



GET OUT THE VOTE 2020

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

Preliminary Report and Evaluation of Common Ground's Nonpartisan 2020 GOTV Campaign December 2020



Get Out the Vote: A Power Building Campaign

Background

Common Ground is a nonpartisan, diverse group of ordinary people dedicated to tackling pressing problems facing our communities in the greater Milwaukee area. We are a non-profit, multi-racial organization. Our 40 member institutions are congregations, non-profits, small businesses, schools and universities. We have a 12-year track record of building power and creating change for the common good.

We recognized that Wisconsin would be pivotal in the 2020 Presidential election and that high turnout from the City of Milwaukee could shape the outcome for the nation. African Americans and Latinx people in Milwaukee have the potential to determine the outcome of statewide elections and in turn impact Presidential elections. Much of this potential power is suppressed and unused.

Common Ground clergy and leaders wanted to build deeper relationships and organize the residents in the neighborhoods around their institutions. This would necessitate going door-to-door in these neighborhoods to start conversations and relationships and to identify potential leaders and issues. We understood that neighborhoods which vote in higher numbers tend to get more resources and greater responsiveness from local government and public officials.

Strategy

After much discussion, Common Ground leaders decided to run a nonpartisan, relational Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign to launch long-term organizing in the neighborhoods around St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabernacle Community Baptist Church, Lamb of God Missionary Baptist Church, Sherman Park (where we have several member institutions), Hillside Public Housing, South Lawn Public Housing, and Ascension Lutheran Church. Our interest was not just helping people in these wards vote and perhaps increasing voter turnout, but to identify potential leaders and begin building relationships in these neighborhoods. The strategy was executed with door-to-door canvassing and phone banking. (Map of canvassing turf and our institutions)

Additionally, we chose to run an internal campaign to turnout 10,000 people within our member institutions to vote. We identified GOTV captains for each institution who built teams in each institution. To multiply our impact, as we found people who committed to vote, we would ask if they would commit to getting three other people to vote.

Adapt and Experiment

We did test canvassing in November of 2019 and planned a March 29, 900-person kick-off assembly at St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church. On March 13 schools were closed in Wisconsin because of COVID-19, and a stay-at-home order was issued.

The assembly was cancelled. We turned our focus to the safety and security of our families, friends, member institutions and leaders. We ran two issue campaigns responding to COVID. In May we began to re-imagine how we could do GOTV during this pandemic. On June 15 we held our first-ever online assembly to launch our voter registration campaign. This assembly was part inspiration and part training, and we repeated the training every week for 6 weeks to onboard new leaders (total 292). We tried creative strategies: Youth Corps, drive-thru registration, doctor/patient canvassing, virtual phone canvassing, barber shops, registration at food pantries and more. In July we began to experiment with COVID-safe door-to-door canvassing. We were gaining momentum when Wisconsin's 20-day voter

registration blackout period (July 23 -August 11) effectively suspended our voter-registration campaign.

On August 31 we launched Phase II of our campaign at a 291-person online assembly. To keep things interesting, we created and mixed in three videos and a spoken word piece. Leaders responded with commitments for turning out 14,998 voters. We also had Claire Woodall-Vogg, the Executive Director of the Milwaukee Election Commission (MEC), at the assembly to inform the leaders about steps she was taking to ensure the safety and integrity of absentee ballots. She also asked us to partner with the MEC to call everyone whose absentee ballot needed to be cured and to go to voters' homes to provide witness signatures as needed.



GOALS

Although we had to adapt and adjust our campaign as we went, our fundamental goals remained unchanged. We were focused on the long game, building CG's power to create change for the Common Good and to begin organizing in our turf.

Our Goals for 2020 Nonpartisan GOTV Campaign

1. Turn out 15,000 voters
2. Strengthen Common Ground
 - develop leaders and organizers -- especially people of color
 - build our base: recruit or create new institutions
 - deepen existing relationships with priority member institutions
 - raise money
 - demonstrate ability to organize and turnout voters
3. Set ourselves up for organizing in neighborhoods post-election

GOAL #1: Turn out 15,000 voters

Preliminary numbers indicate that we helped 16,302 voters vote. When the voting records for the Presidential election are publicly available (probably February or March), we will be able to match names with the public record and see if everyone we helped actually voted and if everyone's vote was counted. There may be some duplicates, which we'll be able to eliminate at that time.

On August 31 Common Ground leaders made commitments to turn out 14,998 voters. The preliminary number of 16,302 shows that we exceeded our goal, and these are just the voters for which we have a name and, in most cases, an address. However, these numbers fail to show the true measure of our work because many of our leaders did not record and report the name and address of every voter they helped. For example, one CG GOTV team called over 400 people in their social networks but

only reported 92. By making commitments and turning in actual names and addresses of the voters we helped, we are accountable to each other, and we build credibility. Turning in names and addresses is a much higher standard of accountability than simply reporting or estimating how many voters we helped. This is power; just the same as putting 900 leaders in a room is powerful. Perhaps we didn't teach this well enough. Maybe it reflects that some of our leaders are not yet



comfortable with power or accustomed to this level of accountability.

It is important to keep in mind that our goal, unlike other GOTV groups, was not merely to turnout the greatest number of people to vote. Our campaign was more about people than numbers. It was about building power with the residents and not about helping a candidate or a political party gain power. We were intentionally inclusive, knocking on every door and calling every resident instead of using a highly targeted list of "likely" voters. The relational way that we called and canvassed

meant that each door-knock and phone call took much longer than the more traditional, transactional methods. By "relational," we mean we employed "deep canvassing," a technique pioneered by Dave Fleischer and Leadership LAB to motivate infrequent voters. A deep canvassing conversation can take 15-30 minutes. It requires significantly more training; in addition to our day-of training, we also ran weekly story workshops for canvassers. We found that by exchanging stories about people we love, we could help voters discover voting as something we do for the people we love.

Additionally, we put a lot of time and effort into following up with voters who needed additional assistance or reminders; sometimes calling or returning to a person's home multiple times. We wanted to be relational and to meet people where they were. If someone wanted to vote, our leaders were willing to do whatever was needed to assist them. We did not concentrate all of our efforts into a few wards to see if we could demonstrate an increase in voter turnout by ward comparisons; we chose to go to more wards.



November 2020 turnout in Milwaukee was flat compared to the 2016 presidential election. This is not surprising because we were aware of only one other group doing door-to-door canvassing. Given that this election took place during a pandemic, a major economic crisis and a torrent of police violence against black people, comparisons to other years don't seem valid. The effort required to vote took on heroic proportions for many. In the wards around St. Mark AME where we invested the most time, the percentage of registered voters who actually voted increased. However, the number of people who were registered was down. Registration began to decline when COVID hit.

Voter registration is hard in Wisconsin! The app from Wisconsin Voices and the State of Wisconsin voter registration site were difficult to learn and use. This really cut into our productivity. Often an organizer or leader had to spend 40+ minutes trying to help just one person register. While canvassing, staff often had to stop canvassing in order to assist leaders with voter registration. If we were to do this again, we would consider making paper registration an option. However, there are significant disadvantages to that approach as well. This is what voter suppression looks like – laws that appear to be fair and equitable, but in reality, have a disproportionately harmful impact on people with low-incomes and people of color.

GOAL #2: Strengthen Common Ground

Develop leaders and organizers

This campaign created many opportunities to engage and develop leaders and organizers. The money we raised enabled us to hire a GOTV administrator and seven young people to work with us as GOTV organizers. Our staff expanded from 3 to 12.



Added GOTV staff: (clockwise from top left): Isaiah Furquan, Selena Deer, Quavon Davis, Britt Bermingham, Zipporah Turnbull, Catherine Johnson, Grisel Herrera and Allie Gardner.

In total, we had 727 leaders who put in 3,506 volunteer hours doing door-to-door canvassing, poll protection, rides to/from polls, calling shifts and more. Plus, leaders put in countless hours calling members of their own congregations or institutions and social networks.

Building GOTV teams with captains or co-captains at each institution was effective. However, the regular meetings of the captains didn't become a place where leaders could strategize together and hold each other accountable. Instead, they were useful as a way to update and check-in with captains.

We had 199 callers who completed 1014 hours of phone banking. Many callers were from around the country; they were members of our IAF affiliates as well as people who found us on the internet. We had 101 volunteer canvassers who completed 784 hours of canvassing. Staff completed 863 hours of canvassing for a total of 1,647 hours.



We tried to create a Youth Corps by hiring recent high school graduates to register their classmates, friends and family but that didn't work. Perhaps they were too young; several had never had a job before. Because of the pandemic it was also challenging to supervise and support them.

Our August 31 Assembly featured a mix of new and experienced leaders speaking

- Rev. Thad Winkle (Bethel Bethany United Church of Christ)
- Isaiah Furquan (St. Mark AME Church)
- Rev. Raymond Monk (Ephesians Missionary Baptist Church)
- Rev. Dr. Joy Gallmon (St. Mark AME Church)
- Rev. Rob Ater (Immanuel Presbyterian Church)
- Fr. Jose Gonzalez (Southside Caucus)
- Brenda McMurtry (Lamb of God Missionary Baptist Church)
- Dr. Mariana Rincon (Sixteenth Street Clinic).

We had several more new leaders emerge during the campaign. For example, at Mount Mary College, we had several new, young leaders emerge and create outstanding participation in the campaign; this was largely due to the GOTV organizer we were able to hire and assign to work in area colleges and universities.

Many of our leaders increased their technology skills, learning Zoom, Empower, MyVoteWI.org, VoteWisconsin app, Google Sheets, VAN phonebank and the Megaphone app. Staff and leaders also became experts in voter registration, voter IDs, proof of residence, absentee ballots and, thus, were able to cut through much of the voter suppression we encountered.



On Election Day, we ran a robust poll protection operation at seven different polling sites, making sure that everyone who came to vote was able to vote. It was a good opportunity for our less-experienced staff as they each got to run their own site. One organizer recognized that some voters were going to the former polling place and sent CG leaders to make signs and redirect voters. One of our pastors took the initiative to organize a team of leaders from his church and adopt a polling site. In total 57 volunteers and 8 staff worked 400 hours of poll protection, saving numerous votes.

Build our base: recruit or create new institutions

In addition to our 40 member institutions, twenty-three guest institutions joined us for GOTV:

- All Saints Catholic Parish
- Students and Staff at Alverno College
- Bethel Temple Church of God in Christ
- El Rey Family Market
- Employ Milwaukee
- Ephesians Missionary Baptist Church
- Greater Galilee Missionary Baptist Church
- Jeremiah Missionary Baptist Church
- Students and Staff at Medical College of Wisconsin
- Students and Staff at Milwaukee School of Engineering
- Community of Grace Baptist Church
- Mount Horeb Baptist Church
- New Song Church
- Parallel Staffing
- Redeemer Lutheran Church
- Risen Savior Community Baptist Church
- Self-Help Federal Credit Union
- Shepherd of the Bay Lutheran Church (Door County)
- Somali Bantu Friendship Association
- St. Benedict's & St. Francis of Assisi Parish
- Students and Staff at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
- Waukesha County for Common Ground

Three to six of these organizations may join Common Ground and many of the others will continue to relate to us and work with us where there is mutual interest.

We also partnered with several organizations, creating some important new relationships and deepening others.

Groups we partnered with:

1. Wisconsin Voices
2. Milwaukee Election Commission
3. League of Women Voters
4. Foley & Lardner
5. Megaphone
6. Milwaukee Bucks
7. Metro IAF and IAF West/Southwest
8. Center for Community Change
9. Election Defenders
10. Election Protection



One creative partnership was with the Milwaukee Bucks. Doing two online voter rallies and a day-long canvass required a lot of additional work, but it was a highlight for many leaders, staff and residents on the blocks we canvassed. It brought out leaders we've never or rarely seen before. We received a lot of press coverage. We began a relationship with Drew Franklin (Bucks Director of Player Relations) and Alex Lasry (Bucks Senior VP).

Deepen existing relationships with priority member institutions

We engaged new leaders at several priority institutions: Lamb of God, Tabernacle Community Baptist and Community Baptist. Community Baptist's GOTV Team was captained by a new-to-Common Ground leader who recruited several members of CBC who had not previously been involved with CG. Lamb of God's team, also led by a new-to-CG leader, turned out the most voters of any team - 1,187. Tabernacle leaders showed up consistently for calling and canvassing around their church and then turned out in force to do poll protection.

Raise money

We raised \$341,493 from 88 individuals and seven organizations: Wisconsin Voices, Movement Voter Project, Power PAC, Tides Foundation, Higher Path Foundation and Battle for Democracy Fund. This money enabled us to hire seven GOTV organizers and increase our administrative staff. The final expenses are still coming in, but we will have significant money that we can use to support our organizing going forward.

Demonstrate ability to organize and turnout voters

Before this November, CG had not demonstrated an ability to turnout a large number of voters. Now we've shown that we can organize and train over 700 volunteers to do relational calls and canvassing, turning out over 16,000 voters during a pandemic.

We earned recognition from Claire Woodall-Vogg, Executive Director of the Milwaukee Election Commission, donors like Tom Holmberg (who came to see and participate in our work before making a series of financial contributions), League of Women Voters, Milwaukee Bucks and several media outlets.

GOAL #3: Set ourselves up for organizing in our neighborhoods post-election



We were intentional about doing all of our door-to-door canvassing in the turf around member churches where we want to organize for the long-term. These are neighborhoods in which we are deeply invested because our congregations are there. These are neighborhoods populated by low-income and working-class African American and Latino residents who are not organized to build power. Our intention is to build long-term relationships with the residents, make the churches true hubs of the neighborhood and

work together – residents, church leaders and CG – to realize the residents’ dreams for their families and neighborhoods. This long-term organizing will produce significant increases in voter participation over time.

We identified possible leaders and will follow up with them. We started to learn the neighborhoods, their character, their strengths, their problems. We observed the value of having a strong member institution in neighborhoods where we were canvassing and calling. It distinguished us and credentialed us; it was also a source of leaders who felt ownership of the long-term neighborhood organizing.

The polling places we adopted for Election Day were also in these same neighborhoods. This gave us another opportunity to engage the residents and to show that we will continue to be present and ready to work with them.

Next Steps

- Neighborhood organizing at South Lawn, Hillside, Tabernacle, St. Mark AME and possibly more.
- Building core teams at Lamb of God, Tabernacle, St. Mark AME, Wauwatosa Presbyterian.
- Getting leaders who emerged during GOTV to training and involved in another campaign.
- Recruiting interested guest institutions to join as full members of Common Ground.
- Using our GOTV knowledge and skills in the spring School Board elections.

Other observations

We saw voter suppression over and over. Many things were discouraging people from voting. There was much confusion and many challenges around the registration and voting processes. Proof of residence was a significant barrier for many voters – even more than the photo ID requirement. There was a lot of fear and distrust of the system; much of this was intentionally created to discourage people from voting. People were overwhelmed with information but didn’t know what source to trust.

There was a lot of misinformation. Some folks were paralyzed because they didn't have enough information on the candidates to decide who to vote for.

Conclusion

We were able to adapt after COVID hit and forced us to shelter at home and cancel our kick-off assembly. We were able to create our own way of doing COVID-safe canvassing at a time when there was a lot of pressure to either be out without social distancing and masks or sheltering at home and avoiding all in-person GOTV work. We saw again and again that people needed face-to-face conversations in order to vote.



This campaign has clearly made Common Ground stronger and better positioned to take on other issues and really dig into neighborhood organizing around our institutions.

By the Numbers:

- Voters helped: 16,302
- 3,506 volunteer hours (poll protection, canvassing, driving, and calling shifts)
- Plus, countless hours calling members of own congregations or institutions and social networks
- Total number of leaders engaged: 727

While this intense, five-month GOTV campaign is over now, our work to build power with these voters is just beginning.

