

State Room Arizona 009: Joseph Kavetsky | Turning Point Action | Ballot Chasing: Winning Elections

Podcast Transcription | Article-Style Transcript

Episode Link: <https://youtu.be/G2OeXhAolfk>

Full Article-Style Transcript

Introduction and the Importance of GOTV

Scot Mussi: Hi, welcome to The State Room, a podcast dedicated to covering the key issues and events that will define the future of Arizona. I'm your host, Scot Mussi. Today on The State Room, we're going to be talking about the importance of mobilization when it comes to turning out the vote. Get-out-the-vote efforts, or GOTV as it is often referred to, are the process of going out, contacting voters that usually align with your values, and making sure that they are returning their ballots and turning out to vote.

Scot Mussi: Historically, when it comes to these types of GOTV operations, they have been run by the political parties or by the candidates themselves. But about 20 years ago, the left started pouring huge sums of money into outside operations and into their own operations to build their own GOTV campaigns, and it proved to be very effective. What they discovered is that by utilizing their own liberal infrastructure to conduct these GOTV operations, they could do them not just more efficiently but more cost-effectively than the traditional political parties.

Scot Mussi: The conservative movement has been a late adopter to this model, but the good news is that our side is catching up. Leading the charge in this effort is Turning Point Action. Turning Point Action, which was founded in 2019, has been working on building ballot chase programs all throughout the country. Now they have built a successful ballot chase program here in Arizona. To talk to us today about their ballot chase program is Joseph Kavetsky, the alliance director administrator for Turning Point Action. Joseph, thank you for joining us.

Joseph Kavetsky: Thank you for having me.

Scot Mussi: Glad you could be here. Before we dive into the ballot chase program that you guys are building out and working on heading into the 2026 election, tell me a little bit about yourself. How did you end up working for Turning Point Action?

Joseph Kavetsky: My involvement in politics really started with Trump in 2016. That's when I really got into politics generally, but my actual career with it started in college. I worked for a fundraising firm here in Arizona before I started reporting for the Arizona Chamber of Commerce for quite some time. I got used to Arizona politics and state politics here. Then I actually worked as a ballot chaser for Turning Point Action for quite some time.

Scot Mussi: So you actually have done the work.

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes. And that's really important. We do want all of our trainers and really all of our staff to be out there in the field to at least some degree. We actually have a Register 100 program right now where all HQ staff members are required to get at least four registrations a month.

Scot Mussi: So you not only have to manage your crew, but you have to make sure everybody is putting in their own skin in the game and getting the work done.

Joseph Kavetsky: Absolutely.

What Ballot Chasing Is and Why It Matters

Scot Mussi: When it comes to ballot chasing, my experience talking with people who are not in a political organization or do not spend a lot of time doing it is that they either do not understand it or they completely underestimate the importance of ballot chasing and what it means. Can you explain why ballot chasing is so important to Arizona elections, or to any election for that matter?

Joseph Kavetsky: Ballot chasing is important because of what you already mentioned. The left has been doing this for a couple of decades now, and we really need to start playing catch-up. We were able to do so in 2024, and it was really effective here in Arizona with actually turning out the vote. From our universe, we were able to turn out 86% of our voters. That is how we essentially determine our metrics: how many voters did we turn out, not necessarily how many people we talked to or how many people we surveyed.

Scot Mussi: You talked about the 2024 election. Was that the first major election that Turning Point ran a ballot chase program here in Arizona?

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes, it was.

Scot Mussi: That is what I thought as well, because looking back at previous cycles, we have had what I would call, especially in midterms, turnout issues here in Arizona. This is what is coming up in November, a midterm election. We did a review of the 2022 election and quickly discovered that turnout among conservatives and Republican voters was actually lower in that election than it was in the 2018 election, and it did not even do as well as the 2014 election. We had an underperformance by thousands and thousands of votes. It was a big deal. Do you think what you have assembled now puts you on track to fix that problem heading into November?

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes, absolutely. That is our main goal: engaging the people here in Arizona. It is not just through our ballot chasing program. We also have our legacy field program as well, which is really establishing relationships with local leaders here in Arizona. They also run our coalitions. Our coalitions are like our volunteer force, and we often mobilize them as well to help turn out the vote.

Scot Mussi: When we talk about the mechanics of ballot chasing and what it looks like, what are the components? If you are going to say, "We want to go out and chase ballots," what are the components that go into a successful program?

Joseph Kavetsky: The way that we do it is what we call relational organizing. We want our ballot chasers to go out there and actually build relationships with these voters before they are even really talking politics with them. We have found that voters need a certain amount of touches before they are really going to be persuaded to go out and vote.

Joseph Kavetsky: Our process is that we are targeting what we call disengaged voters. These are one-by-twos or less when we are looking at the last two midterm elections.

Scot Mussi: What do you mean by one-by-two? Can you explain that so people understand what that means?

Joseph Kavetsky: Of course. What I mean by that is they voted once or less in the last two midterm elections, specifically 2018 and 2022. We are looking at the midterm elections because they tend to have lower turnout than the presidential elections.

Scot Mussi: You are looking at those, and when you talk relational, I am guessing you mean human contact. You are going out and making sure that individuals are getting face time with these prospective voters.

Joseph Kavetsky: Exactly. They are creating face-to-face rapport with these voters out in their own neighborhoods. We only hire within zip codes, essentially. People are working within their precinct or a precinct close to them.

Scot Mussi: So you are making sure community members are interacting with fellow community members and not just bringing in hired mercenaries from out of state or from some other location.

Joseph Kavetsky: Precisely. The ballot chase program is essential for that. It is really all about having those people in their own communities. A big part of it is actually bringing your voters out to community events and things like that, getting them more engaged in the community so that they find the local issues that actually bother them and might motivate them to vote in November.

Relational Organizing and the Precinct-Level Model

Scot Mussi: When you are talking about that type of mobilization, is this something that you have seen patterned on the left as well? Is this how they do it?

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes, it is. This is how they really won Colorado. There is a very interesting book on this called *The Blueprint* and how they won Colorado over. Essentially, this is exactly what they did. They started very small, changing the culture at the precinct level first.

Scot Mussi: That is a book I would recommend to anybody who has not seen *The Blueprint* if they want the history of liberal infrastructure and how that has influenced state politics and how they have turned states throughout the country blue. *The Blueprint* was the book written about the pioneer movement for that in Colorado. I am glad you brought that up, because it is something that we have seen here and watched in Arizona as the liberal infrastructure network got built here in the state. That is where it came from. That is how they do it, and the mobilization you are describing is a key component of that, at least here in Arizona for sure.

Scot Mussi: When you talk about identifying prospective voters to contact, you mentioned one-by-two voters. Do you prioritize certain areas? How does it go? Do you go one-by-two in every community?

Joseph Kavetsky: We do prioritize certain areas. We call them superchase precincts. This is a precinct with 100 or more chasable ballots, and we determine those ballots based off a couple of things. These are low-propensity voters, those disengaged voters I mentioned, but also new voters as well. For us, we are looking at new voters as people who registered after the 2022 election. They may have voted in 2024, but we really want to make it habitual that they are voting in midterm elections. These people have never seen a midterm ballot before. Then we also look at what we call chasable independents as well, those independents who swing a little more to the right. If there are 100 or more of those chasable ballots or chasable voters in a specific precinct, those are the areas that we are targeting.

Scot Mussi: How many precincts are we talking about here? What is the number that you are thinking of as superchase or priority precincts?

Joseph Kavetsky: The way we do it is we actually combine the precincts out. We take one to three precincts and make them into territories, and from those territories, that is what each ballot chaser possesses. That is their territory of people they have to chase. Then from there we also have regions. The regions are what our managers cover.

Scot Mussi: It sounds to me like you probably have dozens and dozens of people on the ground already out there working.

Joseph Kavetsky: Oh yeah, we have hundreds.

Scot Mussi: Are you guys fully scaled up now, or are you still ramping up for November?

Joseph Kavetsky: We are still ramping up, and that is where the training aspect comes in as well. That is a big part of my role, actually training the ballot chasers to get them out in the field. We are doing trainings about every other week now, and our class sizes usually average about 30 to 45 students.

What Ballot Chasers Hear From VotersWhat Ballot Chasers Hear From Voters

Scot Mussi: When your ballot chasers are out there contacting voters and interacting with them, what do you often hear from the voters themselves? What are some of the responses and reactions you get? Is it generally positive? Sometimes people will push back and get mad, saying they already voted or whatever. What is the feedback you are getting when you are out there contacting voters in this process?

Joseph Kavetsky: It really depends. What I have noticed most is that a lot of voters are very apathetic. They think their vote does not count. That is something we always try to push: your vote really does count. It does impact the state. Abe Hamadeh, for example, lost.

Scot Mussi: They do not think the vote counts. That is one of the number one things you hear?

Joseph Kavetsky: That is one of the biggest things ever. It is crazy, because Abe Hamadeh in 2022 lost a statewide race for attorney general by 280 votes. So yes, every vote does, at the end of the day, count. We also hear a lot that people are just too busy or that they do not understand the process as well. That is really what ballot chasing is all about, making the process seem incredibly simple for the voters and walking them through it.

Scot Mussi: This was probably about a month ago, but I heard one of your bosses talking at an event about a little bit of this. He did not have a lot of time to go into depth like you are able to now, but he mentioned that one of the comments they sometimes hear is from people that you guys have already determined had not voted, but they tell you that they have already voted.

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes. A lot of people think they are voting when they fill out perhaps the presidential preference ballot. That is something we have seen in the past before. A lot of people can be confused by the actual voting process because it is made complicated these days, I think.

Scot Mussi: The ballot itself is complicated to fill out for a lot of people. Think about how many races are on that ballot. When I heard that, I was surprised, and as I started thinking about it, it did not shock me. I can see how people would think that, because it is not even just that you have this complicated ballot. Look at all the elections that we do have. You have a primary, a general, special elections, and municipal elections that are off cycle. One of our big priorities, and it has been for over a decade, is consolidated elections to reduce this confusion because we believe it does suppress voter turnout. We need to cut through the clutter and make it as easy as possible for people to understand how to get their ballot turned back in.

Relational Ballot Chasing Compared With Other Models

Scot Mussi: You are not the only group out there. I hear from other groups as well that are doing various ballot chase programs, and some good ones. In fact, we help and do some of our own targeted ballot chasing, not at the large scale that Turning Point is doing. I also see a lot of out-of-state groups coming in each cycle pitching their own programs, large-scale programs, saying this is going to be the difference in changing the next election. I heard from a group last week that wanted to come into Arizona. I will never discourage wanting more people to come in and help our state, but I am often suspicious because whenever people are popping in for a cycle and leaving, I wonder how much skin they have in the game. What separates Turning Point's ballot chase program from other large-scale ballot chase programs that may be run by other organizations?

Joseph Kavetsky: It really depends on the organization that you are talking about. Some use a very similar ballot chase model in terms of relational organizing versus transactional organizing. A lot of them do focus on the relational aspect, building those relationships and following up with voters and having multiple touches before actually even talking about politics at all. But a lot of organizations also do the canvassing model. The canvassing model is when you knock on a door and ask someone some kind of survey question. We have found that to not be as effective in actually turning out those voters. It is more about just reminding them to vote, and that does not often translate to them actually getting out to the polls.

Scot Mussi: I have also seen people come in and pitch a model where they are going to spend money doing phone calls or text messages and things like that. Those things are important, but I see sometimes that people think that is doing get out the vote, or that posting a bunch of stuff on social media is get out the vote. What you are describing with the relational model, I have always believed is a cornerstone to making sure people take action on anything, not just returning a ballot. We get active in trying to get people to engage at the legislature. If all we did was send emails and phone calls, our response rate would be pathetic. It takes the direct contact from us, that relational aspect you said. Do you guys use phone calls and texts, or is it all relational?

Joseph Kavetsky: We certainly do use it to a degree. But we always encourage our ballot chasers to organically get a phone number from their voters first before they are sending them a follow-up text or call. We always encourage that they have that conversation in person first and receive that phone number.

Goals for 2026 and How to Join the Effort

Scot Mussi: Looking ahead to 2026, we are about five months out from the November election. What do you see as your ultimate goal for Arizona? If you could have a dream scenario for Arizona, what would that look like?

Joseph Kavetsky: Right off the bat, it is getting Andy Biggs elected in 2026. For turnout, ideally that would mean beating our last rate, which was about 86%. If we could get something like 90%, that would be fantastic.

Scot Mussi: The 86% is on your universe, not the overall voter universe.

Joseph Kavetsky: The overall voters that we were targeting, we turned out 86% of those voters, which was about 315,000 votes.

Scot Mussi: Of the universe you are targeting, if you hit that goal in 2026, how much of an increase would that be over what we saw in the 2022 midterms, where it appeared that we underperformed in turnout?

Joseph Kavetsky: If we even hit about 70% of our universe turnout, we should be fine. Ideally, we are hitting something like 90%. One hundred percent would be amazing, but that is unheard of. Something like 70% would actually be effective because we have identified about 340,000 targeted voters for this cycle, and the margin in 2022 for the gubernatorial race was only about 17,000.

Scot Mussi: If we get 70%, which would be about 250,000 of those voters, you think we will be in pretty good shape?

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes, we will be in good shape.

Scot Mussi: I am assuming the program is active outside of Maricopa County.

Joseph Kavetsky: It is.

Scot Mussi: One of the things that we saw was that especially in some of the rural counties, which are heavily conservative and heavily Republican, we had some underperformance in key counties in 2022. Mojave and Pinal, for example. Is Turning Point going to be pretty active in those?

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes, we will be. We were active in 2024 as well. Mojave had the highest turnout per county for our universe.

Scot Mussi: Turnout was great in 2024. I keep looking back because I like to compare midterm to midterm. There is a difference. Presidential years historically have just had higher turnouts, and then you run into more apathy problems in midterm elections, at least that is what we have seen historically.

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes. People are less motivated to vote, especially recently with conservatives. People are often more motivated to vote because of Donald Trump.

Scot Mussi: Are you seeing a lot of enthusiasm out there as you are talking with people?

Joseph Kavetsky: Yes, a lot of enthusiasm actually for Andy Biggs, especially because of his economic policies. People are really in favor of getting rid of the income tax.

Scot Mussi: That is good to hear. On the issue side, I am assuming it is a lot of economy and cost of living. Is border security and immigration coming up still?

Joseph Kavetsky: Border security is incredibly important. Andy has talked multiple times about how he wants to have consistent cooperation with the federal government.

Scot Mussi: How important is overlapping the candidates with the ballot chase? Are the ballot chasers advertising those candidates, or is it coming up unprompted as people are interacting with voters?

Joseph Kavetsky: As in, are the ballot chasers going out advertising those candidates?

Scot Mussi: Advertising, or is that coming up? Are you already seeing engagement from people, like you talked about Andy, who already recognize the importance of getting Andy Biggs elected? I do not know if it is one way or the other, or a combination, but is it something that is an easy sale point for voters to encourage them to get involved and vote?

Joseph Kavetsky: I think it is an easy sale point, but we always encourage our chasers not to talk about politics for those first few touches. Right now, they are laying the groundwork of the whole project, which is creating that face-to-face rapport in your specific neighborhood so people recognize you. Then come November, or October during early voting, you knock on their door and they recognize you as a friend perhaps, or just as a neighbor that they already like, and they are going to be more persuaded to actually turn out to vote when you ask them about it.

Scot Mussi: If you could identify the biggest challenge you have going into the 2026 election, what do you think that would be? What is going to be the biggest obstacle to hitting your goals and being successful heading into November?

Joseph Kavetsky: The biggest obstacle typically is just making sure that we have enough people out there in the field.

Scot Mussi: That gets to my last question. For people who are interested in getting involved, how can they join the effort at TPAction and make a difference heading into November?

Joseph Kavetsky: There are a couple of ways that you can get involved. You can get involved by applying to be a ballot chaser. That is tpaction.com/careers if they want to check that out. Also, you can get involved without being in a full-time paid position, and that is through our coalitions program. We have a bunch of different coalitions. Some are based on issues, but basically anyone can join a coalition that matches whatever they want.

Joseph Kavetsky: For example, we have a moms coalition for our mama bears. We also have a Gen Z coalition for our younger folks. Then we also have a men's coalition, and a farmers and ranchers coalition too. If you are involved with any of those kinds of things, you could volunteer and get to know your community a little better. Come November, we always encourage those people to actually go out and chase as well. That is our superchase events, which are run by our legacy field team. It is kind of like Super Saturdays. We get people together. We get them energized with a big tent. Oftentimes, there is a lot of merch handed out. We usually have some speaker. Sometimes it is a candidate. Sometimes it is one of our leadership or someone from the legacy field team as well to get people motivated.

Scot Mussi: Great. Joseph, thank you for coming on here to talk about the ballot chase program. Thank you to everybody today who was able to listen to us here at The State Room, where we cover all the key issues and events that will define the future of our state and keep Arizona free. Thank you for joining us.