

Fired Up, Burnt Out

How Progressive Campaign Workers Navigate Value Conflict

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Sociology

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Tufts University, 2022

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Abstract

If you ever had your door knocked on by a 20-something-year-old reminding you to vote, scrolled by a political candidate's sharply worded tweets, or phonebanked for your favorite party's nominee, chances are you have interacted with the labor of a political campaign worker. Each election cycle, thousands of campaign workers in the U.S. contact voters, create campaign media, and mobilize volunteers. Campaign work is intense—both in terms of the passion of its practitioners and in its demanding lifestyle. While scholars have studied the electoral consequences of political campaigns, minimal sociological research has been conducted on the workers that shape them. This study utilizes qualitative methods and a participatory approach to understand the world of campaign work. Specifically, it looks at how progressive campaign workers experience and navigate the gap between the stated values of progressive campaigns and said campaigns' treatment of workers. In this thesis, I argue that progressive campaign workers are drawn to campaigns out of a desire to have an impact and advance progressive values. While working on campaigns, they benefit from the excitement, sense of fulfillment, community, and skills they access. Simultaneously, they face all-consuming, exploitative, and unstable working conditions. These conditions lead progressive campaign workers to experience alienation and burnout. In response, progressive campaign workers either leave campaign work, advocate for better conditions through unionization, or engage in quiet resistance. This thesis contributes to the fields of labor and political sociology by exploring the experiences and challenges faced by an understudied, unique group of workers whose labor helps shape our political world.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Tisch Community Research Center and the Undergraduate Research Fund for providing grants to support this study.

Thank you to my thesis committee, Dr. Anjuli Fahlberg and Dr. Peter Levine, for their guidance and thoughtful feedback throughout this project.

Thank you to my family and friends for their ongoing support and for teaching me how to value others (and myself) beyond our capacity to work.

Lastly, I would like to thank the many campaign workers who contributed to this study, particularly the participants and advisory group members. Thank you for sharing your stories with me, and for trusting me to share them with others. Most importantly, thank you for your tireless (and tiring) work to build a better world. Your vulnerability, passion, and love for your community make me hopeful that this world is possible. I hope to continue to be a partner for change with you, and that this thesis can serve as one small piece in solving a larger puzzle.

INTRODUCTION

The summer I spent working on a progressive Congressional campaign was one of exhausting days and turbulent nights. I often found myself dreaming that I had forgotten to recruit volunteers for an upcoming phonebank or finish writing campaign talking points and would invariably wake up in the middle of the night in a state of panic. As I tossed and turned throughout the nights leading up to Get out the Vote (GOTV), questions ruminated in my head: Did I close out those volunteer shifts? Would the texting software crash on me in the middle of a textbank? How many times had I confirmed volunteers for the next day's phonebank? Twice? Thrice?

In the span of a few hectic months, I had become enmeshed in the world of campaign work, complete with its own vocabulary, norms, and politics. As I grew more familiar with this world, I became increasingly interested in the apparent contradictions that it encompassed. I observed progressive campaign workers advocating for workers' rights policies to voters, while working eighty-hour weeks themselves without benefits and for low pay. I read about "progressive" candidates who were accused of sexual assault and harassment and about those who claimed to support labor rights while actively engaging in union-busting on their own campaigns. Observing these contradictions was frustrating, and quickly shattered any idyllic view of campaigns I might have previously held. In hindsight, however, it should not have been inherently surprising.

The gap between an organization's stated values and its practices is not unique to electoral campaigns. It is a phenomenon present across many fields such as education, medical care, and non-profit work. In environmental studies and climate change research, this phenomenon is often referred to as the "value-action gap," which explains how people fail to act

in accordance with their stated values of sustainability (Chaplin and Wyton 2014, Chai et al. 2015). In this thesis, I will describe this gap as “value-conflict” in order to encompass both the value-action gap and competing values which do not necessarily manifest in actions.

From my own campaign experience and my initial conversations with campaign workers, it was evident that progressive campaign workers encounter value conflict. The question that then arose for me was not whether value conflict is present on progressive campaigns, but rather, how do progressive campaign *workers* experience and navigate these conflicts? From the outset of my conversations with campaign workers, I was most struck by how campaign workers experience the contradictions of campaigns, but also a parallel internal conflict in how they viewed their work. This phenomenon emerged as worthy of serious exploration and study: most campaign staff describe their work as exhausting and exploitative; at the same time, however, they struggle to understand the elusive draw of campaigns that has them returning to the field cycle after cycle. Some progressive campaign workers even go as far as to describe this chase as an “addiction.”

Purpose of This Research

This study will explore the motivations and experiences of progressive campaign workers as they navigate value conflict on campaigns. Using interview data, I analyze a phenomenon of “push and pull” described by these campaign workers in which they battle disenchantment and burnout fueled by challenging working conditions, while simultaneously being pulled in by the excitement, emotional fulfillment, and the community they find on campaigns. I examine these “push and pull factors” and ask: who and what drives progressive campaign workers to return to this field of work despite the intense labor and challenging lifestyle it demands? What leads campaign workers to ultimately leave the field? In answering these questions, I explore the

relationship between progressive campaign workers' political orientation and the methods they use to navigate exploitative working conditions and a variety of complex labor issues.

In Chapter 1, I review the relevant literature, drawing primarily from the fields of political sociology and labor studies. In Chapter 2, I describe the methodologies employed in this study for participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. In Chapter 3, I examine the identity of the modern progressive campaign worker within the historical context of U.S. politics and the evolving Democratic Party, focusing on the factors that draw individuals to participate in campaign work. I assert that the modern progressive campaign worker is called to the work out of an idealistic desire to have an impact and that while working on campaigns they derive a sense of fulfillment and meaning. In Chapter 4, I delve into the details of the day-to-day life of progressive campaign workers. I argue that the gap between the stated values espoused by progressive campaigns and their actual treatment of workers causes campaign workers to face disillusionment and alienation as they engage in this demanding, unstable work. In Chapter 5, I explore progressive campaign workers' responses to exploitative working conditions and their multifaceted attempt to assert agency over their work. I assert that they respond by searching for other work, resisting management and instead prioritizing their relationships on the campaign, and by attempting to unionize in order to improve working conditions. Ultimately, I argue that the professionalization of politics has made campaign work into a vocation; however, progressive politics and the labor movement have yet to recognize the structural needs of this profession, thus enabling the exploitation of workers on campaigns which otherwise proposit progressive values.

CHAPTER I

Background and Literature Review

Why Study Progressive Campaign Workers?

For people who spend time in progressive spaces and follow progressive politics, the topic of campaigns workers' exploitation and efforts at resistance is likely familiar. On "election twitter," it is common to see threads of organizers describing "abusive" work environments and debating how campaigns should treat their workers. These digital exchanges indicate an eagerness among campaign workers to reflect on their work. This concern was evident throughout my research process: when recruiting participants, I circulated an interest form online and I received a hundred responses in 24 hours! Despite active discussions among progressive campaign workers, very little academic research has been conducted on the experiences and challenges of this profession. For people who are active in leftist political campaigns, this study should provide a synthesis of many of the sentiments commonly shared among campaign workers, whether digitally or otherwise. This study aims to contribute to the existing conversation among campaign workers by situating their experiences and challenges in broader historical and social structures. As Labor Notes activists assert, "you have to diagnose the problem before you can write the prescription" (Bradbury 2016:8).

I also assert that this topic merits the attention of people outside of progressive campaign work for several reasons. First, I argue that campaigns and their staff play an important role in shaping our political discourse and influencing electoral outcomes. Second, I suggest that progressive campaign work should be studied because it entails unique conditions and

heightened value conflict, which have broader implications for labor studies and other work industries.

Campaigns and Campaign Work Matters

An underlying principle of this study is that electoral campaigns, and by definition campaign staff, fundamentally matter. The impact of campaigns can be studied from several angles. Firstly, they impact policy by influencing who is elected to public office by influencing turnout and vote choice (Jacobson 2015, Erikson and Wlezien 2012, and Hillygus 2010). Second, campaigns shape our political discourse by promoting certain issues and advocating for political positions (Laurison 2022). Lastly, campaigns encourage civic engagement among the public, such as through voter outreach and volunteer training/events.

If campaigns play a role in shaping our political world and civic society, then the workers on these campaigns do as well. Thousands of people work on electoral campaigns across the political spectrum each election cycle. These individuals canvass voters, recruit and train volunteers, fundraise, craft political messaging, and much more. These workers play a critical role in shaping our political discourse. Campaign workers' role in our politics can be considered at the micro-level: with each voter canvassed and volunteer trained, campaign workers impact the political and social sphere. These individual conversations hold cumulative weight: in 2020, 84% of U.S. voters said they were contacted by a candidate campaign or supporting organization (Pew Research 2021). On a larger scale, we can consider the digital graphics and campaign advertisements campaign workers create which are then viewed by thousands if not millions. If a project of political sociology is to understand how political ideas spread and how parties/candidates gain power, it is crucial to study the campaign worker as a player in this process.

The study of campaign workers is also important because of the unique environment of electoral campaigns. Political campaigns can be either electoral or issue-based. Electoral campaigns entail persuading and mobilizing a constituency to vote for a candidate for elected office. As the name implies, issue-based campaigns aim to persuade the public, representatives, or stakeholders to take a certain stance on a political issue. For example, the organization Act on Mass is engaging in an ongoing campaign called “The People’s House” to increase transparency in the Massachusetts State House (Act On Mass). In contrast to an electoral campaign, this issue-based campaign is not centered around a candidate; rather it aims to increase public pressure on current representatives. Furthermore, the campaign is not limited to a single election cycle. It remains active during legislative sessions as well.

This research is specifically focused on electoral campaigns for two reasons. First, narrowing in on electoral campaigns allows for in-depth research that would be less feasible while studying both types of campaigns. As I have described, there are critical differences in how the two types of campaigns are structured. Thus, it would be difficult to study both types of campaigns as the challenges and rewards for workers are likely to be different. Second, electoral campaigns are uniquely structured, therefore the impact on the campaign worker is of particular interest and worthy of further study.

As campaign work scholar Daniel Laurison asserts, “intensity is a defining feature of political work” (2022:92). Electoral campaigns are time-limited, meaning that after each election cycle a campaign worker has to find new work. Campaign environments also shift dramatically as election day approaches, building intensity with each month. New staff is often hired just a month or two before an election day. This structure creates a pressurized and unstable environment, which may make conflict between workers (and management) more likely. While

conflict exists in all fields, I argue that it is heightened in this intensive environment. Thus, the study of electoral campaigns is useful for exploring topics in labor studies that may be relevant (although less apparent) in other professions.

The Progressive Movement

Thus far, I have argued that the study of campaign workers is relevant to understanding our political world and topics in labor studies. This study, however, places a particular focus on *progressive* campaign workers. Admittedly, this choice was made in part because of my own familiarity with the progressive movement and my desire to contribute to it as a researcher. But beyond this desire, I was motivated by the apparent contradictions I described earlier between the stated values of campaigns and the treatment of workers.

The progressive movement is difficult to define as it is inherently grassroots and diffuse in nature. The movement's base encompasses members with a wide range of views and includes democratic socialists to those who align more with the policies of the mainstream Democratic Party. For the purpose of this study, I allowed participants to self-identify as progressive in order to reflect the diversity of views within progressive politics. In the data collection stage, participants were asked to define the term progressive. In response, they asserted that progressives are focused on equity, justice, support of the working class, and a "desire to uplift the most marginalized in our society for the better of all of us." Given these values, it is particularly noteworthy that workers claim mistreatment and exploitation at the hands of progressive campaigns (Lacy 2020, Yglesias 2019, and Chávez 2021).

In recent years, progressives have played a critical role in bringing these issues to light on both progressive and more moderate campaigns. Erin Butler explains: "As the Democratic Party has been pushed leftward by the progressive activist wing of its base on economic issues such as

a living wage, the income gap, hiring and pay disparities, and harassment and discrimination in the workplace, it has been forced to confront the pervasiveness of these issues within its own employment structure” (2020:354). Here, Butler connects progressive politics to the recognition of value conflict on political campaigns and within the Democratic Party. This thesis will explore this connection and analyze how and why progressive campaign workers address value conflict.

Literature Review

Campaigns and Campaign Work

The majority of literature on political campaigns typically falls into one of two categories: strategy or media. Scholars who study campaign strategy have focused heavily on the effectiveness of voter turnout methods, such as canvassing (Gerber and Green 2001, Gerber and Green 2008, and Goldstein et al. 2002). Other scholars have examined electoral methods through case studies of campaigns, often as veterans of the campaigns themselves (Bailey et al. 1999, McKenna and Han 2015, Plouffe 2009, and Jamieson 2009). Relatedly, there is an emerging body of literature about the media practices of electoral campaigns, which has been of particular interest to scholars as campaigns have begun to rely more heavily on digital advertising (Heiskanen 2017, Cassese 2020, Hassell et al. 2014, Van Zoonen 2018, Serazio 2017, and Auter 2016). Additionally, some scholars have studied the political candidate in the context of the campaign (Duranti 2006). While this thesis will not focus on campaign strategy or media, this literature is useful in understanding the types of activities and strategizing campaign workers engage in.

Although there is an abundance of literature on the topics of campaign strategy and media, research directed specifically on campaign workers has been minimal. Furthermore, the

scholarship that has explored campaign work has focused heavily on the rise of a “consultant class” in politics (Nelson et al. 2000, Grossman 2009, Walker 2014, and Sheingate 2016).

The focus on consultants in campaign scholarship (as opposed to campaign staff) can be explained by several factors. Firstly, consultants are easier to identify and are more accessible to researchers than campaign staff whose roles change frequently and who are rarely listed on campaign websites. For example, Edward Walker collected data on public affairs consultants by grouping together listings of consultant firms and their staff (2014:15). Secondly, it may be that scholars have focused on campaign consultants because they are perceived as having more power and influence. Political organizer and scholar Marshall Ganz asserts that “the consultant class earned \$11.4 billion in 2016 by turning politics into marketing, campaigns into advertising, candidates into brands, voters into data points, and debate into messaging.” Ganz demonstrates that campaigns pay a premium to the consultant class (which he refers to as the “consultocracy”), reflecting their strong economic and political influence. Thus, the prioritization of consultants in social science research over campaign staff can be explained by factors relating to both ease of access to data and an academic orientation that leans toward studying those viewed as having power and influence. Additionally, this reflects a dynamic observed by Matthew Mahler (2007), in which sociologists and political scientists have often studied politics at a distance, removed from the “nitty-gritty reality of political life” (239).

In recent years, however, Mahler and several other scholars have studied the day-to-day of politics more closely, looking directly at campaign staff and their experiences. In his dissertation, *Homo Politicus: On Politics and Passion*, Mahler (2012) sought to fill this gap in campaign literature. Mahler conducted a participant observation study, first as an aide on a congressional campaign and then as an employee in a Congressional office. Mahler frames his

research subjects as politicos and aspiring politicos, who are eager to make a name for themselves and the candidate in the broader world. As “the first long-term participant observation ethnography of professional politics,” Mahler’s study contributes to campaign literature by revealing how campaign staff navigate the intensities of political life and make strategic political decisions.

While Mahler does address some aspects of the “nitty-gritty” of campaign life, his study is limited to a single Congressional campaign. Furthermore, the “politicos” he studied are in close proximity to the candidate on a national campaign and can be described as campaign “elite.” Thus, they are likely to be more focused on moving from the campaign to a congressional office, just as Mahler did himself. This thesis will build on Mahler’s contribution by investigating the “practice of politics” on the local and state level (Mahler 2007:232). Additionally, the experiences of entry-level campaign workers such as field/digital organizers will be explored and centered in this research. Their experiences, I argue, deal with the “nitty-gritty” of politics perhaps more directly and intensely than the high-level workers observed by Mahler. Thus, this study differs from Mahler’s research by expanding its scope and broadening the lens to the experiences of campaign workers in diverse work roles.

Unlike Mahler’s case study, Daniel Laurison’s scholarship examines campaign workers across the political spectrum. In his upcoming book, Laurison (2022) focuses on “specialists” in electoral production, or people who are “key decision-makers in the upper echelons of campaign organization hierarchies” (4). Laurison explores how the make-up of campaign staff reflects and reproduces the inequalities present in U.S. democratic participation. This scholarship contributes a much-needed analysis of race, class, and gender among campaign workers. I will apply Laurison’s research findings to my discussion of progressive campaign worker demographics.

Like Mahler, however, Laurison excludes “low-level staffers” from his study and focuses on national-level politics. This study will build on Laurison’s work by including the experiences of low-level staff as well as exploring the relationship between campaign workers’ political ideology and their experiences on campaigns. Expanding the scope of this study beyond the experts and campaign elites studied by Laurison’s allows for a more comprehensive analysis of power and authority on political campaigns. Additionally, this thesis differs from both Laurison and Mahler’s work by addressing the many labor-related issues that arise on campaigns.

Erin E. Butler (2020) lays the groundwork for this labor analysis in her article “Progressive Political Campaigns: ‘Champions of workers’ (*Just not Campaign Workers).” Butler argues that there is a disconnect between the Democratic Party’s platform on labor rights and its campaign practices. Using a legal approach, Butler demonstrates how these campaign practices are not compliant with labor laws and contends that the Democratic Party should encourage campaign workers to unionize in order to address this issue. This article provides a framework for understanding the labor practices of democratic campaigns and suggests unionization as a way to support the needs of campaign workers. This thesis will expand on Butler’s work by providing more qualitative data. It will also ground the data in a historical context to help explain the current state of progressive campaign work. Alongside unionization efforts described by Butler, other forms of resistance to exploitative working conditions will be addressed. In addition to building on literature that investigates campaign work directly such as that of Butler, Mahler, and Laurison, this study will draw on scholarship from the fields of labor studies and the sociology of work to explore how workers navigate labor issues on campaigns.

Labor Studies

In the latter half of the 20th century, industrial sociology was a main focus of study within the sociology of work. During this period, labor scholars examined how workers experienced processes of industrialization, namely: specialization, mechanization, standardization, and globalization (Casey 1995). Much of industrial sociology employed a Marxist framework to analyze how workers respond to working conditions in industrial society (Etzioni 1961, Blauner 1964, Braverman 1974, and Burawoy 1979).

More recent literature on the sociology of work has focused on the extent to which work governs our lives. In *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks (2011) uses a feminist and Marxist approach to challenge the commonly held assumption that work is an inherent good. She seeks to instead politicize work by arguing that the workplace is a site in which class and gender relations are “made and remade” (9). Similarly, this thesis aims to politicize the conditions of campaign work and challenge the notion that these conditions are innate, good, or necessary to the political process.

Like Weeks, Sarah Jaffe (2021) applies a feminist and Marxist critique in *Work Won't Love You Back*, to challenge the myth that work should be a “labor of love.” By telling the stories of workers in various industries, Jaffe demonstrates how the expectation that we should love work is capitalist logic that enables the stripping away of hard-fought benefits and job stability. Jaffe builds on the study of emotional labor first introduced by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983), a concept that I will explore in the context of campaign work.

Although both classical and contemporary scholars argue that work is a dominating and exploitative force in capitalist society, they also assert that work is not all-powerful. Rather, workers resist the domination of labor and organize for better conditions. Literature on worker

resistance by labor scholars and sociologists focuses on unions and the labor movement. Some scholars have studied the strategies of specific unionization efforts and workers' struggles, such as Marshall Ganz (2009) and Jane McAlevey (2016). In contrast, other scholars have focused on trends within the labor movement more broadly, such as decline and revitalization (Francia 2006 and Albert 2014). Additionally, labor scholars have studied the nuanced relationship between the Democratic Party and the labor movement, which I will explore within the context of electoral campaigns (Davis 1980, Dark 1999, and Asher et al. 2001).

This thesis builds on labor scholarship by investigating campaign work, an industry not represented in the existing literature. Like nurses or farmworkers, campaign workers have unique needs as a result of the unstable, precarious lifestyle demanded by the parameters of their work. By shedding light on the conditions of campaign work, this thesis will contribute to the field of labor studies and industrial sociology. Similar to how Burawoy (1979) studied the shop floor, this thesis aims to employ industrial-era labor theory to the analysis of a contemporary and understudied industry. Furthermore, this research adds to scholarship on labor unions and professionalized work by addressing campaign workers' attitudes towards unionization (Rabban 1991). This effort is particularly pertinent to the current discourse as union membership continues to decrease despite recent prominent unionization efforts (Johnston 2022).

Political Sociology

This study draws on literature from the subfield of political sociology to address how trends in our political world have impacted campaign work. Political sociologists explore many topics that are of concern to the topic of this thesis. Most notably, they seek to answer questions about political participation and engagement, the influence of political parties and government, and the evolving nature of political discourse across time and societies.

Classic theorists in political sociology include Marx, Weber, and Michels. I will apply their writings throughout this thesis. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), Marx explores how labor in capitalist society impacts workers and causes alienation. Marxist theory is foundational to labor scholarship and industrial sociology, as I discussed in the previous section. Additionally, a Marxist lens is useful in thinking about the ways in which class conflict may manifest in political institutions and in campaign work. I will explore Marx's theory in more detail in Chapter 4, where I discuss exploitative working conditions on campaigns.

In *Politics as Vocation*, Max Weber discusses the type of person who is drawn to politics. He describes engaging with politics as “striving to influence the distribution of power between and within political formations” (316). Weber explains that everyone, at times, is a “politician” to varying degrees— for example, one is a politician when they vote, protest, or express a political opinion. Full-time politicians, however, are individuals who make politics their vocation. This can be done in two ways: by living “for” politics, or by living “from” politics. One who lives *for* politics derives a sense of meaning and purpose from their work, feels a devotion to a political cause, and makes politics their inward life. In contrast, those who live *from* politics make it an enduring source of income. Using these categories, Weber argues that passionate, charismatic individuals feel “called” to politics, but experience disenchantment as they face inevitable ethical paradoxes. Applying Weber's analysis of the politician to campaign workers raises the question: in what ways do campaign workers live for and from politics? Additionally, how do campaign workers' relationships to politics evolve over time — do they experience the disenchantment Weber describes?

While Weber describes the characteristics of politicians, Robert Michels (1911) focuses on the features of political organization and parties. Michels introduced the concept of the “iron

law of oligarchy” to argue that organizations committed to democracy inevitably exhibit oligarchical tendencies and become dominated by elites. This text is foundational to the study of political organizations and is particularly relevant to this thesis’s exploration of the causes of value conflict on campaigns.

Contemporary scholars of political sociology have built on Michels’s study of political parties. For example, Edward Banfield and James Wilson (1963) examined the role of parties and political machines in city politics. Scholars have also studied the decline in political parties in U.S. society and its implications (Crotty and Jacobson 1980, Wattenberg 1986, and Leon 2019). Literature on political parties is located within the broader study of civic engagement in U.S. society. Political sociologists have studied civic engagement in order to better understand how to build a more robust and democratic civic society (Zukin et al. 2006 and Galston 2007). Much of this literature builds on Robert Putnam’s seminal article and book *Bowling Alone* (1975, 2000) in which he asserts that there has been a precipitous and concerning decline in social capital in America. His writing explores the factors that may have caused this decline, such as demographic shifts in the workforce and the impact of new technology on leisure activities. In *Diminished Democracy* (2003), Theda Skocpol traces how the decline in civic engagement identified by Putnam was facilitated by an explosion of advocacy groups in the 1970s. She asserts that professionalization of civic engagement and shift from “membership to management” has concerning implications for our democracy. In Chapter 3, I will incorporate this literature in detailing the professionalization of campaign work.

Professionalization can be defined as a “reliance on paid staff,” as opposed to volunteers or community members (Bolleyer and Correa 2020:1). Some scholars who have studied professionalization have placed a particular emphasis on how it has impacted the U.S. political

left. In *Activism Inc.*, Dana Fisher (2006) investigates the outsourcing of voter outreach on the left to a progressive group she calls the “people’s project” (readers speculate this refers to U.S. PIRGS). Using interviews with canvassers, Fisher argues that the professionalization of the left has led young, passionate leftists to leave organizing because they are burnt out. This pattern, Fisher asserts, is less effective than the right’s methods of cultivating new leaders within the republican party. Similarly, in *Hegemony: How to*, Jonathan Smucker (2017) argues that the liberal left has become increasingly professionalized, leading to the proliferation of “single-issue” non-profits (36). While Fisher assesses the impact of professionalization on young progressives, Smucker examines its impact on the structure of leftist political organizations.

The 20th-century decline in civic engagement and rise in professionalization has also raised questions about who participates in politics and why. There is consensus among scholars that people who are well educated and have resources are more likely to be civically engaged (Verba et al. 1995, Han 2009); however, the privileged are not the only people who participate in politics. In *Moved to Action*, Hahrie Han (2009) expands on the study of political motivation by focusing on how people who come from under-resourced backgrounds become active participants in civic and political life. This thesis will incorporate this body of literature in the discussion of the multi-faceted factors that move progressives to engage in campaign work.

Conclusion

The professionalization of campaign work has created a new and growing occupation category that has yet to be formally classified or adequately studied. The U.S. census does not include campaign workers among its 509 occupation categories (Laurison 2022). The average campaign worker is largely absent from both political sociology and labor studies literature. Yet,

as I have argued in this chapter, campaign workers play a critical role in shaping our political discourse and face unique labor challenges worthy of study. The lack of recognition of professional campaign work makes it difficult to address the needs of these workers, who are only recently being recognized by the labor movement. This thesis aims to fill this gap in the existing literature by investigating the motivations, challenges, and actions of progressive campaign workers. In the following chapter, I will describe the research design and methodologies I employed to achieve these aims.

CHAPTER II

Methodology

Research Questions

The inner workings of progressive campaigns are largely unknown to those outside of them, as are the experiences of workers on these campaigns. From a campaign's launch to election day, progressive campaign staff work around the clock to elect candidates with platforms rooted in economic justice and equity. This study aims to explore and analyze the experiences of these workers who, at times, face economic injustice and mistreatment by the campaign. This objective is captured in the following research questions:

1. What motivates progressives campaign workers to engage in their work?
2. How do progressive campaign workers experience and cope with conflicts between the stated values of progressive campaigns and the way these campaigns treat their workers?

In this chapter, I will detail the methodologies and approaches I adopted to answer these questions.

Research Design: Participatory Action Research

This study implements a participatory action research (PAR) approach. PAR is an approach to research that aims to mitigate the power imbalance that often occurs in academic research by giving participants greater autonomy and influence in the research process (Participatory Methods). PAR encourages researchers to collaborate with communities most affected by an issue. Practitioners of PAR assert that this orientation is not only guided by empathy and a commitment to the decolonization of social sciences; but rather, it is also

motivated by a “commitment to good science” (Fine et al. 20201). By expanding the research team to include those “on the ground,” PAR limits the tendency for academics (a relatively homogeneous group) to rely on dominant narratives and tropes. Thus, PAR differs from traditional research because the methods and topics studied stem from community members, not the researcher. As Kemmis et al. (2014) explains, participatory research is distinct from traditional research in three ways: “shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation towards community action.”

The topic of progressive campaign work is particularly suitable for PAR given that the approach is rooted in leftist ideology. The method evolved out of Paulo Freire's concepts of revolutionary education in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), and also emerged from neo-Marxist approaches to community development (Kemmis et al. 2014). Modern practitioners of PAR assert that the approach synthesizes research and action. Therefore, it is most applicable for research that is justice-oriented and focused on organizing/social movements (Assil et al. 2015:25-26). In addition, the principles of PAR are reflected in some of the organizing methods adopted by campaign workers. For example, campaign staff often ask voters and volunteers: “what issues matter to you” and “what change do you want to see in your community?” These questions reflect the grassroots, community-driven orientation of progressive politics. Thus, adopting this approach also helped establish a trusting partnership between the researcher and the participants.

I began to utilize a participatory approach to this study early on through informal conversations with campaign workers in my network. I asked them about their work experiences and what they might be most interested in learning if they were conducting a study on progressive campaign workers. These initial conversations were useful in narrowing my topic

and identifying issues that were of interest to campaign workers. Following these conversations, I formed a group of four campaign workers (which I will refer to as an “advisory group”) to participate in the study more formally. The advisory group met twice during the study, once before data collection began and then again after the data were coded. I also consulted members of the advisory group individually about various topics and issues that arose throughout the study.

The first advisory group meeting began with introductions and an explanation of PAR. Then, each of the participants answered the following questions in writing:

1. How do you define the term “progressive”?
2. What are the features of a progressive campaign?
3. How would you define a campaign "worker"?

Group members’ individual answers were then shared with the group, and the differences and similarities of their responses were discussed together. These group discussions produced a shared vocabulary that was employed in the study. Once this shared vocabulary was established, we transitioned to brainstorming topics that the advisory group members were most eager to see addressed in the study. Three topics emerged as most notable in the group: the identity of campaign workers, the support they need in their work, and the varied experiences workers have on different types of campaigns. These suggestions directly informed my study: following the advisory group meeting I added several questions to my interview guide that related to campaign workers identity before, during, and after working on campaigns. I also added questions encouraging participants to reflect on times they had received support from or offered support to other campaign workers. I chose not to incorporate the third topic on campaign types in the study

because it focused on campaigns rather than workers and entailed a comparative approach, which was not the approach of this study.

The last component of the focus group was a discussion of the recruitment process for the interviews. Several recruitment methods were proposed, and a recruitment plan was set up. The advisory group also expressed the importance of including a diverse sample in this study. More specifically, they recommended that I prioritize racial diversity because they expected that campaign workers of color would have different experiences than white staffers. They also suggested I include participants with a wide range of campaign experiences to incorporate the varied aspects of work on primary, general, local, state, and national campaigns. Following the advisory group meeting, members filled out an open response questionnaire crafted to facilitate reflection, a core principle of PAR. All members expressed that they had benefited from the conversation. One member stated that they “appreciated the opportunity to unpack what makes a campaign progressive” and another shared that the experience “pushed me to think about aspects of the progressive campaign world I hadn't thought about before.” These quotations from advisory group members indicate that this component of the study was beneficial to the participants in addition to the researcher.

Research Design: Qualitative Methods

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach in order to investigate how progressive campaign workers interpret their work and understand the value conflict they encounter on campaigns. An interpretive approach aims to fully and deeply understand the experience of a participant (Gordon 2016). To achieve this goal, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with campaign workers. This method was most fitting for this study because it

allowed participants to provide detailed reflections and share their analysis of complex issues which could not be distilled into multiple-choice questions. As research methods scholar Liahna Gordon asserts, “interviewing is the best method for understanding meaning, lived experience, and complex emotions and perspectives.” (2016:27). Furthermore, opting for semi-structured interviews facilitated a more flexible, two-sided conversation, in contrast to the rigidity of structured interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2012). This method also enabled me to adapt my interview questions throughout the data collection process as new questions and themes emerged.

While this methodology was beneficial in eliciting rich and descriptive data, it also had limitations. Most notably, the interview data collected in this study reflects the perspectives of a small group of people. This group is not representative of the general public, campaign workers, or progressives, and is therefore not generalizable. Another limitation of this approach is that what people say in interviews might differ from what they would say in other contexts. Unlike observation methods, interviews remove the participant from their environment which likely impacts their responses (Taylor et al. 2016). Despite these limitations, I assert that this method is best suited for this study as its priority is to gain in-depth insight into the motivations and lived experiences of campaign workers.

Recruitment

Recruitment for this study took place in early October 2021. I created a flyer to publicize the study and linked it to a Qualtrics survey through which campaign workers could indicate interest in the study (see Appendix). The survey included questions about the types of campaigns respondents had worked on, their geographic region of work, and optional questions about the racial and gender identity of the respondent. While crafting these survey questions, I aimed to generate responses that would facilitate purposive sampling.

After incorporating feedback from the advisory group in the interest form and flyer, I shared the materials on my personal Twitter account. I then sent a direct message to “OrganizerMemes,” a Twitter account with over 23,000 followers, most of whom are progressive campaign workers. The account agreed to share the study flyer, and within 24 hours the interest form had received 100 responses. Given that I could only include 20 interview participants due to limited funding and the timeline of the study, I closed the form after a day. This recruitment method proved extremely efficient and connected me to participants that I would not have otherwise met through my network or snowball sampling.

Sampling

To begin the purposive sampling process, I eliminated survey responses of individuals who had been campaign fellows or interns, but not paid, full-time campaign staff members. This decision was influenced by the advisory group, which defined campaign workers as people who are officially employed by campaigns and included in staff meetings. Furthermore, my sample still included the perspective of fellows/interns because many survey respondents had held these roles in addition to being paid, full-time staff members. Then, I considered the racial identities of the respondents. The survey responses, my observations, and anecdotes shared by the advisory group indicate that progressive campaign workers are predominately white. Rather than attempt to take a representative sample, I intentionally prioritized the selection of participants of color to include the perspectives of those who are at times marginalized in campaign spaces (according to the advisory group).

I then engaged in maximum variation sampling in order to identify common themes in campaign work despite the diversity of campaign types and roles (Gordon 2016:38). To ensure that the sample included a wide range of campaign experiences, I chose to prioritize some participants who had worked 5-10 campaign jobs. This enabled me to efficiently gather data

about work experiences on local, state, national, primary, and general campaigns. Furthermore, this allowed me to collect data on campaign workers' experiences of moving "up" in progressive campaigns, for example, going from a field organizer to a field director. In addition to selecting experienced, active campaign workers, I followed the advisory group's suggestion to include participants who had worked on a campaign or two and then left the field. I selected some participants who were no longer working on campaigns in order to include the perspectives of those who had been deterred from continuing to work on campaigns. After selecting participants, I invited them to participate in the study via email and included the consent script to provide more information about what participation entailed. Most of the respondents who were contacted agreed to be interviewed, although several did not respond to set up an interview time.

Ultimately, I interviewed 20 campaign workers from October-December 2021. Half of the participants identified as women and half as men. Eight participants identified as people of color. The vast majority of participants were in their 20s, with just a few in their early 30s. This relatively young sample can be attributed, in part, to the average age of campaign workers. For example, several participants described their supervisors and coworkers as recent college graduates. I have even heard progressive campaign workers in their late 20s refer to themselves as "old." Overall, my sample seemed to match the typical age range of campaign staff I have observed. However, the age demographics of the participants may in part reflect a limitation in this study. Utilizing Twitter as a platform for recruitment was efficient, but it may have skewed the data younger, as the largest age group of Twitter users is people between 25 and 34 years old (Statista 2021).

Participants in this study had a wide range of work experiences. All but two participants had worked on campaigns on multiple scales: 15 participants had experience on the national

level, 16 at the state level, and 16 at the local level. Nearly all participants had worked on both primary and general election campaigns. Participants held the following campaign roles: field organizer, field director, regional organizing director, campaign manager, digital organizer, intern/fellow, fundraiser, communications director, policy advisor, deputy field director, deputy digital director, and one participant had been a progressive political candidate for a local race himself.

Notably, all but three of the participants had been field organizers, and nine participants had been supervisors on field teams (either as field directors or regional organizing directors). The high representation of field positions among participants can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the field team is typically the largest team on a campaign. Field staff members spend the majority of their time canvassing voters (“knocking on doors”) and recruiting volunteers. As the direct line between the campaign and voters, they are colloquially referred to as “foot soldiers.” The logic then follows, that the more “soldiers” you have, the more voters a campaign can sway and “turn out” on election day. Thus, field teams are predominantly composed of field organizers. The sample for this study also reflects the tendency for most campaign workers to join campaigns through the entry-level position of a field organizer, whether or not they remain “in field.”

It is also possible, however, that the high concentration of field workers among participants is due, at least in part, to the intense nature of fieldwork. As I will discuss later in this study, campaign workers cited interactions with voters and volunteers “in the field” as contributing to both their sense of meaning and experience of “burnout” on campaigns. As such, fieldwork work may elicit more intensive experience (both positive and negative), which might

lead field organizers to be more eager to participate in this study to share and reflect on their experiences.

Data Collection

This study included 20 semi-structured interviews with campaign workers. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. All interviews began with me reading a script about the study and what consenting to participate would entail. Participants were then given an opportunity to ask questions. After requesting permission to record, I asked participants if they consented to participate, be recorded, and be quoted directly (anonymously). After receiving and documenting consent, I proceeded with the interview. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were compensated for their time with a payment of \$22.

I organized the interview into four parts: involvement in progressive campaigns, work experiences, the structure of campaigns and organizing practices, and concluding questions. Each section included open-ended questions. This interview structure ensured that the data I gathered was through the lens of the campaign workers' lived experiences and that this research related to my two fields of focus: labor studies and political sociology. In general, I followed the interview guide closely and asked follow-up questions to encourage the participant to elaborate on certain topics.

As I progressed through my data collection, my interview strategies and methods evolved. Most notably, I shifted my focus when it became clear to me that my unit of study was campaign workers, not campaigns. As such, I focused more on the participants' lived experiences and identity construction as campaign workers. As part of this shift, I made an effort to elicit from the participants more examples and situations in which they felt fulfilled, challenged, supported, or excited by their work. By asking open-ended questions and prompting the participants to conjure up significant conversations or events, I was able to push past "social

script” answers and reliance on “buzzwords.” Additionally, as the interview stage progressed, I tended to deviate from the interview guide structure in order to ask follow-up questions that pertained to the participant’s unique experiences.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, audio recordings of the interviews were uploaded to Otter.ai (a commercially available transcription service). Then, I edited the transcripts within Otter.ai to correct mistakes in the auto-transcription process, as well as to remove identifying information. I assigned each participant a numerical code and saved each transcript accordingly. The names of the participants and corresponding ID numbers were saved in a separate, private spreadsheet (aliases were added to this spreadsheet later on as well). The data were then uploaded to the software NVivo12 (QSR International 2021) and coded using an inductive approach. I then developed grounded theory, analyzing the data and adding new open codes as themes emerged (Glaser and Strauss 1999).

After completing the interview coding, I set up a second meeting with the advisory group.¹ In this meeting, I shared my initial findings and received feedback that participants related to the data and felt it was overall consistent with their own work experiences. As a group, we discussed how this research could be used to benefit progressive campaign workers. In the post-meeting survey, advisory group members described the conversation as “affirming” and “useful” and shared that hearing the findings helped them feel less isolated in their campaign experiences.

In April 2022, I collaborated with a member of the advisory group to create a virtual presentation for campaign workers about the data. The presentation was part of a larger forum

¹ One out of four of the advisory group members was unable to join for the second meeting as they were in the middle of Get Out the Vote on a campaign. I chose to proceed and meet with the other three members in order to remain on track with the timeline of this thesis.

about community research and was attended by about 15 former and current campaign workers. In addition to presenting the research findings, we left time for attendees to discuss the data and reflect on the challenges they face as campaign workers. For example, one attendee described the isolation she faces on a small local campaign and shared that the data helped her “feel seen.” Another attendee suggested that campaign workers pressure Democratic Party organizations to hold candidates accountable to certain standards, such as minimum wage for campaign workers or days off minimum. The main theme that arose in this conversation was that attendees were interested in thinking about “next steps” to improve the conditions on progressive campaigns. In my conclusion, I address these potential solutions posed by attendees. In addition, the forum discussion led me to connect with campaign workers who I had not previously met. I plan to be in touch with these workers to continue to exploring future uses for this research.

CHAPTER III

Identifying the Modern Progressive Campaign Worker

“If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you're going”

-Maya Angelou, (Cordova 2011)

In progressive spaces, be it a virtual phonebank, community organizer training, or campaign job interview, it is common to hear people ask each other the following question: “what politicized you?” The question evokes the long-standing leftist interest in politicization, radicalization, and consciousness-raising. This emphasis in progressive campaign work on what leads people to participate in electoral organizing reflects an expectation that campaign workers have ideological and personal connections to politics that undergirds their work.

In this chapter, I will explore what draws people to progressive campaign work and trace how the nature of campaign work has evolved over time to draw different types of people. I assert that in the era of machine politics, campaign workers were typically from low-income communities and were motivated to engage in campaign work by the promise of patronage. As progressive era reforms took hold and new communication technologies developed, political machines waned and campaign work became more professionalized. As a result, progressive campaign workers today are highly educated and primarily drawn to campaigns by their ideological commitment to progressive politics and their desire to have an impact. Additionally, I argue that progressives are attracted to campaigns for non-ideological factors, such as the excitement, fulfillment, skills, and like-minded community that campaigns provide. This data provides useful context for understanding how campaign workers navigate the difficult working conditions they encounter on the campaign.

Evolution of the U.S. Campaign Worker

In the 19th and first half of the 20th century, campaign work was deeply intertwined with powerful political parties and was entrenched in systems of machine politics and patronage. In *City Politics* (1963), Edward Banfield and James Wilson define a political machine as a party organization that depends on the offering of “inducements” (be it money or positions of power) in exchange for political favors or votes. Banfield and Wilson explore the political machine as an organizing structure in cities like Cleveland and Chicago. In areas where the political machine was strong, “precinct captains,” or those high up in the party machinery, would allot political and governmental jobs as patronage for acquiring votes for the desired candidate. This often entailed providing someone with a temporary job in exchange for their vote as well as their efforts to influence the votes of their family, friends, and community. In this paradigm, some deserving party workers might be given better-paying jobs such as a clerk or building inspector.

A key feature of machines during this period is that despite dealing with politics, they were essentially apolitical. Like a corporation, political machines are interested in “making and distributing income” to those who run them, which was achieved by securing votes (Banfield and Wilson 1963:116). This apolitical focus makes participation in machine politics less desirable to middle and upper-class communities, where people “have, or pretend to have, opinions on political questions” and do not rely on machines for economic support (Banfield and Wilson 1963:122). In contrast, political machines were prevalent in working-class communities, where votes could more easily be “bought.”

In addition to operating along class lines, political machines also organized around ethnic groups. Political machines are often associated with white, Protestant communities. But political scientist Elmer Cornwell (1964) argues that political machines of the 19th and early 20th

centuries were impacted by waves of immigration, as they relied on an immigrant base that was “characteristically insecure” and susceptible to political manipulation. Cornwell offers a somewhat disparaging analysis of immigrant involvement in political machines. An alternative framing views machines as a vehicle for upward economic mobility and social integration: a working-class person or new immigrant could access a higher paying job, social services, and even political power by working campaigns and collecting votes for the political machine. Notably, Irish immigrants were often the primary beneficiaries of this system, whereas other immigrants and Black Americans were often excluded from these opportunities due to racist party politics (Hersh 2020:9).

Beginning in the 1930s, political machines began to decline. Progressive era reform took hold, and people grew more critical of a system that awarded jobs based on political loyalty rather than merit. Progressives passed laws reforming government processes and voting systems, and it became harder for political machines to grant patronage. Furthermore, more Americans gained access to education and thus to higher-wage jobs, and the passing of FDR’s New Deal led to more welfare programs. These factors made participation in machines less desirable for some of the previously low-income communities that machines had relied on.

As the shape of U.S. politics shifted in the mid 20th century, the nature of campaign work followed suit. Campaign work became more professionalized due to several factors. Firstly, election data and voter files became more accessible to the public. As Eitan Hersh (2015) explains, campaigns and parties began to leverage this data to “sort and segment the electorate” (56). This created a need on electoral campaigns for educated workers who could collect and synthesize data on voters. Once campaigns had access to data, they no longer needed to rely solely on traditional organizing methods like canvassing, which was typically practiced by low-

income workers in political machines. Instead, they could use their data and voter lists to send out targeted mailers and run phonebanks.

Simultaneously, the use of radio and tv advertising increased. As Paul Herrnson (1995) describes, “the overall effect of technological change was to transform most campaigns from labor intensive grassroots undertaking at which local party committees excelled, to money-driven, merchandised activities requiring the services of skilled experts” (14). Herrnson demonstrates how the emergence of new communication methods led campaign work to evolve, leading machine-era organizers to be replaced by professionalized staff. These technological shifts in politics lead campaigns to hire communication specialists, data directors, pollsters, advertisers, and fundraisers to pay for new, costly voter outreach methods (Skocpol 2003). The changes in campaign work occurred in concert with the broader professionalization of advocacy and social movement organizations beginning in the late 1970s (Walker 2014).

Although patronage and political favors are still prevalent in U.S. politics today, the notion of a political machine as a structuring force in politics is largely considered a thing of the past (Cornwell 1964). Nevertheless, the broad strength and subsequent decline of political machines provide context for understanding the evolution of campaign work. This history presents the image of a campaign worker who was working-class, apolitical, and motivated to enter politics for the opportunity it might offer to access a higher-income job and gain power within the political machine. This image stands in stark contrast to the professionalized, highly educated campaign worker of today.

Progressive Campaign Workers Today

If today's campaign workers are not knocking doors and recruiting volunteers for the promise of political patronage, what is bringing them to the work? Many participants traced their political involvement to their upbringing. As a child, Jordan told me he was a "*West Wing* kid." Now a 27-year-old campaign worker in Georgia, Jordan shared this with me while sitting in front of a wall covered in colorful campaign signs. The *West Wing* (1999-2006) is a political drama directed by Aaron Sorkin. It follows a tight-knit team of White House staff as they navigate the fast-paced world of D.C. politics. They support their witty and stoic boss, President Josiah Bartlet, around the clock as they strive to help him serve the country and keep him in good standing with the public. "I had a really privileged approach to politics," Jordan admitted, explaining that he first followed politics as a hobby and then from an academic perspective as a political science major in college. While most participants did not self-identify as "*West Wing* kids" like Jordan, the image of professional politics reflected in the show is not far from participants' perception of professional politics, at least before they took part in it themselves.

When I asked participants what they noticed about progressive campaign workers today, they described people who are typically well-educated, white, and from upper-class backgrounds. Isabella, a 20-year-old campaign worker from New Jersey, noticed that this is especially true when it comes to campaign leadership: "I'm a Brown woman, and then I'm going into these campaigns, and everybody I'm answering to is white...everybody comes from elite institutions...and wealthier areas." Violet, a white campaign worker from New York had similar observations: "people who work on electoral campaigns are predominantly white, from affluent [backgrounds], and they're educated."

The data on the topic of progressive campaign worker demographics was fairly consistent across participants irrespective of their own identity, suggesting that this perception of campaign workers is at least widespread. Yet, it remains a question how empirically accurate participants' observations are across different regions and campaign types, given that the limited data on campaign workers is not specific to the progressive movement. These observations are generally supported by data compiled by Daniel Laurison (2022) on Democratic campaign professionals as part of his upcoming book, *Producing Politics: Inside the Exclusive Campaign World Where the Privileged Few Shape Politics for All of Us*².

In terms of race, Laurison's data indicates that Democratic campaign professionals are far more likely to be white than the average American — 73% of Democrats in the data set were non-Hispanic white, whereas only about 60% of American adults are non-Hispanic white. In terms of education and socio-economic status, 85% of Democrats in Laurison's dataset of campaign professionals attended college, whereas only 32% of Americans older than 25 have a college degree. Laurison further explores the education levels among campaign professionals by looking at what types of colleges people attended, finding that 61% of Democratic politicians attended schools that are categorized as “highly selective” or “ivy plus.” This data suggests that the majority of Democratic campaign professionals come from high-income backgrounds, although of course, it is also true that low-income students attend elite colleges. The relatively high socio-economic status of campaign workers today and the decline of machine politics suggests that the common motivations for entering campaign work have clearly shifted.

² Laurison's dataset includes political professionals with named roles in the following national campaigns: primary and general election campaigns for Presidential campaigns in 2004, 2008, 2020, and general elections campaigns for President in 2012 and 2016 and Senate in 2006.

According to my research findings, progressive campaign workers today are motivated largely by a passion for politics and a desire to “make a difference.” Before progressive campaign workers saw politics as a career, many participants described political engagement as a personal interest and familial value from a young age. Rachel described: “I got interested in politics because I had so many political differences with my family. And so, I was like, I gotta take out all this energy somewhere because yelling at my Republican parents isn't gonna do much.” Ella, a 27-year-old campaign worker from Pennsylvania, shared that she has “always been a very political person,” so politically minded in fact that her AIM username in fourth grade was “KerryRules, for John Kerry.”

Participants’ descriptions of their relationship to politics indicates that they initially viewed politics as a hobby or interest. Most participants described keeping this interest at a distance from the actual practice of political organizing until college; however, some participants had direct exposure to campaign work at a young age. Amber described accompanying her older brother to a campaign office in 2008 as a middle schooler. When an organizer on the campaign noticed her sitting and waiting with her mom, they invited Amber to start making calls to voters. Amber’s early experience in a campaign office led her to see electoral organizing as an expectation: she viewed voting as a given and understood that if you knew whom you wanted to support, it was important to give the time you had available to help them get elected.

Similarly, Nico, a 29-year-old campaign worker from Chicago, described first participating in politics as a child volunteering at the National Organization of Women with his mother and grandmother. However, unlike Amber, Nico connected his family’s political orientation to their immigrant background. Nico explained that his father is a first-generation immigrant from the Philippines and his mother is fourth generation from Mexico. Nico reflected:

“Involvement [in politics] has been kind of second nature to us.” Like Nico, Hassan, a 25-year-old from California, linked his early involvement interest in progressive politics to his ethnic and racial identity:

I've always been a very progressive person. My politics are rooted in empathy and compassion, wanting to see our communities improve. Also, my identity as an Arab American has definitely shaped a lot of it...the discrimination and racism in a post 911 United States coupled with the realization the American dream is not realized for everyone really shaped my perspectives.

Nico and Hassan’s responses indicate that some campaign workers are drawn to progressive politics because of their experience with marginalization. Overall, my participant data suggests that participants were interested in politics from a young age, often motivated by familial values and expectations. This context is useful in understanding the origins of campaign workers’ involvement in politics broadly, but it does not necessarily explain why they chose to make politics their vocation. Millions of people engage in political organizing as volunteers each year, but only a small subset of that group actually commit to working on campaigns.

Two main themes emerge from the data that explain participants’ transition from politics as an interest to politics as a profession: experiencing higher education and high stakes elections that spurred participants to engage with campaign work. All but one participant in this study had an undergraduate degree or was in the process of acquiring one. Some participants explored their personal interest in politics through academia, choosing to study political science or similar fields. Through their academic study and the social network it provided, they began to view campaign work as a career option. For some campaign workers like Amber and Nico who were involved in campaign work at a young age, exposure to politics in college was not new. But for

campaign workers like Hassan, higher education was critical in framing political organizing as a career option:

It wasn't till I got to college and had a very good professor and talked about dimensions of power, and how at certain points you can actually internalize your own oppression. And when I realized that was my thought process, as I was internalizing what people said that...[that] no one would ever take me seriously. Not just because of my politics, but because of who I am and where my parents are from and what my name is. And I realized that the main thing stopping me was myself, and it wasn't gonna let that happen anymore. So I changed my major to political science and started working on campaigns when I got out of college.

Hassan's feeling that professional politics was not an option for someone with his identities is reflective of the exclusionary aspects of campaign work. Certainly, structural factors make it more difficult for some people to access campaign work and easier for others. As I will describe further in the next chapter, campaign work entails long hours and unstable work, which is a difficult lifestyle to maintain for people who do not have access to a social and economic safety net. Furthermore, entering the field of campaign work often requires personal connections, which may make it more difficult for someone whose community is not well networked in the world of professional politics (Laurison 2022). In addition to structural factors, Hassan alluded to the notion that one's perception of who "belongs" on campaigns can function as a barrier to entering the field within itself. It was his encounter with higher education that enabled Hassan to see professional campaign work as a viable option for himself.

Participants also described observing consequential presidential elections as a motivating factor to enter campaign work. Farah, a 24-year-old from Arizona, identified the 2016 election as

a turning point in her political involvement. Before 2016, politics was a passion of hers, but she had never worked for a campaign. Farah was eager to elect the first woman president when she voted for the first time in 2016, and her disappointment when Trump was elected was “crushing.” In response, Farah began to explore how she could help reverse the political climate and sought out campaign work. Similarly, Jordan shared that before 2016, he watched politics from the sidelines. When Trump became president, Jordan was dismayed to learn that his mother, a public-school teacher, was directly impacted by the administration’s attack on teachers’ unions. As a recent college graduate with a degree in political science, Jordan felt urged to “do something” and got involved in local campaigns until it “kind of snowballed from there.”

While I have identified some of the structural, environmental, and personal factors that lead people to seek out campaign work, Jordan’s comment reflects a more abstract pull of campaigns that participants struggled to pinpoint. Like Jordan’s urge to “do something,” campaign workers do not necessarily intentionally seek out campaign work but rather feel drawn to it. In 1919, German sociologist and economist Max Weber published the essay, “Politics as a Vocation,” in which he describes the characteristics of individuals who feel “called” to participate in professional politics. Weber argues that charismatic leaders are called to politics, not necessarily out of vanity but because they feel a sense of duty, “live for the cause,” and experience politics with their “heart and soul.” According to Weber, politicians³ have three qualities: passion, a sense of responsibility, and judgment. This description and the qualities of passion and responsibility (the third may be harder to identify) feel applicable to the participants’ sense of self. Unlike campaign workers during the machine age, progressive campaign workers

³ As I described in the literature review, Weber uses the term “politicians” to refer to anyone who engages with politics, not just political candidates.

today describe being strongly motivated by the “cause,” their devotion to progressive values, and a desire to see their communities better represented and better served.

In *Politics as a Vocation: Notes Toward a Sensualist Understanding of Political Engagement*, sociologist Matthew Mahler (2007) states (in reference to Weber’s calling): “there is still the empirical question of to what extent this relationship to politics [as a calling] exists in modern democracies today and who is most likely to experience it.” This data suggests that to a large extent, this relation to politics does exist for progressive campaign workers. For these individuals there seems to be two trends at play: on the one hand, there is a certain level of structural privilege that opens one up to the possibility of politics as a vocation. As was made clear by participants like Hassan, one can be passionate about politics and feel a sense of responsibility, but not see it as a vocation until they are invited into the professional political world (often through higher education). Simultaneously, the data also suggest that individuals who experience marginalization may be more likely to feel called to politics, as they feel a sense of duty to “fight” for their communities. Weber’s essay and the data presented here suggest that campaign workers are driven primarily by a desire to have an impact; additionally, progressives are also drawn to campaigns by what the working experience has to offer them— mainly excitement, fulfillment, skills, and community.

Chasing the campaign high

The campaign office is a dynamic space: it is abuzz with the continuous barrage of Slack notifications, and the voices of the staff as they canvass voters on “the dialer,” and chat with volunteers. As election day looms closer, you can find overly caffeinated staff with cold pizza in hand, hunched over computers, or preparing piles of campaign literature late into the night.

When the polls finally close on election night, campaign staff and supporters pile into a bar or event space, refreshing their phones as they eagerly await the results together.

Nathan, a 33-year-old from Colorado, explained that when it comes to working on electoral campaigns, “there’s kind of a high that nothing else matches.” Campaign staff describe their work as exciting, empowering, and invigorating (at least at times). Some campaign workers attribute this excitement to the possibility of winning. In this way, campaign work can be compared to a sport— a campaign team fosters comradery, energy, and determination which steadily increases as game day approaches. By the time election day rolls around, campaign workers have left it all on the field, exhausting their energy and skills to turnout voters in their district (or in campaign-speak, on their “turf”).

While campaign staff experience excitement from the possibility of winning within itself, the notion that this win might have political impact is also relevant. Nico, who described campaign work as an “adrenaline rush,” explained that every election feels “high stakes.” Whether it’s preventing another four years of Trump’s presidency or electing a district attorney who will fight to end cash bail, progressive campaign workers often feel that the result of the election will have a tangible difference in people’s lives. Furthermore, progressive campaign workers may feel a heightened sense of excitement as they are frequently positioned as the underdog in primary races. “I think a lot of what made me enjoy it is that we didn’t have a lot of money. We were 100% underdogs,” Jordan shared. Jordan articulated an experience that was common among participants in which they worked on primary campaigns for progressive candidates seeking to challenge the Democratic establishment. Such campaigns often have fewer resources than their opposition. This creates a feeling of “scrappiness” in which campaign staff must creatively and strategically leverage grassroots, people power to beat moderate campaigns

which may be better funded. This common campaign experience among participants reflects the heightened sense of thrill progressive campaign workers access when they feel they are campaign underdogs working to “out-organize” the Democratic establishment and pull the Party left.

In addition to the sport-like thrill of winning, campaign workers garner energy from their interactions with volunteers and voters. Amber described: “I love talking to voters. I love knocking [on] doors. I loved the office time just hanging out with other progressives in between door-knocking.” For Amber and extroverts like her (which campaigns seem to be full of), the campaign offers endless opportunities for social connection, especially for those working on the field team. Moreover, campaign workers enjoy socializing with “like-minded people,” who share their political views. Along with the activities campaigns entail, some campaign workers also find the structure and lifestyle of campaigns exciting. Participants expressed that campaign work offered an opportunity to travel and get to know new areas, an aspect of the campaign work that was especially appealing to recent college graduates early on in their campaign careers.

Meaning making in campaign work

Overwhelmingly, participants described feeling that their work has a positive impact. For some, this feeling manifests in a grand self-concept: “You tell yourself you are saving the world,” Hassan told me. Similarly, Victor explained that he was drawn to campaign work because it felt both meaningful and within reach: “I was never going to be a microbiologist and cure cancer. That was well out of my league, but I figured I could help elect people or help write and craft policy that was up my alley.” Other participants had a more measured perception of their work, but still emphasized the positive impact they were able to have at a micro-level. Violet described finding meaning in little moments when she made a connection with someone

and changed “one person’s life for the better.” For Violet, showing an individual that she cared about them and their community felt central to her work, regardless of whether these conversations were connected to electoral wins.

The meaning progressive campaign staff draw from their work impacts their sense of self and becomes a part of their larger identity. “You really gain a sense of purpose,” Jonathan described. Participants explained that this sense of purpose is heightened when they observe the work of some of their peers, who do not have the same level of responsibility: “I am not just someone's personal assistant,” Jonathan proudly asserted. These reflections demonstrate that campaign work takes on much greater meaning for participants than “just a job,” a factor that draws people to campaign work. As Joseph put it simply, “it’s a good feeling.”

Skill-building in campaign work

As Jonathan indicated, young campaign workers are not just assistants. Instead, they have opportunities for leadership and responsibility that may not be accessible in other fields. Becoming a campaign worker is in some ways like learning a trade (Butler 2020). When you enter the field, you are forced to learn a lot and learn it fast. For example, campaign workers might learn new software for canvassing, digital media strategies, fundraising methods, or organizing skills. Andrea, a 27-year-old from Illinois, explained that campaigns are a bit like a logic puzzle or fast-paced game of chess. As progressive campaign staff navigate this puzzle and engage in hands-on campaign work, they gain tangible analytical and social skills. Carlos spoke to this, sharing that field organizing helped him grow into his “greatest social skills potential” by pushing him out of his comfort zone and encouraging him to interact with more people. Through talking to voters and training volunteers, Carlos developed social skills that he felt were transferable to other fields and useful in his personal social life.

For some participants, the development and honing of their social skills was especially significant given their experiences with social anxiety and a phobia of speaking on the phone. Isabella, a 20-year-old from New Jersey, proudly asserted that through campaign work her phone anxiety was significantly reduced, helping her “grow as a person.” Similarly, Rachel highlighted that she not only benefits from the quantity of social interaction campaign work offers, but that she finds the opportunity campaign work provides to connect with many different types of people to be personally growth-inducing: “I’ve been able to become a more compassionate person and a more understanding person because I have met, like 10s of 1000s of people, I’ve had phone calls and door conversations with [people] who have entirely different life experiences.” As Rachel described, participants felt that campaign work increased their empathy and enhanced their capacity to connect with others.

In addition, campaign work can entail a high level of responsibility. Participants conveyed that they often feel there is an endless amount of work to do and not enough time and resources to do it. Thus, even entry-level campaign workers can quickly take on significant responsibilities and access to management opportunities right out of college. This is appealing to campaign workers like Ariel, a 26-year-old from Pennsylvania. She explained that she thinks most people her age do not have the management experience that she’s been able to attain, which sets campaign work apart from other fields. Other participants highlighted that the culture of campaigns improved their work ethic because they were “forced to work at breakneck speed,” making them more productive workers going forward.

Participants’ descriptions of the skills they hone by engaging in campaign work demonstrate that the progressive campaign worker is not only drawn to campaigns out of a desire to impact politics and “make a difference” in a community but also to grow as people and

workers themselves. It makes sense that the skills mentioned and the responsibility campaigns offer are of particular interest to the average progressive campaign worker: as energetic young people with an interest in politics seek work, they are drawn to a field that allows them to learn “on the job” and provides opportunities for professional and personal growth.

“Not me, us”: Collective Identity and Campaign Work

Observations about the campaign workers as individuals can often take an inward focus, like Weber’s description of an internal calling. But for progressive campaign workers, the communal and collective aspects of campaigns are central to their experience. Participants described a strong feeling of camaraderie on campaigns, where many meet their “closest friends” and even romantic partners. Some participants described finding their “campaign family” and forming supportive relationships that feel unique to the campaign environment. Jonathan spoke to the bonding experience of campaigns, saying that by the end of the campaign “people who came together as strangers left as brothers and sisters and comrades in arms.” In addition to the personal and social relationships campaign workers forge on campaigns, participants also described building strong professional networks which Jordan described as “valuable and substantive.” Even after an election cycle, campaign staff will stay in close contact and provide professional advice to their colleagues working on other campaigns.

The communal aspect of campaign work can be explained by several factors. Firstly, campaign workers spend most of their time together, especially in the weeks leading up to election day. Jordan described how spending late nights and early weekend mornings working in the campaign office facilitates relationship building:

Someone just orders pizza, and we sit there and it's just grueling work. It's not fun, it's repetitive. It's tedious. But everyone's kind of in it together. You're working towards that

common goal. And so those are some of the experiences that I really treasure and value looking back on it...those are some of the moments where I've formed the strongest relationships. I've been in a relationship for almost two years now... we were painting signs on sheets of cloth at one in the morning before a big political rally. That's how we met.

Jordan's description evokes the parallels between campaigns and sports previously described. By working towards a common goal, campaign workers form a bond (which some participants described as a "trauma bond"). Even during COVID-19 when most campaign staff worked remotely, participants described the camaraderie they developed with coworkers after spending countless hours together every day on Zoom.

In addition to bonding over the long hours and a common goal, the shared values and identities of progressive campaign workers likely also facilitate relationship building. Participants referenced being on teams of mostly recent college graduates, in which workers not only shared a passion for progressive values but common backgrounds. Furthermore, the connection campaign workers form with each other is heightened by the feeling that others outside of campaigns cannot possibly understand the campaign experience. Campaign workers who find their place and a sense of purpose in the world of electoral politics (which is complete with its own vocabulary and customs) feel part of an "in-group," and thus form stronger connections with their coworkers than they might in other fields of work.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have shown how the identities and motivations of campaign workers have shifted in accordance with trends in American politics. In addition, I argue that the motivations

of campaign workers reflect trends outside the realm of politics, particularly in how our society relates to work more broadly. In *Work Won't Love You Back*, Sarah Jaffe (2021) argues that in the late 70s and 80s we saw a shift in Americans' attitudes towards work: with the rise of neoliberalism and globalization, the industrial work ethic transformed in what Jaffe refers to as a "labor of love" work ethic. Today, workers are expected to love their work, and if they fail to do so it becomes a source of individual shame. Jaffe investigates the labor of love work ethic, asserting that it functions to make workers endure exploitation. In late capitalism, we have traded employment security and benefits of industrial work for an often artificial relationship of love with work.

Jaffe's argument describes a broad trend that affects all workers, be it campaign staff, teachers, or video game creators. Building on Jaffe's work, I suggest that progressive campaign workers expect and expected to love their work, and in actuality do love aspects of it. Participants spoke about "loving" talking to voters on campaigns, the opportunity to travel that campaigns offer, and the sense of purpose they feel on campaigns. Certainly not all progressive campaign workers today describe their work in terms of love, but most participants did convey a deep devotion to the progressive cause and a "calling" to politics as a vocation that is in line with Jaffe's argument. As I will describe in further detail in the next chapter, progressive campaign workers are expected to endure long hours and difficult working conditions as part of this calling. Investigating the identity of progressive campaign workers as I have in this chapter allows for a more complete understanding of why and how campaign workers "love" their work, and how this devotion might manifest in progressive campaign culture.

The experiences of campaign workers also reflect a classic debate in the study of work which asks: is work undesirable and done only for external reward, or is there something

inherently pleasing about work? In *Work is Desirable/Loathsome*, Curt Tausky (1992) outlines the optimist and pessimist approaches to work and raises the question— are there trends across societies and time that indicate alignment with either of these models? Applying this framework to my data, I argue that progressive campaign workers tend to ascribe to the optimist model—they imbue a strong sense of meaning in their work which is a motivating factor beyond extrinsic reward. This assessment of campaign workers' relationship to their work reflects two likely trends: 1) the past 50 or so years has entailed a general shift among workers from the pessimist to the optimist perspective on work as described by Jaffe's "labor of love" work ethic, and 2) people from elite backgrounds may be more likely to adopt an optimist perspective on work. This second trend can be deduced from the common demographics of campaign workers. As progressives seek a career, their structural privileges enable many of them to view work beyond merely a means of survival, but as a structure on which to hinge their personal and political identity. In Weberian terms, the typical progressive campaign worker enters the field interested in living "for" politics, perhaps more than they are focused on living "from" it. That being said, campaign workers' perspective on their work is fluid and often grows increasingly fraught as the idealistic perception of "West Wing" politics fades.

In this chapter, I have used data from both my participants and Laurison's (2022) campaign worker database to describe the identity and motivations of the progressive campaign worker in the U.S. today. I have argued that in contrast to campaign workers during the era of machine politics, the modern progressive campaign worker is highly educated, often from well-off/elite backgrounds, and is motivated by a passion for politics and a desire to make a difference. On campaigns, progressives draw meaning and energy from their work, gain valuable skills, and build a supportive social and professional network. This data reveals that progressive

campaign workers have nuanced motivations for joining professional politics, part of which includes a sense of duty or “calling.” In the following chapters, I will show how this orientation to campaign work shapes participants’ experiences on campaigns and their responses to the working conditions they face.

CHAPTER IV

The challenges of progressive campaign work

“Even the best job is a problem when it monopolizes so much of life” (Weeks 2011:1)

Campaign work “requires you to push yourself to the absolute brink and then some,” Rachel explained. Progressive campaign staff describe their work as all-consuming— it is marked by 14-hour workdays, few or no days off, countless hours on the phone with voters, and late-night meetings. The long work hours can be attributed to a few factors. As previously explained, campaigns are often described as “scrappy,” because there never seems to be enough resources or people to complete the necessary work. Additionally, campaign workers need to be available outside of the traditional 9-5 hours to canvass voters and train volunteers in the evening after their workday. The intensity of campaign work also has a temporal arch: as the election date gets closer, the campaign activity ramps up to execute “Get Out the Vote” efforts. Hassan illustrated this pattern:

As the date is getting closer, you have that deadline anxiety... that part-time job may become full-time, and that full-time job may become very, very, very overtime. To the point where you are sleeping two hours a night, and then going right back to the office to launch canvassers. And sometimes you just don't have a day off for a month.

These factors add up to an expectation that campaign workers will “give their life to the campaign” and do “whatever it takes” to win, reflecting the extent to which campaigns control workers' lives.

As Marx famously argued, the worker in capitalist society is forced to give their entire selves to their work to the extent that they no longer have autonomy over their labor, but rather their work comes to control them. Workers' inability to assert agency over their work leads them

to feel alienated from the product of their labors, the acts of production, their own bodies, and other people (Marx 1932). Marx based his analysis on work in industrial society, focusing mainly on factory workers engaging in manual, wage-based labor. In contrast, progressive campaign workers in the post-industrial era are ideologically driven and engage in labor that is social, emotional, professionalized, and only occasionally physical. Nonetheless, I assert that campaign workers experience similar alienation and exploitation.

To apply Marx's concept of alienation in industrial work to the post-industrial era progressive campaign worker, I will utilize literature by Guy Standing (2011, 2014) on the topic of precarity. Standing updates Marx's category of the proletariat to account for the rise in precarious work today, arguing that a new class of "precariats" has emerged. This chapter recognizes that the contemporary progressive campaign worker is part of the precariat and explores how the concept of alienation can be applied to a group of workers in this new class.

In the previous chapter, I described the ways in which campaign staff find their work exciting, valuable, and fulfilling. While participants spoke at length about these positive aspects of campaign work, they also emphasized the challenges they faced as a result of the all-consuming, precarious nature of the work. In this chapter, I explore the impact of these challenges, utilizing literature in industrial sociology to demonstrate that progressive campaigns rely on exploitative work practices to garner support for their candidate's platform, despite their stated progressive values. Applying a Marxist framework, I demonstrate how campaign workers become alienated from their bodies, their relationships with others outside of politics, the process of electoral organizing, and politics as a whole. I argue that the working conditions which engender this multifaceted alienation can be attributed to 1) the tension of engaging with progressive politics in a non-progressive, capitalist society, and 2) the expectation that campaign

workers are amenable to enduring exploitation because of their passion and commitment to the progressive cause.

Alienation From the Process of Electoral Politics

In this section, I describe the types of labor progressive campaign workers engage in, which are at times tedious and draining. I argue that electoral prioritization of target goals over campaign workers' needs leads workers to feel alienated from the process of electoral politics. In doing so, I demonstrate that electoral campaigns rely on similar exploitative and alienating practices as those found in industrial era labor.

Campaign workers' idealism and passion for progressive politics are challenged when they encounter the day-to-day, nitty-gritty of campaign work. Invariably, there are high-intensity moments on campaigns (particularly closer to election day). Yet the more typical quotidian day also contains a great degree of monotonous, tedious work. Carlos spoke to this, saying "I certainly expected a higher tempo of work... I was drafting emails, sending emails, doing call time." In some ways, Carlos's encounter with campaign drudgery is what some consider to be the heart of politics, drudgery that is often romanticized by organizers and academics alike. As Weber (1919) articulated, "politics means slow, strong drilling through hard boards." This type of tedious work can also be described in terms of what NAACP organizer Ella Baker referred to as "spadework" (Payne 2007). Spadework is not glamorous or thrilling. Rather, as labor organizer Alyssa Battistoni (2019) describes, it is "the hard labor that prepares the ground for dramatic action." At times, campaign workers find meaning when engaging in "spadework." Although they do not necessarily enjoy the drudgery of the many tedious campaign tasks, they are inspired by the notion that they are contributing to the progressive cause and draw other

benefits from their work, such as community. However, when campaigns place a strong emphasis on data, workers are more likely to describe feeling disconnected from their work.

“Numbers, Numbers, Numbers”

The focus on numbers in electoral campaigns is consistent with their primary goal: to win a certain number of votes. Campaign workers like to talk about the “field margin” when determining the path to an electoral victory. Campaign managers determine that a certain number of voters will likely vote for their candidate and a certain number will likely vote against or not at all. There are also persuadable voters who will “turn out” for your candidate if convinced. The field margin accounts for campaign staff’s ability to persuade and mobilize these voters to shift the margin-of-victory by 5-7% percentage points. Campaigns create a field strategy that attempts to “turn out” enough voters to win, assigning a variety of weekly, daily, and monthly target goals to workers in order to achieve the field margin. As a result, managers and workers can become hyper-focused on the quantity of contact with voters and volunteers, often at the expense of the quality of the conversations. As election day gets closer, the target goals typically increase, with more people canvassing voters for longer hours per day (a process which campaign workers refer to as “scaling up”).

“Reaching goal” becomes priority number one on many campaigns. Victor spoke to this when he recalled an incident of a coworker who got a flat tire and was thus unable to meet goal. In response, they were simply told by their manager that the flat tire did not matter nor did anything else in their life that might impede them and that they needed to “be able to make it work.” If campaign workers fail to meet goals, there are consequences. Several participants described being on late-night Zoom calls after 10-hour workdays and having managers read out people’s numbers from the day. If a worker had not met the target goal, managers would call

them out in front of the entire staff and ask why. According to one participant, this pressured environment ensured that participants reached goal, even if this meant only letting the phone ring a few times before hanging up.

Campaign workers find this focus on reaching goal to be frustrating and at times illogical. Nora reflected this frustration when she stated: “It just felt so pointless...I was like, why am I doing this? I'm not making any direct contact...I'm not even like talking about the campaign. It just felt so disconnected at the end...it was just all about numbers, and I wasn't having any meaningful conversations about specific issues.” Nora’s comment highlights the contrast between the idealistic image of politics and the meaningful work that campaign staff hope to engage in (and occasionally do), versus what they often face in the day-to-day reality of the work itself. When campaigns become increasingly focused on numbers and data, campaign workers lack control over their work, leading them to feel alienated from the process of electoral organizing.

The Dialer

Perhaps the starkest example of the ways in which campaign workers have minimal control over their work is that of “the dialer.” Automatic dialers are tools used by campaign volunteers and workers to reach high numbers of voters. Users log on, and the dialer calls through a list of voters. When someone picks up the phone, the dialer will beep and a script will appear for the user to read to the voter. A typical volunteer will join a phonebank and use the dialer for an hour or two once a week. But for some campaign workers, the dialer is a daily experience. Before COVID-19, campaigns viewed the dialer as *a* tool in the campaign toolbox—an effective (and expensive) one, but certainly not as highly valued as knocking doors; however, when campaigning transitioned to be virtual in March 2020, the dialer was suddenly viewed by

some as *the only* tool through which to canvass voters. As a result, campaign workers (typically field organizers) spent hours on the dialer every day, with some participants reporting spending as many as eight hours a day on the dialer.

Participants described this experience with the dialer as exhausting, miserable, and at times, traumatic. When a voter who does not want to be contacted by a campaign picks up the phone to a perky-sounding campaign worker or volunteer, they typically make a snarky comment and promptly hang up. This type of response is not the worst by far. If you were spending time on an automatic dialer in 2020, you would certainly be subject to much more upsetting phone interactions. On the dialer, progressive campaign workers would regularly reach people who believed in conspiracy theories spread by the far-right political movement QAnon. Amber recalled that when the dialer connected her to a voter, she would say: ““Hi, this is Amber with the Michigan Democratic Party’ and immediately be called a pedophile.” Other participants described being yelled at or told that Democrats deserve to die. Some also received racist and sexist threats from voters. Participants referred to these interactions as deeply distressing. Yet, their campaign culture typically encouraged them to laugh it off. Isabella shared that although she tried not to let these hostile interactions bother her, it wasn’t easy: “I was like, 18 or 19 on my first campaign and getting told to go to hell or go die by a full-grown adult...I don't think that that was okay for me to experience and just be told to laugh it off.”

These experiences and encounters on the dialer are clearly unsettling enough as isolated incidents, but the challenge of these disturbing calls is compounded as campaign workers remain on the dialer for hours on end. Rachel confessed that as a regional organizing director, she could “see the life draining out of my organizers’ faces when it was call time every day.” On one campaign, a participant described spending 3-hour periods on the dialer, having a ten-minute

break, and then being told to go back on the dialer for another 3 hours. The intensity of the dialer is also heightened by the speed at which the conversations occur. When the dialer beeps, campaign workers immediately have to start talking. As a result, they have no control over who they talk to and the pace of the call.

As Jordan explained, data directors can actually adjust the rate of calls that come in through the dialer, but most do not come from an organizing background. As such, they often increase the rate of calls with the goal of reaching as many voters as possible, without considering how this might impact the experience of the campaign worker. Jordan asserted that it is a “horrible experience where it's every second, you don't have time to breathe. As soon as you've disconnected from a guy who may be shouting at you, you're immediately connected to another person, then another person, another person.” This pattern is emotionally draining for campaign workers: within minutes they might go from being sexually harassed by a QAnon supporter to connecting with an elderly woman who needs assistance with voting by mail, to talking to a fervent voter who demands to “speak with the candidate” to discuss a niche policy. The experience can be described as emotional whiplash, as campaign workers traverse political worlds and communities, all while sitting at a desk and staring at the blue light of a computer screen for hours on end.

The automatic dialer is a relatively new and modern tool, but workers have long experienced a similar lack of control while operating on factory lines. Consider the famous clip from the 1950s sitcom, *I Love Lucy*. Lucy and Edith stand by a conveyor belt and are told that pieces of chocolate will come out when the buzzer goes off. They are instructed to wrap each chocolate in paper and to be careful not to let any chocolates pass by without being wrapped. At first, they confidently wrapped each chocolate. But then, the speed of the conveyor belt increases

rapidly. Lucy and Edith become frantic and manage the too-rapid pace by stuffing the unwrapped chocolates into their clothes and mouths.

This comedic scene demonstrates a concept referred to by labor scholars as the “speedup,” which is the process by which workers are forced to work harder and faster, with the expectation that they can produce more in less time. The “speedup regime” was a particular grievance of autoworkers in the first half of the 20th century. The president of General Motors Alfred P. Sloan Jr. described the speedup as follows: “Speed! Do what you are doing but do it faster. Double your capacity. Quadruple it. Double it again. At times it seemed like madness. (Edsforth and Asher, 1995:71)” Like Lucy in the chocolate factory or the autoworkers described by Sloan, campaign workers experience the madness of the speedup. Everything ramps up as election day draws closer: more volunteers need to be recruited, more doors need to be knocked on, and more voters must be contacted using the uncontrollable, fast-paced dialer. On campaigns that rely heavily on the auto-dialer, the productivity of campaign staff is so intensely regulated that workers are told how long they must stay on the dialer to the minute, being allotted what Braverman refers to as “‘humane’ allowances” to use the bathroom (1974:178). When campaign workers fail to match the pace of the systematic speedup, managers use tactics akin to those used by auto-plant managers: they increase quotas, intimidate workers, and elevate the fastest workers (Edsforth and Asher, 1995:73).

Comparing the campaign staff to the industrial worker highlights an aspect of electoral organizing that challenges the campaign workers’ autonomy as they are expected to work at an ever-increasing capacity. Similar to auto-manufacturers like Sloan who felt “there was never enough automobiles to meet the demand,” campaign managers assert that there is no point at which a campaign has done enough. As a result, campaign staff’s work is never seen as sufficient

because the speed and expectations continue to increase throughout the campaign. The pressure this places on the campaign workers is intensified by the social and emotional labor the work entails. Before “jumping on the dialer” or beginning volunteer recruitment calls, campaign workers are encouraged to “smile when you dial.” This deceptively cheerful mantra serves as a reminder to the campaign worker that they cannot merely read through a script, but rather they must convey energy and excitement to the voter on the other end of the call. Given the intense speed at which one moves through calls on the dialer and the verbal harassment that sometimes occurs on these calls, being asked to “smile when you dial” can be draining for workers.

This aspect of the experience can be described as emotional labor, a concept described by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in the seminal text *The Managed Heart*. When engaging in emotional labor, workers are expected to “manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines” (Wharton, 2009:147). This process can lead to emotional dissonance. For example, suppose a campaign worker has just been sexually harassed by a voter on the phone. Ten seconds later, the dialer beeps and they are connected to a civically engaged voter who is undecided on who to vote for in the election. The campaign worker then has to muster up a cheerful voice and demeanor although they are still reeling from the previous call. This process of “surface acting” (essentially faking emotions) leads the campaign worker to feel a lack of authenticity and dissonance. Research on emotional labor indicates that surface acting leads to increased stress and lower job satisfaction (Wharton 2009:159).

In Marxist terms, emotional labor on the campaign alienates the worker both from themselves and from the process of production. As workers experience emotional dissonance, the norms of the labor process take precedent over their genuine emotions, disconnecting the worker from their internal world. Furthermore, this disconnect leads the campaign worker to feel

detached from the process of production as they are forced to follow the emotional rules of electoral organizing. In this scenario, the campaign worker engages in emotional labor to convince the voter that the candidate's platform aligns with their interests. Thus, they themselves become the object of unjust labor practices, perhaps to an even greater degree than the industrial worker who labors on a physical product that exists external to themselves. This sense of alienation is heightened when campaign workers feel that the product of their labor (the campaign platform) does not align with their political values, a topic I turn to next.

Alienation from the Campaign and Political Product

Progressive campaign platforms typically advocate for equity, economic justice, and the rights of workers; however, such campaigns often fail to actualize these values in the treatment of their own campaign staff. This gap between values and practices on campaigns (which I will refer to as “value conflict”) means that progressive campaign workers are at times subject to exploitative and challenging working conditions described at the outset of this chapter. In this section, I assert that value conflict on campaigns also has another, less tangible effect — disillusionment. Campaign workers become disillusioned as they encounter value conflict and the hypocrisy present on campaigns. This leads to alienation from the campaign and from politics more broadly.

Progressive campaign workers notice value conflict in several aspects of their work. For example, Nico recalled observing candidates campaigning for health care for all, yet the campaign staff had no health care benefits. Other participants bemoaned candidates' use of progressive “buzzwords” about justice, care, and community while simultaneously creating “exploitative” work environments in which the well-being of staff was disregarded. Isabella and

several other participants also highlighted their frustration working on campaigns that advocated for a living wage but did not pay their interns or fellows.

The value conflict workers experience on self-declared progressive campaigns engenders disenchantment and disillusionment with progressive politics, as campaign workers feel that professional politicians fail to “walk the walk.” Participants emphasized that this failure to live up to campaign values not only makes the work environment challenging but also has broader implications. Rachel asserted that “the way that you treat your staff on a campaign is very indicative of the way you treat your constituents.” As Rachel described, when campaign workers experience poor working conditions themselves, they become skeptical about the integrity of their candidate. Workers’ frustration and disillusionment with politics intensify as they not only endure exploitative conditions but also begin to feel that their efforts at work will contribute to electing someone who no longer aligns with their values.

As Nora spent more time working on “toxic” campaigns that did not “practice what they preached,” her view of politics shifted more broadly:

“I became disillusioned with politics. Like, these are the people that are supposed to be caring about me, right? These are the people who I’m supposed to be most politically aligned... if they’re treating me and other workers for them like this, there’s no way that they care about other people that don’t work for them.”

As their idealistic view of politics and politicians fade, campaign workers like Nora experience disillusionment and distrust of both the candidate and the electoral process. Nonetheless, as workers (and not volunteers) they must continue to attempt to “sell” the campaign platform to voters, generating feelings of alienation from the politics and the product of their labor. This

sense of alienation is heightened in the context of campaign workers' rigorous schedule which demands their near-constant labor, which I will describe further in the next section.

Alienation From the Body and Self

The toll campaigns can have on the worker is multi-faceted and compounded. In this section, I examine this toll and how conditions described by participants are at times harmful to campaign workers and put them at risk. Structurally, campaign work schedules are intensive and limit workers' ability to care for their emotional and physical needs. Participants also described a campaign culture that encourages them to prioritize their work above their bodily needs. These conditions contribute to the third type of alienation experienced by campaign workers — alienation from the body and self.

Violet described working 90 hours a week on a primary campaign: "I was barely sleeping, barely eating, didn't drink any water because I was out all day... coffee in the morning, coffee at night. It's not healthy." In a more severe situation, Andrea described being sick with pneumonia and having her boss ask her to go out in a blizzard to deliver something to a fundraiser. When she explained that she was sick, her boss said "Well, do you care about winning?" And because Andrea did care deeply about winning the race, she went out in the blizzard and continued to work with pneumonia for two weeks. In addition to impacting physical health, the intensity of campaign culture can also be damaging for workers' mental health. Several participants shared that they struggled with mental illness while engaging in campaign work. For example, Farah explained that the pressure she experienced on campaigns exacerbated her generalized anxiety disorder.

The negative health impact of campaign work is made worse by the challenges workers face accessing health care, as the majority of progressive campaigns do not offer health care benefits. Furthermore, even when campaign workers have the financial means to access care, they often struggle to find the time to do so. For example, it is challenging to find a time to see a therapist or go to a doctor. This might lead to putting off regular doctor and dentist visits until after the election, thereby increasing the likelihood of more serious health issues later on. Jordan shared that when he had a doctor's appointment, his entire field team had to come together to figure out how they were going to reassign who would knock on the doors Jordan had been assigned. This anecdote reflects the blurring of work/life boundaries on campaigns in which leaving the office for a few hours to seek medical care becomes a burden on the whole staff.

In addition to mental and physical health risks caused by the intense work schedule, some campaign workers also find themselves in situations in which their safety is threatened. Participants recalled their candidate and campaign office receiving death threats. And, in one instance, a man with an arrest record for threatening President Obama made repeated visits to the campaign office. Nathan described working on a campaign that received a particularly large number of threats. These threats were only known to himself and his supervisor. He commented, "we're literally putting our lives on the line for next to minimum wage." The threats to campaign workers' safety and health (either real or perceived) lead workers to feel "expendable" and take a toll on their emotional well-being, increasing the stress workers are already under.

While all campaign workers are susceptible to these threats to their safety, some may be especially at risk due to their perceived race, ethnicity, and gender identities. Campaign workers of color and the staff of candidates of color often face more frequent and severe threats. For example, Andrew described that his family feared for his safety when he started knocking doors

as a Brown, gay organizer in rural areas: “They were like, what if somebody pulls a gun on you? Or what if somebody calls the cops on you?” Andrew explained that canvassing in this area was more daunting for him in comparison to some of his coworkers because of his race and the fact that he has a criminal record: “Let's be honest. A Brown person working in rural Wisconsin...that in itself presents a lot of challenges.” In addition, some female identified participants noticed a pattern that seemed to be related to how voters reacted to their gender. Emily, a 29-year-old campaign worker from Florida described facing repeated sexual harassment from multiple voters she had contacted. She asserted that this experience is more common among female campaign staffers like herself. Incidents of harassment in campaign work may have a more severe impact on survivors of sexual assault, like Emily. Campaign workers ability to cope with harassment on the campaign may vary based on both their previous experiences and gender, given that women and transgender individuals are more likely to experience sexual assault and harassment than men (Kearl 2018). Thus, campaign workers may face varying levels of harassment risk, depending on their gender and racial identities.

Irrespective of identity, nearly all participants described a structure and culture on most campaigns that demands workers prioritize their labor over their emotional and physical needs. This is consistent with Marx’s assertion, “the worker puts his life into the object, but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object.” (1932). The “object” in this quotation can be thought of as the electoral campaign— campaign workers give nearly all of themselves to the political cause to the extent that it holds power over them. Furthermore, participants also conveyed that the all-consuming nature of their work prevented them from developing hobbies and engaging in creative activities from which they could draw comfort and meaning. Thus, the campaign worker may become disconnected from their creative, physical, and emotional needs. This disconnect

may precipitate campaign workers feeling estranged from their “species-being,” or personhood. As Marx asserts, estranged labor “estranges man from his own body...and his spiritual aspect, his *human* aspect” (1932: 151).

Alienation From Others

A key feature of work in capitalist society is that its impact extends far beyond the workplace or work hours. In this section, I demonstrate that campaign workers’ rigorous work schedules can have negative consequences on their relationships outside of the campaign sphere. Participants’ experiences suggest that campaign work engenders isolation and alienation from others in two ways: by limiting the time available to sustain relationships and by impeding the ability to connect emotionally.

Participants described struggling to find time to connect with their family and friends. Campaign workers are often physically isolated from their communities because they move to rural areas for campaigns. In addition to the impediment of geographical distance, campaign workers also experience emotional isolation which may stem from several sources. First, they often feel that people who do not work in politics cannot understand the intensity of their unique work life. Additionally, participants also noted a further sense of isolation that is particular to being *progressive* campaign workers. Being progressive often entails operating in opposition to the Democratic Party and outside of the mainstream political world. This outsider status may augment campaign workers feelings of exclusion, loneliness, and isolation.

The isolation and rigorous work schedule can have a long-term impact on campaign workers’ relationships. Amber spoke about how the structure of campaign work impacts her family planning: “I’m 25. If I do 2022 and then I do 2024, do I get married in 2023? Or let’s say I

want to have kids and I have kids in 2025, and then I can't do campaigns for like four years.”

Amber’s thought process reflects the complex ways in which her work seeps into her personal life. Amber will have to plan major life events around election cycles if she wants to continue campaign work. This reality is one of the factors that drive progressives away from the field. Choosing to continue with campaign work, Amber confessed, “might lead to divorce for me and my fiancé.”

Marx asserts that workers feel estranged from others because they come to realize that their labor does not belong to themselves but to other men. This rationale may apply to campaign workers to a degree, as they too labor within a capitalist society (evidenced by participants' descriptions of feeling anger and hostility towards some of their managers); however, campaign workers' estrangement from others is distinct from that of an industrial worker because campaign workers approach politics as a vocation. Workers feel called to progressive politics, draw fulfillment from their work, and build their identity around it. As a result, progressive campaign workers feel estranged from people who do not share this calling. For example, Ella explained: “I really don't have many non-political friends anymore...I have no personality outside of my work.” Participants like Ella described that when they did have time to connect with people not involved in campaign work, they struggled to convey the intensity of their work experience and felt as though their friends and family did not understand. In addition, they had difficulty discussing topics other than work because it felt so all-consuming. These factors contribute to campaign workers sense of estrangement from their social network. This sense of estrangement is then intensified by the day-to-day conditions on campaigns that demand workers' near-constant physical and emotional focus and presence.

Campaign Work in an Era of Precarity

Thus far, I have analyzed the challenges faced by campaign workers using a Marxist framework. While some aspects of campaign work hold similarities to industrial labor, work and society have transformed since industrialization in ways that create new conditions for the worker. The modern campaign worker operates in a neoliberal era of digitization and globalization. In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Guy Standing (2011) argues that in this era, a new mass class has emerged of people who experience precarious labor. In this section, I apply Standings analysis to assert that the alienating and exploitative conditions participants described can, in part, be attributed to the precarious nature of campaign work. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that although electoral campaigns have unique working conditions, many of the challenges campaign workers face can be connected to the broader trend in labor identified by Standing. In addition, I explore campaign workers' varied experiences of status frustration, an aspect of precaritized work.

Standing defines the precariat as a "class in the making," a neologism of the terms "precarious" and "proletariat" (2011:8). Similar to how Marx framed the bourgeois vs. the proletariat, Standing asserts that modern society has created the salariat and the precariat. Standing explores several possible defining features of the precariat. Ultimately, he asserts that the precariat is someone who lacks seven types of labor security (2014:12). Explicating all seven forms is not within the scope of this study, however in essence these forms entail lack of job and employment security as well as worker's protections. As a result of these labor insecurities, the precariat experiences "structural alienation" (Standing 2014:970). Applying Standing's concept to the campaign begs the question: are progressive campaign workers part of the precariat class?

The lifestyle of the progressive campaign worker is marked by patterns of job insecurity and instability as workers routinely move from campaign to campaign and state to state and face periods of unemployment after elections. Participants described this pattern as highly stressful: “It’s that soul-crushing feeling you get when you start GOTV⁴, you’re like, shit this job is ending in a month. I need to find something to do next,” Jordan said. Other participants explained that they have to find new jobs every 6-8 months, which often involves moving to a new state. This process makes it difficult for campaign workers to accrue savings, as campaigns typically do not offer moving bonuses. Frequent moves can also negatively impact campaign workers’ rental history. Furthermore, the moves and periods of unemployment make it difficult for campaign workers to join non-work communities and build sustaining relationships. This pattern produces what Standing (2011) refers to as the “precaritized mind,” characterized by a sense that the precariat lacks control over time. The campaign worker adopts this mindset as they face a variety of “unknown unknowns” and navigate job insecurity.⁵

Standing categorizes the precariat into three types: the atavists (often an offshoot of manual laborers), nostalgics (often migrants), and progressives. He explains that progressive precariats are “the highly educated, mostly young, who were led to believe that in following tertiary schooling they would be enabled to have a career, a trajectory of labour security and social mobility” (Standing 2014: 972). This description aligns well with what we know about the typical identity of progressive campaign workers. Standing asserts that progressives experience “acute status frustration,” as they fail to actualize the stable career promised by their education and instead fall into “precarity traps.”

⁴ Get Out the Vote

⁵ “Unknown unknowns” is a phrase borrowed by Standing (2014) which is attributed to United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Standing's analysis of the precariat provides context for understanding campaign workers' response to difficult working conditions. The conditions are objectively difficult, but they are not necessarily more intensive than several other professions. For example, perhaps if most campaign staff were raised working class and with the expectation that they would work in the service sector or in a factory, they would not face the acute frustration Standing describes. Or to contrast from another perspective, doctors navigate an extremely intensive work schedule (at least in residency) but may not experience the added challenge of status frustration as their career is stable and highly regarded by others (similarly lawyers in big firms and investment bankers.) In contrast, many progressive campaign workers experience structural privileges and hold idealistic expectations for campaign work, but then face the drudgery and exploitation it entails, leading to status frustration and disillusionment.

Applying Standing's discussion of status frustration and precarity to campaign work highlights that participant's perception of their work is not just a product of campaign conditions, but that it is also intertwined with aspects of one's identity and upbringing. Thus, workers from different socio-economic backgrounds likely experience campaigns differently. It is difficult to draw conclusions about how a participant's class impacted their campaign experience due to the relatively small sample size; however, it is notable that the participant with perhaps the most positive outlook on campaign work in this study is someone with a history of significant disadvantage.

Andrew immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines at age 14. In 2006, his family's business collapsed as a result of the subprime mortgage crisis: "I had a pretty good amount of money for college that got flushed down the toilet because of that. So, I had to quit school and help out my family." When Andrew got involved in campaign work as a volunteer, he didn't

think campaign work was an option for him as a college drop out with a criminal record. So, when a campaign manager took a chance on him, Andrew was thrilled. “It was exhilarating, because I was doing something that I didn't think I was going to be able to do.” When I asked participants if they ever thought about quitting campaign work, Andrew was the only one who said no. “I love this job. And, you know, I can honestly say that I'll probably be in this job until I can't walk anymore. Which is probably because there's a lot of walking involved in it.”

It is worth noting that the precariat as defined by Standing is distinct from the campaign worker described by participants in one key aspect: Standing explains that the precariat feels frustrated because their work does not involve the building of trusting and meaningful relationships (2014). This frustration is certainly felt by campaign workers in some aspects of their work, such as when they are on the automatic dialer. But as I described in the previous chapter, oftentimes campaign workers do feel a sense of connection and meaning in their work relationships.

Participants described facing nearly all aspects of precarity detailed by Standing. Yet, at times, they also experience the joy and fulfillment of building meaningful relationships at work. These two facets of campaign work reflect the “push and pull” of campaigns that participants struggled to decipher. Campaign workers’ ability to build relationships at work may indicate that they do not perfectly align with Standing’s definition of the precariat; however, I argue that this ability in itself is part of what sustains their precarity. The relationships and community campaign workers access through their labor is part of the “pull” of campaigns and keeps workers coming back cycle after cycle. Thus, they fall back into a “precarity trap.” Furthermore, campaign workers’ ability to build meaningful relationships is threatened when campaigns function like factories, speeding workers up and striving to meet goals at all costs.

In this section, I have described how campaign workers experience precarity. I have also explored status frustration as a feature of precarity, demonstrating that participants' orientation to campaign work is likely influenced by their upbringing and class status. In addition, I have explained one way in which campaign workers differ from the precariat as defined by Standing and have asserted that this distinction does not preclude campaign workers from the precariat class. By situating the participants' experiences in the context of a rising precariat class, I have demonstrated that contemporary campaign workers' experience of alienation is tied to current trends in labor. Thus, this analysis serves to modernize the Marxist framework I have applied throughout this chapter.

Causes of These Conditions

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, progressive campaign work is challenging, precarious, and at times exploitative. Often, the working conditions on progressive campaigns are in contradiction with the values of equity and justice that campaigns advocate for in their platforms. The tendency of campaigns to fail to live up to their progressive values may reflect what Michels refers to as the "iron law of oligarchy." Michels' iron law asserts that all democratic organizations will inevitably be ruled by elites. Applying Michel's law to progressive campaigns calls attention to the fact that although progressive campaigns, in theory, aim to increase democracy, they are evidently not democratic. When participants were asked to describe the structure of the campaigns, they consistently described vertical, top-down hierarchies. Furthermore, as Laurison demonstrates, the structure and culture of campaign work often magnify inequalities in democratic participation, rather than remedy them (2013:1). Campaign politicians described by Laurison (2022) and the political consultant class may fit into this

category as they gain a reputation and loyalty on the national political circuit. However, many of the participants in this study described campaigns run by people in their 20s, who had only been working in politics for a few years and had little influence or power within the Democratic party or Washington. While these campaign managers are not part of an elite class per se, they may try to emulate elites in their managing style.

Michels' iron law can also be expanded to describe the way organizations seeking to oppose the ruling ideology may inevitably adopt its logic and practices. For example, groups that aim to be anti-racist within in a racialized society may at times perpetuate racism within their organization. Similarly, progressive campaign managers and candidates may attempt to treat their workers in ways that reflect their values; however, they operate within a non-progressive, unequal society. Thus, managers may implement the exploitative practices that been taught to them and that are expected of them by others. This analysis can be applied to nearly all types of work, as most organizations have stated values that they often fail to practice. I assert that progressive campaign work entails a particularly acute degree of value conflict. This can be explained, in part, by the ideological motivations of campaign workers as discussed earlier.

Weber's (1919) description of politics as a vocation has positive connotations— he refers to political calling using terms such as passion, personal devotion, and self-esteem. Despite Weber's positive portrayal, the framework of politics as a vocation or calling may enable the difficult working conditions described in this chapter. In "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," Fobazi Ettarh (2022) asserts that librarians are expected to view their job as sacred and heroic. She refers to this expectation as "vocational awe," which she asserts is "weaponized against the worker" to create exploitative working conditions. Due to vocational awe, good librarianship is measured not by one's ability to fulfill job duties, but by

their passionate struggle for their work. This expectation to sacrifice oneself for work has consequences for the worker. As Ettarh insists, “You can’t eat on passion. You can’t pay rent on passion. Passion, devotion, and awe are not sustainable sources of income.” In establishing a perception of work as sacred, vocational awe creates an expectation that the profession is beyond critique.

Applying Ettarh’s concept of vocational awe to progressive campaign work highlights the connection between workers' motivations for participating in campaign work and their experience of exploitative working conditions. As Jordan expressed, "a lot of the people that work on these campaigns are really idealistic, they are really committed, dedicated, passionate individuals that care about this work. And so yeah, they're gonna put up with really shit conditions, because they care about the work." Jordan’s analysis indicates that campaign workers' experience of difficult working conditions is specific to their idealistic, passionate orientation towards their work. This orientation leads campaign workers to feel they must prioritize “the mission” of a campaign over their own needs, thus making it easier for managers to exploit their labor. Participants' analyses of their own exploitation reinforce Jaffe’s (2021) thesis that the expectation to love one’s work functions to mask the coercion and exploitation workers experiences in capitalist society.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have presented the two sides of campaign work. From one perspective, campaign work is exciting, fulfilling, and skill-building. On the other hand, workers face campaign drudgery, a lack of control, and exploitative working conditions. So, in what state does this leave the campaign worker? Participants described feeling unsure of the answer themselves. In a particularly emotional interview, one participant tearfully shared that she was shocked by

her continued work on campaigns because of how terrible some of her experiences were. Similarly, Nora explained that after working on a campaign in 2020, her main takeaway was that she never wanted to do campaign work again. But when I asked Nora if she worked on another campaign after 2020, she admitted, “well, I did.”

Progressive campaign workers think about quitting, often. Several participants told me that they worked on campaigns in which they thought about quitting or leaving politics nearly every day. The main reason participants felt the need to leave campaign work was because they faced “burnout,” a concept that was referenced in 12/20 of interview participants and 61 total times in the interviews process. Ariel explained that burnout “feels like you're grieving...because you know how you want to show up, and why it's so important to you and what you're fighting for. And you just can't bring yourself to finish out a task or have a conversation in a way that would be really effective.” Ariel’s description of burnout reflects the common sentiment among campaign workers that even though they might want to continue fighting for the progressive movement, the working conditions on campaigns have led them to feel too exhausted and depleted to continue.

In this chapter, I described how campaign workers experience multiple forms of alienation as a result of exploitative and all-consuming working conditions on campaigns that claim to be progressive. This research reveals that the nature of campaign work has evolved to be increasingly precaritized and professionalized. It is therefore all the more striking that workers face exploitative conditions and forms of alienation akin to the industrial workers described by Marx. In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which progressive campaign workers assert agency over their work, resist exploitation, and minimize alienation.

CHAPTER V

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responding to Alienation and Exploitation in Campaign Work

“Workplace fights are most importantly about one of the deepest of human emotional needs: dignity” (McAlevy 2016: 2).

When Dianne Morales launched her campaign for New York City Mayor in 2021, she promised a radical platform centered on “dignity, care, and solidarity” (Getman 2021). Yet just a few months later, her staff spoke out about alleged union-busting and exploitative conditions on the campaign. “We didn't get any of that,” Violet told me, referring to how her treatment as a worker on Morales’ campaign did not reflect the principles espoused in the campaign platform. After staff who had been instrumental in an ongoing unionization effort were fired, campaign workers like Violet reached out to the press in frustration. Soon, the New York Times reported: “Dianne Morales Tries to Calm a Sudden Crisis in Her Campaign” (Hughes 2021).

Campaign staff voiced their resistance to the conditions on Morales’s campaign for almost a month. They contacted newspapers, made their grievances known on social media, engaged in a work stoppage, and protested outside Morales’s campaign office (Chávez 2021). In response, Morales fired over 40 staffers. After the resistance actions of the staff, progressive groups and politicians began rescinding their endorsements. By election day, Morales’s promising progressive platform centered on dignity and care was viewed as a “cautionary tale” (Chávez 2021). Morales’s campaign and its internal politics were exposed and widely reported on. As Violet noted, however, the issues raised were not necessarily unique. Violet maintained: “it's not singular to the Dianne Morales campaign, this is a widespread epidemic of a complete lack of dignity.”

In nearly every progressive space I have been in, campaign workers have made it known: progressive campaigns were not treating them with the values their candidates espoused, and

something had to be done about it. These conversations have persisted over the two years since I began exploring this issue. Beyond discussing the challenges of campaign work online and amongst each other, how are progressive campaign workers responding to their predicament?

I argue that progressive campaign workers respond to exploitative and alienating working conditions in three ways: by seeking alternative work (whether on a different campaign or outside of electoral politics), by organizing for better working conditions, and by subverting direct requests from managers and redirecting their work activities to tasks they find less stressful and to relationships that are more personally meaningful. These methods of response hold similarities to a framework that Albert O. Hirschman (1970) refers to as “exit, voice, and loyalty.” Hirschman argues that when societal institutions or organizations inevitably fail to live up to expectations, members either exit the organizations or voice their dissatisfaction to management. Their choice is influenced by the degree to which they are loyal to the organization. Hirschman's model is fitting for the topic of this chapter (campaign workers’ response to challenging working conditions) as it has been a seminal text in the field of job dissatisfaction (Farrell and Rusbult 1992). The framework has also been applied to a wide range of topics including migration, political parties, and social relationships (Dowding 2015).

In this chapter, I will describe and evaluate the ways in which campaign workers respond to burnout and alienation through the application of Hirschman’s model. In doing so, I add to this model by including a type of worker response which was present in my data but not reflected in the framework of exit, voice, and loyalty (I will refer to this response as “quiet resistance”). Ultimately, I argue that progressive campaign workers may be more likely to resist exploitative working conditions than other types of workers due to their progressive ideology and training; however, they are also limited by structural constraints.

Exiting the Campaign

Leaving the Field of Electoral Politics

In response to pervasive exploitation and burnout, a significant portion of progressive campaign workers leave electoral politics entirely (Butler 2020:353). According to my data, these workers tend to move on to political consulting, non-profit work, education, and labor organizing. There may also be a large contingent of campaign workers who leave the field to apply their data skills to jobs in the technology sector. For example, Farah, a 24-year-old former campaign worker from Arizona, explained that she switched from campaign work to education technology because in “ed-tech” she could still do mission-driven work but with more benefits, like unlimited paid time off and a family and wellness stipend. Farah asserted that the career switch felt like “a breath of fresh air after being in progressive politics,” where she felt values were stated but not practiced in reality. For these reasons, Farah explained that this type of career path is common, referring to it as the “progressive politics to tech pipeline.” Participants like Farah who chose to leave electoral politics emphasized their desire for a more stable job and income and a better work-life balance.⁶

The career paths of campaign workers reinforce the arguments made in Chapter 3 about the evolution of campaign work. In the era of political machines, campaign workers were rewarded for their work with bureaucratic jobs as patronage. Campaign workers today are distinctly more independent. When campaign work becomes unsustainable, individuals leave the field and apply the skills they have honed elsewhere. For the most part, they try to either continue having an impact at a mission-driven organization (i.e., advocacy organization or

⁶ 50% of participants were not currently working on a campaign at the time of the study, although some of these participants were considering returning to campaign work

union), join the technology sector, or work in a field that combines both as in Farah's example. These secondary career choices reflect the professionalization of campaign work.

The exodus of young and skilled workers causes campaigns to struggle with retention and turnover. This instability has significant ramifications for the progressive movement. It depletes the skills, resources, and diversity of many campaigns. When turnover rates are high, campaigns are forced to devote precious time and resources to the hiring and training of new staff as workers cycle in and out of campaign offices. Often, campaigns fail to allocate the necessary resources to onboard new workers, leading to what Jordan described as a "haphazard hiring structure." Thus, the high rates of attrition on campaigns drain resources and leave workers feeling untrained and unsupported. Andrea insisted that the turnover rates are not sustainable for the progressive movement: "[campaigns] lose all of the talent and knowledge and expertise from the previous cycles simply because we burnt out 90% of our workforce." She also asserted that campaign workers who remain in the field often have privileges that enable them to sustain the difficult lifestyle. For example, they have family members who are able to provide additional financial support. Thus, people from working-class backgrounds are less likely to continue with campaign work. This may be a cause of less diversity among campaign staff, both in terms of economic background and most likely race, given the well-documented racial-wealth gap in the U.S. (Bhutta et al. 2020). Participants noticed the homogeneity of workers on campaigns to be particularly acute at the management level, indicating that campaign workers may be more likely to leave the field if they do not have an economic safety net to help sustain the unstable campaign lifestyle (among other factors).

Setting Boundaries in Campaign Job Searches

Alternatively, some campaign workers chose to stay in the field but leave certain types of campaigns or campaign roles. For example, Rachel explained: “every time I wrap a campaign, I try to conceptualize how I can be more selective next time so that I don't suffer as much.” To accomplish this, she considers the size and structure of the campaign she will work on next and attempts to set more boundaries around her work hours. Campaign workers also decide to avoid taking on certain roles that entail a heavy burden of emotional labor such as working on a field team doing voter canvassing. Similarly, Jonathan shared that he set a boundary by deciding that he would only look for campaign jobs in his current state of residence: “this is the first time in my career where I'm saying I'm not just going to move somewhere for a job.” After six years of campaign work, Jonathan explained that he is ready to “give up” the aspects of campaign work that expect him to “pack up and be a nomad.”

Jonathan became more selective in his campaign job search only after working several campaign cycles, indicating that a younger, less experienced campaign worker might not be able to make these choices. Thus, progressive campaign workers do not always have the wherewithal to exit their campaign or campaign role and join another one that better meets their needs and expectations. Exiting is also more difficult for progressive campaign workers during general elections because there is often only one progressive or Democratic candidate in a race. Furthermore, participants described the challenges of campaign work as structural, and not solely the result of poor management. If a progressive campaign worker leaves a campaign with exploitative work practices for another campaign, they may receive better treatment but will still have to navigate a precarious, all-consuming career. An exception to this might be if a worker moves from a non-unionized campaign to one with a recognized union, a possibility that appealed to participants.

Voice and Unionization

Some campaign workers who remain in the field respond to difficult working conditions by voicing their dissatisfaction and organizing for better conditions. The primary method by which participants were interested in doing so was through unionization efforts. In this section, I explore how the complex relationship between labor unions and the Democratic Party is reflected in the unionization efforts of progressive campaign workers. I describe participants' attitudes towards labor unions and their experiences resisting exploitative conditions. I argue that in some instances, campaign unionization improves conditions for workers and engenders solidarity among campaign staff; at the same time, progressive campaign workers face barriers in the unionization process which can precipitate further burnout.

Labor and the Democratic Party

Labor scholars and political scientists argue that historically, labor unions have been “major players” in the Democratic Party (Dark 1999: 2). The close relationship between the unions and the Democratic Party was established in the 1930s when unions were prominent backers of FDR’s New Deal (Leon 2019). Ties between the two groups continued to develop through the 20th century and became centralized in 1955 when the AFL and CIO merged (AFL-CIO). In the past, union leaders forged relationships with public officials in order to procure workers’ protections and benefits with the presumption that electeds would earn the “union vote” in exchange. Simultaneously, union officials have also promoted a broader, liberal agenda in collaboration with Democratic Party officials (Asher et al. 2001:65).

Although union density has continuously declined since the 1950s, scholars argue that the political influence of labor unions among U.S. democratic voters remains strong (Dark 1999:14).

The structure of labor unions is advantageous for electoral influence as unions have a history of collective action. Membership may be dispersed throughout the country, and be “fragmented and decentralized” in structure, all of which facilitate grassroots mobilization for political candidates (Asher et al. 2001:108). Warren (2010) asserts that “the labor movement is still the most powerful core constituency of the national Democratic Party by several measures, including campaign contributions, grassroots mobilization efforts of the Party’s key voters, lobbying and setting the Party’s legislative agenda” (286). Following the Republic Party’s electoral success in 1994, the labor movement shifted to a more aggressive, grassroots political strategy spearheaded by AFL-CIO president John Sweeney (Asher et al. 2001:104). Since then, labor unions have by and large continued to support the Democratic Party through financial contributions and the mobilization of their base. In the 2020 election, unions spent over \$1.8 billion on political spending, the vast majority of which went to supporting Democratic candidates (Pino 2021).

Despite the labor movement’s broad and longstanding support for the Democratic Party, scholars argue that the relationship has also entailed conflict and tension. Historian Mike Davis (1980) asserts that labor has a “barren marriage” to the Democratic Party, in which unions devote resources to the party but do not receive the same support in return.

This uneasy and unequal relationship was reflected in participants’ campaign experiences and interactions with party officials. Jordan recalled a startling comment made by the director of a North Carolina Democratic Party Campaign on his first day of work. He had parked his car that had a sticker from IBEW, a union for electrical workers, and his supervisor promptly remarked, “I don’t like that!” Jordan expressed confusion about his supervisor’s anti-union response: “This is the Democratic Party, I don’t really understand where you’re coming from.” This anecdote aptly reflects the “barren marriage” described by Davis (1980). Similarly, Nathan noticed this

unequal relationship on Democratic campaigns, which he observed have “happily taken their [union’s] money, their endorsements, and their time, but they haven’t done anything for it.”

Nathan’s analysis and Jordan’s interaction with his supervisor reflect the dissonance between campaign platforms and Democratic Party leadership’s relationship to the labor movement, which may entail more lip service than genuine ideological commitment.

In addition, these sorts of negative responses to unionization reveal that party officials and campaign managers may align more with employer interests than progressive values. As Weber observed, “in America parties are run on markedly capitalistic lines” and aim (at least in part) to produce profit (1919:347). Weber’s observation is still true today (and arguably more so), as evidenced by Party’s involvement in the multi-billion-dollar industry of political campaigns and connection to the political consultant class (Grossman 2009 and Sheingate 2016). Thus, campaign managers can be viewed as bosses with capitalist interests not unlike managers of factory workers or a fast-food chain. When workers indicate interest in leveraging their collective power to improve their conditions, it can be viewed as a threat to management.

Resistance to unionization among progressive campaign managers and Democratic Party officials also holds similarities to how managers of labor unions have historically responded to unionization efforts by staff. As labor unions grew bigger and transformed into bureaucratic organizations, staff began to unionize due to concerns about job security and salary equity. In these early unionization efforts by professional union staff, management’s response was often antagonistic and some of these efforts were met with the same degree of resistance and conflict as in other work settings (Clark 1989). If labor unions themselves were resistant to staff unionization, it is perhaps not surprising that Democratic party officials are less than eager when their own staff expresses interest in labor unions.

Campaigns and Labor Unions

When asked about how they view labor unions generally, participants consistently responded with respect, support, and admiration. “I love unions!” Lucas exclaimed, sharing that he had even changed his social media handles to “union fan account.” Some participants identified unions as the “backbone” of the Democratic Party and argued that supporting workers’ rights to organize for better conditions is central to the progressive platform. Participants were not only enthusiastic about labor unions in general but also excited about the prospect of unionization on progressive campaigns.

Unionization on Democratic and progressive campaigns has been a particularly lively and contentious topic within progressive politics in the last few election cycles. Recently, the unionization of campaign staff has become a more prominent issue. In 2019, Senator Bernie Sanders’ staff became the first presidential campaign to unionize. They were soon followed by workers on several other campaigns including those of Senator Elizabeth Warren, Representative Eric Swalwell, Vice President Biden, Andrew Yang, and Julian Castro’s Presidential campaign (Butler 2020). Progressive unionization efforts have also been advanced by the Campaign Workers Guild, a labor union established in 2017 by a group of current and former campaign workers (Butler 2020). In addition to increased unionization on electoral campaigns, staff at the Democratic National Committee recently voted to unionize (Rafford 2022), a development of historical significance.

Progressive campaign workers interviewed in this study were steadfast in their support for the unionization of campaigns: “everyone should have a union...campaign workers are workers and workers need unions.” Furthermore, participants highlighted that the support Democratic campaigns receive from unions makes it especially important that they have

unionized staff. Andrea contended that Democratic campaigns, and progressive campaigns in particular, have “touted their support of organized labor and strengthening organized labor.” Thus, “it only makes sense that campaign workers also have unions and that management on those campaigns treat those unions with the same respect that they do the unions that cut large checks for their campaigns.” Andrea’s assessment represents one reason behind progressive campaign workers’ support for unionization— their desire for the Democratic Party and the progressive movement to follow through on their claims to support their labor movement.

Unionization is not only an ideological interest for progressive campaign workers, but it is also viewed by some as necessary to achieve better working conditions for themselves. Participants felt that they did not have the agency to improve their working conditions as individuals; however, forming campaign unions would allow them to leverage collective power to improve both their work experience and the quality of their work. According to Rachel, the best method to improve campaign working conditions is by “organizing ourselves as staffers and building up collective power to say no, actually I don’t need to spend all of GOTV⁷ pacing around popping out of VAN⁸, vomiting, and just a giant ball of stress.” Rachel insisted that “unionization is the best and at least only existing tool that we have to sustain a progressive or leftist movement” and to “fight burnout and exploitation in electoral organizing.” Amber concurred that unionization would decrease burnout by minimizing stress in general, and specifically stressed caused by the extensive time campaign workers devote to ensure that they can pay their bills, make rent, and access healthcare.

⁷ Get Out the Vote

⁸ The Democratic Party’s voter database which is used mainly for field organizing and fundraising purposes. Interestingly, the software is also heavily used by labor organizations, further reflecting the ties between the Democratic Party and labor unions. See Hersh (2015) for more information.

Participants' interest in unionization reflects Hirschman's (1970) concept of "voice." Interestingly, Hirschman asserts that the categories of exit and voice represent a "fundamental schism" between economics and politics. A consumer's choice to leave a company when dissatisfied and find another instead reflects an economic paradigm in which there are two options: one exits or does not. This method is impersonal and indirect. In contrast, Hirschman describes voice as "messy," because it can vary in degree of protest, be expressed publicly or privately, and is aimed directly at the firm or organization by the consumer. Hirschman's assertion that voice is "political action par excellence," suggests that progressive campaign workers might be more drawn to it than other organization members due to their political orientation. Participants' observations support this hypothesis. Andrea asserted that while the exploitative working conditions are not unique to progressive campaigns, "workers on progressive campaigns probably have a lower tolerance for that type of thing." In addition to the value conflict progressive campaign workers experience, Andrea suggested that they might be more likely to organize for better conditions because most people within progressive politics have had exposure to community organizing and are more comfortable with confrontation than might be true in more moderate environments. For these reasons, progressive campaign workers may be more likely than moderate campaign workers or other types of workers to use voice to improve working conditions and lessen value conflict. While the truth of this assertion remains an empirical question, Hirschman's framing contextualizes participants' eagerness to voice their dissent and organize for better conditions.

The Unionization Process

Whereas exit is described as a simple economic and direct choice, Hirschman explains that voice is often viewed as “cumbrous.” Campaign workers use voice in the process of unionization in an effort to minimize exploitation and burnout by bargaining for a cap on their weekly hours, less time on the automatic dialer, and increased pay/benefits. While campaign workers’ unionization efforts are sometimes successful in improving conditions, the unionization process itself can be complicated and stressful. Participants shared that there was “palpable tension” between staff and management throughout the unionization and negotiation process.

Jordan described his experience unionizing on a North Carolina Democratic Party campaign as both “a great experience” and “one of the worst experiences of my life.” He explained that the process was tense and messy, as workers encountered pushback from management, disagreement among workers, and union-busting. When staff on Jordan’s campaign decided to unionize, Jordan felt it was out of necessity as workers felt unable to continue working under such difficult conditions. He recalled: “We had a voluntary work stoppage at one point. We had a moment where on an all-staff call all 100 of us turned off our cameras and our profile photo on Zoom was the union logo. It was literally desperation.” After several organizing efforts by the workers on Jordan’s campaign, management “signed the final agreement a month before election day, so they dragged it out as long as they could.” Jordan’s experience demonstrates that unionization of progressive campaign workers can be a long and draining process. It is not unusual for campaign workers to endure a dragged-out unionization process that they then only benefit from for a short time before election day.

Alternatively, some participants experienced unionization efforts as empowering and as having a positive impact on their relationships with their coworkers. Violet recalled an unsuccessful unionization effort: “We were all exploited, we all went through trauma, and that

bonded us. We were in that fight together. And it was revolutionary in the sense that it was a true workers' collective, it was a moment where we realized we are the workers." Violet's experience demonstrates that even in cases in which workers do not succeed in having their union recognized, the process of forming a union and voicing workers' discontent engendered solidarity among workers. As Violet describes, the unionization process led campaign staff to develop an awareness of their needs and power as workers, not just as supporters of the campaign or members of the progressive movement. Thus, campaign workers' efforts to unionize can function to facilitate consciousness-raising and worker empowerment, concepts that are central to the progressive agenda and vision.

On campaigns in which staff did succeed in forming a union, participants were able to bargain for better working conditions. Nathan recounted that workers were less stressed after a campaign he worked on unionized. Moreover, he observed that communication among staff improved in part because internal issues could be addressed and mediated by the union representative. Nathan asserted: "I definitely think that the union helped with the quality of work and the quality of life of the workers." Similarly, Andrew explained that once his campaign unionized, they were able to bargain for days off and a less "grueling" work schedule. These changes enabled workers on that campaign to finish the campaign without being exhausted and burnt out. Andrew stated: "it helped us become better field organizers because we had our rest, we had that time to ourselves where we were thinking about the rigors of a campaign."

In summary, participants held overwhelmingly positive views of labor unions and expressed a desire to see unionization on campaigns increase in order to improve working conditions. Some participants who were involved in the unionization process on campaigns described it as draining, whereas others found it to be empowering. Some campaign workers

articulated both positive and negative components of the experience. At the same time, it is also important to note that unionization efforts alone do not eliminate the challenges campaign workers face. Firstly, when participants were part of a union, bargaining units were at times unsuccessful in achieving workers' top priorities. For example, Victor asserted that when he was hired to work on Bloomberg's presidential campaign, workers were told they would be paid through November regardless of how long Bloomberg stayed in the race. When Bloomberg changed his mind and announced he would instead be donating to Biden's campaign, the union tried to negotiate to ensure workers would get the pay they were promised, but they were "wholly unsuccessful."

Although several participants recalled their unions being successful in improving conditions, they noted that staff unions often excluded Regional Organizing Directors (RODs). RODs serve a complex role as intermediaries between entry-level organizers and management, which explains why some participants were included in unionized level staff and others were not. The exclusion of RODs from unions (which one participant explained was a condition of management to recognize the union) is especially harmful given the many responsibilities and intensity of the position. Jordan explained that so much is expected of RODs: "your regional organizing director is literally all things to you. They are your manager, they are your trainer, they are your emotional support, to some extent, they become a pseudo parent, they become a social worker." When RODs are excluded from unions, they are left unprotected and unrepresented in navigating this difficult position. This represents an issue in the way campaigns are structured, a reality that unionization efforts often fail to address.

Furthermore, unionization on campaigns is complicated by the fact that campaigns are time limited. Victor explained: "Campaigns are a finite space. They all end either when the

candidate drops out, or, you know, when they win or lose, it's harder to get demands across.”

Victor contrasted his experience on unionized campaigns with his involvement in a staff union for museum workers. With the museum, the union was already in place when Victor joined. Furthermore, it was easier for the union that represented the museum staff to advocate for workers because the museum had funds allocated for several years of staff payments, unlike campaigns which are short-term and have unpredictable funds.

Yet another challenge posed to campaign unionization is that campaigns vary greatly in terms of their size and scale. Some campaigns have hundreds of workers; however, on local campaigns, there are often only a few paid staff. In small offices, campaign workers may have titles such as “campaign manager” but have minimal pay, benefits, or agency over their work. Even on larger campaigns, managers are often left unsupported by unions. Ariel, a manager, related that her supervisors never discussed how she should oversee a unionized staff or explained what her organizers’ hours cap was. This training failure left her feeling that campaign workers aren’t being “set up for success” when unionizing (even though she was supportive of the union). Lastly, participants also lamented that even when campaign unionization led to better working conditions, the benefits obtained were short-lived. As Victor stated, “when November rolls around, that's all gone, and you don't have a guarantee of anything else until maybe the next cycle.”

Quiet Resistance: Support and Solidarity Among Campaign Workers

Thus far, I have described two categories of progressive campaign workers’ responses to their conditions: exit and voice; however, a third type of response emerged as a theme in my data not included in Hirschman’s framework. In addition to exit and voice, participants engaged in

other methods to limit exploitation and burnout. In this section, I describe these methods and refer to them as “quiet resistance.” I argue that progressive campaign workers engage in quiet resistance by subtly defying supervisors’ rules and rejecting the campaign’s focus on meeting numerical goals. Instead, they redirect by prioritizing their relationships with other campaign workers.

When Rachel was a ROD, her managers set target goals for the organizers she supervised to ensure that they would make a high number of voter outreach and recruitment calls every day. But she struggled to enforce these guidelines when she saw the negative effect they had on organizers’ mental health and productivity. So instead, she chose to quietly challenge the campaign management’s focus on workers meeting target goals:

I could see the life draining out of my organizers’ faces when it was call time every day. So, at one point I said, I'm not monitoring your dialer hours anymore. If someone on senior staff is monitoring them, they can come yell at me, and you'll never hear about it. I don't care. Because at the end of the day, the burnout that my organizers were experiencing was affecting their ability to work every other job they had to do throughout the rest of the day...I had several occasions where one of my field organizers would call me crying throughout the day. So, I just broke the rules for a while and said I don't care what you do, take care of you.

Here, Rachel described defying management’s rules in order to minimize the burnout workers on her campaign were experiencing, a choice that had several positive consequences. She noticed that it established camaraderie between her and the workers. This was especially important given that there was a culture of mistrust on the campaign before Rachel joined. Furthermore, shifting the focus away from dialer metrics enabled organizers to devote more time

to relational organizing and volunteer recruitment, which Rachel asserted are the more rewarding aspects of campaign work. By resisting instructions from management, Rachel enabled workers to move away from what McAlevey (2016) refers to as “shallow mobilization” efforts using the dialer, and to instead prioritize “deep organizing” and relationship building. Thus, independent-minded campaign workers like Rachel counter alienation and burnout by disobeying management’s rules in order to establish solidarity with their coworkers and place a renewed emphasis on what they view to be the most important elements of campaign work.

Several other participants also described bending the rules to support a coworker in a time of emotional distress. For example, Andrea recalled that when she was a Regional Organizing Director, one of her organizers was canvassing with his girlfriend and she broke up with him while they were knocking doors: “he called me pretty emotional and needed to take the day off...I called my boss who said, ‘no, he can't go home, he needs to make recruitment dials.’” Andrea disregarded her supervisor’s instructions and told the organizer to go home and take care of himself. She asked for his VAN account and started calling volunteers to cover for him and ensure he would still make goal for that day. In this example, a campaign worker chose to resist her supervisor’s over-emphasis on making goal not by voicing her dissent or leaving the campaign but rather by treating her coworker with empathy. Notably, Andrea willingly took on more recruitment calls, a task consistently described as unenjoyable by almost all participants. Thus, when participants prioritized solidarity over loyalty to management, they were able to assert agency and find meaning in aspects of campaign work that often engendered feelings of alienation. (It is worth noting, however, that this experience was raised most often by participants who had been RODs, and less often by those who had only held entry-level positions.)

In addition to defying management, progressive campaign workers minimize feelings of alienation by forging solidarity with other workers and supporting their team members. As a ROD, Emily wanted to better understand what management was asking of her organizers. To do so, she simulated a day for herself and tried to accomplish all the tasks that were expected of her organizers. This experiment helped her realize that the target goals that had been set for her team were unrealistic. After this experience, Emily felt emboldened in her efforts to advocate for her team in order to minimize their workload.

These instances in which campaign workers provided support to their staff and advocated on their behalf can also be described as emotional labor. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, engaging in emotional labor on the campaign can be draining and stressful; however, I also argue that emotional labor helps workers extract meaning and fulfillment from their work. Emotional labor can entail surface acting (which is stress-inducing), but it can also include deep acting and “spontaneous and genuine” emotional labor (both of which have positive outcomes). Humphrey et al. define deep acting as “summoning up the appropriate feelings one wants to display” (2015:749). By providing emotional support to their coworkers, progressive campaign workers can evoke feelings of connection, solidarity, and care. These emotions may feel out of reach to workers when engaging in alienating and mundane aspects of campaign work previously described. Summoning these emotions likely helps counter the alienation progressive campaign workers experience, given that deep acting is associated with a sense of personal accomplishment, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Humphrey et al. 2015:753). Moreover, Humphrey et al. assert that workers engage in deep acting as a way to “affirm their identity” (2015:749). By quietly resisting management in order to support their team, campaign workers demonstrate that they value each other as individuals and acknowledge their humanity

beyond their labor value. This stance supports and upholds their identities as progressives.

Solidarity in the Digital Age

In addition to providing direct support to their coworkers, progressive campaign workers also share advice and resources with each other through social media platforms in an effort to make campaign work less exploitative, exhausting, and exclusive. While my interview data does not address this topic, I have included publicly available data to support this point. This discussion contributes to my analysis by emphasizing how campaign workers' response to their conditions is shaped by the technological tools available to them. Thus, I seek to build on my contributions in Chapter 3 about the evolution of campaign work.

One method by which progressive campaign workers support one another and seek to address exploitative working conditions is via the Twitter account "OrganizerMemes," which has over 23,000 followers. The account often posts anonymous questions and messages, and campaign workers respond with advice. Some of the questions that have been asked are: How can I get a campaign job if I don't have connections? How can I advocate for my accessibility needs on a campaign? Is this an acceptable salary for a field organizer position in a rural area? Sometimes, OrganizerMemes also takes on a more confrontational approach by directly addressing exploitative and unfair work practices on progressive campaigns. For example, in 2021 the account shared a job posting for a progressive campaign position with the caption: "posting a job for 1000\$ a month in NYC with no hours listed, in person, requiring flexible hours, during a pandemic is exploitative and wrong, I hope you reconsider this listing."

Progressive campaign workers also engage in efforts to resist burnout by sharing campaign resources. In the past this has been done informally through social networks; however,

this year, alumni of progressive campaign workers published [OpenCampagin](#), a free online library of guides, spreadsheets, and trackers for campaign work. By sharing these documents, campaign workers challenge the “crash and burn” mentality of electoral campaigns which participants bemoaned. These efforts also help fill a gap in training for workers on campaigns, which may function to make campaign work more accessible for people who do not have a political network to reach out to for help.

Interviews for this study focused heavily on what happens within the confines of a campaign itself. But the advent of social media and the digitization of work has made it so that electoral politics also exists in a virtual campaign space. Progressive campaign workers provide each other with advice, support, and resources in this virtual space just as they do for their direct co-workers. This suggests that the ways in which contemporary workers (on campaigns and elsewhere) foster solidarity and resist difficult exploitative conditions is qualitatively different in comparison to the era before digitization and the existence of social media.

In this section, I have described both digital and non-digital methods of quiet resistance campaign workers engage in order to make their work more meaningful, lessen value conflict, minimize exploitative conditions, and build solidarity among workers. This analysis contributes to Hirschman’s framework by introducing a third type of response which is not reflected in his model of exit and voice.

Loyalty: “The Money, the People, and the Guilt”

Progressive campaign workers’ responses to the alienation and exploitation they encounter on campaigns are shaped by multiple types of loyalty. Hirschman defines loyalty as a “strong attachment to an organization” (1970:8). Applying Hirschman’s concept of loyalty to

progressive campaign workers is complicated by the fact that progressive campaign workers encounter multiple and at times, conflicting loyalties. In addition to feeling attached to the campaign, participants described loyalty to the candidate, other workers, their own progressive values, and the progressive movement as a whole.

When I spoke to Rachel shortly after election day, she shared that she had thought about quitting and leaving progressive politics nearly every day of the last few weeks. However, two factors kept her going: she did not want to let her candidate and coworkers down, and she needed the money for financial security. Despite facing burnout and difficult working conditions, Rachel was compelled to keep working because of “the money, the people, and the guilt.” Hirschman asserts that a member’s loyalty functions to postpone their exit, as a loyalist “leaves no stone unturned before he resigns himself to the painful decision to withdraw or switch” (1970:83). As Rachel indicated, progressive campaign workers’ loyalty is a key factor in ensuring that they continue to endure difficult working conditions campaign after campaign.

Yet, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, my data reveals that many progressive campaign workers respond to these exploitative and alienating conditions by leaving the field; however, I propose that this does not indicate disloyalty as Hirschman’s model might suggest. Instead, I hypothesize that high rates of exit also reflect loyalty to the progressive movement and progressive values. Rather than remaining in a field in which they face value conflict, some progressive campaign workers chose to seek other work that either does not conflict with their values or provides more job stability and benefits (or both). Exit can also be viewed as an act of resistance in itself. As Hirschman explains, the “effectiveness of voice is strengthened by the possibility of exit.”

Adapting Hirschman's framework to campaign workers' multiple loyalties provides a favorable view of the resistant campaign worker. Whereas some view campaign staff's resistance efforts and propensity to exit as a hindrance to the electoral goal, applying Hirschman's analysis suggests that progressive campaign workers may also be operating out of loyalty to the progressive movement and a desire to lessen value conflict on campaigns.

Evaluating Response Methods

The numerous ways in which progressive campaign workers respond to exploitative and alienating campaign conditions have advantages and disadvantages. Exiting might allow individuals to access better conditions, but it does not lead to structural change (or at least will take some time to do so). Unionization may be successful in leading to structural change but can be a draining process and leaves manager-level staff unprotected. Quietly defying the boss and providing support to other campaign workers may lead to more meaningful work and worker solidarity but is also unlikely to have a structural impact.

While all of these methods have limitations, unionization emerged as the most desirable outcome among participants. All participants agreed that unionization on campaigns would be positive for the progressive movement and for workers. If they had not yet had the experience of working on a unionized campaign, they aspired to do so. Unionization is the most explicit use of voice described by participants. Progressive campaign workers' partiality toward unionization as voice can be explained by two factors. First, I have argued that participants' progressive training and values lead them to be more likely to use voice, which Hirschman (1970) explains is the "political" choice. Second, participants' preference for voice is likely due to their belief that it is the most effective method to change their working conditions and decrease burnout. These

factors demonstrate that participants' response to their conditions is both ideologically and strategically motivated.

Conclusion

In *The Problem With Work*, Kathi Weeks (2011) asserts “work produces ‘social and political’ subjects.” Progressive campaign workers are in some ways a product of the progressive ideology and the Democratic platform they propagate. As such, they are moved to respond to the apparent value conflict they face on campaigns. Progressive campaign workers resist the exploitation they experience in ways that are both voiced and unvoiced. At the same time, they navigate feelings of loyalty to campaigns and to the progressive movement.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that progressive campaign workers respond to alienation and exploitation in several different ways: by leaving the field, becoming more selective in the types of campaign work they will engage in, organizing for better conditions, resisting instructions from management, and by supporting other campaign workers. Using Hirschman’s (1970) framework of exit, voice, and loyalty, I have argued that participants’ response to their working conditions is shaped by their identity as progressive campaign workers. This analysis contributes to the study of job dissatisfaction by applying Hirschman’s framework to the unique conditions on campaigns and adapting it to include quiet resistance methods. Additionally, this chapter builds on both labor studies and political sociology by addressing how the complex relationship between labor unions and the Democratic Party manifests in electoral politics today.

CONCLUSION

When the summer I worked on a congressional campaign came to a close, I slept a little better. I did not wake in a panic after dreaming about the voter database or the automatic dialer. Instead, I returned to college a lot more skilled in organizing for political change and a little more jaded about the nature of electoral politics. As I sat in sociology classes reading theory, the consequential 2020 presidential election loomed large. A voice in the back of my head wondered: was I doing enough? Even after observing value conflict on the campaign, the pull of electoral politics lingered.

This study finds that progressive campaign workers feel that strong pull toward electoral politics. They are primarily motivated to engage in campaign work out of a desire to have an impact and a sense of fulfillment; however, their ability to actualize these wishes is challenged when they face exploitative and precarious working conditions on campaigns. This study reveals several types of responses to working conditions that engender feelings of alienation and burnout: some workers become more selective in the types of campaign jobs they will take or leave electoral politics to seek work in different fields. Others respond by advocating for better conditions on campaigns through unionization efforts, and some workers choose to engage in quiet resistance to mitigate value conflict and find meaning. Participant interviews also revealed that workers may try one or more of these various coping strategies as they navigate their different campaign environments over time.

The main takeaway of this thesis is that the progressive reforms in the machine era and the professionalization of politics in the second half of the 20th century have created a vocation of campaign work; however, progressive politics, the Democratic Party, and the labor movement

are playing catch up as they are only at a nascent stage with regard to thinking about the needs of campaign workers. While they lag behind, campaign workers endure exploitation and mistreatment at the hands of so-called progressive campaigns. This study is therefore timely and has several implications for the academic study of labor and politics, U.S. political organizing and policy, and the progressive movement.

Academic Implications

Modernizing Industrial Era Literature

This study asserts that Marx's scholarship (and the industrial-era literature which builds on it) provides critical insights into the impact of labor on workers which still apply today, even though labor is fundamentally different now than during the industrial era. Labor in our current society is shaped by neoliberalism, globalization, and digitization. This thesis contributes to Marxist scholarship by addressing how alienation manifests in contemporary, precaritized work.

Political Ideology, Work, and Resistance

According to Weeks, Marx aimed to "politicize the world of work" (2011:7). This thesis takes on a similar task but also asks, what if the content of one's work is inherently political? This study explores the relationship between political ideology and labor by investigating both the treatment of workers on progressive campaigns as well as how workers respond to their working conditions. The data reveals that the advancement of progressive values (which include workers' rights and economic justice) through the product of one's labor does not preclude workers from experiencing mistreatment and exploitation; however, the various ways that workers choose to respond to such conditions are influenced by their political ideology and their environment (among other factors).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Like an electoral campaign, this thesis had a deadline. While I have provided some answers to the questions I raised, much remains to be explored.

This topic calls for a more thorough analysis of the dynamics of race and gender in campaign work than discussed in this study. In selecting my sample, I prioritized gender and racial diversity with the aim of studying how the experience of campaign work varied by identity. Although I included some analysis of race and gender in campaign work, consistent themes did not emerge from my data. This may indicate that the experiences of progressive campaign workers do not vary significantly along race and gender lines. Or, this may be due to the focus in my interview guide and follow-up questions on economic injustice, which could have had an inadvertent effect of steering participants away from race and gender analysis. My identity as a white woman likely also influenced participants' responses in a variety of ways. The lack of data I have on this topic is likely due to the study's design, given that there is some indication in the data that race and gender are significant factors in how workers experience their campaign environments. Further research should be conducted on this topic in order to better address issues of equity and access on campaigns and in politics.

Future research utilizing quantitative methods would also be useful in answering additional questions on this topic. The quantitative data currently available on campaign workers such as the Cooperative Election Study and the American National Election Study is limited in that it does not distinguish between roles and levels. Furthermore, Laurison's (2022) dataset prioritizes national-level campaigns and high-level staff. Collecting quantitative data on low-level campaign work is important because these workers make up the majority of campaign staff and are more likely to be in direct conversation with voters. This data would also be useful in

studying the interplay between race, gender, and ethnicity in campaign work, which this study did not fully address due to its small sample size and research.

This study also explored the trajectory of progressive campaign workers' engagement in politics from their involvement at a young age to their dedication to campaign work as young adults. For some, this trajectory also includes their exit from campaign work. Reflections from participants on this path were limited to the single-hour interviews in which data collection occurred. Longitudinal studies on this topic would address how campaign work impacts the worker over the long term and would provide further clarity on why and when workers choose to exit electoral politics.

Political and Policy Implications

This thesis has brought to light contradictions in the progressive movement and Democratic Party which undermine their political platforms and limit their ability to access power. As my participant data demonstrates, the burnout of progressive campaign staff leads to high rates of turnover, resource strain, and lower productivity. This pattern is significant because it not only affects the campaign workers themselves but also the progressive movement's ability to gain power through elections. The professionalization of campaign work means that although progressive campaigns often claim to be "people-powered" and volunteer-led, most rely heavily on campaign staff to organize volunteers and turn out voters. This problem suggests two options: progressive campaigns can either change the structural conditions of campaign work to reduce value conflict and burnout, or they can decentralize the role of staff. The latter option seems unlikely as it involves turning back the dial on decades of professionalization in politics and advocacy; however, much can be done to achieve the former.

Broadscale Unionization

This thesis discusses the challenges and limitations of unionization on time-limited electoral campaigns. While many of these challenges remain unresolved, the recent and rapid rise in campaign unionization efforts suggests the possibility that unions might become normative in electoral politics. The recent success of The Campaign Workers Guild is one such example. It was founded in late 2017, and by the end of the 2018 cycle, the group had established union contracts with 29 electoral campaigns (Butler 2020). This number likely rose in 2020 and does not account for the many campaign staff who opted to contract with other unions such as building trade unions. This recent shift in campaign culture indicates that although broadscale unionization of campaign staff was not the experience of the participants in this study, with continued effort it may well be within the near future. Ongoing efforts to increase unionization on campaigns may also have the additional effect of strengthening the relationship between labor unions and the Democratic Party.

The Role of the Democratic Party

In the participatory components of this study, campaign workers emphasized the potential for the Democratic Party to play a greater role in setting better guidelines and practices in the management of campaign staff. For example, the Party could set standards for campaigns such as minimum wage or paid time off requirements that could function as a condition for endorsement by the Party. Another way the party could address campaign workers' needs is by increasing staff training and providing other types of support, such as campaign guides. The Democratic Party could also create a union for campaign staff that would function as a guild. Workers would then be able to remain in the union in between election cycles and across different campaigns. This option could address the obstacles that come with unionization on time-limited electoral campaigns. However, this would be a large initiative and an endeavor that would require staff

and resources. Increasing the role of the Democratic Party in campaigns might also pose challenges in primary races for progressives, who often seek to oust candidates viewed as part of the Party establishment.

Campaign Finance Reform

The challenges of campaign work can also be addressed through policy and campaign finance reform. Participants consistently cited the tight budgets on campaigns as one of the contributing factors to the over-work and exploitation of staff. One campaign finance reform that could address this issue is establishing public matching funds, such as those instituted in New York, Minnesota, and Connecticut (Noble 2016). These systems incentivize campaigns to seek small-dollar donations in an effort to limit the influence of big, wealthy donors in politics. Thus, matching funds might help smaller, grassroots campaigns avoid being underfunded. In turn, this could lead to an increase in pay and support for campaign workers.

Legal Avenues

According to Erin Butler (2020), most campaign workers are entitled to legal protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). This means that campaign workers such as field organizers, finance assistants, and aides are entitled to overtime pay. In 2016, Bethany Katz made the first legal attempt to assert her right to overtime pay as a campaign worker. Although in Katz's case the court found that she was not eligible for overtime pay under FLSA, the case and Butler's legal note provide promise that another attempt could be successful. Over-time pay for campaign workers would not only bring about more economic security, it would likely also minimize the common expectation from management that staff should work 60+ hour weeks.

Human Resources

Several participants asserted that the lack of human resources departments on campaigns allow issues of harassment and workplace misconduct to go unaddressed. While human resource teams are impractical on small, local campaigns of just a few workers, they may serve a purpose on larger-scale campaigns. Regardless of whether campaigns have an official human resources position, procedures and channels to file harassment reports should be established on all electoral campaigns. The Democratic Party could be influential in creating protocols to assist campaigns, or perhaps campaign workers could share the guidelines they have used with each other.

Building the Campaign Commons

Sylvia Federici proposes that in order to address capitalism's destruction of communal life, we must rebuild the commons. Commoning is the collective practice of building and sustaining spaces of shared resources and knowledge (Federici 2018). Campaign workers would benefit from such a commons and have recently begun to do so through the creation of OpenCampaign and similar resources. By sharing resources and building the campaign commons, campaign workers can counteract burnout and the slash and burn mentality of electoral work.

Lessons for the Movement:

In *Rules for Radicals*, organizer Saul Alinsky (1989) wrote: "Asking a sociologist to solve a problem is like prescribing an enema for diarrhea." His claim (albeit, a vulgar one) holds weight. In this thesis, I have described a multi-faceted, troublesome problem with progressive campaign work. As I have demonstrated using interview data, this problem is not unique to any single campaign or campaign type. It is also not exclusive to a single campaign role — from field organizers to campaign managers, finance directors, and everyone in between, campaign workers in this study all encountered exploitative conditions. This study does not have the answer to this

problem (although I have included some suggestions above). Nonetheless, the data presented here should be useful to campaign workers and anyone interested in building progressive/leftist power.

Taming the Calling

In Chapter 4, I argued that progressive campaign workers' passion and commitment to their cause contribute to an expectation that they will endure all-consuming, exploitative conditions. This expectation is evidently harmful to campaign workers' physical and mental health. It also makes campaign work less inclusive to individuals with diverse needs. These realities do not mean that campaign workers should give up on their search for meaning and fulfillment at work nor should work be prioritized above all if we are to build the world of care most of us desire. As Sarah Jaffe writes, "Work will never love us back, but other people will" (2021:329). This study reveals that campaign workers are more vulnerable to exploitation when their work is viewed as a calling, as it sets up the expectation that workers will sacrifice all to the cause. Thus, although dedication to campaign work may be admirable, taming the intensity of the calling may help protect workers and create space for other parts of their lives to flourish beyond work.

Resistance

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, participants in this study did not passively endure their exploitation. Instead, they resisted in a variety of ways. They defied the boss, formed unions, bargained for better conditions, provided support to other campaign workers (both in-person and online), and when they could not endure the conditions any longer—they left to seek better work. Given that some of these methods are more visible than others, it is

important to emphasize their prevalence. These stories may serve as a reminder of the collective, and at times unseen, power of workers.

Power in Shared Experience

Many campaign workers in this study described feeling alone in their complex experience of campaign work. I hope that campaign workers see themselves reflected in this data and that the feeling of being seen minimizes some of that loneliness. I also hope that campaign workers see the commonality of their experience as a source of power. Throughout this study, there were few instances in which participants' viewpoints contradicted each other, suggesting that there may be a great deal of consistency in the experiences of progressive campaign workers. Not only did participants share the experience of the tangled push and pull of campaign work, but their ideas about how to improve their conditions were also remarkably similar. For example, as I described in Chapter 5, all participants expressed support for the unionization of campaign staff. This uniformity can be leveraged as power. As Jaffe states “a union is only meaningful if the workers in it believe and act like a union” (2021:330).

The Tide is Turning

This thesis identifies knotty, troublesome problems. But it also describes moments of care and solidarity that represent the seeds of a better future. In every conversation I had with campaign workers for this study, I heard a deep-rooted commitment to justice work, a love for progressive community, and an eagerness to build a movement that reflects its values. Participants shared moments in which they received and gave critical support to other campaign workers. They bent the rules and adjusted their metrics in order to acknowledge the humanity in others. They offered their resources, built relationships that lasted far beyond election day, and helped each other grow as organizers.

The tide is turning. With each cycle, more progressive campaigns workers sign contracts with unions to improve their conditions. New waves of youth activists enter progressive politics, more diverse than the generations before them. They bring with them new, creative ideas and solutions to old problems. And more and more, when progressive campaign workers face value conflict, they are making their disapproval heard online, in the media, and even in the streets.

Alinsky was correct in that the problem of progressive campaign work will not be solved by sociologists alone (nor any academics for that matter). But as I prepare to move from the world of academia into the world of professional progressive politics myself, I am reminded of another Alinsky (1989) quote: “This is the world as it is. This is where you start.” As I have aimed to demonstrate in this thesis, progressive campaign workers themselves have the collective power and skills to improve their conditions and build campaigns that practice the values they preach. In fact, workers across the country are likely doing just that right now.

TUFTS UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Have you worked on a progressive electoral campaign?

- If you answered yes, you are invited to share your experiences in a **confidential zoom interview**
- Interviews will take approximately 1 hour
- Participants will be compensated **\$22** for their time
- **All participants must:**
 - Be at least 18 years of age
 - Speak English
 - Have worked on a U.S. progressive (as defined by the participant) electoral campaign in the past 5 years

**To indicate interest in this study
please scan the QR code below or go
to bit.ly/campaignwork**

For questions about this study please contact
gabriella.cantor@tufts.edu or 917-783-8034



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