The Effect of a Nonpartisan Get-Out-the-Vote Drive in the United States

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Location: Connecticut, United States of America

Sample: 2021 registered voters across 50 streets

Target group: Voters

Outcome of interest: Electoral participation Voter Behavior

Intervention type: Nudges and reminders

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Voter turnout in the United States has declined since the 1960s. To evaluate potential methods of increasing voter participation, researchers examined the effect of a simple nonpartisan leaflet (e.g., a printed card) on voter turnout in the 1998 general election in the US city of Hamden, Connecticut. The card had no impact on turnout of voters registered with one of the two major political parties, but had a significant impact on turnout of unaffiliated voters.

Policy issue

Voter turnout in US presidential elections has fallen sharply in the past several decades. From the 1960s to the 1990s, voter turnout declined by almost one fourth, from nearly 65 percent to just over 50 percent. Declines in candidate and political party mobilization efforts may explain some of the decline in voter turnout. This study evaluates whether a nonpartisan voter mobilization drive can increase voter turnout.

Context of the evaluation

This study took place shortly before the November 1998 general election in Hamden, Connecticut in the United States. A number of local offices were on the ballet, as well as elections for governor and US Senate. In previous election years across the US, the percentage of eligible citizens voting in statewide elections declined significantly from 47.6 percent in 1962 to 38.8 percent in 1994. Similarly in Connecticut, between 1990 and 1998 the voter turnout rate declined from 68.2 to 56.6 percent.



Cards reminding people to vote in the United States.

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Details of the intervention

Researchers examined the effect of providing voters with a printed card with a nonpartisan encouragement to vote on turnout in the US city of Hamden, Connecticut. From a sample of 50 streets in a moderately affluent area of Hamden, researchers randomly assigned half to receive the printed cards. The other half, who did not receive the printed cards, served as the comparison group. On the Saturday and Sunday before the November 3 election, researchers left a small card either between the screen door and the front door or in the mailbox of each home on the street. The printed cards contained a nonpartisan “get out to vote” message which appealed to citizens' sense of civic duty, reminded them of the election date, and encouraged them to remember to vote.

Results and policy lessons

The printed card had no impact on the turnout rate of voters registered with either of the two major political parties: Democratic and Republican. However, the mobilization had a significant impact on the turnout of unaffiliated voters. Distributing the nonpartisan cards led to a 7.2 percentage point increase in voter turnout among unaffiliated voters, relative the comparison group turnout rate of 53 percent. Among unaffiliated voters, the printed card had a large impact on those who voted in previous elections (e.g., the 1996 presidential election) and only a small effect on those who did not vote in an earlier election. Among unaffiliated voters who voted in the 1996 election, voter turnout was 10 percentage points higher among those who received the card than among the comparison group (63 percent voter turnout). This suggests that a nonpartisan stimulus, like the printed encouragement cards, may be successful in retaining participation of unaffiliated individuals who voted in past elections. However, it may not be nearly as effective in changing the behavior of those who do not regularly vote.

One possible explanation for the differential effect for unaffiliated voters is that they do not receive nearly as much attention as voters registered with the two major political parties. If there is a decreasing impact to each contact, then providing a stimulus to those who have been given little attention may have a greater impact. Unaffiliated voters may have also been particularly moved, relative to voters registered with a party, by the nonpartisan appeal to civic responsibility presented on the printed card.

Gerber, Alan S., and Donald P. Green. 2000. "The Effect of a Nonpartisan Get-Out-the-Vote Drive: An Experimental Study of Leafletting." The Journal of Politics 62 (3): 846-857.