

“Be A Part of Something Great!”

College Activism and the Campaign to Elect Barack Obama

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Introduction

In July 2004, at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, then-State Senator Barack Obama delivered a speech that would change our lives.

His remarks, as broadcast by C-SPAN¹, lasted just over sixteen minutes and unofficially kicked off an intense, four-year journey that propelled Mr. Obama to the office of President of the United States.

This speech sparked a movement that mobilized millions, and as one of those millions, I spent a significant amount of my time in college contributing to the efforts of Senator Obama's campaign. The role of young activists in the 2008 election has been widely covered, but rarely in granular detail, so this monograph will illustrate these efforts at Dickinson College through the following lenses:

1. A summary of the forms, functions, and methods of student political activism on campus in the years leading up to September 2007
2. An analysis of interrelationship of the student body, the College administration, and the greater campus community through the 2008 Democratic primary into the 2008 – 2009 academic year
3. A narrative illustration of efforts on campus to support Senator Obama during the general election through his victory in November of 2008

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJ0&ab_channel=C-SPAN

1. 2005 - 2007

This story takes place in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, a town founded in 1751 just west of the Susquehanna River. Named for a city of the same name in England, it has been home to Dickinson College since the institution's founding by Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1783, just days after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, making Dickinson the first college chartered in the newly-founded United States of America.

I arrived on campus in August of 2005, two hundred and twenty-two years after its founding, with an immediate interest in politics. I had little political understanding growing up, but through various influences in my family and elsewhere, I became a Democrat. In my (rudimentary) research prior to enrolling, I knew there were outlets for such activities, such as the Dickinson College Democrats student group. At this time, most campus organizations did not have websites, so early in each fall semester Dickinson held an extracurricular activities fair in the college gymnasium, where student groups could sit at tables and sign up new and returning students alike. Joined by a gaggle of my dormmates, I attended this fair and met the leadership of the Dickinson College Democrats (hereinafter the "DCD") at their table. I was ready, energized, and immediately became an active member of the organization. It was through the DCD that I was steeped in electioneering: in 2005, I was one of two volunteers knocking on doors for a local council candidate. I learned quickly how to speak to voters, interact with candidates, and understand the community environment.

In 2006, our organizing effort was much deeper and wider than the year before — with major races on the ballot, such as Bob Casey's ultimately successful bid for Senate, the DCD attracted

greater student interest than the year previous. Returning from studying abroad were a cadre of experienced fourth-year students, many of whom supported Kerry/Edwards efforts on campus in the fall of 2004. With these organizers at the helm of our student group, I got my first taste of true student mobilization efforts - nighttime drops of literature, interactions with the statewide Democratic apparatus, the use of technology such as NGPVan to analyze voter maps and “cut turf” for GOTV efforts, door-knocking, rallies and events, and party-building efforts.

The difference between DCD volunteers in 2005 and 2006 was stark: high-profile races, celebrity candidates, or nationally-recognized “bellwether” races (ones which pundits deemed indicative of wider electoral trends) tended to draw more interest from the student body. 2006 was one such election, and in November of that year Democrats celebrated huge wins: Bob Casey defeated Rick Santorum, Democrats swept the House of Representatives, and Nancy Pelosi became the first female Speaker of the House. We students went home for winter break excited and pleased with our successes.

On January 7th, 2007, Senator Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for president via a post on her website. About a month later, on February 10th, 2007, Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president on the steps of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois. These two candidates, both electoral “firsts”, had the potential to excite young voters in a way Senator Kerry had not in 2004.

The DCD conducted few activities in the spring of 2007, mostly social events and work on developing a Democratic campus newsletter. We noticed that regular meeting attendance was much lower in the spring, due to a variety of factors: some students felt satisfied with their work

on the election, while others were busy with schoolwork. Some studied abroad that semester. Others stopped caring once an election was decided. Candidly, we struggled to define what purpose the DCD would have when not mobilizing for elections. 2007 itself was another “off-year” in which we had a smattering of local and state races but nothing high-profile. The presidential race, just around the corner, would be the true test.

In May 2007, at the end of that school year, I was elected President of the Dickinson College Democrats. Along with the newly-elected executive board, we convened to plan the coming year, in which we’d have not only municipal and state-level elections in November, but a presidential primary — something in which none of us had participated as voters. To prepare, we needed to be much more strategic about the use of volunteers than we had in the past. It was clear that not all students volunteered in the same way, at the same times, for the same reasons, or with the same energy. With big races around the corner, we needed an intentional plan.

We relied on our student activists to perform four “buckets” of tasks in support of campaigns:

1. GOTV and voter registration
2. Thought leadership, media, and persuasion
3. Rallies and encouragement
4. Organizers and management

a. GOTV and voter registration.

“Get out the vote”, or “GOTV”, was the most crucial type of activism we practiced. While every candidate seeking to win must convince voters to choose him or her over the competition, such

cajoling is meaningless if the voter fails to show up and pull the lever. Campaigns across the country rely on volunteers to assist with this, and this is where we found the college activists most helpful. Their efforts were especially necessary for down-ballot candidates, who had neither full-time canvassers nor an army of excited volunteers ready to go. To this end, we developed training for students on how to effectively door-knock, how to deliver the candidates' message or literature, and how to remain safe while doing so. Training was useful, but no substitute for experience: we often paired experienced campaigners with newer volunteers to help get them comfortable with canvassing and "poll flushing", in which volunteers would visit known Democratic households to ensure they had voted during an election.

Another method we employed was encouraging voter registration. Concerted voter-turnout efforts at Dickinson would complement the efforts of almost two-dozen universities across Pennsylvania, and we hoped — a theme in the 2008 election — that we could help "keep the state blue." One approach was to hold a series of voter registration drives in the student union building and other high-traffic spots, in which we encouraged students to register to vote to Carlisle. Many Dickinson students came from the surrounding states of New York, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey, states broadly Democratic, vice Pennsylvania which was considered a "swing state." We often made the argument that switching one's registration to Pennsylvania, their (likely Democratic) votes would "mean" more and have an outsized impact.

We conducted these drives in 2006, 2007, and throughout 2008, with varying levels of success. To my recollection, very few of those newly registered, or switched their registration, did so as Republicans. It bears stating that those registrations were honored and submitted.

b. Thought leadership, media, and persuasion.

Another important aspect of campus activism is thought leadership, persuasion, and interaction with the media. We encouraged DCD members to share their ideas on Facebook, other social media channels, through the campus newspaper *The Dickinsonian*, and through our short-lived DCD newsletter.

I was an opinion columnist for *The Dickinsonian*, and while my column focused generally on politics, during the 2008 election season I frequently used my column to support ideas, policies, or traits of Senator Obama. I felt we had a robust editorial page, with varying perspectives, and students had ample opportunities to contribute letters to the editors, guest editorials, or to join as columnists.

I also spoke on radio, television, and newspaper outlets about our efforts, as did a few other students (especially towards the end of the campaign.) Mostly, these pieces focused on spotlighting Senator Obama's appeal to young voters.

c. Rallies and encouragement.

Some students just loved to party. Here I am not referring to Bacchanalian pursuits in the name of Democrats, which may or may not have occurred after-hours, but to those student activists with limitless energy and boundless enthusiasm for the candidate and the party. These activists were the first to volunteer to attend rallies, hold signs on the corner of busy intersections, or cheer on their favorite politician at campus debates or events. A few blocks from campus sat the main intersection of Carlisle, and here we employed students to hold signs for various candidates

during Saturday or Sunday mornings. The DCD held numerous public events, including some in which we needed a large crowd on short notice, and we always knew that a few dependable students were just a text message away. They could always be counted upon to show up in force and make noise at the right time.

We also utilized these individuals to make rally signs, buttons, and other promotional items. They often were the first to receive campaign merchandise or signs and were among the first to put stickers on their laptops, cars, or signs in their dorm room windows.

d. Organizers and management.

Finally, some activists were best suited as organizers: either conceptually (creating events, developing new ideas for activism, interfacing between campus organizations and the student body) or practically (setting up for events, logistic support, “cutting turf” for GOTV efforts.)

We needed good managers to keep the logistics of the DCD running. When I joined, our executive board focused more on a social agenda, doing joint events with the Students for Social Action and the College’s Women’s Center. In the 2008 dynamic, our organizers and leaders fused the activism element with a planning element. We needed good managers, people to ensure students showed up to events, organizing communications with internal and external stakeholders, and ensuring that transportation and other logistics were reliably sourced. We were fortunate to have a few students who filled these roles, preferring to sit back from constant public activism and form the logistical core of our group.

We would need to employ all these motives, methods, and modes of participation in the coming year, and we felt as ready as we could be in August of 2007.

2. The Longest Year

Late in September of 2007, I participated in a small, informal meeting at the campus coffeehouse with a handful of students interested in something I hadn't foreseen — Students for Obama. The race for president, now in its eighth month, was well over a year from being decided, and we were faced now with a new scenario: groups supporting an individual candidate in a Democratic primary. The College Democrats were not a monolith, and organically, students began to sort themselves into their “camps” and form loose associations to directly support either Sen. Clinton or Sen. Obama.

By December 2007, it was clear that the contest between Sens. Clinton and Obama would not end quickly. Democrats were divided and became increasingly tribal, and by the start of the new year in 2008, many of the other minor candidates (Dodd, Biden, Richardson, Edwards, and Kucinich) all withdrew or suspended their campaigns. All chose to endorse Barack Obama. Clinton still enjoyed great support, and at the start of the spring semester of 2008, it appeared that the contest would carry itself through to “Super Tuesday” – February 5th, 2008, when twenty-two states and territories held Democratic primary elections². Pundits felt the results of this day's primaries could settle the race³, however this was not the case. In a surprise twist, Senator Obama claimed more delegates than Senator Clinton⁴ thus forcing the primaries to continue. Pennsylvania, often considered a “swing” or bellwether state, would end up becoming quite important to the 2008 presidential race, holding its primary on April 22nd. Although Clinton was favored to win, the Obama campaign had a renewed energy, and so we began to see an

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/14/AR2008011402926_pf.html

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/02/05/schneider.superduper.tuesday/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/02/obama-claims-delegate-lead-008358>

increasing amount of election activities taking place on and around campus. All eyes would be on Pennsylvania.

Four main power players existed at this time, each with their own opportunities and challenges for our group: **The College, student-driven organizations, the campus community and local parties**, and a new, unpredictable player: **the national campaigns**.

a. The College.

The College administration, then led by the affable and civic-minded President William G. Durden, played an important role in the activities of the College Democrats. With the notable exception of hosting a Congressional debate in 2006, the College's visible role in the preceding elections was minimal. At the time, a college center focused just on civic engagement did not exist. There were a few small "centers", such as the Clarke Center (later the Clarke Forum) which provided lectures and programming on topics of public interest, but there did not exist a major, unified civic engagement center that focused on political participation.

This was detrimental, I believe, as there are a few notable examples of organizations and universities taking a direct role in voter registration and encouragement with great success. For example, Campus Compact launched the 2008 Campus Vote Initiative, providing resources for colleges to encourage student voting⁵. Forty colleges and universities took part in the initiative⁶. At North Carolina Central University, the Institute for Civic Engagement and Social Change (ICESC) developed and led a comprehensive and innovative effort to drive student engagement

⁵ <https://compact.org/news/campus-compact-launches-2008-campus-vote-initiative>

⁶ <https://www.hamilton.edu/news/story/hamilton-recognized-in-2008-campus-votes-challenge>

in 2008; as a result, the campus achieved a 90% turnout rate, compared to 77% for the surrounding county⁷. No data exists that compares such metrics for Dickinson.

i. Opportunities.

President Durden's leadership strengthened the College's cultural commitment to an informed and active student body. Dr. Durden had a vested interest in supporting student political groups, not only to encourage free expression on campus, but to raise the profile of the College during a period when Pennsylvania was the center of political attention in the United States.

A critical point of interaction between the College and the DCD was the budget: through the Student Senate, the College would provide an allotment of funds each year for legitimate clubs⁸ to conduct their activities on campus. The DCD mainly requested funds for food (the universal attractor for campus events), office supplies, and mileage reimbursements for travel. The College was surprisingly generous in this process: we were given money to buy charcoal grills for events, which of course we also used for our personal purposes; money was appropriated for sightseeing trips to Washington, D.C.; we purchased swag items and giveaways for contests (including a life-sized cardboard stand-up of Senator Obama); and we even received funds one year to rent a donkey from a local farm, to appear one afternoon in the quad to encourage students to register to vote. Sadly, due to scheduling conflicts, the donkey was unable to visit campus.

⁷ Hall, Jarvis A. National Civic Review, Vol. 99 Issue 2, 2010: 43-47; The campus, the community, and voter mobilization.

⁸ Any club recognized by the Student Senate. For a club to operate on campus, it must pass an annual muster through the legal framework set up by campus administration and Student Senate. Organizations not recognized through this process were not allowed to reserve rooms, draw from College funds, or post signs in public spaces.

ii. Challenges.

At times, the College also served as an impediment to our efforts. This most notably came from the College's status as a not-for-profit, which limited what it could legally do in terms of political activities. For example, during events with campaign surrogates, I was required to verbally deliver certain legal declarations (such as assurances that the speakers did not reflect the views or opinions of the College.) In terms of club expenditures, we could not directly donate to political candidates, somewhat restricting our ability to appropriate funds for our "focus groups" and limiting our access to certain events and surrogates.

We also faced challenges due to established College bureaucracy which sometimes prevented, or tried to prevent, the DCD from conducting desired activities without proper notice or approval. While the DCD strived to provide as much notice as possible, occasionally (as will be highlighted later) proper notice for certain events was not possible. The College's officials, specifically those in the Conferences and Special Events office, became somewhat frustrated with us.

Additionally, the College was very sensitive to questions of fairness, perhaps choosing not to aggressively involve itself in the election due to the perennial claims of campus bias in favor of Democratic or liberal ideals. At times, we felt limited in what we could do given the College's reluctance to be involved.

b. Student-Driven Organizations

Interest in this election extended beyond the Dickinson College Democrats and finding other groups to amplify our efforts was important.

i. Opportunities.

Working with other student groups on joint events expanded our reach and provided a wider audience for us to stress Sen. Obama's message. These events took many forms, allowing us a chance to reinforce our four methods and modes outlined above. For example:

1. We worked with the Dickinson School of Law to host a "Rock for Obama" fundraiser, a concert event we would repeat the following semester. This event was open to all and incorporated voter registration drives
2. We paired with the Campus Green Party to canvass and support campus-wide environmental initiatives
3. The campus debate society, the Union Philosophical Society, [held a widely-attended debate between representatives of the College Democrats and College Republicans](#)
4. We worked with Delta Sigma Theta sorority to create a public display of notecards upon which the student body anonymously submitted their reasons for voting

ii. Challenges.

One of the biggest challenges was the early interrelationship between the Dickinson College Democrats, the Students for Obama, and the Students for Clinton group. These two "focus groups" started organically and with no direction from the DCD itself. Most members of

Students for Obama were members of the College Democrats “main” group, including some members of the executive board. While I personally supported Senator Obama from the start, I made it clear that I would support both the Students for Obama and the Students for Clinton in their activities. From a funding standpoint, things became trickier: how do we fund activities that focused on just one candidate? We brought this issue up for discussion with College administration and concluded that an independent candidate-centric groups would not be able to be recognized by the College; therefore, by extension, we could not provide them resources from the main DCD account.

c. Campus Community and the Cumberland County Democratic Committee

Dickinson’s campus sits on the western end of the Borough of Carlisle, the seat of Cumberland County. The Cumberland County Democratic Committee (CCDC) was the local chapter of the Democratic party, reporting to the state party in Harrisburg. This was a loose group of pleasant senior-citizens, mostly traditional pro-union blue-collar Democrats with a few older progressives. Their location was a basement underneath a U.S. Post Office annex, two blocks from campus.

i. Opportunities.

We worked with them over the course of the prior few elections, and their contributions to our efforts were modest. They had some access to campaign materials and occasionally provided opportunities for us to attend events in neighboring boroughs. For example, they arranged for me to travel to Mechanicsburg, PA, to attend an event with film director Rob Reiner and then-Kansas governor Kathleen Sebelius.

Additionally, as part of the wider campus community, we occasionally saw members of the college staff and faculty wishing to help in their capacity as citizens. This was always good-natured, and we quickly identified that faculty members, as full-time residents of Carlisle, were more than likely to own cars. Poll driving, as previously noted, was of great need for many in the community, so those faculty or staff who were willing to shuttle voters to the polls (or to events) were in great demand.

ii. Challenges.

Fortunately, we ran into few challenges with the CCDC or the campus community. The biggest challenge was simply the lack of resources available to us through these channels; campaign swag (especially Obama-branded items) were in short supply. Likewise, due to the age and mobility of some of the CCDC volunteers, they were unable to pitch in during some of the more grueling GOTV activities we conducted. Their building was somewhat decrepit, and we were not able to use it as a home base for our efforts.

d. National Campaigns

Outside of the college administration and on-campus environment, our biggest counterparties were the national campaigns. As serious candidates began to organize nationally, their nascent campaigns began mobilizing in earnest, developing a vast and complex network of organizers, operatives, and surrogates. Very early on, prominent Democrats at the local, state, and national levels began to self-sort and early adopters for each campaign took the lead on local organizing.

As the campaigns took shape, and both Clinton and Obama gained respective momentum, they began to hire full-time staff to execute events and drive community organizing. Pennsylvania, a traditionally blue-collar state, had deep ties to the Clintons through Ed Rendell, the sitting governor. Pennsylvania also has a strong and active Black community, most notably in Philadelphia, which was perceived as an advantage for Senator Obama.

Organizationally, both campaigns hired state and regional coordinators, all of whom were tasked with managing their own “turf.” My first interaction with these individuals came late in the summer of 2007, when a DCD member and friend called me to introduce our new Obama representative for Carlisle and the surrounding area. This friend had met, by chance, the newly-assigned Obama staffer, and we held that introductory call to discuss ways of working together.

Unlike the DCD’s interaction with the campus administration, in which we exchanged dealing with minor bureaucracy for material support and a surprisingly-wide berth to conduct our activities, our interaction with the Obama campaign was mostly one-sided: the campaign would request – or require – us to do things for them. The DCD had no interaction with the Clinton campaign, and I was not aware of any formal discussions between the Clinton campaign and the pro-Clinton student group.

i. Opportunities.

The greatest contribution the Obama campaign made to efforts at Dickinson was to bring star power to campus in the form of celebrities or campaign surrogates. This occurred mostly during the primary season and was almost always done in direct collaboration with the College itself.

For example, in concert with Dickinson's Clarke Forum and through the generous handling by Professor Vanessa C. Tyson, we hosted senior Obama adviser Dr. Mark Alexander. [Following a short introduction by me, Dr. Alexander gave an address supporting Sen. Obama.](#) This televised event drew a standing-room-only crowd and was even broadcast to an adjacent meeting room, also full of people. This event was quite successful, and we were grateful for the opportunity.

During the primary, these events were often scheduled last-minute: for example, in March 2008, I received a call from the Obama campaign representative for our region⁹ informing me that two television stars would be coming to campus to stump for Senator Obama. The challenge was they would be arriving in less than 72 hours, much less notice than was required by college regulations. We were also charged with packing the room with people, introducing the stars, and delivering the College's legal disclaimers. Despite the late notice, I immediately liked the idea, and sensed that this could be very valuable for party-building for us. The speakers were Zachary Quinto, starring then as Sylar on "Heroes", and later as Spock in Star Trek reboots, and Dulé Hill of "West Wing" and "Psych" fame.

The College balked at the idea of creating an event in such short notice, especially one of admittedly-low educational benefit. With the intervention and support of Dr. Durden, however, we were able to make the event work. We filled the room with supporters, and with introductions by both me and Students for Obama chairman Andrew J. Williams III, the event was a success. Quinto and Hill urged students to register to vote, to discuss the issues among friends, and

⁹ This individual was different from the one referenced in the previous page. Names are not important as campaign staffers on-the-ground turned over so quickly.

engage in honest debate. Although they supported Senator Obama, they encouraged everyone to register to vote regardless of party affiliation and to do their civic duty.

The campaign organizers provided DCD volunteers with opportunities to conduct voter outreach on behalf of Senator Obama. This was somewhat different from our own efforts as we were involved in a broadly Democratic effort, at least during the primary. The campaign, understandably, was focused solely on Senator Obama's candidacy and provided an opportunity for volunteers to do work on behalf of him alone.

ii. Challenges.

Despite the national campaign's modest investment of time and resources into supporting the DCD's efforts, I found the challenges far outweighed the opportunities.

The campaign organizers for our area were some of the most disorganized, demanding, and unaccountable political operatives I have ever encountered. While we anticipated there would be some measure of miscommunication, as there always is with any large undertaking, these semi-professional campaigners were True Believers and saw us as a means to their end — no matter the cost.

The greatest area of concern for me was the method in which these organizers operated: in this high-pressure environment, their *modus operandi* was to simply do what they wished, when they wished it. As a college-sponsored group, the DCD exchanged legitimacy and ability to operate with the restrictions imposed by the college. The national campaign had no such arrangement

and instead of taking our lead, as requested, they operated as they saw fit. Our authority was often circumvented, with the campaign poaching volunteers for their own purposes. They also felt the need to disrupt events and shoehorn themselves into public gatherings however they wished: one egregious example was April 6th, 2008, just days before the primary. Governor Ed Rendell and Senator John Kerry visited Carlisle for a joint event, held at the Cumberland County Democratic Committee headquarters. Although Senator Kerry had endorsed Obama, and Rendell had endorsed Clinton, the event was intended to raise excitement for the primary in general. This event also featured Philly cheesesteaks, in a nod to Rendell's tenure as mayor of Philadelphia, so the prospect of both Democratic stars and free food attracted a large crowd.

Among those in attendance were the Obama campaign organizers, who stood outside with a small group. At one point, this group began to chant loudly, and due to the paper-thin walls of the aging CCDC building, the chant was quite audible. Throughout Senator Kerry's speech, we heard a group outside shout:

"Be a part of something great!! Obama!! Oh-eight!!"

They repeated this chant and it became difficult to hear the speaker. At this point I had become quite disturbed, and I distinctly recall stepping outside, in anger, and unsubtly suggesting to those assembled that such behavior was not acceptable. This type of conduct continued, both throughout the primary and into the general election. I recall two instances in which the Obama campaign staffers showed up, unannounced, to campus events to solicit voter registrations. They refused to leave when asked. Over time, the campaign representatives preferred to deal directly

with the “focus groups“, and on several occasions circumvented the DCD and encouraged members of Students for Obama to do unethical acts in the name of the campaign (such as only seeking to register Democratic voters.)

Another major challenge was the frequency at which the Obama campaign organizers turned over. These individuals seemed to last only a few months at the most; I recall at least four different organizers between March 2008 and November 2008. They came and went with little fanfare and expended no effort in alerting us to the changes. It was distracting to frequently meet new individuals, explain to them campus culture and rules (which they disregarded anyways), and attempt to find common ground.

As much as I supported Senator Obama, I found that the campaign representatives held a lack of respect for the DCD, our processes, and for College regulations. Their near-fanatical purpose and immunity from college rules, regulations, and decorum would be the source of frequent headaches and bureaucratic hand-wringing that distracted us from our goal. This became a problem for me specifically, as it was I who was forced to answer to the College powers-that-be for the transgressions of the campaign.

3. Be A Part...

Senator Clinton won both Cumberland County and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in the primary¹⁰, and the race dragged on for several more months before Senator Clinton conceded and endorsed Senator Obama on June 7th, 2008, paving the way for his campaign to proceed full steam ahead. He would be formally confirmed at the Democratic Convention later that month.

From a management standpoint, this was important for the DCD as we could now focus our efforts and funds on Senator Obama, whereas we were limited during the primary to simply supporting straight-party endorsements. Coupled with an already-organized Students for Obama, working in tandem with us, I felt that we were in good shape with the new dynamic on campus. Our years of party-building, organizing, and event planning were about to be put to the true test.

As noted in the previous section, at the student level our main goal was to mobilize volunteers and provide them with adequate outlets for their activism. This meant we not only had to create opportunities for those already motivated and ready to contribute, but also to identify and motivate those students who might be “on the fence” in the coming election. We came to recognize that specific strategies needed to be in place to motivate each segment of the student body. I participated in numerous phone calls throughout the summer, and even an in-person planning meeting in Baltimore to solidify our strategy.

Hundreds of students showed up to our initial club meeting, and with the DCD executive board (to which I had been elected as President for a second time) and the Students for Obama leaders

¹⁰ <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?year=2008&fips=42&f=0&off=0&elect=1>

combined, we were ready. There were many familiar faces in that crowd, but also many new ones: first-year students ready to make a difference, seniors who have returned from abroad, and many others seeking to be active for the first time. A good number of volunteers were international students, and owing to Senator Obama's magnetism, they signed up to volunteer – despite not being able to vote.

A comprehensive narrative of our efforts is impossible in this monograph, but suffice to say we enacted our plans: we engaged our volunteers thoughtfully and with respect to their individual skills and interests; we participated in canvassing around the Borough of Carlisle; we used the grills purchased for us to hold “grilled cheese nights” on the residential quads in which we registered students to vote; we staffed tables in the student union, and much more. We strove to hold events at least every two days. Most of the club spent almost all our free time tabling, leading rallies, or attending social events. We encouraged constant visibility for Senator Obama. DCD members spent their entire weekends at the CCDC headquarters, making calls or writing postcards. We worked diligently, conducting final GOTV efforts and using as much of our free time as possible to coordinate with the state and local parties to knock on doors. Conventional wisdom holds that greater turnout helps Democrats¹¹, so GOTV was crucial.

On November 4, 2008, Election Day arrived, and anyone who has substantively worked on a political campaign knows this feeling: a mixture of adrenaline, excitement, fear, exhaustion, and anxiety. The day of the election seemed to be a 24-hour affair; many of us awoke before dawn to visit polling locations, ensure signage was up, and coordinate rides. Coffee and sugary snacks

¹¹ <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/does-high-voter-turnout-help-one-party>

kept us awake. At this point, it was too late to register to vote and our operations to do so had ceased; instead, we pivoted to ensuring that those who promised to vote did so. Lines stretched around the block at some polling places. We harangued our classmates to vote, shuttled people to the polls, and (perhaps) found time to attend class.

At the conclusion of this whirlwind day, when the polls closed in Carlisle, DCD members gathered at a campus-owned event space to watch the returns. Many were confident in Obama's chances, as was I. We had done our part, as much as we could, and I felt satisfied. We served pizza, veggie trays, and soda as dozens joined us to celebrate our communal efforts. Once the polls closed on the East Coast, we followed along with Wolf Blitzer and John King as they began to call the race for states that were reporting results. We were elated when CNN called Pennsylvania for Obama, with over 6 million casting votes – 54.3% of whom voted for Senator Obama, and 44% for Senator McCain¹². This was a satisfying win for all of us, and the energy in the room began to build. Wolf Blitzer, with his “caps-lock” speaking style and digital touchscreen, zoomed in on various states to run down the electoral math.

[The final two minutes of the 2008 campaign](#)¹³ were tense, hopeful, and nervous. The big news at that moment was CNN's John King reporting that Virginia had gone Democratic. There were excited cheers from the audience — they knew that this meant big things for Obama. A win in Virginia, at that time a typically “red” state, would mean that Obama had appealed to many in the center and even on the right, thus potentially cutting into Sen. McCain's lead and would give the Democratic side a safer margin to pull ahead — and to be more competitive elsewhere.

¹² <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/2008>

¹³ This video, created by me, serves to memorialize this moment.

Everyone was ready for the big moment, just thirty seconds away, when the polls would close in the West Coast.

Over one hundred students, staff, and faculty members stood in electrified suspense. Everyone had a suspicion that this was the big moment — some had done the math and did not see a way that McCain could win at all, yet no one dared exult prematurely. But we all were ready.

We counted down, New Year's Eve style, along with the timer on CNN. At 11:01pm, Eastern Time, on Tuesday, November 4th, the polls closed in the West Coast states. The network displayed a sweeping "Breaking News" animation.

Barack Obama would be elected president of the United States.

The room erupted in wild exultation. In that moment, and in the hours to come, we celebrated, embraced, and high-fived. On the projector, we watched as thousands filled Grant Park in Chicago, some running to secure a space to be present for an upcoming address by now-President-elect Obama. Similar scenes took place around the country, with voters amassed before humongous projections of CNN. Some danced wildly, others waved flags, and even more were visibly brought to tears. Obama's victory meant something different to each person in our room, and across the country: for some, it meant a return to a more honest, more liberal government intent on patching up America's reputation. For others, it meant a perceived shattering of racial limitations. For some, it meant hope that the war in Iraq and Afghanistan would be ending soon, and that loved ones serving abroad might come safe and secure. Each person attending those

rallies and events had all voted, given money, and volunteered just as we did. Many turned out to organize for Obama in places openly hostile to a Democratic candidate, and others still suffered violence and hatred for their support of a candidate with darker skin.

In that moment, the magic was real, but not without the “man behind the curtain”. Behind the veneer of excited Millennials and exuberant throngs of voters was a place where the flesh of activism was stitched together with hard work, frustration, conflict, and intentional strategy. We worked through many long meetings, late nights, sweltering days and cool autumn mornings, juggling full course loads with the demands of a hectic campaign. Senator Obama’s charisma and charm went a great distance to inspire and motivate citizens, but this was not enough.

Developing intentional strategies to mobilize the entire campus community — administrators, students, faculty, community members, citizens, and staff — to donate their time, money, energy, labor, and other resources to our myriad efforts was crucial. We strove to navigate bureaucracy, an oft-hostile campaign arm, and the decentralized efforts of the Democratic Party.

But for all of us, it meant the ultimate success and validation of our Herculean, communal efforts. “Yes We Can” turned into “Yes We Did,” and the chant “be a part of something great” used by those early Obama supporters to interrupt the speech of John Kerry turned out to be true for us as we pushed, pulled, cajoled, labored, and organized to do our part in electing Barack Obama. I will never forget that night, standing in the campus event space watching the projector, as we felt the truest, most joyous sense of accomplishment. We knew that the future was bright.

In the end, we were a part of something great.