



Robert Hill chatting with a fellow volunteer outside a campaign office in Easton, Pa. Mr. Hill quit his job in California to campaign for Democrats in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Chasing a political moment

Volunteers put their lives on hold to help campaign in U.S. midterm election

BY FARAH STOCKMAN

As Election Day approached, many Americans were fired up. Over the weekend, volunteers knocked on doors across the United States in a final push to influence the midterm election held Tuesday that could shift the balance of power in Washington.

But in this election cycle, some Americans went to extraordinary lengths — quitting jobs, delaying school, moving across the country — to work without pay for a campaign. Their zeal spoke to the historic political moment, in which a dizzying array of congressional races across the country began to feel as consequential as a presidential election.

Democrats were eager to elect lawmakers who could act as a check on the president. Swing Left, a group formed to help Democrats win back the House, said its volunteers knocked on more than a million doors on Saturday, twice as many as the previous week.

Republicans were energized by a desire to support President Trump, as well as candidates allied with him who were locked in tight races. This election cycle, the party trained 25,000 new “Republican Leadership Initiative fellows,” five times more than in 2016.

For die-hard campaigners who spent months working, unpaid, Election Day marked the last leg of a marathon. Or the final steps in a personal odyssey. Or the bittersweet return to normal life.

“I believe this is the most important election of my lifetime.”

After listening to a piece about politics on National Public Radio, Robert Hill, 43, quit his job as an events planner in California and moved to Ohio to volunteer for Danny O’Connor, a Democrat running in Ohio’s 12th Congressional District. He didn’t know much about Mr. O’Connor when he started. All he knew was that there was a chance to flip a seat, and that Mr. O’Connor had refused corporate PAC money.

“My biggest issues are the money in politics,” he said. “All this money is coming in from corporations. It’s not how this country was supposed to be governed.”

He’d never been involved in politics before. But he found his way to a campaign office in Ohio in June and offered his services for free. “Every day there was organized canvassing,” he recalled. “Knocking on doors. There was a place where you get your literature packet and a little pep talk.”

Once, the pep talk came from Mayor Martin J. Walsh of Boston, who went around the room shaking hands. It gave Mr. Hill the feeling that he was a part of something special and important that was bigger than anything he had ever done. He eventually moved on to another swing district — Pennsylvania’s Seventh — to campaign for Democrats. Canvassing can be a little awkward and frustrating, he said. But after five months of door-knocking, he had become the veteran responsible for training volunteers for the last weekend’s final push. After Election Day, he’s not sure what he will do. But he won’t be returning to his old life in California.

“I had a job, but I did not have a purpose,” he said. “I found my purpose.”

“You can’t discuss what you believe without people screaming in your face.” Margo Rushin, 70, a retired schoolteacher in Kingwood, Tex., met Dan



Top, Margo Rushin campaigning for a Republican candidate in Kingwood, Tex. She’s worked, unpaid, between eight to 10 hours a day since March. Above, Grace Hamilton quit her job and traveled around the United States volunteering for Democrats.

One campaign volunteer who quit his job said, “I had a job, but I did not have a purpose. I found my purpose.”

Crenshaw, a Republican candidate for the Second Congressional District, at a Christmas party.

Mrs. Rushin grilled him about everything from the national debt to abortion. His answers impressed her.

“He stood there, with his back as straight as a ramrod and he said ‘I believe in life at conception, and I cannot compromise,’” Mrs. Rushin, a born-again Christian, recalled. “That really spoke to me.”

After Mr. Crenshaw, a retired Navy SEAL who lost an eye in Afghanistan, opened a satellite office near Mrs. Rushin’s house, she and her husband signed up to volunteer. But then the office manager broke her foot. “I said to my husband, ‘I’m a retiree. I’ll go up and help them out.’”

Mrs. Rushin has been in charge ever since. She’s worked, unpaid, between eight to 10 hours a day since March, her first foray into political campaigning.

She’s animated by the feeling that the country is hopelessly divided, and that conservatives can’t express their values anymore without being shouted down. And although she didn’t initially support Mr. Trump — she backed his primary rival from Texas, Ted Cruz — she feels that the economy has roared back since he took office. She wants to consolidate those gains.

“This midterm election is critical,” she said.

She recruited dozens of retirees, known as “DansGrans,” who feel the same. With an average age of about 70, the group’s members had too many aches and pains to go door-knocking. Nor did they want to phone bank, since they hated receiving those calls themselves. So they settled on writing to fellow voters in the district, sending out 16,500 handwritten postcards and letters.

“We wrote them in our own voice,” she said. “Now we have people coming up to the polls saying ‘Hey we got your card.’ It makes me feel like this work is worth it.”

“I’m burning savings. I will probably have to work an extra year or two because of this.”

Matt Yust, 59, a nonprofit consultant, sublet his New York apartment and moved to Iowa for five months to volunteer for Swing Left.

He still remembers the exact moment that the idea popped in his head: “I was sitting at the Blind Tiger Ale House, in the Village, and everyone was complaining about Trump. I said, ‘Stop complaining and do something about it.’”

As a young man in Oklahoma, he’d signed up for the military when his country needed him. He felt that his country needed him again.

He decided to spend the summer and fall volunteering for a midterm campaign, even though he’d never worked on a congressional race before. He settled on Iowa, which has never elected a woman to the House of Representatives.

“There were two great female candidates, Abby Finkenauer and Cindy Axne,” he recalled.

Mr. Yust hadn’t owned a car in 30 years, but he knew he had to have one to campaign in Iowa. He bought a Honda Fit, and drove it to Des Moines in June, in time for the state’s Democratic Party convention.

“People thought I was a little bit nuts,” he said. “But if you’re doing stuff for free, they are going to let you walk in the door.”

After three decades in New York City, Mr. Yust experienced a bit of culture shock. He’s vegan, but ended up at the Polk County Steak Fry, a fund-raiser for Democrats. (“I ate the steak,” he said.)

But volunteering reconnected him with the American heartland where he grew up. “These are very nice people,” he said. “In 2020, I’m going to come back.”

“If things don’t go our way on Nov. 6, I don’t want to feel that I could have done more.”

Grace Hamilton, 24, from Sammamish, Wash., quit her job at a tech firm and embarked upon a 9,000-mile loop around the country, with the goal of volunteering for as many Democratic candidates as she could.

She mapped out a route through the toughest battlegrounds, hoping to lend a hand to 34 candidates. In the end, she made it to 28.

The trip gave her a unique glimpse of how Democratic voters are feeling on the eve of an election that she considers to be the most consequential in her lifetime.

“If the stakes weren’t so high, I wouldn’t be doing this,” she said. “But it’s not that way for everyone. When I am knocking on folks’ doors, I hear people say ‘We’re not political, we don’t vote’ just as much as I hear people say ‘Of course, I’m supporting Democrats.’”

Her schedule kept her constantly moving. At times, she drove through the night to spend a day canvassing in another state. Each afternoon, she walked into a campaign office in a place she’d never been before, and asked for a packet. She knocked on doors all afternoon, returned the packet, and drove on. If her canvass ended early, she made calls from her cellphone for Democratic candidates.

Her political trek, which she chronicled on Instagram, gave her moments she’ll never forget: Getting bitten by a dog in Ohio. Listening to a voter’s conspiracy theories in Pennsylvania. Watching a woman’s eyes well up with tears in New Hampshire, as she expressed her fear that her diabetic son would not be able to afford insulin in the future.

The landscape outside her window changed dramatically as she drove from Michigan, where she canvassed for Gretchen Driskell, to Tennessee, where she attended a rally for the Senate candidate Phil Bredesen, to Arizona, where she got out the vote for Kyrsten Sinema. But the issues stayed remarkably consistent.

“My glove box is full of fliers,” she said. “Health care is the first thing on almost all of them.”

The hardest thing about the trip wasn’t camping by the side of the road, or mastering the platforms of dozens of candidates well enough to persuade voters to support them. It was hearing from people who had given up on politics altogether.

“There have been a couple of people who said ‘I’m not voting, I’m so sick of this nonsense,’” she said. “I feel really badly that our political institutions have failed people to that point. I shared my story with them, and why I was sticking with it despite the nonsense. Maybe on Election Day, something compels them to go and vote.”

Trump Jr. relishes stage as a headliner

HERSHEY, PA.

President’s eldest son is an active campaigner for the Republican Party

BY MAGGIE HABERMAN

On a recent Friday night, Pennsylvania Republicans tucked into a catered meal at the Hershey Lodge as Donald Trump Jr. took the stage, following his girlfriend, Kimberly Guilfoyle, in what has become their pattern on the campaign trail this fall.

“If there’s one question that Donald Trump lied to all of you in this room about . . .” the president’s eldest son said to the hundreds of party officials at the annual fall dinner of the state Republican Party. He trailed off as the room seemed to quiver with nervousness at the use of the word “lied.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, I’m getting somewhere — it’s not a gaffe, promise,” Mr. Trump said to laughter. “If there’s one thing he lied about, it’s that you’d all be sick of winning.”

The line has become a staple at many of the 60 events the younger Mr. Trump has held since May for Republican candidates and committees, as he has emerged as one of the Republican Party’s most visible headliners in a challenging midterms climate for the group.

It has also been a re-emergence of sort. After damaging headlines in 2017 about possible Trump campaign collusion with Russia and Donald Trump Jr.’s role in the Trump Tower meeting with Kremlin-connected Russians, the president’s son is appealing to the Republican base anew and mostly ignoring the investigation by Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel, and all things Russia. He and Ms. Guilfoyle are instead radiating a carefree, tag-team vibe at events, in interviews and in a television ad for the super PAC supporting his father.

Mr. Trump has echoed his father’s attacks on Democrats, mocked President Barack Obama for talking about a magic wand solving problems — “Abracadabra, buddy!” Mr. Trump chuckled from the stage in Hershey — and stoked fear about the out-of-power party winning a House majority in Tuesday’s elections.

The president is “the first politician to ever get killed on a daily basis for doing everything he said he would do — it’s mind boggling,” Mr. Trump said in his speech. “The mistake we sometimes make is thinking he can do it alone. He can’t.”

Visits from President Trump have been a double-edged sword for Republican candidates in certain states, who want his backing but who fear blanket media coverage of his controversial statements. A guest appearance by Donald Trump Jr. has become the next best thing for several candidates, some of whom he’s campaigned for repeatedly in states like Montana (where his father holds a grudge against Senator Jon Tester, who is up for re-election), Ohio (a key part of the Trump 2016 victory), Nevada (a swing state that Mr. Trump would like to add to his column in 2020) and North Dakota and West Virginia (which, like the others, have high-profile Senate races this year).

The Republican Party base, with whom Mr. Trump was a family ambassador when his father campaigned in 2016, is almost as protective of Mr. Trump as they are of his father, seeing him as a looser version whom they can relate to, someone who does not carry himself like a celebrity.

As unfiltered and caution-free as his father is, Mr. Trump’s online persona can be even more reflexive and abrasive, mocking his father’s critics and seizing on instances of “hypocrisy.”

On Twitter, Mr. Trump has unapologetically defended Brett M. Kavanaugh, the new Supreme Court justice who faced sexual assault allegations, and claimed Senator Joe Manchin, Democrat from West Virginia, was late in his support of the justice — despite having decided to back Mr. Kavanaugh before some of his Republican Party colleagues.

Mr. Trump has also attacked news outlets with gusto and amplified conservative memes, including retweeting a conspiratorial thread about the mur-

dered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In recent days, he declared that Senator Angus King, independent from Maine, wants to “repopulate Maine with Syrian and Somali refugees.”

David Axelrod, a former senior adviser to President Obama and an architect of Mr. Obama’s historic win in 2008, described the younger Mr. Trump as “hot-headed and even more unrestrained than his dad when it comes to mixing it up.”

“If Trump Sr. employs a dog whistle, Jr. favors a bullhorn, joyfully transmitting nutty conspiracy theories that even his dad might be hesitant to embrace,” Mr. Axelrod added.

Mr. Trump, 40, said in an interview that he did not regret his use of social media, which often outdoes the president’s own. His father is “teaching other conservatives to fight,” Mr. Trump said.

As Mr. Trump traveled with Republican politicians on the campaign trail far from Washington, questions about the special counsel investigation and the Trump Tower meeting that he held with a Russian lawyer were absent.

“I have literally never been asked about it on the trail,” he said, adding that voters “realize it’s nonsense.”

“I did what any business guy would do. I took an unsolicited meeting, sat there for 20 minutes, wasted my time,” Mr. Trump said in the interview, saying the focus on it became a frenzy. (He said in 2017 that the meeting was primarily about Russian adoptions; a year later, President Trump said the meeting was to “get information on an opponent,” Hillary Clinton.)

If anything, Mr. Trump appears unconcerned about what may come with the Mueller inquiry after the midterms. He noted that he had cooperated fully with congressional committees looking into the 2016 campaign.

A guest appearance by Donald Trump Jr. has become the next best thing for several candidates, some of whom he’s campaigned for repeatedly.

“Guess who didn’t plead the Fifth — me,” Mr. Trump said, referring to invoking Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination, which others connected to the investigations have done.

Republicans say he has made a difference, both in private fund-raisers and on the stump, because he’s able to be at ease with both audiences. “He’s like a relief pitcher — kind of loose and relaxed and easy to hang around with,” said Jeff Roe, the Republican strategist and general consultant for a number of high-profile races this year. “And all the sudden he comes in and throws 100 miles-per-hour fastballs.”

Mr. Roe said that Mr. Trump “has to find a place to live, and he has to find a place he’d enjoy, because he has to run for office.”

Mr. Trump says he is asked questions about his own future “every day,” but if there’s a specific office he would be drawn to, he didn’t say.

His supporters have mentioned possible runs for statewide office, almost certainly in red states where his father performed well.

“Right now, I’m focused on other things, but you never know. I love the intensity of campaigning,” he said. “I love aspects of the fight. I don’t know how much I would love aspects of the actual job yet.”

On the stump, he excoriates democratic socialism and tethers it to the form of socialism practiced in Eastern Europe, where his Czech-born mother, Ivana, sent her children to see her parents for over a decade when they were growing up. Mr. Trump said his grandmother watches democratic socialism described on cable news and says her views — “You don’t understand how bad it is, you don’t know what happens,” he recalled her saying — have shaped his.

While his father has taken over the Republican Party, Mr. Trump said he was mindful that there were still holdouts within his own administration who miss the days before the Trump administration.

“I think there’s still plenty of people that are still old-school, established people that want those things back,” he said, “even if it means going back to losing.”



Donald Trump Jr., center, at a rally. He has echoed his father’s attacks on Democrats.