

My experiences from Election 2012
11/22/2012

I started volunteering for elections in 2004. I went on bus rides to Pennsylvania to canvas for John Kerry. My interest in politics actually came from my environmentalism. I had been hiking with the Sierra Club since I arrived in DC in 1994. Then sometime in the early 2000's I read an email from the Club about all the atrocious anti-environment actions that George W. Bush had been taking and I became a member of the Sierra Club. I wanted to help oust Bush. The election of 2004 was a debacle that I will never forget. All those hours spent canvassing, talking to people all over PA, all that energy invested for nothing. I still remember talking to my friend Tait on the metro. Around us people were looking downcast. He reassured me that these things happen in cycles, that in 2008 people will change course. Yet I also remember that people that we met while canvassing were not adversarial for the most part. One time I went canvassing in the suburbs of Philadelphia with a fellow from England who had come here just to volunteer for the elections. He almost came to blows with a Vietnam vet. (There were a few foreigners campaigning in 2008 and 2012 as well). Many people were worried about terrorism more than the economy or the Iraq war, at least among the ones we talked to.

Of course in 2008 it was a whole different story. This time people were really upset with Bush. The energy and enthusiasm was very high, especially among young people. I met some really wonderful people while canvassing. I did a lot of canvassing in Virginia, in Arlington and Alexandria. I also did a bit of canvassing near Charlottesville. Except for one McCain supporter (or Obama hater) who slammed the door in my face most people were friendly. Even Republicans and some conservatives were supporting Obama. All of that effort bore fruit in the grand inauguration on a very chilly morning in January of 2009 when I listened to Obama take the oath with 2 million other happy citizens. The story of that is in "Inaugurama" (<http://nature-lover.net/writings/stories/inaugurama.doc>)

I also volunteered, albeit to a much lesser extent, during the mid-term elections of 2006 and 2010. In 2006 I remembered people wanting a change in Congress though they were still not as upset with Bush as in 2008. In 2010 I mostly did phone banking at the DNC headquarters. This time my main motivation was to get the healthcare reform bill passed, and then later to support the courageous Congressmen who helped pass it. We called people and also one day I canvassed for Congressman Tom Perriello in the suburbs of Charlottesville. These were the heydays of the tea party. One middle aged white woman angrily said, as soon as she heard me mention Perriello, "He is not of the people." She could not have been more wrong. But I didn't say anything and just told her I am sorry to hear that and started to leave. She seemed a little perplexed, and hopefully, slightly ashamed of her behavior. Perhaps she realized that she was being too angry. I also encountered angry people at the other end of the phone, especially in places like Indiana. It was disconcerting to see how the right wing propaganda machine had succeeded in demonizing Obama and demagoguing the healthcare reform bill. That was another difficult election.

This year the dynamic was different from that of both 2004 and 2010. Although the odds seemed to be in favor of Obama from the beginning, I always had a nagging doubt in the back of my mind. Would America vote to reelect a black man? What if the win in 2008 was a one-time fluke, fueled by the financial crisis and war fatigue, people just wanting a change in any form whatsoever? As it turned out, those fears turned out to be wrong. But I wonder if they would have been, had it not been for the efforts of thousands of volunteers? I was one of those volunteers. As most commentators -- both democrat and republican -- have noted, the turnout efforts on the part of democrats played a big role. Of course there were other

factors, but the role of turnout efforts can neither be denied nor understated. In this story I want to take you through the things that motivated me, the things that I did, a first person account of the days leading to the election, and also a few personal thoughts on the election.

My motivation

What drives people to spend hours and hours on the phone talking to total strangers, in spite of indifference, hostility, cynicism? Of course we all know how we feel about people making random phone calls, so why would a person want to do that? What drives people to spend several weekend days traveling to distant neighborhoods, and then going door to door trying to talk to people? All of this in spite of having work and family obligations that leave little time or energy to spare. These are not trivial questions. It is a simple matter, now that the elections are over, for armchair quarterbacks to assign various simplistic and superficial reasons for Obama's win. They range from the change in demographics to his campaign's fund-raising and strategy and embrace of technology to the Republican Party's and Mitt Romney's many failings. But they ignore the very personal and deep rooted reasons due to which people volunteered, donated or voted for the President. Those reasons are many and complex.

The first and most annoying reason people ascribe to campaign volunteers is that they are partisan and politically motivated. This is annoying for two reasons. First, while it may be true that some are partisan political animals, most of us aren't. There are people who work for the Democratic Party or the Republican Party and some of them might fit that description, but most of us are regular folks who were spending precious time and money out of our busy and impecunious lives. Most of the volunteers I met were workers, teachers, students and others of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. True, we were all rooting for the President and others of the democratic party, and certainly the campaign does get some amount of competitive juice flowing. But political animals we are not. In fact, I cannot tell you how many times I told myself, this will be over in a few months or weeks or days, and then I will not have to do this for a long time.

Second, this is an easy way out for people who complain that the world is messed up but do nothing about it. If you are really worried about poverty, about inequality, about injustice, corruption, environmental degradation, war or any of the myriad problems that our world is faced with, it is not enough to talk about it breezily at house parties or donate a little now and then to charity. It is absolutely not enough to say that all politicians are crooked and that politics is a waste of time. Because, first of all, those politicians also come out of the same group of men and women as you do, and secondly, they are making decisions that affect the lives of millions of people. Decisions that in one stroke of the pen could destroy the work of thousands of well-meaning people and organizations trying to make this world a better place. The least you can do is to support those who are sacrificing their time, money, energy and goodwill to make things better. I don't even count myself as one of the more active people. There are heroes all over the country, soldiers, teachers, social workers, firefighters, policemen, and others putting their lives on the line so that others may live a better life. I met many such people who also volunteered during the elections, who were doing far more than I was. In fact part of my motivation and inspiration came from seeing and working with people who were doing so much. These are the people who brought tears to the eyes of the President at a meeting the day after the elections.

We were motivated because we saw what was happening to the country and to the world

and decided that we had to do something about it. That is the most simple, truthful and basic reason that I can give you. We felt that if we didn't do something about it, others will take advantage of our inaction. We felt that we had to give as much of our energy and resources as we could, because the decisions that faced us were that important.

So what were those decisions that made the stakes so high? Why was this such an important election? I have already stated some of them in rt90 (http://nature-lover.net/writings/random_thoughts/rt90.pdf). Broadly speaking, I felt that this election was a struggle for supremacy between those who want to rule the people and those who want to work for them. There are those who have the money and the power and want to keep it and grow it by exploiting people rather than serving them. I believe in the good in everyone but these people are drunk on power and wealth and ignore their own good self and would do anything to keep the power. Such people can only be awakened by force, and that too I think only by the force of peaceful resistance or peaceful political change. I am a firm believer in non-violence and I think that one has to resist oppression and untruth while always being aware that all human beings ultimately come from the same place. I believe that while we work for change we should also have love in our hearts, not just for the people we care about but also for people who may oppose us. Ultimately that is what peace and justice are all about, to love others as we love ourselves.

So there are forces in every society, especially in the US, who are trying to exploit people and the planet for their own profit. All that talk about deficits and tax cuts and regulations and government is nothing but a proxy for exploiting the poor and the middle class, a smokecreen in this struggle for supremacy. In a recent blog post, Paul Krugman seems to agree (<http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/all-about-the-patriarchy/>). Although I also believe that racism and the fact that a black man had become President was part of this, ultimately, that too was about power. People who had defined themselves and their position of power and superiority through the subjugation of others could not bear the reality that that position might be slipping. Besides, there is no doubt in my mind that if Hillary Clinton had become President, these same people would have found other ways to manipulate the feelings of insecurity amongst a certain section of the population to stoke anger and hatred. Perhaps then abortion and feminism would have become the main bogeymen. The reason people had to build all these smokecreens is because they could not talk directly about what they really wanted to do. They wanted to give people some reason to think they were fighting for a just cause. So freedom, life and prosperity became buzzwords to get people behind them. It is unfortunate that many otherwise honest and well-intentioned people believed in this propaganda without realizing that the policies they were supporting would ultimately undermine these very causes.

As I said before, what brought me to politics was my love for nature and my desire to protect the environment. That was there before Obama and even if Hillary had won, I probably would have done the same things. But Obama brought something new. During the primary season in 2008 at first I was torn between the two of them. But the more I learned about Obama the more I began to like what he presented. I never had the illusion that he would achieve all the things he promised during the campaign. Even now, his actions on fighting climate change while significant are not close to what is required. But what I liked was the promise he brought, the vision he had, and most of all his integrity, basic decency and his striving to see the good in everyone. As Ted and Caroline Kennedy mentioned, no one has inspired the same enthusiasm among young people as Obama has since JFK. Much like Lincoln he has had to face a deeply divided nation, one riven by anger and hatred, and succeed in pushing his agenda through while not losing sight of the union or getting caught up in the negativity and anger.

The more the right wing propaganda machine tried to demonize him and the more his

adversaries in Congress tried to block his work through filibusters and holds on almost every legislation and cabinet appointment the more determined we were to work for his reelection. It was painful to see a good and decent man being made into this monster that was robbing people of their freedom and prosperity. It was even more painful to see that people believed this propaganda. And I never for once doubted that all of this was simply a subtle way of manipulating tribal and race-based fears and insecurity and exploit them to acquire more power and wealth for the plutocrats. As Lee Atwater remarked in his infamous 1981 interview (<http://www.thenation.com/article/170841/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy>) about the famous southern strategy, they simply had to invent more subtle and abstract ways to provoke that race-based fear and hatred. As I watched some of those town-hall meetings during the healthcare reform debate and looked into the eyes of some of the tea party protesters that we ran into in downtown Washington, DC, I could see a blind fear and hatred of the other. In some of them was also a bit of confusion - clearly they were people who came with the crowd but did not quite understand why. They could not understand that here in Washington were people just like them, different only in color or ethnicity.

Now let me answer the question that I posed in the beginning more fully. What motivates someone to give everything they have to support a leader? It is not merely a matter of liking him or her strongly, or mere admiration or adoration. It is a complex combination of the individual motivations of the followers and the leader. Someone said that a good leader inspires people by pointing them to what lies beyond the horizon, to fight for something noble and ambitious. What Obama has been able to do is to take the aspirations of millions of Americans and give them a way to work towards achieving them. He has been able to get them to believe that he is simply a vehicle for their aspirations. Like a beacon he gives a steady direction, pointing people towards a common destination. Blind allegiance or admiration will fade away in time. We know he is also a politician and that he is not perfect. But there is a core of integrity, commitment and vision that shines through, that unites all of us to work with him towards our common goals. We know he will not tire or falter or buckle before the challenges and that makes us want to work tirelessly as well.

Each of us has his or her own hopes. For me it involves protecting the environment. We may not have achieved all we hoped for. But I know he is going to try his best. It is a fair question to ask, could someone else have been more effective? Given the circumstances, I think he is the best. It is hard to imagine another political leader, democrat or republican, who offered all that he did. Besides it is not all on him. What we need to do is to see how we can work together to achieve our goals.

After the midterm elections of 2010 I was very tired and disappointed. And then the tea party republicans came to Washington and we had to endure two more years of obstruction and anger towards the President. Every insult they hurled at Obama, every time they passed a crazy bill, every time they opposed a bill meant to move the economy forward, it only made me more determined to get them out of Washington and reelect Obama. So when 2012 rolled in I was eager to start volunteering for the reelection campaign.

The Campaign

I had planned to volunteer starting in the summer. But work on our new home and the old house that we rented out kept us busy until late June. I was also trying hard to finish the research project that I had been working on for a few years now. Nevertheless, I kept in touch with the Obama campaign (or rather, they kept in

touch with me :-)) and also wrote to Gwen, one of the volunteers I met during the 2010 campaign. A retired environmental lawyer, she is one of the people who inspire me to do volunteer work. Meanwhile, the Republican primaries and the debates kept us entertained. I was pulling for Santorum to win so that Obama would have an easy reelection and we won't have to do much volunteering :-)) The memories of the brutal 2010 campaign was still fresh in my memory and I didn't want the election to be close at all. Terrible as the Republican candidates were, I knew that there were many who hated Obama intensely and wanted nothing as much as they wanted to defeat him. At the same time, the outright crazy and scary positions taken by the candidates in the Republican primaries were very worrisome. One shuddered to think what would have happened if one of these candidates had become the President. It is still worrisome to know that perhaps a third of America doesn't believe that evolution or climate change is real.

I started volunteering little by little in late August. I was also donating as much as I could afford. My first event, and Nicole joined me for this, was registering voters near the Clarendon metro station in Arlington, VA. It was a rather quiet affair. Most people were polite and friendly in this predominantly democratic neighborhood. A few unpleasant looks from Republicans apart, most people seemed to be happy we were doing it. We even met a few who were not yet registered and gave them the information. One Latino man said he was not a citizen yet but was effusive in his support of Obama. "Very nice man," he said. This was a sign of things to come. We found Latinos to be especially supportive and keen to vote for Obama throughout the campaign.

Another group that was at the forefront of volunteering and organizing for Obama were Muslims or middle eastern people in general. We watched the acceptance speech of Obama and Biden during the convention as well as the VP debate at the clubhouse in Takoma village co-housing, hosted by Abe, a bearded older Egyptian man. He and his American wife were great hosts and worked very hard throughout the campaign.

Most weekends I would carpool from DC with other volunteers to the outer suburbs of Virginia such as Falls Church, Woodbridge and Annandale. Often Nicole was able to go with me and it made it more enjoyable. She was definitely a better canvasser than me. On one such trip a man shouted at us, "He is going to lose." This was after the first debate in which Obama did his mysterious disappearing act (although I didn't think so at the time). The man was sitting in a pick-up truck, directing a construction worker. They were trying to get a tree stump out of the ground. A white man in his thirties or early forties, he said he was a small businessman who had a tough time getting a loan from his banks and he blamed on the Wall Street reforms of Obama. I wish I knew more about it - turned out most of his comments about Obama were wrong. Probably he watched foxnews too much. I was very upset and Nicole kept me away and did most of the talking. I was impressed by how she tried to reason with him in a friendly way. Yet underneath all the anger I could see that he was simply misinformed and was not malicious. He claimed he was an independent who didn't like Republicans, and that he voted for Obama in 2008. But the way he kept saying that Obama is a liar made me marvel at the effectiveness of foxnews, Limbaugh, Hannity etc.,

In Annandale and Falls Church I met a lot of Asian American voters. There is a big Korean population in Annandale and a big Vietnamese population in Falls Church. I was expecting a good response from African Americans and Latinos, but the enthusiasm from Asian Americans and young people was a pleasant surprise. During the 2008 elections I met a lot of Vietnamese voters who were supporting McCain. Also this year the young were supposed to be less enthusiastic. I guess there were a lot of people like me who liked Obama for his qualities and had not lost their enthusiasm in spite of all the setbacks of the past four years. Among African-Americans the enthusiasm was off the charts. They were volunteering in large numbers everywhere, canvassing, phone-banking and helping out in every way

possible.

For a couple of weekends I was canvassing in the far out suburbs of Woodbridge and Annandale that were somewhat upscale. The houses there were large and far apart. To be honest I felt a little awkward in those neighborhoods. I didn't understand why people needed such large homes. Moreover it made it difficult to go door to door because you had to walk long distances. On the plus side I didn't need to spend time on exercise on those days because just walking up and down those streets was a workout. There were more Romney signs than Obama signs in those neighborhoods. I wondered if it was really because there were more Romney supporters. I have heard that Obama supporters who live in such neighborhoods do not display their support openly out of fear of offending their neighbors. Also it seems the Romney campaign spent more of its money on giving away signs to people. I don't have first hand evidence of that, though.

As the elections got closer I stopped reading the news. I found that it was getting too much space in my thoughts. So during the week I read or watched very little news, focusing on my work instead. It also helped me worry less about the results. Towards the final weeks I even stopped looking at Nate Silver's projections in the New York Times. It was one of the few news websites I was reading. I continued to watch Obama's speeches, though. I mostly watched them to read his body language. It got more and more positive after the second and third debates. It was clear he was fully confident of winning. While I was at the DNC headquarters downtown for canvassing or phone-banking I found the campaign staffers rather relaxed and focussed on work. None of the desperation that was evident in 2010. Towards the final weeks I saw more and more people volunteering. The enthusiasm seemed to be very high. Nevertheless, I kept my fingers crossed.

On the Saturday before the election I carpooled from the DNC headquarters to a field office in Purcellville, VA with three African-American volunteers. These were people that I was grouped with randomly. But it is amazing how quickly people connect with each other. There is an easy bond and understanding. We all had more or less the same attitude and approach. Most of us are practical people who have our own lives outside of politics but volunteer because we care. I found my fellow volunteers to be mentally tough, resilient and confident but friendly and easy-going at the same time. Occasionally you do meet an odd-ball or an overzealous person but it is more of an exception. It was more likely that you met some truly exceptional people. One that impressed me the most was Diana, daughter of Roscoe Brown, a Tuskegee airman. A teacher at Sidwell Elementary, she impressed me with her energy as well as her driving skills :-). She told me that after the war her father was denied a job with the airline companies. They simply told him "we don't hire Negroes." Now retired and in his 90's, he is still active in black political circles. Diana told me that her father was one of the consultants for George Lucas' "Red Tails" about the Tuskegee airmen. Another person who stood out was an English college student who had already written a few novels and was enrolled in a masters program in literature at American University. She said the reason she chose American was to be in the political capital and also to volunteer for the Obama campaign.

On this evening I was paired with Dexter, a tall black man about the same age as I. His reassuring yet friendly approach to people was an eye-opener to me. It showed how one's personal behavior and approach make a huge difference in how people react. Even people of vastly different backgrounds and beliefs can be brought together with the right approach. This past weekend we saw the movie "Lincoln." He had the amazing ability to win the support of even his adversaries with his calm, reassuring and reasoned approach.

The Obama campaign "field office" was in a barn attached to a farm house out in the countryside. I had once biked to Purcellville en route to Bluemont in the blue ridge

mountains. So I was somewhat familiar with the area. This section of the Appalachian range is one of my favorite places. It was great to see progressive people living in this area because most people that I had encountered in the past in this area were Republicans. It is still very Republican. There were big Romney signs all around. In front of a gun and ammo shop was a big sign saying "If you want freedom fire Obama". The owners of the farm house (it was not a working farm any more) had cooked big pots of potato chili and cider for us. There were a couple of young men from New York who were staying here. They had come here for the weekend to volunteer in VA.

We went around some homes in Purcellville town. As we wrapped up our canvassing it was getting dark. One of the volunteers in our group was talking for a long time with a Vietnam Vet who was upset that Obama had authorized more troops for Afghanistan. A friend of this Vet went to Afghanistan and died there. It was interesting to note all the different reasons people have for either supporting or opposing Obama. The same volunteer ran into another person who did not like Romney at all but was agonizing about voting for Obama because of his pro-life position. On one of my phone calls I talked to a woman in VA who was going to vote for the green party candidate Jill Stein because she was upset with Obama's drone policy. I told her I am not comfortable with it but that I believed Obama was trying her best. Some people on the left are upset with Obama for specific policy reasons. I guess each person has his or her own level of trust and respect for the President.

During the week leading to the election I was making phone calls almost every day upon coming home from work. Sometimes I called people in VA, sometimes CO. On election day I had scheduled a test, so I could not volunteer until 3pm. After my class I went straight to the DNC headquarters. There were a group of people waiting to go canvassing in VA. We piled into the minivan of an older African-American couple, headed towards a field office near Springfield. The husband, a distinguished looking gentleman, drove the van. He seemed to be a little disorganized, perhaps too engrossed in his work to worry about mundane affairs. The car was littered with papers and books. It took us a while to clear it all out into the trunk. Then he got confused by the GPS instructions and got out of the carpool lane. Apparently he did not know that there was such a thing as a carpool lane! So we were stuck in rush hour traffic for a while. Then he got out of the highway and somehow got into the Pentagon, where he got stuck behind a line of cars trying to pick up passengers so they could get on the carpool lanes. Only as he got towards the end of the line did he realize that these people were not trying to get on to the highway. By this time it was almost 6 and there was no chance we would be able to get to Springfield and even if we did, it might not do much good since polls were closing at 7 in VA. So we turned back and drove to the DNC.

At the DNC room after room was filled with volunteers calling voters in VA and other swing states. There was a buzz and a tension in the air. People were watching TV at the same time as calling voters, with what seemed to be cautious optimism. I avoided watching TV and was happy that there were no TVs in the room where I was making phone calls. I was surprised at how nervous I was about the results. It was a long time since I had been so nervous about something. It was then I realized how much this election meant to me. But I told myself that this was just an election, that I had done all I could, and that it is pointless to worry about results, All we can do is to put in our best effort....

After polls closed in VA at 7pm we continued making phone calls to NV and CO. Around 9 pm I was getting tired. I also wanted to watch the results with Nicole who could not make it to the DNC. While traveling on the metro I kept looking for signs that Obama had won. There were few people on the metro, and most of them were twiddling their thumbs on their iphones. I couldn't tell from their expressions how the results were going. While at the DNC I heard that many of the swing states were still close. So people were just waiting, I guess.

When I got home Nicole was camped in front of the TV. I went downstairs to check on my parents and to my surprise they were also glued to the TV. I thought they didn't care that much about the US elections. Normally they would be just watching Tamil TV. I brought them upstairs and we watched it together. Around 10.30 it was announced that Obama had won. We all were overjoyed. Even my mom, who is normally shy, was very expressive and gave us a happy handshake. She said she was happy for us, that our efforts had borne fruit. Nicole started calling her friends and family.

I was quite relieved but to be honest I also know that the work has only begun. I am so relieved that Obama won and hope that I don't have to spend time on politics for several years. I hope the next few years are more prosperous and Obama gets a lot done and that the 2016 elections are a cakewalk for Hillary (yes, I think she is going to be the nominee). But there is much work to be done, both for myself and in society as a whole.