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# DEMOCRACY'S KEEPERS

Stories From Political Activists and Why They Matter



## **Abstract**

The literature on political involvement tends to focus on issue-oriented social movements through the laws of collective action, and spends little time looking into the individual motivations for political engagement in the form of campaign volunteerism. To remedy this problem, this paper begins with the theoretical framework of collective action but expands upon this to look at individual motivations. I examine factors that limit or encourage political participation, and conduct ten semi-structured qualitative interviews with political volunteers to elucidate political participation, why it is important, and why certain people become politically engaged while others do not. My findings synthesize previous research on participation while providing unique insight into the “zealous few,” the three percent of Americans who volunteer for political campaigns. I suggest that we must look more at the root causes of political apathy and the low rates of political participation, while continuing to learn from the stories of those who are involved in our democratic process.

# **Democracy's Keepers:**

Stories from Political Activists and Why They Matter

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“The nation that prides itself on being the best example of government of, for, and by the people is rapidly becoming a nation whose participation is limited to the interested or zealous few” (Samples 2004). While political engagement is essential to the democratic underpinnings of our republic (Boyte, *et al.* 1986, Roberts 2008, Lasker and Guidry 2009), just three percent of Americans actively volunteered for political parties or campaigns in 2006 (Lopez *et al.* 2006). If this is indeed the case, then it is more important than ever to gain insight into this group of “zealous few” — to hear their stories and understand their perspective into the American political system. Who are the three percent of Americans who participate in political campaigns, and why do they get involved?

Analysts and pundits say that political apathy is rampant, but Alexis de Tocqueville noted volunteerism as a special ingredient of American democracy, and every campaign season, thousands of volunteers give anywhere from an hour to a month working for a campaign — for no pay and little reward. I conducted an exploratory qualitative study, consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten campaign volunteers, to examine why people choose to participate in political campaigns, and to find out their motivations and beliefs.

There is a large body of existing research on political involvement, but this work tends to focus on issue-oriented social movements through a collective action framework (Obershall 1993, Dobratz 2002, Gaventa and McGee 2010, Klandermans 1995, etc.), rather than on volunteers for campaigns for political candidates. Collective action has been defined as “purposive, collective efforts to shape and alter existing institutions in order to deal with human needs and aspirations,” or, in other words, when a group joins together to fight for a common cause (Obershall 1993, 1). Less common than individual action, where one pursues a goal on their own, collective action, Obershall explains, differs in its public nature, its challenge to established groups, and its potential to bring about social change. These social movements, however, generally involve a single issue or issue area, such as civil rights, the feminist movement, or the labor

movement. Participation in a political campaign is different, however, due to the myriad of issues that any one candidate may campaign on, as well as the fact that volunteers are directly supporting the person, rather than the issue. Literature on social movement advocacy often focuses on contentious political struggle (Gaventa and McGee 2010). Citizen activists, however, are granted the opportunity to make change from within a governmental structure, utilizing a less contentious framework (*Ibid*). Political campaigns are one example of this phenomenon. Gaventa and McGee write, “Participation does not refer simply to voting ... Participatory processes must entail ... broadly active citizen engagement, and it requires that individuals have a voice in the decisions that affect them” (2010, 7). Political campaigns are in essence a fusing of government-sanctioned citizen engagement with the collective action of social movements.

I utilize this theoretical framework, coupled with an examination of factors specific to political participation as well as interviews with political volunteers, to examine political participation, why it is important, and why certain people become politically engaged while others do not.

## **Methods**

Existing work focuses more broadly on social movements and collective action groups while spending little time looking into the individual motivations for political engagement in the form of campaign volunteerism. The intent of this study was not to come to a single generalizable answer as to why one chooses to volunteer for a political campaign, but rather to explore in depth the many reasons that are likely to exist, to examine the reasons presented in light of the existing literature and theory on the subject, and, perhaps most importantly, to allow the citizens who play a key role in our political system a chance to speak so that we may better understand the political process and this particular set of political actors. The goal was not to elucidate which specific demographics are more likely to participate, as Milbrath and Goel (1977) do admirably, but rather to probe more deeply into a set of individuals, to discover their personal rationales for joining a campaign.

With this in mind, I conducted qualitative research utilizing semi-structured interviews. I administered telephone interviews of 30-45 minutes in length with ten individuals who have participated in political campaigns. Half of the subjects were active volunteers for a Democratic gubernatorial primary campaign, and the remainder volunteered with a Republican Congressional campaign. Some of the participants volunteered for the first time for these campaigns; others had been politically active throughout their adult lives. These specific campaigns were chosen for two primary reasons. First, I picked the two distinct groups in order to examine a diverse population, both geographically and across the political spectrum, in order to avoid one potential source of bias and to discover whether differences exist in reasons for volunteering. Second, I picked these two campaigns for my research because I have access to volunteers in each case.

Prior to the start of my formal research, I served as the field director for the Democrat's campaign, informally observing first-hand the trials and tribulations of volunteer recruitment and activation, and hearing from volunteers as to why they were involved in the campaign and why they believed others avoided political participation. These observations occurred outside of my formal research, and were utilized only to inform the course of my inquiry and to focus the questions that I examined.

I chose to utilize semi-structured interviews such that I would be able to ask a set of similar questions to all participants while maintaining the ability to explore in greater depth the areas of interest that any given participant may express. Due to the time limitations and the purpose of this study, I used a combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. By this, I mean that I contacted first those volunteers whom I expected to have the most interesting stories to tell and those whom I expected to be most open to participating in the interview process. Based on these initial interviews, I then sought out additional volunteers according to those statements and areas which appeared most interesting and relevant to my research.

Questions were largely of a non-sensitive nature, including questions about basic demographic information, voting history, policy areas that the participants were most interested in, civic participation, and the specifics of volunteering for a political campaign. I also asked participants to step back and think reflectively about their time volunteering, what contribute they made and whether they felt this contribution was valuable, how they saw their role within the campaign, and whether they felt they received any personal benefits from their work with the campaign. I also asked participants to look more broadly at the nature of political discourse and to reflect on the other volunteers for the campaign and how they related to these volunteers.

Participants' names were not linked with data from the interviews, and pseudonyms were used in the presentation of the interview data. Participants were asked to sign a consent form to ensure that they understood their rights as a subject, and they were allowed to decline to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with. As such, the risks to participants were minimal, while I hope that the benefits to society in examining a previously unexplored area will be great.

## Why Political Participation Matters

The Constitution mandates the election of representatives by the people as a way of maintaining accountability to the people within government. It is through elections that the Founders expected average citizens to play a primary role in shaping their government. Beyond merely showing up on election day to vote, a duty which increasingly few Americans uphold, citizens may avail themselves of the political process by helping with the electoral campaigns of these representatives—they get involved by volunteering.

Political organizations allow for “learning democratic principles and social responsibility,” while leading to greater understanding of differing perspectives and society as a whole (Eliasoph 1998, 11). Citizen participation fosters a public-spirited moral character (Pateman 1970) and allows one to develop the attitudes and skills of citizenship, making the society at large more democratic (Roberts 2008). In addition, associations serve as forums for deliberation over important public issues (Putnam 2000, 339). Those who are politically active are more likely to be informed about important aspects of politics and current events (Lopez, *et al.* 2006). As one of my participants told me, “volunteering would help in that sense in that people would get to know the people that are actually running the system.” In addition, volunteering is a device for keeping public officials responsive to the people (Gaventa and McGee 2010). As Tocqueville (1835) writes, “An association unites the energies of divergent minds and vigorously directs them toward a clearly indicated goal.”

Politics are a way to exercise power and to have one's voice heard, yet only two-thirds of the eligible population chooses to vote in presidential elections, fewer do so in the myriad of local and state elections and primaries, and even fewer actually volunteer for a campaign (McDonald 2008). As Putnam (2000) claims, it is not that we participate less than citizens of other democracies, but that our rate of participation has declined drastically from the time that Tocqueville studied America and found participation to be one of our strongest community builders. Putnam (2000), however, notes that participation is increasingly seen through donations of money rather than donations of time; participation of this sort does not foster the community bonds of which Tocqueville spoke.

My research participants returned a clear message on why participation matters: you can only have an impact if you are involved in the system. Those who are empowered can work to control their lives and the world around them, and to build a stronger community (Weissberg 1999, Anderson 2010). One participant told me,

You can't complain if you didn't vote. I think that that's what its all about in America, one of the places in the world where you're allowed to vote, and take part in what happens to the populous at large. I just never thought of not voting, because there's always a difference you can see between one person and another person that you might as well toss your two cents in there.

Another participant said,

I feel that's what the American political system was based on, was the community knowing what's going on, having knowledge about the candidate and then going out and doing work for the candidate so that their views would be expressed as they please. I just think that more people should experience it and make sure that their voice is being heard as well and not just sitting back and then complaining when something doesn't go their way even though they have done absolutely nothing to make sure it went their way.

Carmen, a volunteer for the Republican campaign, agreed that one risks being left out of the discussion if one does not get involved: "I really feel a very strong — that people have to participate if we want things to get better. If we don't participate, then our view might not get

represented in the marketplace.” Not only do you gain personal empowerment, but you also empower a candidate who may have otherwise been unable to run for elected office:

[Volunteering] gives individuals an opportunity to run, those who aren't bank-rolled by themselves, gives them an opportunity to run and represent the city. When you're in a campaign, whether you win or lose, just because you started the campaign and you stuck with it, you're winners, because you learn valuable lessons, and also you've been part of a change in one direction in the area ... You have helped the individual who has run to be better known in the community and giving him and possible voice for change.

Al, a folksy dairy farmer who drove an hour and a half each way from his farm to the Democrat's campaign office to volunteer, sometimes as often as four times in a week, told me the story of how he became politically active because of the strong personal impact politics had in his life: “Yes, I actually started getting politically aware—well farmers and a lot of agricultural people become politically active and aware just because politics has a lot to do with your own livelihood.” He told me, “If you have something near and dear to your heart, if you really want to see it happen, you've got to help make it happen. It's not going to come to you, you've got to go to it and make it happen.” When Al had a concern about dairy pricing or subsidies in the farm bill, he felt comfortable showing up at the office of Bernie Sanders, whose Senate campaign he had volunteered for, and voicing his concerns. For Al, volunteering opened doors to those in power and allowed him to amplify his voice.

## **Losing Hope: The Decline of the Democratic Process**

I've been to third world countries, and in a lot of countries, children are much more active and understanding of politics and talking politics than they are in this country ... We need to get civics brought back into the classroom, more than what it is, and have children understand that the political world is much more important to them than what they're actually thinking. —Democratic campaign volunteer

An important corollary to discovering the “zealous few” is to examine why just three percent of citizens are politically involved while the remainder are not. In 2008, just 61.6% of the voter-eligible population voted for the highest office (president) listed on the ballot (McDonald 2008); voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections is lower than the turnout in comparable national elections in nearly all developed Western nations (Campbell 2005). Among young Americans, just 26% say they vote regularly, and a full 17% had not participated within the previous 12 months in any of the 19 possible forms of participation as defined by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (Lopez, et. al 2006). Among all adults, just 32% reported any form of engagement in civic activities in 2006, down from 36% in 2002 (*Ibid*). The U.S. Census (2008, Table 573) reported that just 26.4% of all Americans performed unpaid volunteer activities for an organization at any point during the previous year, and just 5.5% of that participation was for civic and political groups.<sup>1</sup> “I think to be politically inclined involves intellect and motivation, and the idea of volunteerism, which a lot of people today don’t do,” Kathleen told me. “You know they go to the health club, and they go to this club and that club, but in terms of service, they aren’t so inclined.”

Social attachments and community connections, and the resulting increase in one’s sense of being able to make a constructive impact, lead to increased engagement in political activities (*Ibid*). Factors such as an increasingly inward-focused society (Putnam 2000), elite targeting, which limits one’s ability to make community connections, and negative political advertising, which decreases both communal trust and sense of efficacy, have led to a decline in political

<sup>1</sup> Over a third of participation was for religious organizations, and 26% was for educational or youth services organizations.

participation. One volunteer told me, “I think people ... don’t think that their participation would make any significant difference.”

Scholars Vera, *et al.* (1995) cite three primary factors that influence citizen political participation. First, practical concerns influence participation; citizens vote if they have the resources to meet the cost of participation, in terms of time, lost wages, the education necessary to make an informed decision, etc. Therefore, citizens with more education, higher income, and more political information are most likely to vote on election day (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2005). One of my participants told me, “everybody is incredibly busy, so they don’t tend to get involved.” Second, citizens go to the polls if they “want to;” those who are interested in politics and feel they can make a difference in politics are more likely to vote. Finally, citizens go to the polls if they are mobilized to do so (Leighley and Matsubayashi 2005; Lopez, *et al.* 2006). In other words, citizens are more likely to participate if they are approached about volunteering, receive communications from a campaign, etc. We can see, however, that elite influence has grown in importance (Schier 2000), that other populations are not being mobilized, and that factors such as negative political campaigning have led to a decreased trust in government that influences voters’ thoughts on being able to “make a difference.” As such, we have witnessed a decline of the democratic process that has led increasingly few Americans to get involved in the political sphere.

Olson (1968) discusses how organizations are formed to advance the common interests of groups of individuals. These groups often suffer from a collective action problem; when the number of individuals involved is large, one feels that he or she could continue to gain the benefits from the group without personally volunteering for that group (*Ibid*). This collective action problem is one of the strongest inhibitors to group participation. A collective action problem likely exists in political campaigns as well—a citizen may not volunteer for a campaign personally if they believe their own engagement is not the contributing factor to a candidate’s victory, and if they believe that they will benefit from the candidate’s victory whether they

volunteered or not. It is true that a school teacher, for instance, will benefit from the election of a candidate who wants to direct more funding to schools, whether that teacher personally volunteered for the candidate's campaign or not. Political campaigns, however, are able to provide "selective incentives," benefits reserved strictly for those who participate that can motivate one to join and contribute to the campaign (Olson 1965). In other words, individual volunteers for a campaign will act collectively to provide private goods. These benefits may include networking opportunities, career advancement, increased social capital, the "warm glow of giving," or the opportunity to lobby a candidate to provide for a specific private good if elected. Thus, while we might expect greater participation in political campaigns, especially given that Olsen's model predicts that participation is more likely when the subjective expected value of participation is positive (Lubell 2001), we do not see this occurring. My participants lend support to this model; since they belong to the class of political elite, which I discuss shortly, their perceived costs of participation are lower, and the benefits are higher, which essentially means that the return on their investment in political participation is more favorable.

I find three primary factors limiting participation: first, practical concerns; second, the advent of elite influence and an elite “political class;” and third, the effects of negative political campaigning, which decrease system trust and thereby the expected value of participation. By no means are these factors exhaustive; rather, they represent those most clearly represented by my participants and observed during my time working with the Democrat’s campaign.

## **Of the People, By the People, For the People?: Voter Turnout and Elite Influence**

Schier (2000) writes that activists have more knowledge of and interest in politics and that “an exclusive, invitation-only sort of targeting dominates American politics” (13). On the other hand, those who are asked to vote or volunteer are more likely to do so than those who are not asked (Lopez, *et al.* 2006). Political parties and campaigns which were once only able to blanket a neighborhood with appeals now have more sophisticated micro-targeting technology that allows a campaign to focus on only those voters who have been identified as being most likely to support a campaign (Schier 2000). That voter outreach by campaigns is targeted increasingly toward the elite political class only serves to perpetuate the lower levels of participation by minority voters, low-income voters, voters with low levels of educational attainment, and other such groups which are not targeted. Campaigns have limited resources at their disposal, and given that citizens with greater educational attainment and higher incomes are more likely to be politically interested, these citizens are the most efficient activation contacts (Schier 2000). Those with a college degree are nearly twice as likely to be contacted by a political party during an election as those with no high school diploma, and those with the highest incomes are also twice as likely to be contacted as those with the lowest incomes (*Ibid*). As Vera, *et al.* discuss, political participation requires initial input resources from the individual volunteer, such as time or money, and given the increasing role of financial contributions within the sphere of volunteering (Putnam 2000), access to the private goods provided by political

participation may be limited to those with access to resources (Overton 2004). We can see that

this “invitation only” targeting is reducing the population of those who are mobilized to participate. In the 2008 election, only 52% of those earning under \$20,000 a year turned out to vote compared to 77.4% of those earning between \$75,000 and \$150,000. Only 51.1% of those with no high school degree turned out to vote as opposed to 81.2% of those with bachelor’s degrees—a 30% differential—and Hispanics and Asians were only half as likely to turn out than white voters.

My participants tended to fit this elite club of high-income educated Whites that one might expect to volunteer. While the sample was not chosen randomly, and the demographic disparity may be attributed to sample bias, the demographic characteristics of my participants reflects the broader trends of participation and may represent the effects of elite targeting. More telling, however, is not their demographic characteristics, but rather what these volunteers told me about their backgrounds and how they became interested in politics. It is clear that the volunteers I interviewed were firmly among the group of politically aware and involved citizens that makes up the “volunteer class” in America. Logan told me,

I’ve always been interested in the election. And I’d watch a lot of news and read a lot of news and just watch the whole system in general and as I got more into high school and older and started realizing the impacts of the political system of everyday life, I became really more interested in it.

Thomas said,

I guess growing up, I had always been around people that thought about the importance of being politically involved. My mother was always active, so I guess some of that may have rubbed off on me. I was involved in high school politics, so I knew what it was like for the democratic process to play itself out. When Howard Dean was running for president, I got involved.

My participants tended to be lifelong political activists, representative of the group that Schier would expect to become politically engaged; they were educated, had activist parents, or had the time to dedicate to political activity where others may not.

### **Negative Advertising and Political Participation**

One clear factor dissuading more people from volunteering is negative campaigning and negative political advertisement. Negative advertisements have been shown to decrease the turnout of the non-partisan electorate, a group of voters that often includes traditionally low-turnout demographics (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1996). Top political consultants go as far as to say that decreasing turnout is indeed the goal of negative campaigning: “Those who are indifferent are so turned off that they are less likely to vote... so not only does it help you, but it depresses turnout. The ideal, rational goal is to turn out your most committed supporters and make sure nobody else turns out” (Bike, 2001). A 1999 survey in the American Political Science Review found that 87% of people polled are concerned about the level of personal attacks in political campaigns. Fifty-nine percent believe that all or most candidates deliberately twist the truth and 39% believe that all or most candidates deliberately lie to voters. Most striking for my analysis is that due to these personal attacks, only 67% say they can trust the government in Washington only some of the time or never (Jackson et al., 2009). This lack of trust in government may contribute to the markedly lower levels of agreement in the United States as compared to other countries that the government should be involved in providing healthcare, reducing income disparity, and job creation, all policies that greatly impact the very voting blocs that tend not to participate (Lipset, 1996). When respondents were shown a single negative advertisement, they had worse attitudes toward government (Martin 2004) and believed that the candidate being targeted was less honest (Fridkin, *et al.*). When campaign coverage in the media is

negative, trust for the government and other measures of so-called system support will decrease (Banducci and Karp 2003). My participants time and time again cited this very lack of trust in the American political system as a factor that likely turns off potential campaign volunteers, and many had chosen not to participate in other campaigns themselves as a result. When I asked Thomas, a computer scientist whose son was on the Democrat's campaign staff, why he felt that more people are not involved in politics, he told me,

More people than not are disillusioned by the political process ... People elect someone to go to Congress and that's where they'll be. They're not necessarily responsible to their constituents any longer as soon as they get there. It's very hard for an incumbent to get voted out. It's ridiculous the way money gets into politics. [Citizens] have lost faith in the democratic process.

Logan, a college student who spent the summer interning for the Democrat's campaign after failing to get a job in his small hometown told me that even those who do vote do so "begrudgingly." Logan experienced the 2000 presidential election as a middle school student in Florida, only superficially grasping the contentious nature of the election results in that state. When asked to reflect on what he remembered about that election, Logan said that he got the feeling that voters,

...kind of just run into the box, stamp whatever they feel they need to stamp, and then ran out... the people were somewhat doing their civic duty, but they seemed to be doing it begrudgingly ... I got more and more of the sense that people didn't really want to vote but they did it because it's just what you do every four years.

Negative advertising has led to two primary outcomes that have decreased participation. First, in Vera, *et al.*'s framework, negative political campaigning is reducing the population of those who "want to" participate. Citizens are less likely to feel that they can make a difference if they believe that they cannot trust their government or that their government is not working for them. If people have less trust in government, they become disillusioned by the political process, and are less likely to participate. Second, it has shrunk the group of those being mobilized. If the rational goal of a political campaign is to turn out your most only the most committed supporters while ensuring that no one else shows up, through negative advertising, the system of elite targeting is perpetuated.

## The “Zealous Few”: Perspectives on Volunteering

While numerous reasons are likely to limit participation, it is equally important to hear from those who do participate, to learn from their stories, and to examine how and why they became part of the “zealous few,” the three percent of Americans who volunteer for political campaigns. Researchers suggest that various demographic characteristics, such as income, education, and occupational status are positively correlated with participation (Langton 1978, Schier 2000). In addition, those who are most ideologically aligned are more likely to participate (Schier 2000). The individuals with whom I spoke represent a wide variety of attitudes toward volunteerism, but as I discuss they tend to fit the mold of the “volunteer class”: they are ideologically charged, have deep connections within their communities, and for the most part, they are educated and of relatively wealthy backgrounds. They approach the arena of activism, however, from a spectrum of personal narratives that have driven them to get involved. While each received personal benefits from volunteering, whether in the form of career or networking opportunities, a social activity, personal gain, or regard within their professional field, what unifies them is not these benefits, but an unadulterated sense of purpose rooted in personal experience and a commitment to social change.

For some volunteers, activism is not about making a political commitment. It is often a personal stake—a child’s failing school, a low-income neighbor in need—that drives individuals to roll up their sleeves and get involved. Such is the case with Thomas, a parent and political activist from a small Vermont town. When Thomas worked in informational technology at Ben and Jerry’s, part of his compensation was three pints of ice cream, each and every day. While Thomas could have used the ice cream to gain a lot of points at home with his two kids, each day, he brought his three pints to a local homeless shelter. He has been asked numerous times to run for the select board in home town, where he’s lived for 32 years, but he told me, “I guess that’s not my thing.” But when issues near and dear to his heart and home come up, Thomas has never hesitated to get involved:

When the kids were growing up, their daycare center was in trouble financially, and the federal government was going to shut them down, and I was a young parent at the time, and they needed to raise \$10,000 to keep the center open. I worked for about two months selling \$50 raffle tickets for them.

Thomas met the Democratic candidate while serving on a statewide mission board for his church. He told me, “Every year we would go to the state house on Vermont low-income advocacy day. One day a year in the fall they dedicate the legislative session to low-income folks. [The Democrat] came to our lunch and spoke to us. I was really impressed, and I liked is approached.” Thomas recalled being impressed by how much the Democratic candidate seemed to care about healthcare, an issue Thomas had studied working for the Vermont Department of Health doing public health computing in the late ‘80s. When his younger son began volunteering for the [Democrat’s] campaign, first doing policy research and eventually being hired to do fundraising work, Thomas decided to get involved:

When I heard that [my son] was volunteering, I thought I'd see what I could do for him. I went to some of the early forums. I sort of got to liking him more and more. At that time [my son] was volunteering for him, [and he] just kind of grew into the campaign. I thought if [he] can do it, why can't I? The whole excitement of the campaign kind of grows on you. It's a little addictive, but it's a lot of fun too.

While Thomas was skeptical about the role he played in the campaign, saying "What good do you think I did? I don't know, probably not enough. Two hundred votes short of enough," he was particularly proud of the personal benefits and connections he had with the campaign. Asked to recall the most memorable moment he had volunteering, Thomas told me a tale from primary night, as results were being tabulated:

The night that the returns were coming in, and you were kneeling around the computer, and taking results town by town, I was pretty excited when Duxbury comes in. [The Democratic candidate] got 88 votes in Duxbury, and the next closest person [had] 54. [The candidate] beat [the eventual victor] by essentially 4-to-1 in my town. I had some role. I visited probably 25 or 30 of those 88 people at their house.

Thomas was quick to admit that volunteering brought about personal benefits as well: "It was for my benefit as much as anything. I loved getting involved with the staff. What can be better? That's one of the things I liked about [the Democrat]. His immediate staff was young, active, interesting people. Plus, it grows on you. As you get involved in this stuff, you begin to meet a lot of other people who like [the candidate]." Thomas summed up his time with the campaign: "The whole movement kind of grew because everybody was working together for something they thought was worthwhile."

For others, politics has been a lifelong pursuit. Rick got his start in politics working in the Chicago political machine. He remembers delivering turkeys to local constituents for the 32nd Ward Committee. He told me, "My view of government and my view of politics—while I had seen corruption—I had also seen a lot of efficiencies and making sure government worked for the people, at least in exchange for a vote." After volunteering as a precinct worker, working at the polls, and handing out literature, Rick would go on to study political science as an undergraduate, and complete his Masters in Public Affairs at Southern Illinois University. Miraculously, even after working in politics for 28 years in Washington, D.C., and working as a political lobbyist for 18 years, Rick still told me, "My views have been shaped in politics and government as a

very positive force, helping people.” Along with volunteering for “dozens” of political campaigns at all levels, Rick served on the board of the Fairfax County (VA) Democratic Party. “I’ve been involved in politics, I won’t say all my life, but since I was 4 or 5. When I grew up, politics kind of meant helping people,” he told me.

For Carmen, volunteering came as a result of her family and her faith. Carmen was born in the Bronx after her parents moved from Puerto Rico to have “better opportunities” in the United States. “My father was an entrepreneur,” she told me. “I got to see what it’s like to have free enterprise.” Her father owned a number of small storefronts in La Marqueta, a now-neglected Hispanic vendor marketplace under the elevated railroad tracks in East Harlem, and these businesses supported an upper middle class lifestyle for Carmen and her family. “My mother and father always stressed education,” Carmen told me, describing her Catholic school education and three years of undergraduate work at Fordham University. Most importantly, her upbringing stressed the tenets of family and faith: “We were very family-oriented in terms of making sure we supported one another. We really have a strong moral and ethical basis through my family.” In school, Carmen became involved in student government, and she joined community watch groups and the community board in her neighborhood. Today, Carmen serves

as a Chaplain for the United Chaplains of the State of New York, working as a liaison with

pastors and faith leaders to keep them informed on the political climate and on legislation that may affect them, such as faith-based grants, life issues, such as abortion, and the definition of marriage. “We led a fight in Albany for there to be no redefinition of marriage,” she told me. In 2006, Carmen ran for city council in the 38th district of Brooklyn. She felt compelled to run for office because she knew the office held a position of influence:

I was part of the community board, so over a period of three or four years I saw that this member wasn't actively helping and doing that things that need to be done. When I was in the community board, I realized we made some great strides in making sure there were no more sanitation dumps put in our district. We lobbied for a school, even brought students up to Albany for students to lobby for their high school, we had green initiatives. And I said, why just be on a committee when I can make an impact being a city council member?

She quickly ran into the stark realities of running for office as a conservative Republican in a heavily Democratic area. She told me of her frustrations with the campaign, and the lack of volunteer help she had: “It was my first run. I met with a shortage of volunteers. I did almost everything. I put up posters in store fronts and then my opponent, the current councilwoman, went to those stores and took them down.” She would end up receiving a quarter of the vote— more than she was expecting—but an experience that left her disappointed and disheartened. Two years later, however, her state senator was “pushing gay marriage” and Carmen decided to run for the seat. This time, she had more volunteer help, but she ran into what she described as “the lesson of the long-term incumbent” and the organized labor “stranglehold.” The playing field, Carmen told me is “not even” in New York. When the Republican candidate decided to run for office, she felt compelled to help: “I also felt ... that it was really important to help someone who could make a difference; it was a call on my part.” She served as a faith initiatives coordinator for the campaign, spreading the word about the Republican candidate within faith communities and sending out calls to action to religious leaders in the community. “Sometimes people see the inequity and think ‘what kind of difference can one person make’ I still think that one person can make a difference, but collectively, people coming together to care, can keep our republic strong,” she told me.

As a conservative Christian in liberal New York City, Mary is an unlikely volunteer; given that her support of a Republican was unlikely to be highly effective, the collective action literature states that Mary would predict the costs of participation to be higher than the benefits, driving her not to participate at all. Mary, however, was also driven by her faith to become politically active—and her strong faith is an example of the ideological charge that often leads people to get involved. When I called Mary, an art auctioneer and opera singer, she was watching Glenn Beck’s television show. Four years ago, Mary and her husband moved to Harlem, where “it became apparent that the lives of many of the citizens . . . were impaired by whatever forces, by life situations, by whatever, and that they had hopeless situations.” The most important thing in her life, Mary described, is her faith as a self-described “born-again Christian.” After moving to Harlem, Mary told me, she began “praying for a strong black man who could see the truth about freedom, choice, and hope, to arise somehow” to help her fellow Harlemites. Mary said that while she is “not interested in politics,” she is “angry about it.” When one of her girlfriends told Mary about her daughter’s summer internship for a candidate running for Congress against a controversial Democratic incumbent, she was quick to donate to the campaign. After the candidate called to thank her for the donation, she began volunteering for the campaign. “Whatever [the campaign] asked, I did,” Mary told me. “So if there was a little community gathering, and they wanted to hand out pamphlets, I would do that. Mostly foot work. We also gave a party, for [the candidate] for all of our neighbors. Not very many people came.” Mary believes, however, that her contribution to the campaign was not nearly as valuable as the impact the campaign had on her. She told me, “I had a real model for myself in [the candidate]. I had a real model to just be confident and outspoken.” In a city where Mary cannot share her beliefs because “nobody else believes what I believe,” volunteering gave her an outlet for her opinions and a venue where she could discuss the issues that she sees as being important to the nation’s future.

Al has been an avid follower of politics for his entire life, as his farm was often directly impacted by governmental policies set at the federal, state, and local levels. Al told me: I saw the whole thing coming down when Ronald Reagan ran for office. And I told my wife, the way I read it, being a political strategist and reading what I saw, and being a dairy farmer, with support prices and so on, I said ‘get ready to take a ride to the seat of your pants,’ ‘cause I says Ronald Reagan is going to win this one and I said ‘we’re headed for trouble’. And truer words were never spoken. It’s been downhill ever since in the dairy industry.

As well as getting involved with Rural Vermont, an organization that advocates for farm issues, Al volunteered for Bernie Sanders and for Anthony Pollina’s gubernatorial campaigns. When he had the opportunity to run for office himself, Al decided to run for the State House of Representatives, where he would serve two terms. Al believes he became politically minded thanks to his father:

My father was always pretty politically minded. He was a farmer, a logger. And he never really never got into it as much as I have, but he always, always voted, and he always talked politics with friends and neighbors and whoever was around. And he was very politically aware .... If I got up and spoke on the House floor in Montpelier, I could hear my father talking. It’s nothing learned, it’s bred into me.

Kathleen could best be described as a closet activist; when speaking to me it was clear that she had been active in making a difference in her community, but she was quite modest about her contributions.

Kathleen is a nursing professor at the University of Vermont, and she also has a clinical practice at Vermont Respite Home. “I’ve spent my 35-year career caring for mostly vulnerable people. Those are the people that are near and dear to my heart, and what I mean by that, is certainly the dying are considered vulnerable, but then folks with mental illness, folks who have been sexually assaulted, folks with debilitating mental diseases,” she told me. Kathleen described becoming politically aware during Vietnam War protests:

What impact did I think I would have? I don't know that I thought I would have any. I just figured if I was part of a larger group, there would have to be some impact. I didn't necessarily think that I would as an individual have one I don't think. But that being part of a protest would at least raise some visibility to the problem.

Kathleen said that she had been too busy with work and family matters to volunteer for any previous campaigns or civic organizations, but through her work as a professor, Kathleen made an indelible contribution to her community: "In the year 2000, I had students in the various schools, and realized through the students that there were children in the schools that didn't own their own tooth brush," she told me,

I met with the chair of [the dental school] and we ended up forming within the community some key stakeholders ... and formed what was called the dental access committee. Through that we secured funding and started the tooth tutor program in the various schools, and the tooth tutors are dental hygienists who go into the schools and do oral screening on children... And from there, the dental hygienist would refer the kids to local dentists who ... agreed to either see the children at the Medicaid rate ... or not charge them at all ... And then in 2004 ... Bernie Sanders was able to secure a \$100,000 one-time capital appropriation and so we built the school-based dental program at HO Wheeler, which is an inner-city school here in Burlington.

Kathleen would eventually present at two national conferences on the program and write a published article about her accomplishments. She became involved in the Democrat's campaign because has been friends with the candidate since they attended Burlington High School together. Kathleen made phone calls and attended events for the campaign. "I actually did far more than I intended to. It's kind of like contagious. Well I thought, I'll go a few times and make a few phone calls, and well as you know it ended up far more than that."

Kathleen realized that the first key step in making a difference is simply showing up.

Only one volunteer I spoke with broke the mold of the “political elite” class in which my other participants fit: Marie. It is clear that Marie is in the minority of the politically active in the United States. When I called Marie at our appointed interview time, my call went directly to her voicemail. About five minutes later, I received a call from an unknown number and a soulful voice told me that she hadn’t recognized my number and was afraid I was a bill collector. Thirteen years ago, Marie and her daughter were living in a homeless shelter in East Harlem when a community organizer hosted a meeting about the rights that welfare recipients like Marie were guaranteed. Marie told me,

Being on welfare, you don’t have a dollar of lunch money. I came to the meeting to find out information [for my friend]. She couldn’t afford to dress the way they wanted her to dress [in her work program]. They told me if I could get some people together, that they would come to my [Welfare Education Program] site. I snuck the organizer upstairs, and ten minutes later they disbanded the meeting.

This first salvo into community organizing led her to an organizer training program, and then a stint volunteering for the Community Voices Heard program, a group run by low-income welfare recipients that focuses on welfare reform and social justice issues. Her volunteer work would eventually win her a community organizing award.

My participants became involved for a myriad of reasons. Some were driven by faith, others by family, and others by their personal circumstances. Their stories especially demonstrate the ways in which previous community involvement and connections can encourage the decision to become politically engaged as I presented earlier. What is important is that these volunteers actually feel that they could make a difference. Whether working together or individually, these volunteers demonstrate the benefits of participation: they became more civically and morally minded, they became stronger members of the community, and they helped others even while helping themselves. They demonstrate that becoming involved is not in itself difficult, it just requires a certain mindset, and a bit of time to spare.

## Final Thoughts and Future Research

Political participation is essential to American democracy, and those who do participate express that their experiences were valuable and that they wish more people would get involved. Yet the fact remains that increasingly few Americans are participating in the political process, whether by casting their ballot in an election or by volunteering for a political campaign. The fundamental question is then one of getting more people involved in the process. For the most part, my participants fit the mold that we might expect politically active citizens to fit (Schier 2000): they were upper middle-class, educated, and had a long history of political activism, often engendered in them by their family upbringing. However, we might see in their stories a glimmer of hope. Marie was living with her daughter in a homeless shelter when she first became involved. Carmen's parents immigrated to the United States from Puerto Rico to offer her a better life, and her belief compelled her to become politically active. Both became increasingly involved after they received just a small taste of how they could be effective at bringing about change. While these two stories are perhaps outside of the mainstream, all of the volunteers I spoke with offer a lesson of hope for American democracy: these are democracy's keepers, and they are serving us well. We must continue to examine the forces that are preventing greater involvement, but those which are particularly troublesome are the advent of negative advertising and its effects at diminishing citizens' trust in government, and the specific targeting of "elites" within politics that is leaving minority groups out of the democratic process. Of paramount concern is the breakdown of community identity and the increasingly inward focus of our lives. When Tocqueville described the principle of "self interest rightly understood," he saw how "an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state." While the volunteers I interviewed demonstrate this principle well—whether it be Al, who became politically involved due to the impact that dairy pricing had on his own life, or Logan, who joined the Democrat's campaign to expand his knowledge about the political process so that it may serve him in his future career ambitions—it is important to remember that these volunteers now

represent the minority of Americans. If American society is facing increasingly inward, and America's belief in government as an effective change agent is declining, then it is likely that fewer and fewer Americans will commit such "daily small acts of self-denial" that work toward the good of their community (Tocqueville 1835). My sample was limited, and I make no claims that the two campaigns which I chose to examine represent the full spectrum of perspectives. That being said, however, I suggest that we must look more at the root causes of political apathy and the low rates of political participation, while continuing to learn from the stories of those who are involved in our democratic process.

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