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Standing on guard for Barack; Young Canadians are in Texas volunteering for a leader who inspires them more than anyone at home, they tell Salimah Ebrahim

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With mere days to go until the battleground Texas Democratic primary on March 4, staffers at Barack Obama's campaign offices across the state are in high gear, operating virtually around the clock on steady streams of Diet Coke, catnaps and barbeque.

They are, however, about to get some timely reinforcement from an unlikely source - young Canadians.

With the high stakes of this year's U.S. election, a group of 20 young people calling themselves simply "Canadians for Obama" have arrived in the Lone Star State, taking time off school or work and emptying their bank accounts to join the thousands of other volunteers working for a man they believe to be a true agent of change - and possibly the next president of the United States.

"We do everything from phone canvassing to brochure folding to door knocking to visibility on street corners. ... The atmosphere down there is just electric," says 20-year-old Braeden Caley, a fourth-year student in political science at the University of British Columbia who is set to volunteer for Mr. Obama in Dallas, where he and others will be billeted with local Democrats over the next few days.

"It's important to Canadians that we have a more peaceful world and stronger U.S.-Canadian relations," says Mr. Caley, who is also the president of the B.C. Young Liberals and keen to observe the workings of another political system up close. "[Mr. Obama] had the judgment to oppose the Iraq war from the beginning, and for a lot of young people in Canada and around the world who stood in those marches to oppose the war from the beginning, they need to have someone running for president who was in those marches as well."

The group originated out of casual exchanges between friends caught up in the excitement and energy of this year's election. It was set up on Facebook and as a website last month, and has grown to several hundred members. There are over 40 other pro-Obama Canadian Facebook groups (the largest of which has more than 2,000 members), but they mostly express their support passively. Before their Texan adventure, many of the Vancouver-based group's members already had travelled down to Washington State several weeks ago to organize for the Feb. 9 caucuses.

"A friend called me out of the blue and said, 'Want to go to Everett?' " says self-styled political junkie **Ajay Puri**, 27, who days later found himself sleeping on the floor of Mr. Obama's campaign offices in Snohomish County, Wash.

Back home, Mr. Puri is currently working two jobs in health research, juggling two mortgages and supporting his parents as well as his brother's education. He loses money for every day he doesn't work. "It's crazy, but for this guy I'm doing it," he says. "I would volunteer for three weeks straight, basic food and a place to crash on a floor, just so he can get in."

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Mr. Puri says he has been stunned by the response they have received, especially from young people who have never even worked in a campaign. "I get many, many e-mails a week from Canadians ... [who] find this election so exciting that they want to get involved."

He gives a lot of the credit to social-networking websites such as Facebook: "It's been such a critical tool in this campaign and in many ways we're doing up north what the Obama team has done so well down south, to truly build a movement, engaging people who traditionally would not have been involved."

But will we now see, for example, an explosion of Young Canadians for Stephen Harper or Stéphane Dion on social-networking sites, donning T-shirts and taking time off to carpool and campaign in Red Deer for their chosen candidates? Not likely, with a recent CBC-EnviroNics poll showing that 15 per cent of Canadians willingly would trade the right to vote in their own election to vote this year in the U.S.

"We just don't have that level of inspirational leadership in Canada at the moment," Mr. Puri says. "It's the same faces. Obama reminds us of what people said about [Pierre] Trudeau, what they said about [John F.] Kennedy. I think it's been frustrating Canadians for a while. We seem to be continually forced to choose one leader because we want to vote against another, rather than choosing someone we're overwhelmingly drawn to and inspired by."

Mr. Caley goes one step further: "It's not an ideal model for us, but in many respects, the American system is doing a better job of engaging the general public, rather than just party members, than we are."

And while he's quick to point out that working for change down south doesn't mean he or other young Canadians are giving up on the Canadian political process, Mr. Caley is committed to working towards an Obama presidency through 2008. He feels it could help to cut through the climate of anti-Americanism that he believes has pervaded Canadian cultural and political discourse throughout the George W. Bush era.

"It could have a very profound effect on Canadian politics if you had an American president that was well supported by the Canadian people," he says.

He pauses for a moment. "If Barack Obama can come from behind, I'll be able to tell my grandkids about this moment where we helped propel that, helped propel Obama and change in Texas ... and that's hopefully how our contribution will be seen."

Salimah Ebrahim is a Canadian journalist and filmmaker.

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