How to Defeat Trump and Heal America

Deep Canvassing and Political Persuasion in the 2020 Presidential Election

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

People's Action has completed the first-ever deep canvassing political persuasion experiment this month and the results are groundbreaking. We partnered with the New Conversation Initiative to help design the deep canvass persuasion strategy and researchers David Broockman Josh Kalla to conduct an evaluation of the program.

Key Findings

4.9% impact on decreasing Trump's vote margin with women and **8.5% independent women**.

3.1% overall impact on decreasing Trump's vote margin.

Impact is larger than the 2016 margin of victory in nine key battleground states including Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Florida which would translate to **108 electoral votes**.
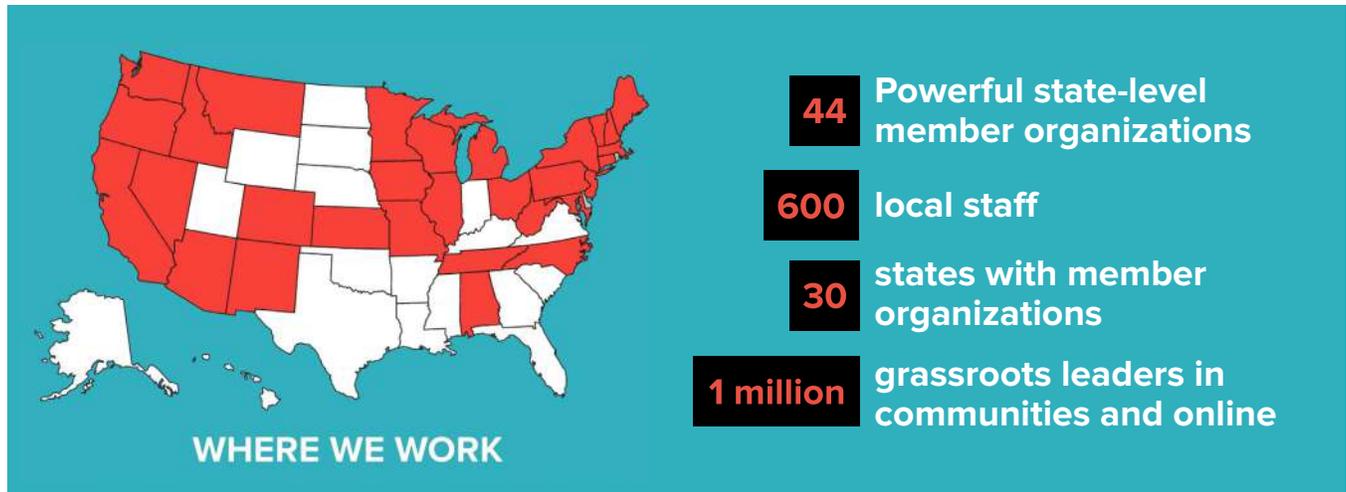
Estimated 102 times more effective per person than the average Presidential persuasion program, as documented by academic research and is one of the only proven field strategies to shift presidential vote choice.

The independent analysis of our deep canvass phone program found that it had a substantial impact on decreasing Trump's vote margin among independent women, respectively **4.9% with women** and **8.5% independent women** and an overall **3.1% impact on Trump's vote margin.** That is larger than the 2016 margin of victory in nine key battleground states including Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Florida which would translate to 108 electoral votes. This tactic is one of the only proven strategies to shift presidential vote choice and is an **estimated 102 times more effective** per person than the average Presidential persuasion program, as documented by academic research.[1]

Deep canvassing is deeply connected to our broader vision of "building a bigger we" -- a multiracial movement that has the power to restore our democracy and build a government and economy that puts people and planet first. People's Action and our member organizations are poised to launch the largest deep canvassing direct voter contact program in the history of the country this electoral cycle. We have built a rigorous model to use deep canvassing on the phones to scale up a strategy that will both persuade infrequent voters about what is at stake in this electoral cycle and engage conflicted voters in powerful conversations to persuade them to vote for Vice President Biden in the presidential election. We believe that this strategy has the power to both defeat Donald Trump and heal America so that we can build a future where we have a government and society that cares for all of us.

WHO ARE WE

People's Action is one of the largest multiracial people's organizations in the country and has:

44	**Powerful state-level member organizations**
600	**local staff**
30	**states with member organizations**
1 million	**grassroots leaders in communities and online**

WHERE WE WORK

We practice Integrated Voter Engagement cycle after cycle and have deep relationships in communities across targeted geographies. We have been doing the sustained organizing necessary to shape the terrain and conversation about the election across a broad range of issues and in the 2018 election we had **487,028 conversations with voters and fielded over 26,000 volunteer shifts.** Since then, our member organizations have successfully enacted a strategy to expand their 501(c)(4) capacity, which puts us in a position of strength heading into the 2020 Presidential and Congressional elections.

> "These results are transformative, and tell us a different story about rural America. For so long, people in rural and small-towns have been neglected and cast out because no one took the time to listen to them. But we did, and we've found that compassion and empathy, rather than division and hatred, can lead us to a multiracial democracy that works for all of us."
>
> George Goehl, People's Action Executive Director

What is Deep Canvassing?

Deep canvassing is one of the most proven and durable forms of persuasion[2] and is far more effective than other forms of persuasion employed by traditional political campaigns.[3] Deep canvasses are candid, two-way conversations where canvassers ask voters to share their relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud.

Deep canvasses typically involve:
- **Non-judgmentally** soliciting voters' views and asking follow-up questions about voters' experiences.
- **Sharing narratives** about personal experiences with the issue that reinforce values relevant to the issue.

Individuals often resist persuasion because yielding to it would pose a threat to their self-image. It is difficult for people to admit that they have held views that were in error and people generally dislike recognizing inconsistencies in their views or seeing themselves as susceptible to persuasion and manipulation. Deep canvass conversations are positioned to overcome these challenges because non-judgmental listening reduces perceived threat to self-image and being heard increases a feeling of respect. Deep canvassing promotes active processing and participation in a conversation which increases openness to engaging with alternative viewpoints. The practice of sharing narratives also is perceived as less manipulative and more engaging than facts and creates an emotional connection that moves beyond surface-level talking points.

> Deep canvassing promotes active processing and participation in a conversation which increases openness to engaging with alternative viewpoints.

PEOPLE'S ACTION MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS AND PARTNERS THAT ANCHORED DEEP CANVASS EXPERIMENT

SCRIPT ITERATION

The experiment was driven by our member organizations and key allies in key battleground states: Michigan People's Campaign; Take Action Minnesota; Rights and Democracy New Hampshire; Down Home North Carolina; Pennsylvania Stands Up and Pennsylvania United; and Citizen's Action of Wisconsin. Each of the organizations has a strong track record of running disciplined and effective voter engagement programs and has been deeply invested in the deep canvass training and methodology.

At the launch of the experiment process in March of 2020, we navigated the complex dynamics of an exploding pandemic and successfully pivoted to a phones-only script iteration process. People's Action was uniquely positioned to run a deep canvass phones program to scale. In 2012, when facing a marriage equality ballot initiative that many thought

unwinnable, our national staff and partners at the New Conversation Initiative helped to design and scale the largest deep canvass phone program to date. That campaign mobilized 13,958 volunteer shifts where callers completed over 2200,000 deep canvass conversations over the phone, persuading 20,353 voters to change their minds Ultimately, the campaign narrowly won by a 52%-48% margin - the first ever defeat of a marriage ban at the ballot box - and the deep canvass phones program was decisive.

The script we developed for the deep canvass program was developed by a powerful team of leaders from our member organizations and allies. Between March and June 2020, the team completed 868 conversations with voters across six states and iteratively tested 27 different versions of the script before settling on our final approach.

SCRIPT NARRATIVE – Who will represent my needs?
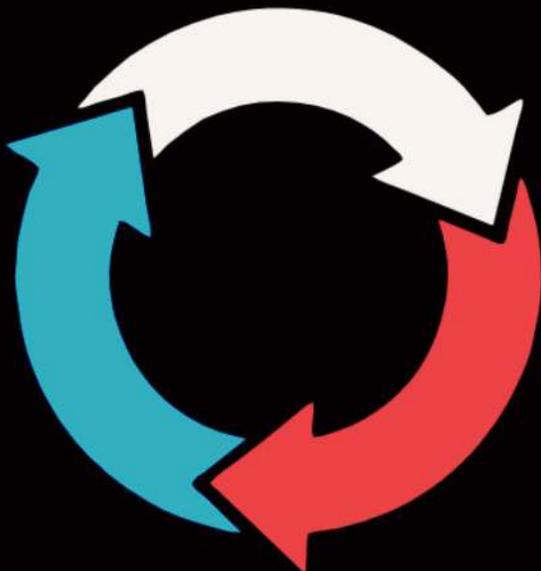
MAP EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF VOTERS
Build rapport through wellness check and empathy through vulnerable story sharing

ACTIVATE HOPE and AGENCY
Story sharing about care and personal stake in the election and making the case for "a President that has compassion & care"

BRIDGE to BIDEN
Share stories VP Biden's character and personal experiences of tragedy and role in leading country during crisis

The script incorporated many of the key insights from the Race Class Narrative Action. We also incorporated insights from a recent study conducted by Kalla and Broockman that demonstrates that pro-Biden messages are nearly twice as effective at moving voter choice.[4] In addition, they found that specific pro-Biden messages are more effective than vague ones and anti-Trump messages do not have any substantive effect on shifting voter choice because we have reached a saturation point with voters on President Trump.[5] The deep canvass phones experiment built a script that focused on story exchanges around care and personal stake in the election and also told a compelling story about VP Biden that speaks to voters' lived experiences and helps map their emotional journey in this moment.

Script Iteration Team

Jill Murphy	Michigan People's Campaign
MariaElena Fournier	Michigan People's Campaign
Daniel Porter	TakeAction Minnesota [Knock Knock, LLC]
Austin Blanch	TakeAction Minnesota [Knock Knock, LLC]
Charlie Barrett	Take Action Minnesota [Knock Knock, LLC]
Giselle Hart	Rights and Democracy New Hampshire
Tom Labore	Rights and Democracy New Hampshire
Lisa Demaine	Rights and Democracy New Hampshire
Laura Marie Davis	Down Home North Carolina
Mahsima Hallaji	Down Home North Carolina
Sydney Zimmerman	Pennsylvania United
Mari Lohitai	Pennsylvania United
Amber Stenman	Pennsylvania United
Ken Hood	Citizen Action of Wisconsin
Kaile Sepnafski	Citizen Action of Wisconsin
Viola Myers	Citizen Action of Wisconsin
Ella Barrett	New Conversation Initiative
Steve Deline	New Conversation Initiative
Adam Kruggel	People's Action national staff

"Being part of this experiment has really given me hope and purpose at a time when I desperately needed it. As a black woman living in the south I have been able to engage people in my community in a way that I did not think was possible. By truly listening to each other and sharing our lived experiences we were able to find common ground around creating a government that truly cares for all of us."

Bonnie Dobson, Down Home North Carolina (People's Action member organization) deep canvasser

RESEARCH DESIGN

People's Action worked with David Broockman and Joshua Kalla to assess whether these deep canvass telephone conversations were effective at moving vote choice in the 2020 presidential election. Broockman and Kalla used a difference-in-difference research design for this evaluation. The difference-in-difference design uses surveys before and after the conversations took place to assess whether the gains in Biden vote margin are larger for the voters who were reached on the phone than the voters who were not.

Survey Recruitment → **Two Online Surveys** → **Reached**

Not Reached → **Online Survey ~6 days after**
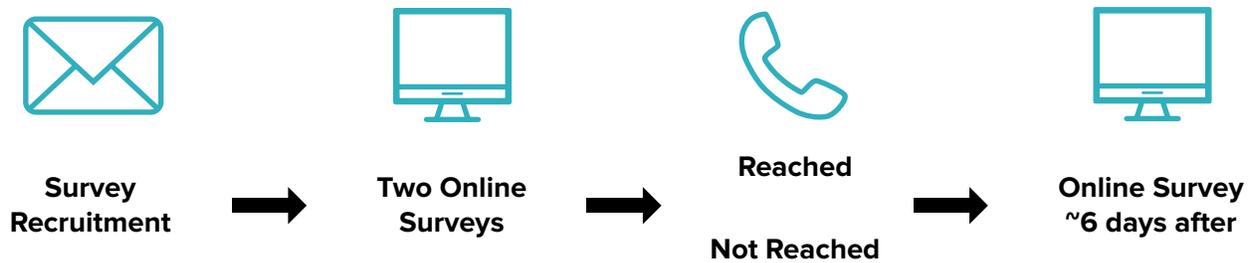
To implement this design, Broockman and Kalla:

1 Sent mail to 460,000 registered voters living in Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin who were previously modeled to be likely to answer the telephone and have a conversation inviting them to participate in an online survey.

2 25,936 voters completed this survey. This survey asked a variety of social, political, and demographic questions. The survey did not mention People's Action or its telephone program. This survey ran from May 19 to June 18.

3 Voters who answered this survey as either strong Biden or strong Trump supporters were removed from the program. This left 15,787 voters who were somewhat undecided or held conflicting views.

4 These 15,787 voters were then invited to participate in a second survey that again asked a variety of different questions. 7,798 voters completed this survey and did not unsubscribe from receiving future surveys. This survey ran from June 17 to July 1.

5 People's Action attempted to reach these 7,798 voters. People's Action had completed conversations with 695 voters (8.9%) and partial conversations with 322 voters (4.1%). These calls took place from July 18 to August 14.

6 Around six days after the calls were attempted, Broockman and Kalla conducted another survey. 6,328 voters responded to this survey. Responses to this survey represent the primary outcome: is the gain in Biden vote margin between this survey and the previous surveys larger among the voters who had a completed conversation than the voters not reached by People's Action?

The biggest threat to the difference-in-difference design's validity would be if there were differences in trends between how the voters who were reached and not reached were changing over time anyway. However, Broockman and Kalla found no differences in trends between the first and second baseline surveys. They also find no impact of the program on a number of pre-registered placebo outcomes where we would not expect to see movement. These results suggest that for this program, the difference-in-difference design is valid.
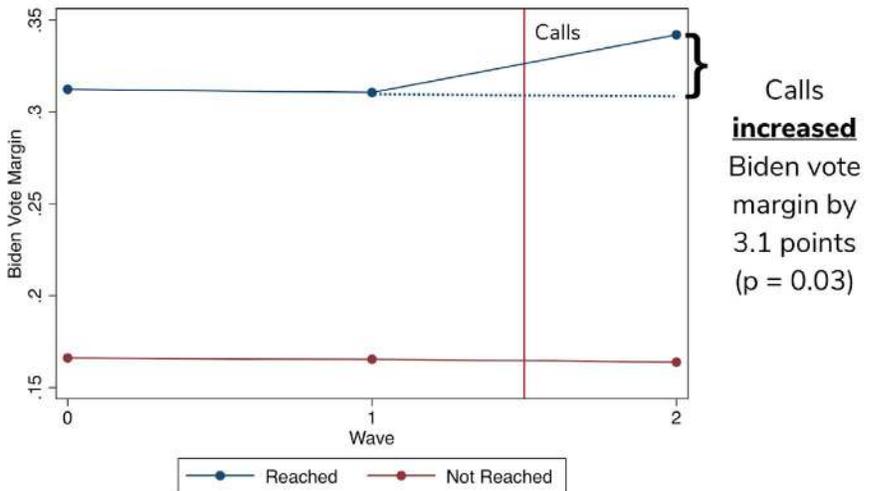
RESULTS

Broockman and Kalla found that the deep canvass calling program increased Biden vote margin by a statistically significant 3.1 points (p = 0.03). That is, for every 100 completed calls, People's Action was able to generate 3.1 net new Biden supporters.
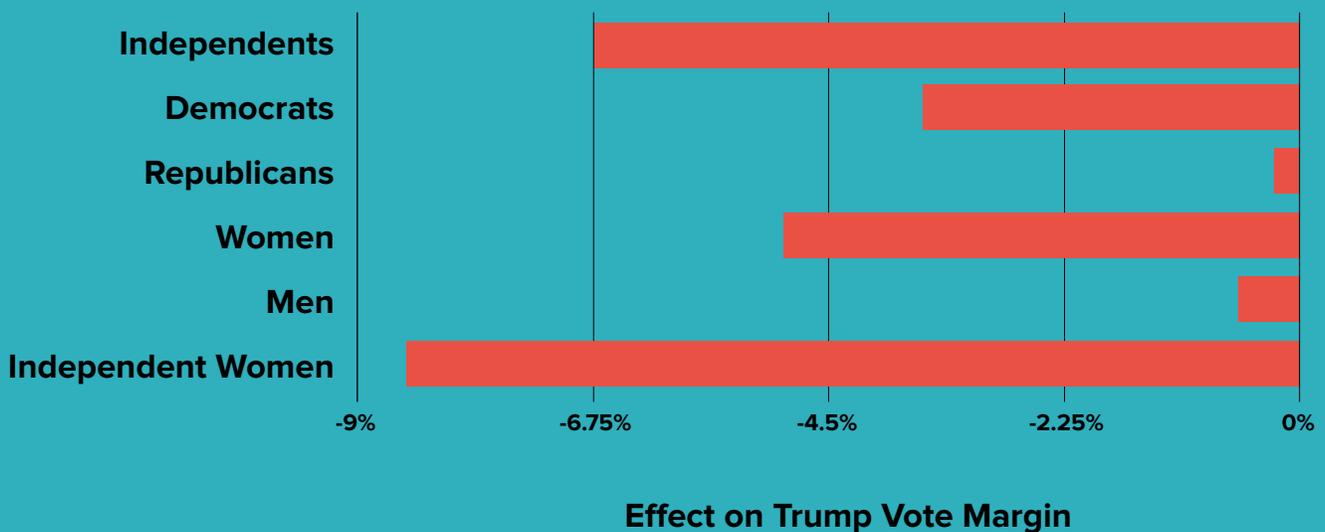
The program was particularly effective among women (4.9 points), self-reported Independents (6.7 points), and Independent women (8.5 points). In addition to increasing Biden's vote margin, the program also increased the intensity of Biden support and self-reported intent to vote this November.

How Big is 3.1%?

3.1% is an estimated 102 times more effective per person than the average Presidential persuasion program, as documented by academic research[6] and is one of the only proven field strategies to shift presidential vote choice. That is larger than the 2016 margin of victory in nine key battleground states including Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Florida which would translate to 108 electoral votes.

Calls **increased** Biden vote margin by 3.1 points (p = 0.03)

Who is moving?

Effect on Trump Vote Margin

Effect on Vote Margin (percentage points)

102x
more effective
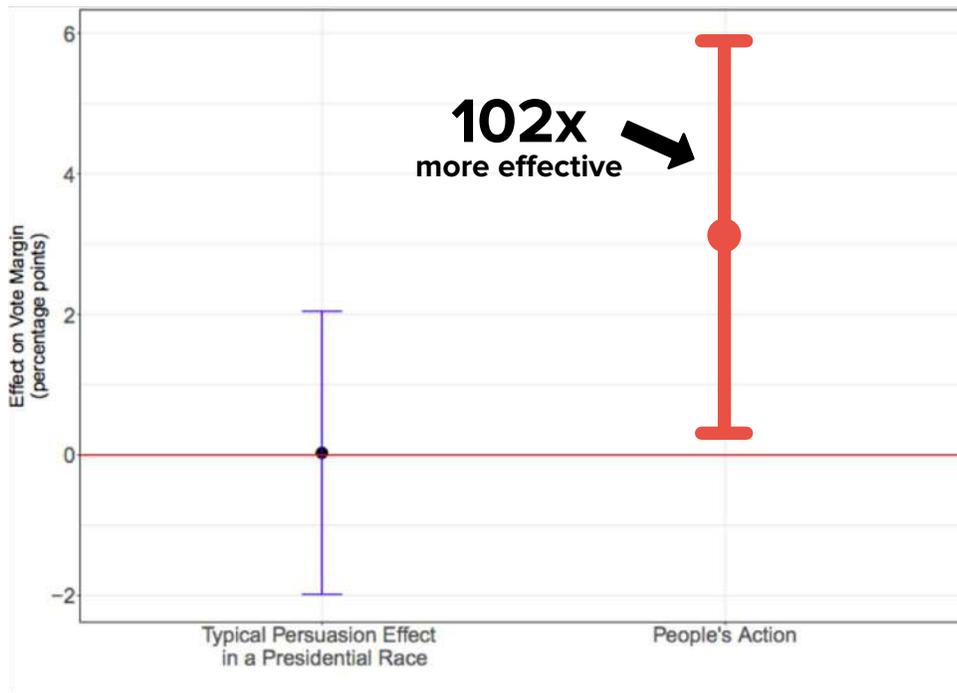
Typical Persuasion Effect in a Presidential Race   People's Action

Typical Persuasion Effect in a Presidential Race President is at 0.0305 (the bars are 95% confidence intervals ranging from -1.98 to 2.04) and People's Action is at 3.116 (bars are 95% confidence intervals ranging from 0.29 to 5.9)

"It's extremely difficult to persuade voters in a presidential election. Since taking office, Donald Trump's approval rating has held incredibly steady. People's Action's work shows that respectful, non-judgmental conversations are able to move voters where many other tactics have failed, producing meaningful increases in Biden's vote margin."

Researchers Josh Kalla and David Broockman

RollingStone

JULY 15, 2020 6:00AM ET

Can Millions of Deep Conversations With Total Strangers Beat Trump — and Heal America?

COVID-19 has upended the 2020 campaign. Activists are testing a cutting-edge strategy to change the hearts and minds of voters in our pandemic election

By **ANDY KROLL**

Photo Illustration by Joe Rodriguez. Phone: Digital Visions/Getty Images; Sticker: ROBYN BECK/AFP/Getty Images

"And in a time when so many of our conversations feel shallow despite the embarrassment of platforms on which we can have those conversations, deep canvassing offers a promising alternative, a way to find common ground and make human connections in a time of political polarization and tribalism. Even in a pandemic."

Andy Kroll, *Rolling Stone*

NEXT MOVES: OUR THEORY OF CHANGE & PLAN OF ACTION

Winning the Presidency, protecting and adding critical seats in the Senate and House will require the strength of our broad, well-organized multiracial, multi-class base rooted in cities, rural areas and suburbs, as well as our multi-touch approach, which includes a strong emphasis on live deep canvass conversations with voters.

Deep canvassing is one of the most proven and durable forms of persuasion[7] and is far more effective than other forms of persuasion employed by traditional political campaigns.[8] Deep canvasses are candid, two-way conversations where canvassers ask voters to share their relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud. Our program is designed to both persuade our core progressive constituencies that there is something at stake in this election and move conflicted voters to cast their ballot for VP Biden.

The current landscape has created incredible uncertainty about any type of voter modeling and turnout predictions. We believe that it is critical to build a robust field infrastructure that has the capacity to **both** persuade infrequent voters about what is at stake in this election and persuade frequent voters who are conflicted about whether or not to vote for Vice President Biden in the general election. According to an analysis by Catalist of the results of the 2018 election, voter turnout played a significant factor in Democratic gains, but "changing vote choice accounted for a +4.5% margin change, out of the +5.0% margin change that was seen overall — *a big piece of Democratic victory was due to 2016 Trump voters turning around and voting for Democrats in 2018.*"[9]

In order to win the presidential election, we need to build a field program that can communicate a positive, pro-Biden narrative and help voters process their choice this November. Democrats have been spending extensively on negative Trump ads, but many voters still do not have a clear picture about VP Biden. Our deep canvass program is uniquely situated to tell a compelling story about VP Biden that speaks to voters' lived experiences and helps map their emotional journey in this moment.

People's Action and our member organizations have already trained over 2,720 volunteers and 170 paid canvassers how to have effective deep canvass conversations over the phone. We have also built a distributed training model that will allow us to prepare and support tens of thousands of volunteers this fall. We have built an incredibly successful deep canvass program that can get voters on the phone and make emotional connections that result in shifting their vote choice. We know that this model will also be successful in moving infrequent voters to decide that they have a significant personal stake and will vote this election. Our plan is to recruit, hire and train 500 paid deep canvassers and recruit and train 10,000 volunteers to have 350,000 live deep canvass conversations with targeted voters in key battleground states.

CLOSING

We are not each other's enemy. We need a government that cares for all of us. These are the core insights from this groundbreaking political research experiment. We believe that this research provides hope that we can build a multiracial democracy in America that is grounded in empathy and compassion. This experiment contributes to a growing body of evidence that deep canvassing can help to provide a path to a politics that is grounded in deeper relationships that can be transformative. This type of engagement can not only help to win elections but it can also change the context for how we co-govern with social movements. There is a new possibility on the horizon of ending the vicious cycle of racial scapegoating and division and replacing it with a more virtuous cycle where empathy and solidarity become the most valuable currency in our public lives. Even during times of deep polarization, we can build a bigger we that is more durable and lasting than any attempt to divide us against each other.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to acknowledge everyone that has helped us to build an incredibly successful deep canvass program that can get voters on the phone and make emotional connections that result in shifting their vote choice.

ENDNOTES

1. KALLA, J., & BROOCKMAN, D. (2018). The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments. American Political Science Review, 112(1), 148-166. doi:10.1017/S0003055417000363

2. https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing

3. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/28/16367580/campaigning-doesnt-work-general-election-study-kalla-broockman

4. https://osf.io/m7326/

5. https://www.vox.com/2020/6/9/21284758/broockman-kalla-biden-ads-trump-ads

6. KALLA, J., & BROOCKMAN, D. (2018). The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments. American Political Science Review, 112(1), 148-166. doi:10.1017/S0003055417000363

7. https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing

8. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/28/16367580/campaigning-doesnt-work-general-election-study-kalla-broockman

9. https://medium.com/@yghitza_48326/revisiting-what-happened-in-the-2018-election-c532feb51c0