The Effects of Canvassing, Phone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout in the United States

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Location: New Haven, Connecticut, United States of America

Sample: 29,435 Individuals

Target group: Voters

Outcome of interest: Electoral participation Voter Behavior

Intervention type: Nudges and reminders

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Partner organization(s): League of Women Voters of Connecticut, Smith Richardson Foundation, Yale University Institution for Social and Policy Studies (ISPS)

Voter turnout in the United States has declined since the 1960's. The changing dynamic of political campaigns, away from personal contact to less personal forms of media, is one hypothesized explanation for this decline. Researchers examined the effects of personal canvassing, phone calls, and direct mail on voter turnout shortly before the 1998 general election in the US city of New Haven. Personal canvassing had a far greater influence on voter participation than three pieces of professionally crafted mail delivered within two weeks of Election Day. Calls from professional phone banks were even less effective than direct mail at increasing voter turnout.

Policy issue

Voter turnout in the United States has declined since the 1960's. At the same time, political campaigns have been shifting away from personal contact (e.g. door-to-door canvassing) to less personal forms of media (e.g. telephone calls). Political scientists have hypothesized that personal canvassing may mobilize voters more effectively than other modes of contact, such as direct mail or telephone appeals. While there is some evidence that suggests that personal canvassing is effective, it is largely drawn from non-experimental studies or experimental studies with relatively small sample sizes and inconclusive results. There is little reliable evidence to date on the extent of the impact of mobilization campaigns, in general, and the relative effectiveness of personal versus more impersonal strategies.

Context of the evaluation

This study took place shortly before the November 1998 general election in New Haven, Connecticut in the United States. 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.

Citizens line up to vote in the United States.

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Details of the intervention

Researchers examined the impact of personal canvassing, direct mail, and telephone calls on voter turnout in the US city of New Haven shortly before the November 1998 general elections. In order to test the relative effectiveness of each mobilization strategy, 29,380 registered voters were randomly selected to receive one or more of the following:

1. Personal door-to-door canvassing: Canvassers contacted voters in person at their homes to remind them of the upcoming elections. Each canvassing script was randomly selected to include an additional appeal related to either civic duty, close election, or neighborhood solidarity.
2. Direct mail: In order to measure the turnout effect of the number of mailings received and the message conveyed, individuals received between one and three mailings with randomly selected content, which mirrored that of the door-to-door canvassing. The mailings were sent out at three intervals: 15 days, 13 days, and 8 days before the election.
3. Telephone calls: During the three days before and including the election, a subset of voters received 30-second phone calls urging them to vote. The telephone scripts mirrored those for personal canvassing, but only the civic duty and close election appeals were used.

The treatment and control groups for the three experiments overlapped, such that 10,800 people were assigned no intervention, 7,369 were sent at least one mailing but received no other appeal, 2,686 received only personal contact, and 958 received only telephone reminders. The remaining 7,567 people were assigned to two or more treatments.

Results and policy lessons

Findings indicate that personal canvassing was highly effective, much more so than the direct mail or phone call campaigns that have come to displace it. Successful personal contact through canvassing raised the probability of voter turnout by 8.7 percentage points relative to those in the comparison group who would likely have been reached with canvassing. The impact of the personal canvassing did not vary significantly across the three messages.

The effect of the direct mailings was small (0.5 percentage points increase in voter turnout per mailing), and there was no indication that telephone appeals raised turnout. As with the personal canvassing, there were no significant differences in the impact on voter turnout among the three messages for direct mail or telephone calls.

Both the callers and personal canvassers communicated the same information, but only the latter influenced subsequent behavior. This suggests that recent declines in voter turnout may be due to the changing character of American campaigns. Although the volume of “get out to vote” activity remains considerable, its increasingly impersonal nature may draw fewer people to the polls. Precisely what distinguishes personal contact is open to speculation. It may make information more salient and memorable, may trigger a feeling of connectedness to the electoral system, or may more credibly convey the urgency of the request.

Gerber, Alan S., and Donald P. Green. 2000. "The Effects of Canvassing, Phone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment." The American Political Science Review 94 (3): 653-663.