotions and a general sense of "we-ness" around which politically diverse individuals could mobilize. Anthony's focus on patriotism

capitalized on emotions, such as pride and love which, unlike the hot cognition discussed above, can deepen individuals' commitment to a cause (Gould 2009, Jasper 1998, Jasper 2011).

Virtually everyone we interviewed contextualized their participation as an effort of "average citizens" who "loved their country" to take control back from "unresponsive," "career" politicians. For example, one woman discussed her motivation for attending a TPM rally and her experiences on the Facebook page:

I went to express my love for my NATION and my hope for it. I was thrilled that there were hundreds [of people] there and it was all positive truth and uplifting LOVE of Country being expressed. I held an umbrella in one hand for protection from the sun, and waved my flag with the other hand and cried for joy. I had found people of like hearts!

This sense of patriotism driving involvement was expressed by rally attendees as well. A young African-American woman interviewed at a rally noted that as a Democrat she was "profoundly disappointed" with President Obama's decision to bailout the banks and auto industry and that it was time for citizens to get involved and "to get the country back on track." Katherine (a forty seven year-old state worker) also linked her FTPM involvement to her love of America:

It [being involved in the FTPM] makes me feel good in my heart... I think that it [the FTPM] encompasses all that is good about humanity – helping your neighbor, working hard, being positive, working together to make things better for our communities, for our country, for our state... I feel very strongly about those things and the people involved in the Tea Party Movement have very similar feelings. Because when I express my feelings, everybody nods and says, "Yes, yes. That's how we feel too." So I think that it kind of goes back to this feeling of love of country – that sounds corny but it really is true. It really is what it comes down to, loving the ideal, loving America. That's what we're all striving for; to have a nice life and be free ... and to live in nice communities... [where] people care about each other.

Casting participation in the FTPM as a "patriotic duty" of American citizens had an important benefit beyond drawing on emotions that can help sustain participation. It cultivated a collective identity based on political difference. It acknowledged that while citizens may be

united in their sense of patriotic duty, they didn't necessarily agree politically. The notion of individual freedom and rights, which are central to understandings of American identity underscore that, while united by a love of country, America is comprised of diverse opinions and people (Schildkraut 2002, Woehrle, Coy and Maney 2008). As such, Tea Partiers recognized that "being united" was different than "being in agreement" on every issue. In fact, FTPM supporters regarded differences among its members as a strength of the movement and, therefore, something that should be embraced. A man recounting his first rally on the Facebook page, for instance, noted that the differences among supporters is what made the movement strong. He explained that when some "rowdy protesters" arrived at the rally "they were not run off as might have been expected but, instead, invited in as neighbors and friends with differing opinions." Another supporter, approving of this response, noted that "patriots do not always agree." In short, a politically inclusive collective identity was flexible in so far as it allowed for disagreement among supporters (Ghaziani 2011, Valocchi 2001).

This collective identity also made it easier for Anthony to alleviate supporter concerns that the FTPM was becoming an arm of the Republican Party. This was particularly important because, as discussed below, on-the-ground Tea Party groups with an explicitly conservative bent used the Facebook page to build their own memberships. Anthony frequently noted that the FTPM was non-partisan, adding that "Tea party patriots seek to influence all political parties." Likewise, Anthony initially made sure that the Tea Party events were non-partisan and that he reached out to politicians on both sides of the aisle when extending invitations to FTPM activities. For example, Tea Partier Alan noted on Facebook that he attended a rally and that the turnout was good, but added, "I will not be back if it turns into a Dem vs Rep movement. I used to consider myself a Republican but after the out of control spending attitude they displayed I

consider myself to be ‘no party affiliation’ now.... I just hope some people take a hard look and let it be known if they are doing this to advance parties or ideals.” Anthony responded to Alan’s post, noting that he “heard” his concerns and assured him that the FTPM was not a “democrat or republican effort.” Anthony wondered if Alan’s post was a response to the fact that only republicans had attended the most recent event, noting that he had invited a number of politicians to the event and that “the only elected officials I could find that [sic] stand with us were Republicans.”

The horizontal structure of communication also allowed on-the-ground groups to advertise their organizations and events, which ultimately built their memberships. Specifically, individuals would interact online via Facebook, and then meet up with one another offline. Recall that Anthony identifies as conservative (he also works for a conservative think tank). This is important because when Anthony asked local leaders to get more involved in the maintenance and direction of the FPTM, it was conservatives who responded. Two local groups that supported the FTPM banner, but adopted different orientations to politics, formed in response to Anthony’s call for assistance, and both of the groups used the Facebook page to share information about their own groups as well as to advertise and support Anthony’s events.¹⁰

Each of these groups developed more particularized collectivity identities, which cultivated commitment, trust, and solidarity among those who attended their respective meetings. The first organization, Christians for Responsible Government, strongly supports the TPM platform but regards Judeo-Christian doctrine as critical to “uniting Americans” and “defending our country.” Members of this group shared an identity as Christians and used religious doctrine as a way to understand their collective action and support for the FTPM. As is reflected in the quote from a meeting attendee below, members believed that their rights were bestowed upon

them from God rather than government. Consequently, the government needed to respond to their claims – not the other way around. The speaker explained:

A right is defined as a power, privilege, faculty or demand inherent in one person and put upon another. Generally defined as powers of free action. Something you have the sovereign authority to do because there is no higher authority to get permission from. There's nobody to ask. You've heard the expression, "The buck stops here." That means you're it. You make the final decision. That's what sovereignty is all about. You are endowed by your creator with certain unavoidable rights. You don't have to ask. Now, this is the exact opposite of a privilege. A privilege is defined as a particular and peculiar benefit or advantage enjoyed by a person, company or class, beyond the common advantages of other citizens. A particular right, advantage, exemption, power, franchise or immunity held by a person or class not generally possessed by others. A temporary authority granted to you by someone of a higher authority..... One of the fundamental problems in the United States is that the government has convinced us that we have certain privileges granted to us by the government. Excuse me? I have rights endowed to me by my Creator. Where does the government get power? We the people grant the government privileges. The power comes from us and goes to government. Not the other way around!

The distinctions between "rights" and "privileges" were used to distinguish the group from the more politically inclusive FTPM, and to situate the organization's efforts as part of a larger movement to reclaim power from "liberals," who trampled their rights so that they could impose a "bunch of privileges on them." "So-called health care reform," "entitlement programs," and "illegal immigrants" who fraudulently used "anchor babies" to "force" their way into the U.S. – all privileges permitted by the government – were discussed by group members. These privileges were attacked as unjust and juxtaposed against the rights members needed to defend such as property rights, the rights of the unborn, and the right to bear arms. One attendee made this link very clearly:

I want to mention something that I thought about for years when it comes to the idea of a right or a privilege. Well, there's probably nobody in this room that is more pro-second amendment than I am. But when you think about those right to carry laws, all you're doing is reducing your God given right with a government privilege. What a government

grants, it can take away or deny in the first place. [Pause]. They got you there. They got you. We need to go back there and just reaffirm the bill of rights as it was originally written.

It is worth noting that one attendee challenged the distinction between “rights” and “privileges” as well as its application at an early meeting. Several times, he noted that he “did not agree” with what was being said – including the “blind faith” in God since he was agnostic. His challenges were shut down by other members and, to our knowledge, he did not return.

The second group, which we call Citizens Holding Government Accountable, describes itself as a fiscally conservative, non-partisan organization that works to “promote good conservative elected representatives to ALL levels of government.” While the organization does not identify as explicitly Judeo-Christian, each meeting began with the pledge of allegiance and a prayer that “thanked God for allowing us to live in a country where we have the right to assembly.” Citizens Holding Government Accountable, whose meetings were primarily attended by older, white citizens, adopted the FTPM collective identity of “American patriot.” However, their construction of American identity was explicitly white and native born, and the power struggle for control of America was clearly a battle of racial and ethnic demographics. Every meeting we attended included attacks on African Americans, Muslims, and Latinx communities. During the first meeting we attended, members discussed the practice of gerrymandering in racial terms. Specifically, the group agreed that some districts were made “black” so that it would be “easier for blacks to be elected.” One attendee added that “Hispanics” engaged in the practice too, which he referred to as a “racial quota.” The group leader agreed and used the local area as an example, identifying the “good” and “bad” parts of town. The “bad” parts of town, he argued, had been redistricted in the past. Attendees agreed this was a common practice that “blacks” and “Hispanics” used to “maintain a population of electable people.”

At another meeting, attendees discussed their opposition to the REAL ID program, which is a series of federal laws that make it more difficult to get driver and non-driver licenses. Presumably, these laws weed out “illegal” immigrants from the citizen identification process and make it tougher for them to take advantage of local, state, and federal programs. At the meeting, an attendee acknowledged that the primary reason for implementing REAL ID is so that “illegal aliens-Mexicans” cannot get drivers licenses, but resented the government “violating his rights” in an effort to “control the illegals.” He voiced support for even stricter measures (tracking DNA of individuals from their birth), explaining that it was a safety issue because the “Mexicans are running amok” in South Florida and are “still driving and still crashing” even with REAL ID. While the other members did not support the idea of cataloging DNA as a way to track citizenship, another participant agreed that the government “needs to stop giving IDs to illegal aliens without checking documents.” The attendees concluded that REAL ID simply made “big government, bigger” by replicating a job “that police officers already do.”

In short, the FTPM Facebook page cultivated an inclusive identity which simultaneously allowed politically diverse individuals to connect with one another via their love of country and enabled on-the-ground groups to find and encourage conservatives to attend local meetings. Christians for Responsible Government and Citizens Holding Government Accountable used the FTPM Facebook page to advertise their meetings, interact with those interested in their ideas or attending a meeting, and ultimately to facilitate in-person encounters. The groups offered supporters particularistic collective identities and gave them an organizational mooring beyond the virtual world.

In other words, FTPM cultivated thick collective identities by encouraging and facilitating interaction on- and off-line. The supporters who stayed involved with the FTPM over

the entire two year observation period pointed to the importance of the Facebook page as well as the on-the-ground groups to the creation of a political community that connected patriots to one another. For example, Bart explained that the TPM showed him the diverse “colors” of conservatives and helped him find a community of politically “like-minded folks” in the area, which kept him engaged in the Tea Party Movement over time.

I think [I’m still involved] because I met more local people that believe the way I do. Yeah. There’s a pretty strong conservative group in North Florida that aren’t Republicans and aren’t Christian led. And that’s kind of where I fit in. It’s okay now to say that you’re conservative, but you’re not a Republican.... It has actually caused me some friendships.... So, yeah. That’s changed.

He was not the only supporter to point to the importance of this political community created by on-the-ground groups for staying involved. Katherine recalled discovering this community and feeling “empowered” to “speak out” against the political status quo.

For me, realizing that so many other people felt the same way I did. I didn’t know that. You certainly didn’t get that from the [mainstream] media. You do now. But, we didn’t know that before. We thought we were this little minority. We didn’t realize there was such a great crowd of people in America who all held that same ideal in their hearts and want to see it kept alive.

Oliver (a retiree) agreed noting he enjoyed “being with people of a like-mind and knowing that we’re [he and his wife] are not alone. So many of our friends are indifferent. Apathetic as we used to be. I found out there are other people that are concerned, and they weren’t concerned about politics –which party you’re aligned with.” He added that his participation in this community gave him “hope” that they could change the political system. Bradley (a 51 year-old who worked in mergers and acquisitions) said it best:

I look at it as a new great awakening. It’s different, but I can see similarities and the great awakenings have always affected change. The first one led to the revolution and the second one led to the abolition of slavery. So, this one, I don’t know where it’s going to

lead but I tend to look at them as good things.... And it feels good to be connected. It feels very good to be a part of it.

The on-the-ground groups became particularly important after the 2010 election. The FTPM did very well in the state of Florida, and state legislators quickly formed a caucus in order to listen to Tea Partiers' concerns. Anthony was asked to be involved in the caucus, which meant he had very little time for the Facebook website. The new moderator, Deborah (a 55 year-old consultant), only posted sporadically and made no effort to keep partisan comments in check. The discourse online quickly became partisan and politically hostile.

For example, a few FTPM supporters debated three proposed bills designed to remove the political teeth of unions in the state. The first bill would decertify unions that did not have at least 50% of the workers signed as members, the second bill would prohibit union dues from being automatically deducted from members' paychecks, and the final bill would require unions to obtain written permission from members to use their dues for political purposes. Tea Partier John posted that "The Tallahassee Tea Party should not support the union busting bills being forced through our state government!!!!!!!!!!!!!! It has nothing to do with the principles of the Tea Party" on the Facebook page. Colt, another supporter, responded, "Telling people that they don't have to pay union dues is not union busting. It does remove considerable money for the pockets of organized crime!" Colt went on to explain that he spent two decades working at the department of justice and knew how corrupt unions really are. John replied:

Thanks for responding Colt. I do not know why any of what you wrote about has a bit to do with the Tallahassee Tea Party, which is what I mentioned I disagreed with. I understand that some unions have issues, well tell me what doesn't? Cops, firefighters or politicians. They all have their good and bad. All I wanted was that the Tea Party to work on local matters like why the city and county have raised and wasted tax payer money. Unions are not the problem. Too much flippin' government is the problem. I was at a political function tonight in which I was told by a state rep that the dues bill was payback and nothing else.

Another supporter, Gerald, agreed and asked:

Colt isn't Florida a right-to-work state?? Doesn't that mean that no one has to join a union if they don't want to?? What the current legislation does is prevent those who want to join a union from having their dues automatically deducted from their paychecks.... Most employers use direct deposit now instead of issuing a paycheck.... if you want 10% of your paycheck to go to a church, all you need to do is supply the routing number and the account number. Why is it that union dues cannot use this same process?? ... Colt, you've shown yourself to be the typical tea partier: completely uninformed about the situation and so full of hatred that you can't help yourself but compare all of your "enemies" with criminals.

Colt took offense to the comments and challenged Gerald to meet him "face to face" for presumably a physical confrontation. He posted, "Name the time and the place. I will be waiting.... I am going to give you a chance to tell me face to face how sorry and full of hatred I am." John tried to refocus the debate on the issues rather than personal attacks. He urged the men to "chill a little," adding:

I would have more respect for the Tea Party if they would start to focus more on local tax issues. For example, I haven't seen any mention of the fact that our county commission wants to raise the gas tax by 5 cents per gallon. I am a democrat and a union member but still cannot stand the way our local governments waste the heck out of our tax dollars and do it for political reasons. We need to consolidate our government. That's the topic I would like to see our tea party focus on! What do ya'll think?

Colt tempered his opinion, but insisted that unions required government regulation:

John, I got a little carried away but the union dues thing does not bust unions or stop workers from joining unions. Every worker has the right to join or not to join at least in this state. The tea party should stay involved and make sure that legislators in this state do not become beholden to the unions as they have in other states. I bet the state rep you talked with was a democrat!

Colt concluded his post with a veiled threat, "Gerald, it's easy to talk crap on a computer, but I am the wrong one [to taunt]. I never forget!" Deborah, the page's moderator, never weighed in on this – or other – heated interactions.

Deborah's silence on partisan rhetoric signaled that the FTPM's collective identity was up for grabs, and the ideas and identities of the Christians for Responsible Government and Citizens Holding Government Accountable quickly filled the void on- and off-line. The events in late 2010 and 2011 took on distinctly partisan, racially charged, and anti-Muslim tones, blaming President Obama specifically and Democrats generally for bringing the country to the brink of collapse by making it vulnerable to terrorist attacks and financial ruin. At one event, the keynote speaker stoked fears over another terrorist attack to highlight the importance of the TPM and the need for it to remain visible:

Friends, this [Obama] administration is quickly doing what Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaida were not able to do. And, that is to bring this country to her knees! And speaking of Al Qaida, do not believe for a second that our enemy is not aware of what is going on. While our nation is drowning in debt, radical Islamic groups quietly build their massive infrastructure within the USA, secretly awaiting our demise. Let's not give them hope. If we care anything for this nation, we must not let that occur!

He then urged TPM supporters to think about how "radical liberals" were undermining freedoms in ways that would affect future generations and the country's history.

Soon my wife Emily and I will be trying to get pregnant. I do not want to leave my son or daughter with a country that is saddled with a debt that cannot be repaid. With a country that cannot be fixed. With a nation that is being built by our enemies from within. I don't want my future grandchildren to have to ask why Americans stood by and did nothing while they watched their country disintegrate. The United States was an experiment that went right. Let's not see it go up in flames. Our children's future is at stake. Let's fight to keep our country the bastion of freedom that we have been used to.

This new way of understanding the FTPM and its goals were echoed online and at group meetings. Online Tea Partiers expressed vigorous support for states championing restrictive immigration legislation (namely Arizona and Alabama), arguing that illegal immigrants were undermining the infrastructure of America. For example, one Tea Partier posted:

Here in Florida we spend millions of dollars to educate, hospitalize, incarcerate, illegal's [sic] who broke the law being here. Because of them we lay off teachers, law enforcement and other fine professionals. Many of these fine people have served in the military, risk their lives and their reward is layoff because Washington refuses to Deport [sic] people who got here illegally.

This message was echoed at a TPM rally, where a speaker proclaimed, to great applause, “We’re not California or Arizona. We want this issue addressed, we want it resolved and the best way to resolve it is to end employment opportunities for illegal aliens so they begin to self-deport.”

The inclusive collective identity based on citizenship and patriotic duty championed by Anthony was supplanted by the identities of the Christians for Responsible Government and Citizens Holding Government Accountable, which were far less flexible in terms of how they defined who the movement did (not) represent. Not surprisingly, supporters who did not agree with this new, restricted identity left the organization. In fact, as we show elsewhere (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017), all of the Libertarians we interviewed left the FTPM because, as Tristan (a twenty two year-old law student) put it, “[The FTPM] has been taken over by regular conservatives doing regular conservative stuff . . . It’s less focused on the economic liberty issues and, it seems that some other things like social issues and just general Republican ‘rah, rah, rah’ sort of got into it.” Likewise, Democrats and moderate Independents quit posting on the Facebook page, where their ideas increasingly came under virulent attack. In 2012, the FTPM dispensed with the idea of political diversity altogether and made the Facebook page private.

In sum, the FTPM cultivated a thick collective identity among its supporters. This is, in part, because Anthony made identity construction central to the movement from the outset. Anthony encouraged interaction among supporters, while mitigating partisanship and political conflict. Initially his efforts were effective because he drew on affective emotions (pride and love) and patriotism, which simultaneously created a sense of “we-ness” and allowed for

political disagreement. Consequently, unlike MoveOn supporters, individuals engaged with one another directly on issues in which they did not agree politically. FTPM's horizontal structure of communication also enabled conservative groups to use the Facebook page to build their memberships on the ground. Leaders and members of Christians for Responsible Government and Citizens Holding Government Accountable interacted with FTPM supporters online and encouraged like-minded patriots to attend meetings offline. On the one hand, this created the grassroots infrastructure and political community necessary to ensure supporter engagement over time, even in Anthony's absence. On the other hand, the FTPM's collective identity constricted and became explicitly hostile to Democrats, people of color, and Islam on- and off-line, causing some supporters to leave the organization.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Scholarly arguments regarding the relevance of collective identity in the digital age differ dramatically. We make sense of these diverse findings by focusing on how an organization's structure of communication, its breadth of mobilization, its goals, and individual interest influence the cultivation of collective identity. We show the utility of this approach through an analysis of two differently structured organizations that work to connect citizens on- and off-line – MoveOn and FTPM. We find that MoveOn cultivates a thin collective identity and the FTPM nurtures a thick collective identity.

MoveOn cultivates a thin identity, in part, because collective identity is not an organizational goal. MoveOn primarily focuses on curating donors to support the group's professionally run campaigns. To this end, virtual campaigns rely on hot cognition to induce supporters to contribute to the organization and engage in easy actions such as petition signing. Likewise, on-the-ground campaigns are designed to help minimize political conflict and ensure

that supporters “feel good” about their involvement in MoveOn. While the organization’s hierarchical structure of communication and sporadic community engagement may help MoveOn reach its financial benchmarks, it creates obstacles for those interested in building a grassroots infrastructure and political community. Those who have political experience may leave MoveOn and take their skills to an existing grassroots organization and work to build the community they seek. Those who lack political skills and find activism intimidating may stay with MoveOn in hopes that they will have opportunities to learn more.

It is worth noting that MoveOn seems to understand that it has a grassroots problem, and is significantly changing their approach in response. In spring 2017, it announced “Resistance Summer,” a summer-long training program for 1,000 people across the country to learn how to organize and lead campaigns in their own communities. It remains to be seen whether MoveOn will make the adjustments necessary to cultivate a grassroots community or whether it will simply rely on 1,000 newly-trained activists to change the political landscape from the ground up on their own. We are watching the campaign with interest. If MoveOn does more to facilitate in-person interactions and does more to flatten its information hierarchies, it is completely possible that supporters will cultivate thicker collective identities and work to affect local level change.

The FTPM cultivated a thick collective identity among its supporters. This is, in part, because Anthony, who wanted to mobilize citizens across the political spectrum, made identity construction central to the organization. Anthony did so by drawing on affective emotions (pride and love) and patriotism, which created a sense of “we-ness” and allowed for political diversity and disagreement. Likewise, Anthony adopted a horizontal structure of communication which allowed supporters to interact on issues directly, use the forum to organize related events (such as the open mic night), and recruit for on-the-ground organizations. The latter proved critical in

the direction of the FTPM because once Anthony focused his political expertise elsewhere, the group's collective identity was up for grabs. Leaders and members of Christians for Responsible Government and Citizens Holding Government Accountable simultaneously filled the hole left by Anthony and constricted the identity of the movement. In this regard, thick identity had a downside. Absent a leader with a non-partisan vision for the organization, the FTPM quickly became a group that was hostile to Democrats, people of color, and Islam on- and off-line.

There is a great deal of work to be done on collective identity in the digital age. For example, we show that how activists' structure communication on- and off-line affects in-person interaction, (the lack of) community building among supporters, and the trajectory of organizations. Clearly, we need additional research that assess whether ICTs can be used in ways that stymie collective identity as well as the conditions in which collective identity may constrict or expand. Likewise, there are other factors that scholars should consider more carefully in future research. We find, for instance, that emotion plays an important role in the cultivation and maintenance of collective identity in the digital age (Rohlinger and Klein 2014). Supporters of both MoveOn and FTPM referenced their feelings when discussing why they engaged in collective action, suggesting it would be worthwhile to more carefully assess the relationship between ICTs and emotion in collective identity processes.

It also would be worthwhile to assess whether movement groups that predate the digital era – especially formalized activist organizations - use ICTs to cultivate a thicker collective identity. We suspect that some of them do. Activist groups like the National Organization for Women and Greenpeace that rely heavily on a paper membership, for instance, may use ICTs to create solidarity around and commitment to feminist and environmental issues. It is easy to imagine groups piggybacking on (and amplifying) popular hashtags in an effort to attract and

engage new supporters. Finally, we need to more carefully consider how individual political experience affects collective identity in the digital age. Our research suggests that there are differences between how seasoned and new activists respond to dissatisfaction with an organization. These difference suggests that scholars should be careful not to dismiss some forms of activism as “slacktivism.” It may be that individuals lack the skills and confidence to engage outside of highly structured organizational campaigns.

In short, scholars need to make more of an effort to understand how ICTs interact with more traditional factors (e.g., organizational structure and goals) and affect collective identity. While our approach is not comprehensive, it is productive because, rather than question the relevance of collective identity, it focuses attention on how the decisions by activists and supporters affect collective identity in contemporary organizations. We hope that other scholars will adopt a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between collective identity and ICTs so that we can better think through the importance of identity in a quickly-changing political environment.

Table 1. Factors Associated with Thin and Thick Collective Identity

	Thin Collective Identity	Thick Collective Identity
Structure of Communication	Hierarchical	Horizontal
Organizational Goals	Collective identity is not an organizational priority.	Collective identity is an organizational priority.
Breadth of Mobilization	Organization seeks to mobilize national constituencies regularly and local communities sporadically.	Organization seeks to mobilize local constituencies primarily.
Individual Interest	Supporters are not interested in cultivating a collective identity. Those who do may lack the skills to do so.	Supporters are more interested in cultivating a collective identity and creating a political community.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents Interviewed Formally*

	MoveOn	FTPM		MoveOn	FTPM
Gender			Age		
Male	47%	70%	18-35	37%	31%
Female	53%	30%	36-50	21%	31%
			51+	42%	39%
Employment Status			Relationship Status		
Employed	74%	61%	Single	47%	24%
Unemployed	5%	6%	Partnered	0%	6%
Retired	0%	27%	Married	32%	48%
Student	21%	6%	Divorced	21%	19%
			Widowed	0%	3%
Race/Ethnicity			Parental Status		
White	89%	82%	No children	37%	12%
Asian	11%	0%	One child	21%	7%
Middle-Eastern	0%	3%	Two or more children	42%	14%
Latino	0%	9%			
Multi-racial	0%	6%			

*Due to rounding, some totals may not equal 100%.

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¹ For an excellent overview of the nature of these challenges see Earl and Kimport (2011).

² For example, see the May 2015 issue of *Information, Communication & Society*.

³ This is not an exhaustive list of factors. The goal of this paper is to offer a common framework for understanding collective identity in the digital age.

⁴ It is important to note, that personalized politics do not necessary lead to thin collective identity in the "real" world. Lichterman (1996), for example, finds that individuals motivated by personalized politics still effectively created political communities and pushed for social change.

⁵ MoveOn has civic and political engagement arms. Here, we focus on the political activities of the organization.

⁶ The lead researcher received approximately 2,000 emails between June 5, 2006 and January 22, 2017. It is worth noting that while most MoveOn emails include a donate link as a post script at the bottom of an email, only 39% of the 294 emails sent in 2016 solicited money. Presumably, this percentage is higher than non-election years.

⁷ MoveOn does provide controlled opportunities for supporters to weigh in on the group's agenda. For example, MoveOn occasionally asks supporters to vote on issues such as which Democratic candidate to support for the presidential nomination, to rank order pre-chosen progressive issues, and to participate in conference calls. In each of these cases, however, MoveOn leaders determine when supporters have a voice and on what issues.

⁸ We attended all MoveOn events between 2006 and 2008 and attended all TPM group events and meetings between 2010 and 2012. In total, we attended 42 events, rallies, and meetings. All

public meetings and events were either tape recorded or videotaped so that they could be analyzed at a later date.

⁹ We had some difficulty getting formal respondents for MoveOn because many individuals were worried that their progressive politics would be “discovered” in a city dominated by Republican legislators and they would lose their jobs. Consequently, we had many conversations off the record.

¹⁰ By local, we are referring to the immediate 25-mile area. There are additional groups that have formed in adjacent communities. While we have monitored these groups online, seen their members at events, and conducted interviews with their members, we have not attended their meetings. Additionally, there was another local group, Working for the American Way, that formed in response to Anthony’s call. This group integrates religious doctrine into its mission, which is to preserve “the rights and freedoms endowed by our Creator and guaranteed by our Constitution.” Unlike the other groups, the primary goal of Working for the American Way is to provide a “bridge” between the TPM groups in order to increase the overall effectiveness of the movement’s efforts in Florida. Consequently, this organization operated primarily online and used social media and email to disseminate information about FTPM issues and events.