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Doorstep Discourse

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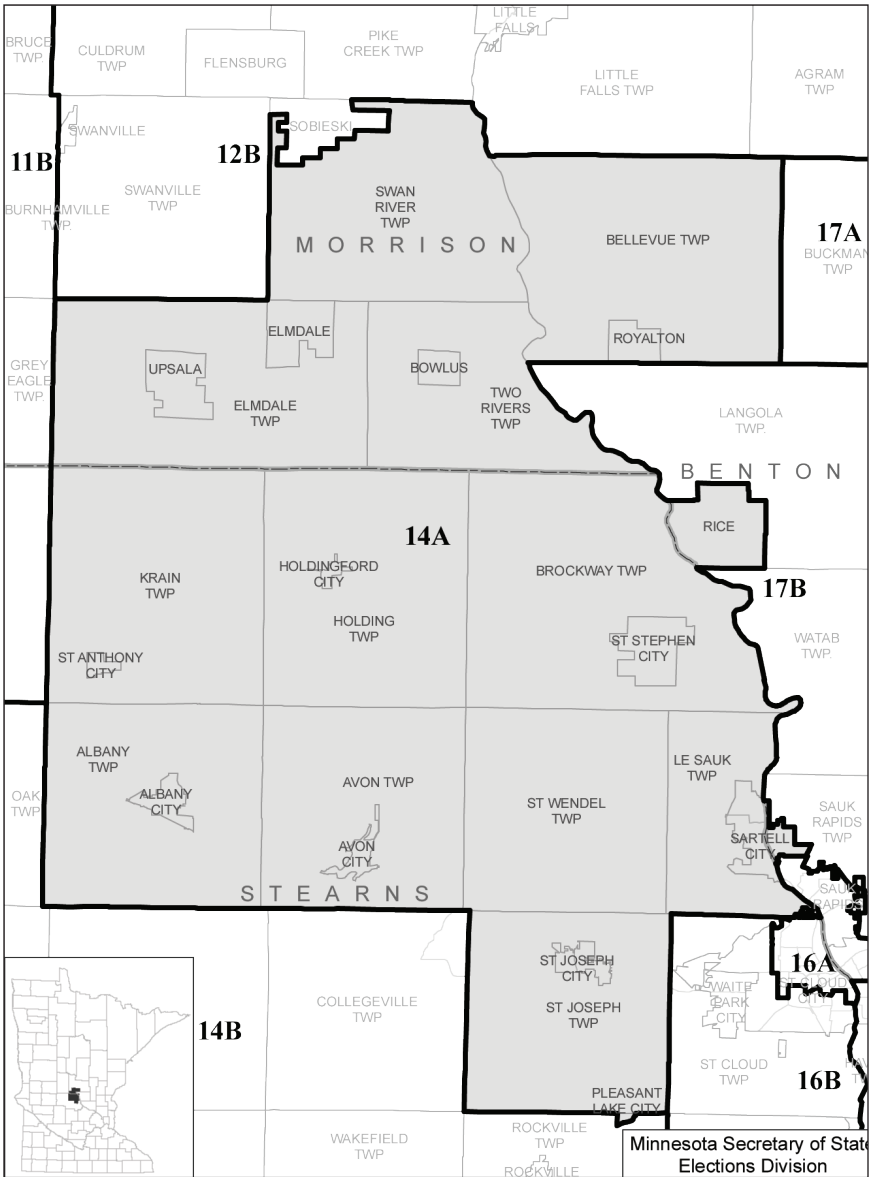
Doorstep Discourse

In 1992 I was the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party's candidate for the Minnesota legislature in House District 14A. A recount established that I lost the election by 98 votes to Republican Steve Debler. The following is a selection from a book-length narrative I am writing about the experience, titled Doorstep Democracy: Face to Face Politics in the Heartland. District 14A at that time included St. Joseph and the College of Saint Benedict (but not St. John's), Sartell, Avon, Albany, Holdingford, Royalton, St. Stephen, Rice, Upsala, and the townships surrounding those cities. At the time I ran for office I had lived in central Minnesota for only four years. I became a candidate because I was the local DFL party chair and could not persuade any other candidates to run in a Republican-leaning district. My purpose in the selection that follows, and in the book, is to describe in-person, face-to-face politics and its potential for enhancing civic engagement and democratic deliberation.

I march along to the next house, careful not to endanger a vote by cutting across the lawn. I record the street address and the name if visible on the mailbox. On my way up the driveway I look for politically-revealing bumper stickers, yard signs, and posters. I carry a handful of campaign brochures and a clipboard (which I try to keep inconspicuous) on which I record each contact's sex, first and last name if they are willing to reveal it, and estimate their age.

Later I will classify each voter according to his or her response to me: positive, negative, neutral, definitely voting for me, definitely voting against me, probably not voting. If I succeed in engaging the voter in political conversation I carefully record what he or she said — sometimes in great detail if the individual intrigued me or provided new perspective on issues. If time permits, the next day I will send the voter a handwritten letter referring specifically to our actual conversation.

At the door my opening is always the same: "Hello. My name is Jim Read and I'm running for State Representative in District 14A. I'm here to ask for your vote." You have to ask for their vote, lest they think you are there to hit them up for money or save their soul. And even if they know you want their vote, they still want to be asked.



Minnesota House District 14A (1992)

I then say, “Are there any issues especially important to you, or any questions you would like to ask me?” I don’t impose my own views unless invited. My purpose is to draw them into conversation so they will remember my face and name even after the brochure is thrown away. In many cases they say politely, “Not just at the moment,” or “I can’t think of anything offhand.” I hand them my brochure, explaining that it describes me and my views on key issues, direct their attention to my address and phone number, and invite them to call or write me whenever they have a question. I say “I hope I can count on your vote,” thank them for their time, and go on to the next house.

Or we manage some non-political conversation. Upon hearing their name I might ask, “Are you related to _____ Ostendorf” (or Schwinghammer, or Pfannenstein, or Salzer) of Holdingford?” (or St. Anna, or St. Joseph, or St. Wendel Township) — whom I had already met in the course of my doorknocking. (In Stearns County the answer to that question was always yes; what varied was how near or distant the kinship.) Proving that I’d met their relatives and remembered their names was a way of connecting myself with a community in which I had no family roots myself.

Or we talk about heat, cold, humidity, rain or lack of it, a thunderstorm on the horizon. (John Brandl, former Dean of the Humphrey Institute and onetime Minnesota legislator maintains there are two indispensable qualifications for any legislative candidate. One is the physical capacity to get from one door to another. The other is the capacity to discern changes in the weather so you will have something to talk about at the door.) “Will you promise to make it rain?” one voter asked me. I don’t remember whether I answered yes or no.

Such encounters might appear superficial. But in-person meetings of this kind — even brief ones — between voter and candidate are essential to a healthy democracy. And for the majority of voters, such conversations are unlikely to occur with candidates for any office higher than state legislator.

Today there are approximately 700,000 inhabitants for every Congressional district and far more for the typical U.S. Senate and gubernatorial seat. Communication with voters in campaigns for these offices mostly means *unidirectional* communication: messages produced on one side and consumed on the other.

In contrast, when I ran for the Minnesota legislature there were approximately 33,000 inhabitants (including children) in each House district. It is possible personally to meet and converse with the majority of the district’s eligible voters in the course of a single election campaign if one works hard enough.

No campaign ad, mailing, literature drop, or campaign volunteer visit can take the place of the candidate himself or herself, at the door, saying in effect to each potential voter: “Here I am. That is my name on the ballot. This is your chance to ask me questions or speak your mind.” An in-person visit signals accountability. Every voter at the door, however uninformed, understands that message. It is an unspoken subtext even in conversations about the weather or family ties.

Sometimes my appearance at the door with campaign materials in hand would trigger a bitter denunciation of all politicians, but the tone would change when the person realized I was not just another campaign worker. “Well, you showed up yourself. That counts for something,” several politician-haters told me.

When I succeeded in getting someone to talk politics with me (about a third of my doorstep meetings), what did they want to talk about? Anything under the sun. Did I think it was fair to use snowmobile licensing fees for purposes other than funding snowmobile trails? What was my opinion of Bill Clinton? Would I promise to get a traffic light on Highway 10 in Royalton (a dangerous intersection)? Would I secure a new elementary school for Sartell? Did I realize that immigrants don’t have to pay any taxes at all (a false view I was unable to dislodge). And of course health care costs, taxes, abortion, and guns came up every day. I went to households where I knew I wouldn’t get the vote, because I felt it was my duty to hear them out; if I were to win I would have to represent those who voted against me as well as those who supported me.

Many of the people I met had little understanding of Minnesota government or of the difference between federal, state, and local issues. I often found myself playing the role of an itinerant civics teacher for individuals I suspected were unlikely to vote. But I didn’t consider this a waste of my time. If a candidate at the door asking for their vote doesn’t connect them to the democratic process, who will?

Taking the Plunge

A legislative candidate for whom doorknocking is central undergoes a remarkable psychological change over the course of the campaign. At first it feels extremely unnatural to be making unsolicited calls on fifty or more strangers every day to ask for their vote and sound out their political views. It is like plunging from a warm ledge into an ice-cold, fast-moving stream: there is no gradual adjustment — it is all or nothing. You feel at first like an imposter or a home invader. When someone you don’t even know yells at you angrily or closes the door in your face, you take it personally and it takes days to recover your emotional balance. Candidates who do not do enough

doorknocking, who consider it an irritating adjunct to their campaign rather than the centerpiece, typically don't get past this painful and awkward opening stage.

After a month or two of intense doorknocking, however, it begins to feel entirely natural: you are now a fish at home in the stream. You realize that most people do not mind the unsolicited call and many positively welcome it. If you treat what you are doing as natural and necessary, most people will respond in the same spirit. And in the occasional case when someone attacks you, calls you names, treats you as Satan's emissary to Stearns County, you simply say to yourself: "I am probably not going to get this vote. Time to head for the next door." Every doorstep is a fresh beginning.

The longer the campaign goes on, the more you enjoy the doorknocking in comparison to everything else that you spend time on. Asking strangers for votes is certainly more enjoyable than asking supporters for money. Doorknocking is also more enjoyable than begging the press to cover your campaign (or responding to distorted coverage), replying to attack ads, meeting with lobbyists who don't care which candidate wins as long as they have access to both, trying to persuade state party operatives your campaign is a competitive one, and attending time-consuming events where you have little chance to speak but it would look bad to be absent. As Election Day nears, such details and duties take up an increasing percentage of your already scarce time; and yet their actual vote-winning effect is inferior to an equivalent amount of time spent doorknocking. By October it was a liberation to get away from all these other tasks and hit the doors.

The standard advice was to spend no more than thirty seconds at a door; some advice cut it to ten seconds. I myself systematically violated this conventional wisdom, especially in the first four months or so of doorknocking. If I believed I could persuade a voter, or if I believed I could learn something valuable from the conversation, I would stay



Jim Read marching in the Wheels, Wings, and Water Festival parade, downtown St. Cloud, June 1992. (Photo by Pia Lopez)

at a single door for fifteen minutes or more and take extensive notes of the conversation. Moreover, I extended the conversations not only with undecideds, but even with people I knew would support me anyway and people I knew would vote against me. My extensive doorknocking notes make it clear that many of the conversations I recorded and the observations I made went well beyond the practical goal of securing the individual's vote. Adherents to conventional wisdom might argue that my violating the thirty-second rule (thereby getting to somewhat fewer doors) cost me votes.

I myself believed at the time, and still believe, that I was right to draw out the conversations (though there were clearly a few where I stayed too long). I could never forget that I started out the campaign as a complete unknown in a close-knit community, without the family ties and local reputation that make trust easier to secure. I had to create community ties and a reputation in the community in the course of the campaign itself, and ten seconds at the door is not sufficient time to build this kind of capital. I had to rely on the "word of mouth" effect: those who engaged with me in some thoughtful conversation and formed some distinct impression of my character would mention it to others. Reputational effects of this kind wouldn't deliver the votes of people I never met at all, but someone who had "heard good things about me" from a neighbor or friend would be predisposed in my favor when I showed up at their own door.

Another reason I engaged in extended conversations was that I myself needed to learn quickly about an enormous range of issues I had never considered before, and given time constraints I would learn them faster in door-to-door conversations than any other way. My notes indicate that my longest conversations occurred in the first three months of my doorknocking and tended to be on complicated issues on which I myself was struggling to work out a position: for instance, health care reform; addressing the state's projected \$800 million budget deficit; educational policy and funding; and the state's expensive and burdensome workers' compensation system (a big issue with small business owners, one to which I'd never given a moment's thought before I ran for office).

A final and perhaps most important reason for the extended doorstep conversations was that I wouldn't have been motivated to run for the legislature at all if there hadn't been something intrinsically interesting about the process, win or lose. I already had a paying job. I wasn't running for president; were I to win I would enjoy at best a modest share of political power. If all I did was spend ten seconds at 7500 doorsteps, learning nothing, teaching nothing, exchanging nothing, I couldn't have kept up the pace over six months. And I certainly wouldn't be writing about it fifteen years after the event.

What kept me going was the thrill of discovery. There is no other way to account for how much detail I recorded about human beings, their political hopes and fears, their good and bad ideas and oddball characteristics. I had found myself in this whole new world of human experience and observation, a hitherto undiscovered universe lying hidden at the end of a thousand ordinary driveways.

Confronting and Moderating Cynicism

My doorknocking notes are my principal source in reconstructing six months of door-step discourse, my window on the political life of a particular community at a particular moment in time. I estimate that over the course of the campaign I engaged in substantive political conversations (i.e., something beyond chitchat about the weather or some other nonpolitical topic) with more than 2500 voters living in the district. From a social-scientific perspective my doorknocking records constitute a “database” of respectable size, though of course I was not engaging in an impartial scientific survey. In what follows I draw wherever possible directly from my doorknocking notes. I do not trust myself to “improve upon” the description after the passage of time. My notes record people saying things I could never have invented on my own.

The first conversational theme I wish to explore is political cynicism (which will surprise no one) but also the way in which a personal visit by the candidate often neutralizes this cynicism (which may come as a surprise).

My first truly nasty encounter came on May 3, the first full week of my doorknocking regime. A colleague from the Economics Department, Ernie Diedrich, was accompanying me and introducing me to his neighbors in Pleasant Acres, a large housing development north of St. Joseph. (This is an especially effective way to doorknock a neighborhood when you can arrange it.) All encounters that day were friendly, with one exception. One man in his sixties, upon realizing that I was a candidate for office, immediately shouted: “Hit the fucking road!” I was more than willing to take the hint. Unfortunately Ernie mistakenly thought the man had said, “*Fix* the fucking road” and began talking about the state highway budget, so the hostile encounter was drawn out even further.

Rather than being scarred by this kind of response, it intrigued me and led me systematically to record anti-politician remarks aimed at me over the course of the campaign. Here are some examples:

“Says he hates politicians so much he doesn’t want to talk.”

“Says he doesn’t vote, doesn’t trust politicians.”

“You guys should all have holes shot in your heads.”

“Just keep going — I don’t care what you’re here for.”

“Doesn’t like politicians, says they should be sprayed with DDT.”

“Wouldn’t give name, hates politicians, favors national health care” (here displaying cognitive dissonance).

“You politicians are all crooked.”

“You politicians are all a bunch of shitheads.”

“Asked if I would work or just take a paycheck.”

“You’ll turn rotten like all the others.”

“Has lost all respect for politicians. Nothing will pass unless the green stuff flows.”

“Asked if I had any experience bouncing checks” (referring to the Congressional check-bouncing scandal of the moment).

“Confusion about where he is supposed to vote. He will punish them by not voting.”

Sometimes I was too hurried or tired to record such remarks in their full splendor. In dozens of cases I simply noted: “Much anger, no clear focus.”

Having run for office only once I can’t judge from direct observation whether levels of anger and cynicism were any higher than average in 1992. In the unusual case where a politician-hater specified a grievance it seemed a rationalization for an attitude generated by other causes.

But for every anti-politician remark of the kind noted above, I received remarks of the following kind. These too originate in a basic cynicism about politics. But they show how it can be turned around when a candidate, contrary to an individual’s expectations, makes a personal call and demonstrates a willingness to listen and be held accountable.

“Appreciated my coming to the door instead of just dropping literature. Cynical about politicians. Doesn’t want me to make any promises.”

“Appreciated my coming out here — not many candidates do” (this was in rural Le Sauk Township).

“Said I was the first candidate they’d seen out here.”

“Said I was the first candidate who had ever stopped and talked for a while.”

“Impressed with the amount of work it took to run for office.”

“Thought anyone who’d do the work of going door to door was a worthy candidate.”

“Impressed that I was ‘pounding the pavement’ myself.”

“Impressed that I would visit in person.”

“Impressed that I was doorknocking on a Friday night. I think he’ll vote for me.”

“Likes my going door-to-door. Hates windshield wiper literature” (here referring to the tactic of leafleting church parking lots during services).

“Impressed with my going door to door and talking.”

“Liked the fact that I was out working.”

Remarks of this kind reveal, in the first instance, respect for an individual candidate (especially respect for hard work) — not necessarily all politicians or the system as a whole. But if you are the first candidate for office a politician-hater has actually met, and you come across as trustworthy, some of this personal trust may carry over to a more balanced view of political life in general.

The Politically Clueless

The politician-haters usually identified themselves quickly and as a result didn’t take up much of my time. This was not always the case with another group of troublesome contacts: the politically clueless, who would seem to be interested and listen politely until some chance remark revealed the extent of their ignorance or disconnection from politics.

In the first few weeks of doorknocking I had not yet perfected my opening routine. I introduced myself and said I was running for the legislature, but I didn’t yet realize I needed to add that “I’m here to ask for your vote.” Sonja Berg, a member of the St. Cloud City Council, helped straighten me out on this point. So did a few encounters of the following kind:

I was at the door of a man in his 30s in a newly-built subdivision in St. Joseph. He looked and sounded like an intelligent and educated person. I said I was running for the legislature in district 14A, handed him the brochure, and went through the rest of the routine. When I finished he said, “What is it you want?” I replied by describing the kind of legislation I hoped to author. He interrupted me again and said, “Why are you here?” Only then did I realize that he literally did not realize why I was there. My tell-

ing him I was running for the legislature did not register anything that explained what I was doing at his door. From then on I remembered to “ask for your vote,” though this person was probably not a voter.

I had a few people tell me straight out they had no idea what the Minnesota legislature does, and I suspect there were hundreds more who kept their ignorance on this point to themselves. When he was a first-time candidate for U.S. Senate in 1990, Paul Wellstone remarked to me in a phone conversation that for the average American “Washington D.C. is as far away as Pluto.” During my own legislative campaign in 1992 I realized that St. Paul was also Pluto for some of the people I met at the doors.

Some individuals’ understanding of what I was doing did not go past a vague recognition that it had something to do with “the government,” without any comprehension that there were different levels of government with distinct responsibilities. I had to explain to one man that, though it was unfortunate the grass was so high in the city park adjoining his property, this was a matter to take up with his city council; and to another that he would have to talk to someone else about getting cable access. (Several legislators told me that if I win the election I should expect to be awakened at 4 AM by someone telling me the snowplow just knocked over their mailbox.)

As a matter of pure campaign strategy I should have ended my encounters with the politically clueless as quickly as possible, because they are overwhelmingly non-voters. But the ingrained habits of a teacher often led me, for better or worse, to stay longer and dispel at least a few fragments of misinformation. One young blue-collar worker was railing against immigration. (Even though the Minnesota legislature does not set immigration policy, I did not consider national issues of this kind out of bounds for conversation.) After repeating the widely-held though false view that immigrants pay no taxes, he continued: “I don’t understand why they let all those Haitians into the country when there are white people here who need jobs.” Where do you begin? I let the anti-immigrant sentiment alone and instead reminded him that not all native-born Americans were white — which he readily admitted once I brought it to his attention. I would like to believe I got the point across, whether or not I ever got his vote (if indeed he voted at all).

There were however pathological cases where there was no point in continuing the discussion. One older man, very strange and perhaps unhinged, started to complain about all the stop lights along Division Street in St. Cloud. This stretch of highway is in fact a great irritation, very time-consuming to traverse, and as sympathetically as possible I began to explain who had jurisdiction over this matter. He looked at me fiercely and cried, “It’s the Jews that did it! The Jews!”

Time to move along to the next door.

Not all ignorance was pathological, however, and at least some of it was pardonable. I did not expect the typical voter to understand the difference between the national health care reforms proposed by Bill Clinton in his campaign for president and Minnesota's recently-passed HealthRight program (now Minnesota Care) to provide subsidized insurance to the working poor. I welcomed conversation about health care reform at either state or national levels. The same applied when someone began talking about the federal budget deficit, which I could easily enough shift to a discussion of the projected state deficit. I did not consider it out of bounds for someone to ask for my opinion of George Bush, Bill Clinton, or Ross Perot. How I answered a question about the presidential candidates might help some voters understand who I was, how I thought about the world, what kind of legislator I would be, even though my responsibilities if elected were very different from national elected officials.

I suspect that many of my efforts as an itinerant, uninvited, and unpaid civics teacher fell on deaf ears. But not all of them. One woman in her 20s, who at first admitted to knowing and caring little about politics, asked me at the end of our conversation how she could subscribe to the Minnesota legislature's weekly newsletter.

The Politically Well-Informed

At the opposite extreme from the politician-haters and the clueless were the individuals who were well-informed, thoughtful, and eager to talk. I stayed and heard them out (whether or not I agreed with their views) because they helped me clarify my own stance on issues, and because I wanted a reputation as someone who genuinely listened. Some individuals provided valuable general perspective on some broad theme (education, budgets, health care); others supplied me with life stories or local perspective that grafted flesh to my own skeletal understanding of a problem.

Doorknocking in Avon in early July I happened upon the home of the principal of Avon Elementary School. (Had I scheduled an official appointment at his office, he might have been less revealing than he was conversing in his driveway.) He said the first responsibility of the legislature was to determine priorities, and unfortunately education was a slipping priority in Minnesota. So far he had been able to keep class sizes down, but it was a struggle. He then proceeded to the issue of gambling. (Both charitable gambling and Indian casino gambling had tremendously expanded in recent years, and legislators were coming under increasing pressure to "even the playing field" and augment state revenues by legalizing gambling elsewhere in the state.) He made the following prediction: the Minnesota legislature, after enacting policies that worsened gambling addiction in the state, would then impose an unfunded mandate on public schools to teach children how to resist the very gambling addiction the leg-

islature had helped worsen. He also talked about the sex education controversy in the Avon–Albany school district: because of irreconcilable differences between advocates of standard and abstinence-only sex education, the school district had to create and fund two separate sex education curriculums. He invited me to attend PTA meetings in the fall.

I stopped by his house again in late October. He remembered every detail of our previous conversation, and added: “Remember my prediction about gambling education.” He said he would vote for me. I do not believe he was a predictable Democratic vote; if anything he seemed an independent with conservative leanings. It was our personal conversation that won him over.

I was always receptive to anyone who could provide some responsible perspective on how to address the state’s budget problems. Predictably, many comments on the budget were simplistic (“just stop spending!”) or irresponsible: simultaneously demanding lower taxes, more spending on programs that helped them, and budget cuts on programs that helped anyone else. I began challenging people who demanded that we “cut spending” to name some program that *they* benefited from that they were willing to cut. Several individuals replied, without irony, that they had never benefited ever in their life from any government spending of any kind.

But I also met many individuals with a well developed budgetary conscience. A recently-retired police chief in St. Joseph, who was equally worried about the national and state deficits, insisted that he “doesn’t want any money spent on him” — that I should spend state money only on people who really need it. I had several individuals tell me (in persuasive detail) that there was no way adequately to fund the state’s transportation network without some increase in the gasoline tax.

A large chunk of state revenues went back to cities and counties in the form of local government aid, and it was generally admitted that the state’s formula for allocating local government aid penalized thrift and rewarded extravagance. A more rational system of local government aid would clearly save the state a significant amount of money, and I listened carefully to anyone who had useful suggestions on this score. A member of the Avon city council (speaking to me as he watered his garden) told me the state could eliminate a lot of waste by budgeting local government aid before — not after — local governments drew up their own budgets, so they knew where they stood. An information systems analyst teaching at Metropolitan State University (a disillusioned former Democrat who wanted to know if I was “fiscally conservative”) believed that wasteful local government expenditures could be remedied by having the state mandate, but also fund, a common computerized system of cost-accounting for all local governments to follow. More anecdotally, mayors and city council mem-

bers in more than one town told me, “If you want to see how cities get rewarded for wasteful spending, take a look at _____” (out of fondness for the town I withhold the name).

I had an unexpectedly large number of doorstep conversations with small business owners on the theme of reforming the state’s workers’ compensation system, and in general about workplace health and safety. Reforming what was perceived to be an overly expensive and confrontational workers’ comp system was especially important to owners of small businesses (the largest source of employment in the district). My strong labor support presumptively put me in tension with business owners on this issue. But I went out of my way to signal a willingness to listen to all sides and look for mutually-acceptable reforms. Some business owners revealed more about themselves than anything else. I recorded that one owner of a construction company “railed about workmen’s comp fraud — was convinced that workers these days were mostly scoundrels, and he looks forward to getting out of business and not having to deal with them any more.” But more often the advice was offered in a constructive spirit. A contractor I met in Sartell (who I recorded as a positive contact but added “probably Republican”) thought it was possible to reduce workmen’s compensation costs without cutting benefits by shortening the litigation process and putting more emphasis on retraining injured workers; he recommended that I look into Wisconsin’s system. The owner of a sawmill believed the system could be improved by more emphasis on prevention: the regulators “tell us to improve safety, but give us no guidance on how to do it.”

The issue that generated the most discussion by far was health care. I received copious quantities of general advice — from doctors, nurses, dentists, hospital administrators, chiropractors, insurance agents, to name a few — about what (if anything) was wrong with the system and how to fix it. I listened to dozens of health care professionals tell me they supported the goals of HealthRight but opposed funding it by taxing providers. I had a long and civil conversation with an employee of a pharmaceutical company (who I marked as “definitely Republican” and who I am certain didn’t vote for me) who insisted that high drug prices simply reflected the costs of research and development and the lack of adequate patent protection. I heard any number of arguments for and against the single-payer proposal or the Canadian model.

But what made a deeper impression were the life stories that left any policy conclusions up to me. In Brockway Township my wife Pia and I spoke with a farmer on crutches in a leg cast, the result of a farm accident. He was uninsured at the time of the accident (because the cost was prohibitive) and was still uninsured at the time of our conversation. Affordable health insurance was his chief issue. (He wasn’t a one-issue man, however: he told us he didn’t like the Minnesota Education Association and

complained that the new Sartell high school was designed too much around extracurricular sports.)

I spoke with a couple with a four-year-old girl. He was a carpenter and she worked for an optical firm. She didn't like her job and would have preferred to stay home with the child, but her job included health care benefits and his did not. So they were locked into an employment and family arrangement they wouldn't have chosen. This was a very typical case.

In Albany I met a woman who lived with her 80-year-old mother. The nearby clinic where her mother received regular care was relocating to a hospital much farther away. Did any programs exist, she asked me, for transporting the elderly to hospitals for non-emergency visits? Some kind of "clinic taxi" service?

In Brockway Township I heard a strange and complicated story from a couple who had both worked for a major national retailer before they married. The company told them: "When you get married, one of you must resign," which the couple claimed was marital discrimination. They both resigned and were suing the company. Both had serious medical problems (I wrote down "horrendous story" but didn't record the details) which may have played a role in the company's decision to push them out. They were both looking for work, and claimed that the welfare office was "not serious about getting people into jobs. They say, don't take any job unless there's medical benefits involved."

In a similar vein I talked with a man who told me that "welfare should be workfare" and who went on to explain that his brother was manic-depressive and can function only if he has psychiatric care. But if his brother works more than four hours a day he loses his health benefits, so it doesn't pay to work.

Perhaps the strangest and most heartbreaking story I heard during six months of doorknocking involved discrimination against a child with a correctible disability. A couple in Sartell had a daughter who required special eyeglasses for which contact lenses could not substitute. The child had enrolled in a private dance school and successfully completed the course. But she was told she could not wear eyeglasses at the final public performance because it disrupted the ballet's aesthetics. Because she couldn't function without glasses, she was barred from the performance. The child was devastated and her parents outraged.

I visited the couple the first time in June, in the middle of this controversy. I promised I would help in any way I could (whether I won the election or not). I gave them the name and number of someone I knew on the St. Cloud Area Human Rights Com-

mission, and said that if this kind of discrimination wasn't already against the law, it should be. I followed up with a letter, which they remembered and appreciated when I visited them again late in the campaign.

In this case whether the problem was in the first instance a “legislative matter” was beside the point. (This was not like cable access or uncut grass in a city park.) When someone has been the victim of a clear injustice, their elected representatives — at whatever level of government — have a duty to step in. Even as a not-yet-elected candidate I felt I had incurred an obligation to help because they had trusted me enough to tell the story. I recognized that if I were elected cases like this would add time-consuming responsibilities to my ordinary legislative duties, but I was willing to accept this charge.

A Tense Encounter

When I was a teenager my grandmother suffered a debilitating stroke and spent the last several years of her life in a succession of depressing and understaffed nursing homes. I don't believe our family had any alternative. But twenty years later, when I was running for office in a district with a large and growing elderly population, my family history predisposed me seriously to consider alternatives to nursing homes.

Budgetary considerations also recommended it: a huge percentage of the state's Medical Assistance budget paid for seniors in nursing homes who had exhausted all family assets. Becky Hooper, one of my campaign volunteers, had worked with a pilot project called Seniors' Agenda for Independent Living (SAIL) designed to provide publicly-funded in-home care for elderly who were still able to manage without full-time residential care. I endorsed this project in my campaign literature and in mailings targeted to senior-age voters. All of this serves as background to an intriguing pair of encounters I had while doorknocking on August 14 in Albany.

A man who appeared to be in his 40s or 50s answered the door. He looked over my literature and looked intently at me, but was uncommunicative at first. Then, without revealing his name, he began quizzing me: what was my position on senior issues? What were my views on nursing homes and alternatives to nursing homes? I proceeded to give an enthusiastic endorsement of the SAIL project. At this point he exploded at me and chewed my head off.

I had walked into a trap. It turns out he was the administrator of Albany's nursing home, and he saw the SAIL project as a financial and ideological attack on his profession. He denied that at-home care was less expensive than residential care, once all

at-home costs like food stamps and fuel assistance were taken into account. He wanted the abolition of pre-admissions screening (to determine whether someone really required nursing home care) because this left nursing homes with only the most expensive and care-intensive patients. “Look, no one *wants* to go into a nursing home,” he said. “But sometimes there’s no choice, and we have to make it work.”

He was also angry that I had not already contacted him to arrange for a tour of the nursing home he managed. (I apologized for the omission and promised to correct it. When a few weeks later he gave me a tour he seemed genuinely to care about the residents.) The encounter at his door was a long and tense one, and in this case I couldn’t simply cut him off and leave. And oddly enough, despite his rude behavior, I almost felt some sympathy for him given the difficult economics he faced and most people’s negative image of nursing homes. He kept pressing me about procedures and regulations of which I clearly knew nothing, and by the end of the encounter he had me half-convinced I was an ignoramus on the subject and would have to re-learn senior care policy from the beginning.

But the god of poetic justice stepped in. On that same day, a block away on the same street, I called at the home of a man in his 70s who was mostly blind and living alone. He had meals brought in and received some other forms of help. He told me he wanted to keep living at home as long as possible; he definitely did not want to go to a nursing home. A few weeks later in Royalton I met another elderly man, also blind and living alone. He had me read out to him the text of my campaign brochure, then talked to me for a long time about his life. He also did not want to go to a nursing home. I came away convinced my position was the right one and I stuck with it to the end.

Facing the Farmers

Doorknocking farms posed special challenges. In a town it typically took only thirty seconds to get from one door to another. Getting from one farm to the next could sometimes take fifteen minutes or more. At the end of a long and vehicle-challenging road I often found no one in the house, and had to track down the farmer in the milk barn or out on a tractor. There were frequently delicate negotiations with dogs. When I did locate the farmer our conversation was often overwhelmed by the noise of machinery. And farmers, more than any other demographic group, made me most conscious of my status as an outsider.

In St. Wendel Township one July afternoon Pia and I drove down one especially long dirt road to find a farmer sitting in front of the house with a shotgun across his

lap. Noting the expression on my face, he explained: “It’s for woodchucks.” We had a brief conversation in which he revealed very little. He got out of me that I wasn’t born here.

My difficulties connecting with farmers were increased by my own inability to engage in small talk about farm operations. I had learned as much about farm *policy* as I could in a short period of time — about how the federal milk pricing system disadvantaged dairy farmers in the upper Midwest, for instance. But about day to day farm *operations* I was embarrassingly ignorant. For example, I didn’t know the difference between — well, I’ll just leave it at that.

Most of the policy directly affecting farmers was set by the federal government. I typically asked farmers what I could do to help them if I were elected. But the Minnesota legislature could only help farmers in marginal ways; they knew it and I knew it, which narrowed the range of possible conversation. When I did have substantive political conversations with farmers it was more often about affordable health insurance, which many of them lacked and which I might be able to address as a legislator. At many farms one family member, often the wife, worked a full-time off-farm job to provide health benefits for the rest of the family.

The following conversation with a Holding Township farmer (who displayed a Farmer’s Union sticker) was typical. He spoke at length and in detail about health care costs. They’d had to pay \$7,000 out of pocket for his wife’s caesarian section, including \$5 per tablet for aspirin they gave her in the hospital. When we got to milk prices, however, he simply shook his head and said he didn’t think any one politician could accomplish much.

Of course, some farmers were doing much better than others; some families were slowly being squeezed out and others were buying up or leasing the land to expand their operation. In Krain Township we met with a father (about 60) and son (about 30) at a dairy farm who told us they had never signed on to any federal farm program, and had no sympathy whatsoever for farmers who couldn’t make it on their own. We heard a very different story a few farms down the road. In reply to my question



Jim Read talks with farmer Darrell Larson in rural District 14A during his campaign, summer 1992. (Photo by Pia Lopez)

about how the Minnesota legislature could help farmers, a farmer in her 40s believed something needed to be done about the obstacles faced by young farmers just getting started after inheriting a debt-ridden farm. I mentioned by name the father and son I had just spoken with. “They were lucky enough to inherit that farm debt-free,” she said. “Most farmers don’t.”

Many family farms survived only by compromising part of their cherished independence. Farmers who once produced and sold their own milk or beef had shifted in many cases to raising chickens or turkeys on contract to large meat-processing corporations. Where the milk barn once stood there was now a turkey shed, the change in aroma evident from a half mile away. I did not follow farmers into the turkey shed.

As the number of family farms gradually decreased, the land was often sold and subdivided for residential developments. This led to predictable conflicts. A farmer who was also on the board of St. Wendel Township (the scene of exploding residential sprawl) described how people would build new houses in the middle of farm areas, then complain about the smell of manure as though the farmers had just moved in.

Farmers would occasionally surprise me by raising some issue I could never have imagined in a thousand years. One August day in Brockway Township I had two different farmers tell me I should pass a law automatically granting every farmer a free deer-hunting license. “We feed them. We should be allowed to shoot them.” I said I would think about it.

Doorknocking Apartments

Contacting apartment dwellers presented challenges of a very different kind. If farmers were the most rooted group of prospective voters, apartment dwellers were the most rootless. The turnover rate in any apartment complex was high: someone you talked with in August may very well have moved out of district by November. And even those who stayed were on average less connected with the community and less likely to vote than homeowners. For this reason many legislative candidates skipped apartments altogether, or relegated them to group doorknocks or literature drops.

But I did my best to include apartment buildings in my doorknocking plans. There were potentially a lot of votes there. And in a good-size apartment complex you could make fifty contacts in an hour, which helped offset the higher percentage of nonvoters and transients. And simply on principle, I believed apartment dwellers deserved representation as much as anyone else did. We ourselves lived in an apartment at the time. These were so to speak “my people”; if they were transients, so was I.

The real problems came not from apartment dwellers but from apartment building managers. Nearly every apartment building has a “No Soliciting” policy. Managers of apartment buildings and the rental companies that employ them see no difference between a candidate for office doorknocking for votes and a door-to-door salesman hawking vacuum cleaners. They interpret the “no soliciting” policy as equally forbidding both, and routinely do everything they can to prevent candidates from campaigning in their apartment buildings.

This is in fact against the law. Minnesota’s Fair Campaign Practices code (section 211B.20, Denial of Access by Political Candidates to Multiple Unit Dwellings) specifically entitles candidates who have filed for public office to go door to door in apartment buildings and college dormitories to communicate with prospective voters. The law permits residential managers to request appointments and restrict campaigning to reasonable hours, but does not permit them categorically to forbid access to the entire apartment or dormitory complex. The law grants access rights only to the candidate in person, not to volunteers campaigning in the candidate’s absence. Any individual apartment dweller may of course refuse to speak with a candidate. The rationale behind the law is that to deny candidate access to multi-unit dwellings is to deprive apartment dwellers of effective representation. It is not merely a matter of a candidate’s right to solicit votes, but also of a *voter’s* right to be informed and to hold elected officials accountable. If an apartment manager denies access to candidates — or even worse, allows access to favored candidates and denies others — this right is violated.

The law is a good one. Unfortunately apartment managers routinely violate it and in many cases do not know the law exists (which is the fault of the rental company that employs them). Universities (my own included, until we convinced them otherwise) sometimes skirt the law by preventing candidates from doorknocking in dormitories and instead restricting them to dining halls and football games — as though their job was to “protect” voting-age students from the dirty business of politics instead of encouraging them to participate in it.

Because of general unwillingness to honor the law, I would simply ignore the “no soliciting” sign and enter apartment buildings when I could, or have someone who lived there let me in. But I had several confrontations with apartment managers. The manager of a large, multi-building apartment complex in Sartell told me to leave or he would have me arrested for trespassing. I explained the law to him. He said he’d never heard of it and I’m sure believed I was making this up. I continued to insist that *he* was violating the law, and if he persisted *I* would contact the police — as though the Sartell Police Department would dispatch squad cars with sirens blaring to punish violations of the election code. We calmed down, exchanged names and addresses, and I followed

up with a letter that included the actual text of the law and public authorities he could contact if he doubted me. In accordance with the law's provisions I requested an appointment. To his credit he admitted his mistake and later allowed me to campaign in the apartment complex.

Running Short of Time

Doorknocking was the one reliable constant in a long campaign in which everything else was unpredictable. But the pace and tone of my doorstep discourse changed over time. When I began doorknocking on May 1, I was still the only declared candidate for an open seat. When people asked me, "Who are you running against?" I couldn't answer their question. I was a complete unknown, and my reputation in the district, for better or worse, depended on me alone. By mid-summer I had an opponent, but to most voters the election still seemed far away; some had to be reminded this was an election year. Conversations were unhurried in the lazy summer afternoons. People gave me ice water and home-grown strawberries and showed me their flower gardens. It was light until nine at night. I believed I had all the time in the world.

By mid-October of a presidential election year most people were already saturated with election-year rhetoric and I had to compete with Bush and Clinton and Perot for a few crumbs of attention. I was now in a heated race. The very effectiveness of my doorknocking had aroused the opposition. At an event in St. Paul around Labor Day I was introduced to Steve Sviggum, the minority leader (Republican) of the Minnesota House. He said he had "heard good things about me." This was in one sense a genuine tribute across party lines to hard work and effective campaigning. But I suspect it also meant that Republicans in the district were calling him up and saying, "Read's been to my door twice! Where's our guy?"

By late September the opposition had matched or exceeded our campaign with mailings, phone calls, and yard signs (though never with doorknocking). Literature drops, mailings, and phone campaigns by independent political groups supporting my opponent and attacking me (especially on abortion and gun issues) began to rival in quantity and expenditure what either campaign was putting out in its own name. I was no longer fully in control of my own reputation. Political deliberation with voters had to compete with damage control.

Every minute of the day was scheduled (Pia and I were both back teaching full time) and essential tasks were neglected for lack of time. I chose not to doorknock in

the dark (lest I be considered a weirdo) so the prime daytime hours had to be booked as tightly as possible; after the sun set I contacted voters by phone, which lacked the warmth and openness of visits in person. My contacts were briefer and more task-oriented: my notes from September and October record fewer substantive conversations and focus instead on who had and had not committed to vote for me. We did group doorknocks of whole towns (by a dozen volunteers wearing Jim Read for State Representative T-shirts). These were fun and created an impression of momentum. But they worked best if they reinforced an earlier visit by the candidate himself, and the hourglass on that was quickly running out.

The activity that to my greatest regret was squeezed out by the time demands after Labor Day were the handwritten letters I sent to individuals with whom I'd had substantive conversations. If I could have somehow bought one more hour every day in September and October that is how I would have used the time.

These letters varied in length and topic, but there were several constants. They had to be addressed by name to the person with whom I had spoken, and had to be sent within a day or two of the visit. They had to be handwritten. They had to refer to several items we had actually talked about. Voters are used to being inundated with "personalized" political mailings that address them by name but are simply canned letters with the same tired rhetoric. A genuinely personal letter is all the more effective because it exposes the falseness of all the others.

In an average day of visiting 50 houses there would be perhaps four or five conversations substantial enough to merit a letter. Writing the letters, verifying the names and addresses, hand-addressing and mailing four letters would take about an hour. In the summer I had that hour and in the fall I no longer did. (I would quote from these letters but I neglected to keep copies.)

Only occasionally did I get a reply, though people definitely remembered the letters and mentioned them when I made a return visit. One young woman, though, whom I had spoken with in Holdingford and to whom I'd sent a handwritten follow-up, replied with a wonderful letter of her own that began:

"Dear Jim, I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to write me a very nice letter. I was very surprised and enthused how you take interest in people and their views. One thing to always keep in mind is to push for the lower and middle class people, since there are many more of us than the upper class and that means more votes now and in the future. I'm very optimistic that I will be addressing you as our State Representative after the election."

I especially like the detail here about her being “surprised and enthused” that a candidate for office would actually take an interest in people and their views. That is certainly what I always tried to do, and I am pleased that at least some of the time the message got across.

Doorknocking in the Age of the Internet

I have tried to describe here the texture of my personal conversations with thousands of voters over the course of a six-month doorknocking campaign. I believed then, and still believe today, that such conversations are essential to a healthy democracy. They need not and cannot occur in the same way in campaigns for every level of elected office. But they need to occur sometime, somewhere, in our democratic system.

And wherever possible they should occur in person. Much has been written (both insightful and foolish) about the revolutionary potential of the Internet for politics. Clearly in some respects these new technologies have transformed the political landscape. But in the most important respect nothing has changed.

In 1992 the Internet was still in its infancy as a political technology. The blogosphere did not yet exist. Most of the voters I met in 1992 were not computer literate and few had access to email. My own campaign literature listed my mailing address and home phone number but no website. Today nearly every legislative campaign has a website with candidate biography and position statements, and many feature blogs of the campaign. If I were running today I would use all of these new technologies.

These new technologies, however, can supplement doorknocking but cannot replace it. The same goes for TV and radio ads, targeted mailings, billboards, literature drops, phone surveys, mass emails, and so on. The undecided voters I most needed to reach would not be persuaded to vote for me unless I showed up in person at their door. A website is an effective tool for coordinating the efforts of already-committed activists. Political blogs allow for the rapid communication of information among political insiders. But the voters I needed to persuade would not have frequented websites like “Minnesota DFLers Blog” or “Minnesota Democrats Exposed” or “Pawlenty Unplugged” even if their equivalents had existed in 1992. The blogosphere is ideologically polarized: activists mutually reinforce already-shared views while flaming the opponent from a safe distance.

With doorknocking it is precisely the opposite. You are forced every day to meet human beings whose political views differ from your own. At every door you may have to answer a critic or rethink your views. There is no retreat to a “comfort zone” where

you hear only the opinions of supporters and partisans. And there are no funds to pay a “handler” to accompany you to every door.

I don't want to overly romanticize the personal politics of a doorknocking campaign. Many of the conversations were trivial or simple-minded. Many voters are not interested in political deliberation. And many legislative candidates in their doorknocking do not actively seek to engage voters in dialogue to the extent I did but simply want to establish name and face recognition. (And of course this was one of my goals too.)

I should also acknowledge that personal politics has its dark side, its own peculiar potential for abuse. If personal encounters between candidates and voters create a space for democratic deliberation, they also harbor the potential for mischief, intimidation, and slander. You can explore ideas in a doorstep conversation that the print and electronic media will never communicate. You can also tell lies that the media are not in a position to correct. Every good thing can be abused and the politics of personal contact is no exception.

Nothing guarantees that genuine communication and deliberation will take place when as a candidate for public office you call upon voters at their door. All you provide is the opportunity. The opportunity may be accepted, declined, or postponed to some indefinite future occasion. Most importantly you are extending the opportunity to *every* eligible voter you hope to represent. Somewhere in our grand democratic edifice there should be a niche reserved for this.

Jim Read is Professor of Political Science. This essay is adapted from his book-length narrative of the campaign, titled Doorstep Democracy: Face to Face Politics in the Heartland, which will be published by the University of Minnesota Press later this year.