

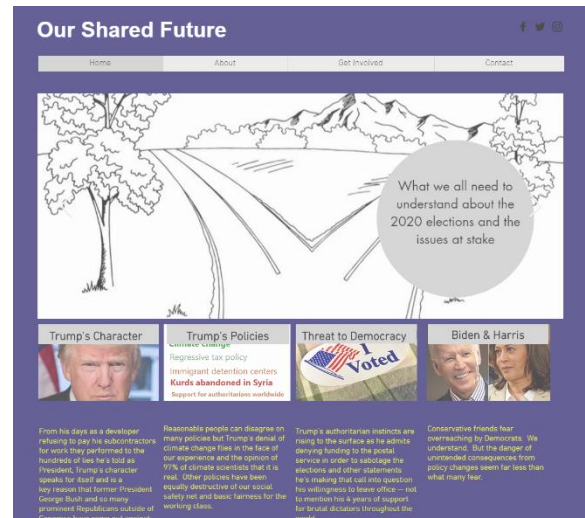
Our Shared Future: A Relational Organizing Model

The Goal: Win the 2020 Elections AND Strengthen Our Civic Fabric for the Future

Tom Pollak (Sept. 3, 2020)

Relational Organizing

In the definitive account of Obama's 2008 campaign, *Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America*, the authors describe relational organizing: "[The field organizer] did not just spend his time knocking anonymously on doors in Waukon; he sought to get to know the people living in those homes by 'sharing his story and having the voters share theirs' in order to understand each other's 'struggles and hardships.' **By getting to know people as human beings, and valuing their whole person, staff and volunteers sought to create a new source of motivation and capacity.** Staff, volunteers, and voters told us that they took action with the campaign not only because they supported Obama, but also because they supported each other."



Relational Remote Canvassing:

Diverse Contacts from the Same Volunteer

How can we translate this approach to 2020 when the vast majority of organizing will occur remotely? We can draw practical lessons on how to do this from "mixed-mode surveys" and civic lessons, too, from psychology and political philosophy. Mixed mode surveys typically include a number of communication modes. A survey of individuals or households, for example, might start with a letter to the participant, then include a number of attempts to reach the participant by phone or, if budgets permit, by visiting them at their homes. They have proven over decades to be the most effective way to improve response rates when social scientists conduct surveys – a goal similar to the campaign's goal of maximizing the number of people we reach.

Why?

Short-term: Win the Election. My hope is that this approach will be equally or more effective than traditional strategies for two reasons:

- Strong Democrats are more likely to volunteer to engage undecided voters because this approach feels like an authentic extension of the relationships they try to build with friends, neighbors or other people who cross their path. For shy introverts, it may reflect how they would like to relate to "strangers" (fellow community members) and provide an opportunity to learn how to do so.
- Undecided voters are more likely to be persuaded to vote for Biden and Democrats. (More below.)

Long-term: Strengthening our civic fabric, social capital, and sense of collective efficacy and trust. At a deeper level and for the ongoing success of the Biden Administration and American democracy, citizens need to feel a greater sense of “civic friendship.”¹ We need to trigger that feeling of being part of the same community, of civic fellowship and interdependence, of having a shared future. As Martin Luther King put it, “We must learn to live [and work] together as brothers [and sisters] or we shall perish together as fools.” This approach will teach a growing number of people the skills they need to connect with people across class, race, and ideology to build those civic friendships and sense of interdependence.

How? Be Patient, Kind, and Gentle – but Persistent and Creative

The proposed process would include phone calls, text messages, emails and hand-written postcards or letters:

- If we know the undecided voter’s cell phone number, we **start by sending a text message** like the one in the below.
- Try to call. If you don’t reach the person, **leave a voice message**.
- **Follow-up:** If you do reach the person, try to get their email so you can follow up or, alternatively, follow up by text message or mailed note.
- **Look for opportunities to interact again: This is how we show we are trustworthy and want to build a relationship.** If they have questions you can’t answer, no problem. Do your best to find the answer and get back to them. Are there other small ways that you can be of service?²
- IF you can’t reach a person by phone, text, or email and they don’t reply to your voicemail, **send a hand-written letter or postcard**.
- **Repeat** sending 1 or 2 more rounds of text messages and phone calls again.

Will It Work? Let’s Experiment!

I don’t know if it will work – or that we can refine the approach quickly enough for purposes of winning the election. Perhaps it is a great strategy for college-educated voters only? Can they be identified in the databases that the Democrats have access to?

Is this approach best implemented by individual volunteers or would it be equally or more effective and sustainable to create small teams of 2-4 people with, perhaps, half making phone calls while the others handle texting or letter/postcard writing?

All I can propose is that we try it QUICKLY on a small scale as soon as possible. We will test on a random sample of undecided voters, preferably with a matched “control group” of undecided voters who would

¹ See, e.g., Harvard political philosopher Danielle Allen, *Turning Strangers into Political Friends* (Dec. 2004). http://inthesetimes.com/article/1777/turning_strangers_into_political_friends “When distrust of one’s fellow citizens pervades democratic relations, it paralyzes democracy; it means that citizens no longer think it sensible, or feel secure enough, to place their fates in the hands of democratic strangers. Citizens’ distrust not of government but of each other leads the way to democratic disintegration...”

² Be of service? Think creatively about how you or others in your network or the campaign can help. For example, perhaps a senior doesn’t have a computer but needs help signing up for something online. Alternatively, if you feel comfortable and are part of the same community, there might be a wide range of ways to connect in person.

receive the traditional messaging. Then let me see if I can find some volunteers to implement the strategy and we'll see how it goes. (We can't wait until after the election for definitive proof but a separate research team could reach out to the volunteers and voters to assess their experiences and the likely results.)

The Psychology of Trust

Most people don't vote on the basis of issues alone. They want to feel that "good well-informed people like me who I can trust believe that Joe Biden and the Democrats will do the right thing." We can communicate that directly in our authentic interactions with undecided voters.

Here's one way to think about it. The "Big Three" predictors of interpersonal trustworthiness³ are:

- Ability (perceptions of a trustee's competence and consistency)
- Benevolence (perceptions of the trustee's caring, goodwill, empathy, and commitment to shared goals)
- Integrity (perceptions of the trustee's objectivity, fairness, honesty, and dedication).

A relational approach can activate trust on each of these dimensions:

- Ability: The volunteer consistently finds the specific and concise answers or responses to a voter's questions.
- Benevolence: The volunteer listens well, empathizes with the voter's situation, is patient and good-natured, and emphasizes that we all want to live in a better world.
- Integrity: The volunteer doesn't rush the process but seeks to have a genuine dialogue with the voter.

The following quotes capture the spirit of this approach:

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. – Theo. Roosevelt

At the end of the day, people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel. – Maya Angelou

I once asked a pharmaceutical rep how he persuaded doctors to adopt a new medicine. Evidence is not remotely enough, he said. You must apply "the rule of seven touches." Personally "touch" the doctors seven times, and they will come to know you; if they know you, they might trust you; and, if they trust you, they will change. That's why he stocked doctors' closets with free drug samples in person. Then he could poke his head around the corner and ask, "So how did your daughter Debbie's soccer game go?" Eventually, this can become "Have you seen this study on our new drug? How about giving it a try?" Human interaction is the key force in overcoming resistance and speeding change. – Atul Gawande, "Slow Ideas: Some innovations spread fast. How do you speed the ones that don't?" (New Yorker)

³ "The Science of Interpersonal Trust" (R. Borum, 2010), https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1573&context=mhlp_facpub.

Draft Text Message

Hi, I'm Jane Smith⁴, a volunteer w/ Shared Future. I believe we all need to make wise choices in upcoming elections if we are to make a good future for ourselves and generations to come. I support Joe Biden and hope you do, too, but I am openminded. I'd like to start a dialogue with you about the election regardless of what you think. I hope we can learn from each other.

In 1968, Robert F. Kennedy said, "What we need in the United States is NOT division, hatred, violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion for one another, and a sense of justice..." That's the country we can create if we start talking and listening to each other.

Can I give you a call in a few minutes to begin a conversation? I'll keep it short. Learn more about us at <https://sfuture.org>. Thanks in advance!

Draft Telephone Script

Hi, my name is Jane and I'm a volunteer calling about the November elections. I know it's early but I believe it's vital that Democrats defeat Trump. I don't believe we can tackle climate change, covid, the growing economic crisis, health care, and inequality in the U.S. unless we do. It matters for ourselves as well as for our children.

At a deeper level, I feel our democracy is truly in peril. Trump has NO RESPECT for the law, has shown he has NO SHAME about lying, and is a SELFISH and MEAN-SPIRITED human being.

I don't want to take lots of your time but I'd be happy to chat or help you register to vote by mail.

If you have questions about specific issues or want more evidence than I can offer, I'm happy to send you a short overview on the issue if you give me your email or direct you to our website at <http://sfuture.org>. *[The volunteer can build trust by setting up subsequent interactions.]*

Draft Personal Letter (Handwritten, typed, or a mix of the two?)

Hi __ - my name is Tom and I tried a couple of times over the past week to contact you by phone and text message. I am a volunteer with Our Shared Future.

I don't mean to waste your time but I believe that this election is too important for Americans not to reach out to one another and talk about the issues that matter to each of us -- both to make better choices in November and to create a country where we feel connected to one another, whatever our political or religious views.

Donald Trump's values feel all wrong for what I want our country to stand for -- BUT I'm happy to discuss with you -- to speak AND to listen to your perspective.

Would you be willing to talk for maybe 5 or 10 minutes by phone or Zoom or some other way? My personal phone number is 301-325-3141 and my email is tpollak2@gmail.com. I hope that we can connect.

I'm also enclosing a 1-page overview on our perspective.

All the best,
Tom

⁴ I intentionally include my last name to show that I'm willing to put myself on the line to support the Dems.

Why It Matters to Me Personally: “Voting is not just about politics. It’s personal.”

The DNC’s approach encourages modest self-disclosure and vulnerability. I would encourage even more of that, as practitioners of “deep canvassing” teach.⁵ Here’s how I might frame my personal narrative, which can be woven into all of the communications in full (in an email or letter) or in shorter snippets in conversation:

“Politics is personal for me. I’ve seen how it has mattered to my family. I’m only 61 but feel like I was raised in the shadow of World War II. My mother was in the WACS (the Womens’ Army Corps) and my father lost an eye onboard his Navy ship in the Pacific. His brother (my uncle) was a prisoner of war in a Japanese POW camp and had horrific experiences. My Jewish cousins had to escape Germany when Hitler came to power.

“At the same time, I also believe that good leadership is possible. When I was growing up, John F. Kennedy and others who had grown from their WW2 or Civil Rights Movement experiences taught us that progress really is possible when people of good will and intelligence work together.”

“When my father died when I was one, my mother was fortunate to be economically secure. Social Security helped make that possible.”

Conclusion

In 2008, huge number of Obama campaign volunteers stood ready to continue the work of community building that the campaign began. Unfortunately, OFA was rolled into DNC efforts and died a quick death. A great opportunity to build our civic fabric – the foundation for a strong democracy – was missed. Let’s not make the same mistake again. This approach helps set the stage for this work.

I’ve spent the past five years trying to convince people to become tutors and mentors in Washington, DC, through the organization I founded, the DC Tutoring & Mentoring Initiative. I’ve taught (or tried to teach) hundreds of volunteers how to get past their social anxieties and customary ways of interaction. They learn to walk up to strangers at farmers markets and other public spaces and events and, speaking from their heart, make the quick case that two out of 3 DC kids are reading below grade level and we are looking for volunteers to help out an hour or two a week. I believe that if people can find the courage to engage a seemingly disinterested stranger in a conversation like this, the same can be done for this election.

I also understand the uncertainties. Prior to starting DCTMI, I spent 20 years as a researcher with the Urban Institute and understand the challenges of implementing new approaches. But at the end of the day, I think it can be done. And it’s important to try if we are going to have a thriving country in coming years and decades!

⁵ See, for example, the work of Changing the Conversation at <https://www.ctctogether.org/about-deep-canvassing>.

Appendix

6 Reasons Why Trump Isn't Right for Our Country: Moral Foundations Theory

NYU's Jonathan Haidt identified six competing sets of values driving the American public. Skilled volunteers can connect with voters on each of these values. These values are listed below:

- Care/harm - Trump epitomizes a lack of compassion. Instead, "it's all about me."
- Fairness/cheating – He cheated contractors at Trump properties, got people to take the SAT tests for him, and has lies without hesitation.
- Loyalty/betrayal – He has pressured highly competent and dedicated staff -- Fauci, Jim Kelly, Mattis -- to quit and throws anyone -- even those loyal to him -- under the bus if it meets his personal needs.
- Authority/subversion – Trump has undermined the Constitution, trying to rig the election by preventing mail-in ballots and encouraging Russian intervention in U.S. elections.
- Sanctity/degradation – Trump's treatment of women
- Liberty/oppression - Ending democracy and laying groundwork for authoritarianism: WW2: "First they came for ... but we were silent..."

Other Themes

- The Future: (This appeals to what Simon Baron-Cohen calls "systemitizers," who are more likely to be males) climate change, legacy for children..
- Legacy: What do you want to leave to your kids, grandkids or future generations?
- Why it matters to me: As the Changing the Conversation organization teaches canvassers to put it, "This election is not just about politics; it is personal." (See "Why It Matters to Me" below.)

Convincing the Pro-Capitalism Conservative That Democrats Won't Overreach

This seems like a critical step in convincing undecided voters who dislike Trump's character but fear Democratic overreaching. They worry that rapid and massive changes to our health care system, policies to alleviate economic and racial inequality, or a Green New Deal could create more problems than they solve if entrepreneurship is thwarted and economic growth continues to be stalled.

An answer might have a couple of dimensions:

Policy. Obamacare, despite its challenges, showed that large-scale policy change can be successful.

A Practical Mindset. Both Biden and Harris and most Democratic members of Congress are moderate by temperament and understand that there are always risks that must be taken into account when large policy changes are implemented.

The Attitude of the Volunteer. When a volunteer can legitimately say, "I understand your concerns and share them. We are all flawed human beings – myself included – with mixed motives and tendencies to overreach. I, too, understand the risks but believe that these risks are much smaller with a well-meaning Democratic Administration than the risks that Trump and the Republicans presents."