

GUIDE TO CANVASSING

Developed by Vote Run Lead in Partnership
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Introduction to Canvassing

Canvassing, or door knocking, has been a central part of campaign organizing strategies for decades. Knocking on doors gives a campaign the ability to target specific voters and talk to them on their doorsteps about the election.

Just as with every tactic, canvassing can increase awareness about your campaign, persuade undecided voters, and mobilize supporters to vote. You might knock on the doors of all likely voters at the beginning of the cycle to make sure they know about your candidate and the upcoming election; later in the cycle, if you need to win more voters, you might knock on the doors of people who have voted for both Democrats and Republicans in the past to convince them to vote for you/your campaign this year; and during the final weeks (and especially four days), you might knock on the doors of people you know are supporting you to make sure they actually show up and vote.

A face-to-face conversation is one of the most effective ways to reach and persuade targeted voters, which is why canvassing is so central to many organizing strategies. Good canvassing programs recruit volunteers to knock doors so you can reach as many voters as possible, and training those volunteers is critical to make sure they're having effective, persuasive conversations when a voter answers their door.

Canvassing also has its limitations, which are important to be aware of. Knocking doors is time-intensive and you're likely to get about a 10 percent contact rate – so to actually reach all the voters you need, you'll likely need a lot of volunteers. The decay rate of a conversation on a doorstep has been found to be about two weeks, so you want to make sure you're talking to voters as close to the election as possible. And it's often hard to reach voters who live in dorms or apartment buildings, people who live in rural areas (where you need to drive from house to house), people who live on reservations, and people who don't live at the address where they're registered to vote.

What Canvassing Looks Like in Practice

1. Recruiting volunteers

You will likely need to recruit volunteers to knock doors. You can recruit volunteers in any way that works for you – send out an email, make phone calls, send text messages, etc. Volunteers can either knock the doors in their own neighborhood or a neighborhood that they don't live in.

2. Preparing for the canvass

To prepare for the canvass, you'll want to make a list of all the doors you want knocked (more on that below under "targeting"). Then you'll "cut turf," or group together around 30-50 doors for one canvasser to knock (if the doors are close together, you can include more doors; if the doors are far apart, it might help to include fewer doors. A canvassing shift should take a volunteer about 2.5 hours, and you'll want to make sure they knock on all the doors in a packet). You'll then want to assemble the materials volunteers will need, which may include a clipboard, pens, and printed packets/scripts if they're using paper packets, as well as printed literature if you want them to hand it out or leave it at unanswered doors.

3. Staging location

Your volunteers will meet at one location at a set time to get trained on how to knock doors. This staging location could be a campaign office, a volunteer's house or garage, even a coffee shop. You'll want all the materials assembled ahead of time, including a sign-in sheet for volunteers to sign in when they arrive for their shift.

4. Training

Volunteers will get trained on how to knock doors, including how to find the neighborhood they've been assigned, how to walk through the canvassing script and what asks to make, how to enter data from conversations, and overall best practices. (More on training below.)

5. Knocking doors

Canvassers will then leave to knock on the doors in their packet. Emphasize that they should try to knock on all the doors in their packets, and have them return to the staging location when they're done.

6. Returning the data

Volunteers should return to the staging locations after all their doors are knocked to give back extra lit, return their packets (if they used paper), and debrief their canvassing shift. Make sure someone is there to receive them – and make sure each volunteer signs up for another canvassing shift!

Targeting: Whose Doors Should You be Knocking (and When)?

One of the reasons canvassing is so effective is because you can target specific voters using data from the voter file. Below is suggested targeting for a primary election and a general election. (An important note – targeting will vary depending on what election you're running in, what the district looks like, and what your path to victory is. The below suggestions can be a guide, but you'll know best how to win your election.)

For a Primary Election:

- IDing

At the beginning of a primary cycle, you might want to knock doors to find out how likely voters are voting for you. To target these voters, we'd recommend targeting likely voters and asking who they're planning to vote for. You should knock on these folks' doors as frequently as you can until you actually have a conversation with them; once you have a conversation, you should remove them from your list for a period of time.

- Persuasion

Pull a list of all voters from your party, especially those who typically vote in primaries, and knock on their doors and ask them to support your campaign. You should knock on these folks' doors as frequently as you can until you actually have a conversation with them; once you have a conversation, you should remove them from your list for a period of time.

- **GOTV (for a primary)**

- Ballot chase

If people are voting by mail in the primary, the Secretary of State may put out regular lists of people who have ballots that haven't been returned yet. Knock on the doors of people you've IDed as supporters (or who you think might support you), knock on their door, and ask them to fill out and return their ballots. You should start doing this just as ballots go out all the way through the election, and you can talk to them as frequently as you can. When someone returns their ballot, make sure to take them off your list.

- Early vote

If early voting is an option for your primary, you can knock on the doors of people you've IDed as supporters and ask them to vote early. You should start doing this just before early voting starts, all the way through the election, and talk to them as frequently as you can. When someone votes, make sure to take them off your list.

- Election Day

Knock on the door of every confirmed supporter and ask them to vote. This usually happens during the final four days of the election. During GOTV, you should try to knock on each door at least twice, but ideally you'll want to knock these doors as frequently as possible. (If early voting/vote by mail is an option where you live, you should remove anyone who has already voted – don't waste your precious time on anyone who's already voted!)

For a General Election:

- IDing

At the beginning of a cycle, you might want to knock doors to find out how likely voters are voting for you. To target these voters, we'd recommend targeting likely voters (people who have voted in previous elections. You should knock on these folks' doors as frequently as you can until you actually have a conversation with them; once you

have a conversation, you should remove them from your list for a period of time (depending on your path to victory/when you talk to them).

- Persuasion

Pull a list of people who have voted for both Democrats and Republicans in the past, knock on their doors, and ask them to support your campaign. You should knock on these folks' doors as frequently as you can until you actually have a conversation with them; once you have a conversation, you should remove them from your list for a period of time (depending on how many votes you need to win/when you talk to them).

- GOTV

- Ballot chase

If people are voting by mail in the general election, the Secretary of State may put out regular lists of people who have ballots that haven't been returned yet. Knock on the doors of anyone you think will support you and ask them to fill out and return their ballots. You should start doing this just as ballots go out all the way through the election, and you can talk to them as frequently as you can. When someone returns their ballot, make sure to take them off your list.

- Early vote

If early voting is an option for your election, you can knock on the doors of all voters you think will support you and ask them to vote early. You should start doing this just before early voting starts, all the way through the election, and talk to them as frequently as you can. When someone votes, make sure to take them off your list.

- Election Day

Knock on the door of every voter you think will support you and ask them to vote. This usually happens during the final four days of the election. During GOTV, you should try to knock on each door at least twice, but ideally you'll want to knock these doors as frequently as possible. (If early voting/vote by

mail is an option where you live, you should remove anyone who has already voted – don't waste your precious time on anyone who's already voted!)

You can also layer any of the above strategies with another touch. For instance, you can follow up a conversation on someone's door with a phone call from a volunteer, send them a campaign mailer, or serve them with a digital ad. This combined outreach may help your conversation stay on the voters' mind, extending your impact.

Recruiting Volunteers

To recruit volunteers to knock doors, figure out how many doors you need to knock, and divide them by about 30-50 doors (best practice is about 30 doors that are spaced out, 50 doors that are close together). That's how many volunteers you need to show up. We'd recommend recruiting twice as many volunteers as you think you might need to take account for about a 50 percent flake rate.

You can recruit canvassing volunteers from anywhere. Here are some tips:

1. Ask everyone who has already volunteered for you to knock doors – and make sure you reshift them (ask them to sign up for another shift at the end of the shift they complete)!
2. Ask your volunteers to bring a friend or two when they show up for their shift.
3. Send an email to everyone who lives in your state/district and ask them to volunteer.
4. Make phone calls to ask people to knock doors.
5. Send texts to people to ask people to knock doors.

If someone doesn't show up for their canvassing shift, call or text them right away and ask when they can come in for their shift.

Training People to Knock Doors

Training canvassers (staff, volunteers, anyone) is critical – it will make sure every conversation they have on the doors is effective and persuasive, and will ensure your campaign is getting good data back from canvassers.

You should train all canvassers together at the beginning of their shift. Once canvassers are experienced and know how to canvass, they can either go out before everyone else gets trained – or, even better, they can take over training canvassers.

Here are things to make sure you include in your training:

- How to walk through the script. Make sure canvassers are familiar with the scripts and asks before they start knocking doors. The conversation should start by a canvasser introducing themselves, then making sure they're speaking to the right voter, and then walking through the script. (When you're training, it's helpful to roleplay a few conversations so your canvassers get the hang of it.)
- How to enter data effectively. Make sure canvassers track every result, including for people not home. They can also add notes to any target. When they're finished canvassing, make sure they know to return to the staging location to give back the packet (if they're doing it on pen and paper), sync their results (if they're using a tool on their phones), and give back any extra materials.
- How to be safe. Make sure people don't go into people's houses. During COVID, have canvassers bring a mask with them, stay a safe distance away from the voter they're talking to, and bring extra hand sanitizer.
- How to keep it legal. Canvassing is legal, even on doors that say "no soliciting." However, make sure canvassers know they cannot put anything in someone's mailbox.
- What to do if someone isn't home. Canvassers should leave literature at the doors of anyone who doesn't answer. They can put it in someone's screen door or under the front mat, but not in the mailbox.
- What to do if they talk to someone who ISN'T on your list. If someone answers the door who isn't on your list and looks at least eighteen years old, see if they're registered to vote. It's possible the person just moved into the house and isn't registered. Ask them if they're registered to vote at the address they live at.

When you're training canvassers, there are lots of ways to make sure people are prepared before they go out on the doors. Leave time for questions. Pair experienced canvassers with inexperienced canvassers and have them walk through the script, or pretend to hold a conversation. And make sure you give all canvassers your phone number in case anyone has a question or issue when they're out on the doors.

Collecting Data

When you're knocking doors, you'll want to keep rigorous data about every conversation, as well as what door you've knocked and when. Most CRMs (including VAN and other voter files) are good at measuring this. When you're actually out knocking, you can either use a tool or an app (like MiniVAN) to enter the data automatically, or you can use paper packets and a pen to enter data and enter in manually later. More on both below;

Tools

There are tools that support canvassing – most commonly MiniVAN (a tool connected with VAN). Canvassers can use these tools on their phones while they go door-to-door. Canvassers typically enter a list number, pull up the list, enter the results from each door and/or conversation on the list, and then sync it back to the campaign.

Using a tool reduces the need for the campaign to manually enter data from a paper list; however, some volunteers might not like using a tool on their phone instead of pen and paper.

(If you're having volunteers use their phones, make sure they know to bring a fully-charged phone, or to bring an external battery with them.)

Pen and Paper

Instead of a tool, a campaign can print out paper packets. These packets will include the script and the list of doors to knock, and canvassers enter the data from each conversation on the paper. Some volunteers might prefer pen and paper, but it requires the campaign to enter the data back into your voter file.

Sample Scripts

Persuasion script:

Hi, is _____ there?

(If no and they look over 18, ask if they're registered to vote at the address. If they are, follow the below script; if they are not and they're eligible to vote, persuade them to register to vote).

(If yes) Hi _____! I'm [canvasser name], a volunteer with [campaign and office they're running for]. I'm knocking on doors in my neighborhood today to talk about the [date] election. Are you planning to vote?

(if yes) Great! Do you know who you're planning to vote for?

(If it's your candidate) That's great to hear! (Double check they know where and when to vote. If they're really enthusiastic about the campaign, ask them to volunteer.)

(If it's not your candidate) Can I ask why? (Hear their reasoning for supporting a different candidate, ask about their values, and weave into the conversation why you're supporting your candidate. Make sure to listen to what they're saying, and try to be personal when you share your reason for supporting your candidate. Leave them with more resources, like lit.)

(If they're undecided, explain why you're supporting your candidate. Ask about their values and what they care about. Listen to what they're saying. At the end of the conversation, make a hard ask: "can I count on you to support [candidate] for [race] on [Election Day]?")

(if they aren't voting) Can I ask why? (Explain to them the importance of the election and why you're voting; leave lit)

GOTV Script:

Hi, is _____ there?

(If no and they look over 18, ask if they're registered to vote at the address. If they are, follow the below script; if they are not and they're eligible to vote, persuade them to register to vote)

(If yes) Hi _____! I'm [canvasser name], a volunteer with [campaign and office they're running for]. I'm knocking on doors in my neighborhood today to talk about the election. I wanted to make sure you have everything you need to vote. Are you planning to vote for [candidate]?

(if yes, make a plan with them) Great!

- What time on Election Day do you think you're going to vote?
- How are you going to get there?
- Is there anyone you're going to bring with you?

(if no) Can I ask why? (Hear their reasoning for supporting a different candidate, ask about their values, and weave into the conversation why you're supporting your candidate. Make sure to listen to what they're saying, and try to be personal when you share your reason for supporting your candidate.)

> If they then agree to support your candidate, make a plan with them for how they're going to vote.

> If they still aren't voting for your campaign, thank them and leave.

Recapping

Canvassing is a great way to target specific voters at their doorstep and have meaningful, persuasive conversations with them about the campaign. Canvassing is also one of the most effective ways to reach, persuade, and mobilize voters – and is a great way to get a good understanding of what voters in your community care about.

We'd recommend knocking doors yourself to understand how long it takes, what training is important, and how to have effective conversations with voters. The more you're familiar with it, the better you'll prepare your staff and volunteers – and the more effective your campaign's canvassing program will be.