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The Other End of the Phone Line

BY NICK EASTWOOD ON JANUARY 30, 2019 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)

The end of the election cycle also brings an end to the swarm of text messages and phone calls daily. We may all rejoice, blessed by the absence of messages from ‘Jenny’ asking us if we’d heard of x, y, or z. I, like many others, rejoice at the thought of my phone not going off every twenty minutes with new campaign ads or political messages. Yet, over the past couple of months, I have experienced being on the other end of the phone line, sending out text messages and making phone calls all for the sake of increasing voter turnout. Now, while I too feel the same annoyance about receiving dozens of phone calls and text messages a week as any other person rightfully would, the fact is that this work really does matter and the impact from it can be life changing in some instances.

A single conversation I had while phone banking convinced me of its value. I had been phone banking for three days and had already called hundreds of people. A majority of the calls went as one would expect. A dial tone plays for several seconds, followed by a generic voicemail telling you to leave a message. Every so often there would be a sprinkle of variety. Someone may answer and actually respond to some of the survey questions or, in one instance, after listening to my entire script on the importance of voting shouted “death to America.” That was one of the most interesting interactions. Yet, out of these sprinkles of difference, the conversation I had with a man I will call ‘John’ showed me the inherent value in reaching out to people.

‘John’ was one of the most polite and respectful people I had talked to. He was an older man in his later sixties; I can only imagine how many of these sorts of calls he had gotten throughout his life. He remained silent as I spoke, quietly letting me carry on with my message promoting voter turnout, with one

caveat. At the end of the script, John had informed me that he had never voted. I was baffled: how could a man of his age never vote? The answer was more simple than I would have imagined. When John was in his late teens he was convicted of robbery, having held up a local convenience store. He went to jail and served his time. He told me he had felt reformed. But his family was still struggling, and John turned to petty crime to pay the bills. After spending the next few years in and out of jail, John decided he wanted to truly reform his life. He started his new job at 7/11 and attempted to “be a contributing member of society” in his own words. However, he still felt like an outcast, because of his previous mistakes early in life. John, now in his golden years, was left alone. Rejected by society, John felt like his voice didn’t matter. He told me he rarely “had an opinion about anything anymore” and even if he did, he felt no one would listen.

John went on for some time explaining how isolating this feeling of silence was. He described his thought process: he was a felon — granted, for a mistake in his adolescence — but still a felon, and thus believed he couldn’t vote. He described how through all of the calls he had been receiving, like you or me, he would have to consistently bring up the fact that he couldn’t vote. He described it as humiliating — a constant reminder of his past mistakes. The thing is: John *could* vote.

John was off-paper, a phrase indicating that he had passed all of his probations and parole. When I told him this, he began to cry. He said this was life-changing. He had gone 49 years thinking he was ineligible to vote, thinking he wasn’t a “real American” as he put it. He told me this was the next turning point in his life. He finally felt like he could be a complete member of society again.

So, in two years, when the campaigning and phone calls start again, remember John. It is because of people like him that people like ‘Jenny’ need to call you and me. Because everyone deserves to feel like they have a voice in our democracy. Because every voice matters.



Published by Nick Eastwood

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