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POLITICS

## The Future Is ... Doorknocking?

Marie Gluesenkamp Perez was a new kind of candidate with an old-school campaign strategy.

BY ALEXANDER SAMMON

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Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by marieforcongress.com and Getty Images Plus.

Of all the election night surprises of this year's midterms, none was bigger for Democrats than Marie Gluesenkamp Perez's shock victory over the Republican Joe Kent in Washington state's third congressional district. Five Thirty Eight's modeling had Kent winning in 98 out of 100 scenarios. But Perez, a 34-year-old mother and auto shop owner with now-famous bangs, eked it out—by just under a percentage point.

The result, Democrats' biggest upset in the House, came in a largely rural district outside Portland, Oregon, the sort of place where Democrats have fared particularly poorly of late and were polling dreadfully. But while post-election autopsies have credited the victory to voters' rejection of Kent's ties to MAGA extremist groups and Gluesenkamp Perez's tactful embrace of pro-choice and pro-gun positions, it's not the whole story. One big reason the Gluesenkamp Perez campaign triumphed has to do with a pretty retro strategy: a big volunteer army of doorknockers.

Over the course of the campaign, over 500 people knocked on a total of 40,000 doors spread across Vancouver, Washington, and its rural surrounds. The victory, called officially on November 12, came despite a complete absence of cash support from the Democrats' official campaign arm, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which deemed the race a "reach," and directed its ad budget elsewhere.

## Lessons from Last Time

In 2020, owing to the health risks of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the Biden campaign and various state Democratic parties issued an edict to "call off door-to-door voter canvassing and emphasize online and digital tactics," according to the Washington Post. It wasn't until October 2020 that an extremely limited door-knocking effort was announced by Team Biden.

Republicans, meanwhile, were knocking on a million doors a week throughout the summer of 2020 with a massive volunteer army. The advantage from in-person contact likely helped with the surprising overperformance Republicans saw that year, despite polls suggesting Democrats would romp all over the ticket.

This year's midterms, which will end this week with a Senate run-off in Georgia, were by far the most expensive midterm election cycle of all time.

Much of that money went to those same online and digital tactics: television spots, digital ads, phone calls, texts, and mailers. Making actual contact with voters, meanwhile, got even more difficult. Hardly anyone even picks up the phone anymore: As numerous pollsters reported, the deluge of paid messaging, combined with the demise of the landline, has made getting people to pick up calls to answer polling queries nearly impossible; phonebanking has also become exceedingly difficult.

"A good conversation with a prospective voter is maybe one in a hundred," Tim Gowan, the field director for the Gluesenkamp Perez campaign, told me. "Phonebanking had really low contact rates, it's just gotten less and less effective."

The campaign tried a different approach: using phonebanks to call volunteers.

Rather than spend time on a futile effort to contact and cajole potential voters, the Gluesenkamp Perez campaign decided to prioritize calling known supporters, convincing them not to pledge their vote but to volunteer their time. A dedicated group of ten volunteers, called the “Call Squad,” focused their energy on encouraging likely voters to show up and knock on doors, and then to come back and do it again. That helped swell the number of doorknockers to nearly 500. Among them: young moms, alienated Republican voters, and political newcomers who had never volunteered before. Many of them made it a habit. “We prioritized getting people to come out again and again,” said Gowan.

All of this may sound obvious or unsurprising, but big volunteer doorknocking efforts are a notable departure from contemporary campaigning strategies. As recently as 2020, some commentators and political scientists were suggesting that doorknocking was no better than phonebanking when it came to getting out the vote, and worse than paid advertising. The ground game, they suggested, was overrated.

## Getting the Ground Game Back Together

Gluesenkamp Perez’s victory has quickly made her a darling of the Democratic party. The young mother, who filmed downing a tree with a chainsaw as part of her campaign pitch, was hailed as a way forward for the Democratic Party in rural America after her win, perhaps most notably by Michelle Goldberg in the New York Times Opinion section. The Cut pointed fans to websites where they could shop for Gluesenkamp Perez’s favorite jeans brand.

But if the Gluesenkamp Perez model is the party’s future, the campaign strategy is also a return to the past. The volunteer heavy doorknocking organizing that pushed her across the finish line is a throwback in Democratic campaigns.

One of the co-organizers of the Call Squad was Harley Augustino, who had worked for 14 years as an organizer for Unite Here, the service workers’ union. Augustino, based in Portland, left the union a year and a half ago to help found a recruiting program called Base Building for Power. He said he joined the Gluesenkamp Perez campaign as a volunteer after an underwhelming experience volunteering for a nearby race, that of Jamie McLeod-Skinner in Oregon’s 5th district, where he found the ground game sorely lacking.

“I was horrified at the lack of attention or interest in doorknocking. I’d show up, I’d be one of maybe four people, the only one under 65,” Augustino told me. “And when I was done they didn’t even ask me to volunteer again!” (McLeod-Skinner told me her campaign’s ground

game was a hybrid effort put together by the DCCC and the grassroots base, which was also focused on a narrow governor's race.)

After reading about Gluesenkamp Perez's race, Augustino messaged the candidate on Instagram, and drove up to nearby Vancouver and quickly set to work crafting a volunteer-heavy ground game with Gowan, the campaign's field director.

Augustino hounded potential doorknockers anywhere he could find them. After a debate between Kent and Gluesenkamp Perez at a local community college, he talked to Mel Finn-Kamerath, a stay-at-home mother of three from the small town of Kalama. Just a few weeks prior, she had voted for Republican Jaime Herrera Beutler in the primary, one of 10 House Republicans who voted to impeach then-President Donald Trump in the wake of the January 6th insurrection. Beutler had lost to Kent, a military vet who embraced election denialism.

But she was moved by Gluesenkamp Perez. After speaking with Augustino, she begrudgingly agreed to try doorknocking for the first time. ("I don't think I've ever recruited a Republican volunteer," Augustino told me.)

"It was the first time I've ever been more vocal than making a Facebook post or going to a debate," Finn-Kamerath told me. But she proved to be a quick study. "As I went from door to door and as I realized just how important the campaign was, I got over that fear," she said. "The more I was speaking and hearing myself speak up for Marie the more comfortable I got."

Finn-Kamerath became a stalwart in the race's final weeks, knocking doors repeatedly, and recruiting friends to stand at the only four-way intersection in her hometown and wave signs.

"I talked to several young moms who weren't paying attention to the election," she said. "Time and again I heard, 'we really don't like the Biden Administration and I'd say 'yes, I'm with you.' And then they'd say, 'But we hate Trump.' And I'd say, 'that's exactly where I was. The candidate that you want is no longer there, but Marie is your candidate. She's gonna be a really great representative.'"

"I just believed that this was such an important campaign," Finn-Kamerath said.

These days, in many races, campaigns often rely on paid canvassers to handle their doorknocking operations. Many of these canvassers are brought in from outside the community in which the campaign is taking place. Even the most successful ground game

operations, such as Unite Here's vaunted machine in Nevada, which helped save Democratic senator Catherine Cortez Masto's reelection, relies heavily on professional canvassers. But the story of Finn-Kamerath, Augustino, and Gluesenkamp Perez shows how important local volunteers remain to the ground game.

Recruiting and training unpaid volunteers, especially in smaller House races and communities where those union operations don't exist, can still clearly make a difference. "We weren't paid, we were just there because we believed in the candidate," said Finn-Kamerath. "I was just having fun." 🍷

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