CHANGING THE CLIMATE AND ENERGY CONVERSATION THROUGH DEEP CANVASSING

Case Study Final Report

Canada

Changing the Climate and Energy Conversation Through Deep Canvassing | Canada Case Study[1]

Executive Summary

At Neighbours United, we wanted to learn how to effectively help people who have been deep-canvassed take an escalating action that demonstrates their support for an issue. Deep canvassing has been shown to be an effective method to shift the underlying belief holding someone back from supporting a particular policy. Neighbours United deep canvassed in two British Columbia small towns, Trail and Cranbrook, having 1842 deep canvassing conversations (1209 full and 633 partial). Through this effort, Neighbours United built more support for the 100% renewable energy transition across community energy use in Trail and Cranbrook, building support for ending tax breaks for oil and gas companies.

This case study explored Neighbours United's tests to escalate people who were deep canvassed to a next action of higher effort, testing how mode of communication, time since deep canvassing, and supporter-rating affected taking an escalating action. The case study found that direct mail was an effective way to escalate supportive residents after being deep-canvassed to attend a community event.

CCE Initiative

The 2021 Carbon Brief global analysis showed Canada as one of the biggest carbon emitters per capita. While climate change is a polarizing topic across the globe, this is especially true in Canada and other major emitting countries, like the US and Australia. According to recent Climate Access polling, 45% of Canadians agree climate change is a real problem but aren't informed or engaged yet, and so their support is not reliable. In non-urban areas of BC, our polling has identified over 50% of citizens with similar attitudes.

For our political decision-makers to have political will, they need the majority of support of their constituents. To have lasting political will for lasting policy changes, we need rural Canadians to join with those in urban centres to support climate solutions and the clean energy transition.

To get the lasting support of rural residents, their cognitive dissonance must be resolved by observing the impacts of climate change and being willing to support policy to prevent the worst effects. To help them resolve their dissonance, at Neighbours United we are using the deep canvassing method, developed from US social movements, to help more than 1 in 3 people resolve their internal conflict and shift their beliefs and behaviours in a lasting way to support more government action on climate change.

This method trains volunteers to have conversations with conflicted residents using psychosocial values-based emotional storytelling and compassionate curiosity. They then are able to resolve their cognitive dissonance and become more supportive of collective climate solutions.

Deep canvassing has been studied by Broockman and Kalla and shown to be the most effective and lasting form of persuasion. Our innovation is applying this method to climate change. Our CCE initiative, which has been underway since 2020, is the first complete climate and energy deep canvass program anywhere in the world, and it has received recognition from Canada's Clean50 for this innovation.

---

1 The views in the report are not necessarily endorsed by the MECCE Project, which funded the research. This report was republished in 2025 following additional copy editing to increase the report's clarity.

By training volunteers to have deep canvass conversations with rural residents, who are often left out of climate conversations, we are ensuring rural public participation and awareness of climate impacts and solutions, as well as helping them become more supportive of increased collective action. Additionally, we train and coach other organizations, initially in Canada and the US, to run successful climate deep canvasses in key areas, and developed a toolkit to share our learnings internationally.

Case Study Methods

The case study's aim was to study the effect of Neighbours United's deep canvassing work on building support for energy policy in two small-town British Columbia communities. While we did that work, we reported on learnings from the pilot in Trail, BC, in our Deep Canvassing Playbook and Toolkit for Climate Solutions and the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication released a case study about this work. We then decided to focus this case study on what happens after residents are deep canvassed. While we know there is new support built for the policy issue at hand (a 100% renewable energy transition in Trail and Cranbrook, B.C.) from deep canvassing research, we were curious to run a test on all the new support identified and built through the deep canvassing to see if residents deep canvassed in Trail and Cranbrook DC would take an escalating action to demonstrate their support and how communications, time, and supporter rating treatments would influence this next step action. We focused on voters in Trail and Cranbrook, BC as our key audience.

Our theory of change was if residents who ended with a supportive rating when deep canvassed get personal high-touch communications soon after being deep canvassed, then they will take escalating action because the deep canvass for the most supportive audience segment has a high motivation to get involved because of their developed support for the issue, have the opportunity to get involved because they have been reached in a way that feels personal like the deep canvass and the deep canvass has been recently part of the lives so it's on their mind.

In Trail, between February 2020 and March 2022, Neighbours United staff and volunteer canvassers had 796 complete deep canvassing conversations (where the canvassers got through the entire script with residents,) speaking with 1181 people total. 506 people took the requested action, which was adding their name in support of their local government committing to the 100% renewable energy transition in Trail. 264 people who could move significantly did move, resulting in an overall 40.1% persuasion rate – that means over one in three people who could change their minds did. For a full explanation of what a deep canvassing conversation involves, and how we measure persuasion, see the [Neighbours United Deep Canvassing Playbook and Toolkit for Climate Solutions](#).

In Cranbrook, between July 2022 and April 2023, Neighbours United staff and volunteer canvassers had 413 complete deep canvassing conversations and spoke with 661 people in total. 217 people took the requested action, which was adding their names in support of their Provincial government ending tax breaks for oil and gas companies. 66 people who could move significantly did move, resulting in an overall 37.3% persuasion rate – that means over one in three people who could change their minds did. We wondered how the mode of communication and the amount of time since deep canvassing may affect a resident's attendance at an event; a community discussion on the topic of the deep canvass. We reached out to everyone with whom we had a full or partial deep canvass conversation.

Trail & Cranbrook Direct Mail Escalation Test

We also sent direct mail to everyone whom we had a mailing address that we had deep canvassed. The direct mail consisted of a printed magazine edition of three Living Here stories

that best met the deep canvassing narrative, a flier with information about the community discussion event, and a handwritten note on the backside. The handwritten note reminded the resident they had had a conversation with someone from our team, said they hoped the resident would enjoy some of these article stories, and invited them to the event. It was signed in the name of one of the Neighbours United team members who had many conversations in the community in question, increasing the likelihood that this person may have talked to the resident. These printed materials were put in a manila envelope with a printed Neighbours United return address sticker and a printed label that addressed the resident canvassed. After postage was affixed, on May 2-4, 2023, the envelopes were given to Canada Post in Castlegar, BC, to be delivered. This heavy manual effort by our staff and volunteers to put together this direct mail took over 70 hours, including approximately 55 hours of direct mail assembly, so adding another step of setting up the data and signing the corresponding name of the canvasser who they spoke with was beyond the scope of what was manageable at the time of the direct mail.

We did not track audience demographics in the deep canvass beyond their residence location and other contact information.

Trail & Cranbrook Email Escalation Test

At 8:00 am PT on May 2, 2023, we emailed everyone we had emails for in Cranbrook and Trail who were deep canvassed. The message to the residents reminded them that a Neighbours United team member had spoken with them and then invited them to a community discussion on May 13 in their community to continue the conversation. On May 9-12, 2023, our team had the final deep canvassing conversations in Cranbrook. Each evening, the same email message was sent to all people deep canvassed from that day.

Case Study Findings

These sample sizes were not large enough for a statistically significant analysis, and we did not have a control group. However, we still can draw some conclusions from the limited results that can inform campaign activities going forward for Neighbours United and other groups to consider in their community organizing activities. The results of the different treatments are below.

We had assumed that the more recently deep-canvassed residents would be most likely to attend the event, with the conversations more fresh in their minds. This was not the case, where in Trail, the four attendees were deep canvassed 14-36 months before the event. In Cranbrook, a mean average of nine months before the event was the time residents who attended the event had been deep canvassed. There was deep canvassing done in Cranbrook in the four days leading up to the event (however, those people did not get the direct mail escalation test), and none of these people attended the event. Therefore, time since being deep canvassed did not contribute to escalating residents to take a next step action.

Seven of the nine residents who came to the events scored a nine or ten on the deep canvassing scale. None of the residents who had changed their minds and shifted their views in a deep canvassing conversation came to the events. Therefore, this email and direct mail test did not escalate the residents, who have been persuaded, to take the next step action by attending a community event.

The direct mail treatment was useful in turning out engaged residents to take the next step in being part of a community conversation. Neighbours United will use this tactic again within a campaign context and consider only sending direct mail to residents in the supportive (7-10 rating) category, as the majority of people (seven of nine) who came out were in that category.

The email was a small amount of effort to set up and send out. So, while it didn't seem to be very effective in this test, there's maybe no harm in also sending out emails to ask residents deep canvassed to attend the event.

Psychosocial Dimension

The most surprising finding was that time since deep canvassing did not seem to make a difference in turning people out. It was also interesting that none of the people who moved from a neutral initial rating to a supportive final rating in the deep canvassing conversations showed up to the community events.

The deep canvass deals directly with the psychosocial aspects of climate change by identifying core barriers, values and stories to engage residents. This draws out their cognitive dissonance on a climate policy issue, opens them up, and supports them to wrestle with what's on both sides of the issue in an emotional place so they can talk themselves into supporting the climate solution policy. It also helps canvassers overcome climate grief and nihilism by participating in meaningful human connection that results in more people supporting the policies we need.

Climate Justice

Neighbours United's program addresses climate justice by building support for climate solutions that shift power to everyday people and limit corporate influence in resource-extraction-dependent communities.

Indigenous Knowledges/Participatory Methods Influence

There were no Indigenous knowledge processes directly integrated into this project. The target audience is voters in Trail and Cranbrook who are primarily of settler descent. Any small or rural community groups looking to organize to take climate action will benefit from engaging with Neighbours United's Deep Canvassing Playbook and Toolkit for Climate Solutions and this case study.

Cultural and Regional Context Influences

The culture and regionality of the two communities directly influenced the program by shaping the deep canvassing script through listening, compassionate curiosity and iteration around the people who live in these towns and their values.

Case Study Impacts

Internal Impacts

Because of this case study findings and due to the effort of direct mail and the residents who came to the event, in the future Neighbours United will only use direct mail to escalate residents who are in the supportive category at the beginning of a deep canvassing conversation. If a resident is persuaded during a conversation and shifts their belief significantly, from that point, escalating their engagement using traditional engagement community organizing can be used. For this, we will explore different modes of communication and a less escalated effort of a request (for example, not to come out to a community event, but something where less effort is required) to engage them.

We also would like to test other modes. In the future, calling back all deep-canvassed residents to invite them to an escalating action, such as a community discussion event, could be tested. Of the total 1842 residents we had deep canvassing conversations with, we had 1417 phone numbers. Using our CallHub dialling system, conversations and dialer time would have to be

under two and a half minutes in order to not exceed the approximately 55 hours of direct mail assembly staff and volunteer time.

External Impacts

The broader implications of this case study are that groups organizing around policy change at their specified level will understand that they can use deep canvassing to have a persuasive impact and can escalate new supporters from high support segments using direct mail to organize and mobilize enough support to build the power needed.

Applicability and Scaling of the CCE Initiative

Neighbours United learned that applying this direct mail escalation to supporters identified or developed in other deep canvassing campaigns should be tested, and there's no reason to think it wouldn't produce similar escalation results. Scaling of the escalation tests can be done in other campaign contexts and as Neighbours United's deep canvassing program grows.

We would advise organizations who are trying to engage public opinion about climate action to do the following:

1. Be clear on the policy outcome that is trying to be achieved. You cannot build public opinion for climate action and have that result in the policies that are the building blocks for that action. You need public opinion to be supportive enough to make each specific policy politically feasible.

2. Be clear if the campaign you are working on requires persuasion to achieve the policy outcome that is desired. If it does require persuasion because not enough people already support it and can just be identified and mobilized to show their support, then deep canvassing is a useful tactic to shift public opinion in an honest and authentic way. If it doesn't require persuasion, simply do good community organizing to develop stories that build relationships to turn into strategy and action instead.

3. If you are engaging with people through deep canvassing then hire a guide. Our pilot project spun our wheels before we were able to get the time of deep canvassing experts who could guide us to get a script that worked to shift more than one in three people. Working with an expert will save groups time and money towards their goals.

4. Finally, we would let people who were deep canvassed know they should have a clear engagement pathway(s) towards mobilizing the newly developed public opinion support from deep canvassing. This case study found using direct mail for high supporters of the policy identified in deep canvassing resulted in an audience showing up to an in-person event, so we recommend other groups build off that learning, try it, and test new escalation methods (and document those learnings and share)

   a. Since this case study, we've been running deep canvassing in other environmental campaign contexts that require a public opinion shift to achieve the desired policy goals. From this case study and these next applications, we've learned that you should use deep canvassing only when you need to shift public opinion in a specific geography to make sure an organization is being as efficient as possible with its resources. When a strong supporter is identified at the beginning of the conversation, a canvasser should poke around to make sure they are a strong supporter, then save time by skipping to the end of the conversation script to translate their support into action. Finally, having the next escalating actions lined up and ready to test within a strategic time frame with each person canvassed will be useful for driving more leadership and

action. We've seen from other deep canvasses in the US with other non-environmental issues, that the conversation structure, and volunteer recruitment and retention best practices are the same. We need to have urgency to motivate volunteers to show up and a clear theory of change to share with the person at the door as to why they should take action at the end of a conversation. This is true regardless of the issue, the demographic of the person being deep canvassed, and the location of the program.

b. Deep canvassing does work outside of BC and Canada. Our work supporting a group in Alberta over the past year, showed deep canvassing works around renewable energy and oil and gas subsidy conversations to change public opinion and translate that into actions taken around a key moment. In this case, an election outcome in a key electoral district. Deep canvassing originated in the US and has been done on a variety of social issues, so the evidence is clear from campaign wins and academic studies that deep canvassing works there. We believe it could work in other polarized places with similar cultural contexts to Canada and the US where to shift public opinion, we could shift one person's beliefs at a time, by letting them talk through their dissonance after being grounded in their lived experience on the issue. Places like the UK, Australia, and New Zealand could be good places to explore deep canvassing in shifting public opinion towards specific policies. The conditions for success include the canvasser's ability to listen and share a story about their stake in the issue, a clear theory of change for people being canvassed to take action on (which includes urgency), and resources for deep canvassing and organizing to match the scale of the public opinion challenge.