

Canvassing is not organizing

Ray Valentine

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If, like me, you have decided to spend a lot of time in leftist milieus or you encounter highly politicized people online, you have probably heard a lot of talk about canvassing and phone banking over the past few months. As the Democratic presidential primary nears its climax, thousands of volunteers are out knocking doors or making phone calls or sending texts to encourage voters to support their preferred candidates. Friends of mine are making “Bernie Journeys,” trekking to Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina to evangelize for the political revolution, lovingly documenting their canvassing experiences on social media and even fundraising to cover the cost of their trips. Even more people are knocking doors closer to home, and some dedicated democracy enthusiasts are even working to support candidates for local office.

Since I am a contributor to Organizing Work, you will probably not be surprised that I am pessimistic about the prospects for achieving significant social change at the ballot box. My less sectarian friends have tried to persuade me to look for a positive side to the left’s enthusiasm for Bernie Sanders and other candidates. They argue that whether these campaigns win or not, and whether or not left-wing elected officials are able to pass progressive reforms through America’s dysfunctional political system, they help build a movement. As Chris Maisano writes in *Jacobin*, Sanders’ “army” of staffers and volunteers “will not forget what they learned when the campaign comes to an end, and the relationships they establish now will likely feed into future organizing efforts both inside and outside the electoral arena.”

But what if that army were better off forgetting the lessons of the campaign trail? Election campaigns are built on particular forms of activity, which I do not think are usually relevant in other contexts. Sure, all things considered, it is better for leftists to get out from behind their various screens and learn to hold eye contact long enough to have a three-minute conversation with a stranger. But volunteer canvassers on political campaigns learn skills and expectations that they have to unlearn to be effective organizers in their workplace or apartment building.

I have volunteered for plenty of candidates, and I will almost certainly do so again, if only to wipe the obnoxious dead-eyed smirk off my city councilman’s face. I have seen how these things work and how they differ from what I have needed to do organizing tenant associations and workplace committees. Canvassing and phone banking requires you to give a fairly short, scripted sales pitch as quickly as possible to a huge number of people you will most likely never see again. Quantity of interactions is usually prioritized over quality. It’s a low percentage game, and canvassers are trained to move along quickly to the next person, especially if a respondent

isn't receptive to the message of the campaign. You need to cover your turf, and getting into an argument with any given voter just isn't worth your time: if someone supports the other guy, you wish them well and move on to greener pastures. From the perspective of a campaign, one vote is as good as any other. Meanwhile, canvassers and phone bankers are relatively interchangeable, and it's easy to show up intermittently for an afternoon of outreach without having to give your life to the struggle.

An organizing conversation is very different from canvassing. It's mostly about asking questions and listening to the answers, being totally present in the conversation, picking up small cues and going deep. Unlike a canvasser, an organizer needs to keep going back to the same people and build up a working relationship with them over the long run. An organizer at a job or an apartment building or some other bounded constituency can't always just move on. To win a majority of people over, you need to identify and convince existing social leaders who influence the people around them and can be a massive obstacle if they oppose you. That means shying away from conflict and disagreement is impossible. When those leaders are resistant to being organized, the organizer needs to confront their objections head-on, get real, and try to persuade them no matter what. An organizer depends on building close relationships with a particular set of individuals, because organizing means asking people to make sacrifices and take huge risks — with their jobs, their livelihoods, their homes — which you can only do once you have won their trust.

The nature of canvassing matches the incentives that exist in electoral contests, and I don't think campaigning could be improved by grafting on organizers' techniques. Social science research suggests that virtually all forms of campaigning, from ads to direct mail to direct door-to-door outreach, are mostly ineffective at changing voters' minds. Almost all voters are strongly partisan, and vote on the basis of deep-seated identification with a political coalition. The real value of campaigns is in turnout: activating the voters who are already predisposed to support your candidate, who you can usually identify on the basis of some demographic markers. Given the scale of the electorate and the short lifespan of a political campaign, it doesn't make sense to invest limited resources in the dubious proposition of changing voters' minds.

Canvassers get accustomed to having short, semi-scripted conversations with strangers, most of whom are non-committal but polite. Most people don't like to start fights with strangers, and regular voters tend to view volunteering for campaigns as an admirable thing to do, so interactions on the doors tend to be pleasant, unchallenging experiences. Volunteers virtually never return to the people they have canvassed, so they never really have to see whether their efforts to persuade people worked or not. Organizing is different: to organize you *need* to know where people stand. Organizing requires you to pierce the veil of social graces, to “stop being polite and start getting real.” If you take collective action at work, you're putting your livelihood on the line and the only meaningful protection you have is the support of your coworkers, so you better know for sure who you can count on. A polite, non-committal “yes” is worse than useless when you're trying to count how many people are going to march on the boss.

In my experience, people with a lot of election campaign experience show up to organizing with an expectation that things will work the same way. They are uncomfortable (understandably!) with digging deep into strangers' hopes and fears, being vulnerable, and really pushing people. When they have to work with people over the long run and experience the extreme difficulty of moving people to action, they get discouraged, especially when they realize that early, shallow interactions don't do much to move the needle.

Leftists might be better off unlearning the lessons of electoral work, because these encourage habits of mind that are a real obstacle to organizing. When left-wing activist groups want to try their hand at “base building,” they tend to gravitate towards doing things that resemble electoral campaigns, like gathering petition signatures through not-very-narrowly targeted canvassing or outreach in public places. Investing in meaningful organization that can exercise real social power within a particular social or economic institution (e.g. by workers who share a workplace and collectively manage that production) is much less common, and I’m not sure that the former leads to the latter on any kind of straightforward path. The techniques of political campaigns are designed for a particular purpose, and that purpose is not organizing the working class to wrest control of social institutions and emancipate itself.

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Ray Valentine argues that the skills built in canvassing for an electoral candidate do not translate to organizing workplaces or tenants

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