

Persuasive Canvassing

Councillor elections are the most likely to be won and lost in the field. With a low voter turnout, no central campaign, no historical partisan allegiances, everything hinges on your ability to convince voters to commit to voting for you and getting out that vote on polling days. The following will provide you with the information you need to host a successful canvass.

Persuasive Canvassing & Voter Identification

When we communicate with voters, we ask them who they are going to vote for. We do this through a variety of voter identification tactics, including telephone canvassing, door-to-door canvassing, texting, and IVRs (interactive voice recordings AKA robocalls).

During a campaign we can integrate these types of tactics to deliver our message and elicit a response most effectively. Using these various tactics, we can gauge the level of support of a particular voter and determine what to do next. We categorize voters as supporters (1s), likely supporters (2s), undecided (3s), or opposed (4s), as well as a few other categories: Won't Say (WS), Ineligible Voter (IV), and Not Voting (NV). These categories are known as 'marks'.

The quality of your marks will depend on how well you train your canvassers. A mark is essentially how you code responses to a direct voter ID question, e.g. "will you vote for X on election day?" or "can we count on you to vote for X on election day?". Ensure canvassers pose the question in a clear and direct manner: i.e., they are not injecting unnecessary qualifiers like "maybe" or "might". A voter ID question such as "do you think you might vote for X on election day?" is pretty much useless. Coding a response that is, in effect, "yes, I *might* vote for you" makes it impossible to tell if someone is a mark 1, 2, or 3, and this is crucial information that informs what your campaign does next.

Canvassers should also be trained to seek out a clear answer to their direct voter ID question. If the answer to your voter ID question is "yeah/sure, I like your candidate" canvassers should clarify further that their intention is to vote for your candidate in the election. It is important not to mark based on 'vibes' no matter how positive the vibes may be. People will often try to be agreeable when interacting with strangers, especially in person, but agreeable vibes are not the same thing as voting intention; teach canvassers how to identify the latter.

Marks represent crucial distinctions that inform the campaign's work. For example, campaigns will likely want to pull their mark 1s and 2s to the polls on election day but will not want to waste time pulling people that may not actually be likely to vote for their candidate. Every minute pulling someone not likely to vote for you is keeping you away from people who are while simultaneously aiding an opponent.

We don't just want to walk up to people and ask them if they will vote for us, however; we want to engage them in a brief yet persuasive political discussion to gain their support first. This is particularly important at the municipal level where voter turnout is typically lowest. You cannot simply identify voting intention in an electorate where the majority do not vote (unless you want to have a list filled with NVs and 3s). You must give people a reason to vote; persuade folks that voting matters by identifying an issue that impacts them and telling them how we're going to change it.

Politicians walking up to a door and 'listening', only to regurgitate back to voters what the former

presumes the latter wants to hear is both ineffective and commonplace. Campaigns looking to change the status quo, and campaigns that are authentic, will come to the door with politics—if you're not running for office to change politics, do not run for office. You still want to listen, and will have ample opportunity to, while nevertheless approaching people with your own priorities.

Persuasive canvassing means coming to the door with politics, but it also means asking people what they think of that politics—voters have agency and can steer the discussion from there. In other words, campaigns are able to listen without lacking substance and politics at the door. People respond well to people who come to the door with passion more so than someone who comes to the door to give them an unsolicited quiz on their priorities.

Equally important to persuasion and the collection of marks is the collection of contact information and the other survey asks for marks 1s and 2s. Canvassers should be onboarded and trained at the outset of every phonebank and foot canvass shift. Even if canvassers have been trained before or tell you that they 'know what they're doing', every canvass should nevertheless start with a run through of how to do persuasive canvassing effectively (go over the marking system, the structure and purpose of the script, and how best to ask for data). Canvassers should be reminded every shift of best practices and campaign objectives.

We cannot win a movement for our political horizon with a single conversation. We need to demand more from politics, but also demand more of each other. When canvassers are talking to a supporter, they need to ask if they will take a sign, get involved by volunteering, and make a financial contribution. All questions should be asked.

The sentiment that "I've already asked too much" and other such instincts for social grace need to be checked at the door. Politics is too important not to err on the side of the other person's agency. The worst thing that can happen is that people say no, and that is OK. Better to let them say no, than to rob them of the possibility of getting more involved, and to rob the campaign of important information and enhanced support. Remember, however, asking the question is not the same thing as being pushy. If someone says no, respect that decision. This makes asking the question effectively in the first place all the more important.

Do not be apologetic in your asks of supporters and undecided voters. Ask all of them for their phone number *and* their email (ask for the number first as a phone call is more important to the campaign than an email send, but always ask for both). Ask for data in an assumptive way, e.g. "What is *the best* number to reach you at?", or "Do you *have* a phone number?", or even just an assumptive "phone number?" works.

Do not inject unnecessary qualifiers, upward inflections, unnecessary explanations, or hesitancy. People do not want to share their information with people who sound unsure about taking it. Again, err on the side of simplicity and their agency; if they get a call, text, or email and decide they don't want to receive anymore, they can always opt out. Let them make that choice if and when they want to.

If canvassers initially ID someone as a 2, 3, or NV, they should be taking that opportunity to attempt to upgrade the individual's support on the spot. Canvassers should be trained on how one might do this and provided with a 'comeback' or 'concern handle' script that is supplemental to the primary script for these scenarios.

Campaigns can expect approximately 1 in 5 doors to open, and 1 in 10 phones to answer, when doing voter contact work (though conditions vary). Anytime you are talking to a live voter, use that opportunity—do not squander it. It is quite likely the only time that person will speak with someone on the campaign before election day.

Part of the reason it is imperative to collect phone numbers for marks 1s, 2s, and 3s, however, is that campaigns will want to call 2s and 3s and try to upgrade their support later on during the campaign. Further, campaigns will want to be able to call 1s and 2s and encourage them to vote, and to offer them rides. Campaigns may also need to call mark 1s for fundraising at some point. The smaller the phone and email list is for your supporters the harder it will be to raise the max, and to get out your vote. Without phone numbers, it becomes very difficult to circle back to mark 2s and 3s to upgrade their support.

Door canvasses should always end with a meet-up and debrief where everyone tallies on a piece of paper the number of mark 1s, 2s, 3s, 4s, WS, NV, IV, as well as the number of sign requests, volunteer sign ups, donations, event RSVPs, and the new emails and phone numbers that were collected. It is good to write on the tally sheet itself some indication of what a good tally sheet looks like, and what some expectations are: e.g., a ratio of 1 new piece of contact information for every 2 marks is an example of a performance metric that campaigns can communicate as a minimum target for canvassers.

You will also want to look at relative performance and the distribution of marks. Is there a surprising number of mark 1s? If so, perhaps check-in with the canvasser to ensure they are not inflating their marks. Remind folks that marks are a codification of a clear answer to a direct voter ID question. Again, marking should not be informed by vibes, positive or otherwise. When in doubt, a canvasser should mark conservatively; vibes should never inform more supportive marks.

Persuasive scripts

A lot of campaigns, especially at the partisan level, will have scripts engineered to identify voting intention and not much else. If you're a political party that has enough latent or otherwise pre-existing support in an electoral district to win an election, then this approach can win office. It cannot, however, win power for your community, as no work was done to shift politics, and raise political expectations, through persuasive and inspired interactions.

For campaigns that want to change politics, and that cannot rely on a favourable media landscape, or the other advantages of a status quo campaign backed by existing power brokers, this approach makes little sense. We need to persuade people that voting for your candidate, or voting at all, may be worth their while.

A persuasive script is all about the structure:

1. Say hello, say your name and who you are canvassing on behalf of, and then punctuate with a 'how are you?'. Never invite someone to exit the conversation by asking them if they "have a minute", and never set an apologetic tone. You're doing important work. If voters want to exit the conversation, they will do so without your help.
2. Offer a concise and persuasive political pitch.
 - a. Start with identifying the issue: "so we're talking to folks in your neighbourhood today

- because we're concerned about how much influence developers have at City Hall" b. Offer a solution: "that's why we're campaigning on stopping the revolving door between the private development sector and the city staff who oversee it."
- c. Then throw to them by asking: "What do you think about that?"
3. Find agreement on that issue or another issue they raise and lock in support: "Great, I'm glad we agree, but we need your help to get this done. Can we count on you to vote for X on October xxth?"
- a. If they are unsure, or don't care about the issue, or about municipal politics, find a thread by asking specific or open-ended questions: e.g., "what do you think about the LRT?", "what do you think about the current Councillor/Mayor?", "what is a top issue for you at the municipal level?"
 - b. If voting intention is leaning, try to upgrade it with "is there anything holding you back from making a firmer commitment at this time?", "is there something you're wanting to hear from municipal campaigns on?"
 - c. Once you're done going back and forth, make sure you've circled back to the voter ID ask to check in on where their voting intention has ended up.
4. If they are a supporter, ask them to take a sign, to volunteer, and to contribute financially
5. If they are a mark 1-3 ask for their phone number and email.
6. Thank them for taking the time to chat with you and say goodbye.

More:

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