



# THE ACTION GROUP NYC'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE CANVASSING

**You are participating in the most effective method of grassroots political action.**

**Thank you for canvassing, which is the most powerful action a volunteer can take in terms of generating voter participation. Nothing impacts the voter like a one on one with a campaign volunteer. Canvassing creates personal contact between campaigns, causes, and voters. At its best, the dialog-based nature of this activity creates strong, positive, lasting impressions which boost the likelihood a potential voter will actually vote or get friends and family members to vote. Powerful stuff!**

## GETTING STARTED

Some campaigns will provide canvassers with paper routes and maps. Others will use a canvassing app, which enables canvassers to pull up voter lists and maps and seamlessly capture and integrate response information into a campaign database.

## DOWNLOAD THE CANVASSING APP

Either the organization with which you are canvassing or the campaign with which you are working will let you know which canvassing app you should use. MiniVAN is one of the most popularly used canvassing apps by Democratic campaigns, although your organizers will let you know which app is being used before you start canvassing.

The best way of getting acquainted with the features of whichever canvassing app you will be using is in the comfort of your own home. In some cases, organizers may pair experienced canvassers with novices, in part to allow newbies to reinforce their at-home introduction to canvassing apps with real-world experience.

While campaigns — even local races — are increasingly using canvassing apps, a few provide



paper scripts, and still others may offer only general talking points. For the most part, however, MiniVAN is the current standard. Regardless of which app is being used, most enable canvassers to enter basic information about contacts made/contacts not made/literature left. These apps are the backbones of canvassing.

If your app has a Notes feature, familiarize yourself with it. Some campaigns, especially down-ticket campaigns, send follow-up postcards to voters contacted. Notes can offer a way to have these follow-up communications resonate with voters. There are hints for using the Notes feature effectively at the end of this document.

A general note on data privacy: Voter information — name, address, and party affiliation — is public information, but how a given voter has voted is not, and is not included in political app information. Canvassing for Democratic candidates usually focuses on Democratic or Democratic-leaning independent voters.

## WHAT TO BRING

**Before you canvass, fill a backpack with most, if not all, of the following:**

**Weather-related items.** You're going to be walking around outside. A sunburned volunteer is not an effective volunteer. Neither is a heavily sweating one, or a rain-soaked one. Sunscreen, a hat, or an umbrella are essentials depending on the weather. Canvassing is usually canceled if the forecast calls for steady rain. But when there are light intermittent showers, a collapsible umbrella that can be stashed in your backpack is a good idea.

**Whatever you need to stay hydrated.** If you prefer cold water, the night before you canvass fill a 1.5-liter bottle with water, leaving an inch and a half of space so the ice can expand without damaging the bottle. Put the bottle in the freezer. Before canvassing, top off the bottle — which is now mostly filled with ice — with a little water. Wrap the bottle

in a plastic bag, because there will be condensation on the outside, and the bag will reduce the moisture next to everything else in your backpack.

**A phone charger.** If you are using a mobile app to make notes on conversations, you don't want to run out of battery power halfway through a route. During bright days, you may have to adjust your phone's display to make sure you can see it, especially if canvassing in direct sunlight. Increased brightness eats up battery life.

**A clipboard.** You may have a script, or talking points, voter registration forms, or campaign literature. A sign on the back of a clipboard is also a great tool for quickly showing who you are with and why you are knocking on someone's door, as we discuss in the *How to Knock on a Door* section.

**A paper notepad.** Yes, we are in a digital age. But sometimes electronic devices go down, or it's just easier to make a quick paper note.

**Pens.** If you have voter registration forms, these are essential. And they're generally a good idea.

**A dry washcloth or tissues.** If you are canvassing in the sun, or in light rain, having something to wipe away sweat or mist, especially if you wear glasses, is very helpful.

**Snacks and/or a light meal.** Some organizers may provide a light breakfast. Some don't. Lunch and snacks are usually the responsibility of each canvasser, although occasionally groups that go together to canvassing events make plans for a late lunch, after canvassing is finished.

## WHAT TO WEAR

Check the weather and dress appropriately. On hot days, loose-fitting clothing from fabrics that breathe is strongly recommended. On cooler days, layers trap warm air.

Avoid *anything* — hats, shirts, jackets — with a sports logo, or any regional reference that is not part of your canvassing area. The idea is to be a blank slate — a sports rivalry, or even something that immediately identifies you as an out-of-towner, creates an avoidable barrier between you and the person you are trying to engage into your phone.

General pro-Democratic or pro-voting apparel is usually okay, but be mindful that some national Democrats may not appeal to the specific communities you are visiting. Generic is generally better.

If canvassing during a sunny day, strongly consider a nondescript baseball cap or other head covering.

Even though you'll have a backpack, you'll probably want something with pockets — a jacket, a fanny pack — so you can easily access small items.

## HOW TO PREPARE THE MORNING OF

### Keep your strength up

If your diet allows, having slightly salty food before starting out may help you retain water during the day.

Regardless, eat *something*. Crashing from a case of the hungries mid-canvass does nobody any good — not you, not the candidate, not the overall voter participation drive. Go for fuel. Protein and complex carbohydrates will give you long-lasting, slow-release fuel that will sustain you throughout the day.

### Keep yourself comfortable

Use a bathroom every time one is available. If you are walking through a suburban area, a friendly gas station or convenience store may not be readily available when you need one. Or the one at hand may not be... welcoming. Even if you don't think you need one, take advantage when available.

### Keep in communication

If you are canvassing with the group, program the numbers of the group organizer, the person who is staffing the initial rallying point (i.e. where you pick

up campaign literature or get talking points), the driver of whichever vehicle brought you to the site, and at least one other canvasser.

## RIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES: RESPECT THE LAW

**Mailboxes, mail slots in doors, or any other structures the U.S. Postal Service use to deliver mail are strictly off limits for campaign literature distribution.** If leave-behinds include door hangers, these can be hung on doorknobs. Fliers can be wedged between doors and frames. Again, never, never, never use any drop-off point reserved for the U.S. Postal Service.

Some homes have “No Solicitation” signs posted. Political canvassing is not a commercial activity, and *legally* does not fall under no solicitation prohibitions. Here's a link that offers information: [www.nvm-educationfund.org/canvasser\\_rights](http://www.nvm-educationfund.org/canvasser_rights). There are a few legalities — canvassing is only permitted between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. local time, although most activities start after that and end well before it.

That said, the objective is to win over voters to consider voting, not to be right under the law. Event organizers may have specific guidelines regarding homes that have no solicitation signs posted: they may want you to just drop off literature at the front door without knocking, they may want you to skip the house entirely, or they may ask you to knock on the door if you are comfortable doing so. As with all legal canvassing activities, the choice is yours.

## RESPECT THE VOTER

Many homes have walkways that are not direct paths between the sidewalk and the front door. Use them, even if it means taking extra steps — cutting across a lawn may be seen as disrespectful, and the purpose of canvassing is to win over a voter to the idea of participating, hopefully on behalf of your candidate.

## HOW TO KNOCK ON A DOOR

Knock and talk, right?

Wrong.

The best place to start is the obvious: Smile. Even though you are one of the good folks, you are a stranger going to someone's door. People who are going to engage with you need to feel relaxed when they see you. After knocking or ringing a doorbell, take a step or two backward — or go one step down, if there are steps leading up to the door. The idea you are trying to project is that you will respect personal space.

If you have a button, sticker, or t-shirt from the organization you are representing, that identifier should be front and center. A clipboard in your hands, or political leaflets, will also give an immediate clue regarding why you are knocking on the door.

Remember to project a welcoming image — body language is essential for getting people to open up. Lower your shoulders (squaring them off is a fighting stance), relax, and smile.

Use the back of your clipboard as a quick-reference messaging board, one that someone answering the door will see before they see you. Some of our canvassers like to cover the backs of their clipboards with a sheet of paper that says We're Here to Listen, especially if the canvassing activity involves engaging voters in conversation. (The message is also a good reminder for canvassers that conversation is a two-way activity.)

In addition to We're Here to Listen, some canvassers include QR codes that allow voters to check the status of their registration, or link to a voter registration form. Be sure to keep these links appropriate to the day's canvassing. If an event coordinator does not provide these — and it never hurts to ask — they can be created with state-specific QR codes. A link to a New York voter registration form will not do potential Pennsylvania voters much good.

A copy of the logo of whatever organization is coordinating the canvassing event can also be printed on the back-of-the-clipboard sheet for further quick identification.

Homes increasingly have camera systems. If you are using a back-of-the-clipboard sign, hold the clipboard vertically so the camera system can see it — or hold the clipboard vertically so someone peeking out of a side window can see it.

Above all, **remember to listen**. Canvassing is not about whipping through a series of talking points, getting a commitment to vote, and then moving on. The goal is to make a lasting positive impression. Voters are not used to people actually paying attention to them. Canvassers occasionally are told “You are the first person to come here and care about what I think.” If you've identified yourself as working on behalf of the Democrats, that creates a lot of goodwill.

Also... someone you've contacted and had an in-depth conversation is more likely to make a comment about that conversation on social media. When that happens, it boosts the power of your canvassing exponentially.

Do not worry about not finishing your MiniVAN route. The system saves uncontacted voters and assigns them to different volunteers during subsequent efforts. Winding up a few households short because you've had several engaging conversations is a hallmark of a successful canvass.

## TAKE NOTES

Grassroot campaign managers often follow up canvassing visits with handwritten get out the vote postcards. Even in the space of a sentence or two, there is room to include information that strengthens how these messages resonate. The “Notes” feature in MiniVAN has a talk-to-text feature which makes note taking easy.

What to put into notes? Anything someone writing a follow-up postcard could use to stimulate voting activity, without getting into “ick” territory. The voter's personal

concerns, specifically expressed facts (There's a difference between a voter discussing children and inferring a voter has children if the voter has not offered that information.) Within Notes, make a clear distinction between information specifically volunteered during a conversation and information inferred by observation.

Case in point: Homes that have solar panels may indicate a voter who is concerned about green energy. Best practices for follow-up notes: don't include "ick factor" over familiarity ("We noticed you have solar panels..."). But they can make a general reference to the issue without acknowledging knowledge of a specific home ("Our candidate has lobbied to release funds in support of environmental concerns.")

Campaign coordinators should have insight into issues that resonate with voters, and your note taking should reflect any indications that a given voter may be sympathetic to those issues.

Other points which may prove useful in follow-up conversations, *if handled tactfully*:

- Presence of children (wading pools in front yard, chalk art in driveway.)
- Indications of active-duty military personnel or military veterans in the house
- Yard or window signs that indicate affinity for specific positions
- Bumper stickers that indicate affinity for specific positions (this is tricky — cars can belong to guests, or be loaners... note, but do not presume)

## CONSIDER CANVASSING IN TEAMS

Yes, volunteering is work, but it can also be fun and invigorating. For some, going alone through a list may be daunting. A MiniVAN route can be divided up between people ("You take the odd numbers, I'll take the even numbers" or "We'll leapfrog each assigned house"). The apps synch feature allows the notes you take to be individually uploaded, although there is often a lag between uploading and having that information reflected on the app.

Canvassing in pairs (or more) also allows canvassers to keep an eye on each other, to provide moral support, to share best practices as they create them, or to revel in especially good conversations. Paired-up volunteers can also remind each other to drink water, or to freshen up between contacts.

If you are an experienced canvasser, consider taking newbies with you to the first few doors you go to before taking off the training wheels and letting them go solo (but within eyeshot).

**TAG!**  **YOU'RE IT!**



THEACTIONGROUPNYC.COM