

## Welcome to McCain Country:

The Impact of the Obama Campaign's Grassroots Organizing on Rural Communities and the Future Involvement of these Communities through Organizing for America

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## INDEX

I. Introduction.....	3
II. Personal Narrative.....	18
III. Volunteer Narratives.....	24
IV. Rural Impact.....	45
V. Organizing for America.....	63
VI. Conclusion.....	80

## I. INTRODUCTION

Lucia King and Jamie Foster walk steadily on a long dirt road in the rural outskirts of Luray in Page County, Virginia. They look down at their canvass packet and confirm that the house with the confederate flag in front of them is the house they are supposed to canvass for Barack Obama. They suppress their fear and knock on the door. A heavy-set white man approaches the door. “Hi, are you John?” asks 18-year-old Jamie. “My name is Jamie, and I am a local volunteer with the Obama Campaign.” “Well, ya’ll are lucky! If you were McCain supporters we woulda’ had a problem,” said John. It is moments like this that defined the historic election of Barack Obama: breaking down barriers and stereotypes and neighbors talking to neighbors about their candidate in previously untouched territory. It is in this same county that I volunteered as a Field Organizer for the last two months of the campaign.

This study focuses on both the past and present organizational structure of rural communities’ involvement with the Obama Campaign and now the administration. As a result of a lack of previous organized campaigning, narrowed sources of media, and the small community connectedness associated with rural America, the recent campaign had a large impact on the voters contacted, regardless of whether or not they voted for Obama. The campaign’s ability to respect, empower and include volunteers in these areas brought people together, and kept them volunteering. As a result, campaigning in rural communities also had a great impact on the volunteers both in terms of the communities created and the ways in which it empowered those involved. However, it is essential to look towards the future, and at how Obama’s Organizing for America (OFA) will continue to involve these communities, or if they have ability to flourish on their

own. I have therefore created a document of suggestions as to how OFA can include rural communities in their attempt to promote Obama's agenda, further civic engagement, energize local Democrats, and enhance communication between the administration and the people. The rich conclusions reached are not only based on my own personal experience as a Field Organizer in rural Virginia, but also on articles and interviews with Obama volunteers, staff members, and rural organizers and activists from around the country. By utilizing participant observation, I have gained a deep understanding of these issues and developed trust between the volunteers of Page County, whose stories I use as a case study to exemplify my points. Narratives of the main volunteers give the reader a better understanding of each person's unique experience and insight as to how the campaign brought together a diverse group of people, all in the name of change.

### 50 State Strategy

The Obama Campaign had arguably the best campaign strategy in the history of politics. In order to win the election, Obama developed a fifty state strategy in which he mobilized voters nationwide. "Instead of the usual way of doing things—putting precious campaign dollars into only those states the candidate has a chance of winning—the Obama team will run hard everywhere, even in traditionally Republican states,"<sup>1</sup> said *Newsweek's* Richard Wolffe. The fifty-state approach had multiple rationalities: it forced Republicans to spend money in areas they typically had to themselves, helped prove Obama's ability to unite the country, and mobilized supporters of Obama to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wolffe, "Everywhere and Beyond," *Newsweek*, June 2008.  
<http://www.newsweek.com/id/141507>.

campaign for congressional and senate races as well as help fund these races.<sup>2</sup> Steve Hilderbrand, Obama's deputy national campaign director stated: "We don't have great expectations that we can win everywhere. But we ... might help elect members to Congress. And they might help pass universal health care and bring the troops home from Iraq."<sup>3</sup> The campaign was therefore thinking towards the future and not just about electing Obama. Howard Dean first created this strategy when he became head of the Democratic National Committee in 2005, dismissing the idea that there is no benefit to campaigning in red states. Obama took this strategy to the next level, investing in states at historic levels. Investing resources nationally has led to a changing political climate, where more than just battleground states have come to expect at least some form of campaigning.

### Grassroots Strategy

The strategy also included a grassroots approach by which field organizers organized volunteers - down to the precinct level in swing states - to knock on doors and call voters. "Those that guided it [the campaign] early on knew what it mean to organize,"<sup>4</sup> said rural Virginian Regional Field Director Million Fikre. "They've invested in a civic infrastructure on a scale that has never happened,"<sup>5</sup> said labor organizer Marshall Ganz. This bottom up approach made a huge difference in the campaign's ability to mobilize voters. Volunteers, some as young as 10, others as old as

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Hooper, "Why Obama Loves Virginia," *CNN Politics*, October 2008.  
<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/10/31/obama.priority/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Wolffe.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for all interview quotes

<sup>5</sup> Alex MacGillis, "Obama Camp Relying Heavily on Ground Effort," *Washington Post*, October 2008.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/11/AR2008101102119\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/11/AR2008101102119_pf.html).

85, were able to take ownership of the campaign. “This is the life blood of this campaign. Volunteers like you guys coming in, making phone calls, getting out signs, knocking on doors, it’s what makes all the difference in the world,”<sup>6</sup> said Obama during his visit to an office in Missouri. “In many states, the Democratic candidate is hewing more closely to the Rove organizational model than is rival Senator John McCain, whose emphasis on ground operations has been less intensive and clinical than that of his Republican predecessor,”<sup>7</sup> said Washington Post writer MacGillis. Obama took the Rove model of campaigning and perfected it.

Whether it was making calls, knocking on doors, entering data, registering voters, or organizing other volunteers to do these things, everyone who wanted to participate had a role in the campaign. Dedicated volunteers were given leadership roles, such as precinct team captain, canvass captain and staging location director. Precinct or neighborhood captains were in charge of managing volunteers and mobilizing Democratic and undecided voters in their designated “turf”. Many captains ended up working more or less along side their field organizer.<sup>8</sup> This strategy proved effective: “The Clinton campaign is the last, antiquated vestige of the top-down model,”<sup>9</sup> said Joe Trippi, the mastermind of Dean’s Internet campaign, back in March 2008. “We’re seeing the last time a top-down campaign has a chance to win it. There won’t be another campaign that makes the same mistake the Clintons made of being dependent on big donors and insiders. It’s not going to work ever again,”<sup>10</sup> he said. Over time, this model

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<sup>6</sup> [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>7</sup> MacGillis.

<sup>8</sup> Zach Exley, “The New Organizers,” *Huffington Post*, October 2008.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zack-exley/the-new-organizers-part-1\\_b\\_132782.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zack-exley/the-new-organizers-part-1_b_132782.html).

<sup>9</sup> Tim Dickinson, “The Machinery of Hope,” *Rolling Stone*, March 2008.  
<http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/19106326>, p5.

<sup>10</sup> Dickinson, p8.

proved even more effective: as the number of team leaders rose, the number of voters contacted on the doors and phones increased as well. Commenting on the incredible number of volunteers, Rural Virginian Field Organizer Chris Nelson said, “As you get closer to an election more get involved, but I don’t know if its supposed to grow exponentially.”

The campaign also put a lot of pressure on the field organizers to take control of their “turf”. “You all are ambassadors for this campaign. You will have more interaction with voters than I will. It’s about their stories. Their fears about this economy,” said Obama in mid October. This message was relayed to all levels of staff. “It’s our responsibility now. If Barack wins Virginia, he’ll win the election,” said State Director Mitch Stewart in early September. They also emphasized our great importance to the movement. “There has never been anything like what you guys are doing....We’ve created a culture,” said Obama in early September. The Regional Field Directors also relayed this to us. “I’ve been looking at our numbers. You have done something amazing in this region. You are swinging the state, and changing the entire electoral map,” said my Regional Field Director, Sara El Amine, in late October. This kind of positive pressure helped keep field organizers accountable for their numbers. The McCain campaign, in comparison, attacked community organizing, at one point mocking the Obama campaign for being so organized. "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities," said Governor Sarah Palin, the Republican nominee, at the VP debates. Obama fought back: “That’s why they’re out of touch and don’t get it [community organizers] – they haven’t spent

much time working on behalf of these folks,” he said on September 4<sup>th</sup>. In the end, the organizing model of campaigning dominated McCain’s top down strategy.

### Internet to Action

The successful building of a strong grassroots force was in great part due to the campaign’s use of the Internet, which Obama harnessed to attract broad based support online. “Can we make this work offline?” thought campaign strategist Hilderbrand early in the campaign. We said to our online supporters, ‘We love you, but we need you to actually go to work in your neighborhood.’ Their online support was only great if we could translate it into activity within their community.”<sup>11</sup> The campaign feared making similar mistakes to the Howard Dean campaign in the 2004 Presidential Election, in which he gained broad support through his Internet campaign, but then was unable to turn out voters on election day. In July of 2007, *Washington Post* staff writers Anne E. Kornblut and Perry Bacon Jr. noted that Obama “must turn the intense devotion of his backers into a force that can win primaries, expanding his base of support beyond the narrow band of Democratic elites who backed Dean.”<sup>12</sup> In preparation, they created Camp Obama to train organizers all over the country. This became known as the campaign’s secret weapon. In the beginning months of the campaign, the volunteers functioned as staff in the states where he didn’t have employees.<sup>13</sup> Then when the Field Organizers arrived, the local community was already organized and campaigning. The campaign also created “Neighbor to Neighbor,” the most innovative political online

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<sup>11</sup> Dickinson, p4.

<sup>12</sup> Anne E. Kornblut and Perry Bacon Jr., “Obama Faces the Test Dean Failed: Broadening Support,” *Washington Post*, July 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/16/AR2007071601831.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Dickinson, p5.



system ever devised for volunteers, where anyone could make calls and print canvass packets from home through an online database. The Internet was also helpful for fundraising because people could go on-line to donate. Previously the Internet did not prove useful to Get Out the Vote.<sup>14</sup> This campaign broke the pattern and instead used it successfully to harness volunteers and send information, specifically YouTube videos, to voters.

### Rural Conservative America

While nowadays it is assumed that rural voters tend to vote Republican, this swing to the right is quite recent. A report by Greenberg Quilan Rosner Research after the 2002 election shows how that election solidified the trend of rural support for Republican candidates that started in 1994.<sup>15</sup> In that election, the GOP won rural voters by a 24-point margin, showing a steadily increasing margin (see Appendix B). The question remains how rural communities have come to vote against their own economic interest. The report highlights their strong support for Bush and continued conservative views on social issues. These include support for the war in Iraq, “right to life” stance on abortion, and a pro-gun viewpoint. In the book *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* by Thomas Frank, the author attempts to answer why poor non-urban America outside the cities has turned to the right. He blames this on the backlash: “While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues – summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Green and Alan Gerber. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout* (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quilan Rosner Research. Election 2002: Rural Voters and Rural Issues. Publication.

– which it then marries to pro-business economic policies.”<sup>16</sup> He claims that the backlash has allowed our current free-market economy, deregulation and privatization to take place. He sees this as a huge contradiction: “It is a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people.”<sup>17</sup> As much as the politicians and party supporters rally around these values, economic policies are always the first pursued by the politicians once in office; they almost never deliver on the social issues that got them elected.

### How Democrats Had Campaigned in Rural Areas

Unlike previous Democratic Party campaigns in the last fifteen years, Obama had a presence in rural communities across the country. “The Kerry campaign effectively wrote off rural counties, and completely abandoned them in the final few weeks of the campaign in a last minute all-in shift to the cities.”<sup>18</sup> While rural counties tend to vote Republican, that does not mean they are not worth the time. “A lot of Democrats at the national level continue to look at where the concentrations of population are. They want the most bang for their buck. States that are less populated look, at first glance, like they aren't worth the investment,”<sup>19</sup> said North Dakota Progressive Coalition director Don Morrison in 2003. He continued: “What they haven't quite figured out is that there are two places in America where you see the most pain, the most economic injustice: the inner city and rural America. Democrats win the inner cities, and they could win the rural

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Frank. What's the matter with Kansas? how conservatives won the heart of America. (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), p5.

<sup>17</sup> Frank, p6.

<sup>18</sup> Exley.

<sup>19</sup> John Nichols, “Needed. A Rural Strategy.” *The Nation*, October 2003.  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20031103/nichols2>.

areas. But first, they have to recognize that there is pain out here. Then, they have to make it a whole lot clearer that they're going to do something about it."<sup>20</sup> Obama did just that, at least more than any Democrat has done in decades. As the campaign went on, the importance of the rural counties became more and more obvious with increased resources from the campaign and attention from the media. "Rural America has become a major part of the battleground that will decide the outcome of this election in the next two weeks,"<sup>21</sup> said Greenberg in mid-October.

Obama's ability to focus efforts on rural areas was in great part due to his increasing amounts of funds raised. In September alone the campaign brought in \$150 million. However, El Amine believes that this isn't the only reason Obama campaigned in rural communities. "Traditionally Democrats don't campaign in rural areas. Hilary only had office in urban areas, and had the resources to be in rural. It was a political choice," she said. "The philosophy of our campaign from the beginning was to compete for every vote. Not cede any precinct, any county, anywhere,"<sup>22</sup> said Figueroa. In 2000 and 2004, strong Republican strength in the rural areas gave Bush his margin of victory.<sup>23</sup> In 2004, rural voters – who consisted of 16% of the total vote - voted for Bush 59% to 40% as indicated in MSNBC exit polls.<sup>24</sup> "We've been saying that the Democratic candidate has to lessen the Republican advantage among rural voters, and Obama has done even better than that. He's pulled the race to a tie among these voters," said

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<sup>20</sup> Nichols.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Greenberg, Rural American Battleground: Rural Voters Divide Evenly in October. Publication. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, October 23, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Dickinson, p6.

<sup>23</sup> Howard Berkes, "Obama Made Inroads into Rural Republican Base," *NPR*, November 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96782692>.

<sup>24</sup> MSNBC exit polls

Democratic Party analyst and pollster Anna Greenberg in October.<sup>25</sup> Campaign spokesperson Clark Stevens stated "It's important for us to have a presence in as many communities as we can...Offices are about giving members of the community the tools they need and the information they need to make a decision on November 4th."<sup>26</sup> Fikre noted after the campaign that this new attention showed the people that "This campaign cares about rural votes. This campaign cares about us." "I look at organizing in rural area like organizing youth. People always write it off. Instead, were going to talk to them, were going to get them organizing," he told me. Now the question is: did this strategy prove effective?

### The Obama Campaign in Rural Areas

Rural campaigning was effectively no different than campaigning in other places, except rural counties had smaller call and door goals and focused more on calling than knocking on doors until the last two months of the campaign. "Canvassing rural areas was something controversial during the campaign," said El Amine. "In Idaho during the primaries, we won by the greatest margin. We couldn't go door to door so we only did phone calling. The contact rate was really high. If we had tried to put people on doors, we would not have had positive results. A mixture is good; it depends on the community." Voter contact thus varied from state to state and county to county, primarily through "neighbor to neighbor" phone calls and door knocks. By "neighbor to neighbor," the campaign aimed to have people in each county contacting other voters in

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<sup>25</sup> Chavvah Lister, "Rural Battleground Moved Toward Obama During October," *Center for Rural Strategies*. <http://www.ruralstrategies.org/projects/tracker/2008.3/>.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin Merida, "Battling in Enemy Territory," *Washington Post*, October 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/31/AR2008103103933.html?hpid=topnews>.

their community, rather than bringing in or hiring outsiders. They believed this would be the most effective way to win votes.

Volunteers were told to ask targeted\* voters if they would be supporting Obama or McCain in the upcoming Presidential Election. On the call or walk sheet printed for the volunteers by staff members, the options NH (not home), WN/Moved (wrong number), Inac (Inaccessible), Ref (Refused), Obama: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were provided. A 1 represented "Obama supporter," a 5 "McCain supporter," 3 "undecided" and the so on. If the voter was a supporter, volunteers were told to thank them and ask them to volunteer, attempting to schedule them for a shift. If the voter was a 5, the volunteer was told to thank the voter for their time and move on, except in certain circumstances where it seemed feasible to still persuade the voter. If the voter was a 2, 3 or 4, the volunteer was told to talk to the voter about whatever was important to them. Often volunteers asked, "Is there an issue that concerns you?" or "What is important to you?" in order to start some sort of dialogue. Even if volunteers did not know Obama's stance on every issue, they were told to speak from their heart, tell their story. They also had the option to write the voters "issue" down on their walk or call sheet and then later other volunteers followed up with a handwritten letter and issue sheet. Data volunteers would then take all of this information and enter it in to the VAN, or the campaign's database run through the DNC. The VAN showed when each voter had been contacted, their response, previous voting history, and any other insights.

\*Targeted voters were identified by the campaign by a complex algorithm that took in to account voters' demographics and previous voting history. Voters to contact were within a certain "universe" the campaign created, the idea being that it would not be

feasible or strategic to contact every voter. The universes expanded and contracted depending on the focus and emphasis of the campaign. For most of the campaign, the universe consisted of voters defined by the system as “Sporadic” and “Persuasion,”; Sporadic being sporadic voting Democrats and Persuasion being those they thought could be convinced to vote for Obama based on their demographics and voting history. Once all possible calls had been made, sometimes the universe was expanded to include “leaning Democrats” or “leaning Republicans.” One of my critiques of the campaign in rural areas was the small size of the universe which often caused volunteers to over contact voters, not a good thing. The last three weeks during Get Out the Vote, they contacted voters still identified as open to persuasion and kept reminding sporadic Obama supporters to get out and vote. The last two days, they took out the Persuasion and just called Sporadic voters.

The campaign’s strategy also included voter registration, but in rural Republican communities it was not pushed as much. Literature on Obama and his stance on different issues was available for anyone that came in to the office. During the last month, staff received comparison sheets, comparing McCain and Obama on the main issues, as well as sheets combating McCain’s “smear” campaign. The literature was also dropped off at the homes canvassed. During most of the campaign, standard literature was given out, but during Get Out the Vote each piece was geared for either Sporadic or Persuasion voters. Literature was specifically targeted for the audience. In rural Virginia, voters feared Obama was too different: that he was a Muslim, terrorist, or a white hater. Thus the literature had to speak to these fears. One booklet used for a while had photo after photo of Obama with his white family and Obama with white workers, because that is the

image these voters needed to see. They needed to feel like it was ok to vote for a black man. I'm not saying this is right or wrong, but rather the reality of what was needed to turn states like Virginia blue.

Volunteers were recruited through organizers, who were each in charge of different "territory." House meetings were held with interested supporters early on in each county where feasible. Field organizers were told from the beginning to focus on each volunteers' "Obama story" – essentially explaining why they were supporting his candidacy. In the beginning house meetings and throughout the campaign, they would have everyone go around and tell their story in order to connect and unite an, up until this time, random group of people. Office opening parties, debate watch parties and other events were also used to unite people. Recruitment calls were made nightly to a list of potential volunteers :strong Democrats, people that came into the offices, on-line sign ups, rally attendees, and any other venue from which the campaign was able to get names and numbers. Confirmation calls were also made the night before to volunteers who had signed up for a shift. In most cases, this made volunteers feel that the campaign cared about them but in rare occasions annoyed them to a point of no return. The VAN allowed organizers to track all of this so that follow up calls could be made for volunteers who did not show up. When volunteers came in to the office, field organizers were pushed to have training and/or directions and materials ready so they could get right to work. The intense focus on providing a positive volunteer experience along with peoples' heart-felt connection to Obama resulted in unheard numbers of volunteers across the country.

### Importance of Virginia

Due to its history, Virginia had particular importance as part of the fifty-state plan. “As the gateway to the south and a bastion of small town America bolstered by a strong military presence clustered around the U.S. Navy's Norfolk base, Virginia is not supposed to be the sort of place where a liberal-leaning Democratic presidential candidate makes inroads,”<sup>27</sup> said CNN’s Simon Hooper. Although Virginia only represents thirteen Electoral College votes, there was political consensus that McCain would likely not be able to win the election without Virginia. “Obama can be president even if he loses in Virginia but it's hard to see how McCain could be if he doesn't win here,”<sup>28</sup> said Times-dispatcher Tim Nolan. Winning Virginia also represented Obama’s ability to unite the country. Since Obama followed Clinton politics in that he mobilized the middle, winning Virginia would prove an example of his success at gaining support of Republicans and Independents.<sup>29</sup> “The historic nature of an Obama victory would be immensely significant given the history of race in this country -- and particularly so in Virginia,”<sup>30</sup> stated Senior Fellow at the University of Richmond, Moeser. The idea of Obama winning this state signified an important advance in fighting racism given that Virginia had played a major part in the slave trade.<sup>31</sup> “Never has a campaign in Virginia done what we did today,” said State Field Director Mitch Stewart on the last Saturday before the election when we had more volunteers in the first shift than we had ever had in an entire day. This signified the success at continuously building a base of volunteers and making inroads in previously ignored territory.

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<sup>27</sup> Hooper.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Mark Halperin and John Harris. *The Way to Win*. (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Hooper.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



The rural focus rang especially true in Virginia, where people campaigned in areas previously untouched by Democratic candidates. Obama had over 70 offices in the state of Virginia compared to McCain's 21.<sup>32</sup> Many of these offices were in small towns that had never seen a Democratic office or a Democratic presence, such as Bridgewater, Bristol, Lynchburg, and my office in Luray. Kevin Merida of *The Washington Post* in his article "Battling in Enemy Territory" noted that the offices in rural parts of the country such as Chase City, Virginia, were a symbol of the campaign's attempt to mobilize voters in more than just traditional Democratic areas.<sup>33</sup> Thanks to the online organizing, many of these towns already had some level of organized support prior to staff arriving. Therefore, when the paid organizers arrived, or Field Organizers as they were called, they could easily work with the ground game already in play.

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<sup>32</sup> Simon Hooper, "Virginia Holds Key to White House," *Washington Post*, October 2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/10/27/hooper.washington/index.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Merida.

## II. PERSONAL NARRATIVE

I arrived in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008, ready to work. To tell you the truth, I had little sense of what that "work" entailed. I had not graduated from college and had never worked for a political campaign. Five minutes after walking into the office, I was "trained" by being given a list of calls to make. Nervous and a bit confused, I called through the numbers on my list. After about twenty calls, someone finally answered. "Stop calling me!" he screamed. "I already told you, I don't want to volunteer!" At the time, I was frightened and thought that I should probably stop making calls from the list. I asked the person in charge. "Just keep calling," he said. Looking back, this is a fitting first day of calling: one that many of my volunteers would later experience, and I would tell them the same – "just keep calling". The following day, El Amine, our regional field director and a friend of mine from Occidental, informed another student, Emily, and me that we would be taking over for one of the Field Organizers whose wife was having a baby. She explained to us that we would plan house parties for the Democratic Convention on the 28<sup>th</sup>. This included inviting attendees, coordinating with a party host, and organizing the upcoming Saturday canvass. This seemed like a daunting task considering we had little idea how to use the database and had no relationship with the hosts or supporters. Somehow everything worked out, and our parties went off without a hitch; except for the massive downpours that inhibited attendance. Two weeks later, Sara asked me to head to Harrisonburg with the intention that in a few days later I would run my own office in rural Luray. The campaign was not kidding around when they said they believed enough in those who volunteered and

worked as campaign organizers to give them an opportunity play a large part in this campaign.

I arrived at the Harrisonburg office and started coordinating volunteers, recruiting volunteers, and soon running the office while the Field Organizer ,Camron Gorguinpour attended a meeting. I asked some of the volunteers about Luray. “There’s urban. There’s rural. Then there’s Luray,” one told me. Two days later, I arrived in the town of Luray in Page County, Virginia. Tourists flock to Luray for the famous caverns, the beautiful hiking trails, and the magnificent Shenandoah National Park. Many miss the less visible Page County – where segregation still exists, racism is blatant, those without homes or food are often left hopeless, and the slim job market forces many to trek two hours to and from DC daily. In 2000, the census showed that the median household income per household was \$33,359, with 12.5% of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>34</sup> In 2000, 7,996 votes were cast - 64% voted for Bush, 34% for Gore. In 2004, 9,603 votes were cast – 65% for Bush, 34.6% for Kerry. Along with its Republican leanings, the racism deeply embedded in the area also presented a challenge when campaigning for a black presidential candidate. As you drive down the hill past the Luray Caverns toward downtown on Main Street, for about three blocks almost every single person you pass is black. Blacks and whites refer to this part of town as “the hill”. I’ve been told that this is an improvement over the previous name. The 2000 census states that only 2.6% of Page’s population is black, while whites represent an overwhelming majority at 96.65%.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> US Census 2000, <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Tourists also miss the powerful force that organized and slowly transformed the dynamics of the county during 2008 Presidential Election. My second day, I spoke to David Newman, a resident who started organizing supporters back in June. When Gorguinpour approached the group in July about campaigning in Page County, he said they could start an office if they wanted. A few weeks later he received a call from David informing him that they had found an office. Their surprisingly large core of volunteers for such a rural area allowed them to have about five callers every weeknight. This tight knit community proved effective; in one night, five callers would make on average 800 calls, frequently more than cities like Charlottesville. David brought me up to date on what they were doing and gave me some background on the area. “Page is different than Chicago and LA,” he said upon my arrival. “Page is highly segregated by whites, but by blacks as well. There’s a lack of trust. We have the chance now to change the social structure of this town.”

My third night there we had an office opening/meet Margot potluck. Prior to my arriving, the office was only open from five until nine during the week. Now it would be open ten in the morning until twelve at night, seven days a week. Before, they were only making calls. Now we would canvass, register voters and do our own data entry. I noticed all of the volunteers here generally of the same demographic– white, middle aged, middle/upper class and originally from outside of Luray. I saw then that one of my challenges would be to include the rest of the community. Although it was amazing that they had formed this united and powerful force of volunteers, I knew diversifying the group would not only bring people together from different parts of the community, but

create a more effective organization for post election work. The original volunteers seemed to believe this as well, but didn't really know how to go about it.

By my second week I was running the office with little assistance from Gorguinpour. I typically organized the office, printed call sheets and walk packets, and trained volunteers until around 4pm, then I would start making volunteer recruitment and confirmation calls as well as train volunteers until 9pm. From 9pm until 10:30pm I would, eventually with the help of volunteers, tally the calls and the doors knocked on for the day and from 10:30 until usually 12 and on some occasions 1 or 2am, I would enter data. Overtime, volunteers took leadership positions so that I could concentrate on recruiting volunteers and overseeing that everything ran smoothly. Their roles included training other volunteers, tallying, coordinating data entry, launching canvasses, managing the office, as well as recruiting and keeping friends volunteering. I also coordinated a Chet Edwards Veterans Forum, Debate Watch Parties, Office Grand Opening/GOTV Sing Up, and GOTV activities. Towards the end up September, Jo Snapp, a NYU social work graduate whose parents have a home in Luray, came to work full time as my deputy field organizer. This helped greatly to keep me sane and strategize how to run the office.

Following a few weeks of recruiting volunteers during nightly phone banks and as they came into the office for campaign paraphernalia, which the campaign referred to as "chum," we had a solid base of over one hundred volunteers, averaging 20 volunteers a day. This group represented a broader group of residents. Volunteers came because of their interest in Barack Obama; they stayed because of the campaign's belief in them: our belief in their ability to make some phone calls and knock on some doors. This influx of

volunteers , residents who were different from the original core changed the dynamics of the office. No longer were we a group of liberals and white “newcomers” trying to get Obama elected; instead we more truly represented Page County and brought together people from all walks of life.

Sometimes I was able to sneak away for an hour or two to canvass. One day, towards the end of the campaign, I drove up with my friend to a home in the middle of a large farm with “No Trespassing” signs and an electric fence surrounding the outskirts of the property. The family sat outside, the adults talking and the kids playing around on a tractor, so we decided to at least approach them. “Hi, my name is Margot, and I am a volunteer with the Obama Campaign. Is a Mr. Stevens home?” I asked.

“He’s inside,” responded one of the men. “What do you want?”

“I am wondering if he has decided if he will be supporting Obama or McCain for president,” I responded. The man sent his five-year-old daughter to ask her grandpa inside the house. While we were waiting, we struck up a conversation with the man, who told us he couldn’t vote because he was a felon, but he wouldn’t vote for Obama because he heard he was a Muslim. We were so into the conversation that we forgot we were waiting for the little girl. Five minutes later, she came running out of the house.

“Obama,” she said, with extreme annunciation on the “ba.” With that note, we left, still in shock that anyone in the family was voting for Obama. Every single time I canvassed I would find myself amazed at the amount of support I found in such unexpected places.

Running the office in such a rural county was quite rewarding. Almost every day, people would walk in and tell me they had never voted, but for the first time they felt inspired to make the effort. Other supporters would come in, completely shocked there

was an office in Page County. The most rewarding part, and I think a truly unique aspect of working in a rural county, was the community that was formed not only around Obama but around a group of people who cared about him winning and about each other. In a community where progressive conversation is as rare, the office served as a safe space where people could come together and engage in dialogue. For many, this was the only space they'd ever felt included, safe and inspired to work for the greater good. After a while, we began to refer to ourselves as the Obama family. Many volunteers would come in the morning and return later to help me do data entry until 1 in the morning. When one volunteer had a family crisis, Jo, another volunteer and I rushed to help him out.

While there were many amazing and heartwarming experiences, I don't want to romanticize the experience. It was not always easy to get volunteers into the office. Every night I made calls for five hours and sometimes would only get one or two shifts scheduled. A lot of people would stop by the office and ask for a yard sign or button and then refuse to volunteer. This was frustrating because I knew yard signs did little to win elections. "He's not going to elect himself," volunteer coordinator Kristen Szakos would say in the Charlottesville office. We even posted the article titled "Why Obama Organizers are Trying to Win Elections Instead of Getting you Yard Signs", but this made people upset. I was told by volunteers that, for some, it was a big deal to ask for a yard sign because they were admitting to their neighbors that they supported a black man, which in some social groups is still looked down upon. One interesting occurrence was when one of our African American volunteers, Mrs. Berry, commented "Good for you," when an older white gentleman asked for a sign. I later asked her why she didn't seem to care if he volunteered. "We're black. It doesn't matter for us [to put up a yard sign]. But

it takes courage for a white man to put up that sign.” We also struggled with reaching canvass door numbers because most of the volunteers were hesitant to canvass alone, and the houses were far apart outside town. This was frustrating because I was being told one thing by the campaign, but in reality knew it was not feasible. My biggest frustration involved errors in the lists and too small of a call universe that meant we over contacted voters. This was especially bad in a small town because volunteers refused to continuously call or knock, afraid they would lose respect in their community.



### **III. VOLUNTEER NARRATIVES**

The following narratives are aimed to give the reader a better sense of the lives of the volunteers and their experience with the campaign in order to see the diversity of the volunteers and how it has influenced peoples' lives. Volunteers made phone calls, knocked on doors, entered data, trained other volunteers, managed the office, or a combination of those tasks. Most had a specific task they enjoyed, while frequent volunteers typically did whatever task was given to them. The Page County office was unique in that volunteers often volunteered in groups; each night of the week they had a different person in charge of organizing their group to make calls and or knock on doors. This team approach increased camaraderie and greatly improved the number of calls each night in comparison to other offices because volunteers felt like they were in it together. Their opinions on the impact are organized for each volunteer: lack of previous campaigning; campaigning as a way to combat smears; small town impact; and how volunteering led to empowerment and to the creation of a strong liberal community in order to smoothly transition in to a analysis of the different ways the campaign impacted rural communities.

Some narratives will be grouped because those volunteers had similar stories. Although throughout the campaign we had over 100 volunteers, the chosen narratives effectively reflect the diversity of volunteers. These are the volunteers who gave the most time and were an integral part of our office and the story of the impact of campaigning in rural areas. Each narrative will give the reader an explanation of that person or group of people in the context of the campaign, why they volunteered, and their feelings on the impact the campaign had on the election and on their community. All

interviews, except for Constance Hanson, whose interview was via email, and Nicholas Carl, who was living in Africa at the time, were conducted in Luray between January 13 and January 15, 2009, for the most part in the homes of the volunteers.

### *The “Come-heres”*

The original volunteers and those that started the office consisted of a group of “come-heres” as they call themselves; those that were not born here but moved into Page County. All except The Clarks and Signe Vaughn, who are in their forties, are white and over 60. Signe actually was born in the area, but lived in Northern California for many years. Betty and Herb Karp, originally from Alexandria, Virginia, moved to a farmhouse in Luray in 2002 to escape the city life. Betty joined the Obama bandwagon as soon as Gorguinpour approached the county because she believes “that as citizens we have an obligation to be involved in our government,” and she saw Obama as the candidate whose ideals were closest to her own. They helped recruit volunteers, fundraised to pay the bills, made calls, and Betty often helped run phone banks. They also housed and fed me during my two-month stay – southern hospitality to the core. Carol and Johnny Clark of Alexandria, Virginia, moved to Luray to run their own veterinarian clinic twenty years ago. They volunteered because Bush was “dangerously disregarding our Constitution and Barack Obama is the antithesis of everything Bush and his administration were about,” said Carol. They wanted to serve anonymously because of their local business, so led our data team. While they worked at the clinic from 7am to 6pm everyday, they would volunteer at least five nights a week from around 7pm until we were done with data around 11pm.

Lucia and Bill King moved to Luray from DC in 1993 to retire. Lucia volunteered because it was a moral issue: "If we "go out" and take most of the other species with us, I'd rather do it having tried to change, than pretending everything is just going to be fine and staying in denial," she said. From the beginning, Lucia, a local potter, was one of the key organizers of the office, always making sure volunteers were filling shifts and that we had supplies. Both were Monday night phone callers and towards the end Lucia became a Canvass Captain. Phel and Bob Jacobsen, a former National Park Service employee also chose Luray in which to retire. Bob was a Monday night phone caller, while Phel preferred to canvass. She would canvass one or two times a week and enjoyed going during the day and visiting older voters. Barbara Coulter moved to Stanley a few years ago and is now retired. She enjoyed canvassing with Phel during the day. Signe Burgen Vaughan moved back to Luray in 2002 to marry her high school sweetheart. She spends her time in garden clubs, book clubs, lunch and dinner clubs, and volunteering for local organizations. She came in almost daily during the week to do data entry. Sherry Myers and Tom Ford were among the first phone callers and often wrote editorials for the local republican newspaper. One cartoon that made it into the local Republican-leaning paper featured a ladder showing that racists voters needed to climb up the rungs to enlightenment and vote for Obama. While their Libertarian friends donated the office space, this group of people donated most of the furniture and materials.

When interviewed post campaign, these volunteers emphasized the importance of our work in the area to increase Democratic Party presence. It made people realize "it's ok to be a Democrat. We are out here doing a job, making you feel like it's ok," said

Betty. “There’s a grudge of respect that you would do it, that you would work that hard,” echoed Barbara. Often Barbara and Phel would venture into the hollows, often called “hollers,” where many volunteers hesitated to go due to rampant racism. “We went up to the hollows and people said, “You are the only people who have ever asked for my vote; that have ever knocked on my door,” said Barbara. “You would expect racism. But we didn’t find it. They’re poor. They know they’re getting short changed. They’re scared. They think they’ll mess up and make a fool of themselves... one day this little redneck man came out [of his house] and said ‘Obama’s my man’,” she said. These volunteers also noted the importance of an office. “Headquarters opened up peoples’ eyes,” said Sherry. “Having a headquarters in town...was exciting. We were visible,” said Signe. “It gave us credibility,” responded Carol. Carol and Johnny said the reason they volunteered was because they were so appreciative that there was actually an office in Luray.

I asked them a lot about how they gauged their effectiveness in combating the RP’s smears and their feelings about standing as a face for Obama in an attempt to combat racism. They voiced a concern regarding the dominance of conservative information through talk radio and FOX news. “Someone said he was the antichrist,” said Carol. “People thought that he was a Muslim,” said Lucia. Most felt these fears stuck because of an historical conservative ideology. Some fears we did not have a chance at reversing: “People that were very religious and pro life weren’t going to vote for Obama,” said Lucia. “Once they had that concept, they had already made up their mind,” echoed Signe. “Republicans are lazy thinkers. They’re not allowing themselves to explore the other side, just because Mom and Dad have always shoved Republicanism

down their throats,” said Carol. “They identify with the wealthy, and they’re not!” said Barbara. “I grew up in Southern Virginia,” said Carol, “there’s this thing about ‘we don’t want government messing with our lives.’ This area has been Republican a long time.” They also noted a strong presence of racism, and the difficulty at combating it. “In the Bible, it says it must be a white man that must run everything,” said a voter Phel was visiting. “I think God would forgive you this one time if you voted for Obama,” she responded. Often they heard people voice the words “I would never vote for a nigger,” on the opposite line of the phone. Moreover, some for the first time had to confront their racist tendencies, or at least come to realize them. “They were mostly polite,” said Bill of the voters. “The racists were for the most part embarrassed by their racism. At least they’re embarrassed by it,” he said. However they did see people grow over time. “It was a tough start for Sherry and me at the beginning,” said Tom. “People were very Republican and racist. It brought Sherry to tears. Towards the end, making phone calls was so much more rewarding,” he said. “I felt that by the end people were more receptive and used to his name. The more you saw him took fear away,” said Barbara.

This group of volunteers noted both positive and negative impacts of the small town feeling. Lucia said she found it harder when she knew people, while Johnny said he found it easier. “Hey, Dr. Clark! My cat had kittens, and I don’t know what to do with them,” a voter told him on the phones one night. “We’ll find home for your kittens,” he responded. “I bartered a vote,” he joked later on. They also voiced a common fear for those volunteers that had jobs that could be negatively affected by their participation. One Democrat, a teacher, was apparently threatened because of his political stance. They also voiced enjoying the office closeness. “I gained confidence by the end just by

knowing a whole bunch of people were also doing it [campaigning],” said Lucia. “I also enjoyed the camaraderie,” said Carol. “To finally find a group of people we could actually talk to...was really cool. I would leave there feeling so much stronger. I feel I’m a broader person because of the experience,” she told me.

### *Gail Price*

Gail Price is a white middle-aged professor at Lord Fairfax Community College in Luray. She came to volunteer because she wanted Obama to win and wanted to do whatever she could to help that happen. She made calls and canvassed once or twice a week. In an interview after the campaign, she told me that people were friendly and nice overall. She found canvassing effective because “it had to make them [the voters] wonder why the Republicans weren’t doing it [canvassing].” She found it a very powerful message to neighbors that volunteers were going around the community; it gave Obama credibility. She also reported incidents racism. Some said they “couldn’t vote for that kind of person” or that they were concerned he would only take care of black people. Agreeing with the others, she said that once voters had their minds made up there was no changing their decision. She also felt that a strong sense of community was formed. “I’ve always joked that I’m 1 of 2 Democrats in the county,” she said. “What I saw happen in this community was that the Democrats had a possibility and felt empowered.”

### *Gordon Hausrath*

Gordon Hausrath is an 84-year-old white lifelong Democrat who grew up in New York. About twenty years ago he moved to Luray to retire with his wife. Here is his

“Obama” story in his words. “I was so angry at the last eight years. Let me explain something: right after 9/11, that made a lot of people angry. But I was even more angry when Bush decided to go to war and invade Iraq because anybody with any understanding of world relations would have understood the fatality of going in there and establishing a democratic government. All he did was to widen terrorist recruiting in the world. Now it’s more unsafe for everybody. I had a very unique high school education. Out of the 400 students, there were 50-75 Negro Americans. I was a high school wrestler and many of the members of my team were black. It was with this kind of competition that I got a full college scholarship. So you’re only as good as your teammates can make you in that kind of sport, and my teammates that included five black men, helped me go to college. In my days [in the army] if you were black you could only be a galley or a servant. My whole attitude is that if you’re going to be one country, you’re going to be one country. I am very much a person who is against racial bigotry. This was my final shot to prove my point, and that’s why I was so about participating in this adventure. I actually felt very good about it. If there is anything I could do in the end of my life, this is the one thing I would want to do.”

He began volunteering before I arrived as a Monday night phone caller. He said he liked persuading voters, so I always gave him the undecided calls, or people that had previously identified themselves as undecided voters. Betty had warned me that although he came off as a bit rough on the edges, that he was an excellent phone caller. Sure enough, he managed to keep every single person on the line his first day of calling. As they would go to hang up and say they were uninterested, he would tell them, “I’m 84 years old! I’m a depression kid. I’ve seen it all. And let me tell you, it’s the

Republicans that got us in to this mess.” Then he would go on for upwards of 45 minutes trying to convince them to vote for Obama. “My obvious strategy is that I’m an old man,” he told me. “I’ve been there, done that.”

Gordon told me later that he thought the office had a huge impact on the voters. “The office was a shock to them [the community] at first,” he said. “They started to put it all together and think: this is an unusual thing. It got people thinking. Their newspaper habits changed. They started buying *The Washington Post*. The box is sold out every day now. Before they simply relied on the local paper – which certainly had nothing to do with national politics.” “I think initially they [the voters] were very poorly informed. But having the office here, canvassing, and phone banks, ... went a long way at changing the mindset of people.” Gordon strongly believes that there is a large Republican bias due to a strong hold on media sources. “Most read the local paper which tells them absolutely nothing except for what the local Republican leaders want them to know, which is slanted against them, against progress at least.” He believes that the local media uses its propaganda to pollute peoples’ minds and get them to believe the conservative mindset is to their advantage when it actuality it works again them. He also talked about the high illiteracy rates of the county, and how that limits their ability to think and understand facts, thus allowing the conservative ideology to dominate. He also expressed having more success than failure at persuading voters, although there were some residents it was difficult to reach.

*Edna and William Berry and Kenneth Lee*



Edna and William Berry and Kenneth Lee – African American Page county locals - were also part of the original group of volunteers. 84 year-old Edna Berry volunteered because she wanted Obama to win and thought that if anything she could do would help, she wanted to be a part of it. Reverend Berry volunteered because he knew since the 2004 Democratic convention speech that Obama was going to win, and he wanted to be part of a winning team. Kenneth – a mid aged DC native – moved to Page County 20 years ago and helps out the Berrys. He saw Martin Luther King make his ‘I have a dream’ speech over 40 years ago, and felt that he “wanted to be a part of moving forward in America with all people.” As an older African American couple, this election was very powerful for the Berry’s. “I’m 80 years old, and this past election time is the first time I’ve ever worked on a campaign in my life. I gave my money, I gave my time,” said Reverend Berry. “This is the first time I’ve ever felt anything about it. I really feel like what I did meant something. When I saw it on TV and watched the returns come in, I started to cry, knowing I was part of it,” he said. “I’ve never given money; this time money ,money, money,” said Mrs. Berry. “I had little faith. “From the very start, I thought he was going to win,” said Reverend Berry, “and I wanted to be part of winning team.” Kenneth was not as confident: “I didn’t see anyway they’d have a black man up there in the office.” “I was hopeful he’d make a good showing,” he said.

The Berry’s came four to five days a week for two hours during the day to make phone calls. They made so many calls that soon we had contacted almost every targeted voter over 65. Kenneth made phone calls and enjoyed canvassing with some of the younger volunteers. Even when Mr. Berry got sick towards the end of the campaign, Mrs. Berry would come in and pick up a list of numbers to make calls from home. As part of

the small African American population of Page County, the Berrys and Kenneth brought an interesting perspective to the group. When interviewed after the election, all commented on how that played out during the campaign. During one of Rev. Berry's first calls, the women responded, "I don't care to talk to you about the Obama campaign, I don't think we need a nigger up there." "It's very difficult to understand I'm a black man by the way I speak. That way I can get away with a lot of stuff," he said. "It's ingrained, they're not going to change," said Mrs. Berry of the racists in Page County. "I met a guy today that said he thinks Obama will be a good president, but it's just because he was looking me in the face," said the Reverend. This again forced people to reflect on their prejudices, something uncommon in Page County. They believed in the power of talking to voters as a way to change public perception of Obama. "There are a lot of people that think they'll still get the same thing once it gets down to them," said Kenneth. "Our white cleaning lady said 'I'm not voting for nobody, neither one any good,'" said Mrs. Berry. "In October, she changed her mind and decided to vote for Obama," said Mr. Berry. "Because I'd been talking to her... about how life was treating her now with the party in there now. Obama was about change. At least you'll get that, I told her. Then we helped her with an absentee." After our conversation, Mrs. Berry took me to see her Obama room, filled with newspapers, magazines, posters, and all the Obama paraphernalia one could imagine. "I bought 16 copies of *The Washington Post* the day he won," she told me. "I'm going to make a scrapbook for each of my grandchildren. They need to understand my struggle as a black women."

The Berry's believed in using personal touches to gain votes. "For instance, I talked to one lady and she said she was home with her husband who was dying of cancer,

so she wanted a poster to antagonize her neighbors, so I said I would bring her a poster. After I got off the phone, I gave it to her, and I've never found anyone so appreciative to receive something of Obama," said the Reverend. Mrs. Berry continued, "I called a lady over by headquarters...and they wanted to vote for Obama but they hadn't registered. I got the papers to them and got them all registered. I went back again and did everything for them." "The man that cuts my grass, just became an American citizen ,and he wasn't registered to vote," said Reverend Berry. "He was very enthused...so he came by, and I registered him to vote. He asked me at that time for whom he should vote. ...he asked me who I was voting for, and I said Obama. He said 'because you're voting for Obama, I'm voting for Obama.' We helped him with absentee."

### *Justin Bailey and Cat Pena*

Justin Bailey, a white male in his early twenties from another rural Virginia community, had recently arrived in Luray and was living with friends of friends in a house down the street from the office with his girlfriend Cat Pena, who also volunteered. Justin moved from his hometown of Fairfax to Front Royal when he was 18 years old. He was homeless for four out of the seven years he lived there. He volunteered because he loved the environment of the office. "Everyone that walked in to talk and the volunteers were really friendly and just great people to spend your day with. I also felt like I was making a difference, since I couldn't vote I felt like I should volunteer so I can at least have some kind of say," he told me through an email after the campaign. Justin would tell me stories about his and Cat's lives and living situation. Both have spent time in jail for various crimes including, most recently, vandalism. Both Justin and Cat grew up in

unstable households. The police used to have to come stop him from harming his parents,;and, at 11 years old, he was sent to a mental institution where he didn't speak for six months. He looked at the diplomas on the therapists' walls and thought to himself, "They don't know me. That diploma means shit." Now he wants to be a therapist because he gets it, but doubts he'll ever have enough money to pay for that education or even be allowed to because he is a felon. From what they told me, it seemed like neither ever had anyone who truly believed in their ability to succeed and do well.

Justin and Cat found Kenneth trying to register voters in the grocery store parking lots next door to the office. They came in to see if they, as previous felons, could register to vote. We told them that sadly, no, they would have to petition and by then it was too late, but that they were welcome to volunteer. We signed them up to canvass and I assumed that like most people of their demographic – young, footloose locals – they wouldn't show. However, two days later they came and canvassed until nightfall in the rural outskirts of Stanley. Then they came back again, and again, and again, until Justin was coming just about everyday from ten in the morning until close. Cat came as much as possible, but for most of the time had a job at the restaurant down the street. The more time Justin spent at the office, the more trust I gained in him. Soon he was running phone banks, organizing the office, and helping with any task I gave him. He understood probably more than anyone else how the operation was working and was more dedicated and worked more hours than any other volunteer. It was as if no one had ever had faith in him, and then suddenly someone recognized his potential and he flourished. While he had been seen by society as a reject, people on the campaign looked up to him, asking him for help and advice.

Justin thinks that we had a large impact on the voters because the community saw great involvement by the younger generation. He believes that talking to people face to face, over and over again, really made a difference because the voters respected that the volunteers cared that much. He remembers canvassing Republicans who at first were resistant to engage in conversation, and then next thing you know, would be talking for an hour. Volunteering at the office had a great impact on Justin. Prior to the campaign, he identified himself as a huge anarchist and hated the government. Now, he has hope for the government and for himself. “It made me feel like I was making a difference to better the economy and the world,” he told me. The house became like a family for him. “I loved the people around me and the people I met. I enjoyed the close, friendly environment.” After the campaign, Justin spoke to me about wanting to go to college and start fresh.

### *Jamie Foster*

Jamie Foster, a white, 18-year-old Mormon and Luray native, discovered our office and soon was coming by every day to help out around the office, canvass, and make phone calls. He was home schooled, so missing school was not a problem. Along with Nick, Justin and Cat, he became part of the Obama family of younger volunteers who practically lived at the office. Jo and I became like parents to him – at times disciplining him when he would get out of line. He liked to spend his time in the office debating with anyone who would disagree with him. Although he was young and lacked much formal education, he could very well articulate his points and was a strong “undecided” caller. Jamie became close friends with Kenneth and the Berrys and would

often canvass with them. I asked Jamie if he felt we had an impact on the voters. “Putting people in front of them made a big difference,” he said. “Most important was info we gave out.” He explained how it took time to convince people because everyone is so used to conservative positions. He believes that “no one would have voted without office because wouldn’t have felt like any point.”

### *Kathy Veney*

Kathy Veney, a middle aged African American woman, grew up in Luray and started volunteering around the time I arrived saying she is a “firm believer in the change that Barack Obama stands for” and was “working for what I believed in.” “It’s what the US needed. I believe in what he believes in. That change will impact my kids, my grandkids.” She came by on Wednesdays after work with Virginia Transportation along with her sister and niece to volunteer making phone calls. Towards the end she became a phone captain with Betty. She often brought a very interesting perspective to the group. One day, an African American couple on vacation from DC came in to the office because they were so excited to see an Obama office in a rural area. The woman sat down and talked with Kathy for a while about how she was voting for Obama solely because he was black. Upon her leaving, Kathy vented to me about how upset it made her that the couple was voting for him not because of his message of change but because of his race. As an African American herself, this appalled her.

When asked about the campaign after the fact she told me she felt campaigning had a large effect on the county, specifically knocking on doors. “Being present, being seen....it made a difference,” she said. Although she was apprehensive about canvassing

due to the Republican nature of Page County, she found that people were very receptive. She thought that people truly appreciated the one on ones and having people take the time to answer their questions. “To see that many people come together in that short of time to achieve the things that we did – phone calls, canvassing –I think the county as a whole appreciated that,” she said. She also felt the office played a great role. “I think it [the office] helped because Page has never had that kind of closeness as far as a Democratic headquarters,” she said.

Kathy ran into a lot of people who thought Obama was promoting abortions. She thinks the negative mailers had some effect, although it was limited. She felt the greatest impact was the terrorist propaganda, something that people in this area seemed to believe more than they did in urban areas. She found canvassing as a way to combat these deceptive tactics. “It definitely helped [to talk to the voters]. Some guy asked me to call his brother after and explain it to him because he had received the mailer,” she said. She also felt our literature had an impact. She told me, “Handing out lit explained a lot even if they wouldn’t talk to you. And that more than likely changed someone’s mind.” This was Kathy’s first time volunteering for a political campaign, although she has done a lot of volunteer work raising money for the American Cancer Society and Relay for Life. She truly felt the “where all in this together” attitude of the campaign. “I think that what everyone did as a whole – that group effort – made an impact. It wasn’t just about one person,” she told me. Volunteering also pushed her out of her comfort zone. She told me, “I was scared to canvass, and then all the sudden I was canvassing. And I liked it!”

*Ryan Hodson and Jay Dedman*

Ryan and Jay, a young white couple originally from the Bay Area, wandered in to the office around my third week there. Having recently moved to Page County to live on Jay's family's farm and pursue their independent film company, they were excited to find any sort of progressive community in Luray. They volunteered "because they wanted Obama to win and we're excited to come to a place where they could actually make a difference." Although they had both done a lot of campaigning previously, they had never campaigned for an electoral race. Jay said that before Obama, he had never been a strong supporter of any politician. Ryan was very apprehensive to canvass in such Republican territory. "The first time we went out, people were so nice and just wanted to talk. That's not what it's like in an urban or suburban area," she said. She was also surprised at how much she enjoyed canvassing compared to her past experiences. Ryan found herself surprised at how many people were actually voting for Obama, and Jay at how many people actually talked to them. He later shared a success story with me: "We went to this young couple's house: in their 20s, mom with baby and kid, husband a felon. We had a good long conversation about society and laws, and they weren't politically engaged at all. That girl voted in Stanley, and she gave me the thumbs up. And she came with her friend!"

They felt we had a large impact on the Democratic vote for many reasons. "It was also important because ...people wanted to know there were other people like that here. I heard a lot of people say that they thought they were the only one," said Jay. "The good job we all did was to create the expectation that people needed to vote." They, like others, agreed in the importance of the office. "That to me was the biggest part of the campaign. They [voters] saw people parked out front," said Jay. They also



saw it as crucial to recruiting volunteers. “If that office wasn’t there, I wouldn’t have gone canvassing or made phone calls,” said Ryan. In terms of effectiveness, Jay said he thought canvassing helped give an alternative opinion “so lies didn’t sit there all by themselves.” He also felt people were not very well informed on Obama’s agenda, more than the idea of hope and change. Ryan said she didn’t try to convince people who had already made up their minds because she thought it wouldn’t help anything. Jay also felt it helped that they were Page County residents. “When canvassing, it seemed important for people to know we were actually from here,” he said. Both Ryan and Jay felt like the office had a big impact on the Democratic community. “I also felt like at the office, it was a place where people were hanging out,” said Ryan. She continued, “I think it’s energized a lot of people, and a lot of people met through this. I would never have cared this much about town politics. Now I’m like wow, we live in a small enough county that I’ve realized I can talk to my neighbors and make a difference.” Jay added, “There’s a lot of people like us, the come-heres, and now we’ve made those connections. Now it’s up to us to do something about it.”

### *Nicholas Carl*

Nick, a 29-year-old white man with dreadlocks, grew up in Page County. He is now living in Africa working with the Maasai tribe, but worked for a canoeing company during the campaign. He volunteered because he realized that this was “a perfect opportunity to become politically involved in a way that is very close to pure democracy.” His mom stopped by the office as an undecided voter. She told me her son might be interested in volunteering, and a few days later he showed up. I quickly put him

to work helping me tally calls for the day. We talked about Obama, radical change, and systems of oppression. Coming from a conservative family and community, this type of dialogue was not the norm for him. He admits to being racist as a child. “I used to be very influenced by the conservatism of this community, the absolute and narrow thinking,” he told me. “I used to also be afraid of homosexuals, Muslims, Jews, and Africans and African Americans, anyone who was not part of the ‘normal’ identity of Page County.” This gave him a unique perspective when campaigning to voters who held similar beliefs to those he held in the past. Through our discussions, he developed greater support for Obama and I believe a better sense of himself. He came to volunteer almost nightly because of this increased support but also in order to engage in these conversations with me and the other volunteers. He would do literally whatever task I asked of him, always with a smile on his face.

When asked after the campaign about his experience, Nick told me that he felt like our office and presence had a large impact on the Democratic turnout. He commented most on the importance we had in representing a different perspective from the norm. “I think it [Page County] is relatively backward and racist...the people are generally white and Christian conservatives, so the social atmosphere is rather homogeneous,” he told me. He heard many people say Obama was the ant-Christ. Sometimes he would run into people from his past when campaigning. On the occasions I witnessed, people were more willing to listen to him because of their shared history and previous beliefs even if they were McCain supporters. He found the community formed around the office very special. “So many of us who are politically to the left were brought together in a space which has never existed, a space where progressive points of

view could be communicated easily and without fear,” he told me. “There has never been, in my experience, such a vibrant space for progressive morality in our town.” He praised the campaign’s ability to teach people how to organize. On many occasions he would tell me how amazing it was that I had dedicated two months to Page and essentially taught them how to organize.

*Constance Hanson*

Constance was born in a white family in Minnesota and has lived in Page County for five years. She volunteered because she said she felt like it mattered. As one of the most consistent volunteers in the office, she made Thursday night phone calls, canvassed, and would find a way to get done anything that needed to get done. When we got large Obama barn signs, within 24 hours she had her husband make wooden stands for them. Although she was very busy running her coffee company with her husband and doing many other not-for profit activities, she found a way to give a good amount of her time to the campaign. In terms of the effectiveness of campaigning, Constance felt that it varied from person to person. “Anytime you engage someone in an intellectual conversation... there’s room for hope,” she said. She found people who were misinformed about Obama’s religious affiliation as well as his gun control stance and felt they held these beliefs due to “quick adoption of media stance based on scare tactics.” She believed the best way to combat the smears was face to face. “In a small town/county, especially a rural and somewhat isolated one, meeting people face to face seemed like the best tool we had to balance perspectives. Even phone conversations were a poor second. Sharing actual facts and allowing people to ask questions made the biggest difference - regardless

of the 'smear'," she said. While she found voters likely and willing to listen, Constance also echoed what others have said about voters' honesty. "There is this Southern style that people adopt, sort of like the advice Thumper got from his mother: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." She also felt we over contacted the voters because by the third time, they usually asked us not to come again.

### *Obama Staff*

Interviews with staff members were also undertaken for an overall assessment of rural organizing. Obama Rural Staff members I interviewed included Sara El Amine, an Occidental College graduate who started working for the campaign in the summer of 2007. She became involved because she wanted to become actively involved in politics, specifically the presidential election, instead of obsessing about it from the sidelines. She supported Obama because of his strong focus on diplomacy, his stance on the Iraq war, and his resistance to accept money from lobbyists. Starting as a volunteer in Iowa, El Amine worked in seven different states, and worked the last four months as a Regional Field Director of Northwest Virginia. Brian Damron and Chris Nelson, also recent graduates of Occidental College, worked as Field Organizers starting in July. El Amine asked Damron to come work for the campaign, and in less than 24 hours he changed all of his plans to move to DC with Nelson and decided instead to move to Virginia. When Damron told Nelson of his plans, Nelson decided he was in for the adventure as well, and together they drove across the country to Virginia. Damron worked first in Winchester and then exclusively in Warren and Shenandoah County. This was his first campaign and his first time as an organizer. Nelson, a politics major who had undertaken previous

campaign work in a senate race, worked first in Harrisonburg and then in Stanton and Augusta County. Million Fikre from Northern Virginia jumped into the campaign in July 2007 because he was an idealistic guy who didn't really have any plans. It was his first campaign and his first time as an organizer, and like El Amine, he went from a volunteer in Iowa to the RFD of Southern Virginia. Andrew Warren was studying in China when he received an email about the fellowship program. He chose to work in North Carolina because he thought it would be a pretty big challenge. Prior to Obama, he had never had any intention of working for a political campaign, but in this case "believed we needed to be working in a different direction." He worked in Columbus County located in Southern North Carolina.

#### IV. RURAL IMPACT

Based on my experiences and research, I have concluded that campaigning in rural communities has a greater impact than campaigning in big cities or suburbs both for the voters and volunteers. By greater impact, I do not mean that the overall turnout numbers will be greater in a rural area compared to an urban area, but that campaigning in rural areas has greater results per voter contacted and a larger effect on the volunteers. In terms of the voters, few have had contact with campaigns in the past, especially Democratic campaigns, many lack access to varied sources of information and many have very strong networks within their communities. In terms of the volunteers, the campaign created a sense of empowerment as well as a new liberal thinking community in many of the counties.

##### Lack of Previous Campaigning

Residents of rural counties are not accustomed to personal voter contact, especially door to door canvassing. "These people haven't had campaigns come to their home, and they think it's not for them. But if someone shows up at their door, that makes a difference,"<sup>36</sup> said out of state canvasser Sarah Johnson in Louisa County, Virginia. They are, in general, even less familiar with the campaigning of Democratic candidates. Multiple people told me that conservatives win votes by coming to these towns and talking about the three G's: guns, gays, and God. By steering the focus of elections to morals instead of the concrete issues like the economy, conservatives in the past have been able to win mass amounts of support. Obama's door to door canvassers showed not

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Meier, "Dems Canvass Unlikely Voters in Rural VA," *Huffington Post*, October 2008. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-meier/dems-canvass-unlikely-vot\\_b\\_137286.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-meier/dems-canvass-unlikely-vot_b_137286.html).

only a Democratic Party presence in the area but often forced voters to question their long held beliefs. It also showed dedication to the candidate. In Elko county in rural Nevada, “a lot of it just had to do with the fact that folks thought: Man, the guy is showing up. He’s set up an office. He’s doing real organizing. He’s talking to people,”<sup>37</sup> said Obama early in the campaign. This had an especially large impact in the many of the rural communities where yard signs and mailers remained McCain’s only strategy. The Democratic Party presence made voters feel comfortable voting for Obama: “For the first time in my life, the Democrats are willing to claim they’re Democrats,”<sup>38</sup> said Delynn of rural Nevada. “There was a constant reminder you had to give to people ... lots of pep talks,” said Rural Virginian Field Organizer Brian Damron. Organizer Nelson felt that success in his counties was due to a “combination of voter registration and having an effect when you talk to someone on the phone and they say ‘I just got my door knocked on yesterday.’ They realize there are a lot people in the community who care.”

The presence of an office also had a great impact. Through analyzing the election results and using Census 2000 definition of rural counties (see Appendix C), I found that counties with offices decreased the margin between the Democratic and Republican candidates from the 2004 to 2008 election by 8.96% while counties without offices decreased the margin by only 6.24% (see Appendix D). Many of the campaign workers had an explanation for this difference: “It [the office] made people who wouldn’t vote for us start to consider to vote for us. It gave some of our hardest opponents a moment of pause: ‘I love my guy, but where the heck is he?’,” said Fikre. “The ones [counties] that

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<sup>37</sup> Matt Bai, “Working for the Working Class Vote,” *NYT*, October 2008.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/19/magazine/19obama-t.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan River, “Rural Nevada Dems Come Out of the Closet,” *Huffington Post*, October 2008.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-rivera/rural-nevada-dems-come-ou\\_b\\_135297.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-rivera/rural-nevada-dems-come-ou_b_135297.html).

had really good functional offices in the county did really well. The ones that had an office for a few weeks...didn't really have as large an impact," he said. "If all field organizers had moved out to counties and had been working out of some place in county two months out it would have had much greater impact on the area," said Rural North Carolina organizer Andrew Warren. "It's a combination of one: becoming more ingrained with the community, and two: a place for the community to go to 24/7. They know they can find you there to pick up pamphlets, packets, etc," he said. He noted how the office brought in lots more volunteers and thus a lot more work was being done. "Visibility has something to do with it, but what visibility helped do was bring supporters and volunteers, who then were persuaded to help knock on doors," said Warren. However, Fikre and other organizers noted that there were some counties where an office just wasn't going to be successful. "The counties where we were getting smashed anyway...putting an office there was awesome because it gave us an ability to reach out to folks supporting us....but we couldn't really get a huge amount of volunteers," he said. Nelson compared his two counties to prove this point. "We had 300 to 400 volunteers in Stanton. In Waynesboro it was hard to get people in to the office. It's just a different kind of town, more conservative. It wouldn't matter if there had been an office," he said.

In Page County, voters saw a Democratic Party office and canvassers of either party for the first time. While many of the volunteers somewhat jokingly voiced a fear they'd get shot, many of the voters appreciated the volunteers coming to talk to them and at least listened to what they had to say. This was a different environment than what I experienced while canvassing in the larger city of Charlottesville. There, voters seemed less willing to talk and cared less about what I had to say. People took a little while to



get used to talking to canvassers. “Calling now [in late September] is so different than before,” said volunteer Tom Ford. “Before most hung up on us or were for McCain. Now it’s the opposite. People here take a while; they have to climb the ladder.” Another volunteer told me that she felt that people who we did not get a visit felt left out. In comparing canvassing in Luray with canvassing in Alexandria, out of state volunteer Leo Bosner told me that Page is “more isolated so more of a sparser support, so being there had a larger impact because it encouraged people that its okay to vote for Obama.” Canvassing truly changed the dynamics of politics in the county.

#### Lack of Access to Various News Sources

In general, people in rural areas lack the immediate access to various sources of news compared to those in urban areas. According to a survey taken this year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, about 38% of those living in rural areas have broadband at home, compared with 60% of those living in the suburbs and 57% of those living in cities.<sup>27</sup> In Page County, the Internet is not common, people in general do not own blackberries that send them up-to-date information, and the local newspaper is heavily Republican and comes out once a week. Most people get their news from the TV – specifically FOX - if they get it at all. In order to learn about the candidates’ true positions on issues, most rural voters would have to go to the library or a cyber café to use the Internet. “Many never heard anything but Rush Limbaugh, or they listen to FOX news. No overall perspective as to what was going on in the country or in the world. Many of them got information that they’d never got before. Many thanked me and asked me to call them again,” said Gordon.

Most importantly, McCain focused his “smear” efforts in the rural areas, assuming a certain level of ignorance. These ads included flyers such as “This is the story of William Ayers...Terrorist. Radical. Friend of Obama. Barack Obama. Not who you think he is.” as well as “The experience and knowledge to lead America?” and “Law and Order: Obama doesn’t talk much about his views on crime and punishment – at least not in front of general audiences – and for good reason.” These smears were filled with blatant lies targeted at the fears of the white, rural population. They used race as a divisive tactic, exploiting the stereotypes of blacks as untrustworthy. When McCain decided to turn most of his advertising negative, volunteer Carol Clark said this would prove effective in the rural areas because people are too un-educated to see the truth or try to find it. Without Obama volunteers coming to their doors, these voters would have had no reason to believe otherwise. “It became clear that there were tons of people who were scared of voting for a black man and needed to know other white people were doing it,” said Warren. El Amine also saw canvassing as a very effective way to combat smears as did Fikre, but he believed that “you can only go so far. Someone who will believe a mailer is probably someone you won’t be able to convince. It did get volunteers to work that much harder,” he said. Having volunteers speak to them face to face had a large impact, giving voters another perspective to the typical conservative stance they have grown accustomed to hearing from all sources.

As seen in the narratives, many volunteers in Page County felt they functioned as an effective tool to combat smears. In my experience, many times just telling people that a particular smear was false actually changed their perception of Obama. For example, I remember visiting a poor, middle-aged woman who told me she wasn’t going to vote for

Obama because he wanted to raise taxes on the poor. I explained his policies to her, and by the end of the conversation she had decided to vote for Obama. Another heard Obama received money from terrorists. I simply explained how his campaign is funded by millions of Americans who felt so passionate about him that they gave whatever they could to the campaign. This worked as well. One afternoon I visited a middle-aged woman with Nick. She said she was worried what kind of change he would bring, if it would be too drastic (i.e. socialistic). We explained his stances and bottom up approach, and by the end it appeared that she was now leaning towards Obama.

Volunteers voiced that once people had their minds made up, it wasn't worth trying to reason with them. I think that if the the smear tapped into personal racist beliefs, it was hard to get the person to believe differently about Obama, that he was not a Muslim for example. Also, combating race-based smears by using typical liberal thought was not highly effective. For example, I had a conversation with a woman about Obama being a Muslim. I told her this was simply not true, but that it shouldn't matter because Muslim's aren't bad people. "But I've heard rumors that he's a sleeper. Ya' know, he'll become president and then it'll turn out he's really a terrorist. So I'm worried he's a Muslim," she responded. Another good example is an older man who stopped by the office, said he was a Democrat, and asked me why he should vote for Obama. I explained some of his policy stances and his belief in the American people, and he responded, "But he's from Africa, and I don't think that's right." I tried to explain that he wasn't be from Africa and that you have to be born in the United States in order to run for President, even printing out an article; but he still didn't change his position. I think in this case he needed a reason not to vote for Obama because he could not admit to

himself that race was the issue. One of my most absurd experiences occurred while registering voters in a large parking lot. “I ain’t voting for him. He hates white people. He’s a racist!” I explained that that was clearly not true, and she responded “Well yes it is, I saw it on TV.” There were also the staunch conservatives who would never vote for Obama just because they always vote Republican. “I’m a hard core conservative,” said a Taco Bell manager. “Always have been, always will be. That’s how I was raised.” There are some votes that we just couldn’t expect to win no matter how hard we canvassed.

### Small Community Networks

Campaigning in small towns can utilize the networks of small communities. “It is a strategy that is testing the relationship between politics and community, especially in small towns like Chase City, where the canvassers are local volunteers who often eat, pray and shop with those whose votes they are soliciting,”<sup>25</sup> said Merida. The campaigns sought to have neighbors talking to neighbors so in theory, voters would be persuaded by people they knew or recognized. “Community networks are tighter,” said El Amine. “When you have someone you might know vouch for somebody that’s going to make a difference,” said Nelson. “When a friend is talking to a friend, it carries so much more importance,” said Fikre. Campaigning in rural areas has a more personal side to it, because it is so foreign. However, challenges still remain. “It’s still a tough community for anyone to not be a Republican in,” said Duane in rural Nevada. Although he supported Obama, he feared putting a sign in his storefront would cause trouble.<sup>26</sup>

To a point, local networks proved effective in Page County. 75-year-old Natalie Zuckerman, took charge of her neighborhood and canvassed it entirely until she had spoken to every targeted voter on her list. She ventured down unmarked dirt roads, to homes with confederate flags, and quite a ways up mountains to reach voters. While many voters out her way would typically refuse to speak to a canvasser, they listened to her because they knew her as the lady that lived down the street or the lady on school board. She would take as much time as each voter needed, sometimes sitting on people's porches for over an hour. She would always return from canvassing and tell me "race is the issue." Then she would tell me stories about the particular voter. "When I was a youngin', my daddy told me you can marry anyone you like as long as they have white skin," said one voter. Another favorite story is when Jo went with her mom to canvass back in the country. They arrived at the home of four older residents who claimed they did not vote. They began talking, and Jo's mom ended up in the kitchen helping one of the women cook while Jo filled out their absentee forms.

In other cases this did not work to our advantage. Especially at the beginning, a number of my volunteers in Luray feared canvassing because they feared retaliation by their social groups. They feared being looked down on in their community, getting kicked out of their book clubs, getting shot, and having their homes burned down. "I ain't going to volunteer. Twenty years ago they burned down black people's homes" said an older man who came in to the office to get a button. "You ain't from here. are ya? This is a red neck area. I don't want my house burnt down," said another voter on the phone. Together we worked past this fear, but it stayed in the back of people's minds. The lack

of anonymity also caused volunteers to fear that over-saturating the list, or visiting voters too much, would lead to many of the same threats.

### Volunteers' Sense of Community

Campaigning in rural towns had a large impact on the volunteers and on the sense of creating a liberal-minded community. A great part of this came from the campaign's philosophy of "Respect. Empower. Include." "Both staff and volunteers are unusually reflective and analytical regarding the team model and the organizing philosophy of 'Respect. Empower. Include.' Those words were plastered in huge letters around almost every office I visited, and organizers will get carried away talking about those principles and how they are supported by various details of the organizing model they're practicing,"<sup>39</sup> said writer Kevin Merida on his experiences in Virginia. Keeping these words in mind created an effective movement around the country, in which volunteers truly felt like part of the campaign and part of a broader movement. "Opening offices in rural areas is a show of respect to people who live in sparsely populated areas," El Amine said. Regional Field Director in Ohio Christen Linke Young said, "I feel like people are committing more time this election because there's a community thing going on, and they're part of something that's local and social."<sup>40</sup> The offices all over the country became something more than a place to make calls; they became a community center, where people came because they wanted to be part of the energy and movement.

Many of the volunteers in Page County said that for the first time, they felt comfortable admitting they were Democrats because of the community of support behind

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<sup>39</sup> Merida.

<sup>40</sup> Exley.

them. “What’s amazing is that it’s been Republican forever. There were Democrats but they didn’t know each other existed. Now they’re organizing like crazy,” said Gorguinpour. David told me stories of wearing his Obama shirt around the downtown area and how people would pull him aside and tell him they liked his shirt. The diversity of our group also had large implications. “Page is different than Chicago and LA,” said David. “Page is highly segregated by whites, but by blacks as well. There’s a lack of trust. We have the chance now to change the social structure of this town.” Both blacks and whites were coming together in a common space and working together, something that rarely happened in the past. People of all sorts became part of the campaign – everyone from political junkies to people who had never been active in campaigns prior. From the beginning, people referred to the office as the Obama house. One volunteer’s five-year-old son once asked when Obama was coming home. We became like a family - we had meetings together so everyone was always on the same page, often ate many meals together, and worked as a united team making calls, knocking on doors, and entering data. Every volunteer had their specific role, and when they entered the office, they would work hard at that activity because they knew we were all counting on them to do it and do it right. Volunteers like Justin and Cat sought trust in other volunteers when most of the people in their past had betrayed their trust. The night of the Obama Rally in Harrisonburg, Justin sent me a text message that read: “That was the most amazing thing anyone has ever done for us [getting them good seats]...being there will be like having our own place in history.” On the night of our GOVT party, when almost 100 people showed up, volunteer Constance Hansen turned to me and said, “You have no idea how

incredible it is that this is happening.” Although I had a hard time seeing it at the time, it is incredible what we accomplished.

### Volunteer and Staff Empowerment

Many of the volunteers came in consistently to do whatever they could for the campaign as a result of the “Respect, Empower, Include” philosophy. “I never meant to work this hard,” said volunteer Hayne in rural Chase City, Virginia. “It’s the best job I’ve ever had and the hardest I’ve ever worked for the least amount of money. Which is to say no money at all.”<sup>41</sup> Damron commented that it was easier to work with volunteers in rural counties because there were “no old political rivalries because no old politics. They had never been burned by anything. Never lost a fight.” El Amine agreed: “with less Democrats, there are less politics to dampen your organization.” Organizers also developed a closer relationship to volunteers in general. “If you were an organizer in the rural area, you know the food, you know what people eat. You become a member of the community. I always felt like the volunteers treated us like part of their family,” said Fikre. “It wasn’t a job. It was your life.” El Amine said that her organizers in rural territory were surprisingly better received by the community than her urban organizers because they were flattered someone was paying attention to them.

In Virginia, the state staff often reminded us that volunteers come because of Obama, but stayed because of us. The front of every supporter card we handed out asked supporters to believe in their ability to make change. Obama’s belief in the people truly transcended to the staff and from there to the grassroots level where people sacrificed their time because we believed in them. “We’re also more effective at harnessing

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



volunteers because the teams do a lot of the training and debriefing themselves—it scales well,"<sup>42</sup> said Young. The paid organizers were not just organizing the volunteers, but the volunteers were also organizing themselves. Through this, the campaign was able to develop a sense of ownership and purpose for the volunteers, even with such minute tasks as entering data. Again this held very true in rural communities because in many cases liberal thought is hidden under the strong conservative presence. The campaign offices allowed these liberal communities to develop and thrive. "There was certainly a sense of accomplishment on election night. People felt like they had a part in getting Obama elected," said Damron.

Volunteers seemed to be especially empowered in my rural office because most had never been involved in any sort of movement in the past. Many supporters showed enthusiasm to volunteer because we respected them regardless of their background, gave them leadership positions, and included them in all activities. Volunteers said from the beginning that it didn't matter if we won or lost – it was about what we had built together. "If we win, that would be great. If not, we've created a great network. We're empowered," said David in early September. This was transformational for many of the volunteers, especially Justin and Cat. They would tell me stories about being disrespected in their family life as well as in the work place. Jo and I respected them for who they were, appointed them office managers and canvass captains, and invited them to be part of our core group of volunteers. They in turn treated us with the utmost respect and worked harder than any other volunteer, coming in for about ten hours a day the final month. It was incredible to watch how they were transformed during their time with the campaign. Nick said he wanted to volunteer more because working in the office made

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<sup>42</sup> Exley.

him realize he had never done anything for his own country but rather focused on Africa. “I feel so inspired,” he continued a few days later. “I was in a bad mood before I came in the office, but now I feel so happy. There’s such a positive vibe here.” “When he wins on Tuesday, I’ll feel like I was a part of it,” said my dad after he canvassed in Page County for the weekend. This shows the powerful force of the campaign and its ability to reach supporters in surprising parts of the country and truly empower volunteers.

### Rural Results

In relation to the final vote, Obama lost rural counties. McCain won rural counties nationally 53% versus 45% to Obama. In another sense he won by trimming the margins: Obama increased Democratic support in rural areas by three percent from Kerry's rural votes in 2004. In Virginia, that number went to eleven percent.<sup>43</sup> "Obama won this election not just because he increased turnout and margins among his base voters," pollster Anna Greenberg says, "but because he [also] eroded Republican support among the conservative-leaning voters in this country."<sup>44</sup> Greenberg also told me in a conversation we had in April 2009 that she believes the increase in support in rural areas for the Democratic candidate was similar to the increase in other areas. “People voted for Obama because they wanted change and the focus of that change was primarily around the economy,” she said. Making these issues visible to voters required a tightly assembled campaign in all parts of the country – rural and urban. Together, volunteers and staff created the “best campaign team ever assembled in the history of politics,” said Obama on Election Day. This energy was not only felt by the heads of the campaign, but

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<sup>43</sup> Berkes.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

by millions of people around the country. This was most evident to me on the drive home to Chicago in my decked out car with Obama painted symbols and phrases. As we waited at a stoplight on the way out of DC, the lady next to us rolled down her window. “We did it,” she said, shaking her fist. We responded back the same. “It was time, it was time,” she said. That encounter really exemplified for me the power of this campaign to unite people across the country and to mobilize supporters to have a part in electing Obama. In Page County, 10,389 votes were cast – 58.14% for McCain, 40.76% for Obama, compared to about 34% for the Democrat the previous two general elections. “We did it. Anything above 40% for Page County is historic,” said volunteer Natalie Zuckerman.

### Long Term Impact

The Obama campaign created the potential for lasting infrastructure of progressive action in these rural towns. “This is your victory,” said Obama on Election Day, giving credit to all the volunteers around the country. *Huffington Post* writer Zack Exley writes about Field Organizer Patrick Frank’s experience in rural Missouri: “Then, at the end of our meeting, my neighborhood team leader, Jennifer Robinson, totally unprompted, told me:

I'm a different person than I was six weeks ago." I asked her to elaborate later. She said, "Now, I'm really asking: how can I be most effective in my community? I've realized that these things I've been doing as a volunteer organizer—well, I'm really good at them, I have a passion for this. I want to continue to find ways to actively make this place, my community, a better place. There's so much more than a regular job in this—and once you've had this, it's hard to go back to a regular job. I'm asking now: Can I look for permanent work as an organizer in service of my community? And that's a question I had not asked myself before the campaign. It never occurred to me that I could even ask that question.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Exley.

These are the kind of inspirational stories that give me hope for the future of the Obama grassroots force and grassroots activism in general. I remember at Obama's Fredericksburg rally he said, "People will be rewarded for getting involved in their communities. Invest in America, and America will invest in you." Obama ignited a flame of giving back and community involvement. Time will only tell the lasting effects of his inspiration.

In Page, the volunteers truly felt that this was our victory but that the true victory was yet to come. "This is the best moment in history. And it was because all of us," said Cat on Election Day. "We will never forget this," said Justin. You don't understand, we've never done anything like this before. We're going to put everything from this campaign in a box for our son." He later wrote me an email asking how he can start his own office for 2012. By the end, the office had become a place to discuss ideas for the future of their community. "Before this campaign, I felt no sense of community or progressive values. I felt alone. Now I realize that there are others fighting for change here, as well as all over the country. Before I felt like I had no voice. Now I feel like part of a movement," said Nick. "You taught us how to organize. You'll leave people with power and hope," he said in October. "Thank you so much for everything," I said to a volunteer, Barbara. "Thank you so much for letting me be a part of this," she responded. "What you did here in Luray was more than "run" a campaign. You helped all of us create a community of like minded people," said my host mom Betty Karp after the election. Now the challenge is to keep this energy flowing post election.

Regarding the impact on the Democrat Party, many volunteers noted a tremendous impact due to the visibility during the campaign. "It has made the Dems

more visible and in some ways, less threatening as we now have a "face," said Constance. "We're out of the closet," said Bob. "This campaign will change the way politics is being conducted in Page. Democrats will be more visible and organized. Between elections, there will be more conversation on the issues. I am hopeful voter participation will continue to be high," said Constance. Volunteers noted being acknowledged post campaign. "People say to me 'I saw your car in the Obama parking lot.' Lots of positive responses," said Signe. "When I go to Wal-Mart people I don't even know say to me 'we got our boy in,' said Kenneth. These kinds of responses caused shock and fear within the Republican Party. "At the last Republican committee meeting, all they talked about was our office and now they are trying to get their own office," said Lucia. "Talk among the opposition party indicates they think the Democrats are a presence to be reckoned with," said Constance. Obama organizer Fikre sees great potential for rural areas to be involved in the future, because now Democratic politicians can't just write off rural counties. "I would hate for people to think it worked, its always going to work," he said.

This increase of Democratic Party presence had very positive effects on the growth of the party. "I think the old Democrats are delighted to have this influx of new people. I think the people who've been here a long time, I think they're delighted," said Betty. "Now they talk like Margot's the best thing since applesauce." Before the campaign, Ryan and Jay were completely uninvolved with the Democratic Party; now they attend meetings regularly. "I think it has energized a lot of people, and a lot of people met through this," said Ryan. "I would never have cared this much about town politics. Now I'm like wow, we live in a small enough county that I've come to realize I can talk to my neighbors and make a difference," she said. "Now it's up to us to do

something about it,” said Jay. “The county committee is getting better organized and being more pro-active, looking ahead rather than just reacting to what Republicans do,” said Constance. She continued, “New local stake holders have been identified. We are seeing greater participation in local events and new folks are beginning to get engaged.” Now the question is how they will utilize this new power. “Whether the young people from the campaign come in and take on responsibility is the question,” said Lucia. Along with Betty, Tom and Sherry, she has planned house meetings to talk to these young people. Then they invited all to a Democratic Committee meeting, where four committees were formed. Now they have two lists of people: the pre-Obama Democratic committee and 150 volunteers. “If we could get the database working and operating, they could be informed and know things were still happening,” she said. Bill remained hesitant: “There is a divide between old and new Democrats, along with a divide between the come-heres and born-heres.”

In Page County, the lead volunteers immediately met after the election to write thank you notes to the 100+ volunteers and to invite them to a Democratic Party meeting. At this meeting, they created different committees to oversee different aspects of the Democratic Party of Page County. These included communications, civic involvement, political strategy and fundraising and budget. Communications as of April 2009 has not made much progress because they have had difficulty getting the password from the DNC to the State Database. The engagement committee is getting involved in county events, such as the Page County Clean Up. They have also been actively looking for Democrats to run for county positions, and have two potential candidates for the upcoming race for at large seats. The last group has created a budget and is working to

raise money through a yard sale. Ryan and Jay started what they are calling “progressive drinks,” where they meet weekly with other younger volunteers to bond and talk about the progressive agenda of Page County. Lucia voiced that attendance to meetings is so so, but that “born here’s” and the “come here’s” seem to be getting along well.

## **ORGANIZING FOR AMERICA – OBAMA 2.0**

After the great success of the campaign in creating a true grassroots movement of supporters, it only made sense to continue the grassroots organizing efforts through the administration. Three days before the inauguration, they announced plans for Organizing for America which will be housed within the DNC. Obama announced:

When I'm sworn in as the president of the United States of America, it will be because of you. You built the largest grassroots movement in history and shaped the future of this country, and the movement you built is too important to stop now. Today I am pleased to announce the creation of Organizing for America, the organization that will build on the movement that you started during the campaign. As President, I will need the help of all Americans to meet the challenges that lie ahead. That's why I am asking people like you, who fought for change to continue fighting for change in your communities. We cannot do this without you. The change we worked so hard for will not happen unless ordinary Americans get involved. Supporters like you must lead the way.

The goals of the program are to promote Obama's legislative agenda, increase civic engagement, support local Democrats and act as a form of communication between the administration and the people through grassroots efforts.

As of April, OFA has started on a pathway towards achieving some of those goals. In November and December, 550,000 volunteers completed on-line surveys asking for their opinion on the campaign. They also met with staff and super volunteers from across the country gathering reflections on the experience. The weekend of December 13<sup>th</sup>, OFA organized over 4,000 Change is Coming house parties to help get a better sense of what people want from the administration and OFA. In an email on January 23, David Plouffe wrote to supporters, "But right now, your participation in the political process is more important than ever. We'll soon be asking you to give whatever time or talent you can to support the President. With your help, we can bring change to Washington and the entire nation." A few days later, OFA National Director Mitch



Stewart asked supporters to host an Economic Recovery House Meeting on the weekend of February 6<sup>th</sup>, coinciding with Obama's big push to push his economic recovery plan. They then collected stories from across the nation and posted them on the website and in an email to give a sense of shared discourse, reminding people that we are all in this struggle together. A little over a week later, Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law.

In March, OFA took a big step and planned a nation-wide canvass they called "Organizing for America Pledge Project." Volunteers were told to ask neighbors to pledge support for Obama's plan to restore the economy, signatures which would then be turned over to Congress. Over 1,100 canvasses were scheduled across the nation, and a total of over 100,000 signatures were collected. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 214,000 signatures were delivered to Capitol Hill, and while the budget passed, it is not obvious that the signatures made any impact at all. In the article "Obama's Machine Sputters in Effort to Push Budget," Thomas E. Mann of the Brookings Institution said the petition drive was "a pretty lame start to the effort, and largely inconsequential to the outcome," adding: "The fact is that the sort of hard politics of policymaking are still driven by partisanship, by public opinion polls, by the roles of interest groups and all the other things that have always mattered in Washington."<sup>46</sup> OFA spokeswoman Natalie Wyeth responded that this is a work in progress, but that the organization's ability to gather so many signatures shows great potential.<sup>47</sup> It is important to keep in mind that this number represents less than 5% of the 13 million supporters on the email list. It seems clear that this way of going about making an impact in Washington needs to be rethought.

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<sup>46</sup> Dan Eggen, "Obama's Machine Sputters in Effort to Push Budget," *Washington Post*, 6 April 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/05/AR2009040501890.html>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

The idea of utilizing campaign volunteers once in office is a surprisingly foreign tactic to politicians, never attempted by a President. “This has never been tried before, literally,”<sup>48</sup> said Stewart. Even more rare is a President who seeks to utilize grassroots organizing, something usually associated with community organizations. However, Obama is not your ordinary President; instead his roots are in these same organizations, organizing in the inner-city of Chicago. One politician who had utilized his volunteer base was the late Senator Paul Wellstone. “What makes community organizing especially attractive is the faith it places in the ability of the poor to make decisions for themselves,”<sup>49</sup> said Wellstone in 1976. As an unknown candidate, he ran a grassroots race, always emphasizing that “The future will not belong to those who sit on the sidelines. The future will not belong to the cynics. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”<sup>50</sup> His organization proved to be a model for the nation: “He mobilized his volunteers and field organization to generate a massive participation in the political process, now a model for the nation,”<sup>51</sup> stated the Jewish Virtual Library.<sup>52</sup>

While much debate remains as to how OFA will be run nationally, there has been no open discussion of the future of rural communities, many organized and involved in politics for the first time. Most likely OFA offices will not be placed in rural counties as they were with the plentiful resources of the campaign. Luray, VA will probably not see a headquarters anytime soon. Although the rural population is not the majority of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ben Werschkul, “The Obama Campaign, Updated.” 8 April 2009.

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/the-obama-campaign-updated/>. Movie.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Wellstone, Proposal for research grant to study rural poverty, 1976. [www.wellstone.org](http://www.wellstone.org).

<sup>50</sup> Paul Wellstone, [www.Wellstone.org](http://www.Wellstone.org).

<sup>51</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/wellstone.html>.

electorate, it represents a good percentage and must not be ignored, especially with the energy and support shown during the campaign. These communities are essential in order to have broad based support to pass legislation. The question remains, then, what is the most effective way to involve rural communities in Organizing for America?

Through speaking to rural volunteers, staff members, and rural organizers from across the country, I have attempted to answer this question. Responses are divided by the different goals of the organization. The overarching response identified the importance of giving communities the tools to organize on their own and working along with, and not against already existing organizations.

#### Rural Organizers and Activists

The volunteers and staff members quoted below have been previously introduced. The rural organizers and activists interviewed are as follows. Tim Marema is Vice President of the Center for Rural Strategies in Kentucky. His organization seeks to improve economic and social conditions for rural communities through the use of media. “Our purpose is to raise the profile of rural issues nationally in ways that improve the public discourse about rural issues so that better policy can result,” he told me. “If you have a perception of rural as either this wonderful beautiful place where everything is perfect and everyone helps each other.... then people tend to think that rural areas don’t need policy intervention. On the other extreme is a vision of Rural America that is the opposite: its abject poverty and horrific economic, social and environmental conditions and the problems are so bad that nothing government can do will really make a difference. The answer is in the middle somewhere, that Rural America, like everywhere

else, is complex and interrelated with the rest of American society.” During the campaign, his organization polled rural voters in battleground states and analyzed voting patterns, with the goal of bringing attention to rural communities. “We wanted the press and candidates to see how rural was up for grabs and that rural is not a monolithic thing. It tends to be Republican, but there is political diversity there, certainly economic, racial and social diversity,” he said. They wanted a better fight over votes in order to get rural policies into the political discussion. Neil Ritchie is the Executive Director of the League of Rural Voters of Minnesota. TRV utilizes grassroots organizing and communications tools to connect with rural voters in key Midwestern states on progressive issues. His life goal is to change the frame of rural America so that it is seen as a place where rural people are important to the future of our country.” He sees this done best in rural areas through organizing and specifically by targeting local newspapers, the main source of news for much of rural America. Ritchie was very impressed by Obama’s campaign, and believed that Obama wasn’t just trying to win votes but that he truly believes in engaging people. He believes one of the large reasons Kerry lost was due to his failure to connect with rural voters. “You had a black guy from Chicago get elected by some white people in Iowa,” he said in amazement.

Jeff Malachowsky started the Western States Center in the mid 1980s, an organization that aims to build a progressive movement for social, economic, racial and environmental justice in the eight Western states. Malachowsky outlines three main objectives of the organization, including bringing rural progressives together across the west, promote the integration of community organizing with statewide elections, and supporting rural progressives to gain power through community organizing. “We want

progressive organizations to aspire to be progressive forces,” he said. He had no involvement with the campaign, but was very impressed by how Obama utilized a very innovative approach at mobilizing. Steven Fisher is a retired Professor and Appalachian studies expert and organizer from Charleston, West Virginia. He remains involved as President of the Appalachian Studies Association and through his work on numerous committees including the Appalachian Alliance steering committee. He has written about Appalachian political identity and resistance in his book *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, and is currently co-editing a follow up book. As a current resident of Bristol, Virginia, he saw first hand the impact campaigning had on rural communities: “In rural areas, door to door is the real important work. Establishing presence, make people feel like they’ve been heard.” He believes that without the office, the county would have been lucky to get even 30% of the vote, while in reality Obama received 39%.

### Pushing Obama’s Legislative Agenda

Ideas of how to work with rural communities to push Obama’s legislative agenda all followed a similar theme of listening and giving resources. Marema discussed the importance of connecting with voters. “What do you have to offer rural people?” he said. Without this connection, they are not going to help push Obama’s agenda. Malachowsky believes this is very feasible, as long as there is paid staff and they are able to utilize technology. “The mechanisms to mobilize support behind legislation are pretty well known and well developed. I think at a basic level, mobilizing rural people to support the Obama legislative agenda is not complicated. Basic, classic outreach: outreach through phone, outreach through email,” he said. Out of state volunteer Leo Bosner put it well:

“OFA needs to identify what people are interested in,” he said, “and get them involved through their interest.” For example, if they are trying to pass a health care bill, they need to connect with nurses unions and other groups already working towards that cause. Jay believes that people would be interested in things like health care and green jobs, but not issues like foreign policy. “If Obama 2.0 tried to get people to canvass, all the people who canvassed the first time would go canvass for health care,” he said. Phel expressed a need to go door to door to talk to voters about the different issues. “There was such energy going door to door, and the people were receptive,” she said. Ryan mentioned how she heard on CSPAN that the way to get legislation passed is to get community support and then pressure your representative to stand for it. “If you can do it from the bottom up with national issues, than that’s huge,” she said. Organizer Damron sees danger in OFA pushing supporters to contact their representatives if they feel like Obama is using their constituents against them. “This overt campaign could infuriate members who won't appreciate being targeted by a president of their own party,”<sup>53</sup> stated Karl Rove. “They could react by becoming recalcitrant.”<sup>54</sup> If that is to happen, OFA will have to reevaluate its efforts.

Lucia and others also saw effective education through other tactics. “We could pick one or two issues and do an educational campaign,” she said. Barbara suggested a forum on something like “Where do your tax dollars go in Page County?” in order to engage the residents. Gordon agreed with educating the public: “You could get legislation passed if you have a more informed electorate. They need to understand why they can’t find jobs locally,” he said. Gordon sees a number of ways to inform them, one

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<sup>53</sup> Karl Rove. “The President Is ‘Keeping Score’: Chicago politics has moved to the White House,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 April 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123862834153780427.html>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

being the nearby office passing on details of legislation to rural Democratic committees so they can analyze it. Constance said it best: “We need information that can be given out in sound bites - chewable and down to earth - so that the agenda itself is understandable. We also need some way to help people connect the dots between what the agenda is and why that makes a difference to them personally - position papers, FAQs, etc.” There seemed to be a trend of using this to gain power locally. “There has to be a way at getting a voice locally, and a voice that has to do with dealing with progress instead of stagnation,” said Gordon. Bill suggested that an organization like OFA could send political celebrities or experts that were relevant to the county, which the group widely supported. Carol added that it would be good to have someone also speak at the high school.

### Promoting Civic Engagement

The second goal of OFA – to promote civic engagement – is one that has the potential to transform the local political arena. Although organizations and community groups exist, “there are few voluntary organizations to which the poor can appeal. Legal service programs are usually nonexistent. In short, low-income people are extremely vulnerable to economic, social and physical retaliation. They face many obstacles and restraints in trying to voice their concerns and influence local government,” said the late Senator and rural organizer Paul Wellstone. Those interviewed had different ways at looking at how OFA can promote engagement in rural communities. One common idea was for them to create a database of different ways to get involved in the community and have this posted on the official OFA website. In many instances there are a great amount

of social groups, but they are often unknown. Many of the rural organizers stressed the importance of connecting with these local groups. “I think it is crucial not to assume organizing hasn’t been done. There is the Virginia organizing project, peace organizations, and anti-mountain top removal organizations. If you’re really serious about organizing in rural areas, you must connect with local organizations... find out what issues are that are important to them and the kind of resources that they need.” In contrast to the top down organizing model often utilized in these communities, he recommended to make those contacts and then form a united agenda. Malachowsky similarly also sees the importance of already existing organizations. “One key that I would have would be heavy investment in providing resources to organizations that already exist,” he said. He believes that organizations in rural areas are very strong because they have had to learn to adapt to a hostile environment and suggests that OFA determine which organizations have survived, build relationships with them, and build leaders from within. However, he warned that one needed to be cautious about building rural networks unless the organization is committed long term.

In terms of OFA initiatives, many volunteers spoke of having special days of service. The come-here group liked the idea of donating canned goods once a month to the food bank to make a statement that they are active in the local community. Jay feels that a day of service similar to the one on January 19<sup>th</sup> would be good to bring people together. Organizer Chris Nelson believes that if you keep the events more open, such as cleaning a park, a broader group would be interested. Through these relationships, organizers could then get people to come to more politically active events. In order for people to have the tools to act on their own accord, many mentioned the importance of



community organizing training. “Organizing these communities so that they can express their own needs through the political structure would be a very powerful tool,” said Marema. “In the war on poverty, people realized they could express their opinions and power, and it was poor people not traditionally in power. They need something that allows rural people to identify their own issues, speak and be heard.” “There needs to be much more focus on giving them tools... to switch back to education and focus on helping people to learn to run and organize their own campaigns,” said Obama Organizer Warren. Ryan explained how grassroots trainings have taught her the power of going to town meetings, of going to state offices and talking to representatives.

From there, many emphasized the importance of giving volunteers names of voters and information gathered during the campaign so they have power to follow through with the skills gained. Some of the Page Volunteers also brought up the importance of teaching the high schoolers organizing skills. Carol recommended a program where OFA sends representatives to get the students interested in civic engagement at an early age. Gail spoke of having a community organizing class at the high school. 85-year-old Gordon said, “Obama talks about the need for young people to be involved in community action. If young people donated time locally, they could earn credit towards college. This would be one way to coordinate efforts of state office with local county offices. If government set up some sort of program...if you had some set of student ....and tied in with state, then you would know what areas to pinpoint.” If rural people are given these tools and OFA works together with local organizations, the possibility at increased civic engagement has great potential.

### Supporting Local Democrats

The third goal – to support local Democratic candidates – has the potential to help rural Democrats gain a greater voice. In Page County, there was a problem of the Republicans holding too much power. “We [Page County] have a legislature that is 100% Republican. And they block . . . most of the common sense measures that good leadership tries to get through,” said Gordon. “It’s getting local people elected,” said Jay, “and it’s a matter of knowing how to do it,” said Ryan. The come-heres voiced a concern at getting any good candidates to even run. Possibly OFA could push Obama volunteers to run for county positions and help support their campaign. Strategy as to how to get these Democrats elected includes similar training with respect to the community organizing training described above. Malachowsky noted the importance of this: “But there will be some places where the Obama forces or the Democratic Party want to build deeper and invest more resources in terms of building political capacity for one reason or another. So where they want to make either a real investment in building capacity or where they have to really make a fight happen I think calls for a second level of strategy similar to developing capacity to get involved in local politics.” While many Democratic committees in rural areas already have a strong presence, this type of strategy could give them the power to become more active and establish grassroots forces in the community. “I think that it’s good for rural America,” said Marema. “It’s good for both parties to be competing for those votes. That’s when democracies work. If all you can do is vote for one candidate, then what good is your vote?” Warren however warned that advocating for a candidate in the primaries is a poor decision, one that could create controversy within the local Democratic Party.

### Facilitating Communication Between the Administration and the People

OFA could also act as communication between the administration and rural communities often left out of the political discussion. Many of the volunteers voiced a need for residents to speak to a representative of the administration, even if it was only a few times per year. “I think the most important thing is clear communication between the local level and higher ups at the state and national level of OFA. What they really need to do is put out feelers in all of the areas where there are volunteers and ask their concerns,” said Damron. Constance voiced that at this point, this could not be done locally over the Internet due to the lack of broadband in rural areas. Damron sees OFA as a public relations as well as grassroots organization that has the power to show communities how things like the stimulus package are directly affecting them. He explained it as saying, “here is what government is doing at the national level, and here’s what we see at local level.” This has the potential to engage more people in politics, if they see how it is directly affecting their lives. Volunteer Gordon sees the importance in doing a political analysis of the communities so the administration and OFA know what they are dealing with and how they can help. Others recommended the organization do surveys of the community to share with the administration and help with local organizing efforts.

### Other Suggestions

Other suggestions included working with churches. “That’s rural communities’ network,” said Obama organizer Warren. In his experience as a Field Organizer, there

was a huge divide between the white Democratic Committee folk and the African American supporters. He therefore noted the importance of a diverse team. While a white person walking in to a black area may only be partly effective, a black person working in a white area could be dangerous. He also mentioned the reality that it takes a long time to build trust and “get people to understand that you’re not trying to hijack their power,” he said. Fisher highlighted the importance of following through on promises in order to keep trust. “They’ve gone through a history of people coming in and doing different kinds of organizing, and there’s nothing left to build on.” He told me about the miners strike, when a community was promised a full time organizer, but then the unions took back their offer. Warren discussed as well the importance of reconnecting with volunteers from the campaign and start organizing as early as possible. He warned, “delegating things to people you don’t know very well leads to nightmare.”

Other ideas included creating a national rural discussion between rural and rural as well as rural and urban. Malachowsky thought of a web enabled technology “where people talking about health care in a small town in Oregon could easily find similar people in small towns across the country.” Facilitation networking has the potential to create greater power and unite people who before felt isolated, creating more of a national voice for rural America. Research Associate at the Center for Rural Strategies Edyael Casaperalta warned however that if the administration doesn’t insure people have access to Internet, than they will be leaving people out of the democratic process and the ability to engage in organizing. Malachowsky also suggested that volunteers in rural Oregon could call rural voters in Kansas, say, for example, that the Oregon senator was already supporting the particular issue they were pushing for. “If there was a way for

some system to show rural communities a relationship to other rural communities, that would be powerful,” said Marema. Marema feels that a shared understanding between rural and urban would benefit both because rural people don’t always realize that people are suffering everywhere from economic struggle. He pointed out that if rural people felt like they were being heard and had a feel of belonging, they would be much easier to organize. Ritchie emphasized this: “To the extent that the campaigning can continue to ...make the point that rural places, rural people, are important not only to the history of this country but to future. Giving people a sense of worth, when they’re getting mixed messages.” One way this could be done is through utilizing small market daily newspapers in order to get a more progressive voice in small town media. He sees a newspaper as one of the best ways to educate rural voters, because in small towns these local papers are often the primary source of information.

In the book *How the Rural Poor Got Power* by Paul Wellstone, he talks about the unique techniques that must be used when organizing rural communities and the challenges faced. In 1972, he founded the Organization for a Better Rice County, and wrote this book because of his frustration with the lack of literature and research on rural poverty. Regarding challenges with organizing, he stated:

The rural poor are not heirs of a tradition of political activism and attempted organization, as are many urban communities. Organizing is difficult where there is no expectation for social change and where the assertion of dignity often leads to retaliation.<sup>55</sup>

Some of the strategies he utilized were action research, where nearby college students documented and identified problems through interviews, but left it up to the people to decide what needed to be done. They also did extensive work with the census data. He

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<sup>55</sup> Wellstone.

discusses one failed meeting his organization tried to organize, and blames it partly on the lack of one-on-ones, which are essential to effective community organizing.<sup>56</sup> He emphasized the importance of the communities knowing their rights, with the idea that education leads to action. We can look at Wellstone's work over forty years ago as hope for the future ability of OFA to positively engage voters in grassroots mobilization.

### Foreseen Problems of OFA

As the largest grassroots organization ever created in terms of the number of volunteers, it is fair to assume that OFA has the potential to create tremendous power and stand as a threat to conservative ideology as well as the administration itself. Brian described this as a "blind giant to those in control." Never in history has there been potential for such a large special interest group to be organized like this. Malachowsky agrees, but has hope in Obama. "Some politicians are absolutely afraid of starting something they can't control. Others, and some of what Obama himself has been saying, indicates that they believe that the Obama agenda has a greater prospect of success when outside forces are agitating around those issues and creating political space," he told me. He believes that if the administration truly believes this, "promoting open ended communication among its members, it will encourage organizations to advocate on issues even if they're not in lockstep with the administration." Rather than seeing this as a negative threat, "They should be delighted to have a bunch of citizens out there hammering on it to keep pulling it to the left, away from those business forces," he said. Obama Organizer Nelson instead believes that opposition to OFA will come mainly from those who are already anti-Obama.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Wellstone, How the Rural Poor Got Power. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978. p17.

Others are not so confident in the organizations ability to harness a large political force. While Malachowsky believes OFA has the potential to help push Obama's agenda, he does not have faith that "it has the potential to be a force in par with old style organizing such as labor unions and other independent groups that apply pressure from the outside." He doesn't see the organization emerging with an independent voice, but instead acting as a grassroots arm of the Obama administration. He believes that people will hold back some trust since OFA is affiliated with the government and that in the end, it has to "respond to and protect the interest of its political leaders." Fisher is also doubtful, but for different reasons. His skepticism comes from lack of communication from the administration as to what has been done with the names and how they are going to be used in the future. "60% of the people voted against him down here," he said. "There's a lot of work that needs to be done to prove to people that there is a genuine concern about rural issues. It's going to be an effort to build a movement down here, to work for progressive issues." Obama Organizer Damron echoes these thoughts because he believes they didn't keep good enough records of supporters and volunteers. He said that the best thing they can hope for is new blood in the Democratic Party and that OFA has to make a good first impression to keep volunteers engaged and involved. Organizer Nelson fears that it will be hard to get the broader volunteer base involved, and that after a while people will reach a level of fatigue and return to a level of apathy. He also worries that fundraising will be a problem. The April 7<sup>th</sup> *Washington Post* article sides with the skeptics: "The episode [of delivering signatures to congress] underscores the difficulty that Obama and his supporters face in attempting to transfer the excitement of a historic presidential campaign to the mundane and complex process of pushing

legislation through Congress. It also comes as something of a relief to beleaguered Republicans, who cast the relatively humble pledge campaign as a sign of broader disaffection with Obama's economic priorities."<sup>57</sup> A lot of work needs to be done if OFA has any chance at creating a good enough reputation to harness any energy left from the campaign.

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<sup>57</sup> Eggen



## VI. CONCLUSION

The precise percentage difference that campaigning in rural communities had on impacting the vote is unknown. However, due to the unique nature of rural areas, the impact it had on these communities – both the voters and the volunteers campaigning for Obama – is very apparent through the points shared above. The lack of previous campaigning, targeted smear campaign by opposition, and small town feeling all contributed to this impact. This resulted in communities being pushed out of their comfort zones and forced to – many for the first time – think about and question their beliefs and to hear others’ perspectives. For many, this did not convince them to vote for McCain. However, in many communities, it opened up an entirely new political discourse. The impact on the volunteers is also of great importance, empowering and bringing together a new generation of potential rural leaders. The question remains if these volunteers now have the tools to mobilize and organize on their own or if they need the support of OFA, and if so, if OFA will offer that support. It seems feasible that in urban areas, where the offices will most likely be placed and where progressive structures already exists, they will successfully maintain the grassroots forces created during the campaign. However, I feel the administration’s biggest challenge in terms of the grassroots force will be their ability to include rural counties such as Page County in this process. This is vital in terms of passing legislation and if the administration truly seeks to include everyone who wants to be included in the process of governance.

At this point in time, it does not seem promising that OFA has the ability or intention to work to engage rural communities in the national and local political process in a way that empowers and gives tools to the volunteers so that they can lead their own

campaigns. It does not seem feasible to create a truly grassroots movement when direction as of now is coming solely from the top, with little transparency as to the decisions that are being made and the future of the organization. Randy Shaw of BeyondChron said it well: “Given the enormous pent-up demand for change, it’s sad that the talents of so many are being unused, and that enacting progressive measures are reliant upon top-down rather than bottom-up strategies for influencing public opinion.”<sup>58</sup> They need to truly trust and listen to rural volunteers and provide them with the resources needed to follow through with their plan of action. As Si Kahn says in his book *How People Get Power*, those who wish to organize for oppressed communities must “believe in the people, in their dignity, in their determination, in their capabilities. It is for those who believe deeply that the problems of poor people will be solved by poor people working together.”<sup>59</sup> Campaigning for a certain issue such as health care is not going to be effective if the volunteers are not thoroughly informed on his policy, or if they are without a deeply rooted interest in the issue. As seen by the first failed attempt to sway Congress, the organization also must determine the effectiveness of efforts such as a signature campaigns and figure out where, if anywhere, they belong in the political arena.

The overall theme of civic engagement was to work alongside already existing rural organizations and teach useful skills such as basic community organizing so communities could run their own campaigns. This is only feasible if OFA truly aims to not only pursue its own agenda of pushing Obama and his policies, but also seeks to improve the democratic process on a local level across the country. They must also be

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<sup>58</sup> Randy Shaw, “The Obama/Progressive Agenda: A Progress Report,” *BeyondChron*, 6 April 2009. <http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=6776>.

<sup>59</sup> Si Kahn. *How People Get Power Organizing Oppressed Communities for Action*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970, x.

willing to give the local Democratic Committees some sort of access to the votebuilder system so they can turn their skills into action. With the vast networks and volunteer base, promoting civic engagement through these means seems fairly feasible. Providing the community with these types of tools would also help to give community members the tools to run local electoral campaigns to get more Democrats into power. This would lead to a more free flowing organization, where each county is pursuing initiatives they see as beneficial, which would require OFA to give up some control. The ability to train rural community members also depends on how many organizers are placed in each state. If OFA only has enough funding for a few staff per state, they will clearly have to focus efforts on pushing Obama's agenda over creating a long-term grassroots movement. As those I interviewed expressed, engaging rural voters in pushing Obama's agenda will require open communication and for OFA to prove that the agenda will actually benefit rural people. This would give more legitimacy to any program or project OFA attempts to pursue.

In Luray, the impact of the campaign will be felt for years to come. Voters were for the first time opened up to a political dialogue with their neighbors, in this case beginning a conversation about the opportunity for change. The office did a great deal to establish a Democratic presence, leaving the Republicans wondering what happened to their party. This is not something they will quickly forget. Volunteers going door to door and making calls, Obama coming to Harrisonburg, a Get Out the Vote Party: these are things that shook up the county and that will leave a lasting impact no matter what comes of OFA. The office brought together a unique and diverse group of people, who have now come together to work for change. This has resulted in a new conversation in

Page County, one previously silenced by a dominant conservative culture. Although the volunteers have made progress within the Democratic Committee since the campaign, they seem to be waiting for direction from OFA. This is because the campaign was not truly run from the bottom up; although the office was volunteer based, they still relied on me for direction, which I received from a long command chain, starting at the national level and relayed to me through a regional director. Therefore it can not be expected that these groups will be able to continue to effectively work for change on their own: most will require direction and/or training so that they can become their own independent forces.

My suggestion is for OFA to first focus on training a solid base of supporters to work on initiatives and/or campaigns in their own communities, and wait to call on them to support national agendas and candidates once these relationships and skills are well established. At this point, utilizing rural supporters to push the legislative agenda – a plan that has already backfired – would be counterproductive and only diminish the power of OFA. The organization must realize that priority must still be staff members forming relationships and building on relationships already formed with other organizers during the campaign. I also feel that this time around, volunteers should be given tools to truly organize on their own, without the OFA staff member having to hold their hand the entire time. I also understand that my hope and the hopes of the many I talked to of what OFA could be are very different than what it appears likely to become. As NYT reporter Ben Werschkul said, “A large part of what’s going on here is maintenance of the Obama campaign apparatus for 2012. An important aspect is growing the huge data base of email addresses.” I’m not saying this is a bad thing; it is clearly very important that we

rally supporters to help elect and reelect Democratic Candidates. However, with the biggest volunteer base ever created, I'm hoping OFA can expand beyond basic legislation and reelection.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Wellstone, [www.Wellstone.org](http://www.Wellstone.org).

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Appendix A

OBAMA VOLUNTEERS

<i>Name</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Date Interviewed</i>
Betty Karp	Alexandria, VA	Over 60	White	1/13/09
Herb Karp	New York	Over 60	White	1/13/09
Carol Clark	DC	40-60	White	1/13/09
Johnny Clark	VA	40-60	White	1/13/09
Lucia King	TE	Over 60	White	1/13/09
Bill King	VA	Over 60	White	1/13/09
Phel Jacobsen	MI	Over 60	White	1/13/09
Bob Jacobsen	NE	Over 60	White	1/13/09
Barbara Coulter		Over 60	White	1/13/09
Signe Vaughan	Luray, VA	40-60	White	1/13/09
Sherry Myers		40-60	White	1/13/09
Tom Ford		40-60	White	1/13/09
Gail Price		Over 60	White	1/14/09
Gordon Hausrath	NY	Over 60	White	1/14/09
Edna Berry	Luray, VA	Over 60	Black	1/14/09
Rev. Berry	Luray, VA	Over 60	Black	1/14/09
Kenneth Lee	Luray, VA	Over 60	Black	1/14/09
Justin Bailey	Fairfax, VA	Low 20s	White	3/24/09 (email)
Jamie Foster	Luray, VA	18	White	1/14/09
Kathy Veney	Luray, VA	40-60	Black	1/14/09
Ryan Hodson	CA		White	1/14/09
Jay Dedman	CA		White	1/14/09
Nicholas Carl	Luray, VA	29	White	3/19/09 (email)
Constance Hanson	Minnesota	40-60	White	2/16/09 (email)

OBAMA STAFF

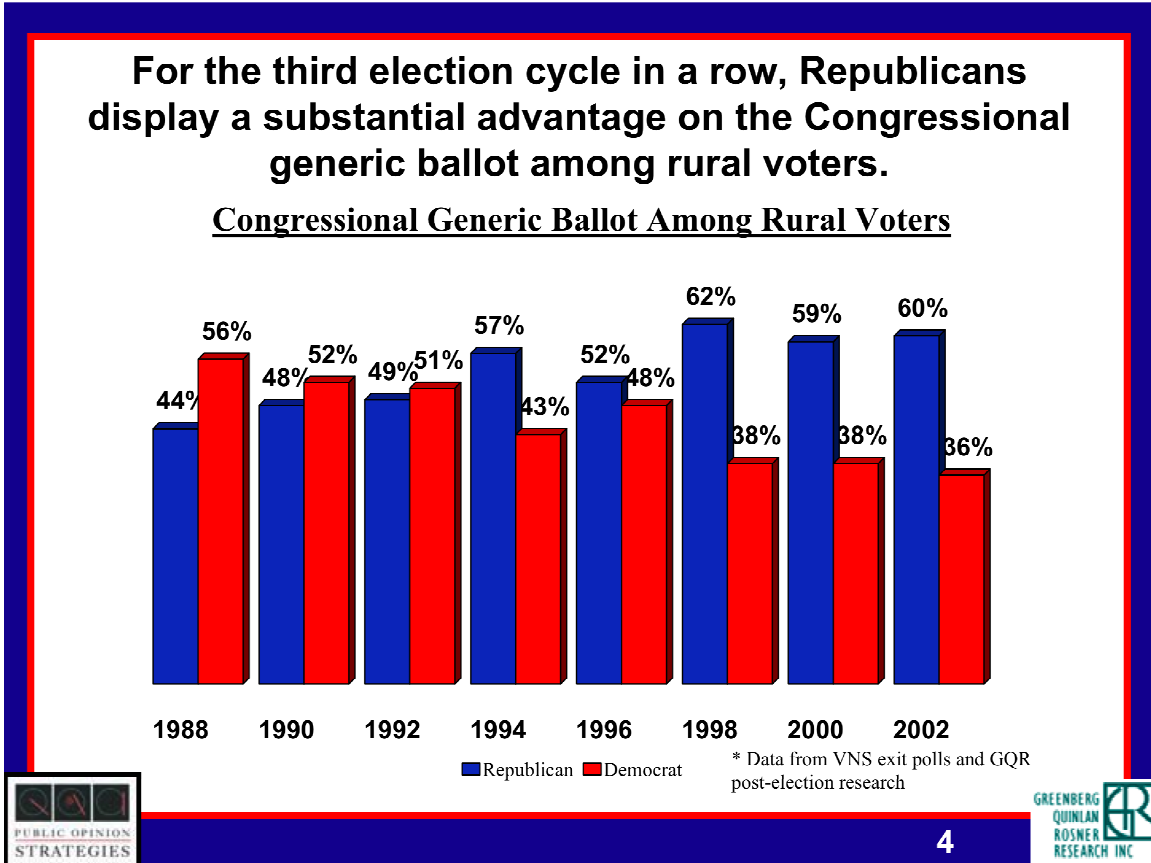
<i>Name</i>	<i>Position &amp; State</i>	<i>Date Interviewed</i>
Sara El Amine	Regional Field Director, VA	2/4/09
Brian Damron	Field Organizer, VA	2/2/09
Chirs Nelson	Field Organizer, VA	2/3/09
Million Fikre	Field Organizer, VA	2/3/09
Andrew Warren	Field Organizer, North Carolina	2/3/09

RURAL ORGANIZERS AND ACTIVISTS

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Date Interviewed</i>
Tim Marema	Vice President	Center for Rural Strategies, KY	2/23/09



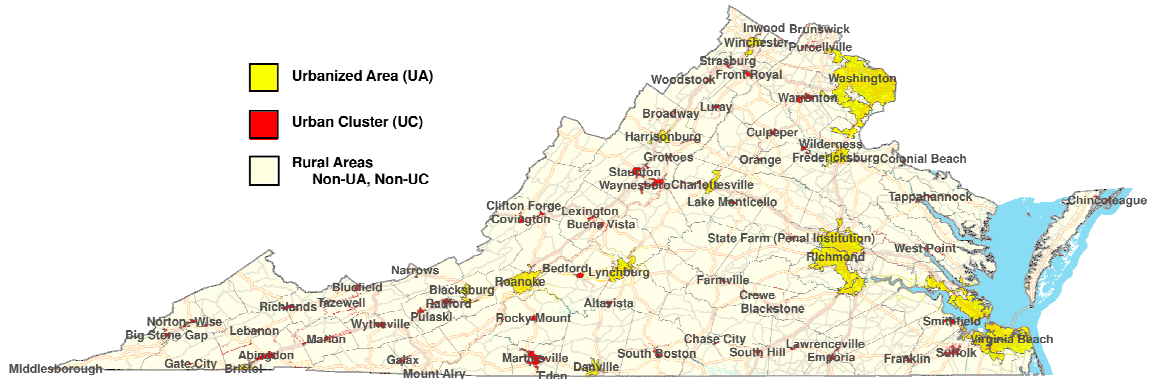
Niel Ritchie	Executive Director	League of Rural Voters, MN	3/20/09
Jeff Malachowsky	Founder	Western States Center, OR	2/22/09
Steven Fisher	Retired Professor	Emory & Henry College	3/17/09



\*Public Opinion Strategies, and Greenberg Quilan Rosner Research. *Election 2002: Rural Voters and Rural Issues*. Publication.

Appendix C

## Virginia Census 2000 Rural -- Urban Areas Urbanized Area (UA) and Urban Cluster (UC)\*



\*Census 2000 classifies as "urban" all territory, population, and housing units located within an urbanized area (UA) or an urban cluster (UC). UAs consist of a central place(s) and adjacent territory with a general population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile of land area that together have a minimum residential population of at least 50,000 people. UCs are a new category for Census 2000. UCs are densely settled territory that has at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000. UAs and UCs use core census block group or block boundaries and therefore represent densely settled areas that often cut across the boundaries of census defined places, census tracts, counties, metropolitan areas and other jurisdictions. The Census classification of "rural" consists of all territory, population, and housing units located outside of UAs and UCs. For additional information see: [http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua\\_2k.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html)

Note: Some programs targeting rural populations, such as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Rural Health Clinic (RHC) Program, define rural as all non-urbanized areas (UAs), thus including urban clusters (UC) within their definition of rural. For additional information on RHC certification requirements see: [http://www.raonline.org/info\\_guides/clinics/rhcfag.php#location](http://www.raonline.org/info_guides/clinics/rhcfag.php#location)

Appendix D

County Name	Obama %	McCain %	2008 margin	Kerry %	Bush %	2004 Margin	Change in Margin	Change in %
Augusta*	30	69	39	24	74	50	11	6
Buena Vista*	46	53	7	39	60	21	14	7
Carroll*	33	65	32	32	68	36	4	1
Culpeper*	45	54	9	35	65	30	21	10
Essex*	55	44	-11	46	53	7	18	9
Franklin City	64	36	-28	54	46	-8	20	10
Greensville*	64	35	-29	59	41	-18	11	5
Halifax*	48	51	3	43	57	14	11	5
Henry*	44	55	11	42	57	15	4	2
Martinsville*	64	35	-29	54	46	-8	21	10
Mecklenburg*	47	52	5	42	57	15	10	5
Middlesex*	40	59	19	36	62	26	7	4
Norton*	49	49	0	48	51	3	3	1
Page*	41	58	17	35	65	30	13	6
Rappahannock*	48	51	3	45	54	9	6	3
Rockbridge**?	43	56	13	40	59	19	6	3
Russell*	43	56	13	45	53	8	-5	-2
Shenandoah*	36	63	27	30	69	39	12	6
Southampton*	49	51	2	46	54	8	6	3
Staunton*	51	48	-3	39	61	22	25	12
Tazewell*	33	66	33	41	58	17	-16	-8
Waynesboro**?	44	54	10	35	64	29	19	9
Wise*	35	63	28	41	58	17	-11	-6
Wythe*	33	66	33	31	69	38	5	2
WITH OFFICE							8.958333333	4.291666667
Alleghany	48	50	2	45	55	10	8	3
Bath	43	56	13	37	63	26	13	6
Bland	29	69	40	30	68	38	-2	-1
Brunswick	63	36	-27	59	41	-18	9	4
Buchanan	47	52	5	54	46	-8	-13	-7
Buckingham	50	49	-1	46	53	7	8	4

Charlotte	44	55	11	41	59	18	7	3
Covington	56	43	-13	52	48	-4	9	4
Dickenson	49	49	0	51	49	-2	-2	-2
Floyd	39	59	20	37	62	25	5	2
Galax	44	55	11	43	57	14	3	1
Grayson	34	63	29	34	65	31	2	0
Highland	38	60	22	34	65	31	9	4
King George	43	56	13	35	65	30	17	8
Lancaster	47	53	6	40	60	20	14	7
Lee	35	63	28	41	58	17	-11	-6
Lunenburg	48	51	3	45	55	10	7	3
Madison	43	56	13	38	62	24	11	5
Nottoway	49	50	1	44	55	11	10	5
Orange	45	54	9	39	60	21	12	6
Patrick	34	64	30	31	67	36	6	3
Prince Edward	54	44	-10	50	49	-1	9	4
Richmond	43	56	13	37	62	25	12	6
Smyth	35	64	29	34	64	30	1	1
Westmoreland	55	44	-11	49	50	1	12	6
WITHOUT OFFICE							6.24	2.76