Infrastructure and Management of Local Political Campaigns For Statewide Elections: Westminster College

Brady P. Mullican

Westminster College

Contact: BMullican.20@Westminster-mo.edu

Abstract

 This essay examines the day-to-day operations of a local branch of the Democratic Coordinated Campaign for the purposes of discerning the key functions and components of such campaigns. Through working as an intern for the Coordinated Campaign, the author of this essay collected information on its infrastructure, methods of community outreach and the technological aid provided to it by key programs such as Votebuilder.org and NGP VAN. This essay also identifies the roles of members of the local campaign, including interns, volunteers, field officers, regional field directors and the field director. In the capacity of an intern performing field work such as canvassing and phonebanking, the author discovered the methods by which the Coordinated Campaign approaches and courts voters. This essay details the latter phase of these campaigns, known as Get-Out-The-Vote, and how the campaign and the roles of its members change.

 The most important finding of this essay is that the term “coordinated” in the Democratic Coordinated Campaign’s name is not only true to its name but a key factor of its success. It is precisely the coordination of the campaign’s vital components that allows the campaign to judiciously commit its energy in the areas where it is best exercised.

Strategy and Tactics

 The Democratic Coordinated Campaign’s methods of approaching voters who may support their candidates is crucial to its success. Prospective voters are found in NGP VAN, a database which contains information on people who are pro-union and/or support left-leaning policies. During the 2018 Missouri Senatorial Election, for example, those who had voted against Proposition A, a piece of Right to Work legislation, were prime targets for persuasion. This prospective pool of voters were not guaranteed to vote Democrat, but rather represented people who were most likely on the fence or who could feasibly be convinced to vote Democrat. This strategy emphasizes the judicious application of the campaign’s resources. Spending energy on those who are already planning to vote Democrat would not be nearly so productive as trying to bring undecided voters to the campaign’s way of thinking.

 When speaking to voters whom the campaign wishes to sway, canvassers inform them of who they are and who they represent. The canvasser begins by asking who the voter plans to support in the election, and should they say that they’re voting Republican and can’t be swayed, or even that they’re firm in their decision to vote Democrat, the canvasser accepts their decision and moves along. However, if the prospective voter indicates indecision, the canvasser continues the conversation. The approach the canvasser should strive for is to be pushy without being coercive. In the case of the voter being undecided, the canvasser asks what issues most concern the potential voter, and begins persuading the prospective voter from there. This approach is called "Feel, Felt, Found." It begins with the canvasser "feeling" for an issue, which is of personal concern to the voter. When the canvasser has "felt" what is of concern to the voter, the canvasser will have "found" a connection with the voter. The conceit of this strategy is communicate to the voter that the issues which are important to the voter are also important to the Democratic Party and the candidates, which the campaign hopes the voter will support. It is an effective way to begin a dialogue about the candidates themselves. Furthermore, lying to the voters is unacceptable, and no information given should be false.

Technical Operations

 The NGP VAN and a website, known as Votebuilder.com, are logistical tools used for data entry and management for the campaign through which the rest of its actions such as canvassing, phoen banking and organizing strategy sessions are planned and conducted. The NGP VAN is a database used to long and sort data concerning voters, including how those individuals voted in previous elections. This database is used in the process of canvassing before and after the canvasser goes out, in finding the addresses of those who can be feasibly convinced to vote Democrat, and in logging the responses of those same voters. In the process of phonebanking, this database catalogues the phone numbers and responses of voters, logged by phone bankers on the campaign. Meanwhile, a Votebuilder.com program, called "Virtual Phone Bank," is a crucial tool in phonebanking. The Virtual Phone Bank puts together a list of people who are, for example, scheduled or invited to attend a strategy session at the Campaign Office, and his handy resources to log their RSVP and scheduled volunteer work with the campaign, which phone bankers also ask about. These two sites serve as the back bone of the Democratic Coordinated Campaign, or more accurately, one hemisphere of the "brain" of the Campaign, with the other being the organizers and workers who use these databases.

Phonebanking

 Phonebankers receive a script, which serves as an outline to follow when speaking to people, and a key for how to log canvassing results on burner phones. When phone banking without Votebuilder, a list of numbers is not presented to the phonebanker. Instead, phonebankers dial a number, and enter a "Campaign ID" and a passcode, which changes at regular intervals to access an automated dialing system. The process is similar to canvassing, but with distinct advantages. The system’s databases allow phonebankers to make and keep notes on the people they contact, so that they know how to approach each voter individually. In the case of the average voter, phone bankers log the voter’s position for a specific candidate, their willingness to volunteer to support the candidate, and availability to volunteer. Phone bankers can also note the voter’s stance on issues which concern them, whatever they may be.

 In speaking to voters in the database, the Virtual Phone Bank sorts them by the subject of their last contact. For example, in the case of information strategy sessions, the people being phone banked are pulled from a database of those who had already been invited to the event and said that they would be there. The scope of the phone bankers’ pool of prospective voters is not only limited to their county, where the campaign is based, but also in nearby areas. In the case of the Callaway County campaign, it was not uncommon for phone bankers to speak with voters in Jefferson City.

 This campaign also makes use of "tier lists" in phone banking. Voters are assigned to tier lists based on their location and the likelihood of their positive response to a candidate’s platform. This likelihood is determined through VAN, which contains data about individual voters’ voting tendencies. For instance, those who have volunteered on Democrat campaigns before are placed on the "Tier 1 list," those who have voted for Democratic candidates in the past are placed on a "Tier 2 list" and those who have voted for left-leaning ideas such as the vote against Proposition A, but are otherwise more independent are placed on the lowest tier. Tier lists are used to focus the campaign’s efforts on the most likely respondents in the early stages of the campaign, and then on those who are less likely to respond in the latter stages.

Infrastructure

 The infrastructure of the campaign is pyramid-shaped: volunteers and interns form the base, followed by field officers who coordinate said volunteers and interns. Regional field directors manage the activities of the field officers assigned to certain counties and cities, and a field director who manages all voter contact operations and field initiatives. Field Officers engage in similar duties to volunteers and interns such as canvassing and phone banking. A field officer’s duties also include organizing the actions of volunteers and interns, which involves calling those who have stated their willingness to volunteer in order to confirm a shift of canvassing or phonebanking, scheduling said shifts when they’ve been confirmed, cataloguing the respondent data brought back by canvassers, communicating with regional field directors on the state of affairs, and, with the help of the regional field director, organizing strategy sessions and the like.

 The regional field director’s duties include making regular visits to each office in a given region to get updates on the campaign’s outreach to their community, reporting to the field director, and helping the field officer to organize strategy sessions. The Field Director’s duties are more general, requiring that he or she coordinates the actions of the other officers and devises the initiatives of some to most effectively spread the message of the campaign and secure as many guaranteed votes for the campaign’s candidates as possible. The field directors also set goals for community outreach such as the number of doors each canvasser knocked on and the number of calls made by phone bankers. These goals keep the campaigns’ volunteers and interns motivated to meet them and give them an idea of how well the campaign is doing. The strategy sessions are a way to keep local potential voters and volunteers informed about the stances of all candidates.

 The duties of each member of the campaign at every level are vital to the campaign but would not be nearly so successful without the coordination present between each level of organization. As mentioned, the field officers report to the regional field directors, the regional field directors report to the field director, and all of these regional field directors speak in an all-staff meeting by teleconference. The volunteers and interns do not deal directly with upper management, but the field officers write reports on interns and submit them to the regional field directors.

 Finally, the campaign receives its funding from three principal sources:donors to the state Democratic Party, donors to the campaign, and first-tier candidates buying into the campaign. This funding is distributed in a way that allows the campaign to pay the salaries of its employees and to reimburse volunteers who drive for their gas and mileage used on the campaign.

Field Officer Duties

 The duties of a field officer require more attention be given to those working on the campaign daily than typical canvassing and phone banking work, as well as a working knowledge of most of the functions of the campaign. It is necessary for the field officer to open the office for the day and lock it when no one is present. When the field officer arrives, he or she sets up the computer and Votebuilder account so that he or she can phonebank as soon as possible. The field officer also needs to prepare the packets with routes for canvassing each day.

 During my time on the Democratic Coordinated Campaign, I briefly fulfilled the duties of Callaway County’s field officer for two days, while the field officer was indisposed. The first duty which I performed in the morning was to call from a list of people who had previously expressed a willingness to canvass or phonebank. This list is changed daily to include everyone who has offered to volunteer on that day, including interns, and is updated with confirmation that they are reporting for their shift, that they won’t be able to come in for whatever reason, or that they have "flaked," meaning that they haven’t come in and have yet to give a reason why. Any additional information is noted as necessary and is used to ensure that the campaign keeps a good record of its volunteers and their availability.

Get-Out-The-Vote

 The latter phase of the campaign is a crunch period, known as Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV). This is a standard period, which begins during the campaign’s final weeks when organizers and volunteers begin to consolidate the voters who they’ve already contacted in order to maximize turnout for their candidate. Organizers and volunteers do not take on new responsibilities, but rather the responsibilities which they already have increase. In the case of volunteers, for instance, the typical canvassing packet contained an average of 60-80 doors on which to knock, while during GOTV, canvassing packets now contain an average of 100-120 doors. The field organizer’s workload increases to the extent that knowledgeable or experienced volunteers are assigned to assist others who are performing the same tasks in order to free up the supervisor to meet his responsibilities during GOTV. For instance, a volunteer who has experience phonebanking will assist other phonebanking volunteers. This is also a trying time for morale; in the case of the 2018 Missouri Senatorial Election, the tight nature of the race between Claire McCaskill and Josh Hawley caused us to lost many volunteers who otherwise were willing to canvas or phonebank during a more lax period.

 During this time, canvassing responsibilities are less focused on outreach and partisanship. During GOTV, canvassers are focused on ensuring that voters who have stated their intention to support their candidate go to the polls, as well as on making sure that they remain informed of their right to vote. For instance, it is the canvasser’s duty to inform these voters that they do not need a valid photo ID to vote, and that not having one should not be a reason for anyone to keep them from voting. The process of canvassing will also involve a greater insistence on the part of the canvasser that voters sign commit-to-vote cards, to get as close to a guarantee as the campaign can get that those who sign the cards will go out to vote.

 Get-Out-The-Vote, as a phase of the campaign that involves a major shift in priority, necessitates a change in how the campaign functions. These changes are to ease the pressure placed upon the local campaign’s sparse staff, which comes from the increased workload of GOTV. These changes involved the addition of renaming certain positions of the campaign staff and the division of activities in the field office into three "buckets." Four roles comprise each "bucket." The four roles are either added to the already existing roles in the campaign office or new roles entirely. The first of these is the staging location director, whose responsibilities are similar in nature to that of the field organizer. A staging location director is responsible for contacting and recruiting volunteers, doing same-day confirmation calls of volunteer shifts and rescheduling shifts, which cannot be completed as shceduled for one reason or another. The canvass director is in charge of managing the capacity in the field office, assuming the staging location director’s responsibilities during reporting times, leading canvass training, managing turf and keeping track of volunteers out canvassing. Then there is the Recruitment Strikeforce, members of the campaign office, and acting as the office’s last line of overflow support when it comes to handling volunteers. Finally, there is the Flex, or Flexes, who are field officers from other offices who function in a role almost indistinguishable from field officers, and fill in for them when needed. The underlying focus of these roles is to ensure that the maximum number of volunteers are on hand to ensure the highest possible voter turnout and that the workload undertaken during GOTV can be managed by the current staff.

 The three "buckets" of activity refer to the broad responsibilities, of which each of these four new roles engage in at least one. The first of these "buckets" is Staging Location Management and Volunteer Coordination, which entails reporting shift numbers to the regional field director at set times, leading on same day confirms and "flake chases," calling to volunteers who haven’t made their shifts, rescheduling, and recruiting volunteers. Capacity Management is the second "bucket," and includes responsibilities such as supporting canvass training, making check-in calls, turf tracking and management, and performing intake and outtake. Finally, there is the third "bucket," Prospecting, which entails providing support on confirmation calls, prospecting dials, dialing voters and potential volunteers on the campaign’s call lists, and performing more general duties.