

**A**fter my first year at Princeton University, I was accepted into the university's Princeton-in-France summer program that began in June 1990. In order to make some spending money for the trip, I looked for a job near my parents' house outside Philadelphia. Attracted by an ad in the newspaper about jobs for the environment, I applied and interviewed at a grassroots campaign office near the train station; they hired me on the spot.

I found the office atmosphere contagious—young people from colleges around the country came to this office to help the campaign to tighten controls on sulfur dioxide emissions in the Clean Air Act. I made friends quickly with these like-minded individuals, spending every evening out with them celebrating our progress toward saving the world. The experience was so life-altering that I called the coordinator of Princeton-in-France and lied, telling her I had contracted mono and could not participate in the program. I spent the rest of the summer field-managing a group of canvassers and going door-to-door throughout eastern Pennsylvania.

Without access to a bathroom and armed only with a clipboard and a petition, I spent my days knocking on people's doors asking them if they would contribute money to the campaign. I even organized a bicycle canvass in a previously uncanvassed part of rural Pennsylvania. The Clean Air Act was reauthorized the following November, and I knew that I had helped make it happen. Returning to school in the fall, I promptly dropped French and focused my coursework on environmental studies.

After graduation in 1993, I moved to Washington, D.C., to work in progressive politics during the first term of the Clinton administration.

work on the legislative process, I found a position at a small civil rights group where I *would* learn how to lobby. Other people, however, were so lucky.

Another member of my class at Princeton, Stewart (a pseudonym) had also taken a job with the same national progressive group because he wanted to get involved in politics. Out of a sense of duty, he lasted longer than I did as a director in the Washington canvass office. After six months, however, Stewart “got frustrated with the fact that success was measured by dollars brought in and not by people convinced,” and he gave up on the sixty-plus-hour weeks coordinating a fleet of so-called field workers for the campaign. He decided that politics wasn’t for him and went back to school for a law degree. Although canvassing had taken the bounce out of his step, he told me it had not squelched all of his idealism. After practicing law for six years, Stewart realized that he wanted to become a teacher. When I caught up with him in the fall of 2005, he was just beginning his second year teaching fourth-graders in Massachusetts. In an e-mail message to me, he rejoiced: “And best of all, I’m finally able to ‘change the world’ and genuinely contributing to making the world a better place.”

Since 1993, as I moved out of my twenties and figured out what I wanted to do with my life, I was haunted by my experience trying to make a difference by working in progressive politics. As a result, during my first year at Columbia University, I wrote a proposal to study how the experience of canvassing affects young people. With funding from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), I spent 2003 and 2004 studying a cohort of canvassers employed by some of the largest canvassing organizations in the country: the People’s Campaign. As canvassers, these young people went door to door or stood on street corners recruiting and renewing memberships for progressive national organizations, just as I had done. In the intervening ten years, however, this

example, the People's Project ran campaigns around the country for more than fifteen groups. From an approved list of forty-one canvass offices the Project ran that summer, I randomly selected one canvass office in each of the six regions of the United States to study.

During the summer of 2003, along with two graduate research assistants, I spent a week in each of these cities: Boulder, Colorado; Portland, Oregon; San Diego, California; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Baltimore, Maryland; and Atlanta, Georgia. At each site I interviewed and surveyed every canvasser in the office who was willing to participate and had completed the organization's requisite three-day training period. In all, I formally interviewed and surveyed 115 canvassers.<sup>3</sup> During the second half of 2004, I conducted follow-up telephone interviews with approximately two-thirds of this sample of 2003 summer canvassers.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of these phone conversations was for them to reflect on their experience with the canvass and to talk about their political and civic involvement since our initial meeting in 2003. Thanks to additional funding provided by Columbia University's Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP), I was also able to travel to Washington, D.C. to interview representatives of national progressive groups that had hired the People's Project to run their grassroots campaigns in 2003, as well as political consultants who had worked on the 2004 presidential campaign.

My conversations with these idealistic young people around the country made me realize how much their experiences play into the challenges facing progressive politics in America today. It also became clear to me that the outsourcing of grassroots activism had extended beyond issue-based politics on the left and now includes aspects of electoral politics as well.

As the 2004 presidential election was heating up, an old friend invited me up to Boston to attend an event in honor of grassroots firms during the

election, I took the opportunity to interview political consultants who were involved in the 2004 presidential election on the left about the grassroots tactics of the campaign. To compare these tactics with those of the campaign which had received significant attention in the media, I also spoke with a number of people who had worked on the campaign to reelect President George W. Bush.

This book is the product of every meeting and conversation I had with canvassers, representatives of national progressive groups, and political operatives on the left and the right. It tells the story of grassroots politics in America, focusing on the significant differences between the Right and the Left reach out to their grassroots base and involve young people, for better and for worse.