

# For Clinton and Obama, a Common Ideological Touchstone

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CHICAGO -- The job offer to "Miss Hillary Rodham, Wellesley College" was dated Oct. 25, 1968, and signed by Saul D. Alinsky, the charismatic community organizer who believed that the urban poor could become their own best advocates in a world that largely ignored them.



Saul D. Alinsky, the Chicago community organizer whose ideas intrigued and influenced Hillary Rodham and Barack Obama as they began their careers. (Associated Press)

Alinsky thought highly of 21-year-old Rodham, a student government president who grew up in the Chicago suburbs. She was in the midst of a year-long analysis of Alinsky's aggressive mobilizing tactics, and he was searching for "competent political literates" to move to Chicago to build grass-roots organizations.

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Seventeen years later, another young honor student was offered a job as an organizer in Chicago. By then, Alinsky had died, but a group of his disciples hired [Barack Obama](#), a 23-year-old Columbia University graduate, to organize black residents on the South Side, while learning and applying Alinsky's philosophy of street-level democracy. The recruiter called the \$13,000-a-year job "very romantic, until you do it."

Today, as Obama and [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) face off for the Democratic presidential nomination, their common connection to Alinsky is one of the striking aspects of their biographies. Obama embraced many of Alinsky's tactics and recently said his years as an organizer gave him the best education of his life. Clinton's interest was more intellectual -- she turned down the job offer -- and she has said little about Alinsky since their association became a favorite subject of conservative critics during her husband's presidency.

Advertisement Alinsky was a bluff iconoclast who concluded that electoral politics offered few solutions to the have-nots marooned in working-class slums. His approach to social justice relied on generating conflict to mobilize the dispossessed. Power flowed up, he said, and neighborhood leaders who could generate outside pressure on the system were more likely to produce effective change than the lofty lever-pullers operating on the inside.

Both Obama and Clinton admired Alinsky's appeal for small-d democracy but came to believe that social progress is best achieved by working within the political system, and on a national scale.

Both went to law school, turned to a mix of courthouse and community remedies, and eventually moved into electoral politics.

Associates describe the candidates as combining streaks of idealism with a realistic appreciation of the politically possible, a mix the goal-oriented Alinsky would have recognized in himself. Like Alinsky, they fashioned political strategies defined more by coalitions and compromise than by the flashy but often hollow rhetorical pyrotechnics that Clinton, in her Wellesley honors thesis, called "the luxury of symbolic suicide."

Neither candidate would agree to be interviewed about Alinsky. But Marian Wright Edelman, the Children's Defense Fund leader, who knows Obama, worked closely with Clinton and spoke at Alinsky's funeral, said the organizer's allure was formidable, particularly in the energized 1960s.

"He was brilliant. He was working for underdogs. He was trying to empower communities, which we still need to do. He spoke plainly. He had his outrageous side, but he also had his pragmatic side," Edelman said. "Both Hillary and Barack reflect that understanding of community-organizing strategy. Both just know how to leverage power."

**A Colorful Thesis Subject**

Born in 1909 and bred in the politicized precincts of Chicago, Alinsky was a lifelong student of the dynamics of power who concluded that the city's famed Democratic machine remained unmoved unless pushed.

Alinsky took action with an organizing campaign in 1939 in Back of the Yards, the desperate Chicago meatpacking district depicted in Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle." Fashioning an unlikely alliance of unions, the Catholic church and others to win concessions from industry and government, he said organizers must listen to people's desires, then find leaders to carry the fight.

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