

# *The Ground Game: Harris's Turnout Machine vs. Trump's Unproven Alliance*

Both parties are frenetically chasing votes in the counties that could very well decide the election. In many places, inexperienced conservative groups are going up against a more tightly organized Democratic operation.

Lisa Lerer, Julie Bosman, Kellen Browning, Maya King and Jonathan Weisman, *The New York Times* Online Edition, October 13, 2024.

In the final weeks of the 2024 election, Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald J. Trump are staking their chances on two radically different theories of how to win: one tried-and-true, the other untested in modern presidential campaigns.

Ms. Harris's team is running an expansive version of the type of field operation that has dominated politics for decades, deploying flotillas of paid staff members to organize and turn out every vote they can find. Mr. Trump's campaign is going after a smaller universe of less frequent voters while relying on well-funded but inexperienced outside groups to reach a broader swath.

Interviews with more than four dozen voters, activists, campaign aides and officials in four pivotal counties — Erie County, Pa., Kenosha County, Wis., Maricopa County, Ariz., and Cobb County, Ga. — reveal a diffuse, at times unwieldy Republican effort that has raised questions from party operatives about effectiveness in the face of the more tightly structured Harris campaign operation. Democrats, in many places, are outpacing Republicans in terms of paid staff and doors knocked, and are counting on that local presence to break through a fractured media environment and to reach voters who want to tune out politics altogether.

“The national discourse kind of falls on deaf ears if it doesn't feel real and localized,” said Dan Kanninen, the Harris campaign's battleground states director. “Ultimately you're trying to have a cohesive conversation with a voter across many modes to connect the dots.”

All told, the number of voters deciding the 2024 election could most likely fit in, and perhaps not even fill, a college football stadium. Across the seven battleground states, where the contests are in a dead heat, every ballot counts.

With 2,500 staff members located in 353 offices, the Harris campaign is working to convert the strongest backers into volunteers and to ensure that sporadic but supportive

voters cast a ballot, all while winning over independents and moderate Republicans. Last week, the campaign said, it knocked on over 600,000 doors and made over three million calls through 63,000 volunteer shifts.

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Iris Acosta, a canvasser for Unite Here, a union aligned with the Democratic Party, knocking on doors in Phoenix this month. Harris campaign officials said their operation knocked on over 600,000 doors across the swing states last week. Credit...Ash Ponders for The New York Times

Mr. Trump’s team is largely operating under the assumption that Republicans who voted for Trump in previous elections will once again back him in large numbers. His campaign is focusing on a smaller number of infrequent voters who his team believes will back Mr. Trump if energized to vote. The campaign says it has “hundreds of paid staff” and over 300 offices across the battleground states. A top Republican strategist who spoke to campaign leaders, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about the operations, said the campaign was training 40,000 volunteers, called “Trump Force 47 captains,” who were each charged with mobilizing 25 of these less likely voters — for a total reach of 1 million voters.

“What is very impactful is personal contacts with voters who don’t reliably vote in every election that are more disconnected from the political process,” said James Blair, the Trump campaign’s political director.

Outside organizations and super PACs funded by conservative donors are picking up efforts to reach even more voters. Prominent among them are Turning Point Action, an organization of young conservatives led by Charlie Kirk, a Trump ally, and America PAC, a super PAC [affiliated with Elon Musk](#) — both of which have little experience running field programs — as well as the Faith and Freedom Coalition, a more veteran Christian organization that is focused on engaging conservative evangelical voters.

A door-to-door strategy that so heavily relies on third-party efforts has never been seen before in a presidential campaign. Mr. Trump's team is taking advantage of [a Federal Election Commission decision earlier this year](#) that for the first time allows the campaigns and these types of organizations to coordinate on canvassing operations.

It's also a financial necessity: Mr. Trump has raised far less in campaign cash than Ms. Harris. Mr. Musk's group alone is seeded with tens of millions of dollars of the billionaire's own funds.

Both sides agree that a bigger ground game doesn't ensure victory. In 2016, Hillary Clinton's campaign boasted about its operation, while Mr. Trump had [almost no field staff in the key states](#). Four years later, the second Trump campaign bragged about knocking on one million doors weekly, while the Biden campaign conducted no in-person canvassing out of concern about the Covid pandemic.

Here's a closer look at counties that could decide the election:

## **In Erie County, Pa., a disjointed Republican operation is plagued by infighting.**



Brian Shank, a superfan of former President Donald J. Trump, with his Trump-themed trailer in Erie, Pa., last month. Mr. Shank and his allies have been feuding with the Erie County Republican Party chairman. Credit...Michael Swensen for The New York Times

If there's one thing that Republican leaders of Erie County, Pa., seem to hate more than Ms. Harris, it's the other Republican leaders of their bellwether county in the pivotal state's northwest corner.



The divisions are open, acrimonious and may be hindering efforts to register voters and get out the vote for Mr. Trump, who won this key swing county in 2016 but lost it to President Biden in 2020. The infighting, according to interviews with multiple people involved, is a byproduct of the Trump campaign's decision to largely leave its ground game not only to local Republican Party offices but also to a variety of outside groups, all with their own methodologies and demands for attention.

Tom Eddy, the Erie County Republican Party chairman, appears to be at war with a core group of Republican activists who have styled themselves as the mainstay of the party's ground game in the county. Mr. Eddy calls those activists self-promoters and cranks.

The activists, led by a Trump superfan, Brian Shank, call Mr. Eddy mean and stodgy.

"I don't know if it hurts," said Harrison Dunn, a young Republican activist in Erie County who founded his own super PAC allied with Mr. Shank to promote Republicans in the region. "It doesn't help, which is its own kind of hurt."

At times, the groups are right on top of each other. Outside a Trump rally in Erie, a tent pitched by one group abutted the tent of another — and both were shouting at passers-by to register to vote or sign up for mail-in ballots.



Outside a Trump rally in Erie last month, Turning Point Action and Trump Force 47's voter registration tents were abutting each other. Credit...Michael Swensen for The New York Times

The day before, Mr. Shank, a former member of the county council who was ousted by a Democrat last November, and Kimberly Hunter, a co-founder of Mr. Dunn's super PAC, Restore America, stood for hours at Dobbins Landing, a popular spot on Erie's waterfront, with about a dozen Trump-flag-waving compatriots from the 814 Patriots Group, another organization of the former president's supporters. Mr. Shank's trailer featured a rickety mannequin of Mr. Trump in a disheveled suit and tie, dark glasses and

a red MAGA hat that nonetheless attracted passers-by eager to climb a small aluminum ladder to pose for pictures.

As they did, Ms. Hunter asked whether they were registered to vote and pressed them to take applications for mail-in ballots. Mr. Dunn, meanwhile, bragged about pushing the county to clean up its voter rolls after the 2020 election, resulting in a purge of 13,499 Democrats.

“The Republican Party’s not doing anything,” Mr. Shank said. “We are.”

At Erie County Republican headquarters in Millcreek Township, outside the city of Erie, Mr. Eddy was openly dismissive of those efforts. Three staff members hired by the Trump campaign under the “Trump Force 47” banner were the real muscle behind the Republican ground game in the county, he said. Yard signs were piled high. His office had people fanning out through various neighborhoods to drop off Republican literature, though he conceded that canvassers were leery of knocking on potentially hostile doors.

Everyone involved noted the Republican efforts were outgunned by those of the Democrats, however.

“The Democrats have 11 paid people in the county,” Mr. Eddy marveled. “We have three and some volunteers.”

On a recent Saturday morning, out of the county Democratic headquarters in downtown Erie, two successive waves of canvassers went out to persuade the undecided. About 120 canvassers, bolstered by union members from as far away as Buffalo, N.Y., checked in for the first wave. Another 60 to 70 came two hours later.

“It’s a little scary and intimidating to knock on doors, but really, it’s been good,” said Conrad Kubaney, 33, who along with his wife, Susie Guisto, 27, has gotten involved in a presidential campaign for the first time, knocking doors for Ms. Harris. “There’s a sense that we’re not taking anything for granted.”

## **Volunteers in Kenosha County, Wis., test the Trump strategy.**

Sandy Wiedmeyer, the chair of the Kenosha County Republican Party, stood in what was once a living room inside the small brick bungalow that is now a county party headquarters.

Boxes of doughnuts had just arrived. More than a dozen volunteers were crowded around a table, ready to knock on doors and catch potential voters at home on a Saturday morning. A cardboard cutout of Mr. Trump peeked out through the window, giving a smiley thumbs-up to cars whizzing by.

“I will tell you, the ground game is what wins elections,” Ms. Wiedmeyer told the group, her French bulldog, Chloe, at her feet. “As many times as we can hit people and have personal conversations about our candidate, it makes all the difference in the world.”



Volunteers gathered at the headquarters of the Kenosha County Republican Party in Kenosha, Wis., last month. Republican groups have knocked on at least 3,000 doors of potential voters in the county, while Democrats have knocked on 25,000 since Vice President Kamala Harris has been their nominee. Credit... Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Enthusiasm like Ms. Wiedmeyer's is plentiful in Kenosha, a county that Mr. Trump captured in 2016 and [again](#) in 2020, despite Wisconsin flipping to President Biden four years ago.

But here, as in many of Wisconsin's other 71 counties, Republicans are up against a more formidable, organized and [well-funded](#) Democratic ground game.

In Kenosha, one of the largest counties in the state, Republicans have knocked on at least 3,000 doors of potential voters, and they expect to ramp up efforts in the final weeks, according to Ms. Wiedmeyer, who said she did not know of efforts by Turning Point Action and America PAC, [which recently combined their operations](#) in the state, in her area.

By comparison, since Ms. Harris has been the Democratic nominee, Democrats have knocked on 25,000 doors in the county, according to a Democratic Party spokesman.

The Republicans set out in their cars with paper and pens, carrying a list of addresses on a clipboard and a stack of literature to hang on doorknobs.

They were trying to reach those low-propensity Republican voters, the people who are conservative but have not been consistently voting in recent elections.

The names and addresses on their lists did not always yield their targets.



One of the first people on the list of one group of canvassers was a man who, when approached, said he was a Democrat. They politely thanked him and moved on.

Another man whose name was on the list told canvassers that he had voted Republican for decades and was already a solid supporter of Mr. Trump.

## **In Cobb County, Ga., Democrats target the voters who helped power their narrow 2020 victory.**



Supporters of Ms. Harris have enthusiastically attended phone bank and door knocking shifts in Cobb County, Ga., a racially diverse corner of the Atlanta suburbs that helped drive Mr. Biden's win in the state four years ago. Credit...Kendrick Brinson for The New York Times

The rush of supporters arriving for phone bank and door knocking shifts on a warm Saturday in October caused a traffic jam in the parking lot of a Harris campaign outpost in Mableton, Ga.

The crush of cars forced volunteers and staff members to direct traffic for several minutes while groups of canvassers left the office with piles of pro-Harris placards in hand, making room for fresh faces to trickle in.

The sheer number of enthusiastic supporters showing up in Cobb County — the racially diverse corner of the populous Atlanta suburbs that helped drive Mr. Biden's win in the state four years ago — was indicative of the renewed energy Ms. Harris's candidacy has given the party. Democrats in Georgia are targeting as many people as possible, from staunch liberals in the heart of Atlanta to independents and even moderate Republicans in the city's suburbs and exurbs. The campaign boasts 26 offices statewide, complete with 200 paid staff members.

The razor-thin margins that could decide the election were laid bare at the doors, however.

Standing on her front porch, Agnes McGhee, 75, said that she planned to support Ms. Harris this November. Originally from Trinidad, she was motivated to secure her citizenship after hearing Mr. Trump's speeches demonizing immigrants. His remarks compelled her to do what she could to vote him out, she said.

"I went and gave my citizenship up when I saw what was going on. I said, 'I'm living here, I need to vote,'" She said. She later added, "When he's making those remarks, that bothers me."

Just across the street, canvassers with Ms. Harris's campaign were quickly rebuffed by a woman who shouted through her window that her family would be voting for Mr. Trump in November.

They moved to the next house.

## **Trump-allied Turning Point focuses on Maricopa County, Ariz.**



Amanda Blake, who works for Turning Point Action, canvassing in a Mesa, Ariz., neighborhood this month. Ms. Blake is participating in a program aimed at turning out Republicans who do not usually vote. Credit...Anna Watts for The New York Times

Dave Heidebrecht walked along the sidewalk of an upscale neighborhood in Gilbert, Ariz., smiling in satisfaction. He had just rung the doorbell of a house in the triple-digit



October heat, hoping to ensure that a woman living there had a plan to vote for Mr. Trump.

Her name was on a list of roughly 1,000 infrequent voters who Mr. Heidebrecht, 56, a full-time canvasser for Turning Point Action, was responsible for corralling in the East Valley area of Phoenix.

Instead he found her son, 18-year-old Duy Pham, who was also planning on voting for Mr. Trump but needed some clarity on how to turn in his ballot.

“I almost view myself as a holy kick in the pants,” Mr. Heidebrecht said.

Outside groups like his say they are swarming to help boost Mr. Trump around the sprawling Phoenix suburbs.

The Faith and Freedom Coalition had knocked on more than 195,000 doors throughout the state as of early October, with about 75 paid staff members and 100 volunteers working there, according to a person familiar with the group’s efforts. Mr. Musk’s America PAC said it knocked on about 250,000 doors in Arizona earlier this summer but declined to share updated figures. And Ashley Hayek, the executive director of America First Works, said her conservative group had knocked on 345,000 doors so far in Maricopa, with close to 200 volunteers active in Arizona — mostly in Maricopa County — each day.

Locals, including a mix of voters at doors and strategists in the area, say they have not seen an extensive presence from some of the conservative organizations on the ground in Phoenix. But that does not mean they are not active, the groups argue: The effort to reach those infrequent voters in under-covered parts of the county is just taking them farther afield.

Some Republican operatives have questioned the wisdom of relying so heavily on outside operations.

“When it’s done by a bunch of different groups and not the campaign, you run into problems with redundancy, efficiency,” said Tyler Montague, a local Republican political strategist who is not a supporter of Mr. Trump or of Turning Point, though he noted their operation appeared effective.

The Harris campaign has six offices and 54 paid staff members in Maricopa County, and knocked on about 90,000 doors between July and early October, according to Jacques Petit, a spokesman. That does not account for its many allied groups, like the Unite Here labor union, which began knocking on doors in May and anticipates hitting 900,000 in Maricopa County alone by Election Day, according to Brendan Walsh, the executive director of Worker Power, an allied group.

The Trump campaign did not provide specifics as to staff or campaign offices, but said it was knocking on doors — but would not say how many — as it prioritized reaching hard-to-get voters.



David Heidebrecht, left, knocked on a door in Gilbert, Ariz., this month hoping to ensure that a woman living there had a plan to vote for Mr. Trump. He was met instead by her son, Duy Pham, who was also planning on voting for Mr. Trump but needed some clarity on how to turn in his ballot. Credit...Anna Watts for The New York Times

All Republican efforts appeared to be dwarfed by Turning Point Action, led by Mr. Kirk. Headquartered in Phoenix, Turning Point has been laying the groundwork since February for [an all-out “chase the vote” program](#) aimed at turning out Republicans who do not usually vote. It is spending tens of millions of dollars on the effort and ensuring it has staff in every one of the hundreds of precincts in Arizona it has identified as most crucial.

The goal has been to have local staff members get to know residents of these key Phoenix-area precincts on a personal level over many months so that efforts to persuade them to vote will feel more natural and less transactional. Voters answering their doors on a recent Thursday were clearly friendly with the Turning Point staff members who knocked, recognizing them from previous rounds of outreach and in some cases inviting them inside.

The organization would not say how many doors it had knocked on, but Tyler Bowyer, its chief operating officer, said it had many hundreds of staff members and thousands of volunteers in Arizona, and was working to turn out about 400,000 people, half of whom are in its high-priority precincts.

Mr. Bowyer rejected the notion that Republicans relying on outside groups to motivate voters was a gamble or even a novel approach.

“The question isn’t: Will it work?” Mr. Bowyer said. “Not doing it is like working with fewer resources.”

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