



AVERTING A NEW COLD WAR

Countering Sinophobia With New Progressive Narratives

Presented by Justice Is Global, a project of People's Action



Members of the Asian American Commission held a press conference on the steps of the Massachusetts State House on March 12 in Boston to condemn racism toward Asian Americans because of the new coronavirus. (John Tlumacki/The Boston Globe via Getty Image)

THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAS MADE IT CLEARER THAN EVER THAT ALL LIFE IS INTERRELATED and that our greatest challenges require us to come together across borders as a united global community. Yet, the crisis also triggered a rapid rise in divisive nationalist sentiments around the world, including a sharp intensification of anti-China nationalism in the US. Justice Is Global has responded with a two-pronged strategy to build power for international cooperation to beat COVID-19 while countering the rush toward Cold War with China in the wake of the pandemic.

Justice Is Global is a project of People's Action devoted to building global solidarity and winning a just and sustainable global economy. Since 2016, People's Action has pursued a strategy to build infrastructure in rural and small town communities in ten target states. This work has included the launch in 2019 of a deep canvassing project to counter anti-immigrant narratives, which draws on the race-class narrative work of Anat Shenker-Osorio and Ian Haney-Lopez.¹

Building on this earlier work, in June 2020 Justice Is Global launched a deep canvass project to develop messaging capable of countering the growth of xenophobic anti-China narratives among average Americans. Our preliminary conclusion is that anti-China feeling is broad but shallow. A hopeful vision of the future built on international cooperation as the alternative to great power confrontation is attractive to voters, and humanizing the people of China is an effective technique to soften the hold of xenophobic narratives. These messaging strategies need to be further developed and disseminated if we are to avoid the growth of militarism, nationalism, and racism that a new Cold War would bring.

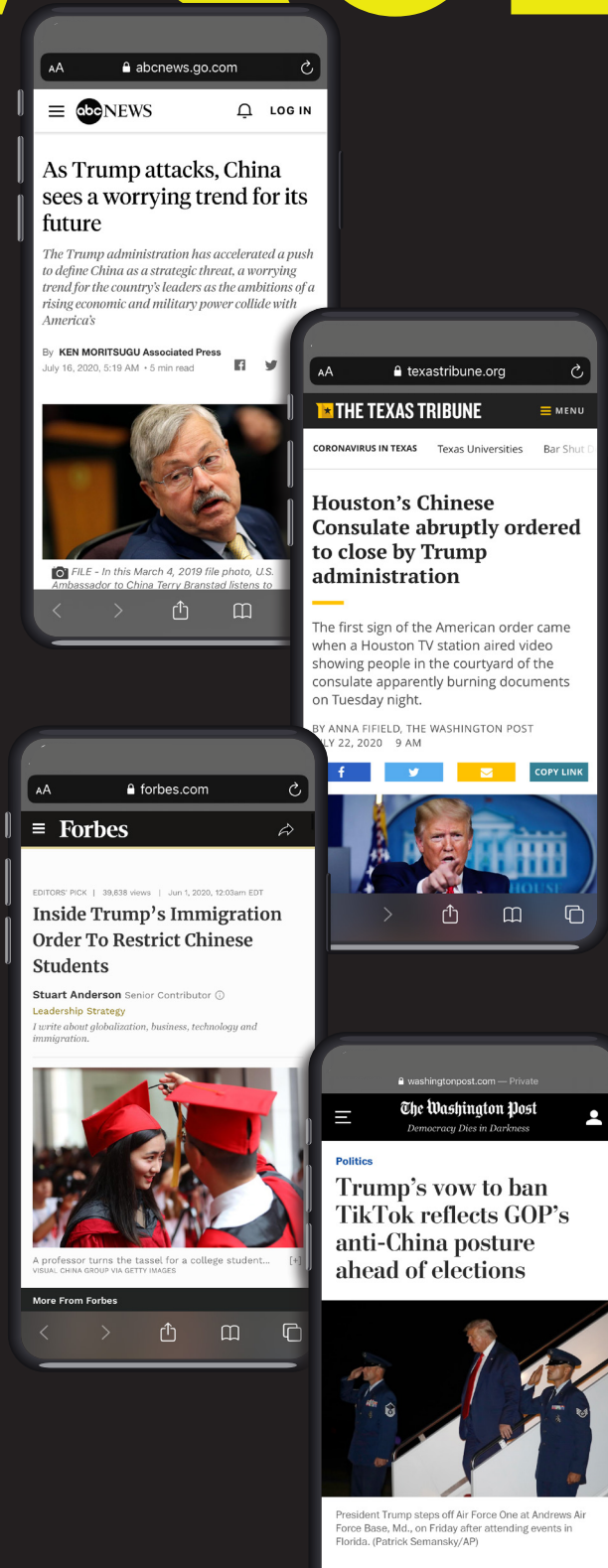
¹ <https://peoplesaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PA-Deep-Canvass-Final-Report-v5.pdf>

A NEW COLD WAR

THREATENS THE ENTIRE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

Because COVID-19 first emerged in China, it was quickly identified with China and Chinese people, leading to a rise in anti-China sentiment as well as anti-Asian racism. According to polling from the Pew Research Center conducted in June and July 2020, 73% of Americans now report an “unfavorable” view of China, a rise of 26% in just two years, and the number of Americans who identify China as an “enemy” has risen to over 1 in 4.² Asian American advocacy organizations have recorded thousands of incidents of anti-Asian harassment and violence since the US outbreak.³

The Trump White House and Republicans have sought to both exploit and exacerbate this trend. In the face of their catastrophic mishandling of the crisis, which has turned the US into the world center of the pandemic, they have determined that their best way to avoid electoral defeat is to blame China for the pandemic and use Sinophobic messages to go on offense against Biden and other Democrats.³ They have repeatedly used terms such as “Chinese virus” to racialize the pandemic, and sometimes describe China as an existential threat to the United States.⁴



The Trump administration has backed this rhetoric with anti-China actions that include economic attacks, military brinkmanship, restrictions on students and researchers from China, and the expulsion of reporters and diplomats. The Chinese government has responded in kind. This threatens to poison the US–China relationship so deeply that a new Biden administration and Democratic Congress would be unable to repair the damage, even if they were to win in the November elections.

Biden and the Democratic Party have so far chosen to respond to this Sinophobic messaging by claiming that it is Trump who has “rolled over” for China and that it is Democrats, not Republicans, who will be “tough” on China and hold China “accountable”. Many Democrats may simply not know how else to defend themselves against charges that they are “soft on China.”

A messaging strategy that affirms core rightwing narratives in hopes of using them against the right is dangerous and self-defeating. If the pandemic and the 2020 election lead Americans to permanently associate China with mass death and economic collapse, nationalist and xenophobic politicians will win a permanent advantage in US politics. Such a political terrain would systematically favor military spending and national security surveillance over progressive priorities like workers’ rights, universal access to healthcare, childcare, and education, or retirement security.

Though Democratic candidates believe anti-China rhetoric inoculates them against Republican attacks, research indicates it actually makes their Republican opponents stronger. **A Justice Is Global partner organization that specializes in testing campaign ads has found that ads attacking Trump as weak on China or raising suspicions about his family members’ connections to China actually increase voter support for Trump.** In a test of 22 video ads thematizing China and Trump in different ways, they found that such Sinophobic anti-Trump ads increased feelings of xenophobia among viewers, who were then more likely to support Trump because of his strong association with antipathy toward foreigners.⁵

Growing Sinophobia threatens the world’s ability to overcome the pandemic and its associated economic devastation. US–China animus also endangers global cooperation around the other great challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change, global poverty, and nuclear disarmament. A progressive approach requires a strong cooperative foundation for the US–China relationship—within which healthy criticism and pressure can be conducted both ways—rather than spiraling antagonism leading to Cold War and nationalist conflict.

A different message is possible—one that rejects great power confrontation in terms persuasive to voters. A Politico/Morning Consult poll in May 2020 found that, despite the rise in anti-China sentiment, voters choose cooperation with China to beat the pandemic over holding China accountable for the virus by a 28 percentage point margin.⁶ What progressive candidates and organizations need is a way to translate that demonstrated potential into effective narratives.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/30/americans-fault-china-for-its-role-in-the-spread-of-covid-19/>
³ <https://www.wshu.org/post/virus-hate-tracking-rise-anti-asian-harassment#stream/0>
⁴ <https://www.axios.com/trump-campaign-joe-biden-china-0bc24346-0942-4df0-b929-7d9807732e15.html>,
<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/gop-memo-anti-china-coronavirus-207244>

⁵ The survey was conducted online as a randomized controlled trial (N=16,000, pairwise comparison n=1650). This research organization has asked to remain anonymous outside the progressive movement. If you are a movement-affiliated individual or organization and would like to review the details of this research, please contact Justice Is Global.
⁶ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/20/anti-china-sentiment-coronavirus-poll-269373>

OUR SOLUTION

IN JUNE AND JULY OF 2020, Justice Is Global conducted a deep canvass to test whether a narrative of international cooperation could be effective in persuading voters away from supporting a new Cold War. Our strategy built upon the race-class narrative framework and was modeled on the scripts used by the 2019 People's Action deep canvass to counter anti-immigrant sentiments. After extensive training in the methodology, our team of 12 volunteers participated in a weekly phone bank, calling Democratic and Independent voters in Michigan and Pennsylvania for six weeks. In total the team made 3,874 contacts and had 126 conversations.

DEEP CANVASS PHONE BANK TOTALS



WHAT IS DEEP CANVASSING?

- Deep canvassing is a **methodology** used to persuade voters in an extended conversation about a particular issue by building trust and sharing stories.
- Canvassers use **non-judgmental listening** to reduce perceived threat to self-image and increase a feeling of respect.
- Deep canvassing, as a result, **promotes active processing and participation** in a conversation which increases openness to engaging with alternative viewpoints.
- Sharing stories also **creates an emotional connection** that allows canvassers to move beyond surface-level talking points.

1 Elicit view on who is to blame for the crisis

- Ask who is most to blame for the spread of the pandemic
- *Purpose: Begin to understand the voter's political concerns*

2 Elicit view on China: cooperation vs. holding China accountable

- Ask if the US should focus on holding China accountable, or focus on working together with China to combat the virus. Voter is placed on a 0 to 10 scale and asked to reflect on why that number is right for them
- *Purpose: The goal of the conversation is to move the voter up this scale*

3 Narrative exchange: personal stake in the crisis

- Canvasser shares a story about what is personally at stake for them in the crisis, and invites the voter to share a story in return
- *Purpose: Build emotional connection and ground the voter in how they are being impacted by the crisis and their personal stake in ending it; learn more about voter's values and concerns*

4 Narrative exchange: cooperation and care

- Canvasser and voter share stories about how they are taking care of others, or how others are taking care of them
- *Purpose: Build emotional connection; reinforce values of care and unity*

5 Making the case

- Criticize Trump's scapegoating; share stories of US-China cooperation at the "grassroots," and concretely describe how US-China cooperation could improve the situation
- *Purpose: Allow the voter to imagine the benefits of US-China cooperation for themselves and people they care about; humanize people of Chinese descent; connect with values and concerns expressed by voter earlier in the conversation*

6 Process cognitive dissonance and opinion change

- Note contradictions in the voter's opinions, strengthening values expressed by the voter that support international cooperation
- Re-elicited view on cooperation with China vs holding China accountable
- *Purpose: Solidify and measure the voter's shift in opinion about China*

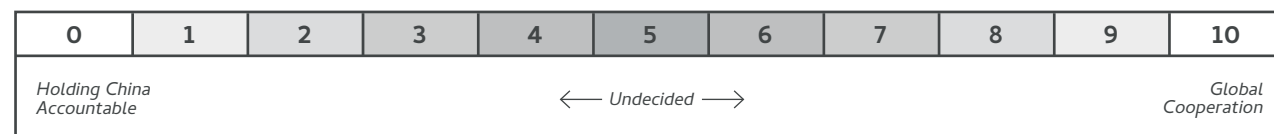
THE PROCEDURE

FINDINGS

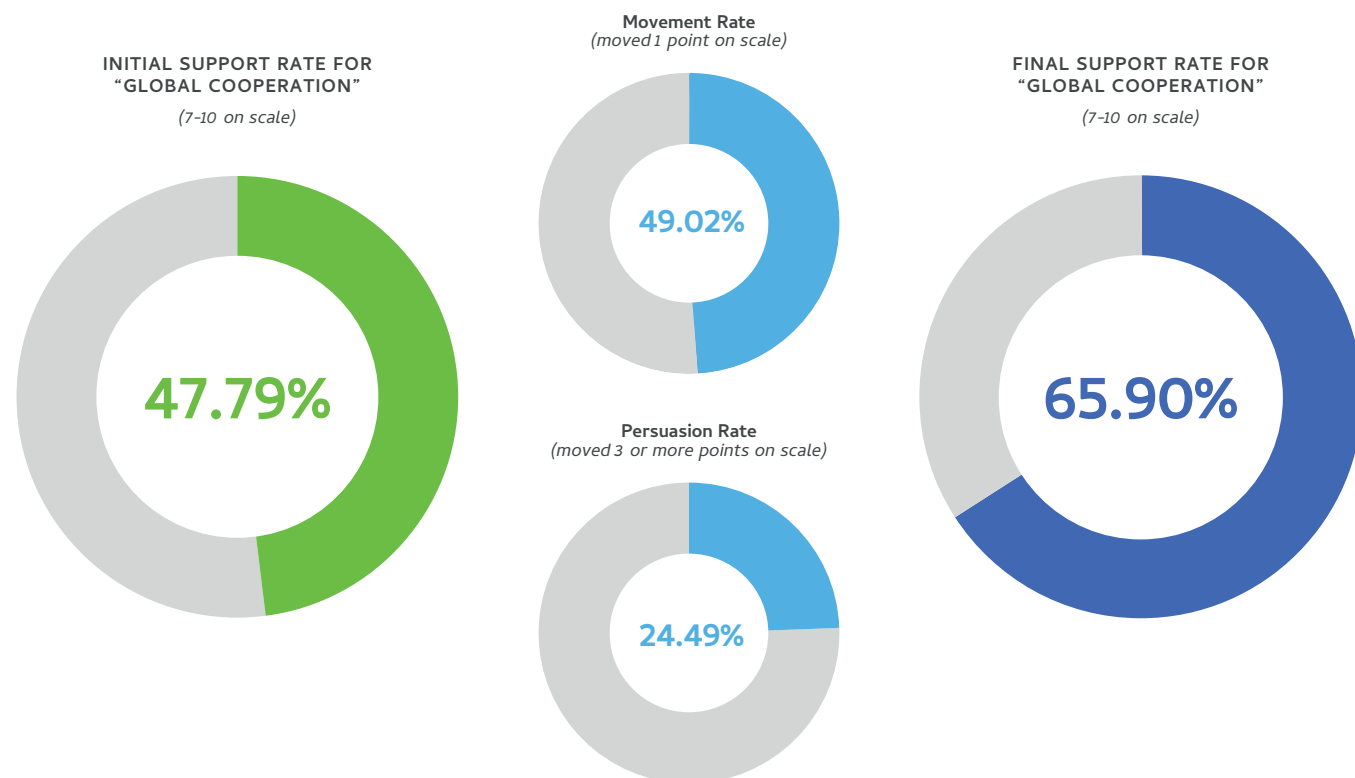
We found that the rise of anti-China sentiment is broad, but not deep. Most voters have been exposed to the growth in anti-China narratives in politics and in media, but have not invested much time or energy in processing these narratives or shaping their worldview in deep ways. Reflecting on counter-narratives about Chinese people, or about how a better US-China relationship could benefit them and

the lives of people they know, has the potential to significantly reshape people's views. Additionally, a sizable portion of Democratic and Independent voters we contacted initially supported cooperation strongly. This suggests a broader social base for cooperation and avoiding great power conflict than mainstream media narratives and political strategists acknowledge.

IN REGARDS TO THE PANDEMIC, WHAT SHOULD THE US BE FOCUSED ON?



OF THOSE NOT ALREADY STRONGLY IN FAVOR OF "GLOBAL COOPERATION"



WHAT WORKED

- **Concretely describe how greater US-China cooperation could lead to real solutions and improve the lives of the voter and the people they care about.** For example: cooperation could hasten the development and distribution of treatments and a vaccine; cooperation could solve problems in supply chains that contribute to PPE shortages.
- **Build upon narratives of unity and care.** These are values that are deeply held right now; many are frustrated that political leaders and people around them are not acting in line with these values. This creates an opportunity to extend these values across borders: just as we would do better if neighbors came together and took responsibility for each other, we would also do better if countries came together to find solutions.
- **Tell stories of how Americans and Chinese people are already cooperating across borders.**
- **Tell stories that humanize people of Chinese descent.**
- **Recognize that there are valid critiques of how Chinese officials responded to the crisis, but keep the focus on the need for real solutions.** Referring to the suffering of people in China due to how Chinese officials mishandled the outbreak also contributes to humanization and helps people appreciate how much they have in common with people in China.



"I was born and raised in Lancaster, living just outside the city in Willow Street. Growing up, my single mother often struggled to make ends meet, and as a result I felt very anxious and alone. When I left Lancaster and found a political community, I realized how much had been missing from my life and I have always regretted not finding that space in my hometown. But the conversations I had on the phones showed me a diverse and caring Lancaster, full of people working together to support each other and survive these difficult times. And I heard my experiences echoed by the people I talked to. That connection laid the foundation for us to build a non-judgmental space where I could question and persuade others to value politics that I support or help cement their commitment to building a progressive Lancaster and world. Now, I'm looking forward to my next trip home not just to see friends and family, but to meet the amazing community growing in Lancaster."

Pat Hughes
Canvasser for Justice is Global

"... the conversations I had on the phones showed me a diverse and caring Lancaster, full of people working together to support each other and survive these difficult times."

“Since coming to the US for college two years ago, I’ve always felt like an outsider. At college, even as I’m speaking out on transnational solidarity and such, I’m always the foreigner, the Chinese, if not the ‘chink’ in the room. I’m constantly on the fence about conversing with new people because so many conversations ended up in something like ‘oh so is it true that you eat dogs in China?’ But the conversations I had through this project went beyond my imagination. Over the phone, I finally got to talk with ordinary people without the presumption of my identities and worldviews. It was just so heartening to see how this exchange of ideas and stories can break down cultural barriers and build emotional connections at difficult times like this. What’s ironic is that while the relations between my home country and the US are deteriorating every second, I finally see the possibility to grow peace and solidarity. And that’s through mutual care and understanding.”

Angelina Chen

Canvasser for Justice is Global



“What’s ironic is that while the relations between my home country and the US are deteriorating every second, I finally see the possibility to grow peace and solidarity.”



A screenshot with some of our canvassers. We conducted our weekly call time over Zoom, to maintain social distancing guidelines. Deep canvassing is also effective on the doors.

OUR SCRIPT

Canvassers used the following script in this deep canvass project.

Establish contact and create a non-judgmental context

Hi, are you _____ ? Great! I’m _____ with Justice is Global. I am calling to check in and learn a bit about how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted you and your family. First off, how are you holding up?

How have you and your family been impacted by the coronavirus? Do you have people you are caring for at home?

The canvasser finds ways to be relational and connect with the voter in these opening moments, for example by empathizing and connecting with any experiences the voter shares, if any (although many voters are not yet ready to share at this stage in the conversation).

A list of local resources is provided in case the voter is in need of assistance.

Elicit view on who is to blame for the crisis

Thank you for sharing with me! We are trying to understand how people feel about the way that the crisis is being handled.

Right now, who do you think is most responsible for the spread of the coronavirus in the United States?

If necessary, the canvasser provides the voter with options: China; Individuals; CDC; WHO; President Trump; Democrats; Republicans; the Governor.

Elicit view on China: cooperation vs. accountability

Certain politicians want to hold China accountable for its role in the coronavirus pandemic, while others want to cooperate with China to combat the virus.

Where would you put yourself on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means the US should focus on holding China accountable and 10 means the US should focus on working together with China (highlight number they choose):

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Holding China Accountable					← Undecided →		Global Cooperation			

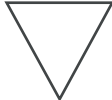
Elicit view on China: cooperation vs. accountability (continued)

Why is that the right number for you? What holds you back from being a 10? What holds you back from being a zero?

Narrative exchange: personal stake in the crisis

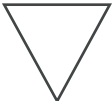
We're interested in talking to everyone, regardless of beliefs. It's so important that we can all listen to each other, and come together at this time.

Right now I am feeling _____ about the way the crisis has been handled.

<p>TELL YOUR STORY</p> <p><i>What feels most at stake for me in this moment is...</i></p> <p>[Name WHAT is at stake for FOR WHOM]</p> <p>And then [TELL A STORY, that paints a picture of how you feel about this and WHY]</p>	<p>ELICIT VOTERS STORY</p> <p><i>Have you or someone you love been impacted by the COVID crisis?</i></p> <p><i>Someone you are close to? What did they experience?</i></p> <p><i>Do you know anyone who has lost their job, or is struggling financially because of the coronavirus?</i></p> <p><i>[over 60] What does it feel like to be high risk?</i></p>	<p>CONE OF CURIOSITY</p> <p><i>Can you tell me more about the situation? How does that feel? What worries you most? Why?</i></p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p><i>Has anyone been giving you support? Are you able to give others support? Who? How did that feel?</i></p>
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Narrative exchange: cooperation and care

I've seen so many stories of communities coming together and neighbors taking care of each other. Have you seen people you know stepping up to take care of each other over the last few months?

<p>VOTER'S CARE STORY</p> <p><i>Is there anyone you are taking care of? Anyone taking care of you? What has it been like to see that?</i></p> <p><i>What was the situation? Who supported you?</i></p>	<p>CONE OF CURIOSITY</p> <p><i>Do you mind telling me more about _____? What/ When? Where? How?</i></p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p><i>How did that feel for you? Why did it feel that way?</i></p>	<p>MY CARE STORY</p> <p>[Tell a story of how you have cared for others, or others have cared for you, during the pandemic]</p>
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Making the case

First, share a story of how people in the US and China have already worked together to share resources and fight the pandemic together, expanding the narrative of cooperation across borders. (Canvassers who did not have a personal story about this from their own experience used a story volunteered by a Chinese American organizer.)

We've also seen people from different countries coming together to help each other during this pandemic.

My friend Wei in Philadelphia leads an organization of Chinese Americans who have donated a lot of their time and money to help collect medical supplies from China for the local hospital, so the nurses and doctors there can take care of everyone and keep themselves safe. They do this even though political leaders and even some of their own neighbors are blaming them for the crisis.

Then the canvasser begins to increase tension between our needs in this crisis and how the crisis is being handled by politicians—in particular the president—polarizing between human need and corporate profit.

Now more than ever, this virus has shown us that we are dependent on each other and whether we're Black or white, Latino or Asian, native or newcomer, we know it's time to pull together to demand the testing, treatment and time off we all need to get or stay well.

We shouldn't have to die from this virus because of lack of preparation. Many people in our country right now have no access to testing and health care workers don't have protective equipment while pharmaceutical & insurance companies are making huge profits.

What do you think about that? Is there anything that you'd like to see the president do differently?

Finally, the canvasser shares their feeling that the president has mishandled the crisis and is engaging in scapegoating of China and others, and makes the case for US–China cooperation.

The canvasser has the option of using two talking points: one about the need for US–China cooperation around the production and distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) to solve shortages, and the other about the need for US–China cooperation around a COVID-19 vaccine. The canvasser chooses one or the other based on stories and concerns shared by the voter previously in the conversation.

I am disappointed that President Trump has not taken responsibility and did not ask corporations who make billions in profits to put the health of our communities first. Instead he has created a distraction by pointing the finger at immigrants and China.

In order to beat this pandemic we need to work together with people from all countries, especially China.

[PPE talking point] We still have shortages of medical supplies here in the US. Nurses and doctors still don't have the masks they need to keep themselves safe and take care of the rest of us. Meanwhile China is making more masks than they can use, and we should be working with them to get those supplies to hospitals that need them here. But we have trouble getting them here because the US and China are still in a trade war.

Making the case (continued)

[Medical research talking point] We need scientists all over the world to research the virus and come up with treatment and hopefully a vaccine. Both the US and China have a lot of great scientists, and if they work together closely we'll get a vaccine more quickly. The US and Chinese governments should help their scientists work together, but instead right now they are arguing with each other and making it harder for scientists to work together.

This is why I would prioritize working together with China rather than holding China accountable, because if the Chinese government thinks the US is attacking them over the pandemic, they will be less likely to work with us to combat the virus.

What do you think about that?

Process cognitive dissonance and opinion change

The canvasser notes any contradictions in the voter's opinions and talks through them. For example, a canvasser might say: "It sounds like you blame China for the pandemic, but you also talked about how divisive people have become around the coronavirus and wish people would come together more. Do you think it would help if scientists in the US and China worked together?" The goal of this part was to explicitly raise any internal contradictions and attempt to resolve them, ideally drawing upon and strengthening values expressed by the voter that support international cooperation.

Process any conflict with voter:

I heard you express _____ as well as _____. Would you say you have some mixed feelings about how our current president and other politicians are handling the situation?

[LISTEN, get clarity about any conflicts they have]

At this point, the canvasser may then address concerns about China, including misinformation, that the voter may have mentioned earlier. Canvassers are trained not to address concerns until this point in the conversation so that voters would not feel threatened until after trust has been built.

Finally, the canvasser asks for the voter's opinion again on the question of cooperation vs accountability, and rehearses any change in opinion. Rehearsal of opinion change is a strategy that has been shown to facilitate active processing and increase the persistence of attitude changes.

After our conversation where would you put yourself on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means the US should focus on holding China accountable and 10 means the US should focus on working together with China (highlight number they choose)

[If changed] Why is that the right number for you?

Thank you so much for talking with me!

Final question: How do you feel about the conversation we just had?

Following the conversation, the canvasser records the responses to questions, any fears, concerns, or stories shared by the voter, and reflects on whether they made an emotional connection.

NEXT STEPS

We intend to build upon these learnings and scale these efforts in the coming months and years, in partnership with other organizations and campaigns who see the need to counter the growth of anti-China politics with a more constructive alternative.

IF YOU'RE A CANDIDATE OR ELECTED OFFICIAL, check out our website for more info and talking points about China. Please consider taking our candidate pledge.

IF YOU'RE AN ORGANIZATION WORKING FOR PROGRESSIVE CHANGE, we'd love to talk to your staff or endorsed candidates about global cooperation and anti-China politics.

IF YOU'RE A GRASSROOTS ACTIVIST, join us! We're conducting ongoing deep canvassing projects and campaigning for global cooperation to end the pandemic.

www.justiceisglobal.org

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