



Skagit Rural Voices Project

A Rural Deep Values Canvassing Pilot Project

by Indivisible Skagit

Acknowledgments

We want to begin by expressing our deep gratitude to Indivisible National, the Indivisible Rural Caucus Team, The Indivisible Training Team, Organizers Nina Moussavi and Scott Ickes, and to Indivisible VAN Manager Bobby Michaels . Without your support this pilot project would never have been possible. We hope our reporting of our experience contributes to the skills and knowledge base that Indivisible groups across the country are building to impact rural communities.

Brief Background

Beginning in March 2021, Indivisible Skagit began preparing for participation in the National Indivisible Rural Caucus Deep Values Canvassing Pilot project. Several of our members had long been interested in DVC, and we had done one version of a DVC post-election survey following the defeat of a ballot measure supported by IndiSkagit to change the form of Skagit County government. We did a followup voter contact campaign asking what concerns/questions came up for them when making their decision about the ballot measure, their primary information source, and other information sources they used.

That project revealed valuable post-election information, but our canvassers did not feel competent in the method, nor did we feel capable of designing a more comprehensive DVC campaign.

Our members were also strongly drawn to learning to canvass in Skagit's most rural areas where progressives had virtually no direct relationship with voters.

An Opportunity

Having met with us when she first received Washington state in her organizing portfolio, our Indivisible National organizer, Nina Moussavi, listened carefully to our interests. Several of our leadership team had begun participating in the monthly national Rural Caucus calls. We were finding very positive support and peer connection in those meetings.

In January 2021, Nina got word of the Rural Caucus' plan to conduct a rural DVC pilot project, and immediately signed us up. Needless to say, we jumped at the opportunity.

Masterclass-level Training

From late April through June, a group of our interested members participated in the outstanding DVC training developed by the IndiNational Training Team. We were thoroughly trained on DV canvassing techniques, script development, and the planning steps for a DVC campaign. Through the classes themselves, and the ability to use the video and slide decks from the classes, we were able to train a team of 9 DVC canvassers.

Following the formal training, National Organizer for the pilot project, Scott Ickes coached us through our own script development process, and our goal setting for the pilot project.

Comprehensive Tech Support

Once we had our script and had decided on our “canvassing universe”, we worked with IndiNational VAN Manager, Bobby Michaels to create our canvassing lists. We used a combination of paper walk lists (cell service in some of our target areas is unreliable), MiniVAN, and one phone bank to cover the territory we had identified. Bobby was responsive, knowledgeable, and prompt in resourcing us every step of the way. He also trained one of our team to enter the canvassing data from our paper lists, and gave her access to our MiniVan precinct so she could cut the turf based on her local knowledge.

COVID Delays and Weather Challenges

We had hoped to start canvassing by August, but had to wait until IndiNational authorized in person canvassing which did not occur until late September. We had some weeks of good canvassing weather, but then started having to work around early nightfall, flooding, windstorms, snow, and power outages. As a result of these challenges, we finally succeeded in reaching our canvassing goal on March 24, 2022.

Goals/Accomplishments

Train 10 deep values canvassers-

9 trained, 7 participated in the canvassing

Conduct 300 DVC conversations with rural voters-

304 conversations completed (1153 doors knocked)

Our Canvassing “Universe”

We identified 10 areas for canvassing in the most rural parts of Skagit. We covered one area by phone bank due to difficult accessibility. We completed canvassing in 6 of the areas before reaching our 300 conversation goal.

We requested canvassing lists of *all voters regardless of party preference or voting frequency*.

Safety

We observed COVID protocols in all canvassing. Some canvassers wore masks, some carried masks with them to use if the voter requested that. (To our knowledge, no voter commented on mask or vaccination status.) All canvassers maintained at least 6 feet distance, and conversations were conducted outdoors. All canvassers wore buttons stating we were vaccinated.

Canvassing in rural areas presents other safety hazards such as long, dark driveways with unknown dogs, hostile persons, or weapons at the end. We opted to canvass in the tiny towns, or villages in our county, or in areas where houses were close enough together to feasibly walk the area.

Focus of the Canvass Script

We chose a name for the pilot project that was politically neutral: Skagit Rural Voices Project. We identified ourselves as volunteers, and the purpose of the project was to make sure the voices of people living in our rural areas were being heard by our elected officials. (This introduction resonated with virtually all voters we approached.)

We initially planned to have an issue identification focus for our DVC pilot project, but an urgent local issue dropped in our laps, and we crafted our script around that.

Our County Commissioners voted to consider a proposal from an outside developer to allow large-scale suburban housing developments in the rural areas of Skagit County. Current law requires urban growth to be focused in the existing cities and towns. Our county has a uniquely diversified farming economy, and beautiful rural areas. We expected this issue might be a truly non-partisan issue, and it did prove to be the case.

After introducing the issue (which most voters were not aware of), we pursued a DVC conversation following the tips below. If (as in almost all cases), the voter opposed the proposal being considered, at the end of the conversation, we offered them two ways to make sure their voices were heard by the County Commissioners: they could sign a petition we carried, or they could take a postcard we carried with contact info for the Commissioners, and commit to send them an email expressing their views. Most of our DVC conversations ended with one of these two actions. We occasionally, had a conversation when the voter said they wanted to do more research. We shared the websites where they could find out more. We actually did not encounter any voters who were in favor of the developer's proposal regardless of the voter's place on the political spectrum.

Tips for Canvassers

Flow of a deep canvass conversation.

- 1) Beginning the Conversation- Who are you and why are you here?
- 2) Empathetic Listening- Work up your curiosity. What can you learn from this person that may challenge stereotypes? What life experiences are underneath the views they express?
- 3) Sharing your story and vision- "Mine" your life experience for stories that can connect with the concerns you're hearing from the voter, and that illustrate your vision/values.
- 4) Reconciling conflicting views- find at least one point of agreement.
- 5) Call to action

Dos and Don'ts:

Do observe COVID protocols- step back from the door, wear a mask if the person prefers that.

Do work up your curiosity. What can you learn from this person that may challenge stereotypes?

70/30 Rule- 70% listening/30% talking

Do listen with empathy, and without judgment.

Do share from your own experience stories, hopes, or beliefs that connect with what the person is saying.

Do keep a sense of humor.

Don't argue.

Don't share facts unless specifically asked.

Tips on handling hate speech, misinformation, or other difficult situations.

First and foremost, if you begin a conversation and the person is abusive or you feel unsafe in any way, end the conversation and walk away. ""I'm sorry to bother you. Have a nice day."

If the person starts the conversation with something radical like "Trump won", you have a choice: end the conversation or indulge your curiosity and see if you can find out what's underneath their willingness to believe that.

A scenario that came up in the national training was this: The "voter" comes out saying "We have to get rid of these immigrants. They get free medical care, and they don't pay any taxes. I have to buy my own health insurance. It's not fair!"

We agreed to try this approach: Ignore the misinformation. Refocus the person on their own situation as quickly as possible. (We assume they are targeting others because of their own fear or feelings of insecurity.) Try a response like this: "It sounds like fairness is important to you, and you feel that you and your family are not being treated fairly." Then, bring their attention back to their own challenge of securing health insurance. At some point, there may be an opportunity to say, "That sounds really hard. I really believe that all families should be able to have good health insurance without all this difficulty."

What we learned

Committed Co-leaders

This project lasted way longer than any of us anticipated because of COVID and weather-related delays. We found it was very important to have at least two leaders equally determined to see the project through.

Hardest lessons for Progressives

We found that the two most difficult things for progressive canvassers was to leave their facts at home, and to ask more questions than they answer. It takes a lot of practice to change our ingrained habits. Regularly reminding ourselves of the 70/30 rule was very helpful.

People are nicer than you think

While we found folks who didn't want to talk, or pretended not to be home, to our knowledge none of our canvassers experienced verbal abuse or physical intimidation. We doorbelled homes with signs posted on their carport "We don't call 911 here" beside a picture of a pistol, signs on gates that said "There's no ammunition shortage here." All these conversations were not just civil, but amiable, and people often thanked us for doing this work. One of our canvassers reported, "I was not going to enter the fenced yard with the sign "We shoot trespassers." I paused and turned away when a man came out asking what I wanted. We ended up having a lengthy conversation. His community was upriver, away from our farmlands, so I was surprised that one of his first comments was "What are we going to do about food?" We often wondered if folks had forgotten about what their signs said.

Yes, there are truly non-partisan issues.

We are led to believe this is impossible, but we found that voters were united across the political spectrum about our issue. Our phone bank canvasser kept detailed records about other concerns voters raised in her DVC phone conversations. A sampling of concerns follows, and none of them are partisan triggers:

- The local live radio station had it's tower dismantled during COVID due to lack of funds.
- Regular bus service and Dial-a-Ride Paratransit are not available in these outlying communities.
- The need for reliable Broadband service.
- Concerns about road and HWY maintenance/safety.
- Lack of grocery stores without trekking all the way down valley.

Some rural challenges

One Canvasser reported, "Dogs- There were multiple homes in one community with 5 or more dogs, there were dogs loose on the street. Lots of barking especially since I was a stranger. One fenced in house had so many large dogs barking like crazy. I just waited by the sturdy fence while they barked and eventually a woman came out and we were able to have a conversation that was probably not as long as it could have been because those dogs just kept barking. At another home (I was able to access because some of the dog owners came out to control their dogs), the woman answering the door had some neighbors over. She took the clipboard inside so everyone could sign and called a few more folks over."

Building our skills through direct experience

Our canvassing team included people with the full range of canvassing experience from novices to veterans. Even so, the DVC method was new or mostly new to all of us. One of our new canvassers had this to share about her experience: "I have been fortunate to have been able to shadow two experienced canvassers on several DVC expeditions in Skagit County. During our last town, Edison, I finally felt confident enough to knock on doors myself. It was very rewarding to be able to interact with neighbors from different sides of the political spectrum about a nonpartisan issue. We brought up an issue that would impact all rural residents in our area. Many of the people we contacted did not know about the issue. They were grateful for the opportunity to either sign our petition, research the issue on the websites we provided, or spread the word to other neighbors. The signatures we gathered made an impact on our county commissioners. They heard loud and clear that the rural residents in our area were opposed to their proposal to allow Fully Contained Communities to be developed in our rural areas outside of the city limits. I felt that our canvassing really did make a difference."

Some Stories

What follows next is the email recap of our first group canvassing event. We include it all here because it captures something of how different rural canvassing can be from urban canvassing. (The names have been changed.)

Our team of four canvassers made our first foray into the little towns "upriver" for the DVC pilot project now known as Skagit Rural Voices Project. We canvassed in one town, population 409.

Here are some fun stories from that event:

One team member spoke with a couple in one neighborhood who did sign the petition. They called another neighbor after she left them who hopped on his bicycle and wandered the neighborhood. When he found her, he said "I heard there was a 'girl' in the neighborhood with a petition." "That would be me" she responded, and he chatted and signed the petition.

Also, in that neighborhood, a young man was cruising in his souped up red Camaro. After several passes by, he stopped to talk and signed the petition. Watch for him later in this narrative.

We talked with a woman nearing 80 who had moved to the town in the 1980s when the local tavern came up for sale. Her husband had always wanted to be a tavern owner, so they bought it and moved there. She eventually became mayor and served for 8 years. We talked with her for about 15 minutes, and she signed the petition all on her front porch in her fuzzy, hot pick bathrobe.

With a tiny bit of trepidation, we knocked on the door of a well-kept house with American flags on every fence post, and two tall flagpoles framing the walkway. One had a large American flag, and the other a very large Trump flag. The door was answered by a soft-spoken man who agreed that politicians and elected

officials should listen to what rural people have to say. When he heard about the issue of giant suburban housing developments being allowed in rural areas, he took the postcard with information for emailing our County Commissioners, and signed the petition.

While he was signing, the young guy in the red Camaro raced up in front of the house, and called from the street, "You better be signing that, Gene!" to which Gene responded laughing, "I am, I am!" The young guy raced off with a great deal of engine revving. One canvasser laughed and said, "young men, what are ya going to do?" He responded with a smile, "Aw, he just likes to do that because he knows I have Corvettes, and he thinks his Camaro is really hot." But then, he got serious and a bit tender saying, "But, you know, he restored that car all by himself, and he did a damn good job." OK, talk about blowing our stereotypes.

At one door, a woman responded to the suburban developments in rural areas issue by saying it was all because of the Biden administration. We were successful in refocusing her on our local situation, officials, and what she can do right here to make her voice be heard.

And what about the "deep values" part of the project? We heard the story of how they came to be in this tiny town and what they care about there from nearly every person we talked to. We were able to share our own worries about protecting our rural life here and found that shared values were easy to find.

In a couple shifts of canvassing there, we had DVC conversations with 41 people. That represented 10% of the population of the town.

Reports from our canvassers in the field

"On a later group canvass, we hit the even tinier town of Hamilton. A couple weeks later, it was hard to see the front page photo in our local Skagit Valley Herald of a flooded Petit Street in Hamilton. We had just been canvassing there on that very street. "

https://www.goskagit.com/townnews/motor_vehicle/hamilton-evacuees-waiting-out-the-storm/article_c1b01322-83aa-501f-a999-01c166596e72.html

One canvasser spoke with an elderly woman who grew up in Seattle. Fled there for Lynnwood when Seattle got too big and congested. Watched Lynnwood be paved over. Fled to Burlington here in Skagit to live on two acres in the rural lands. Watched that town grow closer and closer to her land. Now lives in the country near La Conner with her extended family who care for her in her elder years. She had plenty to say about her life's journey away from urban sprawl, and made no bones about her opposition to the Commissioners' proposal. Our canvasser said, "I have no idea what her politics are, nor she mine, but we were both fully engaged in that conversation."

"A musician at one home in a small town was very interested in the petition and other social issues. As we talked he started considering that he had all of these concerns but never really did anything about them. I gave him some web sites to consider for taking action."

"Another couple I visited were also very vocal about concerns on a number of issues. Ultimately I told them Indivisible Skagit was also looking at these issues and taking action on them. They revealed that they had attended an Indivisible meeting, but lost contact. I provided contact information."

"There were at least 3 homes visited that had business interests that could benefit from the construction of FCCs. (Port a potties business, construction worker and architect/contractor) They were still not supportive of the FCCs in our area; two signed, one maybe."

One of the best stories

“My most meaningful encounter was with an older woman in Shelter Bay who had grown up on Fir Island on a farm, and who has two brothers who are still farming. She was passionate about keeping Skagit County rural, and not only signed the petition but kept me for fifteen (enjoyable) minutes talking about her upbringing and how much things here had already changed. She walked with me to the neighbors next door, and was an effective spokesperson (more so than me!) against FCCs. She also gave me cookies, and thanked me for coming.”

Conclusions

First, here in the Pacific Northwest, canvassing is definitely easier and more pleasant in the summer months and early fall. Nevertheless, we proved to ourselves that we could do it in spite of bad weather and natural disasters.

Our experience highlights that it is possible to have meaningful conversation with voters in our most rural areas, and that the rural population is no more homogeneous than urban populations. Diversity of voters' experience and perspective was apparent from this pilot project.

DVC conversations are interesting, fun, and endlessly surprising.

Our next steps will include:

- Sharing our experience with our members in Skagit as well as Washington state Indivisibles, and those in other states who might be interested in learning from our experience.
- We want to work out how DVC methods can be used to frame other local, state, or national issue campaigns in our community.
- We also want to explore how DVC techniques can be used in candidate campaigns. For instance, can we start with listening and asking questions *before* we talk about our candidate?
- We hope to encourage other Indivisibles in rural areas to try it out and see what they can learn in their own communities.

Logo design by Scott Ickes