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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY POLL WORKER PROGRAM: REFLECTION ESSAY

By Kiran Gandhi

I woke up on November 4th, 2008, excited and alert. It was 5:08am on my alarm clock and it was still dark outside. The night before, I had packed a backpack for myself and so all I had to do was roll out of bed, put my red "This is the face of democracy" shirt and jeans on and head out to catch the bus. As I approached the bus stop, I tried to formulate my expectations of the day, but I had none. Would I make mistakes? Would I do well? Would there be hundreds of fed-up constituents? Would it be a positive experience? How would I be impacting history? I put my headphones in my ears and boarded the bus.

I arrived at Precinct 7 after walking a block from Foxhall Road by following cardboard signs that read "VOTING." This would certainly be helpful for voters. As I approached the Recreation Center, there was already a line of about 50 people around the block and it was only 6am! This election was certainly going to be unlike anything the U.S. had experienced, and I could not believe that I was a college student in the midst of it all! If I had not seen American University's poll worker program for students, I would not have been able to be right in the heat of it all. And there I was!

My Precinct Captain, Kevin, introduced me to the other members of the team, and started me off as the electronic touch-screen voting machine assistant. The doors opened and we would be cooking for 13 hours straight. It was phenomenal! I had such a positive experience throughout the day, and ended up learning about the voting mindset, what the right to vote means to people, and how it is a value so intrinsically American.

I loved meeting voters. Hundreds of people poured through that front door, and each voter I met wanted to learn more and more about the system. Some were excited to use the electronic touch-screen machine, others were wary of it, and others had to be convinced to eliminate their skepticism and consider converting from the paper ballot simply because I could tell they needed and wanted that extra encouragement. Many came in families and brought their new-borns, 5-yr-olds or teenagers to see what it was like to cast their vote and impact change in this great nation. I felt privileged to work in a room with such positive energy emanating from the mere fact that it is through voting that our democracy has been preserved for over two centuries.

Our captain did a great job of stationing us in different parts of the room, so that we learned how to handle and deal with different parts of the process. My favorite of the three jobs I got to work was definitely handing out the "I voted" sticker. The fact that young children and old war veterans alike were so excited about the sticker represented the pride we take in the fact that we have the power to impact how the government of the most powerful nation in the country can preside over its people. It gives us hope. It humbles us with a sense of value that today we are all reduced to an equality that is defined by the equal ability to vote. This in

itself is incredibly powerful and has contributed to the agency that categorizes the American people.

As the many D.C. residents would feed their ballots through the scantron, I would smile and congratulate them for voting, asking what their plans for the rest of the day were and how they felt about being part of such a monumental day in our history's timeline. Some said they were just going to continue their day normally, others would tell me about the rallies or watch-parties they were attending. School children would often tell me about how they voted in their Middle School mock elections while adults would tell me that they were voting so that they could go back to the workplace and serve as an example to encourage others to do the same.

I had never witnessed such a political mobilization of Americans before this election. Our poll site had nearly 90% voting attendance, breaking numerous records and representing the fervor and excitement of the American people finally being granted a chance to respond to the government's behavior over the past eight years. As a poll worker, I felt that I played a far more crucial role than I had imagined: I made the election process enjoyable for D.C.'s voters! Although that sounds arrogant, that is not my intention in the least. Rather, a young college student who is fascinated by the political atmosphere of our country can provide the enthusiasm needed to allow for a positive voting experience in a place that is known to be stressful and overwhelming. Being young and energetic, I believe that the team of American University's college workers engaged in intellectual conversations with D.C.'s voters, learning from them and also teaching them about D.C.'s voting process. I loved serving that role, and I look forward to the possibility of doing it again.

There is only one critique that I would offer, which is to conduct the poll sites in shifts. I do recognize the possibility that creating shifts might result in the disruption of the flow of the poll site, but at the same time, it might allow for maintenance of energy that certainly decreases as the day progresses. I remember it being 6pm, and the group was close to delirious! On the outside, we served our roles with dedication and consistency from the morning, but on the inside, I knew that many were feeling the same way I was: tired, in pain, and restless. Fortunately when the center was busy, we would be distracted from our own minor discomforts, but during the last three hours when our poll site was almost completely inactive, it was very difficult to stay engaged and it was at that point that I thought that it would have been great to have someone to trade shifts with all of us.

Looking back, I cannot be more grateful for my poll worker experience. I gained so much insight during those thirteen hours than I had even when learning about voters in the context of my U.S. Political Systems class, and it was the personal nature of the job that made it that way. We interacted with the most fundamental units of what constitutes American society and

civilization: its people. I look forward to continuing to share my stories from that day until it is my last election in this beautiful country, and I will always remember the people and university that made it possible for me to do so.

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