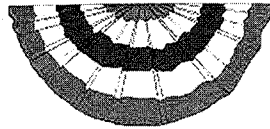


CHAPTER THREE



Door-to-Door Canvassing: Shoe Leather Politics

Door-to-door canvassing was once the bread and butter of party mobilization, particularly in urban areas. Ward leaders made special efforts to canvass their neighborhoods, occasionally calling in favors or offering small financial incentives to ensure that their constituents delivered their votes on Election Day. Petty corruption was rife, but turnout rates were high, even in relatively poor neighborhoods.

With the decline of patronage politics and the rise of technologies that sharply reduced the cost of phone calls and mass mailings, shoe leather politics gradually faded away. The shift away from door-to-door canvassing occurred not because this type of mobilization was discovered to be ineffective, but rather because the economic and political incentives facing parties, candidates, and campaign professionals changed over time.

Although local parties still tend to favor face-to-face mobilization, national parties typically prefer campaign tactics that afford them centralized control over the deployment of campaign resources. The decentralized network of local ward heelers was replaced by phone banks and direct mail firms, whose messages could be standardized and whose operations could be started with very short lead time and deployed virtually anywhere on an enormous scale. National parties and their allied organizations have invested more resources in "ground operations" in recent years, but these activities still account for a relatively small share of total campaign outlays.

Candidates, too, gradually drifted away from door-to-door canvassing, lured by the short lead times and minimal start-up costs of impersonal

campaigning. Furthermore, the ability to translate campaign funds directly into voter mobilization activities through private vendors selling direct mail and phone bank services meant that candidates were less beholden to local party activists. Candidates with money but without much affection for or experience with their party could run credible campaigns without many supporters, even in large jurisdictions.

Finally, a class of professional campaign consultants emerged to take advantage of the profits that could be made brokering direct mail, phone banks, and mass media. Less money was to be made from door-to-door canvassing, and campaign professionals had little incentive to invest in the on-the-ground infrastructure of local volunteers because there was no guarantee that they would be hired back to work in the same area.

You should therefore expect to get conflicting advice about the value of door-to-door canvassing. Campaign professionals, for example, sometimes belittle this type of campaign, because it is associated with candidates who must watch their budget and therefore make unattractive customers. Local party officials often swear by it, but because they are in a tug-of-war with their national party for resources, local activists have an incentive to tout these activities.

In this chapter, we discuss the practical challenges of organizing a door-to-door campaign and review the results from more than three dozen experimental studies. The evidence leaves little doubt that door-to-door canvassing by campaign workers can increase turnout substantially, but the studies also show that mounting a canvassing campaign has its drawbacks. Successful campaigns require planning, motivated canvassers, and access to large numbers of residences. As you review the evidence, think about whether your campaign or organization has the ingredients for a successful and cost-efficient door-to-door campaign.

Organizing and Conducting a Door-to-Door Canvassing Campaign

Door-to-door canvassing encompasses a variety of activities that involve making direct contact with citizens. In partisan campaigns, for example, canvassing may be performed by candidates themselves, their campaign workers, or allied groups. Canvassers may both talk with voters and distribute literature, absentee ballot applications, lawn signs, or other campaign paraphernalia. On Election Day, canvassers may be equipped with cell phones to enable them to coordinate rides to the polls. Lastly,

canvassing should be thought of not only as a means of getting out votes but also as a vehicle for recruiting campaign volunteers and improving the public visibility of a campaign.

Canvassing on a scale sufficient to reach thousands of voters over the span of three or four weeks requires a great deal of planning and organization. But even a small-scale canvassing effort requires a fair amount of preparation. When planning, it is often helpful to break the canvassing operation into a set of discrete tasks: targeting, recruiting, scheduling, training, and supervising.

Targeting

As with any get-out-the-vote effort, canvassing begins with a target population, that is, a set of potential voters whom you think it worthwhile to mobilize. For instance, your target voters might be all registered Republicans who voted in the last general election or all registered Latinos or Christian conservatives. It is important to think about what you need to do to find your target group. Can you just canvass certain neighborhoods, or do you need to identify the specific individuals or households that fit your target?

If the latter, you will need to begin by creating or purchasing an accurate list of potential voters (see boxes 3-1, 3-2, and 3-3 on obtaining, updating, and refining lists). Ideally, your list should be accurate in two

Box 3-1. How to Get Lists

In most jurisdictions, lists of registered voters are accessible to the public and generally are available from local registrars, county clerks, and secretaries of state. The costs of these lists vary wildly across jurisdictions. You may pay \$5 or \$500. Depending on your needs and resources, you may also want to hire a private list vendor or work with a political party or organization that maintains lists. Lists of registered voters always contain addresses and sometimes contain other information that could be useful to a canvassing effort such as voter history (whether an individual has voted in the last one, two, or more elections), party registration, sex, and birth date. In some jurisdictions, these records also include phone number, although this information is often out of date. In states covered by the Voting Rights Act, registration lists indicate the race of each voter.

Box 3-2. Adding Extra Information to Lists

For a fee, list vendors usually can provide two additional pieces of information that can be useful to door-to-door campaigns: four-digit zip code extensions (which identify addresses in small clusters) and mail carrier route numbers (which can be used to create geographically compact walk lists). When requesting or purchasing any list, it is important to find out when it was last updated. Whenever possible, get the list in electronic form so that you can manipulate and update the data easily.

Box 3-3. Refining the List

There are three ways to pare down a list to include only the subgroup you would like to canvass. Information on a particular ethnic or socioeconomic sector of the voting population is available from the U.S. Census Bureau at its website: www.census.gov. Although you cannot get information about individual households, you can get information about census blocks, the smallest geographic area delineated by the census. This will allow you to determine, for instance, which neighborhoods in a particular district have a high concentration of, say, homeowners or Asians or people living below the poverty line. You can then pull the names of registrants from those neighborhoods for your canvassing effort or just canvass those neighborhoods in their entirety, if you have reason to believe that doing so would be efficient.

List vendors can also help with ethnic targeting, for a price. Private firms have name-matching software that allows them to pull names that tend to be associated with a particular ethnicity or nationality. A firm may be able to provide a list of registered voters in a given district whose last names are typically Latino or Chinese, for example. If all else fails, you can team up with ethnic or religious groups that maintain mailing lists of individuals who might serve as targets for your campaign. Since those lists do not indicate whether the individuals are registered, you will need to match them against the registration files.

Although the voter file does not say how a person voted, it often contains information about each person's party registration and record of voting in previous elections. Voting in closed primaries usually provides good clues about a person's partisan leanings. These clues can be useful when developing a targeted GOTV campaign.

ways. It should accurately reflect the pool of individuals you want to contact, and it should provide accurate contact information for those individuals. Maintaining an updated voter list is invaluable. You should enter the list into your computer and adjust it as information comes in. Suppose your candidate is running as a Democrat. Some people listed as Democrats may no longer consider themselves Democrats. Some people, when canvassed, may indicate that they do not support your candidate. If you have the capacity to recontact people after your initial canvass, you should take the time to update your list.

The task of meeting people at their doorstep poses a variety of challenges. How accessible are the people on your target list? There is no sense wasting time cursing locked security apartments. When are the residents likely to be home? If most registered voters in the neighborhood work, your canvassers will have to wait until evenings or weekends to make efficient use of their time.

If you plan to canvass in the evenings, consider the safety of your canvassers. By late October it may be getting dark before 7:00 p.m., and residents may react poorly to an evening visit from a stranger. You do not want to frighten or offend the potential voter you are trying to engage. You should instruct your canvassers to step back from the door after ringing the bell so that they seem less threatening to apprehensive residents. It is sometimes argued that people are more willing to open their door to female canvassers; it turns out, however, that the gender composition of a canvassing team is a poor predictor of the rate at which voters are contacted. Well-trained teams with two males, a male and a female, or two females tend, on average, to have about the same success in reaching voters.

Because there are so many contingencies, and so many details that can throw a wrench into your plans, it might make sense to prioritize your walk lists. This entails choosing the most essential neighborhoods and making sure that they get covered. You may want to get to them first, in order to ensure that they have been reached, or you may want to visit them right before the election, in order to ensure that your message is fresh in voters' minds on Election Day.

Recruiting Activists and Paid Volunteers

Unlike professional phone banks and direct mail, canvassing is almost entirely dependent on labor that, one way or another, you will have to

produce. High schools and colleges are good sources of labor, particularly when students know the neighborhoods in which they will be working. Other sources of labor include churches, civic groups, unions, and interest groups such as the Sierra Club or National Rifle Association.

There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to forging an alliance with a social or political group that supports your candidate or shares a common political goal with your campaign. Any organization that becomes an ally has its own agenda. By collaborating on a GOTV partnership, you may be tacitly endorsing your ally's politics, and the canvassers it supplies may have difficulty staying on message for you. In addition, if the partnership is seen as a personal favor, then a favor may be expected in return. The decision to collaborate may hinge on whether your ally will supply enough canvassing labor to make an alliance worthwhile.

Scheduling

The number of canvassers your campaign needs depends on how many contacts they will make per hour. This number may be difficult to predict. An experienced canvasser working in an area with accessible apartments or other densely packed housing may be able to speak with members of eight households per hour. This rate may drop by a factor of two when it is difficult, dangerous, or time-consuming to reach voters' doors. Splitting the difference, we assume for purposes of making some rough calculations that canvassers on average speak with voters at six households each hour.¹

Using your best guess about your canvassers and the conditions they are likely to face, use the rate of contact to calculate how many hours of labor you will need for the campaign. Simply divide the number of contacts desired by the average number of contacts per hour. The resulting quotient is the number of volunteer hours required. Then divide the number of total canvassing hours into the number of weeks over which the canvassing will take place to obtain an average number of canvassing hours per week. The number of available canvassing hours in a week varies from region to region, but most campaigns conduct their canvassing efforts from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. on weeknights and from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturdays. Sunday afternoon canvassing depends entirely on the region and population but seldom takes place outside the hours of 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Safety

Unlike more impersonal GOTV tactics, door-to-door canvassing can place volunteers at some personal risk. However, you can minimize risk and increase the effectiveness of the campaign in several ways. First, you can send canvassers out in pairs. Each canvasser should go to separate doors, but they can do this while remaining near enough to each other (by working opposite sides of the street or visiting alternating addresses) that they can see or hear if the other encounters a problem. Sending workers out in pairs has the added benefit of providing some assurance that the canvassers are actually doing what they are supposed to, especially if you pair trusted canvassers with newcomers.

Second, you should provide canvassers with maps of their assigned areas so they do not get lost. Third, you should provide canvassers with an emergency number so that they can call you in the event they encounter a problem. Each canvasser should be equipped with a cell phone. Fourth, whenever possible, you should assign canvassers to neighborhoods with which they are familiar. Not only are canvassers less likely to face a problem in a familiar neighborhood, but familiarity also should strengthen their personal connection to the voters—something that may prove beneficial in getting those who are contacted to vote. Fifth, you should give canvassers something to identify them as canvassers and not marauders (whom they may sometimes resemble). For example, it is helpful for canvassers to wear a campaign T-shirt or campaign button. They also can put a campaign bumper sticker on the back of their clipboard, so that residents see it when they peek out their door. Finally, you should require all canvassers to reconvene at a predetermined time and location so that you can count heads. Reconvening all canvassers at the conclusion of the shift also allows you to collect the walk lists and verify their work.

Weather sometimes presents safety and efficiency concerns of its own. Getting stuck in a downpour or an unexpected snow squall can leave canvassers demoralized, not to mention cold and wet. It is useful to discuss ahead of time the contingency plans that will go into effect in case of bad weather. In principle, poor weather presents a good opportunity for canvassing, since more people can be found at home, but the success of the operation hinges on whether canvassers have umbrellas and plastic sheets to protect their walk list.

Training

Door-to-door canvassing is a simple technique that anyone willing to knock on a stranger's door can be taught to do. Interestingly enough, experiments have shown that experienced canvassers tend to be only slightly more effective than newcomers. The power of canvassing stems from the personal connection that face-to-face communication provides. Training of volunteer canvassers does not need to be extensive. A half-hour session should include the following:

- ✓ An explanation of the purpose of the canvass,
- ✓ Precise instruction on what to say and do at each door,
- ✓ Division of volunteers into pairs and the assignment of a canvassing area to each pair,
- ✓ An opportunity for canvassers to practice the script with their partner, preferably under the supervision of someone who coaches them not to recite the script in a canned fashion,
- ✓ Distribution of all necessary materials, such as clipboards, walk lists, maps, and pens,
- ✓ Explanation of what information canvassers should record after visiting an address,
- ✓ At least one phone number to call in the event of an emergency, and
- ✓ Designation of a time and location at which all canvassers will meet up at the end of the shift.

The message given in door-to-door canvassing should be consistent with the message of the overall campaign. The written pitch provided to volunteers should be treated more as a rough guideline than as a script to be read verbatim (see box 3-4). As we show in the chapter on phone banks, an informal style of communicating with potential voters works best. Scripts are necessary to provide guidance and confidence for inexperienced personnel, but the goal is not to create an army of automatons mindlessly parroting the same words. Encourage canvassers to make their presentations in words that are compatible with their own informal speaking style. This will help them to convey their message in a manner that increases the listener's motivation to vote.

When done properly, canvassing opens a conversation with voters. Prepare your canvassers to field some basic questions that voters might

Box 3-4. Script of a Message Directed toward Latino Voters

A door-to-door campaign in Fresno, California, included some messages directed specifically toward Latino voters:

Hi. My name is [your name], and I'm a student at Fresno State. I want to talk to you a few minutes about the upcoming elections on Tuesday, November 5. [Canvassers were then asked to talk briefly about the following points]:

- ✓ Voting gives the Latino community a voice.
- ✓ Your vote helps your family and neighbors by increasing Latino political power.
- ✓ Voting tells politicians to pay attention to the Latino community.

Canvassers closed their conversation by asking voters whether they could be counted on to vote on Tuesday.

throw at them. The more comfortable canvassers feel conversing with voters, the better. In the context of a campaign in support of a candidate or an issue, canvassers may be asked to explain a candidate or interest group's position. Unless you have an unusually savvy group of canvassers, it is probably best to instruct them to invite voters to call campaign headquarters. To the extent that canvassers answer questions, they should focus on why they personally support the campaign.²

Supervising

Once the canvassers take to the streets, problems may range from bashfulness to drunkenness. Campaign managers have developed a number of tactics for monitoring the progress of canvassers, particularly those who are working for hourly wages. First, have them fill out the names of the people they meet at each door they visit. Since this report conceivably could be faked (claims to have contacted an unusually large number of people should raise a red flag), another useful tactic is to send canvassers out with lawn signs or placards advertising the campaign. The goal is to convince residents to plant the sign in their yard or put the

poster in their window; seeing who can plant the most signs can be a useful source of friendly competition among canvassers. This visible indicator of success makes it easy for a supervisor to see where canvassers have been and to gauge how they are doing.

Nowadays, cell phones are sufficiently cheap and plentiful to enable every canvasser to have one. Although it is unwise for their phones to be turned on—lest canvassers spend their day gabbing with friends—you should instruct them to call in at scheduled times and in case of trouble or questions. If canvassers depend on you for a ride to the canvassing area, cell phones can help you to coordinate pickup times and locations.

Payment for services is best done on a weekly rather than an on-the-spot basis. First, weekly payment schedules encourage canvassers to think of this activity as an ongoing commitment. Second, it gives you a chance to discuss their performance with them after a day on the job, while they are still thinking about the payment that they expect to receive in the future.

Finally, you must take responsibility for dealing with unexpected events. The most common problem, at least in some parts of the country, is bad weather. Along with clipboards containing maps and address lists, canvassers should carry plastic covers in case of rain. A backup supply of umbrellas will keep the canvassing campaign from dissolving in a downpour. Besides weather problems, you should expect to field an occasional follow-up call from a resident, building manager, or local politician wondering what your campaign is up to. Think of canvassing as a big walk through town, a meet-and-greet with thousands of strangers. The outcomes are generally positive, but anything can happen.

Experimental Research on Door-to-Door Canvassing

More than three dozen door-to-door canvassing experiments have been conducted since 1998. Although the nature and scope of these campaigns varied from place to place, they shared many common elements. Registered voters in targeted neighborhoods were placed randomly into treatment and control groups. Canvassers, who usually were paid volunteers working under the supervision of campaign staff, were put through roughly an hour of training, given a list of target names and addresses, and instructed to speak only to voters on their target list. The particular GOTV pitches used by the canvassers varied from experiment to experiment (we discuss these variations momentarily), but the communication

was designed to be informal and personal. In some cases, canvassers also distributed campaign material, voter guides, or information about polling locations.

The canvassing experiments can be grouped into four broad categories. The first encompasses nonpartisan canvassing efforts that were orchestrated by college professors. Such studies occurred in Dos Palos (a farm community in central California),³ Fresno,⁴ New Haven,⁵ South Bend,⁶ and Brownsville (a largely Latino city on the Texas and Mexico border).⁷ The second category includes door-to-door campaigns that were organized and conducted by nonpartisan groups such as Youth Vote⁸ and issue advocacy groups such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now),⁹ SCOPE (Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education),¹⁰ Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, and PIRG (Public Interest Research Group).¹¹ Researchers helped to randomize the walk lists used by these canvassers but otherwise played a minor role. This type of canvassing occurred in Boulder, Bridgeport, Columbus, Detroit,¹² Eugene,¹³ Minneapolis, Phoenix,¹⁴ Raleigh, and St. Paul, as well as in several California sites (Bakersfield, Colusa, Los Angeles, Orange County, Riverside, and San Bernardino).¹⁵ The third category includes precinct walking conducted by partisan campaigns. Here we have four studies: a 2002 GOTV effort funded by the Michigan Democratic Party,¹⁶ which targeted young voters in approximately a dozen assembly districts, a 2004 Election Day mobilization effort targeting several inner cities within battleground states,¹⁷ a 2005 GOTV campaign coordinated by the Young Democrats of America¹⁸ targeting voters under thirty-six years of age, and a Republican candidate for local election in Kentucky.¹⁹ The final category includes one instance in which candidates, rather than volunteers, canvassed voters. Kevin Arceneaux conducted an innovative study in the context of a 2004 New Mexico primary election.²⁰ Precincts were randomly assigned to three experimental groups: one to be walked by the candidate, one to be walked by campaign volunteers, and a control group.

As this list of sites makes apparent, these experiments were conducted in a wide array of political and demographic settings. The precincts canvassed in Detroit were largely African American, whereas canvassers in Columbus and Eugene rarely encountered nonwhites. Bridgeport, Brownsville, and Fresno contained large Latino populations, and the areas canvassed in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and St. Paul were multi-ethnic. The suburban areas of Raleigh and the rural precincts of Dos Palos stood in marked contrast to the urban environments of Detroit or

St. Paul. The political climate also varied across sites. Bridgeport, Columbus, and Dos Palos were canvassed amid uncompetitive municipal elections. Somewhat more competitive were elections in Minneapolis and New Haven, where at least some of the races featured credible challengers. By contrast, South Bend and Virginia were canvassed amid a hotly contested congressional campaign, which saw both parties engaging in door-to-door campaigning. Detroit, Raleigh, and St. Paul were also canvassed during the last two weeks of closely contested mayoral elections. When it comes to competitiveness, nothing tops the 2004 Election Day canvassing efforts in the inner cities of battleground states, which were visited repeatedly by Democrats and their allied organizations.

Lessons Learned

The lessons emerging from these studies are rated according to the system detailed in chapter 2: three stars are for findings that have received solid confirmation from several experiments, two stars are for more equivocal findings based on one or two experiments, and one star is for findings that are suggestive but not conclusive.

★★★ *Contacting eligible voters can be difficult.* If your campaign is trying to reach a target group that frequently changes address—young voters living off campus, for example—expect to reach roughly one in six of the people you are looking for on each pass through the neighborhood. Typically, higher-propensity voters (elderly voters, for example) have stable addresses and are easier to find at home, but don't expect to contact more than half of your targets. The Dos Palos study gives a sense of the maximum rate of contact that a GOTV campaign can expect to achieve. After combing the town for two weeks, making multiple attempts to contact each name on the target list, this campaign met up with three out of four voters it sought to target.

★★★ *When canvassers are able to reach voters, canvassing generates votes.* In thirty-six of forty-five experiments, canvassing was found to increase turnout. (The odds of obtaining such a lopsided distribution of experimental results purely by chance are less than one in 1,000.) Putting all of the evidence together suggests that, as a rule of thumb, one additional vote is produced for every fourteen people who are successfully contacted by canvassers.

★★★ *The effectiveness of canvassing varies depending on the type of election and type of voter.* The one-vote-per-fourteen-contacts rule is a good guide for most canvassing operations, but keep in mind that this figure assumes that the targeted voters would, in the absence of canvassing, turn out at a rate of around 50 percent. If you are trying to mobilize voters who would otherwise turn out at rates of 80 percent (for instance, regular voters in a presidential election) or 20 percent (infrequent voters in a municipal election), the rate of vote production drops to one vote for every nineteen contacts. As figure A-1 in appendix A illustrates, when canvassing very high- or very low-propensity voters, the number of contacts required to produce one vote increases.

Notice what this means for cost-efficient targeting of canvassing efforts. In a low-salience election, canvassing has the biggest impact on high-propensity voters, whereas in high-salience elections, canvassing has the biggest effect on low-propensity voters.²¹ A few words of caution are in order, however. If you are walking a precinct in a low-salience election, it may not pay to bypass a door simply because infrequent voters live there. You have already paid the setup cost of the canvassing operation; the extra costs of contacting infrequent voters might still pay off, particularly if you think your campaign is especially effective in reaching out to the infrequent voter. Remember, too, that cost-efficiency is not everything. If your group or campaign is dedicated to mobilizing infrequent voters, your task is challenging, but certainly not impossible.

★★★ *Canvassing is effective both in competitive and in uncompetitive electoral settings.* Experimenters found big canvassing effects in landslide elections in Bridgeport, where little was at stake and many candidates ran unopposed. Experiments also found large canvassing effects in the closely contested mayoral elections that were held in Detroit and St. Paul. It appears that canvassers can successfully motivate citizens to participate in the voting process even when the election seems to have few policy repercussions. The fact that canvassing attracts voters to the polls regardless of the stakes provides an important insight into how and why canvassing works. Canvassing evidently makes voters feel that the election matters and that their civic participation is valued.

★ *A GOTV canvassing effort may be less effective if conducted in areas that are being canvassed by other campaigns.* One caveat to the principle that canvassing can increase voter turnout in competitive races is that some races are so hot that your canvassing campaign duplicates the

efforts of others. This explanation may account for the failure of the non-partisan canvassing campaign in South Bend before the 2002 elections. Battling over a contested congressional seat, both parties apparently canvassed the same turf chosen by the nonpartisan campaign, which may have caused voters to become saturated with GOTV appeals. The burned-over turf problem may also explain the apparent failure of an Election Day canvassing effort in several inner cities during the 2004 election. The target sites in this experiment were all located in battleground states and therefore were saturated by months of canvassing by pro-Democratic campaigns. As a result, the treatment group may have received about as much canvassing as the control group.

★ *If possible, canvass close to Election Day.* Three experimental studies randomized the timing and frequency of canvassing attempts. The two largest studies found canvassing during the last week of the campaign to be more effective than canvassing earlier. The smallest of the three studies found no added value of an additional contact during the weekend before Election Day. This result is surprising because some of the most successful GOTV canvassing efforts begin with a voter ID campaign, during which voters are surveyed about their voting preferences, followed by a GOTV campaign targeting voters who earlier expressed sympathy for a given issue or candidate. The two larger studies seem to trump the smaller study, but more investigation of this question is needed because the financial stakes are quite high. The 2004 presidential contest saw enormous canvassing operations get under way as early as September; one wonders whether these efforts had a lasting impact on turnout or candidate preference.

★ *The messenger matters.* It remains unclear whether canvassers who “match” the ethnic profile of the neighborhood tend to have more success than those who do not. One canvassing campaign noteworthy for its ineffectiveness at mobilizing voters occurred in Raleigh, North Carolina, where black and white canvassers attempted to canvass a predominantly white suburban neighborhood. Some white residents refused to open their door to black canvassers. Two black canvassers were accosted by white residents and told to leave the neighborhood. A coincidental and concurrent canvassing effort by white supremacists seeking to deport Arabs raised residents’ general level of hostility to canvassers, and local police stopped and questioned some of the white canvassers, thinking they were part of the white supremacist effort.

Other studies provide mixed support for the notion that canvassers who ethnically match their targets have better success. In Dos Palos, a team of Latino Democratic canvassers were randomly assigned to canvass Anglo or Latino registered voters. The effects of canvassing were greater when these canvassers talked to Latino Democrats than to Latino non-Democrats or to non-Latinos. In contrast, the Fresno experiment in 2002, which involved both Latino and non-Latino canvassers and a target population of voters eighteen to twenty-five years of age, showed no consistent pattern. Obviously, it makes little sense to canvass in areas where language barriers disrupt communication, but the role of race and ethnicity *per se* remains unclear.

Putting ethnicity aside, there seems to be growing evidence that local canvassers are more effective than canvassers from outside the turf they are canvassing. Researchers studying a large-scale canvassing effort in Los Angeles found that canvassers working in the same zip code in which they live are significantly more effective in mobilizing voters than those canvassing outside their home turf.²² This finding may help to make sense of some of the variation in canvassing results across experiments. Groups who canvass close to their home base seem to be more effective, and when they spread out to other areas, their effectiveness diminishes. This hypothesis needs further testing, but the evidence as it stands suggests that local volunteers may be the key to conducting an especially effective canvassing effort.

★★ *The message does not seem to matter much.* Experimenters have tried many variations on the door-to-door canvassing theme. Canvassers have distributed voter guides, polling place information, and pens bearing a candidate's name. Canvassing scripts have emphasized neighborhood solidarity, ethnic solidarity, civic duty, and the closeness of the election. Sometimes the scripts have focused on the candidates, sometimes on the parties.²³ Although we cannot rule out the possibility that these variations in message and presentation make some difference, the effects seem to be so small that none of the studies was able to detect them reliably. And when we look across the dozens of canvassing experiments, the campaigns that were strictly nonpartisan were neither more nor less effective on average than the campaigns that organized around an issue or a candidate. We do not doubt—even without the benefit of experimental data!—that running door-to-door in a chicken suit or mentioning your support for outlandish political causes would undermine your

effectiveness, but within the range of reasonable behaviors, we do not see much evidence that what you communicate matters.

Although we have concluded that the message does not matter very much, the data do suggest that some tactics might bump up turnout by an additional percentage point. One tactic is to ask citizens whether they can be counted on to vote. Another is to provide citizens with the location of their polling place. These effects are small, and researchers cannot claim to have isolated them with any precision, but they seem worth incorporating into most canvassing campaigns. Asking people whether they can be counted on to vote is virtually costless. Locating polling places requires a bit of effort, but not a whole lot. In general, we find that canvassers feel more comfortable conversing with people if they have information to convey and campaign paraphernalia to distribute, so nuances like providing polling information and asking for a commitment to vote may increase the effectiveness of canvassing simply by changing the tenor and length of the conversation on the doorstep. Speculating a bit, the reason local canvassers are more effective may be that it is easier for them to develop rapport with voters.

★★ *Door-to-door canvassing allows a campaign to influence people incidentally and indirectly.* One attractive feature of knocking on doors is that it provides an opportunity to converse with multiple voters living at the same address. The canvasser first talks to the person who answers the door and then asks to speak to the targeted voter. Everyone is told the purpose of the visit: the importance of the upcoming election.

In part, elevated turnout rates among nontargeted people reflect the fact that canvassers give their GOTV message to everyone who comes to the door, but that is not the only thing that is going on. Using a clever experiment, David Nickerson demonstrated that voters living at the same address also mobilize one another.²⁴ Nickerson led a canvassing effort that knocked on doors and gave a message only to the person who answered the door. Half of the messages were get-out-the-vote appeals; the other half, reminders to recycle. No messages were delivered to others in the household, yet other registered voters in households receiving the GOTV appeal voted at higher rates. Evidently, those who received the GOTV message communicated something about the upcoming election to others in their household. In light of this experiment and other evidence suggesting that canvassing affects both the intended targets and other voters in the household, the usual one-for-fourteen rule probably

understates the effectiveness of door-to-door canvassing because about 60 percent of the direct impact of canvassing appears to be transmitted to voters' housemates.

All in all, we see strong evidence that canvassing generates votes. Canvassing seems particularly effective when aimed at frequent voters who otherwise might skip a low-turnout election. Extra bells and whistles, such as providing polling place information or inviting people to make a verbal commitment to vote, may enhance slightly the effectiveness of door-to-door campaigns, although this conclusion remains tentative. Finally, canvassing campaigns seem to encourage people to talk about the upcoming election with their housemates, thereby extending the influence of a canvassing campaign beyond those who are contacted directly.

Cost-Effectiveness

When you are evaluating the costs and benefits of canvassing, here are a few things to keep in mind. First, canvassing involves start-up costs. It takes time to plot out walking routes. If you intend to target specific individuals (as opposed to conducting a blanket GOTV campaign of all the residents living on certain streets), you need to obtain a voter registration list. You may want to hire a supervisor to recruit and coordinate canvassers. You may wish to send out your team of canvassers wearing the campaign's T-shirts and armed with maps, clipboards, printed material, buttons, or refrigerator magnets, all of which require some up-front investment. High-tech walking campaigns nowadays use small handheld computers to record and transmit data about every canvassing target.

Second, what counts as a "benefit" depends on your goals. The accounting we perform in this section considers only one goal: getting out votes. Using canvassers to persuade voters to vote in a certain way may generate extra benefits as well. Indeed, canvassing potentially provides all sorts of collateral benefits: canvassers receive useful feedback from voters about issues and candidates; the lawn signs and campaign buttons that canvassers distribute may help to publicize the campaign and communicate its message; canvassers can help to clean up an outdated target list of voters, weeding out the names of people who have moved; as canvassers go door-to-door, they can register new voters; and, by conversing with people about the campaign, canvassers can help to create databases of residents who are sympathetic to a given candidate and therefore warrant special GOTV efforts on Election Day. We have

not attempted to quantify these extra returns to canvassing. The cost-benefit analysis that follows is admittedly narrow in focus.

The number of votes produced per dollar is a function of labor costs, the number of people contacted per hour, and the effectiveness with which a canvasser mobilizes the people contacted. According to Susan Burnside, a consultant who specializes in canvassing campaigns, the usual wage rate for canvassers varies from \$10 to \$16. In order to err on the side of caution, let's assume \$16. If your canvasser speaks with voters at six households per hour, and each household contains an average of 1.5 voters, you are in effect getting six direct contacts and three indirect contacts per hour. Applying the one-for-fourteen rule for the direct contacts and Nickerson's one-for-twenty-three rule for the indirect contacts implies that it takes \$29 worth of labor to produce one additional vote. You may cut labor costs dramatically by convincing a team of canvassers to work all afternoon in exchange for a dinner of pizza and beer (depending on how much they eat and drink). Similarly, an unusually energetic and persuasive group of canvassers may increase the number of voters per dollar, just as a hard-to-canvass neighborhood may decrease it. Nevertheless, training, supervision, and infrastructure drive costs up, so your campaign might encounter substantially higher costs per vote.

If you are canvassing by yourself or are using unpaid volunteers, you may find it helpful to look at the efficiency problem in terms of the number of hours required to produce one vote. Contacting six households per hour produces one additional vote every 107 minutes. Generating a serious number of votes requires a serious investment of canvassing hours.

Assessment and Conclusions

When we first began our experimental studies of voter turnout in 1998, we were eager to assess the effects of door-to-door canvassing. This campaign tactic has an almost mythic reputation. Talk to any veteran of local politics and you will hear a story about an overmatched challenger who used door-to-door canvassing to upset a complacent incumbent. Even campaign professionals who recognize the difficulty of mounting a canvassing campaign nonetheless advise, "If your program is well targeted, going door-to-door is the surest way to win votes."²⁵ We were at the time skeptical that a conversation at one's doorstep with a stranger would be sufficient to raise voters' probability of going to the polls. Our first experiment showed canvassing to have a surprisingly powerful effect.

Now that dozens of experiments have weighed in on the effects of canvassing, there no longer is any doubt that face-to-face contact with voters raises turnout.

Although canvassing has received a great deal of experimental attention, much remains to be learned. Just one study has attempted to measure the effects of candidates themselves going door-to-door. The effects were positive, but this study was unable to tell whether a local candidate, who in this case canvassed only a handful of precincts, was more effective at the door than her volunteers. Given the many demands on a candidate's time and the inherent constraints on how many households can be visited, it seems strange that the payoff from a candidate's door-knocking efforts has so seldom been the subject of experimental inquiry. Also uncertain are the benefits of multiple visits with voters and the optimal timing of those visits. These questions, which are of enormous practical importance to campaigns, can only be answered by means of a very large-scale experiment. Finally, there remains the unsettled question of whether certain kinds of canvassers are more effective than others. One persistent question about the 2004 presidential election is whether Republican canvassers were unusually effective because they were often drawn from the local community. Existing experimental evidence is suggestive but not definitive; a large-scale study is needed to gauge the relative effectiveness of canvassers drawn from inside and outside the targeted area.

Eventually, experiments will provide a more comprehensive and detailed account of which kinds of canvassing tactics do the best job of mobilizing voters. But even when best practices become clear, contacting voters at their doorstep will still present practical challenges. Precinct walking can be difficult and even dangerous. Anyone who has butted heads with managers of security apartments knows that some neighborhoods are inaccessible to political campaigns, notwithstanding court decisions that distinguish canvassing from commercial solicitation. Rural areas are often more hospitable, but the distance between houses undercuts the campaign's cost-efficiency.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is bringing a door-to-door campaign "to scale." It is one thing to canvass 3,600 voters; quite another to canvass 36,000 or 360,000. It is rare for a campaign to inspire (or hire) a work force sufficient to canvass a significant portion of a U.S. congressional district. A million dollars is not a particularly large sum by the standards of federal elections; media campaigns gobble up this amount in the production and distribution of a single ad. But a million dollars will hire an

army of canvassers for GOTV work during the final weeks of a campaign. Even if your campaign wins only your canvassers' affections and no one else's, the number of votes produced would be considerable. The massive ground efforts by the political parties and allied organizations during the 2004 presidential elections represent an important turning point insofar as they demonstrated that large-scale precinct work is possible. If present trends continue, the parties will be competing to make their large-scale recruitment, training, and deployment efforts more efficient and effective.

The demonstrated effects of door-to-door canvassing suggest that other face-to-face tactics may stimulate voter turnout: shaking hands at a local supermarket, meeting voters at house parties, conversing with congregants at a church bingo night. We do not have direct evidence about the effectiveness of these time-honored campaign tactics, but they share much in common with conversations on a voter's doorstep. Face-to-face interaction makes politics come to life and helps voters to establish a personal connection with the electoral process. The canvasser's willingness to devote time and energy signals the importance of participation in the electoral process. Many nonvoters need just a nudge to motivate them to vote. A personal invitation sometimes makes all the difference.