



Electoral Organizing During a Pandemic: Lessons from Wisconsin

Aaron Shapiro

The global Covid-19 pandemic has radically altered social and political practices. Aaron Shapiro reflects on the impact the pandemic had on electoral organizing leading up to the 2020 general election in Wisconsin and how organizers responded.

2020 was a year and an election season like no other. Any campaign with Donald Trump on the ballot was sure to be unorthodox, but the pandemic radically altered every aspect of social life and left an indelible mark on electoral organizing. Voter mobilization necessarily had to change its tactics on the fly. This presented challenges, but also forced creativity and innovation.

While Joe Biden won, the results fell short of Democratic expectations, given the Trump administration's botched response to the pandemic and polling indicating a substantial Biden lead. Disagreements have already broken out around how messaging, policy stances, and the contending ideological branches of the party might be to blame. Yet, we should not forget that Joe Biden received far more votes than any other politician in American history. While organic passion was certainly high for both campaigns, organization mattered, especially in an election this close and under circumstances so extraordinary.

My role leading the Wisconsin Working Families Party 2020 elections effort (and as a trained political scientist) prompts me to reflect on what we can learn from 2020: how we adapted our electoral organizing, what impact those *ad hoc* changes had, and what it might mean for the future.

Building infrastructure during a pandemic

The pandemic changed the mechanics of building a volunteer infrastructure. It has been well documented that relational organizing has a growing importance in contemporary electoral politics (Kriess 2012). While digital communication technologies have facilitated the growth of relational organizing, its techniques are grounded in creating traditional, real-world relationships between organizers and volunteers, and between volunteers and their networks (McKenna and Han 2014).

Normally, we build out our field program by inviting volunteers to the office, holding house parties and happy hours, or meeting in coffee shops, where we can train the volunteers on voter contact tools, such as peer-to-peer texting and phone-banking, while also building the sense of community and belonging necessary to retain them. These events are not sterile environments but rather are intentionally designed to be enjoyable. Volunteer retention depends on forging interpersonal bonds and making activism a pleasant experience.

While digital and remote distributive organizing tactics (e.g. video meetings and do-it-yourself tools) have become more common in recent years, they are inadequate substitutes for the staff-led, in-person experiences that form the foundation of electoral field organization. Unfortunately, the pandemic left little choice but to make the most of remote organizing. The strictly technical aspects of this method are manageable, if not ideal. Using Zoom to teach volunteers the basics of voter-contact tools or answering their questions through a Slack channel might be slightly less efficient than sitting around a table, yet these are workable approaches. Relying on them does exacerbate the

problem of generational stratification within an increasingly dynamic and tech-centric organizing environment, but many older activists mastered these tools and were passionate about them (while still sending out postcards).

More challenging than just having to be technologically savvy is bridging the different ways that generations or demographic groups communicate online. Beyond the lingering digital divide, groups differ in whether and how they connect to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and so on. If campaign staff and volunteers do not have competency across all of these mediums, the campaign will not have the personal networks needed to penetrate them.

Even more importantly, a campaign office or other real-world gathering place can provide spaces for building the necessary relationships, sense of community, and excitement. We attempted to use Zoom and Slack to replicate the physical spaces of traditional campaign work. Creative examples were using Zoom to hold trivia and texting nights, present stand-up comedy, watch debates, and hold birthday phone-banking events. Our Slack channel was a lively avenue for sharing articles and thoughts on current events, jokes, and good-natured competition—not just a place where a volunteer could ask for an assignment or help answer a voter’s question.

Being innovative in these ways burdened staff with the extra effort necessary to facilitate large-scale Zoom events and monitor the high-traffic Slack channel from early morning until late at night. None of this could completely make up for the inability to hold in-person events, but we were nevertheless able to build our biggest volunteer program to date and anchor a cadre of consistent volunteers in a real sense of community.

Going virtual also had significant advantages. We could encourage staff to engage activists across the entire state, not only in areas where we could put organizers on the ground. The virtual statewide volunteer operation could also engage geographically isolated activists in community-building experiences that otherwise would have been impossible.

Campaigning without canvassing

While we invested a great deal of gumption and creativity into building our volunteer program, there is simply no substitute for volunteers getting out on the streets and canvassing. While it is unclear whether volunteers can persuade voters in front-door conversations in a presidential general election (Kalla and Broockman 2018), there is evidence that they have marginal but important effects on base mobilization (Green and Gerber 2019). In-person conversations have no substitute in terms of both the quality of interaction and the breadth of people with whom a campaign can interact. Inevitably, voter targeting will miss a significant portion of voters if their contact is over the phone—either because of a lack of accurate contact information or voter refusal to engage—so campaigns must knock on doors to get a “touch” on many voters.

The suspension of in-person activities had an even more dramatic impact on voter registration efforts. Street and campus canvassing is often critical to getting new voters on the rolls. Downtown areas, high-traffic events, and campus tabling are staples of broad registration efforts. Indeed, relatively flat registration numbers among Democratic base groups this year (especially when contrasted with record-setting turnout) could be at least partially attributable to the inability to conduct such activities.

An already difficult turnout environment in Wisconsin makes the sort of mobilization facilitated by canvassing all the more important. Scott Walker’s gubernatorial reign put in place voter-suppression laws that effectively reduced turnout. The canvass is generally seen as the most effective way to communicate with the sorts of transient voters most vulnerable to disenfranchisement as a result of these laws. One cannot overstate how critical even marginal depression in base turnout can be. Indeed, the 2016, 2018, and 2020 elections in Wisconsin were determined by an average margin of just over 24,000 raw votes and less than one percentage point.

The inability to canvass also put a squeeze on other modes of voter contact that may have a finite bandwidth of effective volume. Organizations are generally challenged in making use of surge capacity in battleground states during presidential years. Under normal circumstances, voters get weary of the non-stop phone calls at the end of a highly resourced campaign. Fatigue also sets in for texting. Because people can easily opt out when annoyed by the abundance of texts, this may permanently damage an organization's texting universe.

Figure 1. Working Families Party activists in Kenosha, Wisconsin, gather before an early-vote event



© Aaron Shapiro.

Vote by mail

The shift to voting by mail also had a tremendous impact on our efforts. Wisconsin's April state elections took place just weeks after Covid-19 cases began to surge across the United States, previewing the havoc that it could wreak on elections. A massive influx of requests to vote by mail, as well as confusion around the cascade of contradictory orders being issued by the governor's office and courts, led to multiple significant changes in deadlines and rules down the stretch of the election.

The outcome was a Democratic rout in a key state Supreme Court race and surprisingly high turnout. Yet the baseline for a Wisconsin spring election already tends to be a high turnout of high-information voters. Achieving the scale of mobilization required to win a presidential contest meant also bringing out less politically active people who often had more personal impediments to voting. Wisconsin election administrators were dedicated to promoting voting by mail and making it as

easy as the law would allow. Concerted and coordinated efforts by progressive field operations yielded a massive early-vote program.

At this point, it seems difficult to assess how much our campaign in support of voting by mail contributed to the significant increase in 2020 turnout. It is already clear, however, that the partisan politicization of voting by mail has turned the very act into a partisan screen and a key data point of political identification. Indeed, we found that reaching out to voters who requested a mail ballot was far more predictive of supporting us than any other demographic indicator or even predictive scores from data providers.

Learning from 2020

As the vaccine rollout begins, something resembling normalcy should return for the 2022 midterms. Yet Republicans are already manufacturing claims of fraud to justify erecting new barriers to mail voting and further suppressing votes. In an unpredictable environment with rapidly evolving technology, innovation and flexibility are key. We need to look back carefully at what we did in 2020 against the resulting turnout and voting patterns. When power hangs on fractions of a percentage point in select geographies, maximizing the ensemble of voter outreach methods is critical. Surfacing and analyzing the innovation and variation spawned during these peculiar and tragic times will hopefully yield insights that help us all navigate what will likely be new and unanticipated peculiarities to come.

Bibliography

- Green, D. P. and Gerber, A. S. 2019. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, Brookings Institution Press.
- Kalla, J. L. and Broockman, D. E. 2018. “The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 112, no. 6, pp. 148–166.
- Kreiss, D. 2012. *Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- McKenna, E. and Han, H. 2014. *Groundbreakers: How Obama’s 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Aaron Shapiro has a PhD in political science from the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center. His research interests include American political parties, elections, and political participation. He returned to political organizing in 2017 and is currently the Wisconsin Working Families Party elections lead.

To cite this article:

Aaron Shapiro, “Electoral Organizing During a Pandemic: Lessons from Wisconsin”, *Metropolitica*, 12 January 2021. URL: <https://metropolitica.org/Electoral-Organizing-During-a-Pandemic-Lessons-from-Wisconsin.html>.