



HOW-TO DRAFT: PERSUASIVE CONVERSATION CAMPAIGNS

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DRAFT STATUS: This guide is currently marked as a 'DRAFT' because it does not yet meet all of our editorial criteria, [which you can view here](#). We are actively tracking down additional content/voices to complete this guide but believe that it already contains enough useful information so are making it available to you in the meantime.

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Disclaimer / request for your help

This is a work in progress that is meant to evolve over time with input from campaigners. At the moment, the tips and ideas here reflect the voices of the [contributors/reviewers listed below](#). We are always looking to add more voices of campaigners that have knowledge and experience on this topic. If this is you, please contact us here: blueprintsfc@gmail.com.

Summary

Persuasive conversations, also known as values-based conversations, are exchanges between advocates and their peers or members of the public that surface personal attitudes and perceptions around social issues to shift existing positions or at least open people to a new perspective. These conversations are typically held around polarizing issues — think marriage equality in the United States circa 2008-2015 or Australia more recently — where wider shifts in attitude could result in beneficial policy changes.

When organized at scale, persuasive conversation campaigns, also known as “deep canvassing,” deliberately catalyze as many conversations as possible to achieve impact at a level that could influence voting. Such campaigns call on large numbers of supporters to carry out conversations either with their own peer contacts or pre-selected sections of the general public. This is carried out either through door-to-door canvassing or through organized phone or digital communications drives.

Who’s doing it?

Persuasive conversation campaigns were deployed extensively throughout the U.S. buildup to national acceptance of marriage equality (gay marriage) in 2015 notably by groups such as [Freedom to Marry](#). A similar approach was then deployed across Australia during their successful [marriage equality campaign](#) in 2017. In Ireland, [Uplift](#) and other groups mobilized persuasive conversations in 2018 towards their successful repeal of the 8th Amendment, which had restricted access to abortions in the country.



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Impact/Why do this?

Persuasive conversation campaigns can help break through to segments of the population who have a different perspective or have voted against you. This is especially important when campaigning on polarizing issues.

A study of the effect persuasive conversations have on negative attitudes towards transgender people found that [one in 10 people could be made to completely change their view through this process](#).

In Ireland, where persuasive conversation campaigns aimed to rescind abortion-restricting legislation, thousands of peer-to-peer exchanges were catalyzed and [39% of people polled about what changed their minds to Yes](#) cited a conversation with family or friends.

Why do persuasive conversations work?

Persuasive conversations use four techniques which help in convincing voters to change their minds. The techniques are explained below:

1. Self-persuasion

In simple terms, voters take an active role in persuading themselves to change their attitudes or thoughts on a particular issue. The canvasser plays no role in persuasion, rather they place voters in situations where they persuade themselves to change. This motivation comes from within, canvassers don't have to put in the extra effort to change minds.

2. Active Processing

Active Processing facilitates experiences through role-playing, simulations, and scenarios. Here, people apply what they already know. So, when the voter is presented with the canvasser's experience or thoughts on a particular topic, the voter tries to generate, re-organize, and self-explain the topic. This way, it makes



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the voter think and talk about their own experience.

3. Perspective-Taking

Perspective-Taking considers or understands an issue from an alternative point of view. When canvassers share their perspective, it makes voters ponder and consider the alternative. Sharing their own experience adds value as they see the same old issue in a new light.

4. Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive Dissonance is the tension that comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in your mind at the same time. This is when your actions don't match with your belief. The act of deep canvassing helps people realize that their beliefs and actions don't go hand-in-hand, compelling them to change (voters decide on their own).

When this might not work for you

Persuasive conversation campaigns require a lot of time, training, and volunteer effort. If you have any of the following limitations, this may not be the right strategy for your needs:

- **Lack of Training**

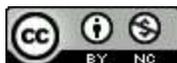
Persuasive conversation campaigns require well-trained volunteers that have the expertise, communications skills, and experience to effectively execute the campaign. This work can be challenging and well-meaning volunteers can hurt the cause if they are not properly trained or easily triggered by these often difficult conversations.

- **Short Timeline**

This method will not work during Get Out The Vote drives or other urgent action campaigns with a compressed timeline, due to time constraints

- **Limited Volunteers**

Persuasion conversations take time and for these campaigns to work they need



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to cover large areas and reach considerable segments of the population, which means that you need many volunteers to succeed.

What this requires (people, resources, etc.)

Volunteers with active listening skills

Active listening is a skill that all volunteers doing persuasive conversations must possess. Volunteers must approach people with compassion while listening and take care to express their empathy, offer validation when appropriate, and to always be honest and forthright. This can test any volunteer's patience as they are inherently addressing disagreement and ignorance regarding an issue that they care deeply about. Leaving space for another person's transformation is a skill that usually takes time to develop.

Big lists and many, many volunteers

A whole lot of donated supporter hours are needed to cover enough ground to influence attitudes across a segment of the population, either through door-knocking or virtual conversations. This means that you will need to activate a lot of supporters to pull this off.

As a benchmark, some estimates of door-to-door requirements suggest that volunteers working a 2-hour shift can, on average, complete 5 conversations.

To recruit the large number of supporters required for persuasive conversation campaigns, groups considering such an approach will need large lists to call upon.

Time

According to Dave Fleischer, who pioneered this approach, it takes about six months for a campaign to get a hang of the method and to recruit and train volunteers.



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In terms of time, the program will gain momentum over a long period meaning that you need to start at the **early stages of campaigning**. But the impact of **persuasive conversation campaigns lasts for about 9 months**, unlike traditional vote-based canvassing, where effects of persuasion are short lived.

Setup steps/ stages

1. Staging campaigns so that they have enough time to run

It is recommended that you start your persuasive conversation campaign 10 months before elections/crucial decision moments and start **training volunteers a couple of months ahead of** campaign deployment.

2. Call-out to start recruiting volunteers

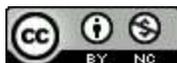
The first active stage of persuasive conversation campaigns involves recruiting from your big lists. This requires prior setup of a sign-on site/process, as well as an induction/orientation process with people who support this if response volumes get high.

3. Set up ground rules and guides for conversations

Since the issue areas persuasive conversation campaigns deal with are sensitive, it's important to set up clear ground rules and principles of engagement for your supporter teams.

[Uplift](#) Ireland, when supporting conversation drives to fight for pro-choice legislation in Ireland, set up the following ground rules:

These are the ground rules for any productive conversation:



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Blueprints for Change

Be curious and open to learning: Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. Listen and be open to hearing all points of view.

Show respect and suspend judgement: Setting judgments aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated.

Find common ground and appreciate differences: Look for common ground you can agree on and appreciate the differences in the beliefs and opinions of others.

Be authentic and welcome that from others: Speak authentically from your personal experience. Personal stories open our hearts. If you don't have personal experience with having or knowing someone who has had an abortion, you still have a story. How you have experienced the debate, your feelings about it, when you first realised the eighth amendment was a problem, your fears about it etc.

Be purposeful: Notice if what you are conveying is or is not pertinent to the topic at hand. And notice if others are taking the conversation off track. It is okay to not be too strict. After all what we want is good conversation that flows and also builds relationships. Find a balance between being proactive and gentle.

Overall, to get supporters to feel confident launching such conversations (no easy task!), a fair amount of guidance and coaching should be provided upfront, as well as ongoing support.

[Uplift](#) Ireland provided supporters with a tiered guide system, including a quick guide for busy folks and then a step by step guide to convos including interactive elements like quizzes.

Here are some sample instructions from their Quick Guide:



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Here are the basics - *practice* and you will have everything you need to have conversations that are productive and constructive, particularly when discussing issues that are traditionally tough to navigate.

Remember, these conversations are not easy, that's why they don't usually happen!

Before you start:

- Take a moment for yourself. How are you feeling?
- Have a few grounding, deep breaths.
- Have a healthy snack, seriously! Research shows that we all function better with a little fuel in us as it helps us to think more clearly.
- Set your intention. You are talking, not debating, with another human. You do not have to have all the answers to begin and you do not need to be perfect.

Some good things to keep in mind:

Though this guide is not for engaging 'extremists', there are many things we can glean from this talk by self-proclaimed former-extremist Megan Phelps-Roper. What changed her mind? What got her to see things even a little differently? [Watch the video](#) and see how she found the simple (but not easy!) principles below as her guide through difficult conversations and ultimately towards a new perspective:

- *Don't assume bad intent - people surprise us all the time!*
- *Ask questions*
- *Stay calm - this takes practice and patience, but it's powerful*
- *Make the argument - be able to logically present your ideas*

Here are some longer-form conversation guide examples:



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- [Uplift's more advanced conversation guide](#)
- [Australian marriage equality conversation starter kit](#)

4. Trainings in person and online to prepare volunteers

Volunteers on persuasion conversation campaigns face a number of challenges. The conversations often trigger emotional responses that are difficult to deal with.

Transforming another person's perspective rarely comes as an immediate epiphany, which means that volunteers rarely experience a rewarding "aha moment". More often, the people they speak with will wrestle with the new lens offered to them for weeks or months before they truly take it on. This can make progress opaque or make success feel painstakingly slow, even though persuasion conversation campaigns often lay the foundation for profound social change.

As such, it's vital that volunteers receive training to set realistic expectations, develop the skills they need, and establish community with other volunteers so that they can overcome obstacles together and commiserate when the work is hard.

Training sessions both online and offline

Trainings offer supporters the opportunity to ask questions and develop a deeper understanding of the campaign and their role in it. Consider these examples:

In the U.S. marriage equality campaign, [Freedom to Marry](#) organizers held trainings that ran 45 minutes or longer to acquaint canvassers with the questions on the script and allow them to practice asking probing questions. Even after this training, it often took canvassers several attempts to become comfortable asking personal questions of voters.

In [Uplift](#) Ireland's abortion rights campaign, they set up several different training webinars for different supporter roles. Teams had their own zoom meetings, and people late to come in watched the original training session - but because it was a 3 month campaign there was one main induction period.



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Their recorded group training session via videoconference is available here on Crowdcast: <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/lqn8ums7>

Digital tools for team coordination and convos at a distance

As with [distributed organizing](#), persuasive conversation campaigns require digital infrastructure to help coordinate with supporters and teams at a distance. Many leading campaigns use [Slack](#) teams and videoconferencing software such as [Zoom](#) as platforms for team coordination and training.

In the Irish abortion referendum campaign, [Uplift](#) tested some more sophisticated tools to enable digital conversations including Mobilisr, a peer-to-peer messaging program, in the run up to the vote. People used it to get in touch with their Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Telegram contacts to either start a conversation about abortion care, or ask them to get out and vote.

Support desk to help answer volunteer questions and dispatch conversations

[Uplift](#) also used [Freshdesk](#), a helpdesk-like customer support tool, to setup an efficient volunteer assistance service, mostly manned by other volunteers.

One volunteer also trained and supported a team of “e-Repealers” who offered undecided people the opportunity to have a conversation via email using [Freshdesk](#). Though at times a little rough-and-ready, this program was entirely volunteer run. The program fostered earnest and often complicated discussions between very different people.

Tricky parts/ fixes

- Engaging in open conversations without a written script can be challenging for supporters. Even after training, it often takes supporters several attempts to become comfortable asking personal questions of those they engage with.



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Blueprints for Change

- Longer and challenging conversations led to increased expenses: The complicated and long nature of the conversations can make large-scale programs, volunteer or paid, expensive endeavors.

Further resources

- Article in [Science which reports UC Berkeley, Stanford Study and Finds Los Angeles LGBT Center's Canvassing Conversations Reduce Voters' Anti-Transgender Prejudice](#)
- [Freedom to Marry's guide to Values-Based Conversations](#)
- [How We Can Reduce Prejudice with a Conversation | David Fleischer | TEDxMidAtlantic](#)
- [Live example of a persuasive conversation approach on transgender rights](#)
- [Mobilisation Lab article: How powerful conversations won abortion rights in Ireland](#)
- [ChangeMakers Podcast Episode 5: Marriage Equality](#)



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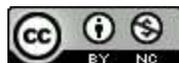
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Input and resources for this framework were provided by:

[Clodagh Schofield](#) with [Uplift Ireland](#), Jasmine Somaiah with [CallHub](#), guides provided on the [Freedom to Marry](#) site, content on the Australian marriage equality campaign presented in this [ChangeMakers podcast episode](#) and materials from the [Victorian Trades Hall Council](#).

This framework was prepared and reviewed by:

[Tom Liacas](#), [Aram Fischer](#).



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