

In the Trenches:

What Republican Operatives Need to Know About Voter Canvassing

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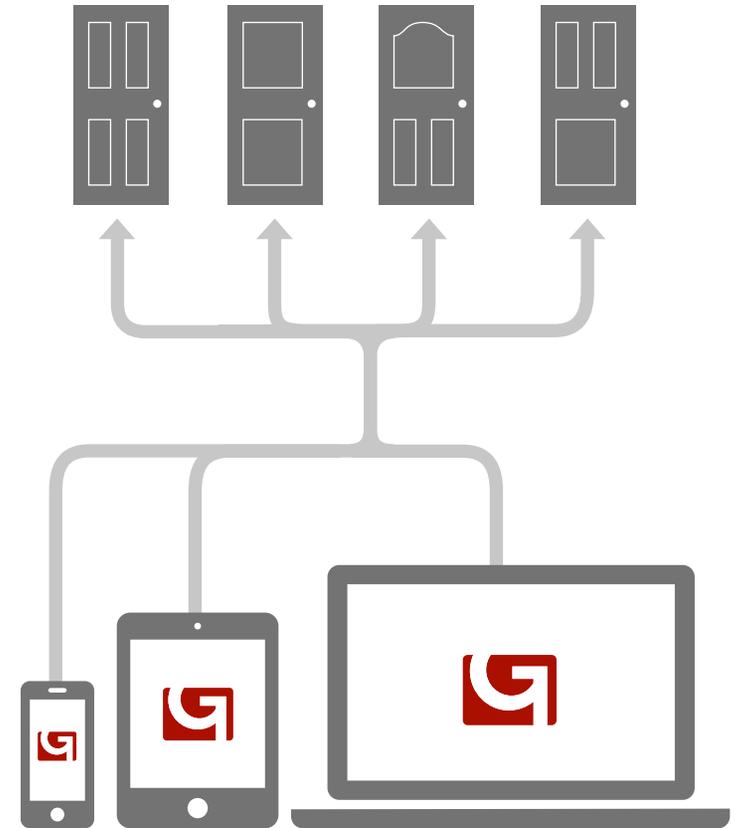
Introduction

When it comes to actually turning out voters, one of the most effective campaign methods is also the oldest: door-to-door canvassing. Even in this age of expensive consultants and slick advertising, nothing beats face-to-face contact with actual voters. For decades, political scientists have analyzed and debated the effectiveness of various means of campaigning, and the utility of canvassing remains one of the few undisputed conclusions reached by major scholars of the subject.

Unfortunately, canvassing requires a colossal amount of time and lots of hard work. Even worse, if it is not conducted correctly, it can be useless or even counterproductive. It rarely makes sense to knock on every door in a neighborhood. It is waste of time to ring someone's doorbell if they are committed to voting for the opposing candidate and cannot be persuaded otherwise. Time – a candidate's own and that of volunteers – is a precious commodity of any campaign. To be effective, canvassing efforts must be properly targeted.

The good news is that the technology exists to coordinate a precisely targeted campaign. President Obama's reelection campaign represented a new peak in campaign technology. The techniques implemented by the president's campaign staff are ideologically neutral. What worked for them can work for others.

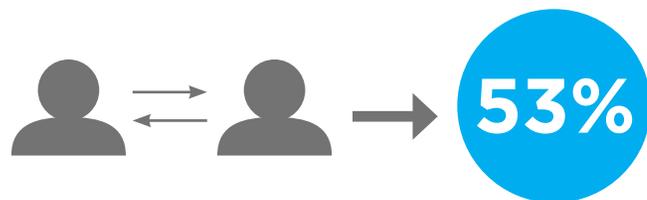
However, advanced technology alone is not enough to assure effective voter contact. Fortunately, the political science literature provides useful guidance for how to reach your potential voters and get them to the polls.



Voter canvassing works

Donald Green and Alan Gerber are the most renowned scholars of campaign techniques. In a 2000 study, they estimated that face-to-face voter mobilization increases voter turnout by 53 percent among those canvassed in a local election.ⁱ These results are congruent with older studies, such as those conducted by Rosenstone and Hansenⁱⁱ and Verba, Schlozman, and Bradyⁱⁱⁱ

In their analysis of all the major studies conducted on voter canvassing, Green and Gerber found that the overwhelming majority of all research on the subject indicates that voter canvassing boosts turnout. Based on their thorough examination of all the relevant research, they concluded that **one additional vote is generated for every fourteen voters that canvassers contact.**^{iv} In a tight race, effective voter contact can make the difference between victory and defeat. As they noted in the conclusion of a 2003 study of canvassing in local elections (which concluded that as few as twelve face-to-face contacts with voters were necessary to earn an additional vote), at a large scale, voter canvassing can have an impressive effect and be worth the expense:



Face-to-face voter mobilization increases voter turnout by 53 percent

*Consider what this finding implies for a large scale GOTV campaign. Suppose one were to hire campaign workers at a rate of \$10 per hour. According to our records for Bridgeport and Columbus, where canvassers traveled in pairs but approached different doors, canvassers contacted eight voters per hour. In Raleigh and St. Paul, the rate was five contacts per hour, but this figure reflects the fact that in these sites canvassers not only traveled in pairs but also went in pairs up to every door. Had the teams of canvassers split up, the contacts per hour would presumably have doubled. If we imagine that **the average canvasser makes eight contacts per hour**, the cost per vote would be \$15.*

It is worth noting that voter canvassing has a different effect on different elements of the electorate. Importantly, canvassing has a greater impact on intended non-voters than intended voters.

When someone who claims he or she is not going to vote is exposed to campaign efforts, this person becomes more likely to later decide to vote.^v

When it comes to vote choice, party identification is key

The primacy of party identification when it comes to vote choice was one of the most important findings of political science in the 20th century. The party with which a voter identifies is a powerful predictor of who he or she will vote for in this election and many elections to come. For most people, party identification is stable over long periods in the absence of a major exogenous shock like a war or depression.

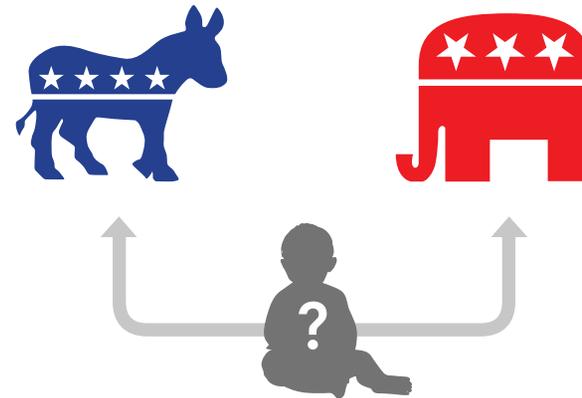
There are many competing theories of party identification. Some contend that party identification stems from early socialization, starting as early as childhood.^{vi} Others have argued that party identification stems from our key social identities.^{vii} A prominent political scientist has argued that our partisan identities are the result of our “running tallies” of government performance – if the party we typically support is leading to worse outcomes, we may abandon that party.^{viii} Ultimately, however, the roots of party identification are not important for our purposes. Party identification is important because it predicts voter behavior.

Using party identification to target voters is easier in some states than in others. In many states, voters specifically register as members of political parties, and these membership lists are publicly available. Records of voting in closed primaries can also allow you to pinpoint party identifiers.

When identifying your core voters, these lists can be indispensable, but they are not enough.

Official party listings can become out of date. This can be a particular problem in the South where many older voters joined the Democratic Party decades ago, but have consistently voted Republican in all recent elections. More importantly, many people consistently support a political party in every general election cycle, but do not formally belong to a party.

Oftentimes, the best way to determine a voter’s party identification is to ask. However, even this has pitfalls.



Party identification is important because it predicts voter behavior.

Don't immediately take independents at their word

During the 1970s, many scholars and commentators examined data indicating that the political parties were in trouble. Americans were ceasing to identify with either of the two major parties at an alarming rate. More and more Americans described themselves as “independents” when asked to name their political party. Many speculated that we had entered a new era in American politics, when campaigns would be issue and personality driven and voters would pay little attention to partisan labels when making decisions. Split ticket voting was expected to rise.

It turned out that these proclamations about the death of partisanship were premature. Yes, many Americans were calling themselves “independent,” but their voting behavior was not congruent with that classification.

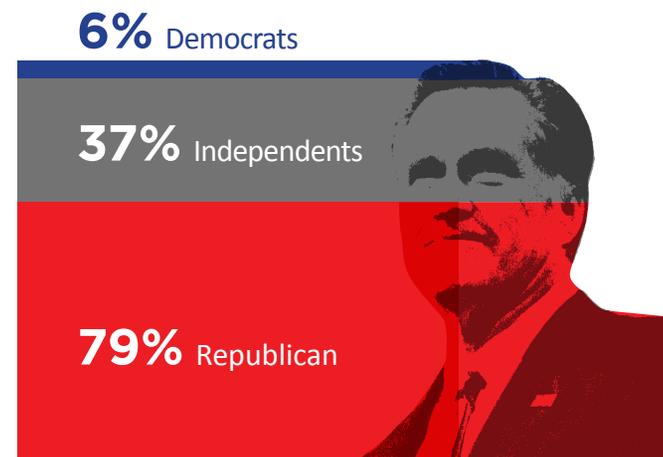
Political scientists have since learned that party identification should not be categorized as a variable with only three possible values. It became clear that voters needed to be asked an important follow-up question. We now typically treat party identification as a seven-point scale, ranging from “strong Republican” to “strong Democrat.”

The common procedure in political science surveys is to ask self-described independents the following question: “If you had to choose, would you say you lean more toward the Republicans or the Democrats, or do you have no preference?”

It turns out that most of these so-called independents will admit to preferring one party over the other. The number of true independents is actually small, and always has been. More importantly, these independent “leaners” are often just as partisan as people who immediately admit to supporting a political party.^{ix} In fact, they may be more dedicated to their party.

To demonstrate what I mean, we can look at the most recent American National Election Study, conducted during the 2012 presidential election. Below we see the vote choice of respondents based on their stated party identification.

First, let's take a look at the distribution when party identification is treated as a variable with three categories.



Percentage Voted for Romney

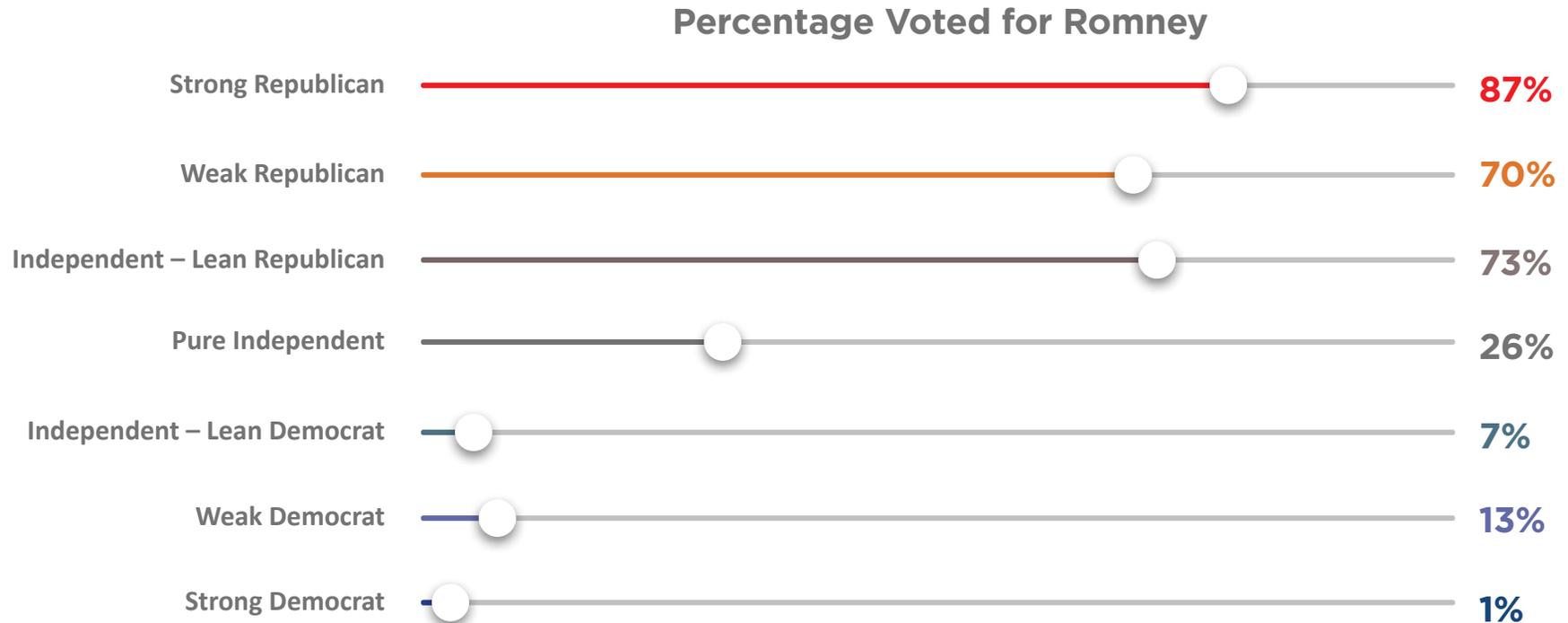
Don't immediately take independents at their word (cont.)

When we consider party identification this way, it appears that independents are split – though a strong majority of self-described independents voted against Romney in 2012.

When we expand our partisan categories, however, a different picture emerges.

Now it should become clear why some “independents” deserve more attention from your campaign than others.

Independents who, when pushed, admitted that they leaned toward the Republican Party, were actually *more likely* to vote for Romney than Republicans who said their party allegiance was not strong.



The geography of campaign donations is not the same as the geography of partisan voting

Where a party can find money is not the same as where it can find votes. This is especially true of the Republican Party. As Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski demonstrated, a community that gives a lot of money to one party is likely also a place where the opposing party can raise money.^x It makes sense to write off certain communities as a major source of votes, but even if

a large majority of people within a geographic unit vote for the opposing party, that community may nonetheless contain many wealthy people willing to write your party a check. Republicans are able to raise a lot of money in Boston and San Francisco, even though the voters in those cities are overwhelmingly Democratic.

Demographic classifications are not perfect predictors of vote choice, but they can offer clues

Following the 2004 presidential election, political analysts were quick to attribute the sophisticated “microtargeting” techniques of the Bush campaign for the president’s reelection. It was said that by accumulating massive amounts of consumer information, the Bush campaign was able to precisely target potential voters based on seemingly non-political attributes. Whether a person preferred Dr. Pepper or Pepsi supposedly told you how a person was going to vote.

It is my opinion that the hype about microtargeting was unjustified.



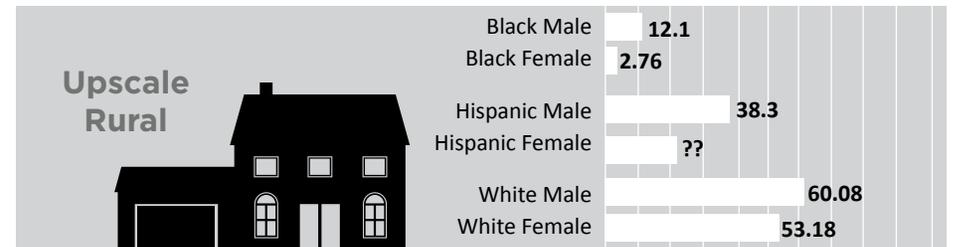
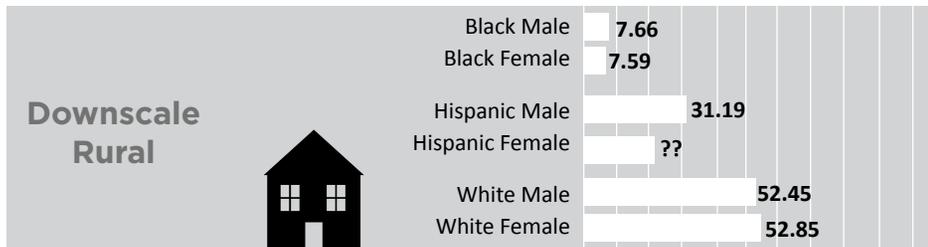
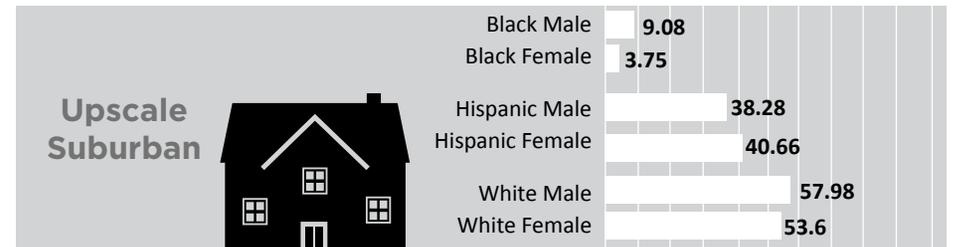
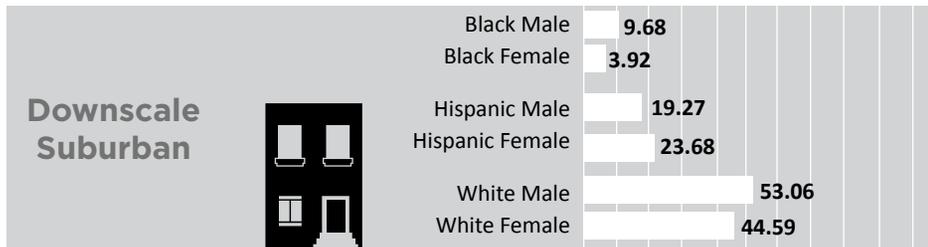
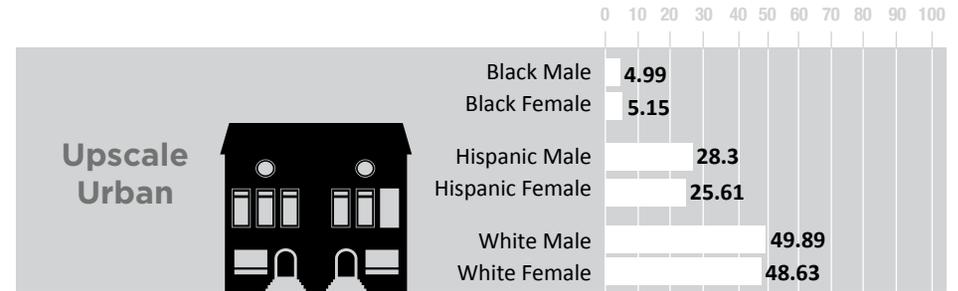
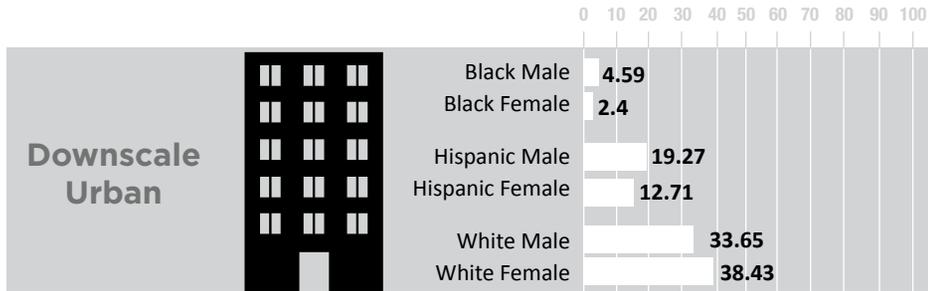
Gathering this kind of consumer information is expensive, and it is very unlikely that is worth the effort. For one, the relationship between consumer choices and voter behavior is likely spurious in many cases. After controlling for age, race, geographic location, home ownership, marital status, and income, whether

someone likes Busch Lite more than German Rieslings will almost certainly cease to be a statistically or substantively significant predictor of vote choice.

The good news is that other voter characteristics, which are publicly available, remain valuable predictors of voter behavior. Looking at exit polls for House elections from 2008 (I would have used 2012, but those raw data are not yet posted to ICPSR), we can plainly see that huge percentages of certain demographic categories vote for candidates of one party, and relatively few groups are evenly split.

I generated the figure using four very simple demographic and geographic predictors: race, gender, neighborhood type, and whether the voter lived in an upscale or a downscale neighborhood. It is true that we improve our accuracy as we include additional characteristics, but even a very simple analysis like this yields important information about where a campaign should look for votes, and where a campaign should not bother.

Percentage that Voted Republican in 2008 U.S. House Elections



Wedge issues are real, and can be used to peel away voters from the opposing candidate

Affiliating with a party is one of the most important predictors of vote choice, but many of those who affiliate with the opposing party can be peeled away. Hillygus and Shields describe a category within the electorate called “persuadable voters.”^{xi} These voters typically describe themselves as members of a political party, but they disagree with that party on one or more very important issue. Without a push, this issue is not likely

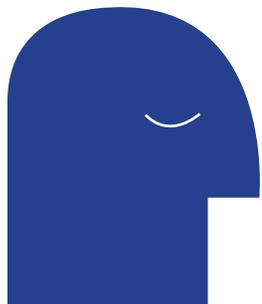
going to sway their standing decision to vote for a particular party. However, if a campaign pushes that issue, either through a targeted message or more generally, such voters can be persuaded to abandon their party on Election Day.



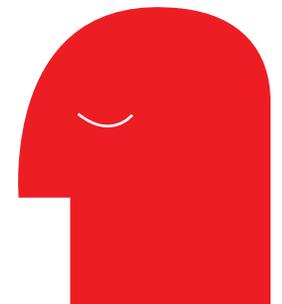
When it comes to voter canvassing, the method seems to matter more than the message

One may be concerned about relying on an army of volunteers to engage in voter canvassing. Will volunteers stay on message? Will they be able to precisely gauge how to best present information to a potential voter? While proper training is important, training does not have to take long and one does not need to be a professional to be an effective canvasser.

Scholars have attempted to discern whether certain scripts are more effective than others when it comes to voter outreach. There is little evidence at this point that the content of the message matters very much. It is the personal contact, ideally with someone from the potential voter’s community^{xii}, which matters the most.



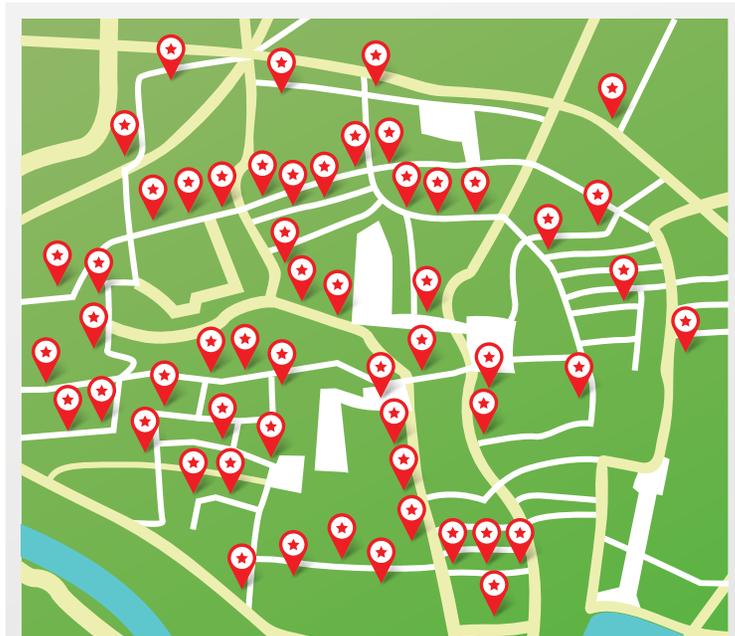
It's personal contact . . . which matters the most



Voter canvassing is important to voter turnout *and* voter persuasion

The majority of all studies conducted on the effects of voter canvassing have focused on voter turnout. Does canvassing get voters to the polls? Whether canvassing can actually *change vote choice* is less examined. This is not because the subject is uninteresting or unimportant, but it is extraordinarily difficult to measure. Because states record whether a person voted, but not who they voted for, we do not have individual data on vote choice. Post-election surveys have value, but they are expensive and responses are not always perfectly reliable.

However, a handful of studies have considered whether or not voter canvassing can actually change minds, and we see some compelling evidence that this is the case. Kevin Arceneaux found that both door-to-door canvassing and the use of commercial phone banks can increase support for a candidate.^{xiii} Lam and Peyton reached similar conclusions.^{xiv}



Additional useful tips

Experimental studies confirm what common sense already tells you. The most effective canvassers are dressed professionally, polite, appear to be upstanding citizens, and are adults in the prime of their lives. The least effective canvassers wear offensive clothing and express an inappropriate attitude.^{xv}

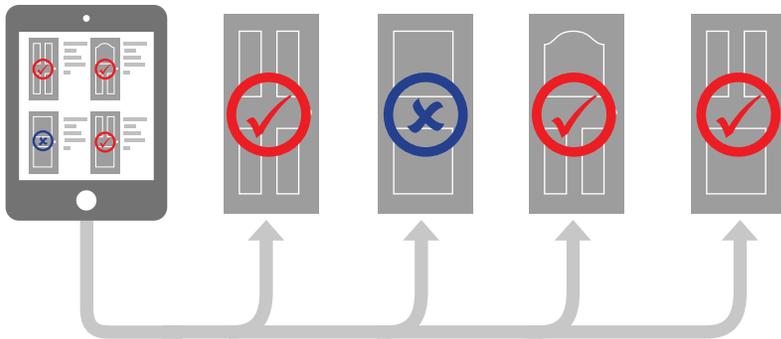
Voters, on average, prefer canvassers who are co-ethnics.^{xvi}

The weather impacts the efficacy of canvassing. For whatever reason, door-to-door canvassing that occurs during unseasonably hot weather tends to be less effective when it comes to voter mobilization. The effectiveness of phone calls tends to decrease during precipitation.^{xvii}

Summary

. . . until we directly ask them, we do not know for sure if a person is planning vote, for whom they plan to vote, or whether they can be persuaded

To conclude, voter canvassing is an excellent use of campaign resources. In a close race, effective canvassing can make the difference between victory and defeat. However, in a world of limited time, money, and volunteers, you need to target your canvassing efforts on those who can be persuaded to vote for your candidate. Because we are dealing with human beings, there is always a stochastic element – until we directly ask them, we do not know for sure if a person is planning vote, for whom they plan to vote, or whether they can be persuaded. However, we now know enough about turnout and vote choice to make reasonable decisions regarding whom to target, and possess the technology to put that knowledge to work.



About the Author

George Hawley is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Alabama. He received his PhD from the University of Houston. His research interests include demography, electoral behavior, political parties, immigration policy, and the U.S. Congress, and his doctoral dissertation and first book, *Voting and Migration Patterns in the U.S.*, focused on migration and the geographic partisan sort in the United States -- that is, he examined the degree to which migration is leading to an increasing number of politically homogeneous geographic units throughout the United States. His forthcoming book, *White Voters in 21st Century America*, examines the voting behavior of non-Hispanic whites, and speculates on how the changing demographic profile of the United States will influence American politics in the decades ahead.

He earned BA degrees in journalism and political science at Central Washington University, and earned his MA in political science at the University of Houston. He also has years of work experience in Washington, DC.

Dr. Hawley is a proud native of northwest Washington State, but presently enjoys life in Alabama with his wife and son.

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Voter Gravity is a campaign technology company that brings a powerful voter database, voter acquisition technology and a user-friendly mobile canvassing solution to campaigns and advocacy groups. Voter Gravity integrates innovative voter contact tools, an extensive voter database, and a user-friendly dashboard to capture voter contact information. For further product features, visit Voter Gravity's features page at www.VoterGravity.com/features.

