

From Ohio to Oxford East: Lessons from the Obama campaign

Labour Staff Network and Young Fabians

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Labour Staff Network

Labour Staff Network is a group for all Labour Party members who work for elected members or the party. The network provides support for staff through organising a wide variety of events including seminars, social events and campaigning.

The Young Fabians

The Young Fabians are the under-31s section of the Fabian Society, Britain's senior centre-left think tank. Set up in 1960, we remain the only think tank run by and for young people. We are affiliated to the Labour Party and have formal representation on the Young Labour National Committee.

Our membership numbers more than 1,400 and includes young professionals, students, parliamentary researchers, political activists and academics. All of the young MPs elected at the 1997 and 2001 elections were Young Fabians and, during those parliaments, there were more Fabian MPs than Tory MPs.

The Young Fabians develop policy ideas through seminars, conferences and pamphlets. We produce a quarterly magazine, *Anticipations*, and organise regular political and social events.

We seek to encourage debate and political education amongst members and within the wider Labour movement through campaigning and activism.

For more information visit www.youngfabians.org.uk.



YOUNG FABIANs

Labour Staff Network and Young Fabians - 2008/2009

This pamphlet, like all publications of the Labour Staff Network, the Fabian Society and the Young Fabians, represents not the collective view of either organisation, but only the views of its authors. The responsibility of the Fabian Society is limited to approving the publication as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

Practical lessons from the Obama campaign

Introduction and background

The 2008 US presidential election was always set to be an important and interesting event for those of us interested in progressive politics in the UK – and indeed across the world. With the prospect of not only a Democrat in the White House but a new, vibrant, and progressive leader in the making, a candidate with a fresh approach to campaigning, many Labour Party members and trade unionists took time out to volunteer on the campaign either as one of the 80 who went out as part of the Labour Staff Network and Young Fabians visit to Ohio, with the trade unions or independently.

For many of us this was not just about being part of a historic campaign, but also about learning from our Democratic colleagues. While there were many parts of the Obama campaign which are specific to the time, the place and the candidate, there were clearly things we could bring back to our campaigning in the UK for the Labour Party.

Following our return from the US we got together to discuss our various experiences and to put together this document which we hope will provide food for thought and also an interesting insight into the Obama campaign.

We have deliberately avoided academic analysis of the campaign, instead keeping the focus on practical information for all members of the Labour Party which we felt was interesting, useful and easily applicable. Our recommendations focus on developing the role of volunteers in Labour campaigns through:

- a more structured campaign and campaign volunteer programme;
- better utilisation of existing people and resources;
- and improved training and briefing.

These are some of the thoughts of over 100 Labour supporters, we hope you find it interesting and inspiring.

Nirmalee Wanduragala

Adrian Prandle

LSN- YF Ohio '08 Organisers



Volunteers

The Obama campaign placed the most importance on volunteers. Volunteers were at the heart of the campaign and valued above all. They are- and always will be essential to political campaigns. This is why this booklet is centred on the involvement and utilisation of volunteers.

Recruitment of volunteers to the Obama campaign followed an 'inform, update, challenge' strategy. When a constituent was canvassed, Obama supporters were told about the need for volunteers, the difference they could make as a volunteer and then 'challenged' by asking if they would also be happy to volunteer. They did not need to be a registered party member to volunteer. Each volunteer's contribution was welcomed and acknowledged.

By including the act of asking those identified as Labour voters if they would like to volunteer when we are knocking on doors not only do we give greater respect to our supporters but we have the potential to dramatically increase our volunteer network without much additional effort.

Practical steps

- Include the question 'Would you like to volunteer with the Labour Party ?' on the canvassing script and do not limit volunteering to only registered party members. Look at ways to increase volunteer database throughout the electoral cycle.
- Have someone dedicated to follow up with any potential new volunteers either by phone or e-mail as soon as possible after the initial contact.
- Give all volunteers relevant and useful information about the campaign.
- Give all volunteers but especially new volunteers appropriate training for the tasks they are allocated.
- Provide new volunteers with manageable 'bite-sized' tasks to begin with.
- Acknowledge the work volunteers are doing, take time to welcome them, to talk to them and thank people for their time.

“There is no more important role than that of volunteer.”

Missouri Organizer's OFA Training Manual

"A Labour canvasser's introduction on the doorstep is usually as the 'Labour Party', setting up barriers as they are seen as part of a party machine.

The Obama Campaign created an environment which encouraged campaigning and volunteering, starting from the very top and permeating to every level. There was strong central control within a framework that gave ownership and trust to volunteers. Importantly volunteering was valued and seen as integral to the campaign." Anon

"I would wager that the majority of the Obama campaign was made up of citizens not affiliated to the Democratic Party, a thought unthinkable in the UK where General Election campaigns are fought by active party members. Parties in the UK could never hope to sign up as many volunteers as Obama,(...) however (the Labour party should) look at how it can harness the support of people who are broadly sympathetic to its aims but who do not wish to join the party. By signing up, perhaps on Labour's website, as a supporter, people could register for what they would and wouldn't like to get involved in, such as offering time to help canvass but only at election time or offering to help with the local office IT.." James Hulme

"All supporters can play a part; it is the job of an effective campaign to ensure they do. And not to worry about whether they have attended enough branch meetings and debated enough sub-clauses of rules."
Adrian Prandle



* The quotes in this booklet are taken from longer essays, which can be read on-line at bit.ly/yfamerica

Campaign organisation and using everyone's skills

The Obama campaign was universally credited as being one of the most organised political campaigns of recent times.

This was made possible not only by having a strong message but through a strong campaign and campaign team structure.

The campaign timetable was set nationally but displayed clearly and prominently in local offices, interpreting what it meant in terms of local targets and local actions. This meant anyone entering a campaign office could know immediately what stage the campaign was at and what needed to be done.

The structure of teams was set nationally, but put in place on a local level too. Within both local and national teams, staff and volunteers were allocated roles in specific teams according to skills, talents and time available (however they were able to progress and take on additional responsibilities as they advanced). Each person knew exactly what their allocated role demanded of them, the chain of command within the campaign and not only who they were answerable to but also who to go to for help or information.

In addition to time and skills if a campaign office needed a physical item such as a computer, a chair, or food and drink for other volunteers, this was also advertised and asked for from supporters. It was about using the resources and skills readily available, and allocating volunteers to clear roles accordingly.

The clear timetable and well-defined structure of the campaign office meant better communication, better utilisation of skills and resources and that a strong chain of command was maintained. This in turn enabled staff at the end of every day to be able to report back to the campaign headquarters an accurate and useful account of the local situation, the work being done and goals being achieved on the ground.

Practical suggestions

- Set the local campaign timetable and display it prominently so everyone knows what is going on and what needs to be done when. It can then be used to get people to sign up to different days or stages of the campaign.
- Decide the roles that there needs to be within the campaign team and allocate people according to their skills, and allowing people to take on more responsibilities as they progress. One role particularly liked in the US was the Comfort Captain who on election day was responsible for making sure everyone got enough food and water!
- Make the ask - if a new kettle is needed to keep volunteers happy with cups of tea and coffee at the end of a canvassing round, or you need someone to help with the design of a leaflet -ask
- Decide on local campaign targets - such as voter contact - and display them prominently. This helps people to know what they have to do and by when, and also gives a visible marker as to how much is being done and how the work they are doing feeds into it.

"If people were putting in the hours as volunteers, they were highly likely to be rewarded with responsibility. Whilst it may seem complex having so many managers and organisers, the simplicity of the organisation was actually very apparent. Arriving at staging locations a few days before the election, they were very clearly split and organised into 3, colour-coded, sub-teams. The blue team dealt with voter contact, the red team was in charge of polling line operations and the white team dealt with logistics (drivers, toilet breaks, feeding volunteers etc). The right people to run these teams were in place and they found the right support from others to make things run smoothly." **Adrian Prandle**

"In terms of recruiting such a large number of volunteers, the focus on building from the ground up by the campaign appeared to be very successful. Two key policies helped to generate this momentum: the focus on teams with a delegation of control and responsibility, and the identification of further new volunteer recruitment as an objective equal in importance to traditional canvassing activities. Team were small and agile with a clear set of tasks. Those who expressed a desire for responsibility were appointed team leaders, injecting fresh energy and enthusiasm, and a closed-loop allowed them to efficiently use information on potential new volunteers to engage them." **David Singleton**

"I was given the keys to an office, and telephone lines. Everything else I had to find. It's amazing what you get given from local supporters if you make the ask. By the end I had a fully functioning office, with desks, chairs, computer equipment and everything I needed" **Field Organiser, Ohio**

"Labour needs a mechanism through its website where anyone, anywhere can offer help - not just canvassing but resources like a car or logistics support. This could develop with Socialist Societies for example, such as SERA adding environmental campaigns attracting volunteers interested in such areas. Crucially, it could break down barriers and direct help to most needed locations." **Anon**



Information, training and evaluation

Every person who wanted to be involved with the Obama campaign was provided with a detailed information pack on the campaign and the area they were volunteering in so that they had a better knowledge of the key messages and aims, the structure of the field campaign and the local area.

This helped provide a starting point for training. The focus on training within the Obama campaign meant that all staff and volunteers received training – for example on data entry, canvassing, their role in the team. Training increases confidence and makes sure all members of the team know what is going on, what the key messages are, what their role is and how it fits into the campaign. Each ‘action’ (i.e. phone canvassing, Get Out The Vote) was preceded with a short training session, explaining the action.

At the end of each session, volunteers fed back in, through a debrief, tally sheets and data entry so the work done (number of voters spoken to, number of doors knocked on etc) could be recorded quickly and evaluated. Allowing a short time for training and feedback helped generate a team spirit which in turn made volunteers far more likely to sign up for another campaign session.

Practical suggestions

- Put together or update any existing campaign training manuals and identify existing volunteers who would be able and willing to train others.
- If you don't already have a local briefing pack, start preparing one and ask other constituencies or party members for examples or feedback on your brief. It will help you to get people up to speed on the area when elections are called. It will also be useful briefing for Ministers visiting the constituency. Identify volunteers (maybe local university students looking for practical political experience within the party) who could help with this. The Obama team were working on training and information manuals from the moment the first primary ended, using the experience to provide better training and information packs for the presidential campaign.
- Start every ‘action’ with a short training session focussed on the task in hand – particularly useful for new people, those lacking in confidence or who are new to the local area. Dedicate a time and space in the office for training so that you are not disturbed during those few minutes. Volunteers need to know what they are doing and why - but it does not need to take up lots of time.
- Take time at the end of each ‘action’ to allow volunteers to give a quick feedback in order to evaluate the work done.

*"The techniques of developing and telling your story was one example of the formal training that the campaign staged. Informal training took place in staging locations prior to hitting the doors or the phones. These were backed up somewhat impressively by larger, planned sessions. Even just a couple of days before the end of the campaign, major sessions for volunteers were taking place to train them in 'line management', for the expected queues at polling stations. It is this investment in people that served Obama's campaign so well." **Adrian Prandle***

*"Voter ID may be a straightforward task, but voter persuasion requires knowledgeable and charismatic canvassers. (...) I would argue there is great benefit in taking a short amount of time to remind them (the canvassers) that their individual voice has great value, particularly the reasons behind why they have decided to give up their own time for this cause. Not only does this help avoid the staleness of a script and better assist the volunteers in engaging their audience, but it also instils a sense of pride and purposefulness in these volunteers which surely becomes visible to those around them. **David Singleton***



Networks

Early on in the Obama campaign, local organisers sat down and took time to identify other groups and networks that could be used and link into the campaign. For example, in the UK if the party was supporting raising the minimum wage, we could look at which other groups would support this issue. Engagement with existing networks holding some shared values further increases voter contact and potential support. It also can provide opportunities for party supporters to get involved with practical action in the local community alongside other community organisations or groups.

The trade unions in the US used their networks particularly well – taking on one issue and saying to their members and members of other trade unions this issue is important to us, so this is why we will support this candidate. They were also able to address particular concerns and issues of their members - such as race. Polls commissioned by US unions overwhelmingly indicated that the best carriers of messages for union members are other union members. Union network strength was further emphasised when data showed that in the US, union members make up only 12% of the population but 26% of voters.

This same philosophy was core to the main Obama campaign, with the campaign making use of personal networks to increase contact – for example, encouraging supporters to contact friends in swing states.

Practical steps

- Locally make sure you are aware of all the different networks and trade union branches in your community that you can engage with that might be useful and may consider supporting your candidate, perhaps because of their stance on a particular issue.
- Ask supporters what groups and networks they are part of (i.e. a faith group, or a carers support group) and get them to think about how they can communicate key campaign messages to people in their networks.
- Consider supporting any practical actions that local groups are running - for example cleaning up the park, or campaigning for more police patrols.

"A great success of the Obama campaign was in building a self-sustaining network of supporters, who would recruit new supporters, who in turn would be asked to contact and recruit yet further new supporters. (...) It was this sense of a network, a growing movement for change, where conversations were encouraged between neighbours, not on an overwritten script from party headquarters, but from the simple idea of someone knocking on a neighbour's door and telling them why they were supporting Barack Obama. Parties like to control by hierarchy, but popular movements work better as networks, eschewing scripts for shared values and personalised messages.

*"Ultimately, a five minute conversation on a doorstep is the most powerful means of turning a floating voter. They are gratified by the direct contact, by being asked about their concerns, to be given the chance to question and, yes, sometimes to complain. (...) For Obama, the advantage was to, in effect, introduce him personally at the door. For Labour, it will be about taking on criticism, but reminding people of what has been done, and what we need to do". **Andy Taylor***

"Obama reached out beyond the groups that normally participate in Democratic politics - embracing community groups, churches, single-issue campaigns, and anybody who shared the Democrats' ideals but did not form part of their traditional coalition. Labour must do the same to re-build our battered movement. Too often, Labour Party membership constitutes a barrier to volunteers becoming engaged with Labour campaigns and values. There is a sense in many local Labour parties that, if you're not a member, you can have no role in Labour's work. This attitude costs the party the support of many community and single-issue groups, and inhibits us from energising a mass movement, as developed by Barack Obama.

*If members of a local Greenpeace group share Labour's aims for the environment, but do not wish to join the party, why shouldn't they take part in Labour environmental campaigns?" **Mark Rusling***

*"I met members of Steel Workers for Obama, Hispanics for Obama, Students for Obama - the list goes on. All were part of a mass movement seeking change from the divisive and exclusive politics of the past. A movement of grassroots organisations that came together (...) For me that is the key message of Obama's victory. By working with grassroots organisations, politicians can become influential voices for both the mainstream and the marginalised. And even more than that - they can win elections." **James Green***

*"A far better use of activists' time would be building local coalitions around progressive causes, ensuring the Labour Party is championing issues at the heart of communities, relevant to people's lives." **Jessica Studdert***

*"Many key constituencies will have thousands of TU members whose votes will be the difference between winning and losing not only that seat but whether we will continue to have a Labour Government." **Ian McLaughlin***

The Campaign Office - attitude, atmosphere and motivation

It might sound trite, but every single person noted the atmosphere on the campaign and the attitudes of people working on it as one of the key strengths of the campaign. Staff and volunteers were welcoming, inclusive, appreciative and positive - and it made a massive difference. In fact their mantra was 'Respect, Empower, Include' - which was reflected by the attitude and manner in which the whole campaign was run.

It meant more people were willing to give time and take on more responsibilities as they felt their input was appreciated and valued.

For the Obama campaign, offices were often in visible places in the local community, and were well organised. Displayed in the local office were key information, targets and goals. The campaign timetable and plan was mapped out and volunteers added their names to specific canvassing slots. Offices were kept clean and tidy, and organised, with an area for training.

The Obama campaign outlined clear, achievable targets and goals for teams and volunteers, with people given responsibility for their own targets. By displaying these targets in the offices, this helped to keep people focussed on the goal and the targets which needed to be met in order to achieve the goal.

One clear example of this was that at the end of canvassing shifts, when all canvassers had to complete a tally sheet with how many doors they knocked on, how many people were spoken to, how many pledges of support were gained and how many volunteers recruited. Campaigners could see how their work effected the targets set, which helped to keep campaigners motivated, enthusiastic and determined.

Practical suggestions

- Maintain a functional and organised office, with campaign targets on display.
- Have sign up sheets for canvassing/volunteering shifts highly visible and encourage volunteers at the end of one shift to sign up for another, putting the emphasis on volunteers to contact you if they cannot do the shift they signed up for.
- Take time to talk to other volunteers, to find out their experiences and reasons for volunteering.
- Introduce tally sheets to be completed at the end of a canvassing shift. By introducing a tally sheet, you have a quick picture of how the round went before having to input all the data, and it gives volunteers a clear idea of what they've done, again without too much extra work.

"An acknowledgement of the value of every volunteer, a pride in being part of the team, a sense that no contribution is too small and of a responsibility to your fellow campaigners: these are the qualities of a bottom-up campaign, certainly evident in Obama for America. Whilst a desire for these qualities may be obvious, the effort to ensure them should be fundamental to any election campaign and that is a message I would deliver from Ohio." **David Singleton**

"We can also learn from the support offered by the Obama campaign to volunteers. Accurate records were taken of every door knocked on by a volunteer, and every contact made, allowing us to compare 'strike rates' at the end of the campaign. Offices were well stocked with briefings and materials to assist casual volunteers who might offer a couple of hours of their time at the end of the working day. Of course, a war chest of over half a billion dollars helps to staff offices and create materials, but the way in which volunteers' contributions were recorded and valued does not cost money, and goes a long way to incentivise activists to work ever harder for a campaign." **Mark Rusling**

"What made the campaign truly exceptional was that underscoring everything - the friendliness, the chanting, the food - was a shared conviction of purpose" **Alex O'Donoghue**

"Every field office and volunteer location was set up to be a focus for campaigning. Firstly, there was a welcoming environment, normally with a designated person having the job of greeting. All locations had refreshments and food, which supporters often brought in. This was seen as a valued part of the campaign and bound these people into the collective effort.

On arrival volunteers were talked through tasks they could do, given training and told what was expected; and in terms of canvassing, the area where they were going to. Importantly they were thanked for their time (reinforcing Obama's inclusive values) on arrival and task completion, and it was explained how their efforts fitted into the wider picture.

The offices had phone banks, data inputting, and preparation of campaign activity, with all feeling part of a collective effort. Phone banks not only involved canvassing but calling prospective volunteers before their session to check they were coming - this was a big push." **Anon.**

All too often in Britain, grudging attitudes and a pile of clipboards await new recruits who do show an interest. Initial enthusiasm can quickly be dampened when those who turn up to help out on a Saturday are asked why they can't come on a Sunday too. Labour must learn to open up to new people and be grateful when people contribute what they can. The party must understand that while belief in the cause may stir people into action, this can only be sustained by investing in volunteers and creating a sense of personal efficacy within the context of a campaign." **Jessica Studdert**

Openness

The openness of the campaign was recognised and welcomed by volunteers. On the Obama campaign, the campaign structure and strategy felt open and well communicated, as were goals and timetables and responsibilities.

All public appearances of key politicians were advertised and any member of the public was able to attend. In the US, as with here, there is always the danger that opponents will find out and decide to hijack events but by trusting and respecting party members to treat information responsibly, you gain their respect and desire to work hard for the party. And in most cases the number of supporters will far outweigh the others present.

As mentioned earlier, a major example of openness and trust was that each new volunteer was entrusted with a copy of the campaign volunteer's manual. The manual contained important information about the campaign, the structure of the campaign, the organisation, the field strategy, the rules, issues and key talking points.



"Perhaps one of the greatest facets of the Obama campaign was its ability to maintain discipline throughout the ranks whilst still nurturing an independent voice in each of its volunteers. There was a chain of command; clear in who you answered to and the prohibited actions for which there was zero tolerance. The most stressed instruction was not to talk to the press without senior approval, and not to publish or blog anything about your work during the campaign. This policy certainly minimised negative or embarrassing stories appearing in the media and helped to ensure a consistent message. Yet despite the emphasis on a common code of conduct this did not at all conflict with a strong encouragement for volunteers to make their work as personal as possible. "This campaign is built on the individual stories from every one of you", we were told, and I believe this simple message generated a great deal of confidence and enthusiasm." **David Singleton**

"Opening the campaign up to all-comers didn't equate to amateurism. Participation was taken seriously – a 70-page manual outlined the commitment and professionalism that was expected of volunteers. This put campaign activity, which can seem repetitive and feel isolating, in important context – it was made clear how actions such as canvassing fitted into the bigger picture and were essential to achieving the end goal. Volunteers were instructed to be polite and respectful at all times, and not to engage in arguments or exchanges with the Republican campaigners. The discipline and respect Obama presented at the top thereby filtered through the ranks of the campaign.

The high expectation placed on recruits demonstrated a willingness to get the best out of them and turn them into local ambassadors of the campaign. Volunteers were trained and allocated clear roles, a strategy which fostered a positive sense of teamwork and was based on a realistic understanding of why people would want to contribute their time. It was a reciprocal deal – we invest in you and in turn you take responsibility for delivering our message into your community. Seeking to respect, empower and include volunteers in these ways was simple psychology: if people feel needed and rewarded, they will raise their game and keep coming back." **Jessica Studdert**

"The campaign strategy was shared, in volunteer briefing packs and with voters through doorstep scripts, to create a sense of purpose and a sense of urgency; to make others become a part of something greater than themselves and to make them act now" **Adrian Prandle**

Media and technology

The campaign used new media and technology to create a sense of inclusiveness and participation. E-mails gave the 'inside story' to those signed up to the mailing list. There was effective data capture of e-mail addresses and telephone numbers through this and other tactics such as getting people to sign up to text messages to hear about the vice president nominee first. Though not new to the Labour Party, at a practical grassroots level, taking time to think of innovative ways to contact voters such as collection of e-mail addresses could be extremely valuable.

On the technology side, all of the Obama campaign offices had wireless internet so volunteers could bring their own laptops and use them for data entry or other work that needed to be done on the campaign. This meant that data entry could all be done immediately after canvassing shifts via a website which volunteers could be given log in details for, without requiring extra computer resources.

Unions in the US made use of a piece of software - the predictive dialler - that rang through the phone numbers, taking out disconnected or wrong numbers and connecting volunteers only when the phone was picked up, which helped increase contact and optimise volunteers' time.

Practical suggestions

- Look into installing wireless routers in the local CLP office - they are relatively inexpensive and it could increase the number of people able to work in the office as some would be able to bring their own laptops.
- Establish a database of e-mail addresses for voters, so you can communicate via e-mail, saving both time and resources.
- Plan an e-mail contact strategy for voters so that they are receiving relevant e-mails and not too frequently.

"On a more technical note, can we please find a way to get the software programme called 'the Predictive Dialler'? We had access to 3 machines, linked to laptops, which call the phone numbers on your list, eliminating wrong numbers and answerphones and connects you to a live person. Their name and your script then appear on the screen and when you've got the response click the buttons to record the answer on the database!"

On Saturday the 1st November we contacted a total of 14,932 people in one day including 7,613 using the dialler!" **Ian McLaughlin**

"Growing and nurturing a network of advocates is important for any campaign but using online tools allows you to empower volunteers and activists to go that extra mile. In Ohio, we saw volunteers being able to download all the essential tools they needed to allow them to ring Democrats and Independents in their local area from home, helping to register new supporters and organise activities in their local area. As well providing the mybarackobama.com site for volunteers to gather these tools, the campaign also encouraged many independent forums and blogs to support the work of the campaign."

This organic growth of social and viral media was witnessed everywhere from Facebook to individual web blogs giving the campaign the technological edge it needed to win. The internet allowed Obama to speak to an electorate that otherwise would have felt they were just spectators in this election."

The right message can go ten times further when coupled with the right methods of communication". **Shruti Dudhia**

"In the area where I was, 500 union activists were out one Saturday campaigning. It was seen as too important to allow traditional barriers to contacting members to frustrate the campaign. They used state of the art technology to underpin good old-fashioned campaigning - like the 'Barney Bus', a steel hut with 14 phone stations where automatically individualised scripts helped the activist talk to the union member answering the call. " **Jason Hunter**

Communication, literature and language

Good communication - both internally and with the public - is essential. For the Obama campaign the strong team structure allowed for clear channels of communication both from the campaign headquarters to the grassroots, but equally from the grassroots to the headquarters. The need for strong clear messages which illustrate Labour values is essential, but in addition language, good quality literature and and above all a narrative are vital.

On a basic level the use of language not only helped to build a strong team but helped get the message across on the doorstep.- using *us* and *we* not *them* and *I*, and most importantly using the word *volunteer* instead of *activist* or *campaigner*. 'Volunteer' is far more easily understood by voters. The words *thank you* had to be the most frequently uttered phrase in the campaign - and the one thing that everyone commented on when they got back to the UK. The word 'volunteer' and the use of it was also important. It creates far more positive connotations and is more easily understood than 'activist' or saying 'I'm calling on behalf of the Labour Party' when on the doorstep.

While for the Obama campaign a lot of the literature did not have a particularly local focus, it was of a high quality, focussing on a couple of key issues. Items such as doorhangers gave high visibility to the campaign and election day, as well as communicating the important information to voters.

However, the importance of a narrative is clear. There were key messages and key talking points, but each person was encouraged to tell their personal story on the doorstep. By creating a narrative, a personal story, volunteers are able to better engage with voters and communicate the key campaign messages whilst attracting people to see themselves as part of the campaign and pledge to volunteer.

Practical suggestions

- Consider asking volunteers to think about how they can develop their own narrative or story about why they support the party, and so that it includes key messages.
- Think about the quality as well as the frequency of the literature you are distributing to voters.

"Taking on issues - Throughout the campaign there was a frank discourse on the thorny issue of race. Many steel workers were happy to back Hillary Clinton, but struggled with the idea of a black candidate. All unions took this head on. As Leo Garrard put it "do you care more about a white man in the White House than you do about your jobs, pay, homes or families". Union literature compared the voting records of candidates on key union issues."

Jason Hunter

"(Union) Doubtters and undecided received simple and direct messages from their fellow workers – 'I'm voting for my paycheck and helping my Union', 'Obama's for Working Families, McCain's for the Rich', 'McCain will tax your Health Benefits' (a vital part of most Union negotiated contracts), 'Obama wants Healthcare for All'."

Ian McLaughlin

"Of course, a disciplined message is important for a political party to win an election campaign. However, that message can be communicated in a myriad ways. Labour can learn a great deal from Obama's strategy of maintaining tight control over his campaign messages and personal image, while allowing activists to spread those messages in their own way, online and through personal contacts."

Mark Rusling

"Door-step persuasion of undecided voters was made easier through 'talking points' with a consistent message and an offer that weaved through all literature, campaign adverts and speeches - in essence a beefed up pledge card narrative, underpinned by clear policy pledges. But the emphasis was on canvassers to tell their own story, explaining why they were volunteering."

Anon

Final points

Many of the suggestions and ideas we have put down here are already in action in various constituencies across the country. This document is about sharing best practice based on our own experiences both here and in the US.

Above all, the role of the volunteer is fundamental to the party and party campaigning. It is imperative that we do all that we can to create an environment which encourages and develops greater participation and communication as we move towards future elections.

Further information and articles can be found online at bit.ly/yfamerica on the Young Fabian website www.youngfabians.org

For any questions about this publication, or to find out more about our experiences campaigning in the US, please e-mail nirmalee.wanduragala@gmail.com

Many of the group are also willing to share their experiences at CLP/union branch meetings.

List of participants at a workshop held in December 2008, discussing experiences from the campaign

Amy Barber
Fiona Brenner
Hannah Cameron
Malcolm Clark
John Cook
Richelle David
Rhiannon Davis
Phil Edwards
Max Freedman
Phil Glanville
Kate Groucutt
Joe Keenan
Ellie Kilyon
Veronica King
Chris Kirby
Leah Kreitzman
Mishka Martin
Ian McLaughlin
Stella Mlyenkova
Debbie Moss
Ali Moussavi
Saba Mozakka
Pamela Nash

Sean Newman
Alex O'Donoghue
James O'Sullivan
Lucy Openshaw
Abby Oppong-Asare
Tom Park-Paul
Adrian Prandle
Jennifer Pufky
Shumon Rahman
Vincenzo Rampulla
Imogen Shillito
Duncan Sinclair
Tom Stoate
Jessica Studdert
Louisa Thomson
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