



Civic Engagement and the Canvass

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How does working as a canvasser for a local campaign run by one of the largest canvassing organizations in the United States affect levels of civic engagement? And how does canvassing for such an organization serve as an entry point into other forms of civic engagement? This paper summarizes the findings of a multi-method study that examines the civic engagement of the young people who worked for the 2003 summer canvass.¹ In summer 2003, the project's research team studied six campaign offices that were stratified by region and randomly selected. In many ways, the canvass epitomizes the connection between local organizing and national politics: several canvasses are nationally coordinated and aim to achieve broad political goals through the mobilization of local citizens. In other words, the summer canvass builds political support for social issues that have legislative pertinence, educating citizens face-to-face about the state of affairs on the national and/or state-level. Throughout summer 2003, the project's research team observed these young people being trained in organizing skills and educated about the issues that they discussed with citizens at their doors and on the streets. During the second half of 2004, follow-up interviews were conducted with this cohort of canvassers.

This paper summarizes the major results of the project, which include a quantitative comparison of our sample of canvassers to a national sample and the major qualitative themes that emerged from initial semi-structured open-ended interviews with the 2003 cohort of summer canvassers and follow-up interviews with two-thirds of the cohort a year later. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses are separated into two sections. First, the study explores what sections of the population are drawn to participate in political and service-oriented work such as the summer canvass, focusing on who canvasses and why. This section also discusses how these young people became involved in the canvass and briefly describes the work. Second, we present a framework for understanding the perspectives of different canvassers, breaking them down into four categories: Go-getters, Centrists, Disaffecteds, and Vanguarders. In this section, we also discuss the key themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews. In short, we find that the canvass attracts politically knowledgeable and left-leaning young people who tend to feel that they can make a difference but do not know how. By looking at the canvassers political identities and how they perceive the politics of the canvass, we gain a better understanding of who stays at this job and why.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the 2004 Presidential election, questions about the ways that American citizens participate in politics and civics continue to be topics of central concern to academics and politicians alike. In recent years, scholars have been increasingly interested in issues of civic engagement at the international (e.g. Curtis et al. 1992, 2001; Lijphart 1997; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001; Wuthnow 1991a; see also Edwards et al. 2001), national (e.g. Brady et al. 1999; Putnam 1995, 1996, 2000; Schudson 1998; Skocpol 1996; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Skocpol et al. 2000; Sirianni and Friedland 2001; Verba et al. 1995) and sub-national levels (e.g. Eckstein 2001; Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 1996; Oesterle et al. 2004; Ostrander 2004; see also Putnam 1993 for a study of civic traditions in regions of Italy). Of particular concern to researchers in the United States is the apparent withdrawal of citizen involvement in political and social life in America. Perhaps Putnam best describes this phenomenon in his seminal work (2000: 402): "Americans today feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected." Similarly, in the introduction to the updated edition of their well-know work on individualism and commitment in American life, Bellah et al. find public life in America is fading and there is increasing pressure to disengage from American society (1996). These findings have been corroborated by scholars who work on multiple aspects of the political system—from voting behavior (e.g. Levine and Lopez 2002; Nie et al. 1979; Piven and Cloward 1988, 2000; Reiter 1979; Verba et al. 1995; but see McDonald and Popkin 2001), to social capital, political trust, volunteering and participation more broadly defined (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1995, 1996, 2000; Eliasoph 1998; see also Smith 1994 for a literature review of voluntary association participation). These results are, by no means, universal. A number of scholars have come to conflicting results (e.g. Boyte and Kari 1996; Eckstein 2001; Paxton 1999; Rotolo 1999; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Sirianni and Friedland 2001; Wuthnow 2004), in many cases focusing on

the ways that Americans do engage civically—via professional organizations (e.g. Skocpol 1996; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Skocpol et al. 2000), and religious groups (e.g. Wuthnow 1991b, 2004). In fact, some studies have found that Americans' disengagement is overstated (e.g. McDonald and Popkin 2001; Paxton 1999; Rotolo 1999). In her multiple indicator approach to social capital in the United States, for example, Paxton finds that, although Americans' trust in individuals declined between 1975-1994, their levels of trust in institutions and associations did not wane (1999). In the words of Skocpol, "Americans are finding new ways to relate to one another and accomplish shared tasks" (emphasis in original, 1999: 499; see also Skocpol et al. 2000; Sirianni and Friedland 2001).

Particularly when looking at young Americans, however, scholars have found that youth voter turnout is down (Levine and Lopez 2002; but see CIRCLE Fact Sheet 2004 for analysis of the 2004 election) and young people tend not to engage, at least not in traditional ways (e.g. Easterlin and Crimmins 1991; Olander 2003). In the words of Curtis Gans, the director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, during a recent interview on National Public Radio, "A majority of young people are now growing up in families, both of whose parents don't vote; large majorities don't discuss politics" (NPR Morning Edition 2004).² As a result, scholars such as Boyte have identified the need for civic education (1993). In his own words, this type of learning "enhances professionalism understood as civic craft, while it also allows students to claim and develop a larger, interactive civic identity on the public stage" (p. 764; see also Ostrander 2004 for a comparison of civic engagement on five university campuses). The benefits of the civic engagement of young people have become widely known. In their study of volunteerism and crime, for example, Uggen and Janikula (1999) find that high school juniors and seniors who work as volunteers are significantly less likely to commit crimes (as measured by self-reported arrest). Similarly, Keeter et al. find the youngest generation—15 to 25 year-olds, whom

they call the DotNets—to be much more tolerant than older generations (2002).

A related literature on volunteerism and the life cycle provides some additional insights into civic engagement (e.g. Babchuck and Booth 1969; Knoke and Thomson 1977; Oesterle et al. 2004; Rotolo 1999, 2000; Sundeen 1990). In their recent article in *Social Forces*, Oesterle et al. focus their analyses on understanding how volunteerism changes as young people transition to adulthood.³ They find that the explanations of volunteerism are life-stage specific. With regard to the “presumed disengagement of the contemporary younger generation from the political process and civic life, as well as its greater individualism and materialism” (2004: 1124), the authors find that there is what they call a continuity in volunteering (2004); those who volunteered during high school were much more likely to continue. In a related analysis of the effects of life cycle transitions on voluntary association membership, Rotolo (2000) comes to somewhat different conclusions when he looks at a broader age range, finding a curvilinear relationship between age and membership in voluntary organizations: transitions such as marriage, and the birth of a child have significant effects on voluntary participation. What remains to be seen, however, is whether young people who come to engage in their early 20s experience a similar continuity in volunteering and how the experience of working on a canvass affects those who have participated.

This paper builds off of the existing research to explore one of the more prevalent ways that young people in America get involved. Participants in this study represent some of the more civically engaged young Americans: they worked during summer 2003 as canvassers for one of the largest canvassing organizations in the United States. As canvassers, they went door-to-door or stood on the street, recruiting and renewing memberships for organizations that included top national environmental, consumer, human rights, and child-assistance groups.⁴ This project tracks a cohort of canvassers who worked for canvass

offices around the United States in summer 2003. Because of the long hours, strenuous work, and low pay, canvassers tend to be young people (in summer 2003, the mean age of the sample was 22 years old). Even though canvasses are run year-round, the majority of canvassing gets done over the summer, when satellite campaign offices spring up all over the United States and employ college students to work for them over their vacations. With concerns about the waning political and civic participation of younger cohorts of Americans (e.g. Easterlin and Crimmins 1991; see also Olander 2003), the findings of this study will contribute significantly to our understanding of the young people who do engage in politics and civics in America.

This paper summarizes the findings of this project. During the first summer of the project, in 2003, one hundred and fifteen canvassers were formally interviewed at six regionally stratified randomly selected canvass offices around the United States.⁵ In addition, all of the canvassers filled out a survey that was adapted from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES) Civic Involvement Interviews to compare their levels of civic engagement to the general population. NHES, a set of studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, are conducted on a nationally representative sample of adolescents and young adults. During the second half of 2004, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with the sample of 2003 summer canvassers.⁶ Follow-up interviews asked the canvassers about their current levels of civic engagement, as well as for them to reflect on their experiences with the canvass. The paper is broken down into four sections. First, we briefly introduce canvassing. Second, we discuss who self-selected into working for the canvass and why by comparing the canvassers to a national sample of young people. Third, we discuss how young people become involved, what they did as canvassers, and how we can understand who stayed at the canvass and why, focusing on the key themes that emerged during the qualitative portion of our study. Fourth and finally, we discuss the

implications of our findings and outline the ways that they will be distributed.

CASE SELECTION—STUDYING CANVASSERS

Although some scholars have studied the people who go door-to-door for political campaigns (e.g. Bartell and Bouxsein 1973; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992), to date, very few people have studied those canvasses that are run by non-profit organizations. Perhaps Harry Boyte, a senior advisor to the National Commission on Civic Renewal, best describes the purpose of this style of canvassing: it is “a method for large scale [citizen] mobilizations to counter corporate pressure to roll back environmental, consumer, affirmative action, and other government regulations” (2001: 3). Every summer, thousands of young people in the United States work at the campaign offices of non-profit organizations in what is called the “summer canvass.” Enticed by the idea that they could “be part of the solution” and take their “conscience to work,” they spend their summer vacations going door-to-door or standing on the street, recruiting and renewing memberships for organizations that include top national environmental, consumer, human rights, and child-assistance groups. In fact, in a recent study of the civic and political health of the nation, Keeter et al. found that over 7 percent of participants between the ages of 15-37 had participated in a canvass at one time or another (2002).⁷

Each summer, the largest canvassing organization in the United States runs between 55-75 canvass offices around the country.⁸ In an estimation provided by a member of the national staff, the 2001 summer canvass had over 275 canvass directors who oversaw the thousands of young people who participated in the 2001 canvass. Based on observations during data collection, the 2003 canvass was of a similar size. The sheer volume of the canvass allows the organization to run campaigns for multiple social movement organizations. In the words of the organization’s Website, “Individual organizations...hire [us] to accomplish specific objectives, including building

a membership, generating political support for an issue, or raising funds. [We], in turn, hire a staff of canvass directors, ...canvassers,...and others to carry out our assigned objectives.” In summer 2003, for example, the organization ran canvasses for multiple social movement organizations with goals as diverse as poverty alleviation, rights for same-sex partnerships, and environmental goals. Because it is one of the largest canvassing organizations in America and runs canvasses for many other national organizations, it provides an ideal opportunity to look at the civic engagement of young people participating in the canvass as a unique tool for political organizing. In summer 2003, some of these campaign offices sent canvassers more than an hour away to garner support for local and national political initiatives.⁹

WHO GETS INVOLVED AND WHY? COMPARING CANVASSERS TO A NATIONAL SAMPLE

Throughout summer 2003, the project’s research team observed over 200 young people being trained in organizing skills and educated about the issues that they discussed with citizens at their doors and on the streets.¹⁰ In contrast to those scholars that have found citizens to be less involved in democratic activities (see for example Putnam 2000; Eliasoph 1998), the summer canvass has become a popular tool for a diverse array of organizations and it exposes thousands of young people a year to political work. As such, studying canvassers provides an ideal opportunity to understand how engaged Americans’ levels of civic engagement change over time. Because canvassers tend to be young people, studying them will also provide data about engaged young people who are going through the transition to adulthood. Oesterle et al. highlight the importance of studying this age group when they say it is a “crucial time during which lifelong trajectories of civic participation are formed” (2004: 1129).

During the project’s first year, one hundred and fifteen canvassers were formally interviewed and surveyed at six regionally stratified randomly selected canvasses around the country.

Analyses of the survey results provide a general understanding about who worked for the canvass in summer 2003 and why. Overall, the canvass participants were young people with a mean age of 21.93; over 60% of whom were enrolled in school in 2003. In comparison with a national sample of young people over the age of 18 who were surveyed through the National Household Education Surveys (NHES),¹¹ this cohort of canvassers was much more knowledgeable about the American political process, was significantly more civically minded, and was more engaged in politics than the general population of young people in summer 2003. Also, in comparison to the national sample, canvassers read the newspaper and talked about politics significantly more. The differences between the means of the two samples for all four of these variables was statistically significant at the .0001 level. Table 1 presents the results of the comparison of means between the two samples.

Beyond developing an understanding of the young people who elected to work for the canvass, preliminary analyses of these data provide some explanation regarding why these young people chose to work for the 2003 summer canvass. Canvassers gave several reasons for spending the summer with the organization. Some came for the money, but most came to make a difference in the world. As one canvasser explains:

"I needed a summer job, but beyond that, I was just looking for something that would be worthwhile on another level, you know, other than just something that earns money and I've had a definite interest and passion for environmentalism for a long time but haven't really been able to get fully involved in them at school ..."
(Canvasser 571, Boulder).

Table 1: Comparison of Means Between the NHES Sample and Canvassers for Selected Variables¹²

Variable	T-Statistic	Significance
Political Knowledge	7.422	.000
Civic Awareness	10.104	.000
How Often Reads the News	3.926	.000
How Often Talks about Politics	14.169	.000

In other words, the young people who self-selected into working as a canvasser were significantly more engaged than the general population of young people in the United States.¹³

Throughout the interviews, the research team found that many canvassers had similar predispositions: they wanted to become involved in political and/or environmental issues. In contrast to the engaged young people in the Oesterle

et al. study who had been engaged since high school (2004), this cohort of canvassers was only starting to become civically engaged. Some were environmental studies or political science majors before coming to the organization, but few had any environmental or political experience. They had the knowledge and knew how to become involved, but lacked the time or incentive to act. The canvass provided them with an opportunity to express their political leanings and get paid for their work. As the following interview excerpt illustrates:

“Q: Did you have any political or environmental experience before you started working in the office here?”

A: Explain experience. I mean I’ve always cared... my family has always been involved, but I have never worked for an environmental group” (Canvasser 958, Portland).

The canvass office experience supports the development of a community of activists. New canvassers draw energy from their peers. With so many committed young people in a room rallying each other through chants and cheers, it is easy to become more involved. Many canvassers reported knowing few people before coming into the canvass, but making friends with just about everyone in the office. As one canvasser explains, although the money and the work drew him in, it is the community that made him stay:

“Well no I actually don’t even care about the money now. Like my goal was just to get \$1500 cuz I needed a computer and I needed to buy a bed and stuff for going back to school, but...I already made that in my first two paychecks, you

know, so...I’m just here because I want to, I want to do this. I mean the people here are so inspiring, like they’re so positive and I don’t know, like, I really look forward to going to work every day” (Canvasser 916, Portland).

In fact, as summer 2003 progressed, many canvassers found that canvassing was a great way to experience democracy-in-action. Most of the canvassers involved in the study agreed that, through the canvass, they could effectively address political and environmental issues. For the canvassers, the political process in the United States prevented people from participating fully. Canvassers understood that people were busy with work and other distractions. They took their position as paid activists as a privilege. Some claimed that canvassing was a way to bring political power to more people. As one canvasser explained:

“Yes. I feel like [canvassing is] the best [way of confronting political problems]. I feel like there’s such a problem with ignorance and apathy and not that that’s necessarily a fault of the public. I feel like the political system is kind of amorphous to a lot of people and that...not everyone gets to be a political activist as their job. This is a way to shift the power from the legislator to the public. So we’re going around talking to regular people and if they don’t get involved, they at least know something” (Canvasser 239, San Diego).

Although many canvassers felt as though the American political system did not afford people the opportunity to become involved, they saw the role of the canvasser as not simply being an activist, but giving citizens an opportunity to act politically and shaping the form that these citizens' participation took. Going door-to-door gives these young people a chance to participate in the political process on a regular basis, not just during elections and, as most canvassers agreed, though canvassing, they made a difference. As Canvasser 274 in San Diego notes:

"[The work we do is] to raise people's awareness about what's going on. A lot of people you talk to, they want to get involved, they are happy to see you at the door. They don't have means, a lot of people they, they have lives to live, they have bills to pay, but when you come knocking on their door, you're giving them opportunity to not only learn about what's going on but giv[ing] them an opportunity to change that...and a lot of people seek out that opportunity but they're not exactly sure how to go about it, and I think that what the canvass does is really give people an opportunity to change things...They're actually making a difference put[ting] pressure on politicians, you know, when the public is informed and knows what's going on, you know, they're a lot more likely to do something about it than if they're sitting and watching Friends on Tuesday night."

Another canvasser, 558 from Atlanta, adds:

"I definitely make a difference in terms of raising that awareness and, of course, getting [to] the people who are already out there who are already supportive. I meet people every day who are, you know, basically practically waiting for me...I come to their door and they're, like, 'oh, you know, this is exactly what I want to do...I want to make a difference.' It's just like they are waiting for that opportunity in the most perfect of ways and this is, like, an ideal chance for them to really say... 'Yeah I did feel helpless, I didn't think there was anything I can do.'"

Other canvassers pointed to specific successes, linking their actions on the ground to political outcomes at the state and/or national level. In short, although canvassers provided a diversity of reasons why they joined in the first place, most stayed at the canvass in summer of 2003 because they felt that canvassing gave them the opportunity to engage actively in the political process. As part of the semi-structured interviews, data were also collected about the canvassers' intentions regarding their political and environmental engagement after summer 2003. Many respondents said that they would continue to canvass the next summer if given the opportunity. In fact, of the canvassers whom we interviewed, more than 65% said that they were interested in canvassing in 2004.

These intentions were also reflected in the differences between the canvassers and young people in the National Household Education Surveys sample. In contrast to the national sample, of the canvassers who were returning

to school in the fall, 98% reported intending to become involved in service in the following year.¹⁴ These intentions were examined during follow-up interviews in the second half of 2004. Of the participants in the follow-up interviews, only a small percentage are still working for the canvass. Although participation in the canvass after one year is less than expected, these young people continue to be civically engaged. Again, in comparison to the national sample, canvassers were significantly more politically and civically active. In a comparison of an aggregate variable of civic and political action in the past twelve months,¹⁵ the difference between the means of the two samples was statistically significant at the .0001 level. Table 2 presents the results of the comparison of means between the two samples.¹⁶

Table 2: Comparison Between the NHES Sample and Canvassers for Action

Variable	T-Statistic	Significance
Civic and Political Action	11.660	.000

In other words, one year later, these young people continued to be significantly more politically and civically engaged than the general population of young people in the United States. Although the sample of canvassers did not get involved until they were in their early 20s, the results of the project suggest that there may be what Oesterle et al. call a continuity in volunteering for people who have become civically engaged by canvassing (2004).

UNDERSTANDING VARIATIONS AMONG CANVASSERS

As has been noted above, canvassers are consistently more civically engaged than a comparable national sample of young people. Canvassers are predisposed to civic involvement and the canvass channels those dispositions into organizationally driven goals. Such findings open the discussion to broader questions about the individuals who choose to canvass: How do young people become involved with the canvass? In what

ways do these young people choose to engage civically?

Examination of the interview data provides a deeper understanding about the ways that the experience of canvassing affects the young people who participate. In the pages that follow, we present the results of analyses of the open-ended semi-structured interviews with members of the 2003 summer canvass. The results break down into five major themes: activism, retention, commitment, consolidation, and goals. Each one will be addressed in turn.

ACTIVISM

As has been previously stated, the canvass attracts politically concerned young people, many of whom

know how to get involved in politics, but lack the time or incentive to act alone. It provides them with an opportunity to express their political leanings and get paid for their work. In many ways, the canvass channels canvassers' politics and practices according to larger, organizational goals. Canvassers and higher-level staff consider themselves activists, but activism has a very specific meaning in the context of the organization: going door-to-door to generate support for the issue in the form of membership and money. Canvassers do not march in the streets or take part in rallies, at least not on the organization's time; to be a canvasser is to be a foot soldier for the campaign. Beyond raising money, they are expected to write letters to politicians about the campaigns and submit opinion pieces to local newspapers—in both cases, the organization provides forms that the canvasser may use or customize.

Canvassers included in the sample gave several reasons for joining the canvass. Some did it strictly

for the money. Most who identified making money as their primary motivation for joining, however, did not last very long at the job. Canvassers work long hours for little remuneration. As has been noted above, others joined the canvass to become more involved in politics. Although all of the canvassers included in our study were relatively politically progressive, their political orientations were distributed along the left side of the political spectrum: from mainstream Democrats to self-avowed anarchists.

The sample of canvassers can be broken down into four conceptual categories based on each canvasser’s personal politics and his/her perceptions of the canvass’ politics: Go-getters, Vanguarders, Centrists, and Disaffecteds.

leaning ideologies and they recognize a similar ideology in the canvass. These canvassers consider themselves to be professional activists and they see their work as proselytizing for the left. They think of people on their canvass routes as be under- or mis-informed about the issues and potentially hostile to the message of the canvass. As a result, the Vanguarders tend to see their job as canvassers to convert people; canvassing is a means of lifting the veil of the false consciousness of most Americans. Canvasser 326 from San Diego expresses typical Vanguard sentiment:

I had like my own microcosmic understanding of hegemonic politics but no really constructive outlet to deal with that other

		Individual politics	
Individual’s perception of canvass politics		Center-left	Radical-left
	Center-left	Go-getters	Disaffected
	Radical-left	Centrists	Vanguarders

Go-getters are those individuals whose personal politics are most closely aligned with those of the canvass: they tend to view fundraising as a necessary part of any political campaign and realize that, as canvassers, they help to support the lobbying activities of the organization. Go-getters are likely to see their work as informing people about the issues that are of social import. They are likely to think of the people on their routes as in agreement with the political goals of the organization, but lacking an appropriate outlet for their voices to be heard. Go-getters consider democracy an effective political system, but one that does not always work properly. Therefore, they see canvassing as a way of making the system work better.

Vanguarders also find their politics to be aligned with those of the campaign. In contrast to the Go-getters, however, they have more radical left-

than telling my friends about all these issues that I was learning about. I answered the classified ad shortly after graduating from high school, I was looking for a job and definitely looked at the activist thing. I guess I’ll call myself an activist. I’m definitely pissed off, but I’m not sure that I had anything really constructive so I came into the canvass and learned a lot of the really basic skills for talking to somebody about an issue that I was really concerned about....I could come out [to someone’s door] and talk to people that had pretty much the same concerns you know as I did but felt marginalized. I had the idea that, yeah, maybe we’re all getting fucked together. It [the canvass] has become one of the more productive outlets, institutionally

that, I can involve myself with. I feel like I walk out and canvass and I'm really representing what most people are thinking but don't feel like can be accomplished.

For the Go-Getters and Vanguarders, who perceive their politics as aligning with the politics of the canvass, canvassing is seen as an ideal job. Consequently, these people are most likely to stay at the job. Canvasser 326 above started in March 2003 and planned to continue canvassing long after summer 2003.¹⁷

Under conditions in which the individual's politics are not aligned with that of the canvass, however, canvassers are not likely to stay at the job for long. Centrists, for example, come to the office wanting to do something good for the world, but tend to find the politics of the canvass too radical. Most of the people who cited money as their main reason for joining the canvass fall into this category: they come in for the first few days, but find too little ideological alignment between their personal politics and those of the canvass to justify the low pay and long hours. As canvasser 841 from Portland described her motivations:

Well I liked [the canvass] for practical reasons, they were hiring for the summer, they were looking for summer help, and I was getting paid to do it because a lot of the internships were unpaid. Not that I'm like here just for the money but it obviously is one of the main reasons.

Aside from writing letters to politicians, this canvasser had little volunteer experience prior to coming to the canvass. Because she was receiving college credit for her time at the canvass, she worked there for the three months of her summer break.

In some cases, canvassers who arrive at the campaign as Centrists experience a conversion to Go-getters as they learn the effect they can make on individuals through canvassing. Canvasser 704

from Boulder explains his conversion:

You get more used to talking to people, you pay less attention to the people who are like not interested or not willing to give you anything, or who are just downright mean to. You pay more attention to the people who are saying you make such a big difference, thank you for being out here, and so it makes up for it 10 times. That's why I stayed. You just see the difference and then you learn more about the issues so then it makes you want to stay. Like I said, I wasn't involved in any kind of political thing [before coming to the canvass]. When I came in here I didn't know what to expect. I had no opinion as far as anything about the environment. I didn't know exactly what we were doing but to just learn more about the issue, and you see it. I've talked to people who are on the other side and you see what they're saying, you know, so just it makes you want to stay.

After going through such a conversion, in fact, this canvasser decided to become a canvass staff member.

The Disaffecteds, however, are much less likely to experience such a conversion, as they find their personal politics more left-leaning than that of the canvass. These canvassers are often professed anarchists who dabble in revolutionary politics. They become involved with the canvass to be paid to live out their political leanings. Upon working at the canvass office, many Disaffecteds become bothered by the canvass' focus on money and fundraising. They also tend to be concerned about its mainstream tactics and attempts to change the system from within. Disaffected canvassers may stay longer than centrists, but often express disappointment in the organization's institutional

goals. In addition, time on the beat can be discouraging, with so many doors being closed or donations denied. The canvass office, however, can be an exciting environment. And many canvassers learn to tune out the negative in favor of the positive, at least for a time.

RETENTION

Although a number of people who work for the canvass find a niche within the organization and stay on, both while they are in college through the organization's student programs and permanently after graduation, they are the minority. Most people don't make it past the first week and many not past the first day. In the words of Canvasser 769 from the Portland office: "There were 19 observers the day I came in. The other...field manager who just quit and I were the only ones left [after three weeks]."

Similarly, a canvasser in the Boulder office discussed the turnover:

"There's been a pretty high turnover rate 'cause a lot of people are just, it's just not the right thing for them, which I can certainly understand...There was one week that I had an observer, like a new person, every single day of the week and that gets a little old after a while...Some people that I've trained have stayed around for like 3 weeks...but there are definitely some [who only stuck around] 2 or 3 days" (Canvasser 103).

COMMITMENT

As has been previously mentioned, canvassing is very hard work and the organization expects long hours. Canvassers spend about six hours a day going door-to-door or standing on a street corner, but they must get to the office at least an hour before going out to turf and come back to the

office after canvassing to record their results from the day and check-out. A typical canvasser's day begins at the office. When they arrive, canvassers warm-up by practicing canvassing for about an hour. Afterwards, they attend a staff meeting, during which the staff members motivate them to go out for the day. Following the staff meeting, canvassers disperse to their assigned routes, where they spend the next six hours. Upon returning to the office, canvassers must record their day's work and check out with a manager.

The day does not end with checking out. Most canvassers also reported participating in what could be called organized socializing after work. On any given day, the office will plan a pizza night or a get-together with another office, which canvassers are expected to attend. As a result of this type of perpetual socializing, members of the canvass office quickly make friends. At the same time, those who have lives outside the office are severely limited in their free time, and some canvassers reported personal relationships—with partners, family members, and friends—suffering. Consequently, many canvassers quickly burn out. In the words of one canvasser: "I left because I was getting really burned out...I didn't feel like I needed to be sacrificing my health to be out there every single day talking to people who were, like, it was taking an emotional and psychic toll on me, as well as physical. So I decided that I kind of had had enough....Everybody says [that] it's coming too, I mean, it happens" (Canvasser 569, Portland).

THE CONSOLIDATION OF CANVASSING

In the past five years, canvassing has exploded as a form of gaining grassroots support for national and state-centered political campaigns. Although originally run by the offices of multiple national organizations, the grassroots campaigns for left-leaning organizations have been consolidated. Instead of each organization running campaign offices around the country that train and manage canvassers to work on their grassroots campaigns, it is easier and less expensive for one organization to be paid to run them all. Therefore, beginning in the late 1990s, many progressive national

organizations began to outsource their grassroots campaigns.

This consolidation of grassroots activism has had serious effects on the way that these grassroots campaigns take place. Outsourcing organizations no longer have to run local offices or train canvassers to conduct grassroots outreach. Instead, they have only to sign up with the organization and trained canvassers will go door-to-door or stand on the street on their behalf, dressed in the T-shirts of the outsourcing organization. As Canvasser 758 in Portland put it, "in a given week, I'll canvas on three different campaigns." Canvassers are expected to work on whatever is the campaign of the day: they cannot necessarily choose based on their personal interests. In cases where the campaign office is running more than one campaign at a time, which happens relatively often during the summer, the office chooses which campaign a particular canvasser will work on, based on the needs of the office and/or the canvasser's interests.

One of the canvassers in the sample used to be the director of a local campaign office of Greenpeace, which now outsources its canvass. Observing the effects of outsourcing first hand, he noted that canvassers are no longer trained "to be very knowledgeable and very articulate about the issues and, then, you just kind of let them go and talk to people." It has become "much more of a science" (Canvasser 542). The canvass is remarkably efficient; it trains young people and gets them out in the field raising money for their campaigns in a matter of hours. Having canvassed for many years for both organizations, this canvasser observed the changes that took place as a result of this consolidation first hand: the canvassing organization "really does have this kind of assembly line, industrial model in mind where they figure that anybody who can walk, talk, and carry a clipboard, they can teach them how to canvass" (Canvasser 542). Anyone who does not show potential in his/her first few days by raising what is determined to be quota for that particular office is let go.

With the consolidation of canvassing by one organization, not only does the organization have different expectations of canvassers, but the entire process has become more centralized: most campaign decisions are made outside the campaign offices. During a follow-up interview in spring 2004, a canvasser reflected on his time with the Ann Arbor canvass the previous summer:

"It's very top-down...There is no accountability from the membership to the leadership and...there are very few attempts on the part of leadership to leverage that membership into more directed political power...I think that sort of mirrors the problem of agency and commitment on the part of canvassers...If people felt that they had power and that the organization responds to their needs, they would be more willing to commit themselves to the organization in terms of both employees and in terms of membership" (Canvasser 795).

GOALS

Related to these recent changes in canvassing are the changes in the goals of the canvass. Raising money is an explicit goal of the canvass. It is not touted as the primary goal, but getting people to write checks or provide a credit card is an important part of what canvassers do.

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

The canvass makes no secret of its expectations for the season. Each canvass office had posted fundraising and membership targets on the walls, at times decorated with colorful paints or markers and decorated with sparkles or streamers. Some canvass offices had novel ways of displaying their

progress toward fundraising goals. Images of thermometers, growing trees, or simply bar charts adorned the walls. In one office, the organization took to collecting bricks, adding one to their homemade wall for every \$1,000 the canvassers collect. The money that canvassers collect goes to all of the different aspects of running such a grassroots campaign including: staff salaries, overhead, and lobbying efforts. Some canvassers expressed concerns about the ways the money was being distributed among these categories.

INDIVIDUAL GOALS

In contrast to the relatively instrumental goals of the organization, most canvassers considered their primary task to be making the public aware of political and environmental issues. The corporations and politicians have the money, they reason, so the canvassers were here to tip back the scales of justice.

Canvassers, however, had several targets against which their productivity was measured. At the end of the day when canvassers returned to the office, they would tally their day's receipts accompanied by some loud, upbeat music. They counted how many members they signed up, the numbers of signatures they got on petitions, but most importantly, each canvasser calculated how much money they raised for the canvass. Curiously, when we asked canvassers how they knew they were doing a good job, they replied that they made "quota" for the day. "Quota" refers to the minimum amount of money canvassers are expected to collect each day.

Failure to meet quota has consequences. Canvassers were aware that, if they went too many days without making quota, they would be let go. There was no consensus from the canvassers or their managers, however, about how many days below quota were tolerable. Field managers often reported that a canvasser's success was determined by his/her enthusiasm and ability to make quota. If the canvasser was enthusiastic and had promise, s/he would be given more time to get the hang of the work.

Individual quotas were a source of considerable stress for canvassers. However many people they got to sign their petitions or to become members, at the end of the day, it was the money that the canvassers felt mattered most to the office.

Since a canvasser earns most of his/her money on commission, the amount of money brought into the organization is important, not simply because it ensures job retention, but also because it makes it possible to maintain a minimum standard of living. One woman reported: "I liked the work but I wasn't doing a very good job. They kind of wanted, you know, an average quota each week, they wanted us to bring in a certain amount of contributions and I wasn't...Maybe I'm just not a very good salesperson or something...but I wasn't doing very well" (Canvasser 500, Ann Arbor). After her experience with the canvass, this woman decided that she was not meant for activism. Since leaving, she has held many jobs—including a stint with UPS. When the research team followed-up with her in spring 2004, she had been working for a company that handles insurance claims for over six months.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of the major findings of this project. As many scholars have acknowledged, there are significant qualitative differences between mail-in membership, monetary contributions and donations of time (e.g. Putnam 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Canvassing is much more than armchair activism. By gaining a clearer picture of how the experience of canvassing affects the young people who participate, we can understand by gaining a clearer picture of how the experience of canvassing affects the young people who participate, we learn more about some of the most civically engaged members of the younger generations.

Theoretically, this study promises to clarify and assess important arguments from the literature on civic engagement. It will provide data for what has become an overly theoretical discussion about

civic engagement and civil society. In addition, it will link to very related but detached debate within the empirical work on volunteerism and the life cycle. Because of the geographical diversity of the sample, results of this project will go beyond the single case-study approach to allow for comparisons of youth engagement and change over time throughout the United States. On a more general level, the results of this project will identify opportunities for the development of tools for civic innovation that further harness the strengths of the summer canvass. In other words, this project will contribute to the development of what Boyte calls "approaches that take the lessons of recent democratic experiments and generalize them across society" (1999: 6).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this project stir up a number of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the canvass in reducing turnover and increasing retention.

As has been noted within this study, many canvassers do not last more than two or three days. The high level of early turnover wastes precious resources within the canvass office: senior canvassers and office managers spend a large amount of their time recruiting and training new applicants. Additionally, early turnover affects the morale of the whole office as canvassers witness their cohorts shrinking. Because of the seasonal nature of the work, it is impossible to eliminate turnover at canvass offices completely, but much can be done to maximize the probability that those who are trained to be canvassers will take to the work.

- Create threshold requirements for applicants—most canvassers learned about the canvass through flyers and ads in community newspapers. As a result, applicants are extremely diverse and possess limited common backgrounds. This shotgun approach maximizes the number of applicants, but does not maximize the probability that the applicants will be a good fit. Canvassers reported a lack of selectivity at the application level, pointing out that they themselves could predict the success rates of their trainees prior to going out to turf.
- Mobilize canvasser social networks for recruitment—because many canvassers are engaged in progressive communities, either on college campuses or within their communities, their social networks could provide a pool of like-minded applicants. In offices that utilized the connections of the canvassers, the community appeared much closer and turnover was lower. By providing some sort of incentive for enrolling new canvassers, canvassers would be encouraged to recruit applicants.
- Expand canvasser training—many canvassers reported feeling uninformed in their first few days when people asked them questions in the field. These questions could be answered by providing more training up front. Although training takes up a significant time for the canvass staff, if the recruitment pool were more restricted based on the suggestions above, the overall time devoted to training would not increase significantly. One possible option is for the organization to provide a one-day seminar-style training to give canvassers background about the issues on which they will be working and the organization itself.

Beyond maximizing the success rate of canvassers from the start of their canvassing experience, steps can be taken to improve the retention rates of canvassers. Canvassers reported experiencing high levels of stress and quick rates of burnout, both of which affect their performance as canvassers, as well as the duration of their stay in the office. Much can also be done to reduce stress and limit burnout.

- Improve canvass office culture—canvassers frequently reported that they did not feel appreciated by the organization. Beyond spending time rallying the troops for a successful day of canvassing, there were no standardized support systems within canvass offices. The offices that had such systems, however, tended to have higher morale among canvassers and elevated retention rates.
- Increase transparency within the canvass office—canvassers frequently reported uncertainty regarding their standing with the organization when they did not meet quota. This sentiment was consistent among newer canvassers and those who had been working for the canvass for more than a year. By providing clearly articulated performance targets for canvassers that incorporate how the monetary quotas fit in, stress levels would be reduced.
- Increase transparency within the canvassing

organization—a number of canvassers reported feeling a disconnect between their office, which was working to garner grassroots support for a campaign, and those who were working at the national and/or state level to advocate on behalf of the campaign. By creating standardized avenues connecting those working on the grassroots level to the legislative component of the campaign, the organization would provide canvassers with a broader sense of purpose and the value of their work.

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ENDNOTES

1. Based on the author's Memorandum of Understanding regarding data collection, the organization shall remain anonymous.
2. Available at www.npr.org/rundowns/rundown.php?prgId=3&prgDate=16-Jul-2004 (Accessed 30 July 2004).
3. The authors follow young people in late adolescence (18-19 years old) through young adulthood (26-27 years old).
4. Although these young people appear to be working for different organizations, they are, in fact, working for one organization that runs canvasses for many national and state groups. In summer 2003, for example, the canvassing organization ran more than fifteen campaigns around the country.
5. The six offices—Boulder, Portland, San Diego, Ann Arbor, Baltimore and Atlanta—were selected from a list of 41 campaign offices that were provided by the canvassing organization. A representative from the organization's national office estimates that they run 55-75 offices around the country each summer.
6. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 62 members of the 2003 cohort, which represents approximately two-thirds of the canvassers who agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview and provided contact information.
7. Because most canvassing offices require canvassers to be 18 or older, it is likely that this percentage underestimates the participation of the general population.
8. This number is based on estimates from a representative at the national office. The exact number of campaign offices varies each year.
9. Of the six canvasses that the project studied in summer 2003, it is likely that the Portland canvass sent its canvassers the farthest—with one "camping canvass" going out to Idaho and another planned for later in the summer in Jackson Hole, Wyoming (Principal Investigator, field notes 8 July 2003).
10. Due to the project's agreement with the organization regarding who could be surveyed and interviewed, observers and canvassers in their first two days could not participate in the study. As a result, only 115 of these canvassers participated in the study.
11. The National Household Education Surveys (NHES) is a set of studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, are conducted on a nationally representative sample of adolescents and young adults. Although the NHES includes data collected from 8043 young people, in order to compare with the canvassers in our study—all of whom were at least 18 years old this summer—only the data from the 384 participants in the youth component of the NHES who were 18 or older were included.
12. Based on the results of Levene's Test for Equality of Variance, all statistics were calculated with equal variances assumed.
13. Although it is possible that some of these results are the product of working for the canvass, because most of the study's participants had only worked for the canvass for a short time, it is more likely that they came to the canvass with these pre-existing characteristics.
14. In a comparison of means, the difference between the samples was significant at the .0001 level ($T = -5.703$).
15. The action variable is the aggregate of eight questions about civic and political activity in the past 12 months. The questions range from more civic questions like: Do you participate in any ongoing community service activity, for example, volunteering at a school, coaching a sports team, or working with a church or neighborhood association. To more political questions like: In the past twelve months, have you contributed money to a candidate, a political party, or some political cause? And, in the past twelve months, have you participated in a protest or boycott?

16 . Based on the results of Levene's Test for Equality of Variance, all statistics were calculated with equal variances assumed.

17. Unfortunately, we were unable to reach this canvasser for a follow-up interview in 2004.

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.



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