

Beginner's Guide to Canvassing (Streetwalking!)



By EricS

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I'm a beginner at canvassing, but I've found it to be much better than being miserable at home and ranting to my friends. Actually doing something makes me feel much better about politics!

So here are some hints from a couple of times walking suburban streets for my candidate. I hope they'll be useful, and **I hope that you will contribute your own hints**. Those of you who are canvassing for the first time this weekend, or who have experience, please add a few notes to this list. I'll update in a day or so.

Let's all get out there, and let's all be effective! So look at the "lessons learned" below the fold!

Preparing in the office:

* You may want to canvass individually; it may be less intimidating to voters than a pair of people, and you'll cover more ground. But go in pairs if it makes you more comfortable and friendlier. A number of responses below have suggested leapfrogging down the street, or walking opposite sides of the street. It gives you company, and it also may make the effort seem more professional and legitimate to the voters.

* Before you leave the office, use a map to divide up the streets among the people who will be walking, and be sure that all of the street names appear on the map. It's much easier to find street names when you're in the office and can zoom in with Mapquest or Google maps ("hybrid"), than when you're broiling under the sun on a sidewalk. And it's frustrating to waste time walking long distances to get to the next street you're responsible for. Therefore, before you leave the office, group the streets into tight geographic clusters! (And be aware that winding streets sometimes indicate steep hills; ask at the office to find someone who knows the area, or spend a few minutes driving at the site to find out for yourself.) Plan where you're going to drop people off.

* Everyone should get everyone else's cell phone number. Agree on a time to stop, and call the person with the car to be picked up. That avoids wasting time walking back to a pickup point.

Each walker should bring along (in a shoulder bag, probably):

* Water

* Food bar

* Cell phone

* Clipboard

* "Walking lists" naming the Democratic and Independent voters and their addresses; there's little point in arguing with Republican voters. (Some campaign software displays the even and odd street numbers on separate pages or in separate sections on one page. Walk even and odd concurrently, to avoid having to walk the street twice.)

* Maps showing all of the street names (some maps don't do that!)

* A guide to your candidate's positions

* Campaign handout literature, including specialized literature (e.g., for members of the military)

* Voter registration forms

* A couple of pens

* A bag of inexpensive clothespins to attach literature to mailboxes (see below)

On walking:

* **This is supposed to be FUN!** (And it IS fun, after you get over your initial nervousness.)

* You will be stunned at the number of people who don't know they live in your candidate's district, who don't know anything at all about politics, and who don't know when the election is. And the excuse that "all politicians are corrupt" is a typical one; prepare an answer ahead of time.

* Wear comfortable shoes; avoid blisters.

* Bring water; think about sun protection.

* When you look at the walking list, notice how many voters are in the house and their ages. (Are the parents not listed because they're Republican, and the kid is a Democrat? Is the wife unlisted because she's a Republican, and the husband is listed because he's a Democrat?)

* Don't bother people who have "no solicitors" signs on their door. Technically, you're not soliciting and the sign doesn't apply to you, but why irritate voters? Just leave the literature.

* If there's a Scary Dog, maybe it's better to mark "not home" on your walking list.

* Notice the environment. Children's toys? Fancy car? Environmental license plate? Gardener? Hunter? Disabled? Bumper stickers? Veteran? Army/Navy/Air

Force flag or decal? Union? Rainbow flag? Realtor lock box? And notice the voter's age; it's probably on the walking sheet. (Before you go walking, think about how you'll break the ice with each of these types of people.)

- * Don't trample the nice, neat lawn to reach the door; use the path.
- * Stand back from the door (one comment, below, suggests you also turn sideways) after you ring the doorbell; don't be intimidating; smile! Your eyes must be visible to the people you're speaking to. Remove sunglasses before you ring a doorbell.
- * Verify the voter's name. (Just greet them by first name, or ask for the voter; they'll tell you if you've made a mistake. No need to get formal about it.)
- * If the person is clearly busy (in bathrobe, holding toothbrush, phone ringing, kids and spouse screaming, teapot whistling, dog barking), apologize profusely for interrupting (you're a decent neighbor, not a paid goon), hand over the literature, be friendly, and consider backing out. (Mark "not home" on your walking list.)
- * Use the questions in the script, and be sure to listen to the voter.
- * If you don't know your candidate's position when the voter asks a question, don't make up an answer! Write down the question, and say that someone from the campaign will call with the answer. (This is a good opportunity to increase the number of contacts with the voter.) Also refer the voter to the candidate's web site.
- * Don't be embarrassed if you're not from the candidate's district, but think about your response if you're asked where you live. The fact that the candidate's votes affect you negatively, as do Republican majorities, may be something you want to incorporate into your answer. Be honest, as always.
- * Canvassing is not the time for a full-bore one-way rant. Find out what matters to the voters, find common ground, then gently lead where you want to go; there's no need to charge in with an abrupt argument. And you may want to make a note on the walk sheet if a voter has a strong position (e.g., on Choice or Iraq); that will help subsequent canvassers or callers. But remember, the KEY idea is to quickly nudge uncommitted voters in your candidate's direction, and to get your candidate's voters to the polls. Don't spend 20 minutes in a foam-flecked fight with a dyed-in-the-wool right-wing Ranting Rethuglican and her crazed mini-dog; you won't convince the voter, you'll lose time, you'll get bitten, and you'll make yourself so irritable and miserable that you'll snap at the next voter you encounter. **This is supposed to be fun!**
- * Your personal recommendation and your optimistic enthusiasm carry surprising weight. If you've met the candidate, briefly say so and say why you like him or her. If you're optimistic, then a discouraged Democrat who wasn't going to vote or

donate "because it's hopeless" may suddenly feel a breath of life! Gee, he's not alone any more, and we're going to win! (Doesn't that feel great?)

* Ask if there are new voters who just turned 18 or anyone else who wants to register.

* If the voters are enthusiastic, ask if it's OK if the campaign contacts them for volunteering, yard sign, whatever. Make volunteering sound like fun! (it is, isn't it?) If they're interested, mark it down on the walking list.

* If there's no one home, leave the walk literature with your candidate's name face up on the doorsill, possibly with an edge pushed under the door so the wind won't blow it away. Do NOT put it in a mailbox; most people think that's illegal, although one of the comments below says it no longer is. Instead, use a clothespin to attach the flyer to the outside of the mailbox, if possible. The recipient won't have to bend down to get it.

On marking the walking lists:

* If there are two voters at the same address, and you only meet one, mark the other "not home" on your walking list unless the voter you meet tells you how the other will vote. In that case, make the appropriate note on the list.

* If the voter has moved, mark "moved" and try to find out if the new resident is a Democrat or is for your candidate. If so, try to get his or her name and write it on the walking list, ask about registration, and welcome the family to the area.

* If there's a lockbox on the door, write a note on the walking list. The person hasn't moved yet, and may not move before elections, so don't mark "moved" unless the house is empty. If the house isn't empty but no one answers, mark "not home."

* If you can't find the house, or it's inaccessible, behind a gate, etc., make a note on the walking list.

* The following are all "not home": If the voter isn't in, or there's a "no solicitors" sign; If the voter's kid is there and takes the literature; If some friend or relative takes the literature; If you meet a Republican spouse (Try to give him or her the literature and include the flyer for Republicans, if you have it.); If the voter grabs the literature, but immediately closes the door because chaos is breaking loose in the house and there's no time to talk.

* AND, when you return to the office, go over the list to be sure your scribbling is legible before you turn it over the campaign staff!

(updated slightly; thanks for everyone's comments!)