



Setting Up A Voter Registration Booth

BY RICHARD P. BURKE

WHY RUN A VOTER REGISTRATION BOOTH?

Running a voter registration tables or booths can help your organization in some very important ways: 1) *You can register voters who will generally support your goals at the ballot box,* 2) *You will meet new people with energy and talent who can make your organization more effective,* 3) *You will raise your profile in the community and build a level of prestige for your organization and,* 4) *You will have a chance to help your volunteers interact with the public, building their sense of confidence and camaraderie.* This paper will help your organization realize all of these benefits by running an effective voter registration booth.

1 SECURE A LOCATION FOR YOUR BOOTH

Where do you set up a voter registration booth? The answer varies widely depending on the community you live in. Generally, county fairs, gun shows, farmers markets, local festivals, open houses, art fairs, and many other sorts of venues are good bets. The organizers of many events let non-profit organizations set up an exhibition booth or table free or for a nominal charge. Some retail stores like Wal-Mart and Safeway will let you set up a voter registration booth, but you **MUST** stress to them that you are a non-partisan, non-profit organization that does not endorse political parties or candidates (most retailers don't like to be seen taking sides in political races).

After you identify venues, you think would work, find out who is in charge. Managers will usually have authority to grant you permission to host a booth at retail stores. For other venues, try the Internet or phone numbers published in newspaper ads. If they are willing to let you set up a booth, they will usually ask you to fill out a simple application, so they have a contact person. Sometimes, they will offer a sheet with rules and restrictions (always obey them). Never argue with such a person, even if he or she says "no," seems impolite or is otherwise hostile. Always be polite. If they say "no," graciously thank them for your time.

2 SET GOALS AND SECURE SUPPLIES

While registering voters is the outward reason to run a voter registration booth, it is really only the frosting on the cake. The most benefit from running a booth is realized in building your network of sympathetic households who support your group.

Remember you are scouting for members, talent, and connections. Set realistic goals for how many people you will speak to, how many members you will sign up, how many pieces of literature you will hand out and, yes, how many voters will you register. Once you set these goals, focus on them and plan everything else in a way that will work to support reaching.

3 SECURE YOUR SUPPLIES

You can get voter registration cards free of charge from your county elections office. While they may limit the number of cards they will give you, the typical booth will only need 100 or so. Involve and work with other members, organizations and contacts to make sure you have all of the voter registration forms, literature, and other materials that you need to make your booth successful. Do this well in advance - don't wait for the last minute.

Think about decorations, banners, or whatever you can come up with. These are very inexpensive and decorating a booth can be an excellent project for an artistically minded volunteer with a little time. Make sure you have plenty of pens, a few clipboards, and some snacks and drinks for booth workers. Find out if a table and chairs are provided. If not, you will need to secure these items as well.

4 PULL OUT

Virtually **EVERYONE** who allows you to set up a booth at their event will insist that your booth be manned at all times. Prior to the booth event, set up a time chart and recruit volunteers to staff the booth in two-, three-, or four-hour shifts. Always try to staff at least two people in the booth and work hard to have your staffing organized for the entire event before the event starts.

Sometimes life interferes, and people don't show up - *count on this happening*. Compensate by asking one or two reliable volunteers to be "on call" if someone doesn't show up.

You may wish to assign the task of staffing the booth to a reliable volunteer so you can focus on other things that will make your booth successful. This person should be willing to remind people of their commitments via phone calls as well as emails - reminding them to be dressed and groomed in a way that lends credibility your local organization. Because people often run a little late, ask them to arrive to five or ten minutes early.

If you know a sympathetic state senator or other well-known public official, ask them to work a shift in your

booth with you. Doing so will establish your chapter in the mind of the official (improving your lobbying clout in the future) and offer the official a chance to appear “the good public servant” mingling with his or her constituents. Having a well know official also creates a “draw” for your booth that will bring in a lot of people and establish your credibility in the minds of those visiting or passing by your booth.

5 TELL PEOPLE ABOUT YOUR BOOTH

Contact your local newspapers, radio stations, and television stations. Tell them about your booth, when and where it will take place. If a well-known public figure will be present, include this information as well - this could improve your chances for media coverage.

Use email discussion lists, Internet services like Meet Up, and phone lists to tell people about your booth. You may have contacts in like-minded organizations who would be willing to spread the word using their resources as well. Leave no stone unturned!

6 ARRIVE EARLY, ANTICIPATE PROBLEMS

If it is possible, go to the site of your booth and table one day early. Did they locate your booth where they said they would? Are electrical power (if you need it) and other promised resources readily accessible? Will you need to bring extension cords, another table, or other supplies you thought would be provided? Are parking passes and fair passes ready for you to pick up and distribute? Not all of these issues will apply to all of your events, but the point is to think about solving problems before your event begins.

7 THANK YOUR VOLUNTEERS AND GUESTS

Always thank your volunteers profusely. Take everybody to pizza within a week or two of the event. Mention those who helped out in any way, especially those who came through when problems arose or those who went above and beyond the call of duty. The best time to begin speaking is a few minutes after everyone has their food (people settle down to eat and there are fewer interruptions from restaurant staff).

Discuss how the event went generally, what went right and what went wrong. Grant credit for successes widely and lavishly. When discussing what went wrong, avoid finger pointing and concentrate instead on how execution can be improved in the future.

In an ideal world, volunteers would need no motivation other than the desire to fight for freedom. But in the real world, volunteers are motivated by recognition among their peers. Recognition of good workers can also inspire dormant members to become active so they be recognized too. Never underestimate the motivating power of an “ego stroke”.

TIPS TO REMEMBER

a. Grassroots comes from the bottom up.

Leadership comes from the top down. As a chapter leader, set an example by making sure to work a few shifts in the booth. It is fine to delegate tasks (we all have busy lives), but make sure you follow up to make sure all gets done.

b. I can’t stress this enough: BE FRIENDLY. Your goals should be outreach and name-recognition - voter registration is just the gravy. If a someone hostile to your organization wants to register at your table, help them with a smile. Give them some material to read and thank them. Maybe they’ll read something they like. Maybe in a couple of years, they’ll be looking for a new political home and remember how friendly you were.

c. Have a nice look to your table. Spend a few bucks and get a nice banner to go across the front of the table. Example: three-line vinyl banner, about 5 feet long. First line: YOUR ORGANIZATION, second Line: “Your County”, third line: “Register to Vote”.

d. Keep your conversations short. Your goal is to communicate with a lot of people. DON’T get dragged into long philosophical discussions or, even worse, get sucked into arguments with people who don’t agree with you. Remember, you want to make contact with as many people as possible. Practice graciously ending conversations. If you need a break, take one. Sometimes it helps to freshen up every hour or so.

e. Have fun! This shouldn’t be drudgery. It should be exciting. This is true grassroots work and, in the long run, one of the most effective forms of political activism you can engage in.