

# Case Study: Changing minds on climate action through listening.

## Deep Canvassing Increases Support for Climate Change Action in Rural British Columbia.

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### Key Takeaways

- The Neighbours United Project, an initiative of the West Kootenay EcoSociety, has shown that deep canvassing and storytelling can persuade on climate in a frontline, rural, industrial community in British Columbia.
- Deep canvassing has successfully been used to decrease racial and transgender bias, but few organizations have tried to use the strategy to persuade voters on climate.
- While more experimentation and research are needed, the Neighbours United Project highlights that increasing a sense of government efficacy and support for government action on climate change could be key to moving citizens on climate change.

### Introduction

Persuasion is notoriously difficult on polarized issues like climate change. Deep canvassing is an outreach tactic that persuades by listening to people's mixed feelings and thoughts without judgment and giving people a safe space to resolve their internal conflict on an issue. Deep canvassing was popularized by the LGBTQIA equality movement in their work around marriage equality and countering transphobia. Since the mid-2010s, the climate movement has been experimenting with the tactic.



*The Teck Resources Ltd. lead-zinc smelter is the largest employer in Trail.*

Some organizations have tried to apply the technique in pursuit of other campaign needs like recruiting activists with mixed or null results. But the Neighbours United Project may have developed a replicable model focused on persuasion. Trail, British Columbia is the site of one of the world's largest lead-zinc smelters and residents have been impacted by lead poisoning in the town and pollution in the adjacent Columbia River. The Neighbours United Project, an initiative of the West Kootenay EcoSociety, is using deep canvassing to overcome polarization and persuade residents in this Canadian town to

support more government action on climate change. Through grassroots organizing, and vulnerable conversations, EcoSociety is seeing a positive shift in the beliefs of residents in a frontline, industry town.

The West Kootenay EcoSociety (EcoSociety) advocates for community solutions to climate change, conservation, and food sustainability challenges in the mountainous southeastern region of British Columbia. EcoSociety organized communities around renewable energy and played a key role in getting 12 local governments to commit to 100% renewable energy by 2050. While their community organizing strategy was successful in many towns, EcoSociety met more resistance in Trail.

Traditional Canvass	Deep Canvass
<p><b>Get an ID Yes/No/Undecided</b></p> <p><b>Train canvassers to use a script</b></p> <p><b>Canvasser delivers a message</b></p>	<p><b>Surface Conflicted Feelings (1 - 10 Scale)</b></p> <p><b>Train Canvassers to Listen &amp; Ask Questions</b></p> <p><b>Canvasser and Voter Exchange Vulnerable Stories</b></p>

EcoSociety’s organizers started out using familiar community organizing tactics (such as tabling at community events or farmers markets), but quickly realized they needed to do more to meet the company town’s residents where they were. Around the same time, EcoSociety’s Executive Director Montana Burgess heard about a tactic called “deep canvassing.” Organizers in Los Angeles had worked to increase residents’ support for gay marriage, and Burgess thought a similar approach might be useful in engaging the Trail audience on tough climate issues.

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EcoSociety’s resulting persuasion program is designed for people who have not been engaged on climate change and may be hesitant to talk about or act on it. In Trail, a town whose biggest employer is mining company Teck Resources Ltd. (formerly Cominco), much of the population has historically fallen into this category. Concerns that increased environmental action could threaten the supply of available jobs are not uncommon.

Through its Neighbours United Project, the organization is completing the first comprehensive deep canvassing project in Canada. The pilot program, which started in February 2020 and formally launched with volunteers in June 2021, aims to increase public support for government action on climate change in Trail. Specifically, the program aims to get the City of Trail to commit to transition to 100% renewable energy across community emissions no later than 2050.

## What is deep canvassing?



*Volunteer canvassers engage with residents in Trail, British Columbia. Credit: EcoSociety.*

Many people are familiar with traditional canvassing, where an activist knocks on the door and delivers a pitch for the campaign. In contrast to quick, transactional conversations focused on mobilization, deep canvassing centers listening and talking through conflicting feelings about an issue. Over the course of a 15 to 20 minute conversation, volunteers concentrate on connecting and storytelling about real, lived experiences instead of arguing over facts. They can assess residents' level of support for an issue and any internal hesitation they may be feeling, and, ideally, both parties share accounts of personal connections to the issue. The format allows for longer, more emotional connections, and aims to create lasting persuasion and resulting changes in opinion.

This approach has shown promising results with other organizations as well. For instance, the Leadership Lab found deep canvassing to be [successful at reducing transgender bias for several months after an initial conversation](#), and [People's Action found deep canvassing to be 102 times more effective per person](#) than standard presidential campaign persuasion tactics. EcoSociety has innovated by applying the strategy to climate change and specifically by identifying what aspect of the issue to persuade residents on: that government can be effective if people work together to hold them accountable and that they should support government action on

climate change. EcoSociety’s work demonstrates how to craft compelling and personal messages, and how to support the volunteers that engage in deep conversations around climate.

Successful deep canvassing requires the right script, trained canvassers (staff or volunteers), and a supportive organizational culture. Developing the script for the EcoSociety project was an iterative process that took a year and a half and involved many rounds of testing. The group drew on insights from its past canvassing efforts; the experiences of other organizations, such as SAVE LGBTQ Foundation’s 2015 campaign to reduce transgender prejudice in Miami; and YPCCC’s related research. Debriefs were conducted after every canvass. The

core organizing team reviewed conversations in the same way that a coach would review game tape. EcoSociety staff also shadowed organizations using deep canvassing including the Montana Engagement Partnership, which paid canvassers to use the technique to increase support for conservation initiatives, and Standing Up for Racial Justice, which focused on gaining support for jail reform measures in Los Angeles.

To make climate action relevant and personal to Trail residents, EcoSociety’s script emphasizes listening, sharing, and vulnerability. After a brief introduction, a volunteer asks a community member to assess their own support for government action on climate change (0-10), and then shares a related personal anecdote. For example, one volunteer emphasized that, because of recent heat waves, he was unable to hike, and hopes rising temperatures won’t prevent him from sharing his love of hiking with future children. Volunteers are also encouraged to use social norms by noting that they have heard concerns from other residents about changing snow patterns and declining trout numbers in the river.

Volunteers conclude the discussion by making a case for action, asking the residents questions to resolve any outstanding concerns, and asking residents the same 0-10 question. After talking with the volunteer concerned about heat, the resident moved from a self-assessment of 5 at the outset to a 7 (more supportive). This is noteworthy as other [researchers have found that most campaigns’ attempts at persuasion fail](#).

EcoSociety’s long-term investment in deep canvassing, including developing an effective script and carefully training volunteers, has proven effective, even with this tough audience. From June 2021, when EcoSociety launched its volunteer pilot program through December 2021, throughout 211 conversations, volunteers saw a 35 percent persuasion rate. For those engaged in rural areas, 1 in 3 resolved their internal conflict and shifted their beliefs and behaviors “in a lasting way” to support more government action on climate and 100% renewable energy.

## Script Structure

Step 1: 0-10 Scale - surface complexity

Step 2: Connect & Acknowledge identity

Step 3: Story Share - climate change personal story

- people-focused climate impacts
- naming our own cognitive dissonance
- helping them find & share their lived experience

Step 4: Make the Case & Help Voter Process

Step 5: 0-10 Scale - understand impact

Step 6: Campaign Ask

## Stories persuade. And everyone has a climate story.

People in Trail, like many people, perceive climate change as a problem for the future or distant places, which can make the need for action seem less urgent. This is a common barrier to communicating effectively about climate change —according to YPCCC’s [Canadian Climate Opinion Maps](#), in West Kootenay and throughout Canada, fewer than half of residents believe the impacts of climate change will harm them personally. EcoSociety’s experience was that most people needed a climate story modeled for them before they could connect the dots between their real lived experience of wildfire smoke, heat waves, and floods, and climate change.

We know from YPCCC research that stories are a powerful means of persuasion. EcoSociety’s decision to appeal to residents emotionally through personal connections and social norms was based on its own observations, and supported by the findings of a YPCCC [experiment shared with the team](#). The study found that a Yale Climate Connections radio story featuring a North Carolina man discussing his emotional attachment to the places he fishes and hunts and the climate impacts on those places had significant positive effects on the beliefs of moderates and conservatives in the U.S.

## Persuasion was needed on government action.

In hundreds of conversations, canvassers heard mistrust of government and a sense that local government climate action would be ineffective. To scale climate action in Trail, it was necessary to focus deep canvassing efforts on government action instead of individual action, Burgess explained. EcoSociety’s goal is not to tell residents they need to trust the government, but to help them walk through their internal conflict, and consider how government action could be a lever for positive change.

To illustrate this potential, volunteers often provide an example of a previous time when residents and government successfully worked together to solve a problem. For example, in the 1990s, local government and community and industry members mobilized in response to concerns about elevated blood lead levels. While air quality remains a concern in Trail, regular blood level monitoring, the formation of a health and safety committee, and a new smelter have [resulted in average blood lead levels six times lower](#) than levels 30 years ago. “This is a great example of people working with decision makers and the industry that they are depending on for jobs,” Burgess said.

## A template for campaigns in the United States. Let’s prove it works.

EcoSociety has built a template for campaigns to use as a foundation for their own deep canvass campaigns, but this pilot campaign was not a randomized control trial. As the EcoSociety moves into new communities, researchers could support them to run a randomized control trial that could prove that deep canvassing can persuade voters on climate. We also see a significant opportunity to leverage this template with American partners. In the U.S. campaigns can use voter file microtargeting models to target their deep canvassing outreach to citizens that are persuadable, while other organizing efforts can focus on moving people to action.

## Conclusion

EcoSociety’s work is building momentum in Trail and other communities in the region. In spring 2022, [the town of Golden became the twelfth in the region to pass a resolution to transition to 100% renewable energy by 2050](#). After completing the pilot in Trail in March 2022, EcoSociety plans to scale up its work to other rural, suburban, and urban towns, and continue to explore best practices—such as ongoing workshops, training, and debriefs—to recruit and retain volunteers. EcoSociety started by recruiting volunteers from its supporter base and continues to experiment with recruitment channels ranging from skill building workshops to dating apps to personal networks. Its success can serve as a model for other grassroots organizations and groups that are engaging with hesitant or skeptical communities in conversations about climate change.

“To do deep canvassing well, you need to let go,” Burgess said. “Being able to show up and be genuinely curious transforms the canvasser. If you are attached to a specific result, you can’t get there. You have to go into conversations with an open mind.”

## Appendix 1: Example Story

**Source:** [Personal Story Building Worksheet - Gov't Climate Action](#)

“I grew up in Rossland, something I looked forward to every year was the winter carnival. I love all the ice sculptures and events, especially the bobsled race! I was so excited last winter (before the pandemic hit) to share the winter carnival with my partner. I had told her so much about it and couldn't wait for her to see the whole town turn into a bobsled course. We were living in Victoria at the time, so drove out to Rossland and stayed with my parents just to attend the winter carnival. That weekend, it ended up being the first time in over 100 years that the bobsled race couldn't happen; it was warm and raining that weekend. I was so disappointed that I couldn't share this important tradition with her. I have so many happy memories of the winter carnival growing up, and now I am worried that the snowpack and warmer winters threaten this tradition that has brought so much to my life and the life of our community. I am worried about what it will mean for Rossland and Trail to not have the winters, snowpack, and spring runoff that we have always relied on, and what that means for not only all the people that depend on a healthy snowpack for work but also for the water reservoirs we all rely on.”

YPPCC’s Partnerships Program grows the capacity of the climate movement to conduct strategic communication campaigns to build public and political will for climate action. We work with diverse organizations ranging from local environmental justice organizations to international climate organizations, government agencies, companies, and foundations. We help organizations clarify their communication goals, identify, and understand their audiences, use tactics and tools based on YPPCC’s research, and conduct their own studies. Interested in learning how we can help your organization? To learn more about how our tools and resources can help inform your organization’s communication campaign strategy and tactics, set up a call with us.