

Recognizing the Role of Volunteers in Building Democracy

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Abstract

It is easy to take for granted the fundamentals of our invaluable democratic process, and in particular, the volunteers who ensure its health and vibrancy. During election campaigns in many countries like Canada, we see levels of voter participation that are reflective of an apathetic citizenry. This commentary suggests that in order to respond to cynicism and indifference towards the democratic process, one should look at the volunteers who participate behind the scenes, both during and in-between elections. A federal election in Canada, for example, brings together more volunteers than any other event, making it the largest episodic volunteering effort in the country. From the various tasks related to campaigning to the organization of advocacy and awareness activities related to specific policies, these volunteers protect and build upon the democratic principles that many other countries have yet to grasp.

Key Words:

volunteers, democracy, civic, participation, elections

Throughout the world, volunteers play an invaluable role in building, uniting, and defending their respective nations. In Canada, with the help of 12 million citizens who contribute almost 2 billion hours of their time over the course of a year (Statistics Canada, 2006), this collective movement of volunteerism spans across many boundaries. It contributes to our nation's economy, it benefits our environment, it creates safer communities, it is linked to better physical and mental health, it uses the skills and talents of new Canadians, and it makes people feel proud to be Canadian. This is indeed the power of volunteerism. It is also a cornerstone of democracy.

During elections, while citizens and political parties contemplate the issues as they relate to the future of the country, it is often easy to take for granted the fundamentals of our invaluable democratic

process, and in particular, the volunteers who ensure its health and vibrancy. Today, it seems as though election campaigns are focused more on who wins and who loses. With the help of the mainstream media, average citizens are taken on a wild ride of volatile polling numbers, often ridiculous political punditry, and the odd scandals that only seem to build up a sense of cynicism towards our democratic process. After all of this is done, citizens breathe a sigh of relief as the long days of campaigning come to an end.

What's particularly concerning is that the whole notion of politics is putting democracy at risk as has been demonstrated in Canada, which has experienced some of the lowest voter turnout rates in history. Recognizing and highlighting the role of volunteers in safeguarding democracy has a vital role to play in perhaps turning civic disengagement around. The story behind

democracy - more than just voting, but the process of campaigning, political work, activism, protesting – is one that shows the critical components of democratic involvement: volunteering, participating, and/or being engaged.

When we look closely behind all of the bravado and posturing of political campaigning, we see an active citizenry that holds our democratic system together. Behind every local and national campaign, countless volunteers are assigned tasks which vary from making phone calls, knocking on doors, or delivering pamphlets to informing local media, organizing rallies, and researching policies. The list of tasks, which is endless, indicates the cross-cutting roles that these individual volunteers play in driving the democratic process. In Canada, a federal political campaign brings together more volunteers than any other event, making it the largest episodic volunteering effort in the country.

The role of volunteers in supporting democracy is not, however, solely relegated to involvement in political campaigning. Volunteers play an important role in building civic participation and encouraging such participation in the holistic democratic process. In Canada, organizations such as Equal Voice and Apathy is Boring rely heavily on volunteers to deliver their message during election campaigns. The first focuses on increasing the participation of women in the political process; the second encourages young Canadians to vote and exercise their rights as citizens. These organizations demonstrate that the role of volunteers is not solely focused on partisan politics or support for a specific candidate, but rather makes a tremendous impact in moving our democratic process forward.

While they are completely different in their goals, social awareness organizations and political campaigns share the same need for volunteers who will go

beyond the basic duty of a citizen, thus shaping the country's future. While the range of activities can vary from delivering one pamphlet to a neighbour to putting a name on the ballot and running as a candidate, they are all examples that make one of our organization's main mantras come alive – the value of one, the power of many.

Further, it is important to recognize that democracy, voting, and civic participation are constructs that millions of us in the global village have the privilege of enjoying and benefitting from while at the same time, millions of others do not. While not necessarily an advocate of the “use the right to vote, or lose the right to complain” viewpoint, not voting and not participating in the political process is rather impertinent when the right to do so is denied to so many around the world.

During Canada's federal election last fall, Canadians witnessed this power as millions of volunteers rallied behind a message for hope and change in the United States. After the election of Barack Obama as the American president, Canadians were still in awe of the way Obama's campaign united and mobilized an entire country towards a focused cause. Members of the media and political commentators credited his marketing strategy; others, his charisma. But ultimately, without his volunteers, Obama's vision for a better America would have been nothing more than an empty dream.

All of this being said, we need to realize that volunteerism doesn't just happen. During our country's election, Volunteer Canada, as the national voice for volunteerism, led a national awareness campaign to highlight the role of volunteers not only during elections but in all aspects of our communities. We also contacted each candidate of every major political party and asked them to think of the unthinkable:

imagining their campaign with no volunteers. As a way of recognizing their volunteers, we asked them to sign a pledge to support volunteerism and acknowledge the need for government to support a national infrastructure to engage and mobilize volunteers.

Wherever we are, and whoever we are – Democrat, Republican, Liberal, Conservative, right, left, red, blue, green – let us all look beyond our political beliefs and thank our volunteers. While working in different capacities during and in between

elections, these volunteers continue to build upon the democratic foundations that are the envy of the world.

Reference

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About the Author

Ruth MacKenzie is president of Volunteer Canada, a national non-profit organization leading the advancement of volunteerism across the country. With 20 years experience working in the voluntary sector and a life-long commitment to voluntary action, Ruth first joined Volunteer Canada in 2001 and was named president in 2007. Prior to joining Volunteer Canada, Ruth worked at the Canadian Cancer Society, Ontario Division, and later the Nova Scotia Division, in the area of volunteer development. Between those two positions, she established and ran her own company, receiving recognition for her business acumen by being selected as an Entrepreneur of the Year.