

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL
INDIVIDUAL STUDY TOUR TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (USA)
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DELEGATE

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Executive Summary

The USA represents a unique political culture. It has the most extensively covered political system in the world. It also has a limitless array of important elections that happen in a constant flow. The political culture, and the history of the country and its political parties have shaped the nation in ways which differ greatly from the Australian context. Many of these were examined in length during my stay.

My time in the USA coincided with a number of major political and social events. These framed the discussions I had and the trajectory of my study. The items which were most impactful were:

- the Presidential primaries
- the fight for \$15 minimum wage campaign
- the 2015 San Bernardino attack and the continued impact of gun violence
- the post-Citizens United world of 'independent expenditure only committees' (referred to as Super PACs)
- the attack on Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs.

During the tour I met with a diverse group of political organisations including unions, political campaigns, consultants, and Super PACs. These organisations brought a variety of contrasting views of the political process. These shaped my broader understanding of the American political system.

During my trip I was looking to observe:

- the operation and execution of a primary campaign
- the role of super PACs in modern political discourse
- the role of data in political campaigns
- community organising in American politics
- the operation of politics on all three levels of government.

As an avid campaigner I was interested in observing campaign techniques utilised in the primary. I was also keen to see the 'Obama style' campaigning in action. The American primary is a unique experience. So much political action is compressed into such small populations. The politically related activity taking place in a key primary state exceeds a federal or state election in Australia. Many consultants hypothesised that spending at this election will exceed four to five billion dollars. The result of which is a political system that is cumbersome. Its size is incomparable to anywhere else in the world.

In this report I will briefly discuss each of my core destinations. The report will then look at a case study of an organisation that provided key insights, Blue Labs. We will then move onto the use of data in campaigns, Super PACs and money, community organising, and the rise of local councils.

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Washington DC

Washington DC represented an opportunity to delve 'inside the beltway'. My stay here was crucial for my understanding of the wider world of political action in the USA. I was able to meet with a number of political consultancies, start-ups, unions, PACs and related political entities.

I observed the epicentre of political life and power in the USA. The historic surrounding of the city provides a perfect examination of the importance of public institutions in American life. The city also provides a microcosm for the frustration that many Americans feel with their political system. People who rely on the current system for their employment will openly speak of their contempt for the gridlock of Washington DC.

Washington DC is also the home of the professional political operator. There exists a whole social structure based around consultants, lobbyists and political operators. This is a result of the high density of consultancies and political organisations. While most are closely tied to an ideology, policy, or ideal; some act as mercenaries.

New York City

New York is a political environment unto itself. The Democrats so dominate the politics; that many representatives are elected on 90% primary votes. This manifests a strange dynamic; unions, developers, community groups, wealthy citizens, and business are in conflict, but are appealing to a single side of government.

My experiences in New York City included:

- attending rallies by unions, and local resident organisations
- attending negotiations for legal changes to New York's occupational health and safety laws between City Councillors, developers, unions, and community organisations
- attending an inquiry into worker safety with councillors at City Hall
- meeting with a number of political strategists
- participating in the organisation of at risk workers in the hospitality industry
- assisting with voter registration on college campuses
- participating in primary campaigning
- attending a vote for union strike action
- attending strategy meetings for primary campaigns
- attending the negotiation of Democratic convention delegates
- participating in the registering of a primary candidate for a presidential ballot
- touring and meeting with the campaign HQ for Hilary for America.



Meeting of SEIU 32BJ voting to take strike action.

New Hampshire

My travels through New Hampshire could not have occurred at a more ideal time. My visit coincided with the New Hampshire Democratic Primary debate. The debate was watched by 7.8 million Americans.

The fan-fare around the debate provided a collage of American political activism. My experience in New Hampshire included:

- assisting with the running of a rally
- meeting with an array of issue based campaigns
- meeting with key democratic fundraisers
- meeting with city hall officials
- meeting with political start ups
- attending the free speech zone at the debate
- meeting a number of presidential candidates and President Clinton
- attending a Democratic Primary rally
- canvassing primary voters
- attending the 'BirdDogging' of a campaign event, a process where interest groups follow a candidate to ask them specific questions at every campaign stop
- participating in 'political tracking'
- attending campaign meetings of a number of issue based campaigns.



Bill and Hilary speaking at a meet and greet after the Democratic Primary Debate

New Hampshire is a hyper-political state. It has some of the most active and persistent systems for encouraging democratic participation. It is also a state without any income or sales tax. The combination of these two facets leads to a diverse cultural experience.

During my stay in the USA I met with representatives from the following organisations:

- American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL CIO) – National Headquarters
- American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations - New York Division
- American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations - New Hampshire Division
- National Education Association – New Hampshire
- Blue Labs – Political Consultants
- America Votes – National Headquarters
- America Votes – New Hampshire Bureau
- New Partners – Political Consultancy
- Veada – Data Services
- Vic Fingerhut Campaigns – Political Pollster
- Facebook – Political Department
- Revolution Messaging – Digital Consultants
- SEIU 32BJ - Service workers' union affiliated with the Service Employees International Union
- Raise the wage
- New Hampshire Young Democrats
- Purpose – Communications Consultants
- Rémy Cointreau
- Hillary For America (HQ)
- Bernie 2016
- Team Bernie New York
- Next Generation - Climate
- Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU)
- Planned Parenthood
- The American Friend Service Committee
- The Stamped

Blue Labs as a Case Study

Blue Labs is a technology, data, and analytics start up developed by senior members of the Obama 2008 campaign team. The premise of the organisation is to use 'Big Data' to create individual level predictive models. While they are most famous for their contributions to political campaigns such as the 'Obama for America' and 'Organising for America' operations, they work on an array of different projects.

Clients include government programs, political campaigns, progressive issue based organisations, and private companies. Blue labs maintain a purely 'progressive' clientele.

An interesting quandary that Blue Labs had to combat was the laws relating to PACs, Super PACs, and official campaigns. Blue Labs performs work for 'Hillary for America' (HFA); the official Hillary campaign. Their consulting also extended to 'Ready for Hillary' and 'Priorities USA Action', Super PACs in support of Hillary Clinton. Specific legislation exists that prohibits direct collaboration between PACs and the Candidates campaign.

The American political system has effectively changed following the US Supreme Court decision in 'Citizens United Vs the Federal Election Authority' court case. This changed the way individuals and corporations interacted with electoral campaigns. The result welcomed the advent of Political Action

Committees (PACs). PACs campaigns allowed corporations, not-for-profits and Unions to be able to accept unlimited sums of money, and use this money to advertise in support of an individual candidate. They can do this so long as the spending is done independent of co-ordination or discussion with the candidate that it acts in support of.

There are many practical implications for a company like Blue Labs who work for political candidates and for PACs. Firstly, the assets of the organisation are split into two. Campaign organisations would be required to have two independent tracks for staff. To ensure staff were not communicating in contravention of the law. Campaign meetings would be held individually, one for staff working directly on campaigns and one for staff working on PAC's. Co-workers could not be told the location of staff working on the other track. Many tasks are replicated due to these laws, creating a level of inefficiency.

The implication is that staff who would otherwise be contributing their time to increasing the capabilities of one or another candidate directly, are now outsourced to PACs. This is often done at the preference of the employee, who can work reduced hours at much higher pay for a PAC.

For Blue Labs Staff discussions between employees were sometimes abstract and non-specific. This ensured that employees who were contributing to the PAC were not communicating with the employees commissioned to work on the candidate's campaign.

This is where the theme of 'crossing the wall' and the term 'the firewall' was introduced. The wall or firewall referred to the separation of PAC and Candidate. As the two cannot communicate, people involved on each side put up a hypothetical wall to stop communication.

Campaigners are not restricted to only ever working for either PACs or candidates. Campaigners would remain on one side of the wall, for long enough to gain valuable insight before swapping to the other side. Campaigns would also work out new and resourceful ways to circumvent the wall. This includes public publishing of diaries, utilisation of bridging consultants and in some circumstances more nefarious acts such as coded tweets on twitter.

Data and Professionalisation

The utilisation of data is central to American campaigns. Data analysis is widely used. Campaigns focus on a data driven interpretation of campaigning. It shapes the content of communications with voters, volunteers, and donors. It informs the mechanism they use to communicate. Data is used to account for all variables that may result in increased effectiveness. Campaigns will also use exterior data sets to inform internal data. Examples of external data may include Magazine subscription data, or pay TV data. Campaigns will construct rigorous feedback loops to ensure that data is constantly being refined.

The infrastructure of the American campaign is highly professionalised. Campaigns would often have many members of staff who were very highly qualified in data science, physics, or econometrics, performing data based optimisation. Data teams were large and very well resourced.

Data campaigners perform experiments around the effectiveness of particular methods, substance, and aesthetics of communication. These experiments could lead to greatly increased effectiveness of communication. The increased efficiency would lead to increased donations, increased volunteers, increased turn out, and increased persuasiveness.

The rate of pay for these operatives was many times higher than could be expected in their relevant field or in Australian politics. A scientist specialising in physics could expect to get double or triple the wage working for a political consultancy, when compared to working in physics. A number of data campaigners used the term 'Obama Levy'. The term describes the additional wage growth that a campaigner could expect if they had been involved in the 2008 or 2012 Obama campaign.

Super PAC's and Money

The increased concentration of money in the political system has caused an array of new political problems and opportunities. The most obvious impact of the increase in money is the prevalence and strength of Super PAC's. PAC's are able to raise unlimited amounts of money; this money can then be used to profit a particular political message. During my time in the USA I met with a number of super PACs.

One example was Worker's Voice. Worker's Voice has a clear and existing base of voters and supporters. Worker's Voice is run by the AFL CIO. They engage with union members in order to pursue pro-union agenda. Their funding is accumulated through a combination of union donations and membership donations. Most of their campaign effort is focused on getting union members to turn out to vote.

Another example is Next Generation Climate (Next Gen). Next Gen was quite dissimilar to Worker's voice. The PAC has only one major contributor, Tom Steyer. Mr Steyer is a Billionaire businessperson turned environmentalist who founded Next Gen. The PAC's sole purpose is to increase political dialogue to avoid environmental degradation. The PAC is based out of San Francisco, but has a focus on key swing states and primary states. The PAC works in conjunction with other PAC's to increase the reach and scope of their message. Next Gen is well staffed with political campaigners who work like a conventional campaign to influence voter behaviour.

Super PAC's have caused an increased debate on the role of money in politics. This has led to a number of 'Counter-PACs'. In my time in the USA I met with a number of these PACs such as The Stampede. The purpose of Counter-PACs is to try and remove and reduce the amount of money in American Politics.

The increase in money has resulted in a saturation of political messaging. Many consultants and employees of PACs freely stated that their messaging was likely to have little or no impact. The degree to which spending has permeated politics, particularly in key primary states, means that most communication is simply getting lost in the noise.

Community groups and Community Organising

The USA political parties have an acute emphasis on process driven Politics. I observed campaigning by the Hilary Clinton campaign, Bernie Sanders Campaign, as well as numerous unions, community activist organisations, and Super PACs. The techniques I observed in the USA were not dissimilar to those used domestically. What was different was the scope and scale of the efforts.

The US context places a high level of emphasis on community organising. Churches, community activists, and interest groups would integrate into community-focused teams. Where candidates and organisers are unavailable, autonomous volunteers will begin to organise stand-alone phone banks, doorknocking, petitioning, and recruiting. These structures exist with very little oversight from the campaign. They become self-sufficient and do not rely on paid staff. These campaign structures may exist only through internet chat groups, and borrowed office space but they are effective campaigning machinery.

Community organisations were critically important to campaigns. Many of these were focused around church groups or local resident organisations. In New York, a local resident organisation was assisting in turning out activists to help ensure safer standards for construction workers. This was done beside an active union campaign.

In New Hampshire, the Quakers were running a campaign to insure a living wage and fair and free access to social security. The Quakers had access to a large and motivated community which many envied. They also have a pure moral direction behind their campaigns. They were able to rally a large amount of support. They garnered this support with ease when compared to secular organisations.

Local Council

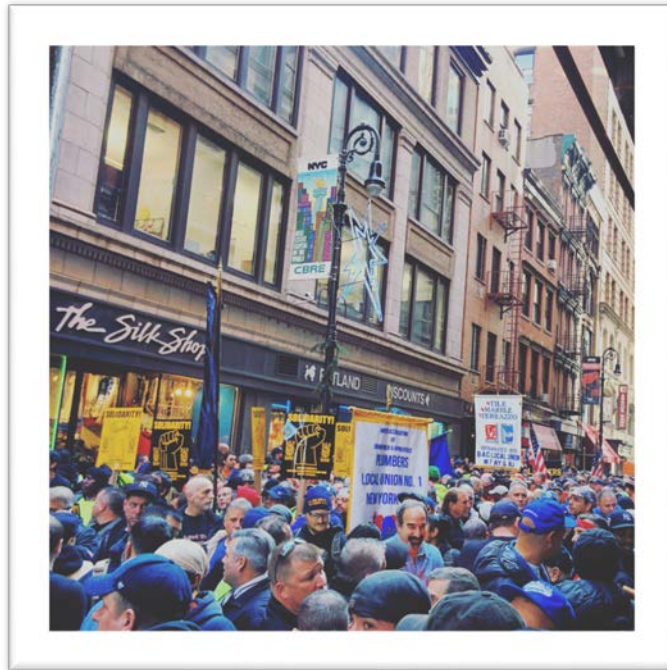
The gridlock of the US Federal Government is well documented. The power and functionality of state houses varies from state to state. This has led to a large degree of political action taking place at the local government level.

In contrast to Australia, an inordinate amount of power exists in local government. Issues such as safety, pay, and conditions of workers are often pursued through local government. Organisations will lobby the local government rather than state or federal governments to address these issues.

The RWDSU is currently conducting a campaign titled 'Fight for \$15'. The objective is to raise the wages of millions of Americans to fifteen dollars an hour. This campaign is being fought on a local government level.

I participated in rally's, government hearings, and negotiations organised by unionised construction workers in New York. The objective was to insure minimum safety standards for workers. This campaign was waged at the Local Government level.

Local Government is often more flexible and adaptive than other levels of government. In the American context it is more effective at delivering services and more reflective of the constituency.



Construction workers in New York marching to City Hall to demand better safety and conditions

Conclusion

The insights I gained during my trip to the USA were invaluable. The connections with peak campaigners and political activists across the USA will be of endless assistance in the future. Political exchanges between Australia and the United States of America are crucially important. They accelerate relationships between Australian and the Americans, and are also important for gaining a fuller understanding of the cultural nuances of the two nations.

I would like to thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for the honour of participating in the 2015 Individual Study Tour program. It was truly a once in a lifetime experience. The educational value of the trip is without comparison. The privilege of such a trip will never be undersold.

I would also like to thank the Secretariat in the Department of Finance for their assistance and support. I would also particularly like to thank NSW Labor Acting General Secretary, Kaila Murnain, Australian Labor National Secretary, George Wright and Assistant National Secretaries, Sebastian Zwalf and Paul Erickson for their support in making this trip possible.

The trip has demonstrated to me the contrasts and similarities of the Australian and American system. It has established strong ties with people inside the American political system and has caused a growth in my understanding of American Politics. I have gained a great deal from the experience. The trip will be advantageous throughout my career in politics.