

Precinct Organizing

Your Country – Starting with your own block!

Note: This section contains information you can present to your local volunteers and precinct chairs/captains.

The precinct is the smallest administrative political unit, composed of a set range of registered voters mandated by the County Board of Elections. A number of precincts typically comprise a ward, the next largest unit. A number of wards typically comprise a larger administrative unit, such as counties, State House, State Senate, and U.S. Congressional districts.

In a party structure, party members working at the precinct level connect the precinct to state-level party organizations. In other structures, activists can create their own network to compliment, compete, or substitute for the party.

Organizing a precinct involves grassroots, person-to-person, face-to-face contact. Building a sustaining precinct organization has obvious advantages over fly-by-night out-of-town professional campaign operations:

- Local knowledge
- Building on existing social networks
- Your neighbors receive you well (or will soon)

These advantages combine to make you and your neighborhood organization vastly more efficient than paid hacks or shipped-in college student canvassers, well-intentioned they may be, who step on to your “turf.” Moreover, unless a campaign organization has targeted your precinct as a priority, you won’t get a great deal of resources from outside. Engaging in a long-term precinct plan will maximize your neighborhood’s Democratic potential more than any last-minute candidate campaign.

Steps to building your organization at the precinct level

1. Gather data: Educate yourself about the precinct.
 - Contact the local Party
 - Your political landscape
 - Obtain your Precinct’s (or Ward’s, or County’s, whatever) Voter File
 - Deadlines and other important dates
 - Targeting plan
2. Recruitment: Core leadership and activists
 - Share your data, educate the leadership
 - Delegate responsibilities
 - Precinct activist gathering (call it a leadership meeting, whatever)
3. Events and visibility (if you have time)
 - Create a presence – window signs, community service, BBQ
4. First canvass: ID, recruitment, registration
5. Targeted Canvassing – See targeting section in this manual.
6. GOTV Canvassing

GET TO KNOW YOUR PRECINCT – BETTER

The Players.

One of the first things any precinct organizer must do is see who else might have already started. Even if you think you're *sure* that the Democratic Party doesn't have a person assigned to your precinct or plan to do anything about it, it's always a good idea to check. The Party has easy access to resources you need and it's usually easier to work with the Party than try to go around them.

Do they already have a precinct captain? Meet with them and build a plan together, invest them into the plan you may already have.

Are they looking for a precinct captain? Perfect. You're it.

Are they less than helpful? That's fine, you're busy too (or you will be) and you'll just start. They can catch up when they're ready.

Remember, **WE** are the one's we've been waiting for.

In any circumstance, having the local Democratic Party on your side is a valuable asset. They will know other activists in the area. And they will have access to (theoretically) more accurate voter lists than those available from the county. They may even provide funding to help you do the work they need.

Who are other important players in your precinct? Do you live near a city councilperson? A school board member? Your pastor? Consider people with valuable social networks or a stake in your success.

The Facts.

First, you'll want to know the basic physical layout. Your precinct may only be a few blocks with many of your neighbors across the street in an entirely different precinct than you. In non-urban areas, your precinct or ward may be enormous. Some towns have centralized voting locations and some cities will have many multiple precincts vote at the same polling locations. Note how many single family homes vs. apartment complexes exist in your precinct. How transient is your neighborhood's population? Your particular strategies will need to take all this into account.

In order to make your plan and establish performance benchmarks, you need to know the kind of timeline you're working in. Some key questions:

- What is the last day to register?
- When can you apply for an absentee/mail ballot?
- By when must you submit absentee or mail-in ballots?
- When does early voting begin, if at all?

Don't forget voter performance data: How much of your district turns out to vote? How much of your precinct voted Democrat last election? This kind of information influences your targeting strategy.

Suspend your assumptions. If, for example, you think, "Well, everyone in my neighborhood votes!" You're almost certainly wrong. Verifiably wrong.

The Lists.

Finding out how many of your neighbors voted, who they are, and to which Party they're affiliated is a matter of public record. You need this to see who's going to need the most follow up, who's not worth talking to, and even who's most likely to help you out.

Obtain a Voter File. You can get this from your County Board of Elections or your County Clerk. They may charge a small fee. It may be in any format (.xls file, hardcopy

printout, etc). It may be out of date or full of inaccuracies. That's normal. You might have a better Voter File made available from your local Party or even a previous campaign. Again, these may need to be purchased.

Recruitment Builds Momentum

You're recruiting a team of activists not only to make your life easier, but also to invest more and more of your neighborhood in the success of your organization. Even if one person could do it all, you wouldn't want them to.

You may already have a group of core activists. If so, great! You can always use more help. Otherwise start recruiting. Remember, start close to home, but cast a wide net as you go.

Invest your first activists with a precinct activist gathering (give it any name you want) to share your information on the precinct's political landscape. Give the outline of the plan, and let people flesh out the roles they can play and the timelines and benchmarks you need to hit.

Because you've started early, you can afford to build up the presence of your group by holding precinct events (possibly joint precinct events). BBQs, house parties, potlucks, etc, can strengthen your social network with neighbors you might not have even known were progressive. Because you have a voter list with addresses, you can mail every registered Democrat to a Democratic BBQ and introduce your team to the neighborhood and recruit more activists. If nothing else, social events will get people familiar with your face before they see it at their own door. Even once voter contact begins, recruitment never stops. When canvassing, calling, or just walking your dog, you'll always have an opportunity to recruit another. Prepare for it. Canvassers should have volunteer cards or a volunteer check box.

Data Collection TIP:

People might not want to give a stranger their contact info, but seem to love to "sign up to learn more." It's a less intimidating way of saying "expect my call."

Volunteer Event TIP:

Ideally, these social events will soon mesh with volunteer events: "Come on over, we're having an envelope stuffing party. Susie's bringing cookies."

Taking Action

The key to every successful precinct mobilization program is repeated retail voter contact. The more personal, the better. Face-to-face contact is proven to get far better results than any other form of contact.

Canvass Early. Canvass often. If your election is in November, your first canvass is September or earlier. The first canvass can be used as a casual introduction of the precinct program to your neighbors. Let people know who you are and that you're working to build the level of civic engagement in the community. The primary purpose of the first canvass is to ID your neighborhood's voters – Are they on your side, on the fence, or lost causes? Just as important as IDing your neighbors is checking the integrity of your list. In some voter lists, as much as a third of the list is incorrect or outdated. Best to get these filtered out early on. The first canvass is NOT about persuading undecideds, or arguing with conservatives. Your first task is to build a database to help you target your voters. Save the rest for when you're ready.

Divide and Conquer. Delegate tasks and divide up canvass and call lists. Ideally one or a pair of volunteers is responsible for a block or a section of the precinct. This builds ownership and accountability. It allows you to set goals and hit your benchmarks along the way. Additionally, one volunteer can be responsible for yard signs and other forms of follow up.

Track and update your data regularly. Weekly, if not daily. All canvass sheets come back to one data person, as soon as the activist has finished a canvass.

Blanket canvass vs. Targeted Canvass. Based on your district's voter performance and your available resources, you may choose to canvass everyone or just a portion of your voter list. A highly Democratic area may be advantageous to do a blanket canvass. In a highly Republican district, it pays to be a bit stealthier.