



# Canvassing Your Neighborhood

BY RICHARD P. BURKE

## 1 WHAT IS CANVASSING

Political campaigns initiate a grassroots movement to mobilize volunteers, interact with supporters, and secure a promise of their vote. Such canvassing is done with the objective of:

- a. Collecting voter data (voter ID)
- b. Discussing issues and standpoints
- c. Convincing swing voters to vote for you (persuasion efforts) or influence confirmed supporters to vote on election day (GOTV efforts)

There are multiple ways political campaigns canvass supporters. The most popular being:

- a. Door to door canvassing
- b. Phone OR text canvassing

Studies have proven direct outreach to be the most impactful way of election canvassing. After all, two individuals discussing common interest and agony topics are bound to reach a consensus on them.

## 2 IS POLITICAL CANVASSING SOLICITING

No! Often, people mistake political canvassing for soliciting. However, canvassing has been distinguished as different from commercial solicitation by law. The First Amendment protects non-commercial speech. That includes discourse that “*does more than inform private economic decisions and... provid[e] information about the characteristics and costs of goods and services...*” Political speech is also a part of this non-commercial speech. So, if a notice board or individual says that solicitors are not allowed in a neighborhood, volunteers can still legally canvass it. Still, use your best judgment. You don’t want to antagonize people. (*Watchtower Bible and Track Society of New York v. Village of Stratton - 2002*).

## 3 WHAT ARE THE LAWS ON POLITICAL CANVASSING ON PRIVATE PROPERTY

- a. Field canvassers are legally allowed to be on private property and knock-on doors. This includes homes or neighborhoods that have “No Soliciting” signs. But beware, not everyone understands the difference between soliciting and canvassing. You may have to be very patient with such house owners. If they insist that you are not welcome, it’s best not to push your luck.
- b. If a property has “No canvassers” or “No Trespassing” signs, stay away.
- c. You have the right to offer campaign literature to voters, even in gated communities with HOAs.
- d. Political canvassers are legally permitted to knock on doors, interact with voters, and distribute literature without any ‘solicitor’s permit.’ (*Lovell v. the City of Griffin, Georgia - 1938*).
- e. You are not required to give prior notice before canvassing neighborhoods.
- f. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that municipalities cannot restrict canvassing between 9 am and 9 pm on all seven days of the week. (*Citizen Action Coalition v. the Town of Yorktown, IN - 2014*).

## 4 OTHER THINGS TO KNOW

- a. Studies have shown that a 3-10 minute interaction between volunteers and voters increases the chances of persuasion. Political leaflets can add to that convincing effort.
- b. You can leave leaflets on doorknobs, between doors, or hand it over in person. Make sure you leave it in a place that is easily visible to the voter and does not fly away or get damaged before the voter sees it. **However, putting campaign literature in a mailbox is a federal offense.**

**a. Prepare Yourself.** Check the weather and dress appropriately. Bring a backpack with water and some food (bring some to share). Make sure you have comfortable shoes. If possible, wear a button or a badge on a lanyard to for identification. Have a charged cell phone with you.

**b. Make Sure You are Equipped.** Try to get a “walking list” that lists the people in the homes you are canvassing in the order they appear on the street. A good walking list will have some information about each person and a place to make notes. Sometimes this is done electronically with a tablet device. If so, make sure it is fully charged. Always work in pairs for safety.

**c. Have Your Pitch Ready.** Think about what you are going to say. Your organizer may have a script for you. When in the field adapt the script with your own words to sound natural but discuss this with your organizer first. You do NOT need a “solicitor’s permit.” Always begin by introducing yourselves by name and tell people who you are representing.

**d. Respect Property.** Use sidewalks where you can. Avoid cutting across properties to save time. Be careful of what you say as you approach homes; many now have “smart doorbells” with microphones and cameras that record constantly.

**e. Keep Conversations Short.** Interacting with people is good, but you are trying to interact with as many people as possible. If you hit it off with someone, you could spend 30 minutes or more at one door. If you sense this could happen, agree on a time and place to meet, politely end the conversation, and go to the next door.

**f. Don’t Take Anything Personally.** There will be people who are rude, people who will slam their doors on you, and people who will simply be jerks. Remember – these people know nothing about you or your life. It is important not to take such incidents personally. You are not asking for their money or their time, other than the time that they spend talking with you. You are offering them information they can use to exercise their political rights.

**g. Take Covid Precautions.** Whatever your views on Covid precautions, be prepared to respect the views of the people whose property you will be approaching. Have a mask ready and put it on if the people you speak with ask you to (you can take it off later). Avoid shaking hands or interacting physically unless the people you are talking to initiate such contact. After you knock on a door or ring a doorbell, step back about eight feet and do not approach them unless they invite you to do so.

**h. Have Fun and Interact With Your Team Later.** Canvassing can be hard work, but there is no reason it can’t be fun. You will have good and bad experiences, but mostly good ones. You will meet interesting people and, maybe, some new friends or allies. At the end of the day, go out for pizza with your team. Talk about your experiences. You will learn from each other and be even more effective next time with an experienced and proven team!