

US ELECTION US ELECTION CAMPAIGN 2020-21

HOW DO YOU GET 81 MILLION VOTES IN THE MIDDLE OF A PANDEMIC?

US presidential campaigns always break new ground in the field of digital communication, Eric Sundström has taken a closer look at how Joe Biden's campaign used a virtual team to win hearts and minds, while meeting the challenges posed by both Covid-19 and disinformation.

By Eric Sundstrom

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The time required to count a record amount of votes, and the dramatic media coverage, gave the impression that the 2020 US Presidential Election was a close affair. It was not. Joe Biden received over 81 million votes, compared to Donald Trump's 74 million.

Biden's margin in the Electoral College was big: 306-232. The turnout was record high: 66.6 percent of eligible Americans voted.

Compared to Hillary Clinton in 2016, Joe Biden won over 15 million additional votes. But how do you mobilise, convince, and incite voter turnout in the middle of a pandemic, in a country where it is notoriously difficult to vote?



A campaign based on three principles

When the Biden/Harris campaign was formed in the spring of 2020, three principles were adopted.

1 It would have to be a virtual campaign, which implied a larger scope than a digital effort supported by physical activity. Phone calls and text messaging would play an important part, given that in-person meetings would only take place once absolutely safe to do so.

The “pole star” of any American election campaign – your overall aim – has always been knocking on as many doors as possible. So how did this year’s campaign overcome the challenges of not being able to physically go door-to-door?

2 To meet the challenges of a virtual campaign, the second principle needed to define a new goal: having as many meaningful conversations as possible, regardless of whether they took place on phone calls, text messages, or social media.

The first time a volunteer engages in a political campaign, he or she tends to have a specific candidate or specific issue in mind. When the volunteer returns to help out again, it is normally because of how much fun it was.

3 The challenge, was therefore to create a sense of belonging, a difficult task in a virtual campaign. The solution was to create virtual election offices using the Slack app. On this platform, volunteers could meet, exchange experiences, and get to work, while a small team of employed election workers were in the background to help when needed.

Two traditional campaign strategies melded into one: community organising, often associated with Barack Obama, and distributed organising, which is associated with Bernie Sanders.

Community organising depends on specific geographical confines: campaigners team up with other community members under the guidance of a local organiser/captain. Distributed organising, on the other hand, is driven by self-starting campaigners in multiple locations, who coordinate through technology across geographical boundaries.

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Thanks to the virtual Slack-offices, volunteers could choose the campaign model they preferred and were used to, with the level of guidance they needed. This meant that many volunteers virtually campaigned in the states where they lived.

The national campaign kept in close touch with these in-state campaign organisations. The most important task – due to Covid-19, the increase in postal voting, and local election laws – was to educate state volunteers so that they in turn could help people to actually vote.

Volunteers who did not chose to campaign in a specific state were brought together in a national team called the fire hose. In October this group was made up of over 150,000 volunteers whose efforts – engaging voters primarily through phone calls and text messages – could be directed to any area within 17 key states where the campaign required additional effort.

In a country with around 230 million eligible voters, 700 million attempts were made to contact all the voters – of which 332 million were telephone calls.

The goal was to find and contact every single voter at least once, and to do so every volunteer needed to find their own place and focus-area in the campaign, regardless of where they lived.

2020 buzzword: Relational organising

The buzz word of the 2020 campaign is relational organising. Instead of knocking on doors and talking to strangers, you were now – with the pandemic as a backdrop – encouraged to talk to your relatives, friends, co-workers, and other acquaintances.



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Having a meaningful conversation with someone you know was found to be three times as effective as knocking on doors, and it could be done while social distancing. A trust gap that needed to be bridged was to get volunteers to share their private social networks with the campaign. This was supposedly done in a secure way, and only with the volunteer’s consent.

Thereafter, the opportunity arose to match these personal contacts with voters who, according to the campaign’s other data, were important and in need of a meaningful conversation.

For example: A volunteer in New York could now find out that in the key state of Arizona, there is an old friend from school who has a mail-in ballot on the kitchen counter that has not yet been sent in! No less than 10 million synchronisations of this kind were made during the final month of the campaign.

Eighty-four percent of the meaningful conversations during the last 10 days were with voters in key battle ground states, conducted by volunteers living in non-battle ground states.

Relational organisation was able to overcome the campaigning limitations imposed by social distancing.

Assisting voters with all parts of the voting process was also achieved through the website iwillvote.com.

As a visitor of the website, if you got stuck on how to vote, instructions would be sent to your home with pre-paid postage.

At that point, the postal service could be tracked, and the voter received an SMS or a call if the campaign noticed that the mail-in ballot still had not been sent in. This kind of ballot chasing may have been crucial in states that were won by small margins.

Reaching difficult voters

In all campaigns, there are voters who are difficult to reach, especially when you cannot knock on doors.

These voters do not reply to phone calls and text messages, and the campaign might lack all forms of traditional contact information in order to reach the voter. The solution was to run targeted Facebook ads that with one click led users to Messenger.

In short: by directing ads to specific groups the campaign wanted to reach, it engaged users in taking a survey or sharing their biggest election concern, which in turn initiated a conversation on Messenger.

In this conversation the voter would start talking about the election with an AI-programmed bot.

Are you going to vote? When, where and how? Important data was collected. If the voter asked a question that the bot did not understand, or if the voter answered in Spanish, a volunteer would take over the conversation.



This way, there were 250,000 additional cases of voter engagement for those voters that could otherwise not be reached.

Another interesting practice in Biden's virtual campaign was getting to know the moderators of existing political groups online, instead of starting new groups. Moreover, AI-robots were used in several parts of the campaign.

During the days following Joe Biden's announcement of Kamala Harris as his Vice President, there were 10,000 new Slack accounts created every day. Because of the rapid growth of new accounts, each new volunteer received a first artificial guide into the world of campaigning.

Through a digital tool, volunteers created around 100,000 events on their own. Zoom was used for all meetings and training sessions, as well as during roundtable discussions for outstanding volunteers in key states.

The purpose here was to anchor the work with relational organising and ballot chasing, as well as to get these star-volunteers to grow and involve more people.

With the help of Soapbox, volunteers and voters could easily record their own video stories. Some were so authentically engaging that they were used as paid ads in local media markets. Others spread organically and became news articles in traditional media (so-called earned media). To summarise: Empower tons of volunteers, give them resources, and let them run.

Tackling misinformation

How could Hillary Clinton lose to Donald Trump? One of many explanations is that rumours, slander and pure conspiracy theories influenced the outcome of the election. The Biden campaign wanted to avoid the mistakes of 2016, and the antidote was internally called The Malarkey Factory.

Online misinformation should primarily be handled by the platforms that spread the lies and hatred, of course.

But the HQ of the Democratic party did not dare to wait. After 2016, important investments were made in social listening tools that monitor online discussions.

The infrastructure that had been built up was integrated with the Biden campaign. The most effective countermeasure is to quickly flag misinformation and force the platforms to remove the content, for example by demonstrating how the specific post is not compliant with terms of use.

Educating those who work for the campaign and all volunteers about how to handle disinformation is a must. The campaign had an ongoing dialogue with journalists who covered the elections.

Representatives working for tech giants were constantly reminded of the need for further actions. But a major task at The Malarkey Factory was to combine social listening with research and traditional campaign work. False narratives that had many mentions and interactions online were immediately included in the campaign's own opinion polls.

Analysts could then assess which groups of voters were affected by the data, and in what way. Is the data just circulating in a right-wing bubble? Or are important constituencies affected?

To be able to back up the campaign's analysis and design various effective counter-arguments for each and every affected group of voters, focus groups as well as existing knowledge about voter behaviour were used.

The results formed the basis of a digital remediation campaign that also took into account the websites and keywords that the relevant target group usually uses.



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The campaign's counter-message could then be directed in real time to relatively narrow groups of voters who were receptive to the disinformation that had begun to spread.

Take for example the attempts to create a scandal surrounding Joe Biden's son, Hunter, or the claim that Osama bin Laden could still be alive.

The campaign's analysis showed that such conspiracies did not affect undecided voters, and the motivation among core voters was unchanged. The decision was simple: the campaign would not waste any time and energy on this matter. If an attack turned out to be harmful, the principle of do not treat the hit, treat the wound was applied.

So when Biden was accused of being controlled by left-wing radical forces, or when his age and mental health were questioned, the answer was not to get into polemics about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or

the public view of the elderly. The campaigner would not repeat, and therefore risk reinforcing, the false messages in the eagerness to respond to false claims, and fact checks would just lead to more rounds of finger-pointing.

Instead, messages, images and films were produced with Biden represented as a strong, experienced and genuine leader who speaks clearly about political reforms and makes his own decisions.

The campaign's research showed that a voter who could be influenced by an attempt at mudslinging, but who at the same time had not made up his or her mind, was receptive to a positive and holistic message.

If the campaign analysis showed that it was appropriate, the digital remediation campaign message could also be conveyed to a relevant group of voters via one of the 5,000 influencers with a large social media following that the campaign collaborated with.



Eric Sundstrom has followed multiple campaigns.

Impact on Europe

The question we all need to ask is how this successful virtual campaign will affect Europe. The answer is that the novelities of American presidential campaigns – for better or worse – always find their way into our political life, and to European businesses.

But will all of this still be relevant when we are vaccinated against Covid-19, and everything has gone back to normal? While we cannot know what the new normal will be, the art of convincing, communicating and courting your audience will inevitably remain at the core of successful European political parties and businesses.

And my guess is that any European political party or business leader would love to know more about how to find 15 million new voters or customers.

Eric Sundström has followed five Presidential campaigns and five Congressional campaigns on the ground in various states in the USA.

Note: This article is based on the author's own transcriptions of online post-election seminars in which the following figures of the Biden/Harris-campaign participated: Rob Flaherty (Digital Director); Caitlin Mitchell (Senior Advisor for Digital); Jose Nunez (Director of Digital Organizing); Becca Rinkevich (Director of Digital Rapid Response); Timothy Durigan (Data Security Analyst, DNC).



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