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Granite Staters Mixed on 2008 Attention

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Lebanon -- Voters throughout New Hampshire are being bombarded by phone calls and campaign literature as presidential campaigns in both parties try to woo independents and undecided voters.

At Milne Travel American Express headquarters in West Lebanon last night, a handful of volunteers for Republican John McCain called Republicans and independents on behalf of the Arizona senator, who has climbed past rival Mitt Romney in some New Hampshire polls.

The script for the calls emphasized McCain's "personal integrity" and foreign policy experience.

Jason Lavoie, a recent graduate of University of Southern Maine who has come to New Hampshire to volunteer for McCain, was running into limited success in wooing voters, but said phone-banking is a grind-it-out part of politics.

"It's like a dentist who's got to take out teeth. Campaigns have to get out the vote," Lavoie, a political science major, said.

Many Upper Valley households say they are getting a little overwhelmed by the attention, which also includes calls from third-party groups and so-called "push polls" designed to steer voters toward a certain candidate or away from another. But some voters revel in it.

Rob Grabill, the gregarious director of Camp Pemigewassett, pretended to have a phone conversation from Democrat Dennis Kucinich -- who placed a recorded call to Grabill's Hanover home -- as he described to a reporter some of the 15 calls a week the Grabill family is getting from campaigns and outside groups, known as 527s.

"I'm much more tolerant than my wife and daughter. They'll look at caller ID and

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won't even pick up. I feel a little more tolerant and will pick up and hear what they have to say," Grabill said.

All the major campaigns are running phone banks daily at this point, and the Clinton and Obama campaigns combined have made more than 3 million phone calls to New Hampshire voters this election season, according to campaign aides.

"We have phone banks up and running all over the state," added Kate Bedingfield, a spokeswoman for Democrat John Edwards, whose campaign placed 30,000 volunteer calls in the Granite State Wednesday night.

Lebanon resident Andrea Calandrella, volunteering for Democrat Christopher Dodd's campaign in his West Lebanon field office, said her family is still getting one or two phone calls a day from other campaigns, even though she and her husband have told rivals they are both supporting Dodd.

"We're getting a lot of it at home. I'm probably more open to receiving them because I'm working on a campaign. If I wasn't working on a campaign, I'd probably feel like I was being harassed," she said.

Calandrella, a stay-at-home mother of three, said she volunteers in phone banks for Dodd and finds the best time to reach busy voters is between 7 and 8:30 p.m., after the dinner hour, though she has had success talking to retirees in the afternoon.

"Generally, they are very open to talking" she said. "It's fascinating to me. It's exciting if you are into politics. If you're not, I'm sure it's a big pain in the neck."

Tom Csatari, a lawyer from Hanover and an undecided Democrat, said he had to stay home last week for a few days and fielded about five calls a day. Like other New Hampshire households, his family is also getting two or three mailings a day now from candidates, which he ignores.

"I think there is more stuff in the mail this time, and a lot more telephone calls, frankly," said Csatari.

Shyrl Rafus, who runs Shyrl's Diner in West Lebanon, said she has been getting lots of campaign literature at her business, even though she now lives in Vermont and doesn't plan to vote, anyway.

"All I know is I've been getting a lot of crap in the mail," she said. "I threw them in the trash."

But not everyone has that attitude.

Posie Taylor, a longtime camp director with the Aloha Foundation in Fairlee who was lunching with Grabill yesterday in downtown Lebanon, said all the campaign activity in New Hampshire sounded exciting.

“I’m sort of jealous, actually,” said Taylor, who lives in White River Junction. “It’s really kind of boring over across the river.”

And the McCain campaign, which has caught fire recently, has run out of bumper stickers and 4-x-8 yard signs in Lebanon, according to Karen Cervantes, McCain’s Grafton County co-chairwoman.

“People have just been calling and calling and coming by and wanting this. It’s phenomenal, the change,” Cervantes said. “In July, we were absolutely beating the bushes to see who we had for McCain supporters, and now they are coming out of the woodwork.”

McCain was in the state yesterday, and most candidates will be back in New Hampshire today for a final blitz before Tuesday’s primary.

Besides staffing phone banks, thousands of volunteers will be streaming into the state and swarming through voter-rich neighborhoods. In other words, many voters can expect at knock at their door this weekend.

“The phone banks will continue, and there is a heavy emphasis on canvassing as well,” said Kathleen Strand, the spokeswoman for Hillary Clinton’s New Hampshire campaign. “We will knock on over 100,000 doors this weekend alone.”

Clinton’s campaign is also “actively recruiting” volunteers with four-wheel drive vehicles to help take voters to the polls, and equipping them with shovels, salt and umbrellas “to be prepared for any scenario,” Strand said.

The weather forecast in Lebanon on Tuesday is for temperatures in the mid-40s and cloudy skies.

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