

Phelim Brady (Politics Psych & Sociology) - USA, 2012

Early in 2012, inspired by his 2008 campaign, his presidency and spurred by a deep conviction that his victory this year was a matter of concern not only for America but for the world, I wrote to Barack Obama's re-election campaign in several states, asking if they would be prepared to have a foreigner volunteer for them. The positive reply from one state, the swing state of Virginia, was almost immediate and I organised to spend four weeks in a campaign office just over the border from Washington in northern Virginia. Split between a traditional conservative south and a younger, diverse, more urban and more moderate north orientated to Washington, Virginia is a state in the midst of demographic change which has transformed it into a political battleground. For my time there with the campaign, I was generally in the office eleven hours a day six or seven days a week.

I arrived in September, thinking that my time with the campaign would mainly consist of door knocking and making phone calls, speaking with leaning Democrats to make sure they came out to vote. This kind of voter contact is particularly crucial in a state like Virginia, where the campaign strategy was clear: squeeze every last Democratic vote out of the northern cities in the hope that, like in 2008, the region might outweigh Republicans in the rest of the state. Canvassing can be a real sociological experience and I had some memorable conversations on the doorstep, giving me a window into the lives, opinions, hopes and fears of the people I spoke to. Most of all I was struck by the people who, even if they only passed me in the street while canvassing, stopped to thank me for what I was doing, without a thought to the fact that I was clearly not from Virginia.

Much more of my time was spent in the campaign office however, working with the campaign's voter database and recruiting volunteers. Most rewarding was training others - other interns and local, neighbourhood volunteers - on campaigning, speaking to voters and using the campaign's systems. 'Community organising' is fast becoming an over-used phrase in politics, but giving local people the tools to campaign and win themselves, rather than relying excessively on outsiders and professionals from different states and even different countries, is exactly what the Obama campaign tries to do.

Despite being a foreigner, without a vote and without a clear stake in the election, I was welcomed into the homes of many supporters and worked with them to help create enthusiastic local teams of campaigners fully versed in the workings of the Obama machine. When I arrived I saw that a volunteer who had come before me had already added 'Brits 4 Obama' to one of the many displays adorning the walls of the campaign office. While one or two voters raised eyebrows when they heard my accent, I had no one else question why I was there or why I felt it so important to contribute. Particularly among fellow volunteers and interns in the office - a group of committed, energetic and inclusive people from all backgrounds including several others from abroad - there was a sense in which such a question simply did not need to be asked.

Leaving the campaign while it was just reaching its pitch was painful. My experience left a real impression on me, and since returning I've written a number of pieces for student publications drawing on my now firsthand-experience of the campaign and of American politics.

While the focus of my trip to the United States this summer was my internship in Washington DC, having never visited the east coast before I took the opportunity to also visit Philadelphia, New York and Boston. I had a very enjoyable day visiting Philadelphia, going on a tour of Independence Hall and exploring the old parts of the city which have a lot of character, before

taking the train to New York. Alongside visiting the classic tourist destinations and art galleries, I managed to fit in a tour of the United Nations building, including the General Assembly and Security Council chambers which we have all seen so often in the media. As well as visiting 'the other' Cambridge and walking around the grounds of Harvard in Boston, I toured the old parts of the city and followed the 'freedom trail' featuring debating chambers and churches important in American political history, having played host to debates and demonstrations on the revolution and the founding documents of the American state, as well as featuring in the temperance movement and the fight for civil rights. Politics in 1960s America is a particular interest of mine so I travelled out of Boston to visit the John F. Kennedy memorial museum, a fantastic and under-visited museum on his life and presidency in a beautiful spot by the water.

For my return to Washington, I was very fortunate to have secured accommodation with an old family friend in Washington. There is a virtually endless list of museums, galleries and historic attractions in Washington and trying to balance visiting these alongside my internship was sometimes a struggle. I toured the Capitol building and sat in on debates in the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as visiting the well-known national monuments and the National Archives where the Bill of Rights, Constitution and also, to my surprise, an original version of Magna Carta were all on display. I also found time to visit a number of the Smithsonian Museums, including the American History and Modern Art museums and National Gallery of Art, but could have visited so many more.