

Shoe-leather civics

There's nothing like canvassing door-to-door to demonstrate that 'democracy is a verb'

by PAUL ENGLEMAN

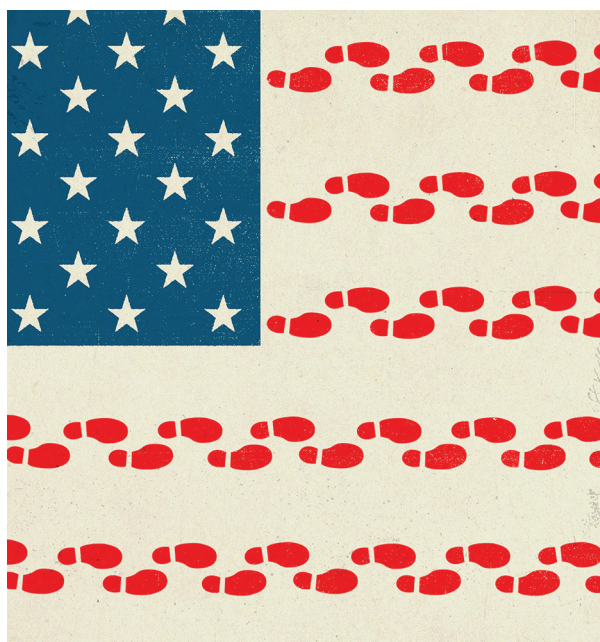
On Saturdays last fall, I would get up early and drive to a region known to many Chicagoans as the Land Beyond O'Hare, sometimes going as far as the Wisconsin border, to knock on doors for a first-time candidate for U.S. Congress.

If you're bracing for a political screed, not to worry. This isn't really about politics; it's about civic engagement.

I got involved with this effort after hearing from a college friend who was the longtime director of a Chicago community organization. On the first weekend, the group of canvassers consisted of four volunteers. By the end of October, our ranks had grown to 50.

We knocked on doors in communities that had seemingly dropped from the sky, car-dependent subdivisions planted on yawning expanses of retired farmland. One town where I canvassed had seen its population mushroom from 124 to nearly 6,000 in 15 years. It was a world I knew nothing about.

The congressional district that we canvassed stretches about 80 miles from north to south, touching seven counties and measuring almost 1,600 square miles. (My own more densely populated district, which includes parts of Chicago and neighboring suburbs, is 96 square



miles.) Over eight weeks, I rang 300 doorbells and made contact with 150 people. Some days I partnered with people I'd known for a long time, other days with folks I'd just met. My recollection of the experience is largely a blur, but I came away with some memorable anecdotes and lasting impressions.

At about one of every two houses, residents were either not home or unwilling to answer their doors. Every third house had a barking dog or two, every fifth a sign prohibiting solicitors. Most of those who did open their doors said they were planning to vote — but about half didn't know the name of their four-term incumbent congressman.

Personally, I found this lack of political literacy rather appalling, but as a canvasser, I welcomed it, in the hope that merely being courteous — and perhaps offering a compliment on a garden or a Halloween display — might sway an undecided voter.

At one house, I learned that a young woman who resided there would be mailing in her ballot from Japan. A neighbor two doors down declared no interest in politics and had no intention of voting. A couple of people said they thought voting should be mandatory. A woman who works at a pharmaceutical company

confided that she believed in “socialized medicine” — and that she was no longer on speaking terms with her mother because of political differences. One man sounded apologetic as he told me he had already voted — for “the other one.” And quite a few married couples, I learned, have opposing political leanings.

On occasions when I encountered a strong supporter, I would offer to have a yard sign delivered. No one accepted. As one man explained succinctly: “Neighbors.”

So what exactly is civic engagement? According to Brian Brady, it's participating in the democratic process. “In a narrow sense, it's being informed and

voting,” he says. “In a broader sense, it’s becoming active in community affairs and issues, elections, and campaigns.”

Brady is president of Mikva Challenge, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that trains high school students in what he calls “action civics.” Several friends of Abner Mikva, a former U.S. congressman and federal judge, started it in 1998 as a project to teach civics in four Chicago schools. With the involvement of Mikva and his wife, Zoe, a teacher and education advocate, the organization expanded to Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. It offers opportunities for students to learn the inner workings of the democratic electoral system by serving as election judges or on committees focused on youth issues, volunteering for political candidates, and interning for officeholders. (Full disclosure: My two sons participated in Mikva Challenge during high school, one logging enough hours volunteering for the 2008 Obama campaign to earn a trip to the inauguration, and the other serving on a youth committee that made education policy recommendations to the mayor of Chicago.)

Operating under the motto Democracy Is a Verb, Mikva Challenge prepares young people to become active and responsible leaders in their communities. Surveys show that alumni have a much higher level of participation in volunteer civic activity than other 18- to 29-year-olds; 88 percent of alumni are registered to vote, compared with 53 percent of their peers. One Mikva alumnus became a Chicago alderman at age 26, three others ran for City Council this February, and still others have run for public office in other parts of the country.

Brady sees little difference between civics and politics. “To me, they’re pretty much the same, but politics has become pejorative,” he says. “Politics is what stands in the way of settling our disputes; civics is a way of settling them.”

A crowd-pleaser among the stories shared at a memorial service for Abner

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Mikva in 2016 was an anecdote about how his political career began. In 1948, he stopped by a Democratic Party ward office in Chicago and said he was there to volunteer for Illinois gubernatorial candidate Adlai Stevenson. “Who sent you?” asked a cigar-chewing ward heeler. “Nobody sent me,” Mikva replied. The ward guy’s response has become a classic line in Chicago: “We don’t want nobody nobody sent.”

It so happens that my career as a canvasser began with Mikva’s congressional re-election campaign in 1976. He won by a mere 201 votes out of more than 200,000 cast, a margin of less than one vote per precinct. On Election Day, 10 minutes before the polls closed, I had successfully roused a student, home from college, who did not realize he was registered to vote. That experience convinced me that in some elections, every vote really does matter.

The overall goal in political canvassing is to identify supporters and make sure they vote. In the initial effort, a canvasser hands out campaign literature and tries to determine whether someone intends to vote — and whether that person is “undecided” or a “strong” or “leaning” supporter or nonsupporter. This can be tricky, because many people believe their vote is nobody’s damn business. Traditionally, canvassers would record this information on voter lists attached to a clipboard, but this being 2018, we had an app for that.

In a well-organized campaign with enough volunteers, canvassers go back for multiple rounds, knocking on doors previously unanswered, leaving campaign materials, encouraging early voting, and making sure supporters know

where to vote. A campaign risks being active to the point of annoyance. As one supporter told a partner of mine, “I’m going to vote for her — unless you people bother me one more time.”

Thanks at least in part to all that bothering, 2018 marked the highest voter turnout for a U.S. midterm election since 1914 — before women had the vote — with more than 49 percent of registered voters participating. (But when you consider that 30 percent of citizens of voting age are not registered, you’re left with the disheartening realization that far less than half the people who can vote, do.)

That level of participation seems pretty dismal to me. As someone who has voted in every election since I became eligible in 1972, I view voting as not only a right but a privilege and responsibility. But Brady points out that among younger people of voting age — whose lack of participation is often attributed to apathy or indifference — one of the chief reasons for not voting is that they simply don’t know how.

With regard to people who do vote, a study published last year by a Stanford professor and a UC Berkeley political scientist determined that campaign outreach has a negligible impact on persuading voters in general elections. They found that most voters — even those who identify themselves as independent — are already steadfastly committed to one political party or the other.

I know quite a few door-knockers who would volunteer to differ with that conclusion. On election night, I attended a small gathering with some of them. As the returns came in, we shared a small sense of accomplishment for having done our part — and a greater sense of optimism that civic engagement can still play an important role in our political system. ■

Paul Engleman is a Chicago-based freelancer and a frequent contributor to The Rotarian.