

Individual Study Tour to the United States of America

Grassroots Campaigning and Volunteer Engagement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are numerous similarities as well as differences between the Australian and US political systems, the most marked of which I discovered on my study tour is the impact of non-compulsory voting. Whilst I have always lamented the apathy towards political participation in Australia, I was completely unprepared for the extremes of low voter engagement and turnout in the US political system. Even more so than Australia, American political leaders need to inspire and mobilise potential voters to get to the polls. Vital to doing this effectively is grass-roots campaigning and volunteer engagement. Born from necessity, America has many leading examples of how to engage volunteers and campaign at a grass-roots level, and I was delighted to be able to gain some first-hand insights into this throughout my Auspol Exchange Individual Study Tour.

During this study tour in the lead up to the US Presidential election I worked on the Obama for America and Elizabeth Warren for MA campaigns, as well as with several union's Member Political Organiser programs, and on a grass-roots marriage equality campaign in Minnesota.

Throughout my experiences I learned that if people are inspired they will volunteer, and they will come back if they feel empowered by the experience and invested in and committed to the cause. To build a genuinely organic grass-root volunteer structure, volunteers must be included in process. It cannot be a transactional, task focussed experience. It must be personally beneficial and meaningful.

From the Democrat campaigns in particular I learned a lot about the usefulness of research and analysis and how to use that information for targeted outreach, communications and messaging.

Throughout the study tour there were certainly some what-not-to-do moments but overall I found it an incredibly enriching, valuable experience, and I was able to forge useful and relationships with mentors and other young political leaders in the US. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all involved at the Auspol Exchange for the experience and opportunity afforded to me and look forward to meeting future Auspol exchange delegates.

Itinerary & Meetings

Monday 8th – Wednesday 10th October 2012

Pittsburgh, PA: SEIU healthcare election campaigning.

- Neal Bisno, President, SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania
- Silas Russell, Assistant Director, One Pittsburgh
- Jennifer Rapach, Political Coordinator, SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania
- SEIU Member Political Organiser Team
- One Pittsburgh Community Organisers: Thomas Jones (Lead Community Organiser); Jon Walker; Glenn Grayson
- One Pittsburgh Community Activists

Thursday 11th – Saturday 13th October 2012

Chicago, IL: Obama for America campaign.

- Janelle Rau-Clausen, Illinois State Director, Obama for America
- Sarah, Operations Manager, Chicago HQ, Obama for America
- Mary, Field Organiser, Obama for America
- Sarah Cupp, Lead organiser, Obama for America.

Monday 15th – Wednesday 17th October 2012

St Louis, MO: SEIU One election campaigning.

- Nancy Cross, Director, SEIU One Missouri
- Lenny Jones, Political Director, SEIU One MO-IL-IN & MPO team
- Claire McCaskill, Senate Candidate (Democrat), Missouri
- SEIU One Member Political Organiser Team

Thursday 18th – Sunday 21st October 2012

Minneapolis, MN: Minnesotans United for All Families (marriage equality) campaign.

- Laurel Wales, Regional Organizing Director, Minnesotans United for All Families
- Christian Ucles, Latin Outreach Coordinator, Minnesotans United for All Families
- Pat Mulligan, Project Coordinator, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center
- Alysa Friedrich, Community Organizer, Minnesotans United for All Families
- Hundreds of Minnesotans United for All Families volunteers

Monday 22nd – Wednesday 24th October 2012

New York, NY: SEIU 32 BJ Member Political Organiser Program election campaigning.

- Jeronimo Saldana, Member Engagement Coordinator, SEIU 32bj
- Walter Cooper, Member Engagement Organiser, SEIU 32bj
- Erik Antokal, Coro Fellow, Coro New York Leadership Centre
- SEIU 32bj Member Political Organiser Team

Thursday 25th – Saturday 27th October 2012

Boston, MA: Elizabeth Warren for Senate campaign.

- Elizabeth Warren, Senate Candidate (Democrat)
- Sam Peabody, Field Organiser, Elizabeth Warren for Senate
- Justin Ross, Vice President, AFL-CIO Investment Trust Corporation

Political Campaigning with Unions

Dates:

- Monday 8th – Wednesday 10th October 2012 (SEIU Healthcare, Pittsburgh, PA)
- Monday 15th – Wednesday 17th October 2012 (SEIU One, St Louis, MO)
- Monday 22nd – Wednesday 24th October 2012 (SEIU 32BJ, New York, NY)

Meetings

- Neal Bisno, President, SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania
- Silas Russell, Assistant Director, One Pittsburgh
- Jennifer Rapach, Political Coordinator, SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania
- SEIU Healthcare (Pittsburgh, PA) Member Political Organiser Team
- One Pittsburgh Community Organisers: Thomas Jones (Lead Community Organiser); Jon Walker; Glenn Grayson
- One Pittsburgh Community Activists
- Nancy Cross, Director, SEIU One Missouri
- Lenny Jones, Political Director, SEIU One MO-IL-IN & MPO team
- Claire McCaskill, Senate Candidate (Democrat), Missouri
- SEIU One Member Political Organiser Team
- Jeronimo Saldana, Member Engagement Coordinator, SEIU 32bj
- Walter Cooper, Member Engagement Organiser, SEIU 32bj
- Erik Antokal, Coro Fellow, Coro New York Leadership Centre
- SEIU 32bj Member Political Organiser Team

Events & Activities

- Meetings with Union officials to discuss political strategy, campaigning efforts and how they engage members in politics
- Spent time with Member Political Organisers (MPOs) observing and participating in their planning, training and election campaigning activities including phone-banking and canvassing
- Observed City Hall hearing for Chelsea Market Development at which MPO's were lobbying
- Observed MPOs plan, lead and conduct a union rally in support of paid sick leave

Member Political Organisers (MPOs)

One of The Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) goals is to educate, engage and empower its member around politics. SEIU believes this is important because, as workers, SEIU members are tax payers, and so they should have a voice and say in how their taxes are used. Getting union members involved in politics is how members increase and really utilise their power to the fullest. In the two to three months leading up to a Presidential election, SEIU seconds members to participate in their MPO programs to help campaign and engage fellow members in politics. My time with the SEIU MPO teams was insightful as I was able to learn firsthand about how to train and develop members to participate in the MPO program, and how they in turn engage other members throughout. The participating MPOs felt they were in the best position to reach out to their fellow members because to their colleagues they are more credible and persuasive. They are from the same communities and backgrounds so they can understand, communicate and connect better than perhaps a union official or campaign staffer could.

During my trip, non-compulsory voting stood out to me as the biggest difference between the Australian and American political systems. I was shocked to hear that 50 per cent voter turnout was 'good', but given the inherently political nature of unions, I thought most union members would be regular voters. I was shocked – absolutely gobsmacked – to learn that only a mere 35 per cent of union members are even registered to vote, and of that 35 per cent, less than 75 per cent would be expected to actually turn up on polling day. This reaffirmed for me the merits of compulsory voting in Australia. Whilst there is no denying political apathy amongst voters in Australia as demonstrated by invalid ballots, the number of invalid ballots is nowhere near 50 per cent.

At SEIU local 32BJ, there are 70 000 members. Based on the above numbers, the ability to mobilise these members alone could have a significant impact on the outcome of any election in the area. Being able to mobilise those members to vote, and to vote a particular way, is an enormous potential power so the work the MPOs were doing was incredibly important. The MPOs would start their day with a briefing and also debrief and reflect at the end of each day. In between times they would phone-bank, canvass or run other member engagement activities.

Over the course of two weeks, 12 MPOs in St Louis had managed to knock on 6686 doors, had 3338 conversations about voting, and identified or persuaded 2345 to vote Democrat. This is undeniably a huge contribution to the Democratic election campaign. SEIU staff and MPOs all noted that after the election their biggest challenge would be keeping the politicians they assist into office accountable to their members, and also keeping their members involved in politics outside of election time. Some locals were experimenting with and in the midst of setting up broader community-political networks to help meet these goals and I look forward to keeping in touch with my new contacts in the USA to hear how they progress with those endeavours.

What I really wanted to learn from the SEIU MPOs was what inspired them to participate in the MPO program, and what drove them to stick with it despite the challenges. Overwhelmingly the answers were to make positive change and to learn and develop themselves. The union locals with the most dynamic and engaged MPOs were those where the members were included in all facets of the campaign including the planning phases, and when they were given ownership and freedom to be part of the decision making processes, rather than simply assigned tasks to do on a daily basis.

Democrat Campaigns 2012 (Obama for America & Elizabeth Warren for Senate)

Dates:

- Thursday 11th – Saturday 13th October 2012 (Chicago: Obama for America)
- Thursday 25th – Saturday 27th October 2012 (Boston: Elizabeth Warren for Senate)

Meetings:

- Janelle Rau-Clausen, Illinois State Director, Obama for America
- Sarah, Operations Manager, Chicago HQ, Obama for America
- Mary, Field Organiser, Obama for America
- Sarah Cupp, Lead organiser, Obama for America
- Elizabeth Warren, Senate Candidate (Democrat)
- Sam Peabody, Field Organiser, Elizabeth Warren for Senate
- Justin Ross, Vice President, AFL-CIO Investment Trust Corporation

Events & Activities:

- Daily phone-banking (voter identification & persuasion)
- ‘Weekend Warrior’ canvassing trip from Chicago, IL to Cedar Rapids, IO.
- Weekend canvassing blitz with Boston union workers, Kick Off rally by Elizabeth Warren

YES WE CAN! This was the Democratic catch-cry in 2008 but the feeling I was greeted with in Democratic offices during October 2012 was more nervousness than conviction. I arrived in Chicago not long after the first presidential debate in which Romney had wiped the floor with Obama. Polls were down for Obama but up for Romney, and the economic situation Obama inherited wasn't doing him any favours. Obama supporters were disappointed with their President's debate performance, they were demoralised. In all the Democrat offices, heads were down and people were working hard, but the distinct feeling emanating from these camps was that most campaign staff were simply hoping for a not-too-bad outcome. In Australian terms, there was hope that Obama could *do a Bradbury*. I don't think that was the sort of HOPE Obama was talking about in 2008.

Despite the nervousness, the Democrat campaign offices I worked in demonstrated a high level of attention to statistics and analytics, targeted and customised outreach and persuasion, and well-designed and well-thought out media communications that all proved interesting and insightful. Meeting with Obama for America (OFA) Illinois State Director, Janelle Rau-Clausen explained that compared to 2008, the 2012 Obama campaign was a lot more structured and organised, but also a lot more decentralised out of the campaign offices. This strong focus on developing clear organising structures and networks of staff and volunteer teams was evident in both the Obama and Warren campaigns. The organising structure they were attempting to set up is described in Table 1.

Field Organisers and above were paid staff, Community Organisers and below were unpaid Fellows and volunteers. Across the greater Chicago area the Obama campaign had 150 Neighbourhood Team Leaders (NTLs) with 614 Core Team Members, and thousands of other volunteers. Neighbourhood Team Leaders were taking responsibility for running phone-banks from their own homes and community centres, and technology was also allowing volunteers to log in to both the Voter Activation Network (VAN) data storage system, as well as a centralised automated dialling system via the internet from their own lounge-rooms.

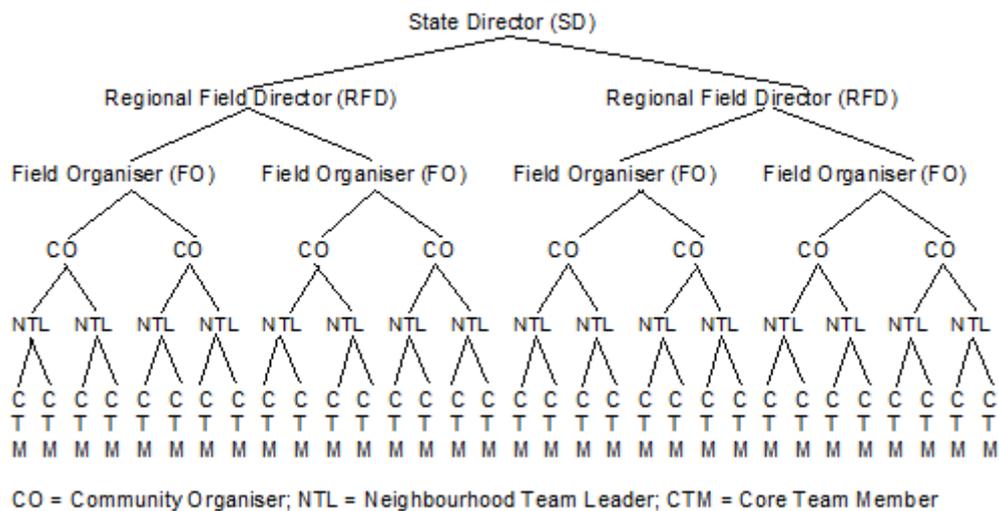


Table 1: Obama for America Organisational Structure

The staff at OFA identified volunteer recruitment as a key priority and the one constant amongst changing campaign activities. To ensure they were constantly building and maintaining volunteer numbers in the lead up to election day, OFA Field Organisers (FO) were each required to reach a target of 700 volunteer recruitment calls each week within their teams. These calls were made to all community members who had been identified as supporting Obama/Democrat. Once a person registered their interest in volunteering they were to be contacted regularly by the FO or NTL to schedule and confirm volunteer shifts and activities, and generally keep in touch with them and keep them engaged. The main tasks volunteers were assigned were:

- Office Reception (greeting volunteers that come in to the office)
- Data entry
- Phone-banking (voter identification and persuasion calls, and volunteer identification)
- Administrative tasks
- Canvassing (voter identification, persuasion and Get Out the Vote)

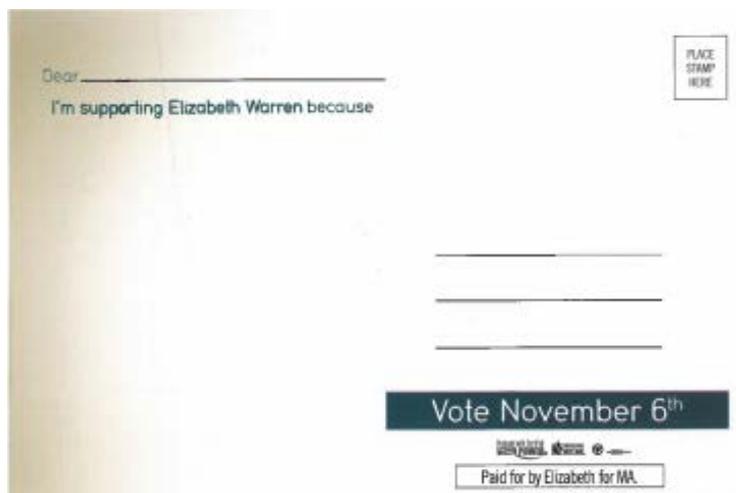
I spent a significant portion of the first two days in both Chicago and Boston assisting with phone-banks to potential voters. Phone-banking in the offices was done either from a paper list using a campaign office phone, or when there were more than eight people, phone calls were made through the computerised auto-dialler system. From the paper lists volunteers would be able to make about 30 dials an hour but with a very low connection rate. Five conversations within the hour was the average. Using the auto-dialler system, volunteers would be able to have 30 connections per hour with an average of 10 refusals, 10 not homes, and 10 actual persuasion attempts. During the time I was there volunteers were averaging approximately 30 per cent Obama/Warren support result using the scripts provided. Volunteers received no real briefing or training for the phone-banking beyond being handed a script and list of phone numbers, or shown how to use the computerised auto-dialler system. Nor was there a systematic debrief. I noted many volunteers found the phone-bank experience quite disheartening with so many refusals and a lot of negativity from voters. Volunteers felt the phoning was fruitless and were not debriefed through this. When people asked questions about why certain things were to be said or done I heard the common response from staff and NTLs to be “We don’t have any control over it. This is what we’ve been advised to do” or “We just need to do it because it is important.”

On the third day in Chicago I travelled to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with a bus full of 'Weekend Warrior' volunteers to canvass the Cedar Rapid suburbs. The time on the bus was used to train/brief volunteers on the upcoming canvass experience. Each volunteer received a pack with information such as FAQs; what to expect when you arrive in Iowa; overview of the 2012 OFA canvassing program; canvassing script; copies of relevant forms such as Vote by Mail forms, Voter Registration forms along with instructions on how to complete the various forms. The pack was useful and well-intended though I felt it could have been better delivered and facilitated rather than just handed to the volunteers. In the end however it was a successful trip. A bus full of 35 volunteers managed to knock on 1057 doors, spoke to over 340 people and collected 47 Vote by Mail forms for Obama in four hours on the ground.

Although Massachusetts is considered a safely Democrat state in regards to the Presidential elections, Elizabeth and her campaign team felt that her Senate race was going to be quite tight up against Republican incumbent Scott Brown. As such, they explained that their strategy was to use a more traditional grassroots ground campaign model which also included daily 'visibility' actions. Similar to OFA, they also conducted weekend canvassing blitzes. On the Saturday I was there, over 200 union workers filled the Iron Workers Union hall for a 'Kick Off' with Elizabeth Warren, followed by several hours of canvassing in South Boston. The Kick Off was essentially a pep rally at which various union leaders and Democratic candidates including Elizabeth Warren spoke.

The speeches were about inspiring and thanking the union volunteers for their support in the elections and highlighted the importance of their ongoing contributions through phone-banking, canvassing and turning out their friends and families to vote Democrat. After speeches the candidate took time to meet and greet volunteers one on one, thank them personally, meet their families and hear their stories. Volunteers then paired up and were given canvassing packs and assigned areas to doorknock in South Boston. This kick off played an important role in volunteer engagement, and helped volunteers to feel special, appreciated, important, and empowered. It helped them reconnect with their reasons for being part of the campaign and left the crowd feeling energised, hopeful and committed to working together to ensure a win for the Warren campaign. It was also a great media opportunity.

One of the key tools used by both campaigns on the doors was pledge cards. Once a person was identified as a campaign supporter they were asked to fill in a pledge card with their name and address details and signing a statement to say they commit to voting for the candidate. The volunteer then collected the pledge card, their data was entered back in the campaign office, and the card was then sent back to the voter close to Election Day in order to remind them of their commitment and to help with Get Out the Vote (GOtV) efforts. Identified supporters were also given postcards they could send to their family, friends and neighbours. These postcards would contain some information about the candidate on one side and space on the back for them to write a personal message to the friend about why they will be voting for Obama/Warren and asking for their friend to consider voting that way as well. This was a tool used to help build organising networks and spread the campaign message in a peer-to-peer, organic manner. An example is provided in Picture 1 (below).



The final and most notable aspect of the Democrat campaigns was the data collection, analysis and pursuant targeted contacts with voters. Using the VAN data system, all sorts of demographic and voting history information was captured, stored, regularly analysed, then cut and re-cut. The campaigns were then able to develop customised approaches, and communications material for specific demographic groups such as senior citizens, women, workers, students, Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and the LGBTI community. For instance, Elizabeth Warren ran nightly Women for Warren phone-banks – women phoning other women and talking about voting for the candidate based on women’s issues. Latino volunteers were assigned lists of Latino voters to phone-bank so they could discuss the campaign issues in Spanish. Similarly, volunteers from particular faith groups with assigned lists of voters to contact of matching faith. Scripts and messages were tweaked accordingly to cover the topics that their research teams showed resonated most with each particular group.

Despite the initial sense of nervousness from both camps, and the tendency towards transactional, task focused treatment of their volunteers, their campaign strategy held them in good stead. All’s well that ends well as they say and the grassroots organising efforts of both Obama and Warren saw them victors in the end.

Minnesotans United for All Families (Marriage Equality Community Campaign)

Dates:

- Thursday 18th – Sunday 21st October 2012 (Minneapolis, MN)

Meetings:

- Laurel Wales, Regional Organizing Director, Minnesotans United for All Families
- Christian Ucles, Latin Outreach Coordinator, Minnesotans United for All Families
- Pat Mulligan, Project Coordinator, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center
- Alysa Friedrich, Community Organizer, Minnesotans United for All Families
- Hundreds of Minnesotans United for All Families volunteers

Events & Activities:

- Daily phone-banking (voter identification & persuasion; volunteer recruitment; volunteer confirmation)
- Data entry
- Volunteer training, briefing & debriefing
- Daily staff meetings, briefings and debriefings

In May 2011, the Minnesota State Legislature voted to put a constitutional amendment on the 2012 ballots in Minnesota that will read: *“Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to provide that only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as marriage in Minnesota?”* Similar ballot measures had previously been put forward and supported in 34 US states, limiting the freedom of LGBTBI couples to marry. In response Outfront Minnesota and project 515 founded Minnesotans United for All Families (MN United). MN United is a broad coalition of organisations and community and business leaders campaigning to defeat this constitutional amendment and encourage Minnesotans to vote NO in November 6 election.

A truly community-based grass-roots campaign, MN United proved to be the superior volunteer experience during my trip to the US. It was proof that grass-roots campaigning does work and that the best way to engage volunteers in an ongoing way is to empower and include them. Starting in May 2011 with just six staff and one small office, by November 6, the campaign had nine offices across Minnesota and thousands of volunteers.

Everything in the organisation of MN United seemed systematised yet personalised. Volunteers were systematically briefed and debriefed before and after every single volunteer shift they participated in, whether it was the first time they were there or the 51st time they were volunteering with MN United. For phone banking and canvassing, volunteers were always trained on the script for the session and set target numbers and required to count the number of dials/knocks, and conversations and then rate the results. At the end of each session volunteers numbers were tallied and the groups' numbers and stories debriefed so that everyone involved could see tangible progress and results, as well as feel part of something bigger. For this reason the MN United campaign offices had the energy and buzz that I was expecting at Obama HQ. Volunteers who were initially nervous about talking to strangers about a very contentious issue such as gay marriage always signed up for another shift and more often than not managed to recruit one other volunteer to add to the network.