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Political Campaigns: Epicenter of Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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We in the United States (in case you've been off living in a cave somewhere) are deep into one of the strangest and intense presidential election process in memory.*

Elections, especially presidential ones, should remind us that advocacy is yet another way volunteers can serve the causes that matter most to them. Most of the time, research and discussion about volunteers focus on their activities with "volunteer-involving organizations" – nonprofit and public institutions enlisting volunteers in delivering services of all types. The volunteer as "helper" model. We acknowledge that there are also volunteer *activists* but, in my experience, as a field we tend to separate giving time to create political change from giving time to doing things for individuals in need. Yet many of the needs into which volunteers pour their time could be radically transformed by electing and monitoring legislators willing to refocus public priorities and tax dollars.

Never underestimate the amount of volunteering that goes into elections. As a reminder, see "[Readying the Battleground for Pennsylvania Primary](#)," a short article a few weeks ago in *The Reading Eagle*. All of that tradition is alive and well.

But because of the Wild West atmosphere of the national campaigns, I've been collecting some of the volunteer-centered political news stories of the past few months. Some are bizarre, some are moving, and all are revealing of the kaleidoscope of citizen action focused on social change. And they just skim the surface of what's happening. So please use the comments area to share stories *you* have found.

Volunteer Management Styles Vary by Candidate

In March we learned that Donald Trump was requiring his phone bank volunteers to sign a non-disclosure agreement, prompting stories with headlines such as:

- "[Trump Volunteers Have to Promise Never to Insult Him for the Rest of Their Lives](#)"
- "Donald Trump Makes His Volunteers Sign Their Political Lives Away"

In part, the agreement required volunteers to “...promise and agree not to demean or disparage publicly the Company, Mr. Trump, any Trump Company, any Family Member, or any Family Member Company or any asset any of the foregoing own, or product or service any of the foregoing offer...and to prevent your employees from doing so.” The contract also forbids volunteers from volunteering for any presidential candidate other than Donald Trump. Neither stipulation has a cut-off date, so theoretically the restrictions last for the remainder of the volunteer’s life! Legal consensus is that such demands are unconstitutional and unenforceable.

In stark contrast (no surprise!), the Bernie Sanders campaign generated quite different headlines for its let-volunteers-do-their-own-thing approach, described in August by *USA Today* in [“Sanders Lets Volunteers Decide How to Support His Presidential Campaign”](#):

The Vermont independent...has invited supporters...to host organizing kickoff meetings across the country on July 29, hoping volunteers will “move the campaign forward in ways they think are best” in their states.

Sanders said his organization won’t be an “anarchistic process.” The campaign will need to coordinate with volunteers. But he said he doesn’t believe in a “top-down structure.”

“I want to see spontaneity,” Sanders said. “People in Oklahoma, people in Nevada — there are people who have ideas and who know their state a lot better than we do, to be honest with you. And we’ve seen some great things happening.”

The Sanders campaign has also been analyzed for its way of mobilizing volunteers virtually, through free online apps, as described in *Politico*’s April story, [“Inside Bernie Sanders' Vast, Virtual Ground Game”](#):

Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' organizational success is fueled by free or low-cost, off-the-shelf apps like Hustle and Slack, and the ability to turn online fans into a real volunteers, online and onsite. He is turning “slacktivists” who don’t normally engage in grass-roots politics “into an advance team capable of doing everything from managing phone banks to planning high-level campaign events,” at a rate even greater than President Obama or Howard Dean did in their campaigns which pioneered the mobilization of online volunteers in presidential campaigns. “Sanders’ virtual volunteers do campaign work that has traditionally been handled by paid operatives or fallen through the cracks in a busy election cycle — such as identifying likely voters or turning out people to campaign events.” While email has raised millions of dollars, direct email solicitations largely failed to get supporters to donate their labor.

[“‘Weird Experience’ Tipped Off Congressional Campaigns about Fake Volunteers”](#) shares that Maryland candidate David Trone (D) “fired two members of his congressional campaign along with their supervisor after they posed as prospective volunteers for two of his opponents in the District 8

Democratic primary.” Note to Hot Topic readers: at least the infiltrated office had a volunteer coordinator!

Finally, here in Philadelphia, political volunteering made the news in a macabre way last month. [“Aspiring Campaign Volunteer Killed ‘Execution Style’ Moments after Meeting PA Candidate”](#) was the headline in *The Washington Post*. Widely reported, there seems to be no connection at all between 18-year-old Elijah Fraizer’s desire to volunteer for Chris Rabb, a local candidate for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, and the shooting, but since the crime occurred immediately after Rabb welcomed the victim’s support for his campaign, the story spun off in that direction.

Getting Out the Vote

Volunteer-related political news is not all connected to specific candidates. Great effort is poured around the country into getting citizens registered to vote and then actually getting to the polls. Most of this activity is directed at populations traditionally disaffected or disengaged from elections, whether by income, age, race, language, or disability. The volunteers attempting to increase voting usually see the challenge as long-term and continually attempt to engage their target group in caring about civic engagement. A presidential election, however, offers a galvanizing opportunity.

One creative example was highlighted by National Public Radio in [“Turnout and a Trim: Bid to Boost Black Men's Voting Heads to the Barbershop,”](#) about a Philadelphia-based project called Sharp Insight that recruits and trains barbers in African-American neighborhoods to generate discussion aimed at getting their customers to become more politically active in non-partisan ways. A local article, [“Barbershop Ballot,”](#) gives more details:

...Sharp Insight...train[s] barbers to become “information disseminators” in their communities, drawing on the informal ways they already fill this role and offering them formal tools to channel that energy towards targeted issues like knowledge of elected officials, under what conditions felons can still vote and the positions of different candidates.

“They will be disseminating information in a non-partisan way,” says Beale. “The point is not to persuade for any particular candidate but rather to simply get them more engaged and help men connect the dots between the issues and challenges in their lives and their elected officials.”

...Since October [t]hey identified neighborhoods around the city in which voter turnout among men of color was particularly low, sent out 300 letters to barbershops in those areas, used radio and social media, and then hit the streets. Stone says they have about 45 barbers currently signed on, and hope to recruit between five and 30 more. Stone says at first she was trepidatious about asking barbers to join the program because politics can be so controversial. But once barbers realized that they could do what they already do but for a broader purpose, Stone says they jumped on board. She says many were excited to be trained in how to talk to people about important political issues, rather than just listening while customers talk at them.

While [Rock the Vote](#), which was high-profile in the last few presidential elections for recruiting rock music celebrities to engage young adults in the voting process still maintains its Web site, it is not particularly active in 2016. But it did support the [successful effort in Ohio](#) and elsewhere to allow 17-year-olds who will turn 18 by the November election to vote in the primary elections. More indicative of projects targeting Generation Y is The Bus Project in Oregon, proclaiming on their Web site:

We're Oregon's next generation, doing democracy right. We're building a great future and empowering great people (like you) to lead it. We're grassroots, nonpartisan and all about organizing Oregonians, face-to-face.

We give people their first taste of delicious democracy, develop new leaders and use person-to-person politics to move Oregon forward. Not just left or right, but forward.

Their active [Facebook page](#) grabs attention with visuals like this one:



Also, Youth Service America's ServiceVote 2016 is an "election-year resource to engage young people, ages 5-25, in the political process by connecting with their peers, voters, and candidates. Designed for both voting age and non-voting age youth, ServiceVote challenges young people to learn more about our government and political system and to advocate, serve, raise awareness, and engage others in the electoral process."

Variety Is the Spice of Life

Finally, here are three stories that are hard to classify, but still worth sharing.

Remember ultra-conservative Phyllis Schlafly who founded the Eagle Forum in 1972 to successfully oppose the Equal Rights Amendment? She's 90 now and back in the news: "[Founder Turmoil at the](#)

[Conservative Nonprofit Eagle Forum: Who's in Charge Here?](#) Quite a case study of dysfunctional volunteer boards (and family relations).

On the opposite side of the spectrum is the [Public Conversations Project](#) which “fosters constructive dialogue where conflicts are driven by differences in identity, beliefs, and values.” They just shared this great piece, “[Shining a Light Beyond Polarization](#),” in which we learn about true bi-partisan collegial behavior by the women in the U.S. Congress. Take heart!

And the final story is Canadian. Our friends to the north celebrate National Volunteer Week at the same time as Americans do. On April 14th, the Liberal Party – which successfully elected Prime Minister Trudeau this year – posted “[National Volunteer Week – Stories from the Campaign](#),” where “On National Volunteer Week, we asked our Liberal volunteers to share their stories from the campaign as a way to say thank you for all of their hard work and dedication.”

Your turn. *Please share the good, the bad, the ugly, and the funny politically-related volunteer stories that you find.*

*For non-Americans needing an explanation of how the U.S. presidential election process works, click [here](#).

Related Topics: [Political Action and Protest](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

Comments from Readers

*Submitted on May 2nd, 2016
DJ Cronin, Melbourne, Australia*

A volunteer dies and finds herself immediately standing outside the pearly gates of Heaven. She approaches St Peter at a desk. "Welcome" says St Peter "and please tell me what you were doing with your life?" The woman answered "I've been a volunteer for many years" St Peter smiled and the gates started opening. "You are very welcome" the saint said. As the volunteer began to enter she noticed another man appear out of nowhere. She watched as the man approached St Peter. "Welcome" says St Peter "and please tell me what you were doing with your life?" The man answered "I've been a politician for many years" With that balloons fell from the sky, fireworks went off, St Peter started clapping and a marching band escorted the politician into heaven. The woman, feeling a little miffed approached St Peter "How come that man got such a welcome and how come there were no bells and whistles for me?" she asked the Saint "Ah my child, we get volunteers like you every day but we so rarely get politicians!"

Submitted on May 3rd, 2016

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LOL, DJ!

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