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- Volunteer canvassers listen as Sarah Thorwirth reviews procedures for encouraging voter participation
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## Feet, not commercials or mail, decide the vote

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"I hear a lot of people saying, 'Oh, my vote don't count.'"

By [Dave Rice](#), Oct. 9, 2016

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Saturday, October 8, served as the one-month marker before next month's general election. Precinct walkers — wooing for candidates and favored propositions — will begin to pound the pavement in earnest.

But for one group focusing on lower-income neighborhoods where English often isn't the primary language spoken in a household, the biggest challenge is getting people to show up to the polls at all.

"The big thing we're talking about is building a culture of voting in our neighborhoods," said Franco Garcia, an organizer with [Environmental Health Coalition](#). "Voting is a habit — once we can get people in the mindset of voting in every election, we get them thinking about what to vote for rather than simply whether or not to participate.

"The best way to turn people out isn't commercials or mailing a bunch of literature, but having individual conversations with a trusted messenger. That's why we have people working within their communities, talking to their neighbors," Franco continued, explaining that training is being offered concurrently in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

"I'll talk about the importance of voting all day long, but if you drop me into a predominantly Chinese-speaking community that's nowhere near where I live, it probably won't go very well."

Meanwhile, a group of about three dozen volunteers sat for final training before being sent out into the neighborhoods of Barrio Logan, City Heights, National City, and Logan Heights.

"As we've learned, there are a lot of people who do not vote for a number of reasons. You'll probably meet some of those people today," Sarah Thorwirth told the group, giving final tips from volunteer information sessions that began last weekend. "We're not telling people which way to vote, or what candidate to vote for, but we are definitely encouraging them to get out and vote."

The coalition does, however, have several positions that canvassers will be promoting. The group is against Measure A, a proposed half-cent sales tax increase [panned by multiple environmental organizations](#) last month, and also opposes Measures C and D, which address a potential downtown stadium.

They favor Measures K and L, which would end the automatic election of local primary candidates who receive more than 50 percent of the vote (as opposed to facing the second-highest ranking opponent in November) and place measures before voters on general election ballots rather than in primaries.

Primary elections tend to attract lower turnout that generally skews more conservative than general elections, so progressive groups like the coalition believe they'd see results more favorable to their viewpoint if these matters were decided in higher-turnout contests. In 2014, for example, residents citywide [rejected a Barrio Logan community plan update](#) that had high favorability in the area it affected but faced stiff opposition from local industry interests, which poured millions into an effort to put the plan before primary voters and then campaigned against it.

Leaving the meeting, City Heights resident Roddy Jerome was excited to begin knocking on doors, particularly when it came to spreading his views about Measure A, which opponents have knocked as a massive freeway expansion with transit improvements mainly an afterthought.

"People need information about how important it is to vote. I hear a lot of people saying, 'Oh, my vote don't count.' These are people that need to be inspired," Jerome said. "I travel using transit, and I've been having a lot of conversations with people on the bus, on the trolley. For the most part it's been positive, it's encouraging to use your voice to get other people to use theirs."

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