RESEARCH BRIEF:
DEEP CANVASS, DEEP CHANGE
MARCH 2019

THE CHALLENGE WE FACE

"WE CAN'T WIN ON OUR OWN"
– CARMEN MEDRANO
FAITH IN THE VALLEY REGIONAL ORGANIZER

Our movement stands at a difficult crossroads. It has become clear that winning durable, majority support for pro-immigrant policies is going to require helping many conflicted voters find a way to stand firmly on our side. In face of an opposition adept at stoking prejudice, rallying those who are already with us is not enough.[1]

What's more, we need to win these conflicted voters' support without hiding who we are or what we believe. Building power beyond our base will mean meeting some people where they are, but it won't mean leaving them there. We have to seek new tactics that will draw them to stand with us in our truth.

A NEW SOLUTION

Rising to this challenge, the Immigration Strategic Messaging Project's field-testing teams have achieved a breakthrough: **the first voter contact approach proven to lastingly change voters' attitudes towards undocumented people.**

The field-testing teams collaborated to create a deep canvass persuasion model on immigration. Deep canvassing is a voter contact model centered on two-way, vulnerable story-sharing between a canvasser and a voter (in contrast to conventional electoral canvassing, where canvassers are most often reading messages off a script).

This new deep canvass persuasion model on immigration has been shown to:

- **PERSUADE POWERFULLY** 8% of voters with whom canvassers have conversations change their minds on a wide array of immigration policies – significantly more than the margin by which we win or lose many elections.

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1 Senser, R. & Morison, E. (2018 October). New Insights: Winning on Immigration: Research Findings and Analysis. Commissioned by Unbound Philanthropy.
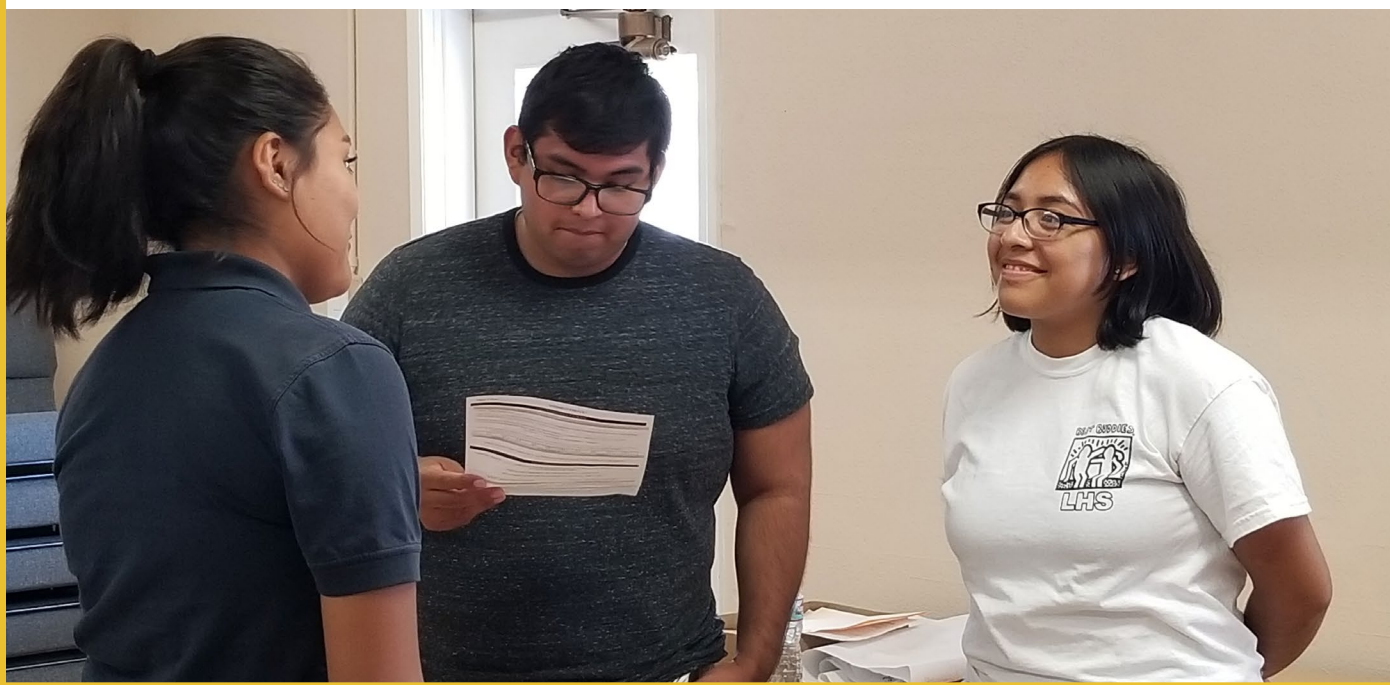
Orange County canvassers in training | **Kimberly Serrano**

- **CHANGE DEEP-SEATED ATTITUDES** 5% of voters with whom canvassers have conversations show a measurable reduction in prejudice towards undocumented people

- **PERSUADE LASTINGLY** As of this writing, the persuasive impact has been shown to persist for at least six months (even amidst the anti-immigrant rhetoric - "migrant caravan invasion", "MS13 out of control", "end birthright citizenship" – of the final weeks of the 2018 midterms.[2])

- **PERSUADE BROADLY** The impact was essentially the same on voters of every race, gender, age, and political ideology.

Notably, the project's research also found that a set of **different conversations, in which canvassers only conveyed talking points, made no impact. Conclusively, the persuasive power came from engaging in a two-way process of vulnerable story-sharing at the door.**

HOW? GRASSROOTS RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

The key to creating a persuasive effect of this magnitude was the **radically innovative, bottom-up approach through which the model was created.**

First, partners in three regions assembled teams of canvassers made up of both people directly impacted by immigration policy (including undocumented people, people with DACA, and their families, friends, and loved ones) as well as less-directly-affected allies. These teams then began knocking on doors with a draft script modeled on successful deep canvasses on other issues, beginning a research process of trial, error and iteration at voters' doors.

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2   Min Kim, Seung. "Trump's Moves on Immigration Roil Midterm Campaign for Both Parties." The Washington Post 31 Oct. 2018: Web. 28 Jan. 2019

Crucially, their approach was:

- **BOTTOM UP** Knowledge was built by the canvassers. As the people having the conversations, canvassers were given the strongest voice in the script and message development process. Canvassers were expected and empowered to share their learning in extensive debrief discussions.

- **COLLABORATIVE ACROSS REGIONS** Teams shared and combined their local learning on a weekly call, pushing themselves to dig past regional differences and identify the deeper dynamics at work among conflicted voters everywhere (and ultimately develop a model that would be broadly impactful).

- **CENTERED ON RAPID AND REPEATED TESTING** The teams canvassed 2-4 times a week, each time trying new things, embracing both success and failure, and adjusting the approach accordingly.

- **REAL-WORLD** The teams spoke directly to the voters who need to be won over, knocking in precincts where, on average, 45-55% of people voted for Trump.

The success of this approach shows how **the process of knowledge creation can be democratized. As a movement, we can tap the vast power of the grassroots to innovate new answers to some of our toughest challenges**, rather than leaving that work to small groups of experts.

In this case, that innovation process was led by Faith in the Valley, the Orange County Congregation Community Organization, the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, and the New Conversation Initiative. This collaboration was managed by the California Immigrant Policy Center as part of the Immigration Strategic Messaging Project.

Canvassing in Fresno County. | **Marcos Nieves**

THE OUTCOME: A BROADLY IMPACTFUL, REAL WORLD PERSUASION TOOL

The way the groups went about accomplishing this learning also fundamentally shaped the final product. As a result of this grassroots research and development approach, **the deep conversation model that the teams created:**

- **CAN BE USED BY ANYONE** This persuasion approach was created by and therefore allows a diverse array of individuals to be effective messengers, including undocumented people, their family members, close friends and loved ones, and allies.

- **INHERENTLY BUILDS POWER** The act of mobilizing to engage in these conversations led to an enormous amount of leadership development and skill-building on each team, in a way that opens up new capacity over the long term.

- **IS PERSONALLY TRANSFORMATIVE** Canvassers reported that engaging in the project deeply changed their confidence and willingness to talk about immigration both in political contexts and with people in their daily lives.

- **CAN BE USED BY A VARIETY OF ORGANIZATIONS** The tool can be used to effectively change attitudes by advocates working in many different circumstances and at many different scales, including teams that don't have access to many of the levers of professional political work.

- **WIDENS THE PATH FOR COMMUNICATION** The conversations are creating connection and trust between our side and conflicted voters, opening new avenues for authentic engagement instead of further division.

A NOTE ON SCALE

In 2012, in a campaign to defeat a statewide ban on same-sex marriage at the ballot box, over 14,000 volunteers in Minnesota had 240,000 deep conversations with voters and persuaded over 20,000 of them to change their minds.

That deep conversation model was very similar to the one developed here, pointing to exciting possibilities for deep conversation on immigration at scale.

CASE STUDY: THE RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The learning occurred at a rapid pace, with each team canvassing, debriefing, and revising the script two to four times per week. In turn, once a week, the organizers leading each team would convene for a weekly cross-site call to share their breakthroughs and ongoing challenges and meld their individual work into a cohesive whole.

It is difficult to convey the amount of learning that occurred. As just one example, in a segment of the script where canvassers aimed to surface life experiences that they and the voter share, **the teams eventually found a line of questioning that consistently worked:**

- COMPASSION When was a time somebody showed you compassion when you really needed it?

Tennessee canvass team daily debrief. | **Marcos Nieves**

... but only after trying all of the following, less successful paths:

- DIFFICULT DECISIONS Have you ever had to make a difficult decision or sacrifice to better your family? Or maybe someone made a sacrifice for you?

- ECONOMIC STRUGGLE How are you and your family doing right now? In terms of jobs, income, healthcare providing for family?

- SECOND CHANCES/MAKING MISTAKES Have you ever given someone a second chance after they made a mistake? Has anyone ever done that for you?

- LENDING A HAND Have you ever needed financial assistance to help you overcome a hardship?

- BELONGING Have you ever felt like an outsider? Like you didn't belong?

- FEAR When was a time when you felt afraid? What happened?

- REFUGE Are there times in your life where you needed/sought refuge? Or someone gave you refuge?

In total, the teams tested 25 different iterations of the canvass script, yielding a rich pool of learning about what does (and doesn't) work in engaging conflicted and conservative voters on immigration.

BROAD LEARNING FOR THE MOVEMENT

In addition to the development of a persuasive conversation model, the teams' work produced learning that has potential implications for other forms of messaging and media:

ALL STORIES WORK The teams put to rest the fear that conflicted voters will only respond to the "right" immigration story delivered by the "right" messenger. A diverse spectrum of canvassers tried sharing a wide array of stories at the door and found that all of them, when offered in an open, authentic, vulnerable way, were impactful.

DIFFERENT ADVOCATES FACE DIFFERENT BURDENS Canvassers who are directly impacted by immigration policy reported feeling unique power in these conversations but also unique pain. When inviting someone who is directly-impacted (undocumented themselves, or close to someone who is) to engage voters in this way, it is essential to ground them with a full awareness of the burden the work might bring, to look for informed, enthusiastic consent (rather than just the absence of an opt out) and to build caring community space and structures for healing throughout the process.

ALLIES MAKE AN IMPACT The research results clearly show that allies can be just as effective, as persuaders and messengers, as people who are directly impacted. Ally canvassers found they succeeded most when sharing not only about the consequences of immigration policy on people they care about but also what if felt like (for the allies themselves) to see those consequences play out.

Fresno County canvassers. | **Marcos Nieves**

EMPATHY IS NOT A ONE WAY STREET The canvassers found that a key step to helping conflicted voters see the humanity of immigrants was to recognize those voters' humanity, first. Being curious about people, listening, and taking a few steps' in their shoes calmed "us vs. them" psychology and made people more inclined to take a few steps with us, in turn.

MEMORIES OF RECEIVING COMPASSION ARE AN EMOTIONAL KEY Asking conflicted voters to talk about a time where they have been on the receiving end of compassion, at a moment when they really needed it, often cracks open a reservoir of powerful emotion and helps carve a channel to identifying with undocumented people rather than othering them.

IN THE WORDS OF THE FIELD TEAM LEADERS

ORANGE COUNTY CA

"This canvass project allowed my organization to expand our understanding of who stands with us in our fight for justice. For over 30 years, our base-building strategies were targeted to people at the center of the pain: low-income people of color who are on the receiving end of systemic oppression. This program allowed us to open our horizons about what it means to build a social justice movement that bridges gaps between race and socio-economic classes. People who have a conservative stance on immigration can change their mindset when presented with our stories of hardship and compassion. **We learned that transformation can be an intentional process. That there are people all over Orange County waiting to be transformed if only we knock on their door and take a chance."**
– Cynthia Sanchez, OCCCO

FRESNO COUNTY CA

"Being a part of this team of pioneers was life changing. It was a challenging experience that led to incredible growth for my organization, our leaders, and also for me personally. As a Latina woman I too have participated in "othering" communities that I believe don't value me as a human being. **This project stretched me to engage with people and neighborhoods in my community that I would have never stepped foot in otherwise and then walk away with a deep, emotional connection grounded in shared values."**
– Lety Valencia, FITV

TENNESSEE

"Participating in the deep canvassing project has shifted the culture of our organization and how we approach building a pro-immigrant majority in Tennessee. We have expanded our sense of who we think is persuadable and have recentered our strategies on the critical role that one-on-one, persuasive conversations play in transforming public opinion. In this political moment, we cannot operate as if it's business as usual. This project gave us space and resources to test and invest in new tactics, more deeply understand how U.S.-born Tennesseans are processing demographic shifts and the news, and has honed our spirit of innovation and experimentation in how we work with non-immigrant communities."
– From Stephanie Teatro, TIRRC Co-Executive Director

IN THE WORDS OF THE CANVASSERS

From the project's final canvasser survey: How has being involved in this canvassing project impacted you?

"Being a part of this project was one of the best decisions I've made so far. It's not the easiest thing to do... But in the long run it's worth it."

"It is important work in this moment in our country and I feel fortunate to be a part of it."

"It's challenged my ability to be confident and bold about my beliefs."

"It has been eye opening to learn...the skills necessary for deep canvassing, and transfer those skills to having other important but heavy conversations with friends, family, and strangers."

"Even when people strongly disagree with me, I've mostly been able to have pretty honest, vulnerable and thoughtful conversations. That continues to amaze me that this is still possible to do with strangers even in this political climate."

"It has made me realize that others have a wrong opinion on immigrants but I have the right to change that."

"I really enjoy doing this. It's incredibly hope inspiring that, even when folks won't change their mind in front of you, they are willing to engage."

"I wish every door was scheduled for a deep conversation at this point so that we could focus in on moving people. I hope to participate in deep canvassing work on a ballot issue at some point in the future."

"I have never really been fully involved in something like this and it makes me happy to be a part of the cause. I actually want to continue doing work like this a lot more often, I think it's something great that we're doing and it makes me happy knowing we can have a connection with someone any day we're out there."

"I feel as though I'm actually contributing to an issue that's made up a large part of my life."

OCCCO — together in faith, forward for justice

FAITH IN THE VALLEY

TENNESSEE Immigrant & Refugee Rights COALITION

THE NEW CONVERSATION INITIATIVE

CALIFORNIA IMMIGRANT POLICY CENTER