

Dear all,

The manuscript that I would like your critique of is chapter 4 in the dissertation that I aim to complete this spring. It is a draft and all the usual disclaimers apply. The larger project is an analysis of what political professionals often refer to as “the ground war”, contacting large numbers of voters one-on-one over the phone or at the door, and is based on ten months of intense field work in two Democratic congressional campaigns in 2008.

I have included here a few excerpts from the first chapter of the dissertation, where I introduce and define two terms I hope people will find useful in understanding the ground war, and that I make passing reference to in the chapter, namely the notion of “personalized political communication” and the idea of “campaign assemblages”. I have also included a table of contents to make it clear where the chapter fits into the overall architecture. This is not intended to be a stand-alone piece.

The reason I am particularly keen to present this to you is that the question of how people are mobilized to join campaigns obviously straddles several disciplines and specializations, and none of them are my own main vocation—I am working in the field of communications primarily, and though I do have a background in political science and sociology, I would not claim to be in full command of either. Collectively, maybe we are closer to that elusive state, and I am sure that my manuscript stands to gain a lot of your scrutiny both of my research craftsmanship and the way in which I try to relate this to existing conversations.

Thanks in advance for your criticism and comments.

## **Selections from Chapter 1 / Introduction**

### The dissertation

This dissertation deals with how what I call “personalized political communication” works. The category identifies the object of analysis, the practices involved in using *people* as media for political communication. The empirical focus is on how personalized political communication works in contemporary electoral campaigns in the United States. Here, door-to-door canvassing and phone banking, the activities that make up most of what is called “the ground war”, are the most important forms. My primary data comes from ten months of ethnographic field research I did on the Democratic side of two competitive congressional elections in the 2008 cycle. The episodes I recount throughout the dissertation, and all quotations without any other reference, come from then hundreds of hours I spent in these districts. All names are pseudonyms, but all events are described as I witnessed them.

[...]

### Personalized Political Communication

Personalized political communication is ‘personalized’ insofar as precisely *people* are media. It is thus distinct from mass-mediated or computer-mediated communications, the traditional foci of political communications research, just as it is distinct from “medio”-forms of communication like direct mail and robocalls. In case of earned and paid media, technological objects serve as channels between senders and receivers, while in the case of canvassing, human subjects are the intermediaries between political organizations and voters. It is ‘political’ in the most ecumenical senses of the word, i.e., in that the people engaged in it perceive it to be

political, the organizations involved are generally perceived to be political, and most of the content disseminated have direct bearing on electoral outcomes and the authoritative distribution of values and the constitution of society. It is ‘communication’ in the most basic sense of a process for sharing symbols in time and space, symbols that, as we shall see below, go well beyond the lexical content of the words involved, and come to involve commitment, attitude, and sometimes the embodied symbolism of skin color, gender and accent too.

[...]

### Campaign Assemblages

I conceive of the ground war here as a *project*, a distinct and temporary task pursued by a set of interdependent organizations and actors (Grabher, 2002). It is defined by clear criteria for success—victory—and an equally clear deadline—Election Day.

[...]

I will call such a set [of disparate elements ranging from campaign and party organizations over allied interest groups to activist networks and individual volunteers and paid part-timers], arranged around a common ground war project in a particular district, a *campaign assemblage*. I use the concept to refer to a heterogeneous collection of elements engaged in concerted action. It is appropriated from recent work in social theory, organizational sociology, and science and technology studies (Latour, 2005, DeLanda, 2006, Girard and Stark 2007, see also Deleuze & Guttari, 1987). The notion has been developed as an alternative to totalizing notions that treat a particular unit such as a campaign organization as a self-contained entity, and to the homogenizing impulse underlying institutionalist views, preoccupied as they are with identifying commonalities within particular sectors. A campaign assemblage is not a thing out

there in the sense that an apple is, but a name for a combination of technologically augmented organizations, networks, and individuals whose combined capacities for action are brought to bear on a common project. [...] There are no one-stop shops for personalized political communication in American today, as virtually no organizations possess all the resources deemed necessary to pursue the ground war alone.

Instead, campaign assemblages are brought together. The concept is useful not only because it makes room for a the whole set of actors involved in field operations, and not simply the professionals in the campaign organizations, but also because its invocation of the verb ‘assemble’ reminds us that a lot of work goes into holding these temporary teams together. Campaigns look like monolithic entities only when seen from afar. Up close, it becomes clear that they are composites. The ground war in a single congressional district might involve not only the candidate’s campaign organization and the staffers employed by it, but also the campaigns of other candidates, running for everything from President to the Board of Education, the state party, one or more of the Democratic campaign committees from the state capital and/or Washington, D.C., local party organizations and party regulars, professional consultants, commercial list vendors and other service providers (sometimes purely by their technical proxies), allied interest groups such as unions, and friendly associations, whether religiously, ethnically, or issue-based, plus hundreds and sometimes thousands of individual volunteers and part-timers. All play a role on the story told in the rest of the dissertation.

[...]

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## Chapter 4, Mobilizing

### *Episode 4.1*

Election Day is less than two weeks away, and John, the field director, is stressed out. “It is usually about now that I start having trouble sleeping and get heart palpitations.” Over a slice of pizza with salami and a can of Dr. Pepper, he spends his five-minute break explaining that the campaign needs to fill eighteen hundred volunteer shifts and find about two hundred people for eight hundred paid canvassing shifts before the GOTV weekend kicks off.

He is pretty strung out, and hard to have a sustained conversation with, but I ask him how things are coming along. He is tapping his feet incessantly as he says “Well, you know we’ve got about sixty paid canvassers already, and all the guys are out recruiting. I think we have maybe a hundred signed up. All the organizers will have to work every day recruiting.” “What about volunteers?” I ask. “You’ll have to ask Brady about that. I think he said he has about a hundred and sixty scheduled, so you can imagine. He has a lot of work to do.”

### *Episode 4.2*

It is my second visit to this particular Democracy for America group. On their website, the organization, which came out of Howard Dean’s unsuccessful primary campaign in 2004, declares itself the largest member-based progressive organization in the country. They claim 750,000 activists across the country (at least as signed up on their email list). On this evening in March, about ten people are here for the monthly meeting of the county chapter. Most are active elsewhere too, in member-based interest groups like the Sierra Club, and in various civic associations. Several sit on their local Democratic Town Committees. They are, one tells me with a smile, “the kind of people who go to meetings.” The event is informal, with a friendly communal atmosphere, and lasts little over an hour. There is only one new attendant. The rest are regulars. The agenda is what people tell me is “the usual”: a brief orientation from the two volunteer organizers, a bit of discussion of what the group can do in the community, of how it can recruit new members, and then an outside speaker.

Tonight, the guest is Luis, who works for the Democratic state party as one of two organizers paid for by the DNC’s Fifty-State Program. He is here to introduce us to the new Neighborhood Leader program that the national party is rolling out, intended to enroll one million volunteers across the country. Each will be asked to contact twenty-five registered Democrats three times before the election to remind them to vote. Luis speaks for about twenty minutes. He explains that what he calls “NOTV”—as in: “Neighbors Organizing the Vote”, a play on the common acronym GOTV—has been shown to be “the most cost-effective kind of electioneering.” He adds that anyone who sign up to the program will have considerable say in whom they contact, as long as they report the names and addresses to the party, so that “we at State Central can keep track of everything.” The Neighborhood Leader program is, he underlines, a way in which people can “make a difference” and “put this country on the right track again”. He calls it “low threshold volunteering” and a “good and easy way to help”. He shows us a brief DVD with Dean—now chairman of the DNC—praising the program and the “people-powered politics” it represents.

Luis’ presentation is met with scattered applause, and elicits a few comments from the group about how the program might be run more effectively. One person at the meeting suggests he could help the party “optimize the database.” “I work with IT”, he explains. Luis just smiles. No one signs up to organize the vote. I speak with Luis later on, and he says “I hate going to these meetings begging for help. There are reasons they just sit there on their fat asses. They don’t want to work. They just want to talk about impeachment [of President Bush], and then they like the attention.”

### *Episode 4.3*

It is the end of September, and Luis has now worked since June as the canvassing director for the coordinated campaign that runs most of the field program in the district. He laughs when I remind him of the meeting in March. “Yeah... Now someone else gets to go and talk to the whacktivists” [*sic*]. His days are long now, interrupted mainly by cigarette breaks, the occasional trip to stock up on Diet Cokes, and

forays into the part of the office where the field organizers work, where he will pull off what he describes as “increasingly lame practical jokes.”

He is still short of his recruitment goals, and when I ask him about them, he shrugs and says “I’ve stopped thinking of it as two hundred people, now I am just trying to fill all eight hundred shifts. I just need more bodies.” He shakes his head and continues, “I’d have loved to have, you know, teams of kids canvassing their local area wearing their local high school sweatshirt. But we’re short, so that’s not going to happen.” On the wall behind him is black-and-white photocopied flier that he picks up and hands to me. “Have you seen this?” It is an irregularly cut half page of letter size paper with a stylized drawing of a donkey—a common mascot symbol for the Democratic Party—trumpeting “Campaign Jobs” in a large font. The sub-title reads “Easy work! Great Pay!”

A month and a half before, the campaign tried to recruit part-timers to go canvassing for the Democratic Party. Two weeks ago, the fliers were encouraging people to work to “Get Obama elected.” (In a solidly blue state.) Now it has come to this. Luis says “That’s my favorite slogan so far. Fuck Obama, fuck the party. Easy job, great pay, that’s what it’s all about.” He shakes his head and turns to his computer.

Contacting hundreds of thousands of voters in person involves thousands of hours of work by hundreds of people. In 2008, the average congressional district had a population of about seven hundred thousand. The number of registered voters varies between three and four hundred thousand. With high turnout expected in a Presidential Election year, a competitive race at hand, ample financial resources, and a strategic decision from the outset to try to call and canvass every potentially Democratic voter at least once, the two campaigns I followed aimed at contacting about two hundred thousand people at home. They got through to an estimated twenty to twenty-five percent of the electorate at least once. (Scale these numbers up for well-funded competitive state-wide races, whether Gubernatorial, Senate, or in Presidential battleground states, and down for most state and local-level races or if a candidate has few resources or faces little or no competition.)<sup>1</sup>

In both campaigns, the basic blueprint was the same, with some variation in terms of the relative reliance on canvassing versus calling due to differences in the geography of each district, the number of allies, volunteers, and part-timers mobilized, and the data available on household addresses and phone numbers. The overall aspiration was to knock on more than one hundred

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<sup>1</sup> Twenty to twenty-five percent is only slightly less than the national average of twenty-eight percent who reported that they were contacted in person by the Obama campaign in 2008, or the twenty-six percent who reported being contacted in person by the Kerry campaign and its allies in 2004. Both figures were presumably considerably higher in battleground states than elsewhere (see Barone, 2006; CBS, 2008).

thousand doors and make more than two hundred thousand calls during the ten weeks between Labor Day and the end of October. During the last four days leading up to Tuesday November 4<sup>th</sup>—the “GOTV weekend”—the campaigns would try to contact every likely Democratic voter at least once more to remind them to vote, adding at a minimum another hundred thousand knocks and calls. At ten to fifteen knocks per hour, and twenty-five to thirty calls per hour, this alone comes to more than twenty thousand hours of work over less than eleven weeks. On top of this comes some voter contact for identification purposes over the summer. The bulk of the work has to be done between four and eight p.m. to have a realistic chance of finding voters at home. Even working seven days a week, this means the campaigns required fifty to a hundred people canvassing and making calls every hour, every day, every week throughout the fall to reach the target numbers. And many more for GOTV weekend. This chapter analyzes how the staffers tried to mobilize the people they needed.

Political scientists and sociologists have identified many mechanisms driving political participation, such as working for campaigns. People’s incentives matter, whether financial, solidary, moral, or other. But there is more to it than that. Socio-economic status (Verba and Nie, 1987), individual interest in politics (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman, 1995), and peoples’ position in social networks and involvement in associational life (Snow, Zurcher, and Eklund-Olsen, 1980; Putnam, 1994) have often been highlighted as important variables. My fieldwork does nothing but underline the relevance of each—the volunteers I met were predominantly middle-class, white, and college-educated, they were often personally invested in politics, and many of them confirmed that they had friends who were also active in campaigns (or members of their church, union, or some such who were). A number of scholars also underline the importance of a culture of engagement, the feeling of community amongst those involved, and identification with

the symbols or leaders of particular political movements (Jenkins, 1983; Luker, 1984). This too I saw on the campaign trail, where many talked about their civic obligation to be involved, how they enjoyed the camaraderie of the campaign, and how strongly they felt about the candidate, the party, the other party, or about Barack Obama. Finally, social scientists agree with organizers that mobilizing practices *themselves* matter, that attempts to get people involved, to keep them involved, and to furnish organizations conducive for this, can make a difference (Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson, 2000; Verba, Brady, and Schlozman, 1995; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001; Ganz, 2009; Munson, 2008, see also Alinsky, 1989 for a practitioner's perspective). This is the aspect I focus on in this chapter, because it is the least understood when it comes to campaigns. It is what my fieldwork gives me unique data on.

Mobilizing practices encompass work done to enroll allies, volunteers, and part-timers in the campaign assemblage. It is predominantly done by staffers, especially junior staffers working as field organizers, and by a few more senior staffers like the field director, canvassing director, and any volunteer coordinators. Campaign organizations are built from the top down and expanded only gradually as both the finance staff and campaign committees in D.C. keep a close eye on the "burn rate" (how quickly raised funds are spent). The senior field people are rarely hired till April or May, after a campaign manager has been found, and most of the field organizers in June or July. By then, the majority of staffers will be working on field, and eventually, almost everyone will at least some of the time. But till early August, the ground war is waged mainly on the planning table. In the spring and the summer, the candidate and a few senior staffers do outreach to the most important allies in the district and visit as many local organizations as possible, but campaign offices are few and far between and lie largely empty as the only volunteers there are the rare self-starters who seek them out asking if they can help.

Then things start to change. So-called “walk-in volunteers” are not enough to meet the contact goals that staffers set themselves in competitive campaigns today. It would be rather presumptuous to simply expect enough to come to knock on a hundred thousand doors in the span of a few months. While survey research suggests that between two and three percent of the adult population have worked for a candidate or party every cycle the last ten years (ANES, 2009), most seem not to do so solely of their own volition. So from the fall onwards, staffers start to work to rope people in, and to hire enough part-timers to make all the contacts that they do not expect that they will have enough allies and volunteers to make. Mobilizing practices are dynamic, contingent, and modular as individuals and individual elements are enrolled in the assemblage, but can be broken down in three steps—identifying, recruiting, and retaining people. In the rest of the chapter, I look first at the principles that staffers articulate for their mobilizing work, then at the practices I observed as staffers tried to mobilize allies, volunteers, and part-timers (and how each experienced being mobilized), and finally at why principles and practices seem to diverge so consistently.<sup>2</sup>

### *Staffers’ Mobilizing Principles*

Campaign staffers have a fairly uniform set of principles for how mobilizing ought to be done. They are articulated most clearly and commonly by senior staffers and more or less quickly adopted by their more junior colleagues while on the trail. They are outlined in training sessions, in in-house field manuals, and in published primers on campaign work (e.g. Shaw, 2004).

Though the principles are almost always reiterated in interviews, many of them are not put into

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<sup>2</sup> Mobilizing practices are deeply dependent on a wide range of information and communication technologies, ranging from specialized tools like online-integrated voter files, over emerging ones like social networking sites, and in particular more mundane ones like email, phones, and something as prosaic as cars. I have dealt with the role of Internet technologies in political mobilizing and activism in details elsewhere (Nielsen, 2009a; Nielsen, 2009b), and foreground other issues in this chapter.

practice. While staffers both in principles and in practice insist on keeping close, quantitative count of mobilizing work to measure progress, and strive to deal with each recruit in an one-to-one way via clearly designated team leaders, constituency outreach workers, or volunteer coordinators, there are three principles in particular that are rarely practiced. They have to do with *who* to mobilize, *when* to mobilize, and who should *do* the mobilizing work. I deal with each in turn.

First, staffers generally consider volunteers preferable in principle to allies, part-timers, and especially to commercial canvassing or phone banking services. Not only are volunteers free, they are also seen as more effective than the alternatives. When asked to describe their ideal canvasser, every staffer interviewed mentioned local volunteers first. They are seen as more motivated, more knowledgeable, and less likely to cause complications for the campaign than others. A few staffers explicitly refer to the research that suggests that volunteers indeed are both more cost-effective and more effective per contact (e.g. Green and Gerber, 2008). Others simply explain that they think that someone acting out of personal conviction, is at least fairly well-informed about politics generally and the campaign in particular, and has some familiarity with local issues is a better medium than hired help. One campaign manager sums it up nicely as we talk in her car on the way back from a rally: “When it comes to canvassers, the less they cost, the better they are.”

Second, staffers always make it clear that they do not believe that campaigns can take volunteers or others for granted. “Recruit early and often”, goes one dictum. Staffers explicitly recognize that it takes work to get people mobilized, and that mobilizing is not something that is accomplished once and for all, but an ongoing process of keeping people involved. Part of this is getting people enrolled on their own terms, or at least shared terms. Staffers often talk about

allies and volunteers—and sometimes part-timers too—as “stakeholders.” They argue that part of what it takes to mobilize them is to make them feel “involved” in the campaign, and to ensure that they feel that it is “their project too.” This does not mean that staffers argue that campaigns should be “bottom-up” enterprises run by activists, far from it. It simply means that they see that people are different and get involved for different reasons, and that an instrumentally effective mobilizing effort needs to accommodate this diversity even as staffers seek to retain control over key things like the message. (I return to the issue of how this diversity is organized in the next chapter.)

Third, staffers argue that mobilizing work should in principle be done by party organizations and activist networks, and not by campaigns. The staffers I interviewed about mobilizing all underlined that campaigns are poorly positioned to do what they call “base-building”—serious and sustained investments and efforts to maintain a meaningful presence at the local level and keep activists involved and ready to help.<sup>3</sup> Staffers themselves are often the first to call what they are actually doing a “circus tent approach”, and generally suggest that mobilizing should ideally start six to twelve months before Election Day.

These principles are deeply informed by staffers’ instrumental perspective. They have some affinities with a more explicitly normative discourse about the virtues of “grassroots” politics that is in the Democratic Party often associated with the late Paul Wellstone, Howard Dean, and sometimes Barack Obama (see for example Madden, 2008). Many staffers privately

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<sup>3</sup> Neither Himes nor Stender were incumbents, and this probably makes a difference in this regard. 2008 was Jim Himes’ first run for federal office; it was Linda Stender’s second in a row (she had, however, served as Mayor and State Assemblywoman in the area for a number of years). In some cases, long-term incumbents will take care to maintain quite substantial networks of local supporters. Nicole Marwell (2007) describes how New York State Senator Vito Lopez mobilizes thousands to get out the vote for himself and others through a network of community organizations that he is heavily involved with, and I saw similar local political entrepreneurs active in the two districts I studied. But far from every long-term local incumbent maintain such networks, and I have seen no data to indicate that federal officeholders are any different. Some probably do, many do not.

embrace this discourse, and decry “Astroturf campaigns”, “corporate politics”, and “electoral strip mining.” They argue that politicians with strong and lasting connections to local communities and networks of partisan activists are more likely to be responsive to their constituents. But whereas this discourse highlights mobilizing work as having a moral value in itself, the staff principles outlined here are primarily utilitarian ones, concerned with what they think works, what might help campaigns reach their immediate goals of winning. When a staffer talks about a “grassroots campaign”, he or she usually means a tightly controlled effort that has mobilized a lot of allies and volunteers to work for it (see Plouffe, 2009). The term has such positive connotations that most will use it to describe their own campaign in public, no matter its actual composition, but privately, and in retrospect, they are more frank—as one senior staffer told me after a training workshop: “When it comes to [mobilizing], everybody agrees in principle. But we rarely do these things in practice.” Just as many academics would admit, if pressed, that scientific practice does not always follow the principles enunciated in methods textbooks or by philosophers of science, and the majority of managers would recognize that there might be a certain distance between managerial practices and the principles of management, most staffers know full well that when it comes to mobilizing, they do not always practice what they preach.

The divergence between principles and practices can be summed up like this: Staffers agree that mobilizing should ideally be oriented towards volunteers, start early, and be done by allies. In reality, it is oriented towards part-timers, starts late, and is done by campaigns. In the next sections, I outline mobilizing practices vis-à-vis allies, volunteers, and part-timers, and then

go on to discuss why they consistently diverge from the principles that staffers I interviewed happily reiterated after the elections too.<sup>4</sup>

### *Mobilizing Allies*

Mobilizing allies for the ground war is different from securing an endorsement or a donation. For the latter, you talk to the union local's secretary-treasurer, the political director of the interest group in question, the Reverend of a church—usually; there will be someone to go to. To get help for field, staffers need to start with these people too. It is rarely a good idea to try to circumvent a broker. “Always go through the right channels”, one staffer says, and adds “If you can figure out who's really in charge.” But to get people to actually *come* and knock on those doors or make those calls often takes a little more. Leaders can rarely simply “deliver the bodies” that the staffers want for field. (As staffers sometimes discover late in the process, to their consternation. See Fisher, 2006.). Few entities can muster the material incentives that were part of what animated the big machines of yore (Gosnell, 1939; Erie, 1988; Wilson, 1962) or for that matter the solidary and moral incentives and promise of change that have helped energize major social movements (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001).

Campaign assemblages enroll many different kinds of allies. At the core is the compound campaign organization (combining the top candidate campaign and the party's coordinated campaign, if there is one), and in D.C. and the state capital, there are party organizations like the DCCC and the relevant state party helping with consultants, staffers, data, and the like. When it comes to mobilizing people for personalized political communication, however, a wider net is cast. The ones who can write the biggest checks are not always the ones who can help the most

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<sup>4</sup> The mobilizing of allies is reconstructed mainly on the basis of interviews and secondary sources; the mobilizing of individuals is based on field-work and interviews.

on the ground. Campaigns approach member-based sympathetic interest groups (like unions and environmentalists, women's rights, LGBT, and civil rights groups) They reach out to networks of progressive activists, whether old (Democrats in the reform club movement, Americans for Democratic Action, or good government groups like the New Jersey and Connecticut Citizen Action Group) or new (like Democracy for American and MoveOn). They contact local party organizations of widely varying strength, size, and spirit, and they talk to state- and local-level politicians with their own cadres of supporters. They go to civic associations with partisan political histories (from local conservationists, over select ethnic associations, to some African-American churches). All of these entities have their own different incentives for getting involved, and these are of course of prime importance (Herrnson, Sheiko, and Wilcox, 2005), but what I will look at here is how they are actually mobilized.

Allies will be asked to help in any number of ways—by bringing people for the last days of GOTV work, by encouraging people to volunteer for the campaign, by letting the staffers try to hire part-timers amongst their membership, and in the few cases where they really *can* “deliver the bodies”, to do so in all these ways. (Machine politics and patronage is not entirely a thing of the past, some union members are dependent on their local for jobs, and so on.). What they all have in common, from the largest union local or most vibrant Democratic Town Committee and all the way down, is that they will not and cannot do all the field work for the campaign. The assemblage is build in a piecemeal fashion both when it comes to allies, volunteers, and part-timers—fifteen union members this weekend for a literature drop, ten members of an activist group coming in for a volunteer canvass, five members of a congregation taking on work as part-timers, an aide to a local party official taking a few days off to help.

#### *Episode 4.4*

Monday, October 27th, just about 7 p.m. I'm making calls to undecided voters while two staffers and a local Democratic district leader are discussing how to fill all the shifts for the GOTV weekend. It is five days away. The local field organizer says his hiring is going "pretty well", but that he is still short of his goals. He adds "And some of these people...", and lets the sentence trail off. The district leader says "I have five to ten people who can come." The senior staffer adds "and we can count on five from McDonald, and five from Reverend Jackson. But they expect us to pay." I ask her about the conversation afterwards, and she says, "We will take them on as paid canvassers, but you have to understand, these are just better people, even if they aren't volunteers. They don't do it only for the money."

Identifying allies: Any junior staffer or student of American politics can name the basic components of the "liberal" or "Democratic" coalition, the amorphous universe of various party-affiliated organizations, labor unions, interest groups, activist networks, and some politically active black and Latino civic, ethnic, and religious associations. But campaign assemblages are not built at this level of abstraction, and coalitions do not coalesce of their own accord.<sup>5</sup> When identifying potential allies, staffers try to find particular elements that might be enrolled in the assemblage, and try to ascertain whether they are worth mobilizing. At this level, it is one thing to know that "African-American churches" might help Democratic campaigns, and another to know that the Mt. Aery Baptist Church in Bridgeport (one of dozens in the city) has a large and well-connected congregation and a long history of civic engagement. It is one thing to know that "organized labor" is an important part of the Democratic coalition, and another to know that the SEIU 32BJ in Connecticut (just one of many locals) holds a special grudge against Representative Chris Shays for what they see as broken promises on immigration reform. Who is who is not always clear to out-of-state senior staffers or inexperienced junior staffers, as the following excerpt from a conversation suggests:

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<sup>5</sup> Organizations like America Votes represents attempts to institutionalize this, so far more effective at the professional staff and targeting levels than at the member level. Union members and environmental activists may have less in common than SEIU and Sierra Club staffers do, and fewer incentives to work closely together on an ongoing basis.

*Episode 4.5*

It is the end of May, and I've spent parts of this afternoon chatting with the campaign manager and the field director on one of the campaigns. I am eager to try to map out who they think their most important local allies are going to be. Apparently, so are they. The campaign manager says that the unions have generally been "supportive", but that she is still working on finding out what they can and will do. The field director says that one of the local staffers have been around to activist meetings and local Democratic Town Committees, and that "Some are strong, and some not so strong, it seems to depend." I say it all sounds rather vague, and ask what he means more precisely. He chuckles says "Take it easy. We are still in the process of working on it. Give us a little time, and we'll see who's worth something. We are still getting introduced to the people we need to talk to." This is about five months before Election Day.

The work of identifying allies is not only about finding them, but also about assessing their interests and their instrumental value. Given that they rarely come without strings attached, the staff question is always: are they worth it? The value of adding a particular ally to the assemblage is rarely clear. Some exaggerate their own importance and resources, others are overestimated by staffers or those who advise them. Experienced staffers and local operatives are quick to discard some possible partners, explaining their judgment—"the local Democrats in Marion only come out for their own", "the Sierra Club in Jackson is a paper tiger, they have no bodies", "the secretary-treasurer of the IBS likes to talk, but he can't deliver." And then there are others you have to go to—"nothing happens in Democratic politics in Greenville without the chair's approval,", "here in Auburn, you know you have to go and kiss the ring."<sup>6</sup> These insights are a form of local knowledge that outside consultants and staffers rarely possess, but have to acquire, from local operatives, incumbent officeholders, and the experience of those who ran the last comparable campaign in the area.

Even when potential allies do bring something to the table, these are not simple calculations, but judgment calls. Intangible and often intransitive factors are all mixed up, a particular potential ally might be powerful but demand political concessions, scare off coveted electoral constituencies, or have mixed loyalties. When a campaign gets involved with a local

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<sup>6</sup> The place names and the acronym in this paragraph are all pseudonyms.

political machine, it may be able turn out the vote in a crucial urban area, but will also taint the candidate's reputation and anger progressive reformers and some parts of the suburban electorate. Community organizers from groups like ACORN may deliver a substantial number of motivated activists as volunteers, but the policy concessions they will want on, say, affordable housing, may be at odds with what consultants would recommend for candidates running in relatively affluent districts. Whether political allies are involved in strictly transactional politics or not, the arithmetic is never simple, the coin of the realm unclear. How do you weigh an asset like fifteen committed canvassers against the risk of modifying the candidate's stance on immigration reform ever so slightly?

*Episode 4.6*

“There have been some problems in the past with... How shall I put it? Corruption?”, says one staffer. “But the fact of the matter is that we need [this city], and there may be no way around dealing with at least elements of the machine. [The campaign manager] will have to feel out some of the locals and figure out who is worth it, for apparently, there are many different power centers. And they are holding out for something in return, but who knows what they can actually deliver? And those kinds of unsavory connections are certainly not going to help us in the suburbs, so you are not going to see [the candidate] around any of the more colorful characters, that's for sure.”

Recruiting allies: When they have been identified and deemed useful, allies have to be enrolled. Many ideologically or otherwise aligned groups may offer a first gesture of support (an endorsement, a financial contribution) early on to signal their positions, but bringing on board a major ally like a union local or a large activist network takes more than that. Even if much work is done behind the scenes, allies will typically expect to hear from the candidate him or herself, and they will expect a public commitment acknowledging their support—a candidate may be expected to join a picket line with a union, to march in a parade with an ethnic association, or to come and speak to a religious congregation or political meeting. In one campaign office in Connecticut, an entire wall was decorated with pictures of Himes with various local allies, most

notably a series of pictures of him with members of the 32BJ, a strong SEIU local. Such acknowledgments signify the mutual relationships between candidates and allies. They may look like symbolic gestures, and they are—in an important way: “He did not come to our event, so we cannot support him,” says one person from a potential ally that did not get the same treatment. Part of the reason that senior staffers and candidates are heavily involved in mobilizing allies is that their involvement signal seriousness. Another is that the political calculations are intricate and consequential—nobody wants to leave it to a 23-year old college drop-out to decide whether the candidate should get involved with politically potentially inflammatory groups—but another is the symbolic elements involved in recruiting and retaining allies. Allies expect to “Hear from the man himself,” even as staffers push back and insist, “We can’t make every man a king.”

Retaining allies: And they continue to expect to hear from the candidate and senior staffers. Allies are never in once and for all. Every involvement can be calibrated according to a campaign’s sensitivity to the interests and ideology of a particular associate. Initial help may simply be access; the candidate is invited to come speak. Then calls for volunteer support are sent out to members. A candidate may be implicitly involved in whatever member-contact program a particular ally plans for the election. And staffers, volunteers, or part-timers may be channeled from allies to the candidate and coordinated campaign canvassing and phone banking. It all depends on the ally and the ongoing relationship. Each of these steps is a discrete choice, and depends on how receptive campaigns are to potential allies, and a key indicator of this is access and face-time, with the candidate, or, at the very least, with the campaign manager. The common staff saying “The candidate’s time is the most valuable resource we have” suggests how scarce such attention might be—and it is needed for many other purposes than mobilizing (fundraising, public events, policy briefings, etc). On one occasion, when I asked a senior staffer

why some allies I had expected to see involved were nowhere to be seen, the (understandably) irritable response was: “Look, there is so much we *could* have done, but only time to *do* so much, okay?” This sum up one reality of mobilizing that is easily forgotten in abstract discussions—it takes constant work, and there are so many potential allies and only time for so much.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Episode 4.7*

The Himes campaign has been trying for weeks to ramp up its outreach effort to the local Latino communities. Census data suggests that their numbers are growing, but the voter file shows that their turnout is low. Himes was born in Peru, and speaks Spanish, so the staffers figure that they may be able to generate a little excitement and get a few thousand votes more. This month, in October, they brought in two new staffers who actually speak Spanish, but they are both from out-of-district, and are having a hard time finding someone to connect with.

Tonight, a local school teacher has been in and worked the phones as a volunteer. He overhears two staffers discussing the limited progress they've made on Latino outreach. He says, “I have to be careful, working for the city, but I can help you. If you send me an email, I can hook you up with some people who can help. The Latino community in Stamford is very active and...” Both staffers interrupt him simultaneously “Really?!” and he continues, “... Yes, absolutely, they are very involved in the churches, in the schools, in the community board and the like.” He looks around and says “I'm actually surprised that they aren't here, especially the young ones.”

Allies' experience of being mobilized: Allies come from a heterogeneous population of different entities with differing interests, identities, and conceptions of electoral politics and their roles in it. But a couple of commonalities do exist between their experience of being mobilized. First, they are heavily colored by the scarcity of candidate attention. “I can't believe we haven't even *seen* [Stender]” says one local notable. “We are not going to help [Himes], because he did not come to our meeting”, says another. The position behind is sometimes bluntly articulated: “Don't they know who we are?” asks one activist organizer. Sometimes, indeed, they do not. Even senior staffers may simply not know who a potential, and potentially important, ally is. During my field work, I have seen well-connected local State Senators, high-level aides to

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<sup>7</sup> Over time, incumbents will an opportunity to use time and the resources and clout at their disposal to build a more durable net of allies in their district and beyond.

Mayors, and state-level union political directors walk in and out of campaign offices without being recognized by a single staffer—sometimes junior staffers innocently asked visiting dignitaries “Are you here to volunteer?”. Secondly, the fact that especially staffers at the more professionalized allies (unions, interest groups) hold the same basic mobilizing principles as the campaign staffers articulate means that they are particularly sensitive to the failure to follow through in practice. “Never take your base for granted”, one staff dictum, may just sound like a rule of thumb, but if the allies that supposedly make up your base knows it too, and agree that mobilizing should be done early; they will interpret a lack of early high-level outreach differently, and may feel slighted by a late approach from junior staffers. Being contacted in August and given just one or two chances to speak to the candidate or campaign manager is not always satisfying, whether for those interested in—“What will she do for us?”—or ideologically invested in—“What does he stand for?”—a particular race. As Luis pointed out in episode 4.2, the mobilized, whether allies or individuals, like attention, not simply because it is gratifying, but because it signified commitment and may be parlayed into influence and raise their profile. One union political director put it bluntly: “We want to help, but we want to make sure it is appreciated.” A campaign manager provides the implicit retort: “We want their help, but we want to make sure it is worth it.”

### *Mobilizing Volunteers*

Mobilizing volunteers is different, and in principle, they are always worth it. But “We never get enough volunteers, we always want more”, as one senior staffer puts it. Some academics suggest that many non-profits do not mobilize volunteers because they need their help, but because they give the organization legitimacy (Eliasoph, forthcoming). While volunteers are certainly

considered useful in this way too in campaigns, they are also prized for their instrumental value. The work done to get them involved is primarily done by field organizers in spare moments between their other duties, and by the volunteer coordinator(s)—if there are any. (The Himes campaign only hired one—half-time—in the late fall, the Stender campaign had one pretty much full time from the summer, and another split between volunteer coordination and other duties from the fall on.) Potential volunteers are sometimes found in large numbers—through allies, sign-ups at events, or on lists of people who have volunteered in the area in the past—but they are mobilized *one by one* by individual staffers (See Munson, 2008 for a similar point about pro-life activists.). This work starts in earnest in August, once the junior staffers have been hired and have acquired their sea legs, and summer vacations and other complications have wound down. In July, volunteers are few and far between, a couple of party faithful, some friends of the candidate, maybe an especially motivated high school intern. In late August, as the mobilizing work starts to bear fruit and the election gets closer, people come in greater numbers.

Identifying volunteers: Staffers identify potential volunteers primarily on the basis of past behavior, and therefore, mobilizing efforts tend to have the same self-reinforcing tendency to focus on the usual suspects that political fundraising has. Large quantities of extremely heterogeneous information is gathered about bits and pieces of the population in a given district, parsed for signs that mark individuals as potential recruits, and matched to whatever contact information is available from voter files or elsewhere. From this, staffers build endless lists of people who can be contacted and asked to help. The sources aggregated are truly eclectic and far from as systematically gathered or analyzed as the data that goes into targeting (See chapter 6.). Campaigns will acquire lists of people who have volunteered on past campaigns. They will compile names of those who have donated money. They will include people who have left

contact information on the ubiquitous “sign-in sheets” that staffers ask everyone come to campaign events to fill out. They supplement with the people who sign up on campaign websites. They add whatever names allies might provide. They will use available information about people’s voting record to single out those who vote regularly in party primaries, and add them also. Many add names from their own personal networks too, relying on friends and family to expand the universe, especially in the last days of an election. All are asked to help. Survey data may, as said, suggest that thousands of people should be ripe targets for mobilizing work, but practically, campaigns cannot rely on the abstract probability that, say, four thousand people are likely to volunteer in a given area. They need concrete individuals, and work to find names and contact information to reach out to them and get them involved.<sup>8</sup>

Recruiting volunteers: Contact information is particularly important because most staffers are moored in offices or otherwise preoccupied most of the time. “I felt very tied to my desk”, says one field organizer. (Others echo the sentiment.) Hence, they can rarely meet people where they are, and have to rely on outreach over the phone and via email to the lists of people identified as potential recruits. The work that goes into mobilizing volunteers is, in the words of staffer, “haphazard.” It takes many hours to recruit volunteers, but these hours are scattered and rarely structured or scheduled in advance. It is always on the to-do list, but done mostly when nothing else demands attention—which is rare. The volunteer coordinators and a few field organizers may do recruitment work on a regular basis, but many do not, and are only intermittently ordered to do so when field directors grow worried about the recruitment numbers that they regularly receive—usually in the last minute.

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously enough, mobilizing work remains overwhelmingly staff-centered, so volunteers are rarely asked to provide names of potential recruits, or to contact them. Even as staffers abstractly recognize that social networks underlie much mobilization, they rarely make use of that knowledge. Some campaigns have experimented with a different approach, where volunteers take part in the mobilizing work (Plouffe, 2009), something that is more widespread in community organizing and movement mobilizations.

Given the uneven nature of the data involved in identification, and the uncertain inferences that can be drawn from it, it is unsurprising that recruitment rates vary widely. Some days, staffers are abuzz over “magic lists” of “hot prospects” where fifty percent of those reached agree to get involved. Other days, the same organizers are left despondent by hours on end spent on phone calls to no avail. Take just two rough estimates offered by one experienced organizer: he suggested that an “okay” list has a recruitment rate of around ten percent. Then he added that fifty percent of those who agree to come would fail to show. (This is what is sometimes called “the rule of halves”.) On top of that, he said that “at least” fifty percent would only come once or twice a month, if they ever came back. (One thing is whether people volunteer or not, another how often and how much—a few people were there as much as the staffers.) Other interviewees give similar rough estimates (and they are estimates, volunteers are not tracked as closely as voters or donors are). If we take them as reasonably accurate, the time it takes recruit one volunteer can be approximated—thirty phone calls an hour on a list with ten percent recruitment rate, with only half of those who agree to come actually showing up equals one and a half hour of work for every single volunteer who ever even sets foot in a campaign office. This rough figure is not to suggest that more mobilizing alone necessarily results in more volunteers—the many other factors identified by social scientists retain their relevance. But it underlines the *instrumental* importance of the principle of mobilizing early and often, and the significance of retaining volunteers once they have been in once—all the work that goes into identifying and recruiting someone has a very limited pay-off if that person simply comes in once or twice.

But the thousands of phone calls made to recruit volunteers are made only reluctantly. In a sense, mobilizing is for staffers what contacting is for volunteers and part-timers—stressful and

often unsatisfactory work. This is how one organizer describes the feeling after a couple of volunteers have left after making a couple of dozens of phone calls:

*Episode 4.8*

“The volunteers, I just don’t feel like I have anything to give them. I mean, these people, they could be at home, they could be with their family, they could be working, and instead they are making phone calls for me. And I feel shitty about it.”

I ask him if he doesn’t feel like they get anything out of it, and he says: “You know, we sometimes give them food and stuff. But perhaps, it would be different with another social or demographic or economic group or whatever, but this is really... [Pause] I don’t feel I can give them anything in return. Is it any wonder I don’t feel like roping them in?”

Attempts at recruitment are individual interactions where the person making the opening move put *themselves* at risk (“making calls *for me*”, emphasis added), the way a canvasser or caller does with a voter. In this case, what is at stake is the professional identity of someone in a campaign mobilizing people who will be working for him, and from an instrumental perspective asking for a favor without offering anything in return. Many staffers’ feelings about recruitment work is akin to the stress that those doing contacts feel, and their reluctance have some of the same roots, the personal sense of rejection combined with low recruitment rates, the sense of tedium involved in repeating the same basic emotional actions again and again, and the overarching sense of futility that comes with the slow way in which assemblages are built. Especially in the last, intense weeks, when almost all staffers work full-time recruiting, scheduling, and confirming volunteers, this feeling of a mismatch between the large numbers needed and the piecemeal progress overwhelms some staffers.

Retaining volunteers: Volunteers, like allies, are never in once and for all. Relationships have to be maintained, and staffers are keenly aware of this—witness the common saying, “They come for the candidate, they stay for you” (which again underlines that the staffers *themselves* are in play). Some volunteers come only once, and work very little; others come back regularly,

and contribute dozens of hours. Like with mobilizing more generally, many of these fluctuations are partly dependent on factors beyond staff control, like the many highlighted by social scientists studying political participation (And mentioned above.). But mobilizing practices and organizational form matter too, and staffers recognize the importance of this both narrowly in terms of keeping individual volunteers involved and thus meeting numerical goals (such as filling a certain number of shifts), and at a more principled level (as suggested above). Given all the work that goes into identifying and recruiting a given volunteer, the hours spent sifting through various kinds of information and building lists, the days spent on the phones calling through them, it matters a great deal whether an individual contributes one hour once (and thus was not, from an instrumental perspective, worth the investment), or come back for two hours twice a week for a month or two. This is an area where some staffers in practice approximate the principles they articulate. But others do not. Volunteers are often seen by staffers as “high maintenance.” “There are so many egos you need to massage,” says one volunteer coordinator, and adds, “In that sense, part-timers are easier.” Since there are few systems of accountability, reporting, or reflexivity, nor any effective mechanisms of quality control oriented towards mobilizing, particular staffers’ style in this area seems to be mainly a matter of individual style, inclination, and talent. (This is contrast to how voter contacts, direct mail, and fundraising is standardized, and indeed to how customer interactions are routinized in, for example, the service industry (Leidner, 1993).)The variations here are truly extraordinary, and hard to explain systematically. To mobilize effectively, staffers have to, in the words of one, “Take everyone and anything.” Not everyone is prepared to or capable of handling that (I would probably be a terrible volunteer coordinator myself). Some staffers go to great lengths to remember every individual volunteers’ name, a few facts about who they are and what they do, always thank

them when they come and when they leave, ask how their children are doing, how their work is going, or chat about some shared interest, whether sport or politics. Others have only the briefest and most superficial interactions with volunteers.

Consider the following two examples of interactions between staffers and new volunteers entering different campaign offices:

#### *Episode 4.9*

Brady has his desk right next to the front door to the campaign office. Today, I sit behind him, helping the finance team stuff some envelopes for a mailing. It is a hot day in August, so the door is open.

A white woman in her sixties walks in and sees Brady. She asks him, "Is this the Obama office?" Brady says "Yes, Mam. We work for all the Democratic candidates in this area. Would you be interested in helping out?" She says "Yes, I talked with James about that, that's why I'm here." (James is an Obama staffer working in the area.) Brady introduces himself, and repeats her name: "Arlene, right?" "Yes." Then he says, "Please come with me". He leads her into the adjacent room, where most of the volunteers who come sit. It is empty at the moment. He explains, "We are making some calls to undecided voters right now, trying to find out who they are planning on voting for, and maybe trying to sway them a little bit, ok?" He gives Arlene a script, a list of talking points, and a couple of call sheets, and says, "We start with Linda Stender, the candidate for congress here, because she has a really tough race. Then we ask people about Obama, to make sure that everything is alright—you've probably seen the polls, but you never know." Arlene nods. Brady says, "Have a look at it, then I'll come back and we can talk about it if you have any questions. It really is mostly about being nice, but you can find some phrases in there you might want to use." She asks "Are people hostile?" Brady says, "No, it's been OK. It's a good list today. And it's a good feeling when you get through to someone who is a registered Republican and they tell you that they plan to vote for Obama."

Arlene sits down, reads the material, and makes some calls. I can't hear the details from where I sit, but she stays for about an hour and a half. Brady stops by once to check in on her. They chat a little about the traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike, he leaves, and she goes back on the phones. Around 6.30 p.m., she gets up to leave. As she walks by his desk on the way out, Brady stops her, "Thanks so much for your help today, Arlene. We really appreciate it. How did it go?" She says "It was all right, I guess. Most people don't really care to talk much." Brady laughs, "Yeah, they are not all equally good citizens, that's why we have to call them and remind them to vote." Arlene smiles. Brady straightens his back, and asks her "Can I schedule you to come in again, a couple of hours maybe? That'd be a great help." She says, "Sure, let's see", and takes out a calendar. She asks him, "Are you here on Sundays?" Brady says "Yes, we are here every day, from ten to eight. We also have a location in Martinsville, if that works better for you?" She says "No, I'm from Cranford, this is good". Brady says "We start making calls in the afternoon, so if you could come Sunday afternoon, that would be great." She says nothing. Brady says "How about two to four?" Arlene says, "That'll work." Brady says, "Great, thanks. Can you just give me your phone number? I'll add that when I schedule you. One of us might give you a call to check in on you." Arlene gives him her contact information, and then leaves with a "Goodbye!"

#### *Episode 4.10*

A white woman in her fifties, wearing a crisp dress suit, comes into the office this afternoon in early September. I haven't seen her before. She stands for about a minute, looking around, seemingly waiting for someone to react to her presence, then says to no-one in particular: "I'm here to volunteer for Obama".

Felipe has been working on his computer, trying to organize a weekend phone bank with some of his old college friends, who are helping him out. He gets up to greet the newcomer. “Hello Miss, welcome. My name is Felipe,” she says, “Hi, I’m Janet”. He continues: “I am the field organizer here. Will you help me make some phone calls?” Janet says, “Sure.” Felipe gives her a couple of call sheets, a script, and a set of talking points (all Jim Himes material), and says “Have a look at this, then you can start calling. Feel free to ask if you have any questions.” He does not explain the relationship between Himes and Obama, why the calls are to be made, or how the people to be called are selected. He goes back to his computer. Janet sits for a few minutes, reading through the material. There are no other volunteers in right now, so there is no one making phone calls. I am doing data-entry from last night’s calls. Janet reads the material again, gets up, gets some water. The only sound in the office is of fingers tapping on keyboards. Felipe is listening to music on his headphones. She looks at the script. She goes to the ladies room, and returns. She makes her first call, and a couple more. Few people seem to be home.

After about fifteen minutes and something like five calls, Janet gets up and walks around a bit. Then she comes back in, and says to Felipe, who is still working at his computer: “Nobody’s home. I think I’ll leave now.” She pauses while he takes his headphones off. He smiles to her. Then she asks “Can I make the rest of the phone calls from home?” Felipe says “You know, I’d rather have you come here and do it from here.” Janet nods her head and says “OK, I think I can come back later this week.” Felipe says “That’d be cool.” He turns to his computer. Janet waits for another second or two. Then she leaves.

These episodes show the practical skill involved in maintaining relationships between staffers and volunteers. It is not that staffers like Felipe do not *understand* why Brady’s way of dealing with people may be more effective. It is that they *despite* understanding this do not imitate it. Volunteers would explicitly praise Brady and staffers like him in conversations about their involvement, while many did not even know the name or job of staffers like Felipe, who barely talked with them.

Volunteers’ experience of being mobilized: Volunteers are rarely aware of the effort that goes into identifying them. But the work that goes into recruiting them and retaining them is very visible, and something they often bring up in conversations about their experience of being mobilized. Almost every interview and informal conversation confirms the idea that mobilizing in itself matters. Whereas staffers may feel uneasy about asking people to do them a favor (i.e., helping out with instrumental goals) without having anything to offer in return, most of the people who actually volunteer are in fact happy that they were asked, and mention that when asked to explain how they came to be involved—“When Brady called, I thought, “why not?” and decided to give it a shot”, “Well, I was at this event, and they asked for help, so here I am”, “Luis

came to our meeting, and they clearly needed people, so then I started coming in.” (To quote just a few.) Because of the importance attached to mobilizing work by the volunteers, differences in it are also felt keenly. Many volunteers complain about slow and sporadic communications with the campaign and say that they feel that there is “no sense of urgency.” Several people said it had taken more than a month before they heard back from the campaign after having signed up to volunteer, either online or at events. People who come in without being greeted by staffers complain that they do not feel “appreciated.” One thing many grumble about is coming in and finding that there is no need for their help. (This is especially common problem for people who refuse to make phone calls, by far the most important volunteer activity. Some staffers will make up work for them to do that is of no instrumental use, just to avoid having them feel they are not needed.)

Especially serial volunteers, who have been involved in many different campaigns over the years make clear that while it might be almost a given that they will volunteer for *some* Democrat every election year, *who* they volunteer for depends largely on how they are treated. Even volunteers who spoke very warmly of Barack Obama as a candidate would underline that they had decided to get involved with the congressional campaigns I followed instead after unsatisfying encounters with the Presidential campaign. (Which had few instrumental reasons to care about volunteer involvement in New Jersey and Connecticut, solidly blue states.) A few volunteers even explicitly recognized that what Brady and staffers like him were doing when they asked volunteers to count yard signs was “busywork” and yet valued it, “It shows that they care enough about us to keep us activated”.

### *Mobilizing Part-Timers*

Campaigns rarely mobilize enough volunteers and allies to reach all the targeted voters. Staffers know this, and no matter how much of a grassroots campaign they aim (or claim) to run, they will from the outset plan to use paid part-timers to reach their contact goals. Even the Barack Obama campaign, with its estimated three million volunteers, resorted to paid phone banks in 2008 (Jamieson, 2009: PAGE). The field plans drafted for Connecticut's 4<sup>th</sup> district and New Jersey's 7<sup>th</sup> called for thirty to fifty paid canvassers going out every day from Labor day onwards. One campaign eventually hired additional part-timers to make up for low number of volunteers on the phones too, and both campaigns had about two hundred part-timers knocking on doors over GOTV weekend. Most canvassing was in both cases done by part-timers. (Volunteers made most of the calls, allies a substantial part of the GOTV work.)

Most of the volunteers in the two campaigns were white, older, well educated, and relatively privileged. This is common in most kinds of political participation (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman, 1995). The part-timers, however, have a different profile. I did not survey them systematically, but the majority of them seem to come from two groups. One is made up of high school seniors and college students (many of these were white, but younger). The other is older and made up of people who are poor, unemployed, or "between things"—and many of these were black or Latino, and less well educated. These two groups are the kinds of people who find jobs working five to six hours a day knocking on doors for ten to fifteen dollars an hour (no benefits) attractive.

The part-timers were predominantly mobilized in intense rushes of work right before they were needed, one group in the week before the paid canvassing programs started after Labor Day (and in the first weeks after it started), and the rest in the week leading up to GOTV weekend.

During these weeks, basically all the junior staffers would spend their time identifying, recruiting, and retaining part-timers in what was a much more intense mobilizing effort than the more sporadic ones aimed at volunteers.

Identifying part-timers: Even though a few names of potential part-timers will be picked up along the way as former interns and interested volunteers are offered gigs as paid canvassers (effectively cannibalizing the volunteer community), the majority of the work done to identify them begins only about a week before the paid canvassing itself starts—in mid to late August. Again, staffers rely on lists, but since the only recognized form of behavior that leads them to infer that people might be interested in doing part-time work is past part-time work, the information gathered is much more homogenous. It is basically a question of getting access to lists of people who have done recent paid part-time work for other Democrats in the area, potentially supplemented with lists of people whom allies know might be interested in similar work. (Unemployed union members, young Democrats, out-of-luck congregation members, etc.)

With one important exception, basically everyone “Barring the absolutely most sketchy types” are asked to bring their friends. The important exception is the institutional racism integral to instrumental mobilizing practices, something most staffers either preferred not to talk about or shared their deep resentment of in private conversations and interviews. Because staffers think that personalized political communication is the more effective the more the person contacting the voter is like the voter (see chapter three on this), and the electorate has a well-known over-representation of whites, campaigns will in many cases be less interested in hiring black and Latino part-timers than white ones. Here is how a particularly frank canvassing director—who was himself black—described the delicate situation in an on-site conversation:

*Episode 4.11*

I ask Nelson how the hiring is going. He says, “Frankly, I need more canvassers, and I especially need more white canvassers.” I ask him what he means by that. “You know what I mean. You’ve seen Leroy, who interned here over the summer?” “Yes.” “OK, young, black kid. You remember how he used to dress? Shorts, basketball jerseys. He is a nice guy, a decent young man, and a college student. But if someone in Fairfield see him at the door like that, you know, I think it is fair to say that they are less likely to open than if you were at their door.” He points at me.

We both pause for a moment. Then Nelson continues, while shuffling around a stack of walk packets, “Remember that kid who used to help me cut turf?” “Alex?” “Yeah, Alex. He was always wearing jeans, a t-shirt, sneakers. Very relaxed, very casual. But he was white. It just screams “college kid.” I was sending a bunch of interns to canvass in Fairfield. All but Leroy were white. All were wearing rather casual outfits. You know, I try to be sensitive around these issues, but I also consider myself a fairly good judge of people and their reactions. And sometimes, you just have to intervene. So I try to make sure that I sent out the white kids first, to get Leroy one-on-one. Though of course, Alex and one of the others come back to pick something up. But so I ask him, “Leroy, would you mind wearing a shirt with a collar today?” And he is like “What do you mean?” And I’m like “I’m just asking you, would you mind wearing a shirt with a collar today.?” Nelson touches his own collar. “And he is like “What are you talking about?” So I go “What size do you wear”, and he says “Extra large”, so I’m like “Good, I have one in my car, let me get you a shirt.” So I run down to my car, and take one of my shirts, and give it to him.

“Of course, he was a little angry about that whole incident, and I understand him. He is the only kid I asked to dress up like that, and though I tried to make sure it wouldn’t be like that, we ended up having that conversation in front of other people. But what can you do? You need to face the facts.”

Staffers insisted that they would not turn away non-white applicants, but they did acknowledge that they did not recruit as actively in black circles as elsewhere. The canvassing director in the other campaign had avoided the issue in my conversations with him, even when pressed on it, but after the election, he said in interview “Let’s say we don’t go out of our way to recruit more black canvassers, ok?” One junior staffer explained in a post-election interview: “I felt so sick when I realized what was going on. I had a big fight with [the canvassing director] over it. Maybe I should have quit. I thought about it, but I didn’t.”

In addition to the lists that staffers call through, they try to identify potential part-timers through public postings about campaign jobs. (Interestingly enough, unlike volunteer opportunities, these are not posted on the campaign websites themselves, but on Craigslist and sometimes even in the classifieds section of local newspapers.) Finally, as time passes, recruitment off lists falls short, and deadlines loom ever closer, staffers are sent to pedestrian areas in inner cities, suburban malls, or college campuses to literally try to hire strangers off the

street. (In 2000, Jon Corzine's campaign for Senate memorably ended up bussing in men hired at homeless shelters in Pennsylvania for its GOTV weekend in neighboring New Jersey.) One day late in October, two field organizers came back to the campaign office despondent after having spent four hours in a shopping center without finding a single person willing to work for the campaign. Afterwards, Luis, the canvassing director, remarked dryly "It was hard enough to find these guys [gestures towards the field organizers]. No wonder it is even harder to find canvassers! They will be paid much less."

Recruiting part-timers: Since the number of part-timers needed is quite substantial, there is only a limited known population to recruit from, and the time left to get up to speed is short, recruitment is often rather rushed. In both campaigns, several staffers had to be taken off their existing tasks and dedicated full-time to recruitment to meet the numerical goals set. This was never done to mobilize volunteers. They would spend the mornings out of the office, trying to identify potential recruits, the afternoons calling through lists to recruit individual part-timers, and the evenings training each new band of part-timers. It is important to appreciate how slow this process is. In one campaign, the canvassing director quickly had to give up on the idea that all the needed part-timers could be recruited in the span of two weeks and trained at two big training seminars. Instead, all five regional field organizers dedicated at least half of their time to ongoing identification, recruitment, and training of part-timers for several weeks. One week into the ten-week paid canvassing program, one campaign had hired sixty percent of what they needed (after two weeks of mobilizing for it), four weeks in, they had about eighty five percent of the number they wanted. The other campaign reported similar numbers. Mid-September, one campaign sent six field organizers to the campus of a large state university to try to recruit part-timers. They spent all day there, and returned with three new recruits. Knocking on doors part-

time, for a few weeks, for about ten dollars an hour, is simply not particularly attractive work. (Especially not in generally affluent districts like the ones I researched.)

As with volunteers, recruitment rates are low (though varying)—many promise to come, then never show, and many people who come do so only once. So mobilizing a hundred part-timers to fill fifty daily five to six hour shifts (from Labor Day till late October) or two to three hundred part-timers (for GOTV weekend) actually involves recruiting many more—one experienced field consultant suggested in an interview that a two-to-one ratio was a good rule of thumb. (The rule of halves again.) Broken down by campaign office and individual staffer, this means that a single field organizer working out of a regional office, often alone or with only one or two other staffers, may have to go from working with twenty people to working with sixty people, all in the span of a few weeks towards the already-intense end of a campaign. Rejection seems to be as common as with volunteers, the dynamics much the same, and the satisfaction even less, since every staffer recognize that they end up “scraping the barrel” trying to mobilize enough people to get the work done. One was blunt in his assessment of the work of mobilizing part-timers: “I fucking hate it. And you can quote me on that.” Hereby done.

Retaining part-timers: As with volunteers, there is a strong and basic social component to the work that staffers do to keep part-timers involved. And again, there are important individual variations in how well they do this. Some will learn part-timers’ names, a little something about them, and chat amiably with them every day before they go out, plus engage in more professional conversations too, going over the previous days’ experiences and briefing them about current affairs or the campaign to keep them up to date before their meeting with voters. Others do not. The extremes between Brady’s and Felipe’s interactions with volunteers illustrated by episode 4.9 and 4.10 recur with staff/part-timer interactions. One field organizer

professed to “love” her team of paid canvassers. “They are so sweet!” One of her colleagues replied that he “hated” his, because they were “stupid” and he “[couldn’t] trust them.” The two dealt with their teams accordingly. Facts that they both had to deal with included (1) low political knowledge amongst canvassers (who regularly got names wrong (“Will you vote for Senator Frank Luxemburg?” [sic]) and titles wrong (“Jim Himes is running for State Congress”), and often knew nothing about the policy positions or backgrounds of candidates, (“What *is* her position on abortion?”), and remained politically disengaged themselves (“Do I have to be a Democrat to work for you guys? I’m not even registered to vote.” The answer to that was “No, don’t worry.”). (2) As both agreed “We can’t actually fire people, unless they cheat”, since they needed so many. (3) As one put it, “I think the fact that we lose people to part-time jobs at McDonalds is indicative of how much people are into this.”

Part-timers’ experience of being mobilized: Just as allies and volunteers do, part-timers too make inferences from the work they see going into mobilizing them. Whereas volunteers often feel that the staffers are not attentive enough to them, and thus conclude that their effort is not seen as urgent or appreciated, part-timers experience the staffs’ mobilizing effort as intense and perhaps even frantic, and quickly come to think that they are, in the words of Charlene, the part-timer I have quoted in previous chapters, “desperate.” She was only one of many part-timers who reasoned that the fact that campaigns hire “Pretty much anyone who can walk for a couple of hours” meant that they could not be “too picky” and therefore could not be “too demanding” either. When one’s sense is that one’s job is arise out of what Daniel, one of her co-workers, called “their” (i.e. staffers’) need “To put some flesh in front of people”, one’s work ethic may reflect it. This basis sense that the job is theirs as long as they want it, combined with the fact that many part-timers considered the job no more attractive than any other kind of low-wage

part-time labor, helps to account for the ever-shortening work hours and occasionally low levels of personal engagement.

Staffers recognized these limitations too, of course, which is part of the reason they in principle prefer volunteers, who to a much larger extent match their idea of an instrumentally ideal canvasser—one field organizer in the span of two months went from describing the kind of person he was looking for to do part-time work as “Someone local, who knows the community and cares about politics” to a rather less demanding idea that “We need people who aren’t crazy and don’t look crazy.” “You should see some of the people who come in”, he added. And I did see them, and they were ordinary Americans, most of the kind who are either uninterested in politics and simply take the work to earn a little on the side or of the kind who finds themselves in a tough spot where any job is better than no job. They are not ideal media for personalized political communication, but they are heavily relied on. As one campaign manager put it when I asked her about the reliance on the part-timers that the staffers so often belittled, she looked at me and said: “It is more important that we do field than that we have volunteers do it.”

### *Principles versus Practices*

At the end of the campaign, the tables are occasionally turned, and those who had previously been mobilized gain the upper hand, even within the campaign itself. Even if it does not translate into early investments in mobilizing, senior staffers remain cognizant of the importance of field—“If we don’t get out the vote in Bridgeport, we are fucked.” In the final days of a race, they may be willing to make compromises to make sure they find the bodies and voices to reach the entire target universe. Everyone dreads the close defeat that could have been avoided with just a few more calls, a few more knocks—it is, as one staffer explained, in a sense worse to lose

narrowly than in a blow-out. In the latter case, you do not have to worry about what you could have done. In the closing days of an election, remaining principles are often put aside in the face of practical considerations as staffers turn to anyone who can help, and sometimes get involved with the kinds of local political brokers or commercial vendors they had forsworn they would use “this time.” A ward boss or local politician may have a few people willing to work for “a little money on the side.” A community leader may know who will take some of the “street money” often handed out towards the end of campaigns, for help and for votes. A local operative can fix a paid phone bank in the last minute. And if the money is there, the gap will be closed, and the numerical goals for contacts will be met, even if it was not supposed to be like that this time.

Keeping the staff principles of mobilizing in mind, and the low priority of this work in the preceding months, it is an almost surreal experience to watch the campaign go all-out on recruitment in the final days before the GOTV weekend. Everyone available—the usual divisions of labor none withstanding—will be commandeered to make recruitment calls, to make new volunteers and part-timers commit to coming, to schedule them, and to call them to confirm. On October 30 and October 31, people in both campaigns were asked to call through lists of registered Democrats who had voted in four out of the last four elections to ask these total strangers if they would like to help. Recruitment rates are extremely low on such lists. Even with all hands on deck, the resources far from sufficed, and what had been characterized as haphazard previously was now described as “chaotic”, “out of control”, and “a mess” as staffers tried to keep track of everything on posters, clip boards, sheets of paper, individual spread sheets on their computers, and on documents shared online. No one claimed to be able to keep track of

everything going on, and everyone recognized that mobilizing in practice had—again—turned out to be quite different from mobilizing in principle.

Staffers' mobilizing practices diverge from their mobilizing principles for several reasons. Ideally, staffers argue that others, like party organizations and activist networks, should do the mobilizing work. In reality, they do some, but rarely enough to provide the numbers the staffers need to reach their contact goals. As chapter two has shown, many of the local organizations are not what some used to be, and attempts to institutionalize mobilizing and professionalize political organizing from the national level down have yielded mixed results. Instead, campaigns start mobilizing, even as staffers, like one campaign manager I spoke to, complain that “It is unreasonable to ask us to do the party’s work.” Reasonable or not, as long as they want to wage a full-fledged ground war, what choice do they have? Most allies are durable and multi-faceted entities, nurtured in many ways, pursuing many goals. Competitive campaigns are temporary entities with only one overriding goal—victory, in this district, this cycle. Nothing else. The staffers know this, and know that it means that the buck stops with them.

Ideally, they would like to start mobilizing early. In reality, the work only really gets under way in August—three months before the election, not the six to twelve often mentioned. The reason is the way campaign organizations are build, staffed from the top down, with the junior staffers who do most of the mobilizing work hired in June and July. Once they start, their effort is often hampered by their lack of experience and that fact that many are not from the district they work in. Furthermore, the work that they engage in is much less professionalized than for example targeting or fundraising. Political operatives like to refer to their work in these areas as a “science.” In contrast, mobilizing is not even considered an art (like media or political work) or a craft (like advance and scheduling). It is, in the words of one field director, “not

rocket science. It is just something you do.” (Though he did concede that “Some people are not cut out for it”—in one turn of phrase individualizing variations like those between Brady and Felipe in episodes 4.9 and 4.10.) In politics, mobilizing work is not standardized, structured, made measurable, and occupationally validated the way targeting and fundraising is. It is not cultivated the way it is in some member-based interest group allies and community groups. It is not considered a skill the way interactions with customers are in the service or hospitality industries, or even the way we might prize it amongst friends. It is just something you do. And it is low prestige too. (Partially as a consequence.) Being a field organizer—sometimes referred to as a “field rat” or “field scum”—is an entry level job in politics, and one people rarely hold more than once or twice. When asked if they would like to work on campaigns again, junior staffers would often reply “Yes. But not in field.” Instead, field organizers would aspire to work in a more prestigious area like fundraising or media, or closer to the candidate (As a scheduler or personal assistant.). Few would want to move up as a deputy field director, canvassing director, or volunteer coordinator. Given the ratio of about five to one between junior positions and these more intermediary and senior positions, that is probably a good thing too. (The ratio is two or three junior staffers to one senior staffer in most other areas.) Luis was rare in having worked several cycles in a row in field, and he too, a twenty-eight year old self-described “veteran”, was thinking about going to graduate school and go into more policy-oriented work. So mobilizing work tends to be deferred and displaced as the staffers who eventually will have to do it come on board late, would rather do something else, and are not always trained or held accountable to clear metrics, especially when it comes to volunteer recruitment.

For ideally, these are the people campaigns want to mobilize. In reality, they usually end up—and staffers know this will happen—relying on part-timers. Many allies are self-starters,

they have their own reasons for getting involved. At least some of them will come on board, and will help with getting out the vote. Part-timers can be hired by the dozen in a pinch, provided a campaign is willing to send enough field organizers out to find them, and offer enough money—easy job, great pay indeed. For GOTV, as staffers struggle to fill their shifts, they ramp up the wages offered, from something like fifty to seventy-five dollars for a five hour shift to about a hundred dollars for a six hour shift. The part-timers who have been on board for weeks are often more than a little annoyed that late comers are thus paid more for the same work they have been doing for at least a month or two. But people eventually take the jobs, fill the slots. Staffers will get their “bodies”, alright, if they want them enough. The question is what kind.

### *Conclusion*

Staffers mobilize many different kinds of allies, volunteers, and part-timers to help with their ground war efforts. Though personalized political communication has been rediscovered by political operatives, and been the subject of increased investments from campaigns and national party organizations, staffers continue to find that they have to build their own campaign assemblages anew each cycle if they want to achieve their contact goals. Field directors like John (episode 4.1) know from day one that they will have to find their own ground war troops. This is what their mobilizing work aims at. A few people are self-starters; some come with allies, but most have to be actively recruited. In principle, staffers would like to enroll volunteers recruited early and by others, but in practice, they end up relying in addition on part-timers recruited late and by the campaigns themselves. The professional rediscovery of personalized political communication has so far been accompanied only by a partial and uneven professionalization of political mobilizing work. The assemblages mobilized are heterogeneous and often sprawling,

with no single center of authority, operating principles, or clearly demarcated boundaries. They are defined simply by their collective project—winning the upcoming election. How their work is organized is the question I deal with in the next chapter.