



## UNITE HERE, the 2020 Elections and Beyond

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Many weeks after Democrats swept the Georgia Senate runoff elections, the right-wing extremists' January 6th assault on Congress saturated the news cycle. The Capitol insurrection and the debate about an independent and nonpartisan investigation overshadowed the compelling story of how Democrats prevailed in both the November 2020 election and the Georgia runoffs. The lessons of the elections are most relevant for the 2022 mid-terms--notably, the impact of UNITE HERE's "safe and contactless" door-to-door canvassing to turn out Democratic voters.

UNITE HERE is a union representing 300,000 North American hotel, gaming, food service, airport, and sports arena workers. UNITE HERE members are predominantly immigrants, youth, women, and people of color. The union played an outsized role in Nevada, Arizona, and Pennsylvania--critical swing states for the Biden-Harris Electoral College victory. Building the union's electoral capacity has taken many years. It is a model other unions, progressive organizations, and the Democratic Party can replicate in 2022 and beyond.

**The UNITE HERE Electoral Strategy: Lost Timers and the Ground Game**

Four pillars anchor UNITE HERE's electoral achievements:

1. Aggressive organizing in the private sector, which exceeded all other unions by adding more than 63,000 new members between 2014-2019;
2. Encouraging new union members to register and turn out to vote during each election cycle;
3. Negotiating with employers to permit members to leave the workplace during the election cycle, and work as paid precinct walkers (aka "lost timers"). After an election, lost timers can return to work and retain their same job and seniority.
4. Recruiting and mobilizing workers to take union leaves-of-absence. To recruit sufficient lost-timers the union taps into many workers' commitments to urge voters at the door to make change for a better world by participating in the electoral process.

The union is strongly committed to precinct organizing and door-to-door canvassing. D. Taylor, President of UNITE HERE international claims: "I don't think there is any replacement for it."

Over the last two decades, field experiments by researchers at [Yale University's Center for the Study of American Politics](#) have demonstrated that face-to-face contact at the door is the [best way to turn out voters. Their research shows](#) that voters identified and mobilized by canvassers can often provide the needed margin of victory in close elections.

The union provides lost timers extensive training to become effective canvassers and to develop their leadership skills. When they return to the workplace, many serve as shop stewards, on contract bargaining teams, and in other leadership positions.

Max Bell Alper, former Organizing Director with UNITE HERE International Union and current Executive Director with North Bay Jobs with Justice, is an experienced canvasser who served as a trainer in Reno for the November elections. Alper stated, "Our goal for the campaign was not only to deliver Nevada for the Biden-Harris ticket but also to ensure that rank and file canvassers become stronger leaders and organizers after the elections."

The union's ground game has become more sophisticated over time, using massive databases, tablets and smartphones to identify, track, and turn out voters. In addition, lost timers and union volunteers supplement walkers by phoning and texting most voters who receive a knock at the door.

## **Nevada as Laboratory for the Ground Game**

By the late 1990s, after two decades of bottom-up organizing, most of the large Las Vegas casinos and hotels were organized by the union. The 60,000 UNITE HERE members of [Culinary 226 in Las Vegas](#) and Reno are the union's political backbone in the Silver State. [Nevada has been a laboratory for the union's ground game](#): the state has flipped from red to blue since Barack Obama carried Nevada in 2008 and 2012; Hillary Clinton won Nevada in 2016, followed by Joe Biden in 2020. Presently the Governor, both Senators, and three of the four Congressional Representatives are Democrats, and Democrats control both chambers of the Nevada legislature.

## **Preparations for the 2020 Presidential Elections**

[According to a report by the union, \*How UNITE HERE Delivered for Biden\*](#), the union began to prepare for the 2020 elections in 2016 by building coalitions and electoral infrastructure in such crucial swing states as Arizona. In response to Arizona's infamous anti-immigrant law SB1070, passed in 2010, UNITE HERE Local 11, based in Los Angeles and Phoenix, was one of the founders of [One Arizona](#), a coalition of twenty-eight labor, faith-based, environmental justice, civil, and immigrant rights organizations. *One Arizona* focused on voter registration and engagement of youth, Latinx, African-American, Native American, and immigrant voters, particularly in Maricopa County that includes Phoenix and surrounding suburbs home to 60 percent of the state's population. In 2016 the coalition registered more than 100,000 new voters.

That fall, [UNITE HERE Local 11](#) and its sister economic justice organization, [CASE Action](#) (Central Arizonians for A Sustainable Economy), joined with a broad coalition of labor, environmental justice, immigrant and civil rights organizations to launch the most extensive canvassing effort in the state's history to defeat racist sheriff Joe Arpaio, who for decades had terrorized and violated the legal and human rights of Maricopa County immigrants and black and brown residents. The coalition also supported a [successful statewide ballot](#) initiative that lifted Arizona's minimum wage to \$12 an hour and provided five paid sick days for all residents.

These victories marked the coming of age of a progressive electoral coalition that in 2018 became ["Mi AZ"](#) and helped elect Democrat Krysten Sinema to a Senate seat long held by Republicans by a slender 2.3 percent margin. According to a report by the Latino Voter Project, [75 percent of Arizona Latinos voted Democratic in 2018](#), up 22 percent from 2014.

In 2019, UNITE HERE Local 11 also worked to elect former housekeeper and [UNITE HERE Organizing Director Betty Guardado](#) to the Phoenix City Council. Progressive Democrats now comprise a majority on the Phoenix City Council.

In June 2019, hundreds of delegates to the UNITE HERE convention in Las Vegas pledged to walk precincts for Democrats in 2020. Even though 98 percent of members were laid off or furloughed after COVID-19 began in March 2020, ultimately 1700 rank and file members, many still unemployed, would participate in the ground game. Daily socially distanced canvassing began in Phoenix in July, Reno and Las Vegas in August, Miami and Orlando in September. [In Philadelphia, the fifty who began canvassing on October 1st grew to 500 by Election Day.](#)

[The Democratic Party and other unions had abandoned](#) door-to-door campaigning when the COVID-19 public health emergency began, relying instead on the phone and digital outreach to voters. UNITE HERE was the first union to organize a canvas in these swing states for the November general election and UNITE HERE had the biggest union canvassing operation in these four states.

### **COVID-19 and Safe, ‘Contactless’ Canvassing**

All UNITE HERE precinct walkers participated in a one-day training, and lead canvassers—who had completed a comprehensive one-week training—supervised both paid and volunteer canvassers. Precinct walkers were required to strictly adhere to epidemiologists’ safety protocols at all times—both at the door and off-hours, when they could not go to bars, restaurants, health clubs, malls, or restaurants. Lost timers and canvassers far away from home were housed at extended-stay motels and prepared meals in their rooms.

Having a conversation at the door required that voters were willing to wear masks (that canvassers provided), handing them to the voter using tongs. Canvassers took daily temperature checks, wore masks (or masks and visors), remained six feet from voters at all times, and participated in meetings held outdoors or on Zoom. No canvassers contracted Covid-19 as a result of their participation in the ground game.

The field operation focused on Democratic, independent, black and brown, low-income, and infrequent voters. Canvassers were expected to hit 70-80 doors each eight-hour shift and have extended conversations with at least 15-20 voters, asking them at the door to publicly commit to voting for Biden-Harris and also making a voting plan with each voter. The union estimates that one in four door knocks yielded a conversation with a voter.

Most voters at the door were receptive to the union’s message. However, some were not. In open carry states like Nevada and Arizona, residents could answer a knock on the door with a gun holstered on their hip. Canvassers also experienced racist and sexist taunts,

aggressive dogs let loose and some physical assaults. Despite fears about contracting the disease and confrontations with hostile residents, canvassers did not give up.

At the end of each shift, rank and file members checked in with their supervisors to discuss their tallies, challenges in the field, and how they could improve the next shift.

### **Phone Banks and Social Media to Targeted Voters**

Simultaneously, UNITE HERE mobilized members and community allies to phone voters in those swing states. The union claims that one in five calls led to a brief conversation with a voter. Bilingual callers spoke to voters in their native languages, including Spanish, Tagalog, Mandarin, Cantonese, Amharic (Ethiopia), and Hausa (Nigeria).

Callers used the “ThruTalk” phone bank system that automatically dials landline and cell phone numbers (via a computer or another device) and can ‘call through’ disconnected numbers and answering machines until a live body answers the phone.

The phone banks grew to 1000 participants a day by late October. Callers identified Biden voters, made a voting plan with each, and encouraged voters to vote by mail or vote early. Callers also provided voters information about hours and locations for early voting, Election Day voting, and mail-in drop boxes. The information obtained on the phone was then transmitted to tablets that canvassers carried in the field and was invaluable during the pre-election GOTV days. UNITE HERE GOTV phone bankers conducted targeted calls in all of the above languages as well.

Beyond voter outreach by canvassing and phone banks the union designed and implemented a paid digital media program directed at unlikely or infrequent voters in these swing states that included 15 second video ads in English and Spanish viewed more than 38 million times.

### **UNITE HERE and the November 2020 Presidential Victory**

In the November 2020 Nevada election, 41 percent of voters cast their vote early, and 48 percent voted by mail, electing Biden-Harris by just under 33,596 votes (2.4%). The UNITE HERE ground campaign had canvassed the doors of 745,000 voters and turned out more than 61,000 Biden voters through face-to-face conversations. Nevada retained a blue and female majority in the state legislature.

In Arizona, the ground game also delivered: Biden-Harris won Maricopa County by more than forty-five thousand votes, and bested Trump statewide by just under 10,457 votes



(0.3%). The union delivered not only for Biden-Harris but also campaigned for Democrat Mark Kelly who won a Senate seat. Canvassers also helped to flip one Arizona House seat and another State Senate seat to bring Democrats within one seat of a majority in both chambers. [Predominantly Latino and African-American precincts in Maricopa County supported Democrats by a three-to-one margin.](#)

In July UNITE HERE Local 11 and CASE Action formed the federal Worker Power super-PAC that coordinated the Maricopa ground game. By election day the union's [canvassers knocked on 800,000 doors](#) and made 2.5 million phone calls, boosting overall turnout in the primary and general election record levels. Their ranks of 500 canvassers included more than 100 volunteers from the national organization [Seed the Vote](#), as well as other small groups of volunteers from across the United States who wanted to make history as part of Local 11's electoral effort. The union estimates that its canvassers turned out 48,364 Arizona residents at the door who did not vote in 2016.

In Pennsylvania, 200 canvassers hit the streets on October 1<sup>st</sup>, joined by 300 more for the GOTV during the final week of the election. [The union's precinct walkers knocked on 575,000 doors in Philadelphia](#), and 67,000 voters pledged to support Biden and Harris—including 34,863 who did not vote in 2016. According to UNITE HERE, it was the largest union-based GOTV operation in the state's history. Turnout from Philadelphia voters ultimately pushed Biden over the top by an 80,555 margin (1.1%).

"We believe we made a critical difference in Pennsylvania by focusing our efforts in the disenfranchised Black and Brown communities where most of our members live," said UNITE HERE Local 274 President Rosslyn Wuchinich. "And despite a pandemic that has devastated our industries and our communities we did just that. That is a testament to how our union brings together those from all walks of life to harness our collective power and win for working people."

All together during the November 2020 Presidential election UNITE HERE precinct walkers [in the key swing states of Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Florida](#) knocked on 3 million doors while hundreds of phone bankers made 10 million phone calls to voters. The union contacted 440,000 infrequent voters in Nevada, Arizona, and Pennsylvania, of whom 125,000 had not voted in 2016 but pledged to vote for Biden and Harris in 2020—two-thirds were voters of color.

## **UNITE HERE and the Georgia Run-Offs**

Just after the Thanksgiving holidays five hundred UNITE HERE canvassers started to walk

precincts in three counties in metro Atlanta just to support Democratic Senate candidates Rafael Warnock and Jon Ossoff.

Canvassers included three-dozen African-born union members and community allies from such nations as Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Cameroon, Liberia, and Nigeria. These workers, part of the union's 'Get Out the African Vote Initiative,' knocked on doors in suburban Atlanta's DeKalb County—home to most of Georgia's 40,000 African immigrants who are naturalized citizens and are eligible to vote.

In Georgia, the union collaborated with Stacey Abrams, who had lost Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial race by a razor-thin margin. Abrams founded both the nonpartisan [New Georgia Majority](#), focused on voter registration and engagement, targeting youth, immigrant voters, and voters of color, and [Fair Fight](#), which monitors election practices and organizes to thwart voter suppression.

The Georgia runoff partnership, coordinated by the national [America Votes](#) coalition, also included Black Voters Matter, Black PAC, the Poor People's Campaign, Peoples Action, Georgia Stand-Up, Georgia AFL-CIO, Mijente, and SEIU. Many of these organizations had already established a robust socially-distanced ground game in Georgia, which was essential to flipping the state for Democrats by 12,670 votes (0.25%) in the November Presidential election.

By Election Day on January 5th, UNITE HERE locals had deployed more than a thousand union housekeepers, cooks, and airport concession workers to canvass low-income and black and brown precincts in the Atlanta metro region and the City of Columbus (GA). [UNITE HERE canvassers knocked on 1.6 million doors](#), and two-thirds were black and brown voters. Altogether, the America Votes coalition knocked on the doors of over 10 million Georgia voters.

Historically voter turnout in Georgia runoffs had been 40-60 percent of previous November general elections. But in the January 2021 runoff, turnout soared to 90 percent of the total November election turnout, fueled by opposition to the racist Trump's administration policies, popular demands for massive federal assistance to address the Covid-19 and economic crisis, and the largest ground operation in Georgia history, to give the Democrats a narrow victory.

Tony Evans, a member of UNITE HERE 2850 in Oakland who canvassed African-American voters in both Reno and Atlanta said, "We made this happen 'on the doors', we're the people in the background who did the heavy lifting."

Black voters, energized by black women like Felicia Davis, convener of the Clayton County (GA) Black Woman's Roundtable, comprised one-third of the Georgia electorate and were decisive in the Georgia run-off; 93 percent of Black voters cast their ballots for Warnock and Ossoff.

Davis told the New York Times, "I am unapologetically Black, my agenda is Black, my community is Black, my county is Black. So, what I do is Black. And for 20 years we've been trying to tell people what was possible."

### **Towards the 2022 Mid-terms and a New Democratic Majority**

UNITE HERE's experience in the 2020 election cycle points to several critical takeaways if Democrats are to increase their majorities in both the U.S. Senate and the House in 2022.

First, the ground game is essential to prevailing in close elections, even during a public health crisis like COVID-19. Democrats and labor unions must make year-round investments to build training and organizational infrastructures as UNITE HERE and allied community based-organizations have done. Ongoing digital organizing is vital as well but should not be substituted for the knock on the door and phone calls by volunteers.

Democrats must begin immediately to prepare for the 2022 ground game to win Senate seats in swing states, such as North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Ohio where incumbent Republican Senators are retiring. In Wisconsin, incumbent Republican Ron Johnson is up for re-election, but Democrats could flip that seat. Georgia US Senator Raphael Warnock and Arizona Senator Mark Kelly will run for full terms in 2022, and the Democrats must retain these two seats.

Second, by large margins, voters of color, women, youth, labor, LGBTQ, poor, low-income, and infrequent voters in major metro regions supported Biden-Harris and Warnock-Ossoff. It is also essential to continue making inroads into the ever more diverse suburbs where Democrats prevailed, such as in the Phoenix and Philadelphia metro regions—with an emphasis on voter registration, engagement, and turnout of these core Democratic constituencies in both the inner city and suburbs. To forge an enduring Democratic new majority, the electorate must be continuously expanded and lower propensity voters within these constituencies must become *likely* voters.

A progressive electoral organizational infrastructure must become permanent in every state but independent of the Democratic Party and anchored in the constituencies comprising the new Democratic majority.



Moreover, it is crucial to combat voter suppression at the state level by passing the ["For the People Act", HR 1](#), in the House and S1 in the Senate to consolidate the new Democratic majority. Blocking voter suppression in Texas and North Carolina could enable Democrats to flip those states.

Third, the labor movement must hold Democrats accountable for implementing the party's most progressive platform for any Presidential candidate—which is in large part a byproduct of Bernie Sander's 2016 and 2020 Presidential campaigns and the progressive resistance to the Trump regime after 2016. The recently enacted \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package is a historic step forward, as the two pending infrastructure bills totaling \$4.5 trillion could also be—but much more must be done.

To win the loyalty of core constituencies and to build an enduring new majority, Democrats must implement a progressive agenda that includes: a \$15 minimum wage; canceling student debt; creating good green jobs and a just transition to a clean energy economy; approving the Protect the Right to Organize Act; winning comprehensive immigration reform (including a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented); legislating paid sick and family leave; expanding access to the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid, and curbing police violence and transforming the racist criminal justice system.

Such a progressive agenda is now moving from the margins to the mainstream within the Democratic Party. [The approval of Proposition 208 in Arizona](#) in November 2020 that raised taxes on the wealthy to fund public education and [Florida voters' approval of \\$15 minimum wage](#) by 60 percent of the vote indicates the popularity, in red and blue states alike, of a multi-racial economic populist agenda.

Moreover, this progressive agenda will enable Democrats to make further inroads with non-college educated white voters who decisively supported Trump. Many of these voters deserted the Democratic Party due to NAFTA, job loss, and deindustrialization, the stagnation of their wages and household incomes, the shredding of the social safety net, and never-ending wars in the Middle East.

According to UNITE HERE Secretary-Treasurer Gwen Mills, "The key takeaway from the election is that workers saved our democracy—workers did the essential door-to-door canvassing and everyday working voters turned out. With their votes comes a mandate for change to help working and low-wealth people."

There is no guarantee that the current Democratic coalition is stable. The path to victory in 2022 runs through the ground game as demonstrated by UNITE HERE, broadening the

electorate, and achieving concrete policy victories that directly address the needs of the emerging Democratic majority.

UNITE HERE is now meeting with other unions and community-based organizations to develop an even more robust ground game for the critical 2022 mid-term elections. As union President D.Taylor told the *American Prospect*, ["I need to urge all labor unions to get on the doors."](#)

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For UNITE HERE 2020 elections data references, please see:

<https://unitehere.org/wp-content/uploads/Take-Back-2020-Report-links.pdf>

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