

ELECTIONS

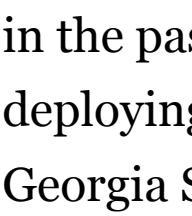
‘If we do this right ...’: The new Dem organizing strategy catching fire ahead of the midterms

Operatives who helped elect Sen. Jon Ossoff are exporting their voter contact program to more states for the midterm elections.



JONESBORO, GA - NOVEMBER 19: Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Jon Ossoff speaks at a campaign event on November 19, 2020 in Jonesboro, Georgia. Democratic U.S. Senate candidates Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff are campaigning in the state ahead of their January 5 runoff races against Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) and Sen. David Perdue (R-GA). (Photo by Elijah Nouvelage/Getty Images) | Elijah Nouvelage/Images

By ELENA SCHNEIDER
04/08/2022 04:31 AM EDT



A group of Democratic strategists is trying to spread a novel organizing tactic in this year’s election. Technically, it’s called “paid relational organizing,” but it boils down to this: paying people to talk to their friends about politics.

Democrats think it helped them win the Senate in 2020 — and are hoping the get-out-the-vote strategy will help limit the pain of a brutal 2022 election environment.

Advertisement

Get A Consultation

Open

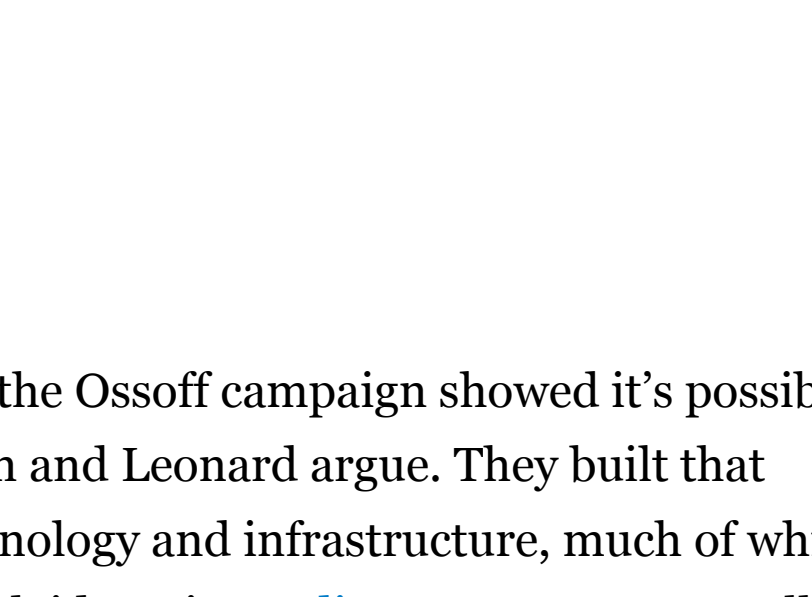
Conversations with friends, family members or neighbors are more likely to earn a voter’s support than chats with a stranger at their front door, which is the traditional way campaigns have run paid canvassing programs in the past. And an important test case for deploying the strategy at scale came out of the Georgia Senate runoffs in 2021 when now-Sen. Jon Ossoff’s (D-Ga.) campaign, flush with nearly unlimited cash but only two months to spend it, used a paid and volunteer relational program to get people talking to acquaintances instead of strangers about the election.

In particular, the Ossoff team hired 2,800 Georgians, specifically targeting those with little or no voting history themselves to do this outreach to their own networks. The campaign was making a bet that many of the friends and family of their highly political volunteers were already engaged in the runoff election, but that this group could expand the electorate with relational outreach into their networks — which were likely to include more irregular voters or non-voters like them. The campaign folded this data into their vast field program, tracking conversations and whether those contacted had voted. They could even [notify organizers](#), based on their own network, which voters were tagged as “only reachable by you.”

A [post-election analysis found their efforts boosted turnout](#) by an estimated 3.8 percent among the 160,000 voters targeted through their relational program. Ossoff and now-Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.) won by 1.2 points and 2.1 points respectively, flipping the state and the Senate to Democrats.

Now, the two women behind that effort — Davis Leonard and Zoe Stein, who are partnering with Greta Carnes, the former national organizing director for Pete Buttigieg’s presidential campaign — are working together to export relational organizing, both paid and volunteer versions, to a host of Democratic campaigns and groups ahead of the 2022 midterms.

Advertisement



The Progressive Turnout Project, another canvassing group, is putting \$1 million behind a paid relational program in Georgia, Arizona and Nevada — top battleground states this fall. Red Wine and Blue, a group focused on organizing suburban moms, is also working with them on a volunteer relational program.

The Texas Democratic Party is rolling out a statewide volunteer relational program, called Connect Texas, giving every county party in the state access to those tools. They’re also piloting a small paid relational program. And in partnership with PDI, a progressive technology company, they’re also launching an app that allows campaigns and committees to use relational organizing for voter registration — a tool that lets volunteers or paid organizers check whether their family and friends are registered to vote, then help them sign up for it. It’s also customized for states that require voters to physically mail in their absentee ballot requests, like Texas.

“Campaigns are the last door-to-door salesmen. No one is trying to sell you knives at your door anymore, we’re using share codes on Instagram from the people we follow,” said Carnes, who joined Leonard and Stein as a partner at Relentless, the relational organizing firm the latter two co-founded. “If we do this right in a couple of important places in 2022, similar to what they were able to show with Ossoff, then I think we can look forward to seeing a lot more relational programs in 2024 and 2026.”

Relational organizing itself is not new, with a long history in community organizing movements. But incorporating it as a central feature of a political campaign is new. And reaching voters, especially less-likely voters, through trusted communicators is an especially important goal for Democrats this year, with the party facing a stiff midterm climate and a [serious enthusiasm gap](#).

The push also comes from the conclusion that some traditional organizing tactics didn’t work as well during the coronavirus pandemic, with fewer volunteers wanting to work in person and the spam-call era pushing people to send unknown numbers to their voicemails.

“We know that traditional, cold voter contact methods have a ceiling for their effectiveness,” Leonard said, referring to door-knocking and phone-banking.

“And we know that peer-to-peer conversations do work,” Stein added.

Relational organizing does require a lot of back-end operational strength from the campaigns — tracking volunteers’ conversations, storing that data in a usable infrastructure and scaling it to a statewide race. That’s a lot more complicated than counting up how many doors a volunteer has knocked on.

Advertisement

But the Ossoff campaign showed it’s possible, Stein and Leonard argue. They built that technology and infrastructure, much of which they laid out in [Medium posts](#), an unusually clear look inside the guts of campaign work that’s often treated like state secrets. The Ossoff campaign hired at least one organizer in all 159 counties in Georgia, facilitating over 17,000 personal contacts with voters in just the two days leading up to the election.

“What the team did with Ossoff in Georgia on paid relational constitutes a rarity in politics — a powerhouse new tactic that could affect close, statewide races,” said Ben Wikler, chair of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, which runs its own volunteer relational program. “The biggest challenge for relational organizing has always been how to scale. Impact-per-voter reached is high, but getting to enough voters to shift election results has been devilishly hard. But a paid relationa [program] I has a way to dramatically expand the size of it.”

Ossoff campaign manager Ellen Foster said the “math is there” to show that the paid relational program “made a difference” for their victory.

She also credited Ossoff himself with the campaign’s focus on relational organizing. When the candidate ran in an expensive congressional special election in 2017, regular or semi-reliable voters “were hammered” by paid communications and voter contact campaigns, Foster said. But “what kept [Ossoff] up at night was how to get those voters who didn’t have a voting history and pulling them in.”

“People are always trying to find more direct ways to communicate [with voters], and this is now on the table,” Foster added.

In 2021, the Progressive Turnout Project ran its own paid relational program in Hampton Roads, Va., finding that voters contacted by their paid organizers turned out at a rate 9.2 percent higher than the general population in that area. In 2022, PTP plans to spend \$1 million on a paid relational program in Georgia, Arizona and Nevada, “and possibly much more,” said Melissa Gallahan, the national relational organizing director at PTP.

“These trusted messengers are the key to rally Democrats to vote,” she said, “because we’re trying to meet voters where they are.”

FILED UNDER: ELECTIONS, ARIZONA, NEVADA, VOTING, DEMOCRATIC PARTY, TEXAS, GEORGIA, JON OSSOFF, RAPHAEL WARNOCK, 2022 ELECTIONS

MOST READ