



The Effects of an Election Day Voter Mobilization Campaign Targeting Young Voters

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ABSTRACT

A field experiment was conducted in order to gauge the effects of Election Day voter mobilization efforts directed at registered voters 18-25 years of age. Prior to New Jersey's November 2003 state legislative elections, volunteers contacted 2,817 registered voters through a combination of phone calls and door-to-door canvassing. This list of contacted individuals was randomly assigned to receive an Election Day phone call encouraging them to vote or to receive no further contact from the campaign. After the election, voter turnout records were examined in order to assess whether the Election Day campaign increased voter turnout. Election Day calls generated a statistically significant increase in turnout. This increase was confined almost exclusively to those who, prior to Election Day, expressed an intention to vote.

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INTRODUCTION

A large and growing research literature has documented the effectiveness of various voter mobilization campaigns directed at young voters, but these experimental studies have yet to examine the effectiveness of a voter mobilization campaign conducted during Election Day. The present study fills this gap by examining the gains in turnout that are achieved when voters who have been contacted in the weeks leading up to the election are urged to vote on Election Day.

SETTING FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

Unlike most states, New Jersey conducts its state elections during odd-numbered years. State elections that do not involve a gubernatorial contest, such as the 2003 election, tend to attract low levels of voter turnout, especially among young voters. In an effort to encourage young people to vote in these state elections, the Center for

Public Interest Research targeted approximately 60 precincts across the state that had especially large concentrations of young voters. The areas selected included both campus and non-campus precincts.

The campaign was conducted using a decentralized network of organizers and recruiters. Four organizers recruited volunteer precinct captains for each target precinct. These volunteers were in turn responsible for contacting young voters residing in their precincts. The volunteer precinct captains, with some assistance from volunteer phone banks and canvasser teams, were able to contact approximately three thousand voters through the peer-to-peer phoning and door-knocking. A few hundred of these voters were contacted by both methods. When contact was made with voters, they were asked whether they intended to vote. The distribution of canvassing outcomes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Disposition of Pre-Election Contacts, by Treatment and Control Group

Disposition	Control	Treatment	Total
Message left, unspecified receiver	8.6%	8.0%	8.3%
Message left on answering machine	26.7%	28.9%	27.8%
Message left with Roommate	18.7%	18.6%	18.6%
Not voting or refused to answer	7.9%	8.3%	8.1%
Uncertain about voting	6.9%	5.6%	6.2%
Will vote	31.3%	30.5%	30.9%
Total (N)	100% (1399)	100% (1418)	100% (2817)

RANDOM ASSIGNMENT

Those who were contacted in some way by the campaign (including those for whom messages were left, whether with housemates or on message machines) were randomly divided into treatment and control groups. Excluding two very small counties for which voter turnout data are unavailable leaves 1,418 in the treatment group and 1,399 in the control group. In order to check the integrity of the randomization, logistic regression was used to predict treatment assignment using county of residence, the disposition of the pre-election contact, and whether each person voted in 2000, 2001, and 2002. As expected, the chi-square with 14 degrees of freedom is insignificant ($p=.81$).

ELECTION DAY ACTIVITY

Although New Jersey allows absentee balloting, very few young people make use of this option. The question is thus whether voter turnout can be increased by urging people to vote during the day of the election.

Precinct captains and volunteers made calls throughout the day to people in the treatment group. Voters in the treatment group were reminded to vote using the following script:

Hi, can I speak to [voter's full name]?

Hello, this is [caller's name] and I'm a volunteer with the New Voters Project. We're a local campaign working to get 18-24 year olds voting this Election Day. I'm just calling to see if you've voted yet today...

[Wait for answer, if yes]: That's great to hear! Remind your friends and thanks for helping to get out the youth vote!

[If no]: OK, well we're just calling because right now, less than half of all eligible 18-24 year olds are voting. We're trying to turn that trend around, getting young people voting and making the youth vote the most

powerful in America. The polls are only open for [time left] more hours!!!

Can we count on you to vote today?

[If no]: OK, well we'll still hope to see you down at the polls, and remind your friends to vote!

[If yes]: Great, your polling place is _____.

Have a good day!

Table 2 shows the dispositions of these calls. Direct conversations with targeted voters occurred in 38% of the calls, with about half of these conversations resulting in a pledge to vote. Slightly more common were phone messages, which account for 39% of the calls. The remaining calls ended without any contact whatsoever with voters, either because no one answered the phone or because the voter was found to live elsewhere. Defining "contact" quite broadly to include any call that resulted in a conversation with or a message left for a targeted voter, we find that the Election Day canvass had a contact rate of 76.9%.

EFFECTS ON VOTER TURNOUT

Table 3 reports voter turnout rates among those who were assigned to the treatment and control groups. Because this table ignores whether people were actually contacted by the campaign, it conveys only the intent-to-treat effect, that is, the effect of being assigned to an experimental group. Turnout increased from 13.2% in the control group to 17.0% in the treatment group. Fisher's exact test shows the intent-to-treat effect to be significant at the .01 level using a one-tailed test. When one controls for county of residence, disposition of the pre-election contact, and past votes in 2002, 2001, and 2000, the estimated intent-to-treat effect drops to 3.0 percentage-points with a 1.2 percentage-point standard error, which remains statistically significant at $p<.01$. The surge in turnout among those assigned to the treatment group cannot plausibly be attributed to

Table 2: Disposition of Election Day Phone Calls, by Experimental Group

Disposition	Control	Treatment
Disconnected or moved		0.6%
Message left*		39.2%
Will not vote*		9.2%
Parents: youth is away at school		7.8%
Undecided about voting*		5.9%
Already voted*		4.4%
Yes, will vote*		18.2%
Not contacted	100%	14.7%
Total	100%	100%
(N)	(1399)	(1418)

* These responses were coded as "contact."

Table 3: Intent-to-Treat Effect of Attempted Election Day Contact

Voter turnout	Control	Treatment
Voted	13.2%	17.0%
Did not vote	86.8%	83.0%
Total	100%	100%
(N)	(1399)	(1418)

chance.

When one takes into account the fact that 76.9% of the treatment group was contacted in some way (whether directly or via messages) on Election Day, the estimated treatment effect rises slightly. Without covariates, the estimated treatment-on-the-treated effect is 5.0 percentage-points (SE=1.8). With covariates, the treatment effect is 3.9 percentage-points with a standard error of 1.6. Again, we clearly reject the null hypothesis that these estimates were obtained by

chance.

A further question is whether certain subgroups were more strongly influenced by Election Day contact. Here the results are quite striking. Table 4 shows the intent-to-treat effects by the disposition of pre-election contact. Among those who were contacted only through messages, the effects of Election Day contact are weak and statistically insignificant. Those who refuse to state whether they will vote or report that they will not be voting are unresponsive to the Election Day

Table 4: Turnout Effects by Disposition of Pre-Election Contact

Pre-Election Disposition	Voter Turnout in the Control group	Voter Turnout in the Treatment group	Difference	Contact Rate	Average Treatment Effect
Message left, unspecified receiver	9.2%	9.6%	0.4	59.6%	0.7
Message left on answering machine	11.0%	13.9%	2.9	79.8%	3.6
Message left with roommate	17.6%	16.7%	-0.9	74.2%	-1.2
Not voting or refused	7.3%	3.4%	-3.9	73.5%	-5.3
Uncertain about voting	4.2%	7.5%	3.3	83.8%	3.9
Will vote	16.9%	27.5%	10.6*	79.9%	13.3*
*p < .01, one-tailed					

treatment (the effects are negative and statistically insignificant). By contrast, those who earlier stated that they intended to vote respond markedly to the Election Day reminder. Within this group, turnout rises from 16.9% to 27.5%, a large statistically significant increase. Overall, we find a statistically significant interaction between the Election Day treatment and the expression of an intention to vote in the pre-election phase. An F-test rejects the null hypothesis that the treatment effect is constant across all the dispositions ($F(5,2796)=2.7$, $p<.05$). The effects of Election Day mobilization were apparently localized to those with a pre-existing proclivity to vote.

CONCLUSION

The New Jersey experiment offers two important insights. First, Election Day mobilization can produce significant gains in turnout among young voters. Second, these gains are largely confined to those who earlier expressed an interest in voting (or at least uncertainty about whether they would vote).

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest the importance of establishing pre-election contact with young voters and of targeting Election Day reminders to those who are most receptive to this type of message. This pattern of results should be welcome news to voter mobilization campaigns. Had it turned out that the Election Day mobilization effect were evenly distributed among all members of the treatment group, GOTV campaigns would have been in the uncomfortable position of trying to contact their entire target lists on the day of the election. The results presented here suggest that complete coverage may be unnecessary; the same results can be achieved with greater cost efficiency by revisiting voters who had earlier expressed some intention to vote.

The fact that the effects of Election Day mobilization appear to be strongest among those who intend to vote raises a number of interesting questions for further research. Are the effects of Election Day mobilization larger in presidential elections, where larger proportions of the electorate intend to vote? Are they larger for demographic groups that have higher propensities to vote than the sample of young voters targeted in this experiment? Or are the effects of Election Day mobilization weaker for higher salience elections and for more frequent voters, because Election Day messages are drowned out by other forms of campaign-related communication?

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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