

Organizational Profile

People's Action Institute



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INTRODUCTION

In the first couple of months of 2020, things at People’s Action seemed to be steamrolling ahead. The organization had just received results from a study on its deep canvassing work, a specific tactic where organizers would spend intensive time with potential voters on key issues and election candidates — an alternative to traditional, fast-paced door-knocking. The results showed that deep canvassing was highly effective, and People’s Action was eager to work with its local member organizations to endorse a presidential candidate and then engage voters in the lead-up to the general election.

But as staff departed from a retreat in late February/early March, the tenor started to change — they began to worry that they would have to change course because of the growing concern about the COVID-19 pandemic. What change looked like, though, was unclear. As an organization composed of forty member organizations based in their own state and local communities, with varying missions, populations, budgets, and scopes, People’s Action spent years building a structure of internal democracy that gave local organizations and leaders autonomy. As the pandemic shut down all in-person contact, each of these diverse organizations would need to adapt — and in turn, so would People’s Action as a whole. How could People’s Action maintain the strength and outcomes from in-person deep canvassing, while pivoting to a largely digital strategy spread across all of their member affiliates?

Organizational Overview and History

People’s Action is a national alliance with 40 member organizations across 30 states. It was founded in 2016 as a merger of National People’s Action, the Alliance for a Just Society, US Action, and organizations such as the Campaign for America’s Future and the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. The organization is focused on building the power of multiracial, working-class people across the country to shift economic and social policies including a just energy transition, health care for all, housing justice, and free college for all.

People’s Action centers community organizing and power-building as the core focus of its work. The organization’s multilayered approach to decision-making and structure includes the following components:

Key Question:
How did People’s Action pivot during the pandemic to a digital deep canvass program that reflected the same values, culture, and effectiveness as its traditional in-person engagement at the local affiliate level?

Theme



Culture and Needs



Home within a Home



- **Delegates' Assembly** — The Executive Directors and one member-leader from each member organization
- **Issue Cohorts and Campaign Committees** — Cross-member organization committees that meet regularly
- **Board of Directors** — Individuals elected by the Delegates' Assembly

These entities drive internal strategy via a matrixed approach. The Delegates' Assembly decides the broad strategic direction, chooses which campaigns to engage in, and elects new members to the Board of Directors, while the Issue Cohorts and Campaign Committees decide on strategy within active campaigns.

Members typically become part of People's Action via the forty member organizations, so until early 2020, People's Action did not have a national volunteer program that recruited people independently of those local organizations.

The question of whether to expand into working directly with volunteers resurfaced just before the pandemic, when People's Action was considering incorporating volunteers into its deep canvassing program. The governing assemblies decided to invest in the forty member organizations instead of volunteers, and to allow the member organizations to lead the deep canvassing work at the local level.

Everything changed, however, when COVID-19 hit. Member organizations became internally focused. Swamped with responding to immediate local needs and limited by social-distancing guidelines, member organizations were unable to launch a deep canvassing program. Through a combination of experimentation and approval from these internal assemblies, People's Action adjusted course. By October 2020, it had built and staffed a nationally distributed deep-canvassing volunteer program which, as of Spring 2021, had more than 17,000 registered online volunteers and dozens of online volunteer leaders who collectively had an upwards of 40% movement or persuasion rate in the January 2021 Georgia runoffs (see **Figure 1**).

FIGURE 1:

Deep Canvas Results: Georgia U.S. Senate Runoffs (January 2021)

Voter movement on the opinion scale 48.6%. A percentage of cases when a voter moves up 1 or more points on the 1-10 opinion scale, as a proportion of all "moveable" voters (defined as those with a 2-9 initial rating with whom volunteers completed a deep canvass conversation)

Metric Percentage	Description
48.6% Movement Rate	A percentage of all cases when a voter moves up 1 or more points on the 1-10 scale, as a proportion of all "movable" voters: people with a 2-9 initial rating with whom volunteers completed a deep canvass conversation.
58.7% Persuasion Rate	A percentage of all cases when a voter initially identified as a 2-6, but identifies as a 7-10 on the 1-10 scale at the end of conversation, as a proportion of all "persuadable" voters: 2-6 initial rating where a deep canvass conversation was completed.
43% Persuasion Rate among voters initially unaware of runoff election	A percentage of all cases when a voter says "no" as a response when asked if they are aware of the runoff election, and finishes the conversation identifying as a 7-10 on the 1-10 scale, where a deep canvass conversation was completed.
58.9% Persuasion rate among voters initially not planning on turning out or unaware of runoff	A percentage of all cases when a voter says "no" when asked if they are aware of the runoff election, or initially indicate they are not planning on voting (1-6) and the voter finishes the conversation identifying as a 7-10 on the 1-10 scale, where a deep canvass conversation was completed.
42.7% Warnock/Ossoff supporters canvassed voted early at a date after our conversation with them	Early vote data are administratively reported at the individual-level by the Georgia Secretary of State, and matched to the voter via a unique identifier.

Figure 1. Recap of the impact of volunteers' deep canvassing conversations in anticipation of the Georgia U.S. Senate runoffs in January 2021. Source: *People's Action report, authored by Jessica Burbank.* Note: On the scale, 1 represents a contact who is an unpersuadable Republican voter; 10 represents an unpersuadable Democratic voter.

Adapting to unforeseen and challenging circumstances is one thing; succeeding in doing so is another, and it is still another to have such a sizable impact. The ability to make such a dramatic pivot and be effective is not a guarantee. Many organizations struggle with switching to online modalities particularly because they can be more impersonal and transactional than in-person activities, making it easier for volunteers to disengage. What worked in People's Action's favor? How did they build a successful and engaging online platform?

Much of the answer lies in two central principles the organization has held for years and applied in this situation:

- First, an ingrained commitment to leadership development allowed the organization to scale up by giving volunteers and staff the chance to help craft the way forward. Rather than being rigidly tied to a particular structure, People's Action looked for opportunities to develop the leadership capacity of its community members, who then helped guide the structure that ultimately took shape during the pandemic.

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- Second, the organization's approach to community building meant that People's Action surfaced tension, wrestled openly with uncertainty, and invited reflection. Rather than trying to map its offline techniques directly onto online modalities, People's Action sought to deliberately create structures and rituals in online spaces that would help foster a sense of community amongst its volunteers.

These principles have not only facilitated an organic, member-led development of a deeply connected social and political community, they have enabled People's Action to adapt and scale its efforts during a critical time.

“They Knew Their Power”: Creating Opportunities for Leadership.

“It's in our DNA to create transformative experiences for people,” says Executive Director George Goehl. Throughout its programs, People's Action builds in opportunities for people to get trained, then lead trainings themselves; take action, then conceive of more actions. “There's a tremendous amount of space to take leadership ... I mean, you could end up being the chair of the board and that's just a straight hierarchy path,” Deputy Director Bree Carlson says. “But I think more often than not, [leadership] is what you can build and what risks you will take — and what investment you will make in building a political home for yourself and for others.” Despite the fact that organizational leaders had just decided not to manage volunteers directly, they reversed course when COVID-19 hit and opted to use staff resources to train and support volunteers to lead the phone-based deep canvassing effort.

To make a volunteer program work, they had to invest in developing those volunteers' leadership skills. Developing leaders begins with identifying potential leaders; thus, program staffers built a system to identify promising leaders. First, the data team presented a large list of people to reach out to via text. Second, volunteers texted those contacts, inviting them to phone bank events on Zoom. When new people attend phone banks to participate in deep canvassing, they are put into a “new caller” breakout room, where a veteran volunteer walks them through the process, answers questions as they go along, and generally works to motivate, inspire, and engage the group. “Talent scouts” in the “returning caller” room identify new prospective leaders; if a volunteer has attended at least three phone banks, staff and volunteer leaders reach out to have a one-on-one conversation with them to build intentional relationships, understand their self-interest, and learn the volunteers' vision for the work they can do together. Through these conversations, staff ask volunteers to take on a leadership role, whether that's joining the Advanced Call Team that leads small phone bank breakouts, talent-scouting, leading trainings and debriefs, or moderating Zoom and Slack rooms to ensure questions are answered and drive healthy conversation amongst volunteers. Most recently, staff have begun identifying volunteer leaders who can serve as deep canvass captains that oversee whole segments of the operation.

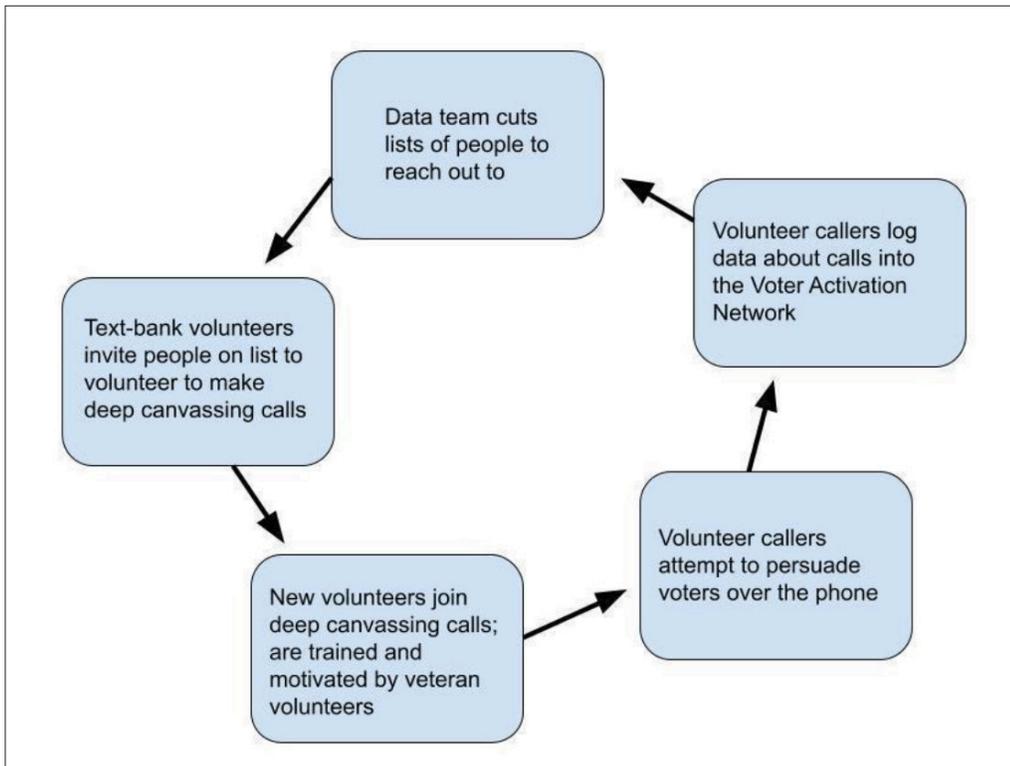


FIGURE 2: Relationship between texting and phone banking segments of the deep canvassing program.



FIGURE 3. Model of deep canvassing team leadership structure. Source: *People's Action's Advanced Call Team Guide (Feb. 2021)*

Teams of trained volunteer leaders constantly support and reach out to new callers and potential leaders. This structure, as demonstrated in Figure 3, enables staff to focus on creating stronger trainings and materials for supporting the volunteer leaders.

In the fall, staff anticipated high attrition after the 2020 general election. "I was worried that there was going to be this huge drop-off of energy as we headed into Thanksgiving and Christmas—people were either going to be like 'We lost, it's over,' or 'We won, it's over,'" recalls Catherine Curran-Groome, Distributed Program and Events Manager and a self-described pessimist.

There were 27,000 people in their distributed program base at the time. Ultimately, Curran-Groome continues, "I would say that was actually a much smaller subsection of the base than I expected.... I think what made the transition out of electoral mode into visioning what we can win under a Biden administration (and how [each volunteer] can be a part of that) successful, was that sense of them having had such a critical impact in both of those elections — really feeling like they knew their power, that they knew how powerful we can be if we keep building this base. And really critical to that is the leadership element, that people feel ownership now over the teams they're on and the programs they're a part of." Volunteers helped develop and operate the program's systems and built teams that they cared about — and they stayed in. As of Spring 2021, there were still more than 17,000 volunteers.

Transferring Community Principles to New Platforms: Intentional Culture Building Online

Rather than treating culture as a byproduct of volunteer interaction, People's Action has sought to instill a culture that encourages volunteers to bond beyond the surface. Strong relationships are especially crucial because deep canvassing conversations can be hard and scary. There is no guarantee that they will go well, particularly since the goal is persuasion, not mobilization — meaning that the targets of these conversations are more likely to hold political views that are more distant from the volunteer canvasser. It's easy for a volunteer to have a negative conversation and not want to keep going. People's Action staff were well aware that their typical methods of support and motivation in offline canvassing are missing on Zoom. As a result, they had to think deliberately about how to translate support through online modalities. "We tried to think really intentionally about how we can replicate or even use some of the advantages of being on Zoom to create more of a sense of community," says Curran-Groome. "If we aren't really intentional about building those structures over Zoom, then it won't happen."

From the get-go, they knew they wanted to encourage a sense of inclusion, manifested in what they called the People's Action family; as such, they chose radical hospitality, radical honesty, and radical love as the grounding values to structure the spaces and systems they would create and the kinds of interactions they wanted volunteers to have. People's Action trainers feel that honesty and love are clearly evident in the agitation work above. "In particular," Curran-Groome says, "we wove radical hospitality into all of the fabrics of our onboarding processes for new volunteers so that when they came in, when they joined Slack, they automatically get a message welcoming them, appreciating them." These values provide a moral imperative for making sure that new volunteers are seen and supported — a motivation that extends beyond the more transactional need to scale efforts.

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Similarly, PA's emphasis on rituals can provide a sense of consistency and stability as community members learn what to expect; people develop relationships not just with other members, but also with the organization's practices. This can be tricky on Zoom, where hugs, snacks, and chit-chat before an event aren't possible. Instead, the distributed team has adopted practices such as playing music and making sure there's a volunteer responsible for welcoming people with a "high-energy radical hospitality greeting" as they sign on, and closing out every session with time for a debrief and then a dance party. "Even the ones who are clearly uncomfortable dancing on video just get to sit and laugh at the lady dancing with her cat or the guy with the wild moves," Curran-Groome laughs. "Cultivating joy like that has been really key to a sense of community and home." Volunteers also know that they have Slack channels where they can ask questions and share stories about their calls with the full volunteer (and staff) community.

But Slack can be overwhelming, too — less like a conversation and more like a constant deluge of information. To create more opportunities for intimate communities to form, staff have started adopt-a-state programs, where the same volunteers call into the same areas, and therefore start to become familiar with one another; they encourage volunteer leaders to set time to check in with and coach each other; and they have just started a mentorship program within the Advanced Call Team to help foster personal growth and relationship growth at the same time.

One of PA's value practices also centers an embrace of tension and agitation. Agitation is not a new concept in the organizing world; it has been used for decades as a tool to guide leadership development and to build commitment to advocacy efforts. It is the idea that probing beyond the surface to explicitly identify, address, and move past areas of discomfort can trigger deeper transformation. For People's Action, agitation has manifested as both a trauma-informed training methodology and a core component of leadership development. This orientation infuses People's Action as a whole, calling on everyone in the organization —whether staff, volunteer leader, or otherwise — to be willing to be vulnerable and treat others' vulnerability with compassion, thereby developing a foundation of deep relationships and trust. "This way of being in deep relationship with each other is what informs one of our core values — we call each other to greatness, but don't expect perfection," says Carlson.

While most community organizers developed the agitational approach for in-person use, the distributed team in People's Action has found a way to adapt it to online formats that capture the spirit, if not the full essence. In a two-hour, Zoom-based "propositions and basebuilding" training, the lead trainer was able to encourage one volunteer in particular into a more vulnerable space to address her doubts about her own skills. "I've got a self-interest in your own growth," he started out. "What is it that I'm hearing that's holding you back? Is it a fear of failure?" "Yeah," the volunteer responded. "I'll admit it ... I think I still question my ability to meet people where they're at in this work, even though I've been doing it for a little bit."

She continued, but the trainer challenged her further: "I believe so strongly in you, and it makes me a little mad that you were demeaning yourself by saying you have been doing this for 'just a little bit.' You were part of a groundbreaking effort [since 2019], not only on immigration, but

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George Goehl, Executive Director

you helped win the country back last fall! What's that internal voice?" Characteristic of many agitational efforts, this deeply personal but loving conversation created an atmosphere of reflection, inviting volunteers to examine questions of identity and meaning, and to consider where being an organizer and leader fit into their self-conceptions.

From Here: Meeting the Moment—Adaptation

People's Action adapted to the pandemic's challenges by allowing its commitments to leadership development and community building through exploring tensions and intentional culture-setting to influence the structures it adopted — not the other way around. Doing so has kept the organization grounded in a learning posture, one in which the people doing the work are challenged and trusted to inform that process and given the voice to do so. Despite the organization's national scope and its limited staff capacity, this approach has allowed People's Action to position its resources at key points in order to facilitate others' growth and commitment to each other, creating a social home and allowing a new collective entity to emerge and grow — even during crisis — to become more than the sum of its parts.

As the political environment transitions to a new administration with new priorities, People's Action will be challenged to adapt yet again to a wholly different set of circumstances. The choices the organization faces from here may yet illuminate new insights about how these dynamics influence its adaptability.

