

APEC Individual Study Tour - Jamie Clements

United States of America - October 1 - 18 2012

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Executive Summary

My individual study tour undertaken in October 2012 gave me a fantastic insight into the 2012 Presidential election campaign and American politics generally.

I visited Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington, met with elected officials, candidates, diplomats, campaign consultants, political operatives, union leaders and opinion pollsters and spent time working on the Obama for America campaign.

I witnessed the all important role played by money and fundraising in a nation where politics, like everything else, is big. American campaigns continue to lead the world in terms of organisation, technique and technology but most of all expense. For that reason I devoted a significant share of my time talking to the professionals, officials, candidates and volunteers I met to discussing fundraising.

With regards to the 2012 Election campaign, the most important lesson I learnt from my tour was the key role that big data played in Obama's victory. It was the key to the 'ground game' which, in my view, won the election for an incumbent facing the longest period of above 8% unemployment since the Great Depression. The ability of the Obama campaign to identify potential voters, target them on the issues they cared about, turn them into volunteers ready to work on their friends and neighbours and to monitor key benchmarks to map progress all through technology, won the 2012 election.

In city and state wide races, the politics of Democrat strongholds of Philadelphia and Chicago, while still dominated to an extent by old style machines, the changing nature of politics in America is such that anyone who is willing to get in and do the work to recruit friends and supporters to their cause can be elected to office. Money remains the key however, and if you are not a wealthy individual, you need supportive unions or a lot of friends and supporters in order to raise the cash you need to get elected in these cities.

As the American media and the political debate it 'covers' become increasingly partisan, the percentage of potential voters who are truly independent and therefore persuadable by campaigns continues to decline. As a result, US elections are increasingly about registering and turning out committed partisans. Australian elections continue to be dominated by attempts to persuade uncommitted or soft voters to support each party's candidate, making comparisons with US election techniques decreasingly relevant. The use of cutting edge technology and the pioneering of online (especially social media) advertising offers many new opportunities for Australian campaign professionals.

October 3 - 5 Philadelphia

Pennsylvania is a turn out state: the Democrats win in Presidential years thanks to strong votes in Pittsburgh, Allentown and Philadelphia. Amongst these three cities, Philadelphia is the most important.

During my visit to Philadelphia I met with Patrick Millham, the State Political Director for Pennsylvania and worked with his team at the Obama for America Field Office over the course of my three days in that city.

I also visited a number of small precinct offices around Philadelphia. The job of the Political team in a state, whose election task is to turn out the votes in the heavily democratic major cities, is directed toward generating activities to turn locals supportive of the Democrats and Obama into committed voters and volunteers.

My time in Philadelphia coincided with the first of the three Presidential debates: Wednesday October 3 2012 was the night of the first Presidential debate, and most of the activity in and around the Obama campaign was centred on encouraging locals to attend neighbourhood 'debate parties'. The debate party was one in a long list of events which were constantly being organised by the Obama campaign in order to build volunteer and voter numbers.

Once a supporter attended the particular event, they were asked to sign a pledge to commit to support Barack Obama. The pledge card recorded the person's details and also encouraged them to volunteer to assist the campaign in other ways. The collected pledges were then entered into the campaigns database, and the pledge was followed up by campaign volunteers. If the pledge signer had committed to vote, a conversation was commenced with them by local 'volunteer leaders' (many of whom had been recruited at similar events via the same process) about how and when they would vote. The volunteer would discuss with the pledged voter where they would vote and how they planned to get to the voting place.

The entire process was built on a model which resembled a pyramid scheme and was based around benchmarks and targets. In order to reach their turn out target, the field office was required to hit weekly commit to vote pledges and volunteer and volunteer leader recruitment targets.

Philadelphia remains a 'Union City': Labour Unions continue to play a pivotal role in ensuring voter registration and turnout. During my time in Philadelphia I visited an AFL-CIO campaign committee meeting, and spent time with Local 234 of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) of America, observing its political activities. These activities remain at the grassroots level: registering voters and recruiting its members to volunteer to drive turnout for the Democrats. While unions such as the TWU of America play a small role in Presidential election campaigns, their real importance stems from their ability to bring voters to the polls for down ballot races such as local judges and alderman during non-presidential election years and primaries.

Building Trades Unions dominate the Philadelphia Democrat political scene. I was a guest at the 1st Ward Democrat Executive Committee Presidential Debate Viewing Party hosted by Ward Leader and President of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 98, John Dougherty. The IBEW has political contributions written into its city contracts in Philadelphia, which provides the union with real political leverage through its ability to fund favourable candidates' campaigns.

I also met with the Chair of the Philadelphia Democratic Committee, Congressman Bob Brady, a former President of the Carpenters' Union Local 8. I discussed a range of issues with Congressman Brady, including fundraising, problems with Philadelphia voter turnout in non-presidential election years and underlying issues of race in the city and the challenges this presents for the Democrats for the future.

Chicago - October 8 -12

I commenced my time in Chicago with lunch with Australia's Consul-General to that city, the Hon Roger Price. Roger provided some valuable insights into the city and also agreed to arrange a number of meetings during my time there.

Roger then accompanied me to the Headquarters of Obama for America, at One Prudential Plaza. We were given a tour of the campaign HQ by North East Political Director Micah Ragland. Obama HQ houses the campaign management team, the rapid response unit as well as over 425 election workers, predominantly working on processing voter data. The campaign was built on strict reporting lines and was very much data driven.

Essentially teams were split into Political, GOTV (get out the vote) and Voter Protection. A good deal of resources were concentrated on targeting voters. Track polls were monitored to identify problems with specific demographic groups, such as white working class males, or single females without children. If the tracking polls identified a drop in support from a group, qualitative polls were conducted to identify the cause of the problem and resources were despatched to persuade these voters back towards Obama. Another source of data used by the campaign was volunteer numbers in turn out states like Pennsylvania. If volunteer targets were not being reached, then it became the job of the political team to organise more events targeted at key demographics in order to ensure volunteer targets were met. If these efforts still failed to deal with the problems identified by the data, then resources (mainly personnel) would be poured into the state to turn the problems around.

I also took the opportunity to meet with Steve Berlin, the Executive Director of the City of Chicago Board of Ethics to discuss the efforts that the newly elected Mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emmanuel was taking to try and improve transparency within the city government. Following his election the Mayor replaced the entire board with new members and is now developing an ethics regime based around encouraging city employees to seek guidance from the board of ethics where they feel they are unsure about the ethics of a particular situation in which they are placed.

I also met with the newly elected City Clerk, Susana Mendoza to discuss the increasingly active and important role that Hispanics are playing in Chicago politics as well as her views on where the city Government was headed.

During my time in Chicago I also met with Scott Cisek, the Executive Director of the Cook County Democrats to discuss the changing nature of politics in that city and emergence of 'reform' candidates replacing the old school machine politics which has dominated the city for many years. Scott and I met with Mia Phifer, a local Political Fundraising and Events Consultant who was working for a number of candidates in congressional and state house races throughout Illinois and the Mid West. Mia explained the importance of fundraising in these races, with a congressional race costing at a minimum \$4000,000 which must be raised from supportive individuals. As a result, around 60 per cent of new candidates' time is spent identifying prospective donors and working on raising the funds needed to run campaigns. Mia's role is to help these candidates raise the money they require to run their campaigns.

I also met with Robert Martwick, a Democrat candidate for the 19th District of Illinois to discuss the challenges involved in winning a Primary campaign in an overwhelmingly Democratic area like Cook

County. Robert described the challenges he had faced over the past 20 years attempting to win the endorsement of the Democrats.

I attended the Democrat campaign offices for the Illinois State Senate and discussed the campaign challenges they face both in fundraising and campaigning during a Presidential election year. I also attended a fundraiser which that office had helped to organise for Daniel Biss, a Democrat State Senate candidate in the Illinois 9th District.

I spent a day working with Teamsters Local 477, as they organised local school bus and factory workers and encouraged them to get out the vote for the Democrats in Chicago. I visited a number of their sites and witnessed the very difference this union was making in the lives of its members.

Finally in Chicago I met with Eric Adelstein, a local political consultant, to discuss the emerging role of social media and online campaigns and the interplay with data and targeting being pioneered by the Obama campaign. The real breakthrough being pioneered in this campaign is the ability to track a person's political interest and voting habits via their ISP address and to then target them with advertisements based on that information. For instance, if a person signs an online petition on an issue, donates to a cause or reads articles about an issue, software is being developed to target that person on that issue with the campaign's message via an online advertisement.

October 15 - 17 Washington DC

On arrival in Washington DC I met with Australia's Ambassador to America, the Hon Kim Beazley AC. Over lunch we discussed the Australia's relationship with America, the upcoming election and Kim's day-to-day activity as Ambassador.

During my time in Washington, I also visited the International headquarters of both the Transport Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. During these visits I discussed both unions' ongoing political activities across America as well as their organising efforts in difficult times. The leadership of both unions were concerned about the prospect of a Republican President limiting their ability to represent workers. At the same time, both unions expressed disappointment about Obama failing to implement the Employee Free Choice Act.

I also met with Jeremy Rosner from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Alexander Braun from Penn Schoen Berland to discuss the latest developments in opinion polling around the world.