

# How to Organize a Precinct Campaign

## FOREWORD

In California political campaigns bear more resemblance to the campaigns of such agencies as the American Red Cross and the Community Chest than they do to the highly organized permanent precinct structure of some of our large eastern and middle western cities. But it is important to note that even in the East the power of the old style political "boss" and his "machine" is on the decline—if not even broken.

For example, Senator John Kennedy's family tea parties were a departure from the practices in "The Last Hurrah". Soapy and Nancy Williams' coffee hours helped bring rock-ribbed Republican Michigan to heel, and Democratic volunteers and amateur reformers broke the back of entrenched Republicanism in the city of Philadelphia.

### **THE "NEW LOOK" IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS**

Throughout the nation there is a "new look" in the Democratic party. Increasingly the ranks of our party workers are made up of volunteers whose chief characteristics are idealism and enthusiasm. And what is true in the nation as a whole is especially true of the Democratic party in California. Here without any old-style political organization to supplant or transform, the volunteer club and council movement, encouraged by the Democratic State Central Committee and the local County Central Committees, has grown and spread into all corners of the state.

### **CLUBS AND COUNCILS PROVIDE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONAL BASE**

California's clubs and councils provide a year-round field organizational structure for the Democratic party. Between elections the experienced precinct volunteers of a club remain as a leadership core for recruiting and training the new volunteers that every fresh campaign attracts. From campaign to campaign our party organization has been growing and consolidating its gains.

### **CONFLICTS TO BE RESOLVED**

For an effective precinct campaign our party leaders must set overall objectives. On the other hand any precinct campaign must also conform to the needs and wishes of the volunteers themselves. They are not unfeeling objects who can be moved about the board like chessmen.

Inevitably, there arise conflicts in aims and points of view. And until the day arrives when we have more than enough volunteers to cover adequately ALL the precincts in the state, these conflicts can only be resolved through compromise solutions.

### **THE "WORK-YOUR-OWN" PRECINCT SCHOOL**

For purposes of understanding our problems, what are these conflicts? First, there is the well-established opinion that the best kind of precinct work is done by

a person who lives in the precinct and who makes calls regularly on a year-round basis. We fail to completely realize this goal because

1. Many of our best precinct workers live in Republican precincts and their work is more urgently needed in unworked Democratic precincts
2. Many precinct volunteers will only work during a campaign. Once the campaign is over they redirect their energies to personal or community objectives. In the off-year the dedicated club member tends to turn his attention to running a successful club, raising money, special elections, politicking, etc.
3. Many precinct volunteers do not like working alone but prefer to work in teams. They need the discipline of a precinct chairman telephoning them at a certain time and a certain place for meeting in order for them to get their precinct work done.

#### **THE "WORK THE DEMOCRATIC PRECINCTS" SCHOOL**

A second point of view is that the heavily Democratic precincts should be worked before the less Democratic or Republican precincts are touched. We fail in perfect accomplishment of this goal because

1. Many of our heavily Democratic precincts are in weakly organized areas
2. Heavily Democratic precincts tend to be concentrated in districts where there are incumbent assemblymen and congressmen whose reelection is a foregone conclusion. With the excitement of a hotly contested battle lacking, there is little incentive for outsiders to come in to do precinct work.
3. Club workers take pride in doing a good job in their own communities regardless of its registration. They also become hopeful over the chances of their local candidates.
4. The further people go away from their own neighborhood, they are apt to be able to give less time to precinct work itself.

#### **GUIDE LINES FOR A CAMPAIGN**

Obviously, because of the above conflicting factors a practical program of precinct work must be flexible enough to meet specific local situations. The first responsibility of an assembly, county or congressional district precinct chairman, then, must be to evaluate the needs of his district and his resources for meeting these needs. Next, he must somehow match these resources to the most urgent requirements of his local situation. Useful guide lines for a precinct chairman are as follows:

1. A good precinct chairman will keep workers as close to home as possible but will make sure the Democratic precincts are covered first
2. A good precinct chairman will not under-organize his activity. He will not, for example, try to supervise or have supervised more people than one person can handle. (Have you ever tried to telephone, needle, follow through on forty people?)
3. A good precinct chairman will not over-organize his program. He will not draw up a plan on paper with enough colonels, captains and lieutenants for 300 workers when his rosiest expectations are for 50 volunteers. Otherwise he will end up with all chiefs and no workers and the precinct plan will collapse of its own weight before it ever gets off the ground



## **BASIC ELEMENTS OF A PRECINCT CAMPAIGN**

Whatever the size or complexity of a precinct campaign, it must provide the following basic elements:

1. An overall plan that allows for a system of priority for the work that must be done.
2. Specific and limited responsibilities that are delegated to particular groups and individuals.
3. Workshops or some kind of training for precinct workers.
4. Time schedules for getting jobs done, and follow-through for making sure that time schedules are being met.
5. A system for getting and keeping some kind of record of the progress being made, and a system for reporting total organizational progress back to the workers.

## **A PLAN FOR ACTION**

The following approach has proven practicable for setting up a precinct campaign in an assembly district which has several clubs:

### **A LINE OF CONTROL**

Since there can be only ONE really effective precinct organization in a district, it is essential that all groups, organizations and individuals be brought into it and that the volunteers work for all the Democratic candidates. Inasmuch as the assembly district councils do include representation of all official Democrats and chartered clubs, the council is therefore in a good position to give overall direction and coordination to an assembly-wide campaign.

Once the council appoints an assembly district precinct chairman, this chairman has the responsibility of having each club appoint a precinct chairman. His next responsibility is to work out with the club precinct chairman an allocation of precincts for coverage. This allocation should be made on the basis of the community served by the club, the size of the club and the effectiveness of the club.

Where a club serves a community, it is the practice to give that club all of the precincts in that community. In a metropolitan area or in a community where there are more than one club, it is necessary to allocate arbitrarily a group of precincts to a club. Even so, the chairman should try to give to a club those precincts which are as close as possible to the homes of the majority of the members of the club.

### **ANALYZING THE DISTRICT**

The assembly district precinct chairman should make an analysis of the registration figures for the precincts in his district. It is important to know how many Democrats and how many Republicans are registered in each precinct. Only in this way can any system of priority be set up for the work that has to be done. It also helps to have the primary voting figures, as these figures, when related to the registration figures may reveal strengths and weaknesses that merit attention.

### **PREPARING CARDS FOR WORKERS**

Precinct work tries to accomplish two main jobs, (1) locating SURE Democratic votes and (2) getting the SURE votes to the polls. It is absolutely necessary, therefore, for the workers to have cards with the names, addresses and phone



numbers of the registered voters to work from. However, if there is no prospect of getting all the precincts covered in the district, don't use up a lot of valuable time and material preparing cards for every precinct. Prepare cards only for those precincts which have the highest priority in each club's area and for which there appears to be an adequate supply of workers.

A simple shortcut for preparing cards is to have an extra set of duplistickers made for the registered Democrats in a district. Then paste the stickers on 3x5 cards. Sort the cards in each precinct by street and street number and wrap them together with a rubber band. Use a larger and stronger rubber band to hold the cards for the whole precinct together. This arrangement makes it possible for workers to call upon Democrats in a natural sequence. It also makes it possible to parcel out the calls by streets to helpers or to teams of workers.

#### **GETTING TELEPHONE NUMBERS**

For many metropolitan areas the telephone companies have a reverse telephone guide. In this kind of directory the phone numbers are listed by streets and house numbers rather than by the alphabetical beginning of the person's last name. Once your cards are arranged by street and numbers, it is possible to use the reverse telephone guide and go down each street and write the telephone if there is a listing for that house. This is a tremendous saving in time.

It is not always simple to get a telephone reverse guide, as the companies release them sparingly. In some areas such guides are not released at all and in some areas are released only at considerable cost. In such cases, try to obtain a loan of a guide from a friendly businessman. Every effort should be made to obtain one.

#### **PRECINCT MAPS**

It is desirable to have a precinct map for each precinct. The simplest procedure is to buy a set of the assembly district, cut them up and maount each precinct on cardboard. These maps are usually prepared by the various County Surveyor's offices. In Los Angeles County the maps may be purchased at the County Surveyor's office, 108 West Second Street, Room 500, or telephone MAdison 9 4747. Each map usually covers several precincts. The sheets cost 21 cents.

The precinct chairman should secure a complete set of precinct maps of the whole assembly district for headquarters use. Club precinct chairmen should also have maps of precincts for the area they are covering. As each precinct is worked the club chairman should use a crayon to color in the precinct. This gives a quick visual picture of the progress being made.

#### **PRECINCT YOUR MEMBERSHIP**

If a club has a large membership or mailing list, it is often times helpful to precinct the names. In this way it is possible to get a picture of how the membership is distributed geographically.

Precincting can be easily done if the chairman get (a) a county-wide map book or (b) community maps from local chambers of commerce or (c) maps free from gasoline stations. It is necessary to use these maps because they have street guides which precinct maps do not. After a person's address is located on a street guide map, it is usually simple enough to locate the address on the precinct map.



## TRAINING PRECINCT WORKERS

The mere fact that a volunteer has called upon a registered Democrat does not mean that friends and converts have been automatically made. In fact, the opposite can be true. If calls are handled poorly, we can even lose votes. For this reason, some kind of precinct training is necessary to make sure the volunteer understands what he is to try to accomplish and how he is to go about doing it.

At the beginning of a precinct campaign it is customary to have a workshop at headquarters for the precinct volunteers. A rundown on the overall job can be given, targets set, the organizational structure explained, techniques for handling the precinct call discussed. Experience has shown that merely TELLING workers what to do does not make deep impressions. Before a volunteer can absorb advice and make it a part of his behavior he has to become emotionally involved in the learning process. Probably the most valuable training device is role-playing.

**ROLE PLAYING** Role playing is the acting out of lifelike situations followed by a group analysis of the process. A director of role playing sets the stage for two people to act the VOTER and the PRECINCT WORKER. If possible, the voter should be someone who has done precinct work--his responses will be more typical. After each situation is role-played, the director gets the group to discuss the good points used by the "precinct worker" and to make suggestions for improvement. In this way any situation that is apt to occur in precinct work can be analyzed and a suitable technique worked out. Role-playing not only gives experience and confidence to workers but it also gives them the benefit of the total group's judgement and wisdom.

**SERVICE TRAINING** In addition to role-playing, there is a second common training device. It is a kind of IN-SERVICE TRAINING. This involves an inexperienced worker going out with an experienced precinct worker. The new volunteer listens and observes and then tries a few calls himself. During the last few weeks of a campaign many volunteers are recruited to precinct work from people dropping in at headquarters or from visits or telephone calls into precincts. Frequently the only way to give these people any training at all is to have them accompany and work with experienced workers.

**MANUALS** Manuals are prepared from time to time which describe good precinct visiting practices (see the CDC Manual, HOW TO WIN ELECTIONS). However, a manual will be read with more insight and understanding if the worker gets it after a discussion of precinct work or after a session of role-playing.

**BULL SESSION** Precinct workers very often meet for food and drink after a session in the field. In the bull session that follows they compare notes and recount their experiences and the pitches they have developed to meet certain kinds of situations. This is often the final step in the training process. For this reason precinct chairmen should make special efforts to arrange this type of post-mortem meeting for their volunteers.

## DOING THE JOB

**ASSIGNING PRECINCT WORK** There is no set rule for the assignment of precinct work. The only rule to follow is to use whatever practice brings the best results in a specific situation. Where most of the workers are new and inexperienced, it is best to have the workers



meet at a special time and place. The precinct chairman then distributes the cards for the house calls and asks that they be turned back when the workers are finished. In this situation the volunteers usually work in teams.

In other situations a worker may be assigned a single precinct. Even in this situation it is well to have a kick-off meeting for all workers to make sure the work isn't being put off until a later date. An average precinct takes about eight man hours to cover thoroughly, so if given to one worker it is usually not possible to get it done during one work session. In many instances, precinct workers will work together in teams—flying squad fashion—to cover heavily Democratic precincts, and in addition will work their home precinct at their convenience. Regardless of how the work is done, it is desirable to have the workers turn in their cards after completing their work. This is the ONE SURE WAY a precinct chairman has to establish the fact that the work was done. Getting precincts covered on paper is a lot easier than getting them covered in fact.

#### **"FOLLOW-THRU" IS THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT**

No matter how the work is assigned, the precinct chairman must ride herd on the workers—in a nice diplomatic way, of course. He must needle, wheedle and encourage them to keep on the job. Because of this constant need for follow-thru, a precinct chairman cannot directly supervise too many people. Probably 15 are about as many as one person can handle. If a club has more precinct workers than this, it is best to divide the group into two or more teams. But there should never be more teams set up than there are good precinct chairmen to handle. Such a chairman must be a dedicated person with great tact, firmness, perseverance and patience. He assumes nothing until it has happened.

#### **ELECTION DAY ACTIVITIES**

The climax and end-all of precinct work is the getting out of the vote on election day. Where the precinct work has been done on a team basis, the cards for the precinct will have been turned back as the precincts are worked. However, it is not a bad idea to have all the cards turned back to headquarters where they can be evaluated. Special problems, such as taking voters to the polls, can be noted and handled on election day as speedily as possible.

For election day it is a good plan to arrange the precincts in some order of priority and assign the heavily Democratic precincts first. However, there will be instances where there are good reasons for letting the person or persons who covered a precinct work that precinct on election day regardless of priority. Again, judgments have to be made in terms of how the work was done and the wishes of the workers themselves.

Experience also shows that more people are willing to work on "getting out the vote" on election day than are willing to do precinct work itself. This is fortunate, for precinct work can be done over a period of time whereas "getting out the vote" is an activity that must be compressed into a few hours. So every effort must be made to recruit manpower for this crucial day. For these last-minute recruits a mimeographed sheet of instructions is helpful.

After the polls close, election day workers should again be required to turn back their cards to headquarters with a report on the results of their efforts. In any kind of post-election appraisals of our efforts it is of the utmost importance that results are discussed in terms of demonstrable facts and not in fancies.



## REPORTS AND RECOGNITION

At any one time in a drive or campaign, the participants will want to know what the score is. The simplest way to show progress in a precinct campaign is to color in the precinct map as the work is done. The map should be displayed in some prominent place at headquarters where all the workers can see it.

Regular bulletins to workers giving an account of the number of volunteers recruited and the work that is accomplished helps to keep a precinct program moving.

Following the election, clubs should send a mailing to their members and to new volunteers giving a complete report of all the work that was done and the names of those who helped to do it. Special recognition should be given to those workers who shouldered the heaviest loads.

## DYNAMICS OF PRECINCT WORK

It is important that precinct chairmen who are responsible for recruiting and keeping volunteers on the job have a sympathetic understanding of volunteers' feelings. A precinct chairman must appreciate that it is not easy for an individual to ring a stranger's doorbell—especially if he has never rung one before. In fact, the volunteer must be quite powerfully motivated to do so. Two of these motivating factors usually are:

1. conviction of the importance of the election, and
2. feeling of responsibility as a member of a group to help the group achieve its goals.

## VALUE OF GROUP ACTION

While the importance of conviction has been pretty generally acknowledged, the value of group action and group discipline has not. But people like to identify with a group—to have a feeling of belonging. And when they do have this feeling of belonging—of not being alone in their work—they will do all they can to measure up to the group's standards and to help the group complete its job—providing, of course, the job is within reasonable limits of accomplishment.

As members of a group, volunteers more easily feel they are participating in a great movement; they also can enjoy shared experiences, friendships and accomplishments. As members of a group, volunteers are more apt to take rebuffs in the spirit of adventure; they often work beyond the point of weariness; they are less prone to "goof off".

Because of the many kinds of compelling disciplines that a group exerts over its members, a precinct chairman will do all that he can to create a group feeling. He will use kick-off meetings, group assignments, teams of workers, post-mortem get-togethers, etc. to create an atmosphere of teamwork. As a matter of fact, experience shows that where there has been good precinct organization, some kind of group behavior has usually been spontaneously developed.

## NO NEED FOR GENERALS

The precinct chairman must also have a good understanding of his own role as a leader among volunteer workers. He is not a general who barks orders for volunteers meekly to



carry out. Rather, he is one of the troops, only he works a little harder, more patiently and more sympathetically than they. So while responsibility must necessarily be pinpointed on certain individuals, the motivating spirit throughout the organizational structure must be one of team play and cooperation.

Volunteers are able to work varying amounts of time at varying periods. Instead of trying to force a volunteer into a rigid work plan, and thereby losing him, a precinct chairman must organize his work and materials to accomodate the volunteer. If it's a half hour, hour, half-day or a week that a volunteer can give, the Democratic Party needs that half-hour, hour, half-day or week. And if our leadership people are well organized and flexible, they can get it.

### CONCLUSION

In talking about precinct work in the past, there had been a tendency to spend most of our time discussing what the precinct volunteer says and does. Very little has been written about how large numbers of people are mobilized into action. Yet, to deploy thousands of volunteers up and down the streets with information and materials, securing coverage and at the same time avoiding duplication, is a formidable administrative task.

Overall direction is essential.

In addition, there is a middle group of leadership people who must function skillfully and well. Otherwise a precinct program bogs down into a random and sporadic ringing of doorbells. The neglect of this middle leadership group seems to have been one of our chief weaknesses in developing a precinct program. We have been telling them what their workers are to do. But very little about what THEY are to do. It is hoped this manual goes one small step in suggesting to them some "how to do it" ideas.