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# Democracy Knocking: First-Time Candidate Works the Sidewalks with a Smile and a Handshake

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# Richmond magazine

## Democracy Knocking

First-time candidate works the sidewalks with a smile and a handshake

BY TOM SHIELDS

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In the movie *The Candidate*, a young Robert Redford plays Bill McKay, an idealistic, budding politician who believes in going directly to the voters. There is one scene where a voter approaches McKay in the parking lot of a flea market. The voter hands McKay a hot dog and then proceeds to punch him in the face. McKay gets up, bloodied, realizing that he probably lost that vote.

The interaction between candidate and voter in American politics has always been an interesting dance. In August we saw that during several sometimes-contentious congressional town-hall meetings across the country. Having taught politics for many years, I would tell my students that the voter-candidate exchange was the crux of democracy, but of course that was theoretical. Having worked with other political candidates, I knew of that interaction firsthand, but from an aide's perspective. As a candidate for the House of Delegates I have been like McKay — bright-eyed and hopeful for the best.

The first thing that all candidates must do is to get out and meet with as many voters as possible. The best way to do that is door to door. I remember well the first door that I knocked on in March; I was very nervous. I had canvassed for several campaigns over the years. Knocking on that door as a candidate felt very different: I couldn't hide. It was my name on the literature that I handed out, and it was my ideas and opinions and point of view laid out in detail.

I approached the door, rang the bell and waited. No one appeared. I grew more nervous. Then I knocked really hard. A woman peered curiously through the window. She slowly opened the door

and said, “Yes, can I help you?” I extended my hand, anxiously, and said, “I’m Tom Shields, and I’m running for the House of Delegates.” The woman looked at me, smiled and said very nicely, “It’s nice to meet you. I appreciate you coming by.” The anxiety inside melted away as I realized I had become a candidate for public office. I had entered into the democratic process.

Since that cold day in March, I have personally knocked on more than 5,000 doors while my campaign has knocked on more than 8,000. I still find it a thrill to approach the house of a voter with the great expectation of discussing the issues that will be of concern to that individual or family.

Some voters are still unsure, don’t want to be bothered or don’t have the time to chat. Overall, I continue to be amazed at how people welcome being face to face with a candidate. On hot days I’ve been offered a glass of sweet tea. On rainy days I’ve been invited to come in out of the weather. I have met incredible people and have heard heartbreaking stories. I’ve been given advice. I’ve been told how my position or argument could be made stronger. I’ve been told in clear but civil terms why I’m not the candidate they’ll vote for. I’ve heard what’s on people’s minds and learned a lot about what people expect from elected officials: honesty, transparency, accessibility, communication, common sense. No one has ever yelled at me, called me a name or even slammed a door in my face. Regardless of party or ideological affiliation, many, many people have thanked me for running.

In the era of Facebook, robo-calls and telephone town-hall meetings, our political process has become removed from that face-to-face immediacy and interaction so natural to human beings. It is something that worries many who study people in the social space. In 1995, Robert Putnam wrote a piece that appeared in the *Journal of Democracy* titled “Bowling Alone,” which discussed the need for social capital in our lives. He went on to write a book with the same title that discussed how our space for interaction was dwindling. According to Putnam, even bowling had become a solitary sport. I believe the town-hall meetings during this summer’s congressional recess, in which members of Congress faced rooms packed with constituents, some groups numbering as large as 1,000, were a good thing. Combined with the large turnout in the federal elections last fall, I think it shows our democracy is alive and well.

Proving the old adage that politics is a contact sport, the voters I’m meeting seem to appreciate that democracy has come to their front porch or stoop. (I hope they’ll leave their homes on Nov. 3 and vote, maybe even for me.) I’m more and more convinced that the best way to make contact is with a handshake and a smile at the door of a voter — but please don’t ask me to hold a hot dog. I’ve seen that trick in the movies.