

QUICK READ SYNOPSIS

The Science of Voter Mobilization

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Partisan Mobilization Using Volunteer Phone Banks and Door Hangers

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Overview

This article presents the results from a field experiment conducted during the 2002 Michigan gubernatorial election using phone banks and door hangers to get out the vote.

- Phone calls boosted turnout by 3.2 percentage points.
- Door hangers boosted by 1.2 percentage points.
- The study results imply that both of the above are cost-competitive with door knocking and that partisan and nonpartisan campaigns are equally effective at increasing turnout.
- The particular campaign studied focused upon voters younger than thirty-five.

Method

The experiment was conducted in cooperation with the campaign to provide unbiased estimates of its effectiveness in get-out-the-vote efforts:

- The campaign targeted specific individuals and neighborhoods to maximize the effect on the campaign.
- For both the phone and door hanger efforts, individuals targeted by the campaign were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups.
- The independent and dependent variables were measured as follows:
 - Contact information was provided by the campaign itself.
 - Official voter turnout records were used to see if contacted individuals turned out to vote at higher rates than the control.
 - A postelection survey was conducted to measure vote choice.

- Door Hangers* The door hanger experiment provides a precise estimate of the effect of campaign literature drops because it was an extremely large effort and the contact rate was high.
- In ten of thirteen experiments, the treatment group voted at a higher rate.
 - Cost was about \$23 per vote. This might be adjusted downward to account for the message getting to more than one voter per house.
 - Door hangers work better than direct mail probably because the message can be delivered just before Election Day and the door hanger is more likely to be read. It also provides the voter with the polling place address.
- Phone Calls* Partisan phone calls were tested in six of the fourteen groups.
- After adjusting for the contact rate, a volunteer phone call boosts turnout by 3.2 percentage points, roughly the same boost in turnout prior nonpartisan experiments have discovered.
- Conclusion* The two studies described in this article are the first to use large-scale field experiments to study partisan door hangers and volunteer phone calls.
- While the campaign was cost-effective, the postelection survey showed no evidence that the additional voters contributed to the Democratic margin of victory—they mobilized equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats.
 - There is no evidence that opinion change took place.
 - Despite successfully increasing turnout, the voter mobilization campaign was ultimately ineffective. Targeting potential supporters proved to be a major hurdle—better party databases of voters are needed.

An Experimental Field Study of the GOTV and Persuasion Effects of Partisan Direct Mail and Phone Calls

Emily Arthur Cardy, Yale University

- Background* The present study goes beyond the previous literature on voter turnout and persuasion by analyzing both get-out-the-vote (GOTV) and persuasion effects of partisan direct mail and phone calls and the synergy between them.
- The results indicate that these methods, whether used independently or together, have neither significant GOTV effects nor persuasion effects.
 - This mail and phone campaign took place during a 2002 gubernatorial election.
 - Abortion was an issue that clearly differentiated the candidates.
 - The media labeled them as pro-choice and pro-life, using these titles even when abortion was not the primary focus.
 - The experimental structure of this study facilitated precise analysis of the effectiveness of phone calls and direct mail—accurate targeting is a cornerstone of this study.
- The Campaign* The treatment groups were phone only, mail only, phone and mail, and intensive phone and mail.

Conclusion

This article extends the previous results that have found that partisan GOTV phone calls from commercial phone banks had no effect on voter turnout.

- This study finds that partisan persuasion messages have no detectable effect on voter behavior.
- Partisan mail and/or partisan phone calls have no significant mobilization effect.
- Partisan mail and/or phone calls have no significant persuasion effect.
- There are insignificant GOTV and persuasion effects from partisan direct mail and phone calls, when used separately and together.

NOTE: This study's null findings indicate that current GOTV and persuasion campaign practices may need reevaluation. The study's findings also warn of the hazards of using self-reported survey data as an analytical tool—the discrepancy between validated vote effects and self-reported is substantial.

Phone-Based GOTV—What's on the Line? Field Experiments with Varied Partisan Components, 2002-2003

John E. McNulty, State University of New York at Binghamton

Background

This article describes four field experiments embedded within the get-out-the-vote (GOTV) phone drives in San Francisco in 2002 and 2003.

- One drive was strictly nonpartisan.
- Two were Democratic.
- One was quasi-partisan—opposing a municipal proposition.

NOTE: The overall results raise serious questions about the efficacy of GOTV phone drives, particularly those with intent to affect electoral outcomes.

San Francisco

The GOTV phone drive was to two segments of voters expected to support a no vote on a proposition affecting control of the city's power utilities:

- Republicans whose turnout was uncertain
- other registrants, while not registered as Republicans, who were likely to oppose the proposition.

NOTE: An experimental design was only implemented on the second segment of voters. There is no evidence the phone calls had any systematic turnout effect.

Youth Vote Coalition

The Youth Vote Coalition (YVC) was a nonpartisan effort made up of volunteers getting young people to register and to vote.

- Youth who were registered by the YVC were called in the week before the election to remind them to vote and to answer any procedural questions.

NOTE: The nonpartisan mobilization was modestly successful but had a paradoxical effect—Democrats receiving the nonpartisan stimulus from the Berkeley YVC were encouraged to vote. There may have been a complementary discouragement to Republicans, but the effect fell short of statistical significance.

- Cal-Berkeley Democrats* Cal-Berkeley Democrats had two partisan GOTV drives—in 2002 it was to get Democrats to vote in a local election, and in 2003 it was an effort to get Democrats to vote no on the Governor Davis recall.
- In both drives, volunteers called Democratic registrants to remind them to vote and to offer procedural information. They also answered questions about candidates and initiatives.
- NOTE: No statistically significant difference is present between the treatment and control groups in either case; in fact, it appears the treatment group had less response than the control group, although this difference is not statistically significant.
- Conclusion* The preponderance of the evidence implies that GOTV phone calls are inefficient at increasing turnout.
- The evidence is strong that these calls do not increase turnout among those who are already likely supporters of one's side.
 - Adding a partisan cue to a GOTV message does not enhance the efficacy of the contact at all.

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Giving Voice to Latino Voters: A Field Experiment on the Effectiveness of a National Nonpartisan Mobilization Effort

Ricardo Ramírez, University of Southern California

- Background* This article is a summary of the findings of a randomized field experiment that explored three modes of communicating with voters—direct mail, robotic phone calls, and live calls.
- Only live calls made a statistically significant increase in voter turnout.
 - It is unclear whether direct mail and robotic calls targeting low-propensity voters would be effective in presidential elections.
- Targeting Latinos* Given the patterns of selective recruitment of Latino voters by political parties, it is imperative that nonpartisan organizations focus on Latinos.
- In 2001, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Education Fund created the Voces del Pueblo to provide Latino individuals with information, to invite them to participate in the electoral process, and to determine whether these efforts were successful in increased voter turnout.
 - The get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort was done in California, New York, New Mexico, and Colorado.
 - Los Angeles (plus Orange County) was an ideal site with a large Latino population, lower than average voter turnout, and the potential for increased political clout.
 - In California, all three contact methods were used.
 - Phone recipients preferred Spanish, and the callers were bilingual—in the control group, language preference is not known, and it cannot be determined what effect the phone call language had on GOTV efforts.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the Voces del Pueblo campaign revealed challenges faced by organizations conducting GOTV efforts.

- Perhaps the most critical challenge was obtaining access to quality data that could then be matched after the election to determine the effectiveness of the campaign.
- Data from Los Angeles suggest that low-propensity voters are harder to contact because of outdated phone numbers—newly registered are the easiest to reach.
- The fact that live calls worked much better than robotic calls underscores the importance of communication quality.
 - In spite of resources limiting the scope of the live calling, the calls that did occur increased voter turnout substantially.
 - For every twenty-two live contacts made, one new vote was produced.
- Direct mail and robotic calls had minimal effects on turnout.
 - Future campaigns using these two methods need to experiment with messages and formats.
 - It remains to be seen if mail and robotic calls will work better in presidential elections—midterm elections may not be the best setting for GOTV efforts.

Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization

Melissa R. Michelson, California State University, Hayward

Background

Nationwide, less than a third of Latinos vote in presidential elections and less than a fourth in congressional elections.

- Recent years have seen an interest in the power of mobilization efforts to increase Latino participation.
- Survey-based studies have shown that mobilization can increase turnout, but results are not entirely consistent.
- Latinos have been largely excluded from get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts conducted by the major political parties.

Field Experiments

The first Latino voter mobilization effort was a door-to-door GOTV drive in Dos Palos in central California in 2001.

- It showed that face-to-face canvassing works best when the canvasser and the targeted voter share ethnicity and partisanship.
- A study in Fresno in 2002 showed that Latino canvassers were more effective at contacting Latino voters than were non-Latino canvassers.
- Individuals who had voted in one of the previous four elections were more likely to turn out and more likely to be influenced by the GOTV effort.

NOTE: Additional studies in a variety of electoral settings find that the actual content of the mobilization message does not matter and that canvassing can double or even triple Latino turnout.

Conclusions

Real-world efforts are indeed effective at increasing turnout.

- Latinos are receptive to mobilization—the same kind of door-to-door, personal efforts currently in vogue among campaign professionals.
- The messenger matters—Latino voters respond better to coethnics and copartisans, and Latino canvassers produce higher contact rates.

- Quality matters—devoted canvassers do better than groups such as students forced to go door to door as part of their course work.

NOTE: Unless candidates and campaigns adopt the above practices, Latino turnout is likely to remain low.

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Mobilizing Asian American Voters: A Field Experiment

Janelle S. Wong, University of Southern California

Background

This study examines the effects of mobilization on voting turnout among Asian Americans.

- This study relies on a randomized experimental design to better isolate the effects of “contacting efforts” on increased voter turnout.
- The treatment group received a “prompt to vote” phone call or card.
- Multivariate analysis shows that calls and mail increase voter turnout.
- Parties and other groups may be reluctant to mobilize Asian Americans because a multiethnic, multilingual campaign is time-consuming and difficult.
- Phone calls or mail may be a cost-effective means of turning out Asian American voters.

Test Results

Does mobilization through phone and mail increase turnout among Asian Americans?

- The initial results indicate that phone and mail contact have only a modest effect on turnout among Asian Americans.
- Multivariate analysis suggests that person-to-person phone calls reminding Asian Americans to vote increases turnout by about 3 percentage points.
- A postcard reminder increases turnout by about 2 percentage points.
- Once covariates such as national origin as well as age, partisanship, and voting history are introduced, the coefficients associated with both phone and mail contact are statistically significant.

Conclusion

Because they do not fit the profile of the “high-propensity voter,” parties and other groups may be reluctant to spend limited resources mobilizing Asian Americans to vote.

- It is clear that a multilingual effort can pay off.
- Even a short call or postcard can be effective at increasing voter turnout.
- In a close race, a modest 1 to 3 percent change can swing an election.
- Analysis shows that the study campaign effort generated an additional 183 votes at a cost of \$27 per vote—a good use of limited resources.

The Effect of Identity-Based GOTV Direct Mail Appeals on the Turnout of Indian Americans

Neema Trivedi, Yale University

- Background* This article presents the results of a randomized field experiment testing the effectiveness of three different identity-based appeals communicated via direct mail to Indian American voters in Queens, New York.
- The findings show that a single mailing seems to have little effect on the turnout rates of Indian Americans.
 - None of the identity appeals was effective at bolstering turnout.
- Need for Information* Voter mobilization is of deep concern for scholars and activists who are interested in understanding the voting patterns of racial and ethnic minorities.
- The question is, “What kind of appeals are most effective?”
 - Because of cost constraints, parties and organizations want to focus on efforts with the most impact.
 - This article reports on the effects of three different identity-based direct mailings to Indian Americans. These were
 - U.S. citizen,
 - person of color, and
 - Indian American.
- Conclusions* The findings suggest that direct mail has a weak positive effect on an individual’s likelihood to vote.
- This may be due to the impersonal nature of direct mail.
 - It may be also be due to having only one mailing, and further testing of multiple mailings should be looked at.
 - Further work is needed to determine whether appealing to various identities is more effective using phone calls or in-person contacts.
 - The effect of all three appeals is so minimal that it may be unwise to use identity-based appeals.
 - One might try to amplify the effects of mail by deploying mailings in conjunction with techniques such as phone calls and door-to-door canvassing.

Caught in the Ground Wars: Mobilizing Voters during a Competitive Congressional Campaign

Elizabeth A. Bennion, Indiana University South Bend

- Background* This article examines the effectiveness of a nonpartisan mobilization drive in a hotly contested election in Indiana.
- Students went door to door to talk to registered voters and distribute get-out-the-vote (GOTV) messages.

- Studies suggest that face-to-face mobilization campaigns are more effective than less personal direct mail and phone banks.
- This experiment was designed to see what, if any, effect a nonpartisan mobilization effort could have in the midst of door-to-door campaigning by both major parties on voters in general and on young people in particular.
 - Low levels of voting among the young adds to concerns about future turnout in the United States.
- Evidence shows that the decline in voter mobilization efforts has contributed to the erosion of voter turnout.
- Evidence suggests that it would be well advised to replace indirect efforts with more labor-intensive door-to-door campaigns.

The Randomized Study By randomly assigning registered voters to treatment or control groups, researchers can assess the specific impact of their intervention.

- Voter registrations can be compared to turnout data to show who voted to compare turnout rates of treatment and control groups.
- Researchers can even adjust these figures to account for the fact that the people most likely to be canvassed are also the people most likely to vote anyway.
- Least squares regression was used to estimate the effect of each experimental treatment and to determine the effect of the messages used.
- The study also looked at effects on different age groups.

Discussion

It is vital that both positive and negative results are published to understand the contexts and conditions for successful turnout results.

- Negative findings move us closer to understanding the limitations of nonpartisan mobilization campaigns.
- The study suggests that the competitive context of this election may have diminished the effectiveness of the GOTV efforts.
- It suggests that young people may be more susceptible to voter mobilization campaigns.
 - Careful analysis shows that youth-led GOTV campaigns may have an impact on voter turnout among young voters even in the midst of massive partisan activity.
- The results of this study do not necessarily suggest a futility of GOTV efforts for older voters. Instead, they suggest that groups concerned with increased turnout should coordinate their efforts.
- While face-to-face mobilization is effective, multiple contacts are unlikely to yield substantial increases in turnout numbers.
- The most immediate application of this research for field organizers is the need to coordinate partisan and nonpartisan GOTV efforts that share the same goal.

Do Phone Calls Increase Voter Turnout? An Update

Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, Yale University

Background

Commercial phone banks provide a way for campaigns to conduct large-scale get-out-the-vote campaigns. The question is whether they succeed in raising turnout and, if so, whether they produce votes cost-effectively.

- Nonexperimental studies of voter mobilization may produce misleading results if parties and campaigns target active voters.
- A correlation between voter turnout and phone contact is open to two opposing interpretations:
 - The phone call increases turnout for campaigns, or
 - likely voters tend to receive disproportionate attention from campaigns.
- The present study reports the results of two large-scale randomized experiments.

NOTE: There is little evidence that telemarketing firms increase turnout appreciably by reading brief nonpartisan scripts. Judged in terms of dollars per vote, these telemarketing calls are less efficient than other voter mobilization tactics.

Experimental Studies

The early literature on phone canvassing indicated that it might have profound effects on voter turnout.

- However, recent experimental work based on much larger samples has tempered the conclusion that calls from commercial phone banks stimulate voter turnout.
- The West Haven experiment, which is more than twice the size of earlier studies, finds that several different variants on a nonpartisan script failed to increase turnout.
- The Iowa and Michigan experiments, which are much larger than the West Haven experiment, suggest that calls from commercial phone banks have at most a minimal positive effect.

NOTE: This is not to say that phone calls are inherently incapable of motivating voters in competitive electoral settings.

- During the 2002 presidential elections, local nonpartisan volunteer phone banks increased turnout among targeted young voters.
- Volunteer phone banks calling on behalf of candidates also increased turnout.

The Future Use of Phone Calls

The problem is not that phone calls are ineffective.

- It seems that mechanically delivered phone scripts are ineffective, regardless of whether they are partisan or nonpartisan.
- The task for future research is to more systematically assess the extent to which a phone call's effectiveness is determined by the manner in which the script is delivered.

Unintentional Voter Mobilization: Does Participation in Preelection Surveys Increase Voter Turnout?

Christopher B. Mann, Yale University

Background

Survey researchers have been concerned with the question of whether participation in preelection surveys increases voter turnout. This is a specific case of social scientists' concern that people behave differently when aware that they are research subjects.

- This article presents findings from three large-scale experiments in Maryland, New York, and Pennsylvania in the 2002 general election.
- Contrary to past research, in these studies that used improved experimental methodology no significant increase in voter turnout was found from participation in preelection surveys.
 - Surveys were administered to random samples drawn from voter registration lists that provided information on demographics and past electoral behavior.
 - Registered voters were assigned to either treatment group (to be contacted for preelection survey) or control group (no contact).

Discussion

The absence of any effect of surveys affecting turnout in these three large-scale experiments should allay concerns and criticisms of preelection surveys.

- The failure to find a significant turnout effect from telephone preelection surveys suggests that telephone contact does not mobilize voters directly or indirectly.
- Additional field experiments are needed to be certain that the null result would be replicated in other regions and election types.

Using Cluster Randomized Field Experiments to Study Voting Behavior

Kevin Arceneaux, Yale University

Introduction

This article shows how researchers can use precinct-level randomization to conduct voter mobilization experiments.

- The design offers a number of benefits, including ease of implementation and the ability to analyze the impact of campaigns on vote preference as well as turnout.
- Care should be taken to maximize the effective number of observations; researchers should also collect covariates that are predictive of outcomes to ensure greater statistical power.
- The statistical analysis should correct for the clustered nature of the data when calculating standard errors.

*Cluster
Randomization*

An alternative in voter mobilization experiments (typically using individual-level randomization) is to switch to cluster randomization.

- This sort of randomization can be easily executed by assigning voting jurisdictions such as precincts to treatment groups.
- A benefit is that researchers can study the effect of voter mobilization on voter preferences as well as on turnout.
 - Experiments at the level of precinct can use publicly available election reports to study preference effects.
 - Randomization ensures that individuals in the treatment group have roughly the same baseline probability of voting as those in the control, so a difference in voting rates can be attributed to the campaign effort.
- The benefits of group randomized experiments come at the cost of statistical power.
 - With cluster random assignment, observations within clusters are likely not independent—citizens in the same precinct likely share similar predictions to vote.
 - If this correlation is not accounted for, errors will be biased downward—one can account for intracluster correlation by using a robust variance estimator.
 - In the case of voter turnout, past voting behavior, age, gender, and party registration are highly predictive and increase the precision of the treatment effect estimate.
- In addition, researchers can increase the power by increasing the number of clusters included in the design.

*Kansas City
Study
Example*

In Kansas City, Missouri, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), an advocate on behalf of low-income families, organized a voter campaign to support a needed increase in the sales tax that featured door-to-door canvassing.

- It is important to see if random assignment was conducted properly—it was checked at the precinct level (the level of randomization).
- The experimental analysis can be conducted at both the precinct and individual level.
 - At precinct level, one does not have to account for intracluster correlation.
 - However, this approach results in less precise estimates.
 - The individual level may provide more precise estimates, but it is imperative to account for intercluster correlation.

NOTE: Because electoral outcomes are reported by precinct, one can assess whether ACORN convinced citizens to vote for the proposal. This is done by calculating the marginal difference between yes and no precinct-level votes and comparing both groups.

What We Should Know about the Effectiveness of Campaigns but Don't

Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez, CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) and University of Maryland

Background

When campaigns and other groups try to mobilize voters, they consider what makes citizens decide to get out and vote.

- The many pragmatic reasons in favor of voting include
 - influencing how money is spent,
 - affecting policy decisions, and
 - choosing the quality of leaders.
- Many arguments against voting include
 - the time and effort involved,
 - knowing that one vote has a marginal effect,
 - the limited number of candidates, and
 - the limited number of referendum questions.

Getting-Out-the-Vote Methods

Those who try to increase turnout often structure their get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns to reduce the perceived costs of voting, increase the perceived benefits, or enhance a sense of moral obligation to vote.

- One cost is the difficulty of obtaining information—to mitigate this cost, various groups remind people about the election, explain the practicalities of registration and voting, and provide information about the candidate's stand on issues.
- Parties, partisan groups, and civic organizations also try to reduce the difficulty of voting by registering people and driving them to the polls.

NOTE: It would be useful to understand to what degree the factors against voting keep some eligible citizens from participating.

Motivating to Vote

It seems a safe assumption that people are more likely to gather political information and then to vote if they are interested in politics.

- The problem is that we do not have a clear sense of the importance of motivation and interest relative to other factors.
- Researchers need to know answers to operational questions such as
 - What messages are most efficient at increasing motivation?
 - Are different messages most effective with different groups or types of people?
 - When and how often should a message be delivered?
- It would be useful to know more about the difficulty of registering and voting and the effect on turnout when these are reduced.

What We Know

The knowledge we have about what gets people to vote comes from three main sources:

- surveys,
- vote tallies, and
- randomized field experiments of voter mobilization strategies, which have substantiated the following points:
 - Young voters can be mobilized cost-effectively.
 - In GOTV, quality matters.
 - The message may matter little.
 - Mobilization methods have consistent effects regardless of the context in which they are used.

Why People Vote

Current information offers some clues as to why people vote.

- We know that “low-quality” contacts such as robotic phone calls do not increase turnout.
- Mailing sample ballots to all residents does raise turnout.
- Changing the message does not usually alter the effectiveness of the various forms of contacting registered voters—the medium matters more.

*What Needs
to Be
Investigated?*

It is important to note that the publicly disclosed experiments have involved nonpartisan GOTV, and therefore we cannot yet estimate the impact of partisan messages.

There are many operational questions that remain to be investigated. Some examples are

- messages that might be more effective;
- effects of multiple contacts and the timing of those contacts;
- the efficiency of going after likely voters versus unlikely ones;
- the value of broadcast ads;
- early educational efforts at pre-voting-age youth;
- effects of various methods of voter registration;
- effects of messages on answering machines, using friend-to-friend viral messages, canvassing at large-group meetings, contacts in various languages; and
- different messages for different age groups.

NOTE: Many other variables in the GOTV effort also need to be looked at for study.