Volunteering in Florida, November 2004

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Abstract

In the fall of 2004 in the United States, thousands of citizens participated in volunteer activities to make sure that the presidential election scheduled for November 2nd would proceed in a lawful and fair manner. While volunteering related to political campaigns and polling have been common at the local level, 2004 was unusual in that thousands of volunteers traveled great distances to help out in areas that were unfamiliar to them. This activity was in direct response to the confusion that occurred in Florida during the previous presidential election in 2000, in which the outcome of the election remained unknown for an unusually long period of 36 days and which led to a bitter debate over which candidate rightfully won.

Citizens came to Florida from far and near to offer their time and assistance, both as nonpartisan volunteers to support the voter drive and as campaigners for one of the two main political parties. This writer was one of ten U.S. citizens who traveled to Florida from Tokyo, Japan as a volunteer in the nonpartisan category. Following is an account of what took place during the days leading up to Election Day based on the writer’s experience as a volunteer during that time. But first, an introduction to the background of volunteering in the United States will precede the main story to offer an insight into this tradition, because it may help explain the reason why so many people from outside Florida were willing to travel to the state and volunteer, and why the volunteers were readily accepted by the residents of the local communities.

Key words: volunteering, voter drive, canvassing
I. Background: A Volunteer Mindset

Volunteer activities have been a familiar part of the American cultural landscape, as people who have spent significant amounts of time living in the United States can attest. The tradition of volunteering is carried out through various institutions such as churches, schools, local organizations, and businesses. Volunteering arises out of a collective desire to fulfill a social or community need, and it may originate from an altruistic concern or an activist desire. Many activities have the word “drive” attached to them, for example fundraising drive, voter drive, book drive, coat drive, food drive, blood drive, etc., and this is especially the case when the intended recipients are perceived as being in a less advantageous position than the volunteering party—although volunteer drives are by no means limited to circumstances of economic or social hardship. Typical volunteer activities include providing meals or services to the needy, organizing winter coat drives for the indigent, collecting toys at Christmastime to donate to children, and providing emergency relief in times of disaster. When economic hardship is not a factor on the part of the intended recipients, volunteering can assume a variety of community activities, such as coaching children’s sports teams, leading youth associations such the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, or donating one’s time and energy to help candidates win a local or national office.

Several recollections concerning volunteering come to this writer’s mind when reflecting on a childhood and early adulthood spent in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s. One of the earliest memories has to do with an annual Halloween candy drive that was organized by an elementary school in New Jersey that this writer had attended during the mid-1960s. On the school day following Halloween, a large box was set up in the foyer of the school’s main entrance, and students were encouraged to drop off much of the candy they had collected. The candy—perhaps several thousands of pieces—would be sent to schoolchildren in the Appalachian states, which were known to have far fewer economic resources compared to the neighboring states to the east. Later, when this writer entered college in the late 1970s, a name synonymous with volunteering became familiar—although for this writer not in the context of giving but in the context of receiving. The Salvation Army was known in many college towns for their thrift shops where stu-
dents and people with limited budgets could purchase secondhand furniture, household appliances and utensils for cheap prices, all the goods having been donated by well-meaning patrons. The thrift shop was useful for outfitting this writer’s first apartment, and after graduating from college and establishing an independent means of living, the Salvation Army became for this writer an outlet for donating furniture and household goods that were no longer needed but were still, usable.

Two more examples connected with volunteering are worth mentioning since they suggest the extent to which the volunteer mindset has become a part of the American psyche. This writer’s first employer after college was a small typesetting company in Boston that employed only four workers, and because of the company’s size, the business did not have the resources that a larger company would. Yet the company’s owner regularly donated English language typesetting and editing services to a non-native English language community newspaper, pro bono. In another employment-related example, this writer had worked for a large multinational company based in New York beginning the early 1990s, and that company encouraged employees to volunteer their time at a non-profit institution in their communities. The company even offered generous cash awards to employees who made outstanding efforts, and award recipients were commended for donating their personal time at “shelters, soup kitchens, hospitals and organizations serving the disabled and at-risk children.”

Regardless of the amount of personal time and effort involved or the size of a donation, or regardless of the organization which initiates a volunteer activity, volunteering for the sake of helping people—especially those who are perceived to be in a less advantageous position than the volunteering side—has been a common way to contribute to the betterment of a community or society. Such is the background that prompted thousands of volunteers to contribute their time, effort and expenses in order to avert another election disaster in November 2004. Florida was host to a great portion of the volunteers, since that state played the key role in deciding which candidate would be the U.S. president in 2000.

II. Recap of the Florida Incident in 2000

U.S. presidential elections are held every four years, and a candidate wins the election if that candidate has received a majority of electoral votes rather than a
majority of individual votes from the entire U.S. voting population as a whole. Each state has a set number of electoral votes depending on its population, so the most populous state has the greatest number of electoral votes (California at 55 electoral votes) while the least populated states have the minimum number of electoral votes that can be allotted (six states and Washington D.C. have three electoral votes each) 4. In presidential elections, the candidate must win the state in order to secure the total number of electoral votes that the state has to offer; those votes are then counted toward the national total of electoral votes for each candidate. The usual case is that the winning candidate receives the majority vote of the entire U.S. population and this is reflected in the majority share of electoral votes; in fact this would be the ideal of such a system.

However, the system allows for the possibility of a candidate’s win if the candidate has received a minority share of the individual votes nationwide but has received the majority share of the electoral votes5. Although rare, such a case happened in 2000, and Florida, which holds the fourth largest share of electoral votes in the United States at 25 electoral votes6, ended up being the swing state—that is, the state that determined which candidate would win the presidency. In the battle to win Florida, the candidates resorted to a legal device that allows for a recount of votes in the event of a very small margin between the two front-running candidates. In the case of Florida, nearly six million votes would need to be recounted.

During the recount, details about suspicious activities became known, and doubts about Florida’s voting process became vocalized in the national media. The state became the center of a rancorous debate with liberal newspapers such as The New York Times criticizing the close connection between one of the candidates and the state’s governor, who was the candidate’s younger brother. The New York Times in fact asserted that Florida’s governor acted improperly to help his older brother win—for example by devising new legislation to tip the votes in the brother’s favor after the elections were held7. Another liberal publication, a political journal called The Nation, criticized the fact that politicking tends to be divided along racial lines and that African American citizens are discouraged from exercising their voting rights in disproportionate numbers8. In particular, doubts arose over the fact that several tens of thousands of votes had been rejected due to voters’ technical errors on ballots that were confusing or poorly designed—the most infamous being the so-called “butterfly ballot” which had a confusing layout—and
those users could not recast their votes on a more clearly designed ballot. Most of the votes that were rejected originated from minority-represented communities. In a news article, The St. Petersburg Times described the Florida county that had the largest number of votes eliminated from the overall state count:

No county produced more spoiled ballots than Duval—nearly 27,000—and they were concentrated in African-American neighborhoods. An estimated one in five black votes was tossed out in Duval, three times the rate of white votes.

Eventually, before all the votes could be recounted and against the wishes of many citizens and officials, the case was turned over to the Supreme Court in Washington D.C., which then determined who the president of the United States would be. At that point the difference in the number of votes between the candidates stood at 537 in the chosen candidate’s favor. The incident left many Americans with the realization that the process had been unduly influenced by public officials who cared more about politics than representing the people in a fair manner. By the time of the next presidential election in 2004, preparations were well underway to prevent a reoccurrence of the 2000 election disaster.

III. Armies of Volunteers

The incident of 2000 was the catalyst for the mobilization of volunteers in the 2004 presidential election. Volunteers consisted of campaigners for the two national political parties—the Republicans and the Democrats—as well as volunteers who maintained a nonpartisan stance but wanted to help with the voter drive by educating and assisting voters or preventing voter intimidation. During the early fall of 2004, volunteers began arriving in Florida in large numbers. Thousands of partisan volunteers worked to support the local Republican or Democratic party, or campaigned directly for one of the two presidential candidates, who were the incumbent president George W. Bush of the Republican party and Senator John Kerry of the Democratic party. At the same time, thousands of nonpartisan volunteers helped voters register, while others arrived during the crucial week before the election to instruct voters who needed information about the upcoming vote.
Volunteers came from throughout the United States as well as communities within Florida. They represented a vast array of American citizens: college students, teachers, lawyers, homemakers, business people, young working adults, retired people, disabled persons, and workers from the health profession and religious communities. Even Americans living overseas came back to volunteer; for example, this writer returned as part of a group of ten expatriate Americans who decided to join out of a belief that an injustice had been committed in the 2000 election and desired to ensure that a repeat not happen in 2004. The people who comprised this group of volunteers (the “Tokyo group”) were four men and six women in their early thirties to late forties that were living and working in or near Tokyo, Japan. They decided to take between one month to five days off from work to meet in Florida and participate in the voter drive. Like the stateside volunteers, the Tokyo group’s members came from a variety of occupations: there were two IT specialists and two university teachers (including this writer), an independent business woman, a restaurant manager, an attorney, a graduate student, a company consultant, and a nongovernmental organization (NGO) worker. Interestingly, no one from this group was originally from Florida but the members were instead natives of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California. Seven other stateside volunteers joined up with the Tokyo group for the canvassing operation, and they included a retired professor from Massachusetts, a recent college graduate from England, a mother and daughter from California, and three Florida residents, one of whom grew up in the targeted canvassing area and thus was instrumental in locating the difficult-to-find neighborhoods that eluded description on detailed maps.

While the volunteers who had assembled throughout Florida represented a diverse cross section of Americans in terms of age, occupation and interests, one group as a whole stood out. Leagues of attorneys had organized nationwide to donate their time and expertise in Florida during the months leading up to Election Day. The count varies depending on the source, but it is fair to say that the cumulative number ran into the thousands: one legal organization, the Florida Democratic Lawyers Council, recruited “3,200 [Democratic] lawyers” who “worked the polls on election day” 1, while another called Election Protection recruited “nearly 5,000” volunteers from the legal profession nationwide12, many of whom went to Florida to watch the polls. As for Republican lawyers, The St. Petersburg Times lists a “350-person legal response unit” that had been formed two years earlier13. During the
course of the time spent in Florida, this writer had come into contact with several attorneys from within the state as well as those from New York, Texas and California. It would not be an overstatement to say that the magnitude of concern for a fair election as shown by the turnout of so many volunteer lawyers was unprecedented and truly impressive. The lawyers’ overall role was to facilitate the voting process by providing legal advice to citizens as needed and to prevent voter intimidation if questionable disputes should arise.

The desire to see the elections carried out fairly and legally was a strong impetus not just for the legal experts, but also for many other concerned civic groups. Local and national organizations recruited volunteers with their own networks to work in Florida as campaigners or nonpartisan volunteers. Many organizations could be found by doing a search on the Internet, and a number of websites beckoned people to volunteer. One site listed three statewide organizations that people could join and featured an opening paragraph that gave the commitment of volunteering the appeal of a vacation:

Florida: The Sunshine State

Get your friends together and hop in a car, bus or plane to register voters in sunny Florida! Florida was the most important swing state in the 2000 election."

The website made it easy for people to join, for example by posting a ride board in which people could sign up and find a ride or riders headed to the same destination in Florida. And since Florida is well known throughout America as a state with year-round warm temperatures and beautiful beaches, it offered a compelling reason to volunteer for a worthy cause and also enjoy a relaxing environment once the work was finished—an attractive incentive at a time when most of the United States would be cold due to the oncoming winter season.

The volunteers in the Tokyo group joined forces with a statewide citizens’ group called Florida Consumer Action Network (FCAN), which was technically nonpartisan but which, like many of the legal organizations, tended to be more liberal than conservative and thus sympathetic to the Democratic party’s concerns. The group member with experience in NGOs had researched various volunteer organizations from Japan using the Internet and expressed interest in working with FCAN
in the summer of 2004. The same group member went to Florida a month earlier than the rest of the members and opted to be the point person for the operations that the Tokyo group would undertake.

In general, volunteers assumed responsibility for all expenses involved on their parts. Expenses typically involved transportation, lodging, meals, and other costs. Many volunteers traveled hundreds or thousands of kilometers to their Florida destinations, so costs amounted to hundreds or even thousands of dollars per person. In many cases this included airfare, hotel or housing rental, meals, travelers’ insurance, costs for car rental and equipment (e.g. cell phones, recording devices, video cameras), printed matter (thousands of photocopied and signs), and other necessities (cases of bottled water and stationery). In some cases, lodging was provided at no cost: since quite a few out-of-state citizens own a second home in Florida, many such citizens were willing to assist in the volunteer effort by donating the use of their houses during the voter drive. In fact, for the most part all ten members of the Tokyo group stayed in various residential homes that had been set aside for the purpose, thanks to the generosity of these concerned citizens.

IV. Volunteers’ Mission

The volunteers’ mission was to assist eligible voters with the voting process, encourage voting, and on Election Day, help prevent voter confusion or intimidation, thereby helping people to exercise their right to vote. Activities included registering voters, providing voters with information on where to vote and offering rides to and from the polls if necessary. As this writer learned, there were voters who had registered to vote but were skeptical of voting, in part due to the incident of 2000 since that incident left people unconvinced about the relevance of politics in their lives. In those cases the volunteers tried to dispel the skepticism—for example if a voter thought his or her vote would not matter, then a volunteer explained some reasons why that single vote would matter. Or if a voter was not convinced by either of the candidates, an explanation would be given as to why not voting could end up being more detrimental than voting for the lesser of two evils—that is, the candidate whom the voter disliked less. And if a voter was undecided about which candidate to vote for and wanted an opinion, a volunteer would offer his or her opinion. The volunteers had already formed their opinions on their preferred candi-
date, so there was little hesitation in offering a candid opinion when asked.

Despite the organization and planning, the volunteers’ task was challenging and at times daunting. Since there is no national standard for voter registration deadlines, ballot design, voting hours, or type of voting machine or voting facility (there are mechanical machines, paper ballots, and computerized machines, and polling sites can be in a public facility such as a municipal building, or in a private building such as a church), each state—and to a certain extent, each county within the state—sets its own rules. As a result, instruction on many basic details of the voting process cannot be done with a consistency on a national scale (like the national income tax forms can, for example), so it is not difficult for people to become confused over the technicalities of voting even though they may have a clear idea of whom they want to vote for. Thus if any step in the voting process is missed, such as failing to register by a certain date, or going to the wrong polling station—which may in fact be closer to a voter’s residence than the polling station assigned to his or her voting precinct, or incorrectly marking a ballot whose layout is confusing, the mistake could result in the loss of one vote.

Based on these factors, the volunteers had their work cut out for them. The Tokyo group spent the greater part of their volunteering effort canvassing neighborhoods and assisting with poll watching on Election Day. Neighborhood canvassing consisted of visiting voters at their residences and leaving them with a packet of literature that contained information about the election and useful telephone numbers. Telephone lines had been set up throughout the state by legal and civic organizations to respond to voters’ issues or to take requests for rides to a polling station on Election Day (there was no public transportation in many of the communities). Polling activities included facilitating people’s movement around the polling stations, such as guiding people where to stand in line, or providing lighting when the area around the facility became too dark to see in the evening, and supporting delegated volunteers who compiled detailed, final voter tallies after the polls closed. However, for most of the non-local volunteers, much of the time at the polling stations on Election Day involved just standing by and observing while being prepared to record any problems or complaints from voters, since the polling stations were well staffed with personnel and local volunteers.

The local FCAN chapter that the Tokyo group joined was one of many that had been working throughout the state. This chapter had assembled approximately
50 committed volunteers from Florida and out-of-state or overseas, and was in charge of covering Manatee County, which is situated halfway down the Florida peninsula on the Gulf of Mexico side. Manatee County’s makeup was one of socioeconomic extremes where at one end of the scale there were well-lit, affluent neighborhoods that had luxurious homes, while at the other end there were poor neighborhoods that lacked basic municipal features such as sidewalks and street lighting. The county had well over one hundred voting precincts, but FCAN, like many of the other volunteer citizen and legal groups, focused on the few minority-represented precincts since it was known that the residents of these communities were the most vulnerable to voter manipulation. The local FCAN chapter covered 14 of Manatee County’s precincts, and the Tokyo group was assigned to three of those precincts—Precincts 62, 63 and 106, which were adjacent to one another.

V. Logistics

Election Day falls on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, and years with presidential elections are always the busiest with campaign-related activities. One week before November 2, 2004 in Florida, election activities reached a fever pitch with the unprecedented numbers of out-of-state volunteers streaming into the state to participate. State and national absentee voting laws that allow voters to cast their ballots by mail, fax or e-mail ahead of Election Day had been expanded since the 2000 election and as a result tens of thousands of citizens voted early in order to have the flexibility to travel elsewhere and assist other voters. The volunteers from the Tokyo group, like the other volunteers in Florida, had sent in their ballots in advance of Election Day so they could assist with the voter drive. The absentee ballot voting law was therefore an instrumental factor that allowed thousands of non-local citizens to travel to Florida for the purpose of volunteering shortly before the election.

The Tokyo group agreed to meet Saturday morning before Election Day in Bradenton, Manatee County. Since the volunteers would be arriving in Florida on different days and at different airports and were planning to stay at different locations, a meeting time and place that was suitable for all had been arranged in advance in Tokyo. The designated place was a diner at a highway intersection that was easy to reach by car from the different locations and was very convenient for
the deployment of the intensive canvassing operations that followed over the next four days (Saturday-Tuesday). The site was also convenient for its large parking lot and sidewalk tables and benches, which served as an assembly area for volunteers. The diner itself was spacious and offered inexpensive meals. The restaurant’s employees knew that Florida was preparing for thousands of out-of-state volunteers, and like the people of other commercial establishments in the area, were willing to help by allowing the use of its outdoor meeting area, restrooms and other facilities.

At the same highway intersection were two more businesses that proved to be extremely useful for the operation. Across from the diner was a Starbucks’ Coffee shop, another comfortable restaurant with large, open tables and affordable fare. Volunteers met here during canvassing breaks in the afternoon to update one another of the day’s progress and to prepare materials for distribution on the canvassing rounds. The large tables were handy for this purpose. The restaurant was also equipped with a hot spot—that is, free wireless access to the Internet—which allowed volunteers to keep in touch by e-mail within the local group and chapter or with other contacts nationally or in Japan, and also to follow the latest election-related news on their laptop computers. The other useful facility was a Kinko’s copy and computer rental shop, a do-it-yourself printing shop for those working in transit. Volunteers used this shop for the thousands of flyers and labels that they would distribute while canvassing. Fortunately, these facilities stayed open very late (on several occasions volunteers worked late into the night printing flyers or attaching labels) and the managers of the shops showed a tolerance toward the volunteers that was more accommodating than a business-as-usual attitude.

After the rendezvous at the diner, the volunteers from the Tokyo group drove to the local FCAN chapter’s headquarters, which was a temporary meeting area stationed in the large parking lot of a mall, to meet the volunteers from that chapter and other volunteers. FCAN supplied the volunteers with thousands of sheets of printed materials that were intended for statewide distribution; these were combined with literature pertaining to the local area polls that the volunteers printed and assembled. The local FCAN chapter also provided maps of the target areas and address lists of voters that the volunteers would contact. The Tokyo group worked out a plan for canvassing the neighborhoods and decided on three people to be the captain, or contact person, for each of the three precincts under its charge.
VI. Canvassing and Public Relations

With concrete plans and a chain of command in place, the grueling work of canvassing began. The days leading up to the election—Saturday through Tuesday (October 30-November 2)—typically began with a meeting at 7:00 AM and finished with meetings over dinner at around 9:00 PM. After dinner, volunteers assembled packets of printed materials for distribution or worked out details of the canvassing strategy for the next day. On Election Day, the day began at 6:00 AM and ended close to midnight. Canvassing involved walking to each household on a list of registered voters and engaging the voter in conversation to confirm whether he or she would be voting and was sufficiently informed of the details, such as the location of the correct polling station. The address list for the three precincts contained nearly 2,800 addresses, almost all of which the Tokyo group was able to visit. The residential characteristic of the three precincts was suburban and there were single-family houses and clusters of low-income, multiple housing complexes. Since the neighborhoods in the precincts were spread out over a wide area and were often difficult to find on a regular road map, one of the group’s members purchased a detailed map on CD and demarcated certain areas using a computer, then printed out the maps so the addresses could be located more accurately.

To cover the three precincts, the volunteers had six cars for their use, three of which were rented by the Tokyo group and three of which belonged to the stateside volunteers who joined the Tokyo group. In a typical canvassing round, two or four volunteers drove to a targeted area, parked the car, and visited residences over an area that could be covered on foot in 30 minutes, or if it was a multiple housing complex, in one hour. After the volunteers visited and spoke with the resident of an address, they continued to the next address until that neighborhood had been covered. Volunteers used rented cell phones and walkie-talkies to relay information to one another while canvassing.

As a general rule, volunteers paired up when visiting people’s residences. The pairs usually, though not always, consisted of one male and one female volunteer. This had been decided on as a safety measure as well as a way to approach residents in a friendly and non-threatening manner in neighborhoods where the volunteers were clearly outsiders. Working in pairs was an efficient strategy in that
one person would do most of the talking while the other provided support and additional information, and checked off a list of items to cover or took notes if necessary. Between the pair, the person who did most of the talking alternated depending on who struck up a quick rapport with the resident, or in some cases, who had the most energy for making a sincere and convincing speech.

Out of respect for contacting residents at an hour that would be the least intrusive to them, the volunteers had established “prime time” hours for the canvassing operation. The times when residents would most likely be home were also considered. On the weekend canvassing began in the late morning, with a break around lunchtime, then continued all afternoon and finished at around 6:00 PM, as sundown followed shortly thereafter and it had been decided that no canvassing would be done after dark in the evening. On the weekdays, canvassing started from 8:00 AM as residents prepared to leave for work or were sending children off to school and were most likely to be at home. Since many residents were away from their homes all day during the weekday, a door hanger—a printed PR piece that contained voting information specific to the voters’ precincts—was left on the doorknob of the home’s front door.

Public relations materials were well organized and prepared far in advance before volunteers started assembling in Florida. Shortly after arriving, this writer was given a standard volunteer’s T-shirt which was created for the voter drive, a black T-shirt with “November 2” written across the front to identify the wearer as a volunteer. For the canvassing operation, volunteer civic organizations such as FCAN and Election Protection had prepared thousands of printed flyers, including a Florida voters’ bill of rights which listed the legal rights of all state voters and toll-free numbers to call for free legal assistance (figure 1). The same organizations also prepared posters, cards and pamphlets that explained polling information and issues that were up for vote, and voting reminders such as the door hangers (figure 2). The groups working with FCAN also prepared flyers specific to each precinct, including the correct polling station location and directions how to get there.

The sense of mission that the volunteers assumed intensified as Election Day approached. It also grew deeper on the occasions when local residents expressed appreciation for the volunteers’ efforts. This writer was told by a handful of residents that no campaigners from either political party had approached them to court their votes and explain the issues that were on the ballot. This left the residents
with the feeling that they had been left out of the political process, so they were thankful of the visit from the non-local volunteers. This itself was a strong reason that made the volunteers want to contact as many addresses as possible, even though the work of canvassing became exhausting toward the end of the day.

Overall, most voters were receptive to the visits from the volunteers, and there were only a few difficulties when visiting the addresses. Voters who were undecided about voting or the candidates always needed more time for explanations; this was one area where the volunteers could have benefited from a strategy in concise explanation. In a few cases on the canvassing rounds, a residence was unapproachable because one or more dogs kept visitors away from the house. In this situation, the volunteers did not leave voting literature or a door hanger unless the dog was inside, because of the danger that the dogs posed. In another case, there was a closed-gate community of mobile homes where one resident stood watch near the gate and clearly did not wish to engage in conversation, let alone open the gate, so the volunteers left that area. Another situation had to do with a neighborhood that was extremely difficult to find. The neighborhood was finally discovered thanks to the perseverance of the local volunteer who was familiar with the general area but not the area in question. It turned out that the neighborhood had a very high concentration of voters but was located an unreasonable distance away from the polling station where those residents had to vote.

VII. Challenges to Getting Out the Vote

On the surface, a well-organized voter drive would appear to be the logical solution for increasing voter participation and ensuring fairness. The will, coordination and effort exemplified by this volunteer activity showed that many hurdles could be overcome when a problem was identified and tackled in unison. However, below the surface was where the most challenging problems lay, and these were the problems that could not be eliminated by volunteer effort. For example, the task of instructing voters on the location of the polling stations where they had to vote would seem to be almost too easy. But in this writer’s opinion, this was one of the biggest and most insidious challenges to the voter drive.

Only by looking at a map and understanding where the precinct boundaries lie did the challenges become clear. The three precincts that the Tokyo group covered
were adjacent to one another, running from east to west. Among the three only one had its borders drawn in a logical configuration from a geographical standpoint, and that was in the shape of a rectangle (Precinct 63). The other two had illogical configurations that made no sense geographically: on the western side was Precinct 106 which straddled part of Precinct 62, and Precinct 62, in the middle, had a highly distorted configuration (figure 3). This precinct had a major expressway, U.S. Highway 301, and a freight rail line running through it, both of which neatly bisected the precinct. Precinct 63 on the eastern side also had the expressway running through it, and Precinct 106 had a highway running through its southwestern corner (U.S. 301 Boulevard West). So two out of these three precincts presented difficulties in that voters would have to cross a major expressway and/or rail line in order to get to their polling station, and without a car, this could be hazardous to their safety; furthermore, there was no public transportation in that area.

The larger problem facing voters, however, was that none of these three precincts had its polling station located conveniently in the center of the precinct. Instead, each precinct had its polling station positioned at the far end of the boundary. In the case of Precinct 62, which this writer helped cover, the polling station was positioned as far away as possible from the very heavily populated multiple housing complex; those residents had to cross the national expressway and rail lines in order to cast their votes. In fact, two polling stations were much closer to the same housing complex but each belonged to a different precinct, while the distance to the correct polling station was about four to five times as far away. A close look at a Manatee County precinct map reveals that polling stations for certain precincts tend to follow the same pattern in which the correct polling station is inconveniently positioned on that precinct’s boundary rather than in a location that is central to and convenient for the overall population of that precinct. Such positioning can give the misleading impression that residents should go to the polling station that is closest to their homes, when in fact the correct polling station may be on the opposite side of that precinct. This was the case with the three precincts that the Tokyo group covered, Precincts 106, 62 and 63 (figures 4, 3, 5). Arrangements such as these present a high potential for confusion and mistakes because a voter can easily go to the wrong polling station. If this were to happen, the voter, who is not required to visit a polling station in order to register to vote, would be turned away and would have to find the correct one for his or her precinct. And this in
turn increases the likelihood of a missed vote.

Whether or not the drawing of precinct boundaries and the positioning of polling stations are done for political reasons is the subject of an entirely different study. Regardless, the volunteers' assignment was to work within the system as it existed during the election of 2004 and get as many people to exercise their right to vote, and in so doing, ease some of the difficulties that hindered this process. There were other challenges that volunteers encountered, some of which could be remedied in small ways while others could not since they were also endemic to the state's system. Many of the polling stations were located in churches, and churches often do not have the utility-grade fixtures that public facilities such as schools or government buildings have, like adequate lighting when necessary. Sunset was shortly after 6:00 PM on November 2nd, and that evening it was cloudy, so darkness set in quickly. At the polling station for Precinct 62, the church's entrance to the building, the driveway leading to the church, the church's parking lot, and even the road leading to the church's grounds all lacked adequate lighting in the evening. From about 6:00 PM, when most of the voters came to vote after having finished work, people were lined up in the dark just outside the church's entrance. Several volunteers used the headlights of their cars to illuminate the church's entranceway and the road sign at the front of the church's driveway which identified the polling station.

Yet another challenge was the fact that Election Day is not a public holiday in Florida, as it is other states. In Precinct 62, many voters came to the polls early in the morning before going to work, while the afternoon was slow with a trickle of people coming and going at the polling station. But beginning early evening, the polling station received a crush of people since most of the voters came after work. The parking lot was the fullest with cars at this time and a long line had formed outside of the church's entrance. Furthermore, the polls closed at 7:00 PM, which is earlier than many other states, so this left just a narrow window of time to vote for the people who had to work a full day. All of these factors—the surreptitiously positioned polling stations, poorly lit facilities after dark, and limited time to vote in the absence of a public holiday—presented challenges that if missed, could result in the loss of a vote, but if surmounted, could work toward a collective show of force as one active voting bloc.
VIII. Results and Conclusion

After the polls closed, the local FCAN chapter recorded the results of the 14 precincts to confirm whether all of the persons who went to the polling stations matched the total number of votes cast, and whether the votes cast were Republican or Democratic. This information is allowed to be publicized, and since each voter had to sign his or her name in order to vote, the number of votes could be corroborated with the number of signatures, although the candidate each person voted for always remains unknown.

By late evening, FCAN had tallied the votes by precinct and distributed a results list to the volunteers (figure 6). Looking over the list, it may be concluded that the volunteers’ mission was highly successful in accordance with the goal set, which was to get people from “neighborhoods where voter turnout is historically low” to exercise their right to vote18. Voter turnout among the 14 precincts averaged a high 71.1 percent18. Three precincts had extremely high voter turnouts at 90 percent or more, while two precincts had a low turnout at 44 and 31 percent. Precincts 62, 63 and 106, which the Tokyo group and seven other volunteers covered, had a turnout of 71 percent, 81 percent, and 73 percent, respectively. The 14 precincts combined voted overwhelmingly Democratic at a ratio of approximately 2 to 1, with the total number of Democratic votes at 5,487 versus 2,682 for Republican. The results were welcomed by the volunteers had who worked in these underrepresented neighborhoods, but when the national results became known the following day, the Republican win ended up disappointing many of the same volunteers.

The success of the volunteer activity in Florida in November 2004 can be measured by increased voter turnout and an absence of poll-related incidents. Absentee voting laws allowed citizens to vote early so they could travel to Florida, and volunteer legal professionals and citizens’ groups established the foundation on which the volunteer movement was built. Advances in technology since the 2000 election helped to expand volunteer outreach and facilitate communication: the Internet made networking on a nationwide scale possible and devices such as cell phones helped to quicken the pace of relaying information.

Equally as important was the qualitative outcome. On Election Day, this writer
had asked a poll watcher whether the 2000 election left Florida residents with a bitter feeling toward politics. The poll watcher responded by saying that the voters, having been caught off guard by political supporters in 2000, had only themselves to blame, and that this time, they had made an all-out effort to prevent another similar disaster. The volunteers in Florida had worked with a sense of urgency and mission that only a large, collective and diverse group could generate. Overall, the state’s residents were receptive to the volunteers and appreciative of their efforts, and many felt flattered by the attention. In addition, the nonpartisan stance taken by FCAN helped promote harmony and avert potentially divisive encounters during this heated time. In fact part of FCAN’s written instructions to volunteers was:

While it may be tempting to spend time discussing the issues with people, our mission is to encourage people to vote—not persuade them who to vote for. We are non-partisan. Thus, please try to avoid long discussions about the issues.19

After the election was finished and the Tokyo group returned to Japan, this writer mentioned the volunteer experience in Florida to a few American friends and colleagues. Even though the event was over, they expressed gratitude that people had traveled from as far away as Japan. Like many others, they felt a sense of unity when reflecting on a problem that had affected other American citizens, especially those who were in a less advantageous position. The sense of empathy, a can-do attitude and the desire to volunteer when the circumstance called were the factors that made the volunteer movement in Florida in November 2004 a reality.
IX. Figures and Photographs

Fig. 1 Flyer issued by a volunteer legal group, Election Protection. The back contains the bill of rights for Florida voters and is written in English and Spanish.

Fig. 2 Door hanger. The door hangers were left on people’s front doors as a reminder to vote and contained the address of the correct polling station.

Fig. 3 Precinct 62.
Fig. 4 Precinct 106.

Fig. 5 Precinct 63.

Fig. 6 Results of the voter drive for the 14 precincts covered by FCAN in Manatee County. Listed in the columns are (left to right): names of precinct captains, numbers of targeted voters, actual numbers of citizens who voted, Democratic votes, Republican votes, voter turnout percentage, and precinct number.
Fig. 7 (photograph) Location of the polling station for Precinct 62, Manatee County, Florida.

Fig. 8 (photograph) Young residents of Precinct 62. Although too young to vote, these high schoolers clearly expressed an interest in the polling activities.

Fig. 9 (photograph) Out-of-state volunteers assemble at 6:00 AM on Election Day before a final canvassing run and poll watching in Manatee County, Florida.

Fig. 10 (photograph) Polling station at Precinct 62. 6:50 AM, November 2, 2004. Voters wait for the church doors to open to cast their votes.

Fig. 11 (photograph) Resident Florida volunteers canvass neighborhoods in Precinct 62 on Election Day to confirm whether people had voted.

Fig. 12 (photograph) The Tokyo volunteers meet over a late dinner after the activities finished on Election Day.
Notes


2 States in the eastern part of the United States which contain parts of the Appalachian Mountain Range are known as the Appalachian states, and they extend from northern Mississippi to southeastern New York.


4 For further information on the U.S. electoral vote system, the following website is helpful: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electoral_vote> (November 2007)

5 This is a measure designed to prevent states with the largest population centers from overriding concerns that may be specific to areas with low populations; again the website in footnote 4 is informative.

6 The figure is for 2000; in 2004, Florida held 27 electoral votes.


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14 Florida: The Sunshine State, Driving Votes website,  
<http://www.drivingvotes.org/states/florida.shtml>  
(October 2007)


16 Precinct boundaries and their polling stations for Manatee County, Florida may be accessed on the Internet at <http://www.votemanatee.com/PrecinctMaps.asp>  
(November 2007); however, some of the polling stations may have changed since 2004. The polling station for Precinct 62 was moved to Southeast High School, a short distance away from the 2004 site (Church of the United Brethren in Bradenton) yet it is still skewed to one end of the precinct. The polling sites for Precincts 63 and 106 remain the same as of 2007.

17 Florida Consumer Action Network, “Precinct Walker Instructions” (from pamphlet distributed to volunteers in October 2004).

18 Sandy Lee-Shirley, FCAN, “Manatee County FCAN Results,” (compiled list of voter turnout results for 14 precincts covered by FCAN in Manatee County, November 2, 2004. All figures in this paragraph are based on this list).

19 Florida Consumer Action Network, “Precinct Walker Instructions.”