

Canvassers in Queens Work to Put New York Democrats Over the Edge

ACORN-connected Working Families Party brings out Democratic voters



Canvasser Ty Leveridge, 19, gets instructions from Working Parties field organizer Amanda Brown, 23.

By *Elaine Meyer*
November 04, 2008

QUEENS — Canvassers came to Richmond Hill from all over New York — Brownsville, Harlem, Jamaica — to help elect a Democrat who could deliver the party a majority in the New York State Senate for the first time since 1965. But they did not work for the Democratic Party.

They represented the Working Families Party, a group connected with urban activist group ACORN and that the New York Democrats heavily enlisted to canvass for close State Senate races this year. The effort paid off. Democrat Joe Addabbo, a city councilman who was in a tight race for State Senate, won, allowing the Democrats to pull off a two-seat majority on Election night.

Working Families is an official political party that appears on the New York state ballot, though it largely functions as a voter outreach and issue-activism group. The party has tripled its election year votes, from 50,000 in 1998, the first year that the party appeared on the ballot, to 156,000 in 2006.

It expected at least 160,000 votes for Barack Obama on Row E, which is one of the columns for which New York voters can pull a lever, according to Working Families spokesman Dan Levitan. The party endorsed Obama for president and benefits from New York's "fusion" voting, which allows a candidate to get endorsements from more than one party.

Its key issues are making health care more affordable, increasing the minimum wage, reforming criminal drug sentencing, and, most recently, fighting the City Council's and Mayor Michael Bloomberg's extension of term limits.

Working Families already helped to get a new minimum wage of \$6 per hour passed into law in January 2005, which has since raised two additional steps to \$7.15.

Earlier that day, Working Families canvassers, who are all paid, and many of whom are students, crowded into an office in Richmond Hill to get their canvassing assignments for Addabbo.

Because Working Families pays for canvassing, the job attracts people who ostensibly support the party — those who could use an extra \$100 for eight hours of work but are not necessarily party stalwarts.

One worker, Terrence Sailor, who is pursuing an acting career, said he had a number of side jobs over the years, such as selling vacuum cleaners.

Like many of the canvassers, he applied to a Craigslist ad to make some extra money, but said he felt a connection to the party as well.

Canvassers get paid \$70 per 8-hour day leading up to the election – which is more than minimum wage – and \$100 for working on Election Day from 11 a.m. until the polls close at 9 p.m., according to Mandy Bidwell, 23, the canvassing director.

When Sailor first got to New York, he worked at a movie theater that paid him \$5.15, then the minimum wage.

“Two years later, I found out [Working Families] were responsible for raising the minimum wage to \$7.15.”

Working Families shipped out an estimated 100 workers in 14 vans from Richmond Hill on Tuesday to remind people to vote for Addabbo.

The party was founded in New York in 1998 by ACORN, a community organizing group that advocates for higher wages and educates low- and moderate-income families about homeownership, and a coalition of labor unions.

ACORN and Working Families are still closely linked: one of Working Families’ party co-chairs is Bertha Lewis, who is also ACORN’s executive director, and the organizations both have offices in the same Building, 2 Nevin Place, in Brooklyn.

Sen. John McCain made ACORN a target in the last weeks of the 2008 presidential election, alleging it had committed voter registration fraud. McCain based his claim on the fact that some of the registration cards ACORN collected were not for real people.

ACORN responded that it could not be held responsible for what its canvassers did in the field but that it reviewed voter registration cards and turned in cards with fake names immediately after they were identified.

The lack of control over its paid workers, who do not always have an immediate tie to the Working Families Party, is an issue for which the party tries to screen. All people who apply get interviewed by party representatives before they are allowed to canvass.

“It’s about how they respond more than what they respond with,” said canvassing director Bidwell.

“We do make sure we don’t hire anyone who is going to just grab a packet and putz around,” said Kate Scholsi, 21, who works as a fundraiser and as a field manager for the party.

Tuesday afternoon, a group of young canvassers crowded around field managers Scholsi and Amanda Brown, 23, as the two women told everyone to knock on doors of known Democrats and remind them to vote. If no one was home, they said, the canvassers should return later.

The group then broke up, planning to meet an hour later for lunch and then more canvassing.

Moving down the block, Scholsi, who has worked for the party since she graduated from college in August, received no answer at the first few doorbells she rang.

Finally, at the fifth house, she encountered someone.

“Who is it?” a woman yelled from behind her door. Scholsi yelled back, asking the woman whether she had voted. The woman responded yes. Scholsi asked for whom.

“That’s my business,” the woman yelled back.

“That happens,” Scholsi said, turning and walking down the stairs.

At the next stop – a small apartment building – a young woman on the first floor answered with barking dogs in tow. When Scholsi asked if she had voted, the woman seemed to have just remembered that it was Election Day.

Another woman who looked like the first woman’s older sister came to the door, and Scholsi decided to bring up Addabbo’s affiliation:

“He’s running on the Working Families ticket.”

“Row E?” asked the second woman.

Scholsi was happy. She said she was always relieved when people had heard of Row E.

When the group met again at 3:30 p.m. to return to headquarters for lunch, there were mixed reports.

"I ran into no nasty people today," exclaimed one of the canvassers, Ty Leveridge, 19, who lives in Brooklyn.

The group still had five and a half hours to go.

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