

Political Passion and Pain in an Election Campaign

My Experience Working as a Volunteer for a United States Congressional Campaign
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From June 2002 to September 2002 I worked as a volunteer for a local United States congressional candidate. After studying political science for so long (I received my M.A. in August 2002), I was finally able to put some of what I learned in my classes to practical use. I strongly recommend to any political science major that you take the time to become involved in a political campaign. However, you should thoroughly research your candidate before becoming involved. As political science students, you will be asked to be more involved than other volunteers, and you should be able to strongly support your candidate. As I worked more closely with my candidate, I became more convinced that he was the best man for the job. This belief made the long hours I put in on behalf of his candidacy worth every minute.

It is important for me to add that while I was an unpaid volunteer working for the man I believed would be the best Congressman for this area, I did have one other major motivation. I have always wanted to work in Washington, D.C. I approached this volunteer experience as a four-month long interview. While it would have been inappropriate for my candidate to make any promises regarding future jobs, several of us hoped we would play some role on his staff. I often imagined myself strolling the halls of Congress with my Congressman preparing to introduce important legislation to the floor of the House. Legislation that I helped write, of course. I determined before the election that our office would be the best, most organized, most constituent-friendly office in the entire House of Representatives. Our office would be seen as a model for any future Congressman, but first we had to win the campaign.

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Working in a political campaign was a fast-paced, exciting experience. Volunteers can help in as many or as few ways as they choose. I did quite a bit of the candidate's research, helped with his scheduling, attended events to pass out literature, wrote letters to the editor, and made phone calls to key voters in the area. I even ran in a local 5K race with several other volunteers. We all wore our campaign T-shirts to advertise our candidate. Now that is sacrifice, especially considering the 5K was on a hot July morning! Soon after the race began, I chose to split from the fast runners and advertise the candidate among the walkers and joggers. Hey, they vote too! Campaigns need other volunteers to make phone calls, staff the campaign headquarters, pick up absentee ballot requests from the supervisor of elections, and place signs in yards.

Most of my volunteer time involved researching both the congressional record of the incumbent (or "interim Congressman" as we referred to him because he had previously been elected to fill out the term of a Congressman who resigned) and other issues relevant to constituents in the area. My candidate used much of this research in his television shows and other advertising. Correct interpretation of the legislative votes was critical. In school, you will get a bad grade on a paper or test if you do not prepare well enough, or if you do not take enough time to deliver a polished paper. You are the only one affected by your poor performance. Not so in a political campaign! If any of the research I did was flawed, the candidate could give statements that were incorrect and risk public embarrassment at minimum. And yes, this did happen once. Because of the immediate need for the information I was researching on one topic, I badly misinterpreted a congressional vote. My candidate then went on several local media outlets explaining his opponent's vote to the people. Shortly after, we discovered that my information was incorrect. Because our campaign was able to simply stop talking about the issue, the only

real harm done was to my ego. I was very fortunate, however, that my mistake did not cause more problems for the campaign. This experience taught me to take my time and to make sure I understood what I was researching before I gave the candidate the results of my labors.

Occasionally, the candidate would call me at work (I also worked full-time during the campaign) and ask me to quickly research what topics are important to doctors, or realtors, or whatever group he was meeting with that day. He wanted this research so he could be educated on the issues important to certain groups. Certainly, he did not always agree with the positions of all groups, but the research allowed him to know what types of questions to expect. Along with conducting research, I was also able to go with the candidate to meetings to pass out literature and to take notes.

Early in the campaign, I was able to accompany my candidate for a day on the campaign trail. This experience, more than any other, showed me what candidates really do each day on the stump. The day started later than most. The first meeting was at 9:00 a.m. (toward the end of the campaign, my candidate was doing morning radio shows at 7 a.m., and attending forums until 10 p.m. each night, then driving at least an hour home). From the moment I got in his car, he was on his cell phone. After the first meeting, he was introduced to several employees at the local supervisor of elections office. My job was to hand out literature to all the people he met, say wonderful things about the candidate that he could not say himself (such as "I'd like you to meet our next Congressman!"), and take notes in his meetings. At his second meeting, a local leader called a special meeting of his department heads. The candidate spoke to this group of leaders for about half an hour, and then headed off to the next stop. The morning and early afternoon were filled with similar stops across the Pensacola area. At 2 p.m., we

headed to the Fish House for lunch with a reporter from the *Pensacola News Journal* and the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency who was in town for one of the candidate's fundraising dinners. After this late lunch, the candidate left for a fundraising event in Fort Walton Beach. Many of his volunteers, myself included, went along. The day ended at about 11:00 p.m.

Because of my work responsibilities, this was the only opportunity I had to spend an entire day with my candidate. Also, shortly after this day, a full-time volunteer became his right hand man and went to every event with him. I believe this position is one of the best ways to learn the about the reality of running for office. If you aspire to hold elected office, I recommend that you offer to shadow a candidate throughout his campaign. Most candidates, especially those running for national offices, take someone along with them to all of their meetings. No one can effectively explain what it is like to run, run, run all day, every day, for five to six months. I have talked to several people more experienced in political campaigning who said that my candidate was the most driven candidate they had ever seen. He truly did not stop from the time he announced his candidacy until Election Day. This made dealing with his schedule somewhat challenging, because he would get antsy if any free time existed in his day. We had to force him to allow for lunch in his daily schedule.

While my candidate did not win the election, I came away from the experience quite a bit wiser about politics. Because of all the forums I attended where candidates for other offices were also there making speeches and taking questions, I was the most educated I have ever been about each candidate for whom I voted. I was also able to meet many key political people in the Pensacola area.

Attending just one forum does not allow you, the voter, to fully understand what each candidate stands for, what type of man he is, and what he will do for your area as your representative. Because I attended so many different forums (at least two to three per week for the last month of the campaign, and nine forums and luncheons the last six days of the campaign), I was able to put together a picture of the platforms of each of the candidates, and also gain a fairly good understanding of their character. At some forums, the candidates were cordial and pleasant to each other; at others, they were not so nice. Each forum had candidates for U.S. Congress, Florida State Senate and House, County Commission, School Board, and other local offices. Forums are usually sponsored by Rotary Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, County Republican Clubs, and other civic organizations. Unfortunately, attendance at the forums is extremely low. Only those who are active politically take the time to attend. In fact, once I attended two or three events, I realized that the majority of the people in attendance were people like me who were working for other candidates. Forums have really become a necessary evil for the politician—if he does not attend his opponent will accuse him of not caring about his constituents or being out of touch with his community. However, those in attendance at the forums have generally already decided for whom they will vote.

Most forums simply consist of a question and answer session. A moderator, who is supposedly impartial, reads questions either from the audience or the sponsoring group and each candidate is given a certain amount of time to answer the question. The events are usually civil and allow the audience to watch the candidate explain his views on relevant issues.

One forum, however, was different than all the others. In August, a Veteran's Organization in Okaloosa County held a forum in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. It was

anything but civil. Each candidate was allowed to have a “second” who would ask the other candidate questions. At this event, the incumbent took the gloves off and personally attacked my candidate. My candidate is a highly decorated retired Air Force officer, so the Congressman chose another retired military man to pose his questions. The first question implied that my candidate was dishonest in his business dealings. My candidate was visibly flustered and upset by this allegation, especially since it came from an equally ranked member of the military. He spent the next few minutes of the debate trying to regain his composure. However, in my view, he won the debate when the incumbent defended a big spending bill by stating that his predecessor,

Joe Scarborough had voted for the same bill. My candidate said, “I know Joe Scarborough, and you’re no Joe Scarborough.” But again, while some voters present were undecided, the majority was either in our camp or the opponent’s camp. I must add, however, that those who were undecided were leaning strongly toward my candidate after the way he was attacked by our opponent’s second.

Because of the low turnout at these forums, they present opportunities to talk one on one to the candidates for various offices and get to know them better. If I had not gone to these forums and other meetings, I know of at least two races where my vote would have been different. At the very least, even if you do not work for a political campaign, you should plan to attend several meetings where candidates will be in attendance. The more you are able to observe the candidates for yourself, the more informed your vote will be on Election Day.

In the past, I have always felt that I knew enough about the candidates I was voting for when I got to the polls. Boy, did I discover that I was wrong! Simply looking over campaign literature, reading a campaign website, and watching a debate on

television does not give you enough information about a candidate. Even reading the newspaper on a daily basis does not necessarily give you complete information on all candidates. First of all, a candidate can say anything on his website. Of course, the purpose of this site is to present every candidate in the best light possible, and a candidate's website will not tell you negative things he has done.

The same applies to campaign literature. In fact, in the case of the United States Congress, Congressman take so many different votes on the same bill before it is finally a law that it is quite possible for a congressman to vote two different ways at two different times. This makes understanding what your Congressman is really doing very difficult, if not nearly impossible. For example, if a Congressman is on the military affairs committee, he may vote against sending a bill that includes a military pay increase to the House floor. In essence, the Congressman is voting against said pay increase by blocking its progress to the full House. However, if the vote passes and the bill continues to the House floor, he may vote for the bill when it comes up for vote by the entire House. That way, he could say on his website that he voted for the bill to increase military salaries. The average voter who wanted to do a basic search could look up the bill number and see that he voted for it on the House floor. Much more digging and research is required to see that he really did not want the bill to ever leave committee. This is just one example of the confusing state of affairs in Washington D.C. One must be extremely vigilant and love spending great quantities of time in the library perusing old editions of the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Magazine* in order to discover these discrepancies. Luckily for the average voter, you and I as political science students are just the type of people who enjoy this type of research.

Also, do not depend on your local newspaper for correct coverage of the candidates! In my experience, newspapers tend to be very pro incumbents. You will not get a clear picture of every person in the race just by reading the newspaper. Our local newspapers did not print several stories that were not complimentary of the incumbent, but were relevant to this area. For example, our campaign heard from many members of the military that their jobs were being relocated to a different area of the country. NAS Pensacola would be losing departments. The local news media did not pick up this story until just a few days before the election. Even then, it was written as speculation and not as fact, even though local military members actually had their transfer orders. Also, the newspapers did not print many letters to the editor that were for the challenger (my candidate). I wrote three letters that were never published, and I know of many others who also wrote in but whose letters were not printed in the *Pensacola News Journal*. . Now, newspapers do have a rule that you can only be published once in a 30-day period. However, not even one of my letters was ever printed. From what others involved in campaigns have told me, this is not unusual to this campaign; anytime a candidate is challenging an incumbent, he will face these types of difficulties getting free press time.

By attending forums and other meetings, I was able to meet many people who are involved in local politics. Because I worked full-time and attended school full-time, I did not have any free time to become involved in local politics until after I finished work toward my degree. This campaign was my first opportunity to network in the Pensacola area. On a professional level, I was able to work with at least two people who will be willing to write employment references on my behalf in the future. On a personal level, I have made many new friends who are interested in politics just as much as I am. In short, the entire campaign experience was rewarding, challenging, and just plain fun. I cannot,

however, leave out the one part of the campaign that was not so much fun—the Victory Party.

Election Day was by far the most difficult day of the entire campaign for me. Every other day of the campaign I felt that there was something that I could do to help my candidate get one more vote. On Election Day, there are no more events, no more scheduling, and no more research. I spent the day at campaign headquarters calling “Super Republicans” (Republicans who vote in at least 75% of elections) to remind them to vote. We did have a few people come into headquarters that day; one pharmaceutical salesman came in just to say he had voted for my candidate. He also asked if there was anything else he could do. He volunteered to take campaign literature to hand out to people. We also had a lady come in who wanted to know why she should vote for our candidate. She spent about thirty minutes talking with us. Otherwise, the day was quiet. About 4:00 p.m. all of the volunteers that were at headquarters took decorations and went to the site of the victory party to decorate. For a while, I felt better because I was busy decorating for the Victory Party.

Many candidates have victory parties on the night of the election. Clearly, while they are all called victory parties, there is only one winner. Everyone involved in our campaign was very optimistic going into election night. We had been receiving quite a bit of money from the community in the last week or so of the campaign, so we believed that we had a chance to win the election.

The Victory Party was held at a local conference center, and began at 7:00 p.m. Earlier in the day, we found out that the polls were staying open an extra two hours because of some problems with voting in South Florida. Because of the time extension, no results would come in until well after 9:00 p.m. People began arriving a little after

seven, and we all sat around, had food and drinks, and waited for the results to begin coming in. I volunteered to write the numbers on a board so everyone could see them as they came in. The candidate and his wife arrived a little after 8, and soon after 9 we received the first results. We knew we would not do well in Santa Rosa County, because that is where our opponent lives. We were hoping to hold our own in Escambia County, and win Okaloosa County and possibly Holmes and Washington Counties. When the first Escambia County results came in, we were down by quite a bit, but only a few precincts had reported. By around 10:00 p.m., I was wondering why I volunteered to write those numbers. Clearly, my candidate had lost the campaign. Around 10:30 p.m., he gave a wonderful concession speech, and thanked all of us volunteers for our hard work. The next few days were difficult because no one called needing research done quickly, no one e-mailed me with scheduling updates, and no one needed me to attend a forum to promote my candidate. I spent four months devoting every spare moment I had to a great campaign, and suddenly it was over. My candidate lost the election, and I lost any chances of working for him in the halls of Congress.

Dr. Witt, one of my instructors, told me many times throughout the campaign not to get my heart involved. He told me this was a job and great experience, but that I should not be too upset if we lost the campaign. However, when you spend so many hours of several months with a candidate that you really believe in, you cannot help but become a bit emotionally involved in the campaign. Election night was really heartbreaking.

Upon reflection, the campaign manager and the candidate agreed that our campaign would have had a greater chance of succeeding if we had had more money. A candidate who runs against an incumbent will have a difficult time raising money.

People are simply not willing to be perceived as disloyal to the incumbent by financially supporting his opposition. I was not involved in the fundraising aspect of this campaign, but I understand that it was extremely difficult to convince people to give large sums of money to our candidate. Some of the sweetest memories for me are of the people who came into the campaign headquarters who were on fixed monthly incomes but wanted to support our campaign. Some of these people gave \$20, and one person on a fixed retirement income gave \$50. These were the people that encouraged us to work harder and longer hours to make sure that we got our message out to the community.

Unfortunately, we were not able to get any prime-time television time because of the expense, and our opponent had nearly unlimited funds from Political Action Committees in Washington and the Republican Party. He was able to advertise nearly every evening on the 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock news and we were not. Despite a great push at the end that allowed us to lease billboards in the area as well as publish an excellent ad in the newspapers for the last four days of the campaign, we were unable to get the message out to enough people. I remember one member of the campaign staff saying, "We definitely had the better product, we were just not able to sell it."

Once the campaign was over, I spent about three days (OK, really more like six weeks) convinced politics was not for me. However, after a bit of reflection, I realized that one great way to change this country is to get involved politically. Political campaigns are hard, hard work, and obviously I did not walk away as part of a winning campaign. However, I learned so much. I was able to be involved with the research, attend forums, meet many politically active people, and put all of my years of study to work. Above everything else, I was able to work for a candidate who I believe would be an excellent Congressman for this area, and I had fun doing it.