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Knocking on doors: Canvassing during the 2021 Georgia run-off election

An interview with canvassers Isaac Katten and Miguel Madrigal

Across the United States, countless political advocacy groups, unions, and other civil society groups mobilized during the 2020 US Presidential Election. From grassroots to professional, these organizations helped tens of thousands of people to get out the vote for their candidates. In a country with a history of voter suppression, the strategy and success of these groups ultimately play a decisive role in the outcome of the election. Among those groups were Unite Here! and Mijente.

Unite Here! is a labor union supporting workers in the airport, food service, gaming, hotels, transportation and the textile, manufacturing & distribution industries. They are active in the United States and Canada. They represent over 300,000 working people, who are predominantly women and people of color. They organized a voter mobilization campaign called “Take Back 2020” which sponsored 1,700 canvassers to knock on 3 million doors in Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Florida. In early 2021 they continued with the “Take Back the Senate” campaign, which ultimately helped swing the Senate to the Democrats.

Mijente is “a political home for Latinx and Chicana organizing”. They seek racial, economic, gender, and climate justice with campaigns and connecting people throughout a wide network that serves as a hub for culture, learning and advocacy. They sponsored the “FueraTrump” campaign, which provided voting information,

support, and canvassers during the 2020 US Election and also during the Georgia Senate Run-Off.

Both Unite Here! and Mijente mobilized not just for the presidency. Although Joe Biden's victory was a historic feat, an equally decisive election was won by the Democrats just two months later on January 5th, 2021: the 2021 Georgia Senate run-off election, with two Senate seats on the ballot. Due to the two races being too close in November, the dramatic run-off was triggered. At stake was Joe Biden's ability to govern. Before the election, the Republicans had 50 Senators and the Democrats 48. Two Democrat victories would result in a 50-50 partisan balance in the United States Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris delivering the tie-breaking vote and the ability to pass legislation without Republican support.

The two Democrats, Jon Ossoff and Reverend Raphael Warnock, both won, changing Georgian history by becoming the first Jewish and Black Senators in the state. As a result, just several months after Biden's inauguration, the historic 1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan was passed. What roles did these political advocacy groups play in electing the two Democrat Senators and putting the United States back on track to build back better?

I interviewed two canvassers, who were in Georgia knocking on doors leading up to the Georgia run-off election, taking place one day before the attack on the United States Capitol. In the interview below, Isaac Katten and Miguel Madrigal give a first person account about how they were organized, the work they did, their motivation to get out the vote, and in doing so, help draw a line between political mobilization and the passage of one of the most comprehensive stimulus packages in modern US history.

Who organized your canvassing efforts, what were your organization's goals and how were you organized?

Isaac Katten: Unite Here! They're an international union supporting their affiliate, local 23¹, in Georgia. I knocked on around 500 doors in 9 days, Unite Here! knocked 1.5 million doors since they started in early Nov. We had 350,000 conversations, and voters were 13% more likely to vote if we talked to them. Unite Here! aimed to knock around a million doors and surpassed that goal.

Our training for canvassing was very simple but incredibly effective. They taught us to tell our personal stories and why those motivated us to come and knock on doors in this election. Our goal was not to talk about statistics or policies, but to make a connection with the voter. We were divided into teams and were assigned different turfs everyday. We had people from all over the country and with varying levels of experience in our group. Until the last day, we never visited the same turf twice, but we generally stayed in the same counties.

¹ <https://www.unitehere23.org/>

Miguel Madrigal: I first canvassed with Unite Here! They were all about the numbers, and making sure every voter we contacted had a plan to vote or already voted. The voters on our lists were either independent or Democrats. They focused specifically on turning out voters to the polls.

I then began with MiJente. They were laser focused on contacting Hispanic voters in Georgia, regardless of their party affiliation. We were not required to present an end of day report to our turf leader. MiJente wanted us to raise awareness about issues important to Hispanic voters (Covid-19 relief, immigration, jobs), and remind them that David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler (the two Republican candidates for Senate) were working against their interests.

We worked with Minivan, an app designed for canvassing. We were given a turf, we would then drive to the place, and knock-on doors. If no one answers, we mark “no response” on the app, and if we did, we would fill out the person’s information on the app. We asked the voters if they had already voted, and if they were willing to vote for the Democratic Party.

In total, knocked on about five hundred doors adding up both grassroots organizations.

What did a day of canvassing look like for you?

Isaac Katten: Team meetings usually started at 10am. I would meet up with my team at a gas station or fast food shop where we would get our turf and partner assignments. We used Minivan² to track progress and Reach³ to make notes. From around 10:30am to 6pm we would knock on doors. Because we visited different turfs everyday, sometimes we would get apartment complexes, other times it would be a subdivision, or private community.

The area around Atlanta was beautiful to drive through. Lots of woods and rolling hills, sometimes you would pass through a quaint preserved portion of an old town. I was sometimes fearful hearing reports from other canvassers about racist threats, or dog attacks, but most people were very kind and willing to talk with you. At 6 we would rendezvous and debrief before heading back to the hotel. There was great food around Atlanta, so I made sure never to eat at the same place twice.

Miguel Madrigal: I had a similar experience with Unite Here. I had to attend a meeting at 11 am with my fellow canvassers to discuss goals of the day and the neighborhoods which we were supposed to canvass. Then, I would be paired up with someone and head out to the day’s turf. We would canvass from 12 pm to 7 pm. At 8 pm, we would attend a meeting where we filled out a report with our numbers, and discussed challenges and meaningful interactions of the day.

With MiJente, the canvassing experience was more relaxed and less structured compared to Unite Here!. The night before, the field director would text us a code for the turf we were supposed to work for the day. Each volunteer canvassed at their own pace, starting

² <https://act.ngpvan.com/minivan>

³ <https://www.reach.vote/>

and ending their door knocking shift whenever they were able to. MiJente did not have a daily briefing or de-brief, nor did we have to fill out a numbers form.

Can you briefly explain your most encouraging encounter?

Miguel Madrigal: While canvassing in Forsyth County with MiJente, my team mate, Michael Loria and I approached the last house of the day. We knocked the door, and the entire family showed up to talk to us (in Spanish), they told us they had never been contacted before. They were grateful and very pleased to see us. Our conversation started about politics, but rapidly evolved in a friendly one, where we discussed family, sports, school, work, and a wide array of other topics. Despite not being able to vote, Mrs. Terrazas and her youngest son were enthusiastic about the upcoming runoff election and even considered volunteering as canvassers. My canvassing partner and I spent over an hour talking to the Terrazas family!

Isaac Katten: Given the short timeline for voting, Unite Here's strategy was to focus on turning out people who would vote for the Democrats. Most people could figure out a plan to vote on their own, so in particular, we wanted to identify people who would vote Democrat but were hindered in some way from voting—be it of their own accord, or because they were facing any of the difficult obstacles to voting in Georgia. At one apartment, I met someone who was a Nigerian immigrant, single mother of three, who was trying to put her kids through college but was undergoing serious financial hardships. She didn't have a car and had not received a mail-in ballot, perhaps because her apartment complex frequently moved people around to conduct repairs on its poorly maintained infrastructure. She had been despaired of being able to vote in this election until I showed up at her door and offered to provide an Uber to her polling location. We organized a time and drove her to vote the next day. It was really exciting to meet someone who so clearly needed help voting and we were actually able to do something. Now we just need to work on getting some laws passed that will actually help her out!

Based on your experience canvassing in Georgia - what is the future of Georgian politics? Are we seeing a more permanent electoral shift or rather a battleground state?

Isaac Katten: Nothing in politics is permanent. The party of Lincoln is now the party of white supremacists that want to restore the antebellum US. When listening to an interview with Stacy Abrams, the founder of Fair Fight Action,⁴ I was reminded that she had spent a decade leading up to her run for governor registering and mobilizing Black, Latinx, and other voters of color. It was Black voters that put Senator Warnock and Senator Ossoff into office, but those voters needed to be mobilized to vote. The history of voter suppression, and Georgia Democrats' previous (and naively futile) efforts to assemble a larger coalition of white voters enabled the distorted representation of GA's elected officials. What we saw in Georgia was the result of voter mobilization efforts that far preceded any recent political or global events. In order to ensure that that wave continues to roll, progressives need to keep pushing long term to maintain relationships and interest beyond election events. Making sure that we continue to fight for positive

⁴ <https://fairfight.com/>

change and make substantive differences in peoples' everyday lives beyond any given election is essential to ensuring that progress continues and representatives are actually representative. Demographics are not destiny. Expanding rights and mobilizing voters is.

Any other comments on the Georgia special election from the perspective of being on the ground leading up to election day?

Isaac Katten: I was truly impressed with the union Unite Here! They are the most diverse, effective, and inspiring political organization I have ever worked with. As I was told, the union won every district or county in which they canvassed during the presidential election, and won almost every swing state they worked in—Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada (where I also was), and Arizona all had a Unite Here presence. Unite Here also worked in Florida and won Miami-Dade County, though Florida as a whole went for Trump. That being said, they really bring together everyday people who are motivated and thoughtful. I was also impressed with the deep concern for voting that a lot of Georgians expressed. When I spoke with people, it was clear how important voting in this and every election was to them, and that kept me energized on long and cold days.

What motivated you to fly from California and go canvas in Georgia?

Isaac Katten: There were a few reasons, both ideological and practical. Having worked on the campaign for the general election in Nevada with Unite Here, I was excited by the possibility of working with them again. I felt they were incredibly organized, motivated, effective, and did a good job of making sure people were Covid-safe and part of the team. I also knew how high the stakes were: for Biden to be able to implement his agenda, he would have to do it without Republican support, which means he would need at the very least a majority in the Senate. We've since seen how intransigent the Republican Party remains despite the widespread popularity of many of Biden's legislative objectives. Of course that's hindsight, but it wasn't a stretch to foresee the need to regain control of Congress. In addition to all that, I had lost my job as a result of the pandemic, so earning a little money by working on this important issue was a win-win.

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Isaac Katten canvassed for Unite Here! in Nevada and Georgia during the 2020 US Presidential Election and the Georgia Run-off Election.

Miguel Madrigal canvassed for Unite Here! and Mijente in Georgia.