

# WATCHUNG DEMS

## Volunteering for a Campaign: Beginner's Guide

So, you're ready to volunteer to help our amazing candidates win and/or thinking of running yourself someday --- YES! We're here to say do it! Don't know where to start? We're here to help.

A couple of upfront guidelines:

First rule of volunteering on a campaign is — **show up**. Showing up is 80% of life, as well as volunteering.

Volunteers join a cause with the absolute best of intentions — but life is complicated, and other priorities often get in the way. That's ok. No one will hold it against you. But it's really important to be honest with yourself, and with candidates, about what kind of time commitment you're realistically able to make. Winning comes from a hell of a lot of daily, detailed hard work, and campaigns need dependable, consistent volunteers to make it happen.

If you show up and do what you say you will do — or just do what is asked of you — you're going to be an essential part of the campaign team, and you'll be in the room where the magic happens. You'll see how the game is played. See how the sausage gets made. How the trade is made. Don't just assume that it happens. Lesson from "Hamilton": be present, participate, share your ideas.

Second rule, it's not all "West Wing." No one can run for office on their own, but volunteers don't get to be Josh Lyman on Day 1. And most down ballot campaigns don't have a C.J. Cregg. Trusted advisors? Sure, eventually. A full-time paid staff that write speeches and deal with press and develop policy positions? Not a chance. It's a lot more Donna Moss and Charlie Young. And you'll be doing stuff that's way too boring for a TV show. But it all really, really matters. Volunteers really, really matter.

OK, now let's talk about what you can do on a campaign based on what skills you have (or want to develop).

### **What exactly can I do to help?**

This is the biggest hurdle for many people who want to volunteer on a campaign. Some of our volunteers may have helped in elections by canvassing, phone banking, sending texts or postcards, but most have never volunteered on a campaign at all. That's no problem! What's

great about volunteering on down-ballot, local races is that you can jump in and do more earlier in your volunteering career — just like our candidates can jump in and do more earlier in their political careers.

No more excuses, it's time to do this.

Often, it's not easy to figure out how your own skills and interests translate into a campaign setting. So, based on the personal experiences of volunteers who've been through this before, we've put together a list of ideas.

Also, a shoutout to our partners at National Democratic Training Committee -- they offer free online trainings for candidates and also for volunteers who want to learn more about how to help campaigns. If you're interested in delving deeper into these topics, [sign up here](#) and follow the "Campaign Staff" training sessions. You can choose the course topics you are most interested in -- there is no need to progress in a linear way with their online courses.

What you do	How that relates to campaigns	Your campaign team jargon
I would do anything and I'm a Jack/Jane of all trades	Show up, say you'll help and follow through, and you can grow with the campaign. Offer to answer emails, liaise with volunteers, print out sign up forms, run errands. There isn't a lot of envelope stuffing in current campaigns. Few candidates have physical offices, so a lot of this work is done from your home computer.	<b>Field Organizing/ Fundraising Teams</b>
I like to talk to people. Anyone. Anywhere.	Candidates can't be everywhere, so they rely on trusted surrogates to spread the word about their vision, and to make sure voters cast their ballots on Election Day! <b>Canvassing:</b> Meeting voters where they are — at their homes, at places of worship, at the senior center. Or, if your schedule doesn't allow for canvassing (or you don't feel comfortable meeting people in that way), you can do this work from home as a <b>phone bank</b> or <b>text bank</b> volunteer.	<b>Field Organizing Team</b>
I am the social planner amongst my friends, OR I have a background in	Help plan events like candidate forums and chats with community groups. Organize one on one meetings with influential community leaders. Your planning skills will make sure the show runs as smoothly as possible.	<b>Field Organizing/ Fundraising Teams</b>

theater/film production		
I love social media	Posting updates on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and more can take a lot of time out of a candidate's day. If you're good at it, offer to take this off their to do list!	<b>Digital Team</b>
I'm a writer/editor/public speaking expert	Offer to write web content and fundraising emails, to review notes for public speaking engagements, or to refine the candidate's stump speech and help them talk to voters when knocking doors.	<b>Communications/ Fundraising Team/Digital Team</b>
I like to organize people and things	If you know how to use spreadsheets, Google forms, or a CRM (customer relationship management) database, or other similar software, you can offer to help the candidate learn the system they choose (NGP-VAN, Votebuilder, Action Network, ActBlue are some of the programs you may hear about most often). This kind of software is essential for organizing field volunteers, and to make sure they know where and when to canvass or phone/text bank for the best, most targeted results.	<b>Field Organizing/ Fundraising Team</b>
I'm a wizard at making things look beautiful	<b>Graphic Design:</b> Candidates need help designing or refining logos for business cards, yard signs, palm cards/door hangers (handed out while canvassing or at events), buttons. There's usually not a big budget for these items and keeping it simple helps.	<b>Communications/ Digital Team</b>
I like making/editing videos	While few candidates will have a budget for TV ads, many are interested in using videos on their social media feeds.	<b>Communications/ Digital Team</b>
I'm a proud computer geek	Candidates need endless help with website development, backend data management, and moving between different databases (because there is not one database that does everything a candidate needs).	<b>Digital Team</b>
I'm in marketing/advertising	Messaging makes candidates stand out. You could help to write and edit emails, web copy/design, palm cards/door hangers (handed	<b>Communications Team</b>

	out while canvassing or at events). Budgets on campaigns are limited for paid advertisements or swag — so if you have ideas about how to do it on the cheap, that’s a huge bonus!	
I have a background in accounting/ bookkeeping	Reporting, compliance, and bookkeeping are key to a successful campaign, no matter how big or small the budget. If you have comfort with basic accounting, you could be a campaign treasurer and save the candidate tons of time by helping track donations and report them appropriately.	<b>Fundraising/ Finance Team</b>
I’m a proud data geek	When candidates get access to voter data, they often don’t know where to start. Or, they have fundraising data but don’t have time to organize it for disclosures. Or maybe the field team has gathered data from canvassing and can’t use it because it’s written on paper from clipboards, and it needs to be uploaded to a database.	<b>Fundraising/Field Organizing Teams</b>
I know a lot about policy and research	When deciding what policies to adopt for their campaign, candidates need trusted sources of research. There’s a lot available online for progressive candidates, but who has time to read it all? Policy and research minded folks can help digest what’s out there, or find materials that support a candidate’s stances.	<b>Policy Team</b>

**FAQs**

**How much time are we talking about?**

That’s totally up to you. Many campaigns would love to have full-time volunteers, but that’s a rare find. Be honest with yourself about how much time you have in your schedule to give, and be honest with the campaign. If you’re only available one weekend a month, say so. If you’re able to do some work on your computer from home a few evenings a week, great! It helps both you and the campaign if you can clearly communicate when and how often you’re able to help.

**Is this a way to get a job in politics?**

Maybe, but don’t count on it. If you’re thinking of running for office yourself in the future, there is no better training than volunteering on a campaign. If you’re thinking of a career change into politics, ditto. But most volunteers are just doing this out of the goodness of their hearts for the

common good. If it leads to a job, that's a bonus.

### **I signed up to volunteer for a campaign, but never heard back. What's next?**

You know who reads the submissions for volunteers? Other volunteers. If there isn't a volunteer to do that, then the campaign manager is reading those submissions in between everything else they are juggling. Or it's the candidate doing it. If you haven't heard back, it doesn't mean they don't care. It means they're overwhelmed with the millions of things that have to happen while running a campaign. And, they likely have day jobs in addition to campaigning. Don't hold it against them.

Often, campaigns are so overwhelmed it's hard to take a step back to figure out how volunteers can make their lives easier. If you live locally and you're interested in helping out, see if the candidate has any upcoming events listed on their website or social media. Show up and try to meet the candidate or other volunteers there, and offer to help.

*Pro tip* — check the volunteer task chart above for some of the campaign team jargon that will help you communicate how you want to help them out.

### **When should I get involved?**

There's no bad time to get involved in a campaign. The closer it is to Election Day, the more the campaign is going to need help with GOTV efforts (get out the vote — making sure people actually cast their ballot in the election). If you're hoping to help out more behind the scenes and with planning — the earlier you get involved, the more opportunities you'll have to build up credibility with the campaign team.

### **What legal requirements/restrictions could there be on my volunteer participation?**

As a general matter, volunteer campaign activity **must** happen:

- 1) On your own time (after work/on weekends);
- 2) With your own equipment (personal phone/laptop, not an employer provided one); and
- 3) Uncompensated (you may not be paid for your time by the campaign nor reimbursed by a third party).

If those requirements are broken, you may be opening the campaign to legal liability.

If you work full time for a labor organization, the federal, state, or local government, or are a government contractor, you may experience additional limitations on volunteer activity.

If there might be a conflict of interest between your day job and campaign volunteering, it's best to check with the HR/legal department of your company before becoming involved as a volunteer.

### **Can I purchase food/coffee/paper/(insert item here) and donate it to the campaign?**

There are two things you may spend money on without it constituting a campaign donation:

- 1) Purchasing gas for your personal vehicle for mileage incurred in relation to volunteer activities; and
- 2) Food and/or lodging for yourself incurred in relation to volunteer activities.

Beyond those two things, anything that you may purchase and donate to the campaign is an “in-kind” donation and must follow the same reporting guidelines as monetary contributions to the campaign. The campaign should know this, but you’ll need to provide them with any receipts for items you purchased, as well as your name, address, employer, and occupation. Local campaign rules differ, so make sure to ask before you help the campaign out.

### **Can I donate old printers/couch/chairs/(insert item here) to the campaign?**

Generally, yes. But these are also “in-kind” donations. You’ll have to follow the same reporting guidelines as above — assessing a fair market value for the item, and providing the campaign with your name, address, employer, and occupation.

Please note that in any jurisdictions with a campaign contribution limit, “in-kind” donations are counted towards and cannot exceed the limit amount.

### **Volunteers share some advice:**

“I volunteered on the digital team ... and I can say from later being on the staff side, a lot of people came with volunteer proposals for digital things that we didn't need (SO many people wanted to build us an app!) So I'd recommend first looking for what [the campaign is] already doing and seeing if your skills could fit in with that. Then be specific about what your skills are and how you think they could fit in.

So if you know how to code, rather than offer to build an app, ask if they need help maintaining their existing website. if you're great at photography or video, ask if they want someone to send back social media content from press events or canvassing outings. if you run a really engaged Facebook group, is there anything the campaign would like you to ask your followers to help share?

**THEN** you can ask if there is anything they'd like to be doing that they just don't have the capacity for. So when I started volunteering, I had video skills but what they needed most was someone to translate blog posts into Spanish. So I started there, and once that need was met, I was able to talk to them about helping shoot and edit videos.”

[Taylor Behnke](#)

Former Hillary for America staffer

“I think the best advice I’d give is to always be willing to do anything, while knowing when to stay in your lane. Know who to go to for assignments and put yourself out there, but don’t go overboard. Being ambitious and being over-eager are very different things, especially when it comes to volunteering.

Being organized and being able to multitask are very important as well. It’s all about being flexible and efficient, all while being cool under pressure. Politics changes by the minute, so you can’t bend under that pressure.”

Tony Michael

Field Organizer, Molly Sheehan for  
Congress and Former volunteer for  
Obama for America