

# Personal Voter Contact Plans: Build Power and Win Campaigns

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When auto mechanic Dave Gerth hit the streets of Roslyn, Washington for votes last Fall, it marked a return to the person-to-person campaigning that was once a hallmark of this old mining town. Earlier generations were steeped in union culture and the solidarity that won victories on working conditions, wages and health issues. But the mines are closed, the unions gone, and with them went the organizing that had involved workers and residents in the politics of the day. With only 950 full time residents, races for mayor and city council were barely contested.

But things are changing — fast.

Development pressure is squeezing east from Seattle, only 90 miles away, and the largest destination resort in the state is in the works just next door. Roslyn residents, who had been personally monitoring both logging and land use for the last decade, decided that, to counter the realty and development interests driving growth, it was time to take control of town government.

Personal Voter Contact Plans follow the same basic steps as standard electoral campaigns — with a key difference. Instead of relying on mass media, they start with, and strengthen, personal relationships. Person-to-person campaigning builds a connected, motivated base of voters and leaves an organizational infrastructure in place beyond Election Day. It is the key for community-based groups wanting to build progressive movement through the electoral process.

## 1. Candidate Recruitment or Issue Identification

Whether you're advancing an issue through a ballot measure or trying to run one of your own as a candidate, you need to start with a commitment to a Personal Voter Contact Plan. If it's not a fundamental commitment, time and money will take the path of least resistance — towards shotgun mail and paid media.

In Roslyn, some of the citizen activists resisted what they called “aggressive campaigning.” They assumed it would be slick and heavy handed, which would backfire in such an intimate setting. Despite this concern, Gerth and his allied council candidates were recruited to run with campaign plans that encouraged constant tracking of the town's 648 voters.

In larger settings such as statewide campaigns, the priority will always be on swing voters, usually a mismatch for the constituencies targeted by progressive organizations. But even if the central campaign can't allocate its resources towards organizing your community, you can mount a Personal Voter Contact drive that will complement the campaign's efforts and consolidate your organizational base.

In 1990, Portland's Rainbow Coalition forged a contractual relationship with Barbara Roberts' gubernatorial campaign to organize the two House districts where the Rainbow's primary recruitment targets lived. Later in the decade, Californians For Justice contracted with labor unions to do the same in precincts where the unions needed a persuaded turnout and CFJ had built personal relationships with residents.

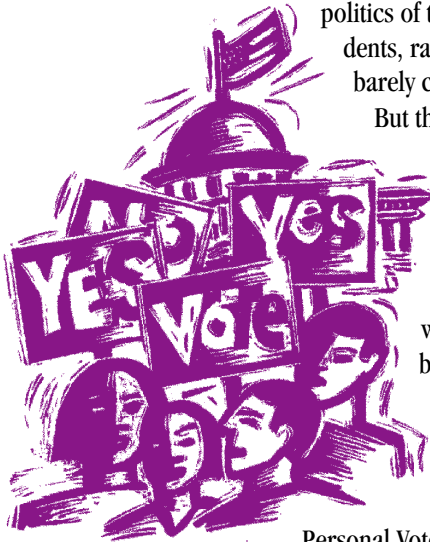
## 2. Voter Registration

Random voter registration is as good as stuffing the ballot box for the other side. Unless you plan to maintain a relationship with a prospective voter, it won't advance your goals to register them. Standard methods of tabling and working a crowd with a clipboard aren't likely to produce an informed, connected, or motivated voter.

Registration done through personal relationships, however, can produce a sustaining base of support and expand the pool of people meaningfully participating in the democratic process. Voter registration cards should be collected, and all contact information taken down for follow up before being submitted to the election office.

## 3. Who Should Make the Contact

Here's a common-sense hierarchy to follow whenever possible, whether for registration, identification, persuasion or getting out the vote:



- Best – Someone as close to the voter as possible, e.g. neighbors, co-workers, family.
- Great – Someone the voter doesn't yet know but where there's a basis for ongoing relationship, e.g. parents at your child's school, people at your work site.
- Good – A member of an organization that the voter has an interest in, e.g. a labor union, an organization tied to their race or ethnicity.
- Barely Adequate – Canvassing a neighborhood or constituency with non-residents in an effort to raise the voting rolls.

#### 4. How to Make the Contact

Nothing beats face-to-face, ideally in the person's home. Phone contact is a less effective alternative, followed by individual conversation in a community setting. When written communication is used (e.g. a leaflet at the door of someone who's not home), a hand-written note promising phone follow-up or a return visit is essential. (Then make sure you do follow up!)

Voter contact is a numbers game, and door to door is the most labor intensive method. You'll have to recruit twice the number of people you need, and provide good training with role-playing to make sure each walker knows how to establish a persuasive connection with the self-interest of the prospective voter.

#### 5. Voter Identification

Voter identification begins with acquiring a list of your organizing targets, ideally in street address order, along with voter history, phone numbers and mailing addresses. Progressive list enhancement projects used by many membership-based groups combine the data of a number of allied organizations. The resulting lists allow you to tell a voter how you got their name and establish the link to the organizations or issues they care about.

Using the personal contact methods above, you'll determine who's with you (your base), who's against you (the opposition), and who's undecided (the middle). Ignore the opposition. Keep in close touch

with your base: you need them to win, and ideally can convert some into activists for the cause.

#### 6. Persuasion

Dave Gerth's full-time job running an auto repair shop didn't stop him from visiting voters on a regular basis, often with friends or family. With only 648 eligible voters it was possible to visit all of them, providing for extra time with targeted voters whom he could persuade.

Persuasion is, again, best done in person, but can include phone calls or printed material and other media. The most effective is the most targeted, i.e. responding to the specific concerns you've noted this voter has during the identification phase.

The most satisfying words that a candidate can hear were frequently spoken in Roslyn last Fall: "Sure I'll vote for you. No candidate has ever come to my house before."

#### 7. Get Out the Vote

It all comes together on Election Day — or whenever people choose to vote in the case of absentee voters and vote by mail. Your contact plan should track absentee voters, reaching them as their ballot arrives in the mail, and following up to ensure their ballot gets turned in if the elections office shows it hasn't. On election eve, all of the relationship-building that's come before should culminate in a final, enthusiastic get out the vote effort.

Dave Gerth and his campaign called every supporter the night before Election Day. Gerth beat the eight-year incumbent mayor by 33 votes. And voter contact programs helped aligned candidates take four of the five city council seats as well.

The result? This Spring the Roslyn City Council voted 5-0 (with one abstention) to join the Yakima Indian Nation, the Building Trades of the AFL-CIO, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and others in challenging the environmental impact statement of the destination resort looming next door.



*"Sure I'll vote for you. No candidate has ever come to my house before."*