

DEEP CANVASSING PRIMER

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ONE PAGE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROBLEM

Civic engagement is at a historic low and numerous policy fights remain at a stalemate. When organizations rely on tactics that generate only small or short-term impacts, they fail to change the underlying drivers of turnout and support, such as prejudice or disempowerment.

A NEW SOLUTION: DEEP CANVASSING

Rigorous experiments show that a tool for communicating with voters called deep canvassing may generate larger and longer-lasting impacts on voters' core attitudes than other methods.

WHAT ARE DEEP CANVASSES?

Candid two-way conversations where canvassers ask voters to share voters' own relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud.

WHY DOES DEEP CANVASSING WORK?

Voters who share relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud often realize for themselves that these experiences conflict with the underlying assumptions that animate their opinions and behaviors, leading them to change these assumptions. To elicit such experiences and encourage such reflection, canvassers:

- *Non-judgmentally solicit voters' views.* Make voters feel comfortable stating their views.
- *Listen actively.* Ask follow-up questions about voters' experiences to solicit details.
- *Model vulnerability.* Canvassers may tell their stories to facilitate voters sharing theirs.
- *Connect on values.* Canvassers and voters develop a connection based on experiences that reinforce an important value relevant to the issue.

WHY INVEST IN DEEP CANVASSING?

- *Voters are saturated with impersonal tactics.* Organizations barrage voters with one-way communication that tells them how to think. A deep canvass may be the first time a voter has a two-way conversation, which psychology research indicates may be more effective.
- *It can be cost effective.* Results from one program show only 25% lower contact volume than conventional canvassing. However, size and duration of impact can be much greater.
- *It can have lasting effects on voters.* Today's efforts can pay dividends into the future.
- *It can build infrastructure.* The skills and team a program builds can last across multiple election or issue campaigns.

HOW IS DEEP CANVASSING DIFFERENT? A COMPARISON OF APPROACHES

<u>Conventional Canvass</u>	<u>High-Quality Canvass</u>	<u>Deep Canvass</u>
• Canvasser hurriedly reads a script. • Canvasser delivers a "message." • Usually under 30 sec. • Canvassers tell voters what to think.	• Voter talks, but canvasser talks more. • Canvasser delivers a "message." • Usually under 2 min. • Canvassers tell voters what to think.	• Voter does more talking than canvasser. • Voter candidly describes personal experiences. • Average 10 min. • Voters draw own conclusions.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

WHEN IS IT STRATEGIC TO USE DEEP CANVASSING?

Deep canvass is a tactic that can be used to break through to voters in a challenging landscape, such as when confronting a controversial topic, a polarized issue, or a saturated communications environment. The following pages provide information for practitioners who are interested in employing this tactic.

CASE STUDY: TRANSGENDER NON-DISCRIMINATION

The Leadership LAB at the Los Angeles LGBT Center has developed a deep canvass proven to reduce prejudice against transgender people. In the canvass conversations, canvassers ask voters to share their experiences with a) LGBT people and b) personally facing negative judgment. In sharing these stories and answering probing questions about them, voters often remember critical moments when they found judgment hurtful; then they realize that they would rather support transgender people than judge them, too. Canvassers did not need to be trans themselves for the conversations to be successful; nor did the voters need to have any experience of a trans person. Rigorous research found that over 70% of voters who opened their doors had the full conversation, and that roughly 1 in 10 of these changed their mind as a result.¹

HOW DEEP CANVASSING SCALES

A successful volunteer model or a robust paid model can both scale deep canvassing. The mentors listed at the bottom of the document are glad to give advice on scaling either form of program.

The key to scaling deep canvass is giving experienced canvassers leadership roles so that they can train and recruit others. In our experience, strong organizers can stimulate and maintain canvasser interest in deep canvassing. These real human interactions prove addictive; volunteers and staff reliably return to canvass again. A key component of scaling is having the canvassers be part of the program development and have ownership of the outcome of the program. Examples of this include:

- Leadership roles
- Script writing
- Training updates
- Data analyses
- Material development
- Coaches and trainers for the canvasses

Deep canvassing can also scale in a cost-effective manner. Practitioners and funders are keen to maximize return on investment. They should remember that the large and lasting effects of deep canvassing mean that it has the potential to be cheaper “per changed mind” or “per vote” than tactics that are cheaper to deploy per voter but have smaller impacts that do not last as long. For example, if a GOTV mail program costs \$2 per voter to deploy but has an impact of 0.5 percentage points, its cost per vote is \$400; a deep canvass with an effect of even 5 percentage points is twice as cost effective per new vote even if it costs \$10 per contact.

HOW TO START A DEEP CANVASS PROGRAM

¹ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.aad9713>

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1. **Begin early.** Significant investment in training leaders, canvassers, and a persuasion approach is needed months in advance. Early investment allows for development of a) a robust conversational approach, including script and training iteration b) canvasser skills, and c) a sufficiently large canvass leadership team.
2. **Recruit a team of organizers that make canvasser recruitment, leadership development, and canvassing competency their highest and ideally only priority.**
3. **Go see it and do it.** Contact an organization that is currently doing deep canvassing and ask if you and your team can come for the full experience; that includes going through training and then going out and having conversations with voters, not just observing. (See end of document for experienced practitioners.) In our experience this is absolutely essential.
4. **Write a first draft script with your team.** Take ideas from other deep canvass scripts, especially ideas that make it easier to build rapport and uncover concerns. Brainstorm the real lived experiences you want canvassers and voters to remember, think about and share; and list questions that could elicit those stories.
5. **Try it out.**
 - a. *Do it for real.* Do a test canvass where you run the training and every aspect of the canvass the way you would for real. Running 1-2 test canvasses allows your team to improve your script and your training before you take out a larger group.
 - b. *Video.* Either recruit videographers or prepare your canvassers to film each other so that you have video footage of actual conversations to review. Video of canvasses substantially speeds the iterative learning process.
 - c. *Everyone canvasses, even you.* The thinkers behind a project need to do it in order to be competent in evaluating the quality of the interactions and to refine the recipe; and the doers need to think both because it speeds the iterative learning process and because the up-and-coming leaders will increasingly feel invested.
6. **Revise, try again, and continue talking with others doing deep canvassing.** This is the easiest to describe but takes the most time.
7. **Have your program independently measured.** Developing a deep canvass approach is a process. Independent quantitative measurement allows you to rigorously learn how far along the learning curve you are: have you developed a successful approach, or do you need to go back to the drawing board? In our experience, many encouraging anecdotes may give the impression a deep canvass program is working even when it is not. For an example of an experimental design ideal for measuring deep canvassing, analysts can see Broockman et al. (2016).² Typically, a minimum of 400 conversations is required for a persuasion experiment, although this depends on program details.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The Leadership LAB at the Los Angeles LGBT Center developed this approach when canvassing on same-sex marriage in Los Angeles in the wake of the loss on Prop 8. In pioneering this tactic, they drew on a long history of deep conversations in community and labor organizing; deep canvass extends many relational organizing principles to voter contact. Through visiting

² http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2742869

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canvasses and mentorship, other organizations have since learned from the Leadership LAB, and each other, about how to adopt this model to a variety of issues and topics.

Although the key psychological ingredients that underpin deep canvass are still being researched, the following psychology theories may be responsible for why deep canvassing works:

- *Self-persuasion.* Persuasion is more effective when people change their own minds instead of being told what to think.
- *Active processing.* Deep canvassers ask voters questions that cause them to expend “mental calories” and think deeply about a topic. Theories of active processing suggest conclusions people reach while thinking deeply produce larger and more enduring changes to their attitudes.
- *Analogic perspective-taking.* For prejudice reduction, deep canvasses ask voters to reflect on experiences that allow them to understand the perspective of groups against whom they feel prejudice.
- *Cognitive dissonance.* When people state one opinion and then describe their own real, lived experiences that reflect a different view, they may feel the need to resolve this dissonance by changing the opinion they first offered.

BEST PRACTICES

The hardest task in a deep canvass conversation is earning the voters’ candor. Canvassers’ ability to make voters feel comfortable sharing meaningful stories from their lives is a skill that must be learned. Previous deep canvasses have used the following tactics to elicit voters’ candor and emotionally significant stories:

- *Train canvassers in active listening.* To earn candor, training before every canvass needs to help canvassers understand and practice non-judgmental active listening.
- *Consider showing video depicting both sides.* In some programs, canvassers show each voter a short video depicting spokespeople and arguments on both sides of an issue and then ask voters for their unvarnished reactions.
- *Ask non-judgmentally for voters’ existing views.* If voters are not asked to share their existing views, voters may not acknowledge their real feelings. Asking the voter to place their opinion on a 0-10 rating scale at the beginning of the conversation and after the video clip is a common tactic. The reason the scale goes from 0-10 is so that voters who are predisposed to say they agree or disagree can telegraph even a small amount of ambivalence and show that they may see something valid in both sides of an issue.
- *Canvassers tell stories to model vulnerability.* Canvassers often tell their own stories to make voters feel more comfortable sharing theirs. However, a common misconception is that canvassers telling their stories is the primary ingredient in deep canvass. Rather, the primary purpose of canvassers sharing stories is to build rapport with the voter and make the voter comfortable describing their experiences. Story sharing is one way canvassers build a safe space in the conversation for voters to remember, share and reflect on their stories, even stories they rarely tell others or speak aloud.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

As we write this primer, in April 2016, deep canvassing remains in its infancy. This document should therefore be viewed primarily as defining a tactic as it is currently practiced, not indicating that all of these practices are proven effective. Remaining questions include:

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- What is the ROI of these deep components over a “high quality” canvass and/or a “conventional” canvass?
- For which issues will deep canvassing be particularly effective, and for which will it be less helpful?
- Can a deep canvass move people to action beyond opinion change?
- Can these principles be successfully deployed over the phone?
- How important are each of the best practices described above?

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

Sign up for news about deep canvassing [here](#).

The individuals below have helped run a deep canvass program, have contributed to the thinking included in this document, and are glad to discuss their experiences:

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