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Feature Article



On a recent edition of MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, host Matthews announced in a crowded auditorium, "Tonight – Barack Obama for the *full hour!*" Suddenly, a school band launched into a full anthem, and the crowd's applause was so loud one could be forgiven for thinking it was Hulk Hogan coming from the back instead of the potential-Democratic nominee. At this point in the election, this kind of response to the appearance of Barack Obama should surprise no one – he's been called "the most inspiring and exciting" candidate to be running for the Presidency in recent memory. People see him as the Next Great Hope, the proverbial basket the voters are willing to lay their eggs in.

But it's one thing for Americans to take a shine to this man – he is running to be their President, after all. It's another thing altogether when *Canadians* get all googly-eyed over him. (He is still *mortal*, right?) And yet, a rising number of Canadians seem to be supporting Obama's campaign more than, well, any Canadian politician in the last two decades. Maybe three.

In fact, a new Canadian Press Harris-Decima survey polled Canadians on how they would vote if Obama was a candidate in a *Canadian* election. The results? Obama would handily win the election easily by almost a 2:1 margin. "When you combine the survey's findings with current voting intentions, either federal party would win a landslide victory with Obama as leader," Harris-Decima president Bruce Anderson said.

So it should come as no surprise that some Canadians are clearly rooting for Obama in the U.S. election campaign. What is less understandable is why some of these Canadians would actually volunteer to help Obama win, traveling great distances and losing money from work to do so. Yet that's precisely what Ajay Puri, a 27-year old health care researcher has done – and he's not alone.

Puri has gone so far as to create the website CanadiansForObama.ca, a group that currently boasts membership at around 300 people, while his Facebook group has another 200. A similar Facebook group in Toronto has more than 2300 members.



Ajay, Chuck W, Vikram C, Harjit and Braeden Caley
at the Obama victory party in Seattle

More than just a group of political junkies, Canadians For Obama is a group that has actually sent members into the states to volunteer to assist Barack Obama's campaign. Puri himself traveled down to Seattle not only to hear Obama speak, but help answer phones and door-knock.

Asked why Puri made the trip, he responded simply, "This is the time for change and Obama is the guy to lead that movement. He has really inspired and motivated me and after I heard him speak for the first time at the Democratic Convention, I decided if he ran, and I hoped he would, I want to try and help in any way possible. So I did."

Ajay wasn't alone – two of his closest friends were also inspired by Obama's words and actions. Together, they formed the Canadians For Obama website in an effort to galvanize more Canadians around Obama's cause. They dreamed up plans to visit Texas, North Carolina, Pennsylvania as well as nearby Washington to assist in Obama's campaign. But first they had to find the answer to a pressing question: *would doing all that be legal?*

The team spoke to some people from Obama's campaign and looked into American bylaws and election rules and discovered there was nothing preventing Canadians from *volunteering* to assist a campaign, so long as they didn't do anything that would actually *affect* someone's vote and were not paid for their assistance. That meant they were free to travel to the States and assist Obama's campaign – so they did.

Seventeen of them piled into their vehicles and headed down to Seattle to help Obama as he came through there ahead of the Washington primary. Once they got there, they got right to work. "We did everything we could, 24 hours a day," Puri recalled. "We knocked on doors, we canvassed, answered telephones, and did some fundraising. It was a great opportunity to see why Americans like him so much. It was really a very interesting experience."

The group of 17 were interesting themselves. They were comprised of several different political groups: some were Liberals, others NDPers, a few were even avid Conservatives. And yet they had all come together under the umbrella of Barack Obama. “It was interesting to see such a diverse group come together to help someone who was so progressive in the States.”

Puri himself didn’t grow up in the Trudeau era but has read his books and met his son, Justin. “Those guys know how to lead a country,” Puri said, adding that, “Obama reminds me of Trudeau. He has good ideas, can capture any audience and knows what people really want and knows how to engage them and in the right way.”

Puri is not just motivated because he’s smitten with Obama – he also thinks the Democrats would be good for Canada. “We need a Canadian version of Obama here,” he elaborated. “If Obama doesn’t win, he should be given an honorary status here in Canada. If he does win, it will be good for Canada. It’s important, I think, to get a progressive person who is open to the world and I think Obama would definitely help unite our two countries together.”

It’s true that a lot of Canadians are looking south with great interest. There’s no doubt that, for some reason, the U.S. election has caught the attention of many Canadians. A February Environics poll found that 15% of Canadians would happily give up their ballot in Canada's next federal election to vote in the one currently going on in the U.S. When Puri is asked why that is, he tells a story as a way of giving an answer.

“Down in Everett, I asked a 7/11 clerk who she was supporting in the election and she told me she wouldn’t be supporting a Democrat and certainly not Barack Obama,” he recalled. Puri said that the clerk told him bluntly, “I would never support a person like him.” When Puri asked why, she responded, “Well, first off, he’s Muslim and I just can’t see an African-American running my country. That’s just not going to happen.”

Puri, himself a South Asian, was stunned by the clerk’s comments. But it proved something to him as well – most Canadians tend to be more aware. The clerk had the wrong information about Obama, but most Canadians know that he is in fact not a Muslim and understand the issues perhaps a little better.

“We *care* about his Iraq policies, his stance on health care, his foreign policy plans,” Puri said. “*That’s* why we get involved. Canadians are apathetic here because they read the rhetoric from *our* politicians and we endure scandal after scandal, but in the U.S. right now, there is this openness of new candidates coming through and that’s what’s motivating me and a lot of my friends.”

Many of the team of 17 in Washington State needed to take time off work to go on the trip, and some of the students that went had no real money to start with. That said, “We still think this is the best investment of our time and money,” Puri confirmed. There’s no point in doing things half-heartedly, which is why those that go on the trips are always the most dedicated, passionate members of the group.



Canadians for Obama sport their cool T-shirts in Seattle

But even passion can have limits imposed upon them, and that proved true again in the case of these traveling politicians. One of the group members, en route to an airport in the States where she was set to fly to Texas in early March, was questioned by U.S. border officials as to where she was going and the purpose of her trip. When she told them she was going to Texas to volunteer at an Obama event, a red flag went up. Not only did they officials

deny her entry into the U.S., they interrogated her for several hours.

“How can you afford this?” they asked her. “Why are you doing this?” They told her she was not allowed to “meddle in our affairs”, and apparently, threatened to tell McCain, Clinton and the mainstream media about what she was doing – the threat being it would hurt Obama’s chances in the election. (When was the last time you can remember hearing about someone committing a crime at a border crossing and having the border guards threaten to call the *newspaper* on them?)

They not only then denied her entry - they banned her from entering the U.S. for the entire length of the nomination process. And worse, denied her entry for *eight years* should Obama win the White House.

This behaviour angered members of Canadians for Obama and only strengthened their resolve. “This has only made us want to get *more* involved and really makes us want to see this infrastructure change, both here in Canada and in the States.”

There’s a long way to go before that change occurs – the race for the White House is far from being decided. There still remains a slim chance Hilary can find a way to win the Democratic nomination and even if Obama wins the nomination, he must still compete against Republican nominee John McCain. Puri isn’t sure what he will do in the event Obama loses, beyond losing some of his interest in U.S. politics.

“I have no idea what I will do if Obama doesn’t win,” he said. “No idea at all. My interest will drop, and that of others as well. A lot of youth votes will be lost, and some African-American ones too. If you lose the main agent of change, what’s the point of getting involved?”

That said, Puri knows Barack will not lose faith, and will find some other way to stay involved. “No matter what happens, I know Barack will not get discouraged,” he said simply. “And if he doesn’t get discouraged, well then what's my excuse?”

On the Web: CandiansForObama.ca

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