



Tips on leafleting at campaign events or town halls

In 2008, we circulated leaflets at presidential campaign events on the issue of mountaintop removal coal mining. It was a lot of fun, and was part of an effort that helped persuade all four presidential candidates (John McCain, Barack Obama, Cynthia McKinney and Ralph Nader) to publicly oppose the practice during the campaign. We also learned a few things that might help you, if you want to encourage like-minded people attending the event to ask questions about your issue.

“Free speech” zones

With more polarized politics come more “cultivated” audiences at events. This may include relegating opposing viewpoints to “free speech zones”. Justification for this stems from a legitimate concern for candidates’ or representatives’ safety, but it’s clearly been twisted into a way to stifle free speech. Someday, the courts will recognize these zones to be unconstitutional and prohibit them. Until then, if you plan to protest – with placards, banners, costumes, street theater, anything of that kind – you should talk to a friendly attorney first to understand your rights and practical options.

If instead what you want to do is leaflet, there should be no problem if you follow these tips.

The campaign creates a security zone within which the event occurs. There will be a gate or gates through which everyone has to pass to get into the security zone. At the gate, the security guards make sure that no one who is a potential threat to the candidate gets in. This is also where they eject people with protest banners and placards, and they may well do the same to someone trying to get in with 1,500 leaflets. They will not, however — and this is the key – eject someone carrying one leaflet.

This means that if you distribute flyers to people before they get to the security gate, they will take the flyers into the event for you, one by one, and they won’t be stopped.

These security gates actually help leafleters in a way because they slow down people’s entrance into the event, and a line of waiting people stretches out from it, sometimes for blocks. Leafleters can just go right down the line, distributing very large numbers of leaflets as they go. Plus, people have a chance to read the leaflet and talk to one another about it while they are waiting.

The more leaflets you get out the better, so you’ll have to resist the temptation to stop and chat with people in the line until you’ve run out of leaflets. You don’t have to have much of a rap as you move down the line. “Did you get one of these?” is just fine.

What if we want to leaflet *and* protest?

Good. Just make sure that some people in your group are leafleting and different people are protesting. If you mix the two, you could easily see your leaflets confiscated, and hundreds or thousands of people won't get a chance to hear your message.

Leaflet content and form

Keep your message short and simple. Highlight in bold a question or questions for participants to ask, should they get the chance. Be sure to include on your leaflet how to contact your group or an affiliated group, so interested parties can stay involved.

When you are ready to print the leaflet, you may want to consider using paper with a bright distinctive color such as yellow or lime. Once all the event-goers are inside and waiting for the event to start, they'll notice the sea of bright leaflets being read by others in the crowd. The candidate and his or her staff will notice it, too, and they will make sure they get a copy so they know what's going on.

Best of luck!

Ohio Citizen Action

614 W. Superior Ave. #1200

Cleveland, OH 44113

216-861-5200

www.ohiocitizen.org