

Hitchhiker's Guide to Persuasion Canvassing in Virginia
James D. Shelton
September 17, 2017

Overriding Principle: Connect with the voter at a genuine, personal and human level. Be open and sincere. Listen and adapt as the interaction proceeds, recognizing differences among people. Not really so hard - something we do every day.

Rationale and Setting: We can have a great Democratic win in Virginia in 2017 – but only if we work hard and smart. Basic canvassing is not difficult and is effective. But increasing the effectiveness of canvassing can make all the difference. After several months experience canvassing for Virginia candidates, I decided to describe some things I find work for me. I also draw on research and some basic behavior change principles. Whether you are a veteran canvasser or new, I think this guide will help

During the persuasion phase, campaigns often focus on so-called persuadable voters. These may be independents, those tending Democrat or Republican or those not known to have preference. Also crucial are people who tend to vote Democratic pretty consistently, but not in off-year elections – sometimes called low-frequency voters.

Elements of a Full Good Encounter

- Introduction
- Warm-up/Transition
- Soliciting Voter's Key Concerns/Issues
- Highlighting your Candidate(s)
- Additional Conversation
- Closure
- Key Actions for the Persuaded

You should address these components to fit your own style and the situation. Bear in mind that in the typical walk packet with perhaps 40-50 doors, you may only have a handful of extended conversations as well as some briefer ones.

The Introduction: Campaigns have a “script” of how to approach voters. Scripts usually move directly to introducing the candidates. That can certainly work. But I find that awkward and prefer to start in a listening mode. Your walk sheet (or Mini-Van) will identify a particular person(s) by name, age, gender at the address. If the person answering the door fits the description, I like using the person's name from the outset. Here is a typical example (with friendly demeanor and good eye contact):

“Hello Ms Jones? (Assuming they say “yes”). My name is John _____. I'm a volunteer with the Democratic party here in [Manassas.] We're reaching out to voters in the neighborhood to talk about the upcoming election in November. We're interested in **hearing what is on voter's minds and what things are important to them.**” (Very often people will say something like: 1) “I always vote Democratic,” in which case you can **skip** quickly to the

“Key Actions for the Persuaded” section below or 2) “I’m a Republican so don’t waste your time” or otherwise indicate they are not sympathetic, so you say “OK, have a nice day” and move on.)

Warm-up/Transition – Next I look carefully at the reaction and body language. Some people will rapidly engage and some will require encouragement.

Especially if they do not rapidly engage, I will often ask: “Have you been following our election in November?” If they say no or not very much I might say: “Well you know, the voters are electing a Governor, Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General, as well as the House of Delegates who are representatives in the State Legislature in Richmond” (Most people will only have a rough idea of what the House of Delegates is.)

Another good follow-on question is: “As a voter, do you tend to vote in most elections or just selectively?” (This helps especially to find those all-important low-frequency voters.)

Some canvassers like to explain why they themselves are motivated to come out and canvass at this stage. But this point, I don’t know that much about the voter, so I prefer to weave that in later.

The “Trump” card icebreaker. Some voters will be polite, but reticent to discuss politics with someone just showing up at the door. So I often ask “Well Ms Jones, can you please tell me what you think about how things are going in Washington with Mr. Trump.” I find this to be a great icebreaker Very often the verbal and body language indicates they are not at all happy and that really opens up the conversation. Even if they are ambivalent, or support what Mr. Trump is doing, it is still a good opportunity to listen.

Soliciting Voter Views. The key question: “**Let me ask you Ms Jones, what things or issues are important to you now?**” The answer is usually one of these 8:

- Health Care
- Women’s Health
- Transportation (sometimes linked with over development)
- Environment
- Education
- Gun Safety
- Gerrymandering/Voting Rights
- Bad things happening in Washington

Some voters will not offer a ready answer. Then I might offer a few possibilities. Or if I see evidence of children - “I see you may have children Ms Jones. Are they in public school?”

Ask them to **elaborate** on their concerns. Listen, validate, affirm and connect with the voter and bring in your own experience. Remember all these things are motivating.

Use the voter's issue(s) as a springboard to **focus on the candidate(s).** After listening and some back and forth you have a good opportunity to move to the candidate(s.) For each of the issues it is good to have a **simple "sound bite" message** that contrasts your candidate(s) with their opponents.

Education example: "I really agree about the importance of education, Ms Jones. Our children's future depends on it. And my candidate is strongly in favor of much better support to public schools. But you know the Republicans want to take money away from public schools and give it to private schools through vouchers." Then comes a good opportunity to **introduce the candidate(s).** You can present the campaign literature and point out their faces – reinforcing their support for education as well as personal qualities.

Health Care Example: "Of course health care is so important. I'm fortunate enough to have health insurance, but so many people do not. **My candidate(s)** favors affordable health care, but the Republicans opposed extending Medicaid in Virginia, leaving hundreds of thousands of Virginians without affordable health care".

Transportation example. "You know, I really hate having to sit in congested traffic for hours to get to work. I think we just need to appropriate the needed funds for better roads as well as public transportation. In fact that is one of the reasons I am out canvassing today"

If the issue is women's health, environment, gun safety, gerrymandering or bad things in Washington, discussing them is a slam dunk, (unless they are confirmed right-to-life advocates or second amendment hardliners, in which case you move to the "Have a nice day" mode.)

The campaigns will typically have simple talking point bullets to help you in these discussions. You don't have to be an expert on all the issues. You are just a volunteer. If a voter asks you something you don't know, just say: "That sounds like an important point, but I am just not that familiar with it. I can check with the campaign for them get back to you on it if you like."

Target the entire Republican legislature and the way they waste time on trivial issues. I like to go after Virginia's Republican legislature's propensity toward extreme ideological pursuits. "The Republicans in the legislature waste a lot of time on things like bathroom bills, requiring transvaginal ultrasound, defunding Planned Parenthood and voter suppression instead of doing the people's business. My candidate wants to work hard on important things and end the gridlock in Richmond."

Be respectful and don't get into debates. Stay in the courteous, earnest, active listening mode. If they say something you don't agree with, probe a little deeper, you may be able to find common ground. Focus on the things you do agree with.

Voters who are not issue-oriented. Recognize many voters do not follow politics very closely or frame their thoughts in terms of issues, though various things will be important to them. They vote more on likability, things in common with the candidate or "character."

Point out characteristics you think will resonate with your voter, for example family background, military service (big in Virginia,) leadership experience, community service, gender. The campaign literature usually highlights these points.

Take Time But Manage it. Many “persuasion” voters have independent and varying views. Fascinating though it may be, you reach a point of diminishing returns. You have other doors to knock.

Closure. Don’t expect many independently-minded voters to have a sudden epiphany and be totally swayed by your conversation. Rather you hope to move them several notches in the blue direction. Sometimes you sense the voter is leaning Democratic. You can say. “You know Ms Jones, just listening to you, it seems you are leaning toward voting for my candidate(s) this year. Am I right?” Often they will agree. I reinforce that response, and later list them as a lean Democratic on the walk sheet.

In concluding the conversation, stay in the connecting mode and to come back to the candidate(s.) “I’ve really appreciated having this discussion with you Ms Jones. As a responsible voter, you clearly do good independent thinking. I do think that my candidate(s) will serve your interests best, especially on education and transportation. Thanks so much for this opportunity to hear what you are thinking.”

Low-frequency voters are probably the most important conversations. For those who typically vote Democratic, you may have in fact convinced them your candidate(s) are best. The real key is motivating them to turn out to vote. “Ms Jones, you know in these times, this election is so important. We have great candidates who will do the right thing on health care and environment that you care so much about. All right-minded citizens need to come together to win this election. Please remember to vote for all the Democrats. When we vote we win.” I typically make a note that this voter merits a return visit during GOTV.

Registering the voter’s tendency (Voter ID). A key reason campaign canvass is to assess how likely it is the voter will vote for your candidate(s,) especially to come back at a later time to those strongly supportive or leaning. You can now register on the scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is the most likely and 5 the least) their likely support for your candidate(s.)

Key Actions for the Persuaded.

Commitment Cards and handshakes. Commitment cards are proven to increase voter turnout. Typically the voter fills one out and it gets mailed back a few days before the election. Often there is also an option to get an email address or cell phone number to remind the voter close to or even on election day. The approach I like: “We have these reminder cards that will **remind** voters to vote near to election day. We’ve found it really helps to use them and shows your commitment to vote. Are you willing to do one?” Getting commitment card agreement is not easy and is a true sign of accomplishment. If the voter will not accept the card, I will say. “Okay, I respect that. But in that case can we at least shake hands and say we have a deal?” At which point I extend my hand, look them in the eye and without fail they smile and shake my hand.

Reaching out to others. “You know this election is so important and I am so glad you will be voting. But we need every vote we can get. Who else do you know that you can reach out to, to help make sure they also vote – family, friends, co-workers, church, Facebook contacts?” Usually they pause to think whom they might reach out to and sometimes give some ideas. In that case I reinforce their ideas. In any case by thinking through whom they might contact, they become enlisted in and have ownership of the turnout process, and I believe increases the chances they themselves will vote.

Volunteers, donations and yard signs. If a voter seems particularly committed and especially if I get activist vibes, I might say “ It’s great you are so very committed. You know you should be out here doing what I’m doing. You live in the community. I can tell you would be very good at it.” If they decline, I often move to donating: “Okay, I see your hesitation, but you can always contribute money to the campaign. How about that?” If they decline and especially have a strategically-located yard, I make the last request. “Okay, how about a yard sign then. Is that a possibility?” It is possible of course for someone to agree to all 3. If they agree to any, I make sure to get the correct phone number and write it on the walk sheet so the campaign can follow up.

Additional points.

1. Write liberally on the walk sheet (or Mini-Van.) For example if you think a voter would really benefit from a return visit or call.
2. Plan to take a sufficient amount of time canvassing and don’t hurry the conversation. You spent a lot of time and effort to arrive at these conversations. And a relaxed style is more effective.
3. Talk to anyone who answers the door. Ask for the person(s) the walk sheet specifies. But sometimes that person will be unavailable and you talk to a household member. In some cases they can be considered a key respondent for your voter e.g. my whole family is Republican or my husband and I always vote Democratic. In those instances I record that as a valid 1-5 voter tendency but make a note on the walk sheet of who the key informant was. Sometimes you find someone totally different, including a new occupant. So talk away. People who have recently moved are more likely to be Democrats.
4. Many people seldom use front doors. A side door may be better.
5. People are very seldom hostile in my experience. That may be because campaigns tend not to target strong Republicans. And possibly the courteous listening mode does not tend to evoke strong feelings. Sure, once in a while people may be a bit discourteous. Just be polite, move on and record the appropriate information.
6. For the voter in a hurry, adapt to the situation. Focusing on the candidate(s) and handing over the literature is generally the highest priority, although for low-frequency voters, stress the importance of their participation.
7. **Talk to people on the street** if it seems opportune. It can be very productive.
8. When people are not home, leave the literature in a secure place, e.g. not under the doormat. Sometimes that means wedging it behind interior door weather stripping or next to a doorknob and of course never in a mail box or mail slot.

9. Bring food and water.
10. Mentoring – i.e. partnering up a new canvasser with an experienced one is a good practice that helps new canvassers learn and helps motivate them.

The more you canvass the better you will be. I find canvassing rewarding because I really enjoy the conversations – plus contributing to a vital effort. Canvassing really is the best tool to win elections. Do it your way, the best you can. **When we vote, we win!**