



I N S I G H T

Lessons learned from our grantmaking programs

New Experiments in Minority Voter Mobilization

*Second in a Series of Reports
on the California Votes Initiative*

Melissa R. Michelson, *California State University, East Bay*
Lisa García Bedolla, *University of California, Berkeley*
Donald P. Green, *Yale University*

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Foreword

Critical decisions about public policies and who represents us in government are routinely made at the ballot box, and yet in California, it is a fact that those who regularly vote do not reflect the demographics of the state's eligible voters. There are myriad underlying reasons, but the bottom line is that the voices of certain communities are not represented as fully as others in public decision making and, as a result, our democracy is not functioning as it should.

This concern led The James Irvine Foundation to launch the California Votes Initiative in January 2006. The California Votes Initiative is a multiyear effort to increase voter participation — particularly among low-income and ethnic communities — and to discern and share effective nonpartisan strategies for improving voting rates. During the initiative's first phase, from January 2006 through December 2007, nine organizations conducted outreach to infrequent voters in Central and Southern California and, with a research team, helped uncover new findings about effective strategies to increase voting rates. This research was documented in the initial report of this series, published in September 2007 and available at www.irvine.org.

This report provides an update on the initial findings, with new insights gleaned from outreach conducted prior to the February and June 2008 elections. A final report, to be published in spring 2009, will include additional information learned through the outreach that will be conducted prior to the November 2008 elections.

Irvine funded the California Votes Initiative both to support efforts aimed at increasing voting rates among low propensity voters and to disseminate lessons from this work. The research findings show how specific approaches for contacting potential voters can raise participation rates. It is our hope that civic organizations, the philanthropic community and others who conduct or support voter outreach will utilize these findings in their efforts to increase civic participation in diverse communities and thereby foster more representative public decision making.



James E. Canales

President and Chief Executive Officer
The James Irvine Foundation
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Executive Summary

During the first phase of the California Votes Initiative, spanning elections from June 2006 to March 2007, participating community-based organizations personally contacted over 82,000 low-propensity voters, through strategies such as door-to-door outreach and phone calls, plus reached an additional 100,000 voters through less direct methods, such as voter forums and messages to congregations. This outreach inspired many to participate in the electoral process for the first time. The initiative evaluation team worked with the community organizations to imbed field experiments into their outreach efforts, comparing turnout among those targeted for contact and those assigned to control groups. This resulted in strong empirical support for a series of best practices that were detailed in a September 2007 report.¹

A second phase of the initiative has continued this path-breaking research with further field experiments in the February and June 2008 elections, with more planned for November 2008. This report briefly reviews the results from the first phase of the initiative, adds findings from February 2008 and June 2008 as available,² and outlines the follow-up studies planned for November 2008. Many findings from the first phase were confirmed, and the two rounds of experiments conducted so far this year provide valuable refinements to the list of best practices established in that earlier report.

THE CALIFORNIA VOTES INITIATIVE

In early 2006, The James Irvine Foundation launched the California Votes Initiative to accomplish three goals:

1. Improve voting rates among infrequent voters — particularly those in low-income and ethnic communities in the San Joaquin Valley and the Southern California counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino.
2. Glean lessons about effective approaches to increasing voter turnout among these populations and share with the civic engagement field in California and across the country.
3. Encourage increased policymaker and political candidate attentiveness to low-income and ethnic communities by demonstrating a growth in voter participation among these groups.

The initiative supports nonpartisan voter education and outreach conducted by nine community-based organizations that are employing a range of strategies to encourage infrequent voters to participate in elections, including door-to-door outreach, phone banking, voter forums, mailers and other methods.

Prior to its completion, the initiative will support outreach, evaluated by an expert research team, and will share findings from election cycles in 2006, 2007 and 2008. Additional information about the initiative is available at www.irvine.org.

¹ Michelson, Melissa R., Lisa García Bedolla and Donald P. Green. 2007. "New Experiments in Minority Voter Mobilization: A Report on the California Votes Initiative" (San Francisco, CA: The James Irvine Foundation). Available at www.irvine.org.

² In many counties, particularly large ones such as Los Angeles, voting information is not released until several months after an election.

Initiative Participation

To implement the California Votes Initiative, Irvine is working with the following community organizations in California.

Outreach Organizations	Geographic Outreach Areas
Asian Pacific American Legal Center APALC	Los Angeles County
California Public Interest Research Group CALPIRG	Los Angeles County
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice CCA EJ	Riverside and San Bernardino counties
Central American Resource Center CARECEN	Los Angeles County
National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials NALEO	Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties
Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance OCAPICA	Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties
Pacific Institute for Community Organization PICO	San Joaquin Valley; Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties
Southwest Voter Registration Education Project SVREP	Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties
Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education SCOPE	Los Angeles County

Evaluation Team

Melissa R. Michelson, *California State University, East Bay*
 Lisa García Bedolla, *University of California, Berkeley*
 Donald P. Green, *Yale University*

Research assistance was provided by So Yeon Cha, Grace Chung, Kim Danh, Elizabeth Fernandez, Olivia Garcia-Quíñones, María Elena Guadamuz, Marisol Gutierrez, Lisa Hahn, Angela Ju, Stephanie Loera, Amanda Knockaert, Xavier Medina, Thien-Huong Ninh, Alexandra Ramos, Daisy Reyes, Jonathan Sarpolis, and Diane Tran.

Best Practices

Prior to the launch of the California Votes Initiative, only a limited number of voter mobilization field experiments had been conducted among infrequent voters, particularly those in ethnic communities. While it may be tempting to assume that findings from American voters overall can be applied to ethnic communities, research shows that approaches effective with non-Latino Whites will not necessarily work for African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos.

The initiative thus fills an important void in the scientific literature, using tactics tested among non-Latino White populations in ethnic communities and also introducing new approaches to determine the best methods of increasing participation in these communities. To date, the California Votes Initiative has uncovered or confirmed several best practices for voter mobilization efforts targeting low-propensity racial/ethnic voters. The discussion on the following pages summarizes the research to date underlying each of these five best practices.

Best Practices at a Glance

Phases one and two of the California Votes Initiative have uncovered a series of best practices summarized below. Additional findings pertaining to voter age, low-propensity voters, habit formation, social networks, as well as a commentary on indirect methods of outreach, are also discussed in the latter part of this report.

- 1. Recruiting canvassers:** stay close to home. Canvassers should ideally be drawn from the local community, either residents of the same neighborhood or representatives of a local organization or religious institution. Canvassers who are personally known to targeted voters are particularly effective at increasing turnout.
- 2. Canvasser training:** get comfortable with the conversation. Good canvassing practices can enhance the effectiveness of a campaign. Groups that train to increase canvasser comfort with the script seem to be most effective in their outreach efforts. This training helps ensure interactions between canvassers and voters are conversational as well as informative.
- 3. Campaign timing:** work the final four weeks. Going to the field too early can decrease a campaign's effectiveness. Canvassing should not begin more than four weeks before Election Day.
- 4. Door-to-door approach:** personal contacts work best. Campaigns should ideally use face-to-face canvassing, although phone banks can be preferable for turning out widely dispersed or multilingual populations.
- 5. Live phone banking:** pre-screen, personalize and follow up. Phone bank calling is enhanced by pre-screening lists for working numbers (this increases efficiency and helps maintain canvasser morale) and by making follow-up calls to those who earlier expressed an intention to vote. While many communities can be targeted by English-speaking or bilingual English-Spanish speakers, effective phone bank calling in most Asian American communities requires a multilingual approach.

Recruiting Canvassers

The June and November 2006 mobilization campaigns conducted in South Los Angeles by Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) illustrate the value of using local canvassers. SCOPE has worked since 1993 to reduce structural barriers to social and economic opportunities for poor and working class communities. For many years, the organization has also strived to increase civic engagement and voter turnout in disadvantaged communities, and election volunteers are often residents of the areas slated for mobilization.

For the June 2006 election, SCOPE targeted voters living within 26 selected precincts in South Los Angeles where the organization has worked for several election cycles to mobilize voters. Although many canvassers were residents of the targeted precincts, only 168 of the contacts took place between neighbors, defined as individuals sharing a ZIP code. Nevertheless, the results suggested a slight “neighbor effect,” in that those contacted by their neighbors were more likely to vote than were those contacted by “strangers.”³

The effect of neighbor-on-neighbor canvassing was further tested with SCOPE’s campaign for the November 2006 election. While the June 2006 campaign targeted all registered voters in SCOPE’s precincts of interest, the November 2006 effort was limited to low-propensity voters,

The powerful effect of door-to-door canvassing increased when canvassers worked in their home ZIP codes.

defined as individuals who had voted only occasionally in the past or who were newly registered. The canvassing script referenced the grassroots mobilization by including the line: “We’re out today talking to our neighbors about the upcoming elections.” Comparing those in the treatment group to those in the control group, there was a 6.6 percentage increase. Examining the effect of contact separately for those canvassing their neighbors and

those canvassing strangers revealed that neighbors increased turnout by 8.5 percentage points, while strangers increased it by 5.2 percentage points. In other words, while door-to-door canvassing in general had a powerful effect in this campaign, canvassing by individuals working in their home ZIP codes made the effect significantly greater.

Canvasser Training

Research has shown that phone bank canvassers who adopt a conversational tone, regardless of whether they are volunteers or paid professional callers, are better able to increase turnout among those canvassed. The importance of speaking in a measured, conversational tone can be conveyed to canvassers via training. A good training program also can prepare canvassers to respond to prospective voters’ reasons for not wanting to participate, their inquiries about ballot measures, polling places and times of voting. Trainings also serve to instruct canvassers in how to keep track of who is contacted in order to allow for accurate post-election analyses of the impact of a get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaign. Role-playing can help canvassers internalize their scripts; role-playing opportunities should be sufficient or frequent enough to ensure that canvassers are confident about what they are saying to voters.

³ It is important to note that even contact by “strangers” was effective. Overall, door-to-door contact by SCOPE canvassers in June 2008 increased turnout by 8.0 percentage points.

The importance of training for a successful phone bank is illustrated by results from an experiment conducted for the February 2008 election by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO). NALEO has worked since 1981 to increase the political empowerment of Latinos in California and nationwide. In the weeks prior to four elections included in the California Votes Initiative — June and November 2006, March 2007 and February 2008 — NALEO conducted a phone-based voter mobilization campaign designed to encourage participation among low-propensity Latino registered voters in various counties of Southern California and the Central Valley. In the February 2008 campaign, NALEO conducted initiative experiments in four counties. In Kern County, NALEO staff trained local affiliates on how to conduct phone bank caller training. In Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, NALEO staff traveled to the local affiliates' offices and conducted the caller trainings themselves. In Los Angeles, NALEO's home base, NALEO staff not only conducted the same training as in the other counties but also was able to conduct “refresher” trainings before each day of canvassing and to make on-the-spot suggestions to canvassers as the phone banking was conducted. The quality of the training was therefore highest for the Los Angeles office. This difference in quality is reflected in the results. Overall, NALEO's efforts in February 2008 increased turnout by 8.2 percentage points. In Los Angeles, this figure increased to 11.4 percentage points. Effects were smaller in Riverside and San Bernardino and the weakest for Kern County.

The high quality of training — such as that where initial training was augmented by “refresher” trainings before each day of canvassing and with on-the-spot suggestions during the campaign — was reflected in the results.

Campaign Timing

Experiments with the general population have found that campaigns that start too early are less effective than those that wait to contact voters until fairly close to Election Day. Results from California Votes Initiative experiments mirror those findings. This is best illustrated by comparison of June 2006 efforts conducted by Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ).

CARECEN has been active since 1983 in the Pico-Union/Westlake community of Los Angeles, an area heavily populated by recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America, particularly from Guatemala and El Salvador. CARECEN was created to help Central American political refugees and has been very successful in providing legal services to the local community, including assistance with immigration cases, labor violations and housing. CARECEN also provides educational programming, including citizenship classes, to the local community. The organization only recently began working directly to promote voter participation. Prior to the randomized experiments described here, CARECEN had worked to increase local voter turnout in the March and May 2005 Los Angeles mayoral contests.

CCA EJ has been actively working on environmental justice issues in the rural communities of Mira Loma and Glen Avon in Riverside County for 25 years and has an established network of community outreach volunteers whom the organization calls *promotoras*. Prior to June 2006, CCA EJ

Initiative experiment results mirror previous findings that campaigns that start too early are less effective than those that wait to contact voters until fairly close to Election Day.

had never conducted a voter mobilization effort. For that election, the organization targeted five precincts in its core neighborhoods. During the two weeks before the election, canvassers went door to door to encourage individuals in the treatment group to turn out to vote. All of the canvassers were residents of the five targeted precincts. Turnout among those randomly assigned to the control group was 11.1 percent, as compared to 19.6 percent among those randomly assigned to the treatment group. This constitutes a treatment-on-treated effect of 43.1 percentage points — the largest estimated treatment effect to emerge from a voter mobilization field experiment. This estimate is reduced to a still-impressive 33.6 percentage point effect on turnout among those who were reached by canvassers when precinct of residence, race/ethnicity and voting history in the four previous elections are taken into account.

CARECEN conducted a voter mobilization campaign for the June 2006 election that began several months before the election: 48 percent of individuals targeted for door-to-door visits were contacted before May 1, and 72 percent were contacted more than three weeks prior to Election Day. This campaign had an estimated effect of only 0.6 percentage points. In contrast, CCAEJ organized for the same election but limited its outreach to the two weeks prior to the election for a 33.6 percentage point effect on turnout. Even recognizing that the organizations were not entirely similar in terms of the voters targeted, the strong differences in impact indicate that timing may have been a factor. For the November 2006 and February 2008 elections, CARECEN did not begin canvassing until closer to Election Day and achieved improved voter mobilization effects.

Door-to-Door Approach

As found for other populations, door-to-door efforts remain the most consistently effective method of increasing turnout among low-propensity voters. Particularly effective are those campaigns that have established relationships with their communities and that use canvassers from the target neighborhood.

The power of door-to-door canvassing as opposed to other GOTV methods is well illustrated by the experience of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO). PICO is a statewide network of faith-based community organizations. The network has been active since 1995, training local community and congregation members in ways to improve the quality of life in low-income and immigrant communities through policy initiatives. Prior to PICO's involvement in this project, the network had conducted numerous grassroots voter registration and GOTV campaigns, typically targeted at local ballot initiatives concerning education and affordable housing.

During the June 2006 campaign, PICO's affiliates worked to increase voter turnout in various low-propensity communities throughout the state using a variety of indirect methods such as mailers, leaflets and robotic calls. These efforts were largely ineffective, despite including a number of innovations designed to make those indirect methods more personal. In subsequent election cycles, an increasing number of PICO affiliates have shifted their focus to direct efforts, such as door-to-door

and live phone bank canvassing. For the February 2008 election, PICO affiliates conducted 21 door-to-door experiments, which resulted in greater effects on voter turnout. Pooled across sites, the 21 campaigns increased turnout by an average of 9 percentage points. A saturation campaign in the city of Winters, where voters not successfully reached at the door were then targeted for live phone calls, increased turnout by 12.9 percentage points. This demonstrates the power of personal contact and also the ability of community organizations with little or no experience in direct GOTV methods (live phone banks and door-to-door canvassing) to quickly become effective practitioners of these methods.

Live Phone Banking

Although door-to-door canvassing represents the strongest method of increasing turnout in most situations, in certain circumstances live phone banking is the better choice. These circumstances include GOTV campaigns targeting populations that are dispersed geographically or hard to access, and also multilingual populations. If targeted voters are widely dispersed, then the time needed to travel between households to make door-to-door visits might make such an operation both difficult and needlessly expensive. This may also be the case for populations in gated communities or locked apartment buildings, where access is difficult if not impossible. With multilingual target populations, using a phone bank allows for a list of targeted voters to be segmented by national origin (and therefore by likely preferred language). Each list is then assigned to an appropriate bilingual canvasser. Both Asian American-serving organizations participating in the initiative have used this method for contacting their targeted voters with marked success. (See “The Ability to Conduct Multilingual Campaigns,” page 10.)

Finally, a group might choose to use live phone banking instead of door-to-door canvassing because of the increased level of control and safety involved. Canvassers working in a centrally located phone bank can be constantly monitored with corrections made as needed to the quality of the mobilization conversations as described with regard to the NALEO effort for February 2008. A live phone bank setting also protects canvassers from the dangers of unsafe neighborhoods.

The Power of Follow-Up Calls

Experiments conducted by the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) and the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA) have found that using a second round of phone calls to individuals who have previously identified themselves as likely to vote can increase the power of a phone bank campaign.

SVREP has long mobilized Latino voters in Los Angeles County. Its phone bank campaign for the November 2006 general election was the first conducted under the auspices of the California Votes Initiative, and showed striking results. For this election, SVREP targeted low-propensity Latino voters living in five city council districts in Los Angeles for a multi-stage GOTV campaign. Callers asked contacted voters whether they intended to vote; those who responded affirmatively were contacted and reminded to vote a second time the day of or the day before the election. As often as possible,

A variety of indirect methods such as mailers, leaflets and robotic calls were largely ineffective, despite including a number of innovations designed to make those indirect methods more personal.

voters were contacted both times by the same canvasser, and the script was altered informally to remind voters that they had spoken with them earlier and promised to turn out. The effect among those contacted was 9.3 percentage points.

Live phone banking is the better choice in campaigns targeting populations that are dispersed geographically, hard to access or multilingual.

OCAPICA has worked for more than a decade to improve opportunities and outcomes for low-income Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Orange County. The organization sponsors programs related to youth development, education, community health and economic development. Although OCAPICA has long been active in political issues of concern to the Asian Pacific Islander community, the organization directly mobilized voters for the first time in November 2006, achieving a 4.2 percentage point effect among those reached. For the June 2008 election, OCAPICA made follow-up phone calls to individuals who had previously indicated that they planned to vote. Calls were made earlier to those planning to vote by mail and closer to Election Day for those planning to vote at the polls. Pooling results across national-origin groups, the effect among those contacted was 11.1 percentage points, both with and without controlling for voter history.

These results are comparable to the impact of a high-quality door-to-door canvassing effort. Compared to other recent experimental studies of phone banking, these estimates stand out as possibly the strongest effects for live phone calls ever to be observed in large studies.

The Value of Screening for Working Numbers

Anyone who has participated in a phone bank can attest to the loss of efficiency and canvasser morale that results when a large proportion of attempted numbers are found to be disconnected, business lines, fax lines or otherwise invalid. The experiences of NALEO in the June and November 2006 elections highlight the value of screening lists for working numbers to avoid these problems.⁴

NALEO's results from the June 2006 campaign had been disappointing. Contact rates varied from a low of 9.2 percent in Fresno County to a high of 12.4 percent in Los Angeles. Based on that experience, in which live callers had found it frustrating to call non-working numbers, NALEO began its fall 2006 campaign with a round of calls designed to screen its telephone list for invalid numbers. Canvassers then called the remaining list of working numbers. The result was an overall contact rate more than double that of the previous election, from 20 percent in San Bernardino to 41 percent in Fresno County, which suggests that a preliminary round of calls is an effective and inexpensive means by which to improve the efficiency of a live phone bank. The tactic of using first-round calls to clean up phone lists was subsequently adopted for NALEO campaigns as well as those by other initiative organizations.

Phone lists can also be cleaned by using a commercial vendor to screen lists of registered voters. This strategy has been used by several California Votes Initiative organizations, including the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC). APALC has consistently achieved strong contact

⁴ In California, screening phone lists for working numbers must be conducted in accordance with California Public Utilities Code Sections 2871–2876.

rates during initiative phone bank campaigns, ranging from 13.6 percent to 33.8 percent among various national origin groups for the June 2006 election and 26.9 percent to 39.5 percent for the November 2006 election.

The Ability to Conduct Multilingual Campaigns

While most communities can be targeted by English-speaking or perhaps bilingual English and Spanish speakers, mobilization in most Asian American communities requires a multilingual approach. Although Asian Americans constitute a large and growing segment of the population in California, they are generally excluded from GOTV campaigns because of the organizational challenges such a multilingual campaign would entail. Several experiments conducted as part of the California Votes Initiative, however, demonstrate not only the feasibility of using phone banking to reach out to low-propensity Asian American voters, but also that phone calls can move many of those voters to the polls. These experiments were conducted by APALC and OCAPICA.

APALC was founded in 1983 and has long worked in Southern California to advance Asian Pacific American civil rights, provide legal services and education, and work for a more equitable society. While APALC is the nation's largest organization to focus on the legal needs of the Asian Pacific Islander community, APALC had not conducted a voter mobilization campaign prior to the June 2006 election. As part of the initiative, APALC has run three campaigns to date consisting of phone calls and direct mail aimed at a variety of Asian national origin groups. The phone banks ran for about three weeks prior to the June 2006, November 2006 and June 2008 elections and used multilingual teams of interviewers calling weekday evenings and weekend afternoons. The June 2006 campaign generated an effect of 2.5 percentage points. The November campaign was more effective, increasing turnout among those successfully contacted by 3.7 percentage points.⁵

OCAPICA directly mobilized voters for the first time in November 2006. Its efforts generated a 2.9 percentage point effect; adding controls for voting in the previous five elections increased the estimate to an impact of 4.2 percentage points. As noted above, for the June 2008 election OCAPICA added follow-up calls to its phonebank campaign, making a second round of calls to voters who indicated in the first contact that they planned to vote. This resulted in a 11.1 percentage point effect among those contacted, both with and without controls for voter history.

The experiences of these organizations demonstrate not only that multilingual phone banks are possible, but also that they are effective in turning out voters. This finding is also important for groups interested in mobilizing populations, such as Asian Americans, that are not sufficiently concentrated geographically to make door-to-door canvassing feasible.

⁵ Results from the June 2008 experiment await availability of turnout data from Los Angeles County.

Other Findings

This section discusses additional insights about voter outreach gleaned from experiments of the California Votes Initiative.

Young Voters

Several campaigns were particularly effective among young voters, suggesting that perhaps youth are especially responsive to this type of outreach. NALEO's efforts in the weeks preceding the February 2008 election, for example, had an overall effect of 8.2 percentage points, but increased turnout among contacted young people ages 18 to 24 by 18.6 percentage points. NALEO's November 2006 campaign also had a stronger effect among youth than among older voters. Similarly, SCOPE's February 2008 campaign increased turnout by 8.8 percentage points for contacted voters under age 30, but only 3.4 percentage points overall. With its November 2006 phone bank, APALC increased turnout overall by 3.7 percentage points, yet the impact for young people ages 18 to 24 was 13.4 percentage points.

Low-Propensity Voters

All of the organizations participating in the initiative defined low-propensity voters using their own criteria; for example, those who had participated in fewer than three of the previous four major elections, or those newly registered. This relates to differences in impact for obvious reasons, as some voters are simply more set in their non-voting ways than others. Evidence to this effect comes from several experiments, one based on voter history alone and several based on differential effects found among young voters.

In isolating registered voters who had participated in at least one prior election, canvasser contact increased turnout by 15.7 percentage points.

For example, CARECEN's effects for the November 2006 election outreach campaign were weak, with large standard errors and a great deal of statistical uncertainty regarding the outreach campaign's impact. However, the effect of the mobilization campaign was diluted because the pool of voters targeted by CARECEN included a significant number of "habitual non-voters." Isolating registered voters who had participated in at least one prior election, canvasser contact increased turnout by 15.7 percentage points. By contrast, the effect among those who had not voted prior to 2006 was negligible. CARECEN's overall average impact of 3.4 percentage points reflects the fact that the latter group is approximately five times larger than the former. This suggests that habitual non-voters are especially difficult to move to the polls and that the effectiveness of a campaign will vary depending on the underlying voting habits of the targeted population. Follow-up analyses to this effect await future initiative efforts.

Habit Formation

Another question investigated using results from these experiments was whether individuals successfully mobilized in one election but not contacted in a subsequent election would still be more likely to vote. In other words, do individuals need to be contacted for every election, or can they be transformed from low-propensity voters into likely voters after participating in one or several elections? While a more definitive answer to this question will depend on results from the November 2008 election and beyond, preliminary results suggest that voting is indeed habit-forming. In comparison with those voters assigned to the control group in November 2006, voters assigned for contact in November 2006 were more likely to vote in February 2008, even if they received no further contact after 2006. Further research is needed to determine whether these voters developed more interest in politics or whether political campaigns developed more interest in them; however, it seems that the November 2006 outreach efforts may have caused a certain portion of the electorate to develop more consistent voting habits.

Voters assigned for contact in November 2006 were more likely to vote in February 2008, even if they received no further contact after 2006.

Social Networks

The results from the CCAEJ and SCOPE experiments detailed above provide support for the proposition that social networks can enhance the impact of a voter mobilization campaign. These two campaigns used community networks to enhance their outreach by, for example, assigning canvassers to contact voters living in the same ZIP code. The power of other forms of social networks, including personal networks and congregation-based networks, was explored by several PICO affiliates in various elections included in the California Votes Initiative.

In the weeks leading up to the June and November 2006 elections, PICO launched a diverse round of GOTV experiments aimed at mobilizing members of PICO-affiliated churches and their surrounding communities. One congregation distributed a small number of handwritten letters. A number of congregations used pre-recorded calls with a message from a local pastor — a credible and distinguished source. Despite their attempt to cue local social networks, these efforts were not successful at increasing turnout, consistent with other findings regarding the ineffectiveness of indirect methods.

More suggestive are the results from a social network experiment conducted by a PICO affiliate in Long Beach for the February 2008 election. The campaign assigned callers to five friends from the congregation, five fellow congregants that the callers did not know personally and five individuals from the neighborhood who were strangers. Although the small size of the experiment means the results fall short of statistical significance, there is a clear linear progression to the estimated effects: The impact was largest for friends, smaller for fellow congregants and smaller still for strangers. Additional social networking experiments conducted by various PICO affiliates for the February and June 2008 elections await analysis.

Indirect Methods

Indirect methods are not recommended. Occasionally an indirect method, such as providing a local voter guide as follow-up to a candidate forum, was found to increase turnout, but in general such tactics have not been found to be a reliable method of increasing turnout. Before the June 2006 election, the PICO affiliate in Long Beach distributed to targeted voters a local voter guide that summarized local candidates' positions on four leading issues. The result was an impressive 9.2 percentage point increase in turnout; however, attempts to duplicate these results by the same affiliate and in other experiments failed to produce increases in turnout. Other evidence comes from a group of experiments conducted by the PICO affiliates in Los Angeles and Fresno for the June and November 2006 elections. In 10 different experiments, targeted voters received phone calls with pre-recorded messages from local pastors. Just one experiment saw higher turnout in the treatment group as compared to the control group.

Organizational resources are better allocated to more reliable tactics such as door-to-door canvassing and live phone banks. The California Votes Initiative has also found no evidence of synergy from the use of these methods in combination. For example, a phone bank does not seem to be more effective if used in tandem with a piece of direct mail.

Further Study

Building upon findings from the experiments conducted to date, the evaluation team of the California Votes Initiative will join outreach organizations in designing experiments to discern further the effectiveness of various outreach strategies in encouraging greater voter participation in low-income and ethnic communities. Outstanding questions will be explored in the initiative experiments planned for November 2008 and with long-term analysis of communities and individuals targeted in more than one election cycle. The team plans to study further whether individuals mobilized in one election are more likely to participate in subsequent elections, even if not contacted, as well as how many contacts or cycles it takes to turn a low-propensity voter into a habitual voter.

The use of social networks and neighbor-on-neighbor or friend-on-friend canvassing also will be studied further in the November 2008 election. The team hopes to determine more exactly the impact of using local canvassers and of using friends and acquaintances to maximize the effectiveness of personal contact. The team also looks forward to testing the effects of messages that are information-rich versus simple, and messages that are more general in nature versus those that call attention to a particular ballot measure or race on the ballot (while remaining neutral). The wide variety of outreach efforts already planned by initiative grantees for the November 2008 election will address these and other questions.

The evaluation team also hopes to explore further some intriguing subgroup differences that have been observed in results to date. For example, several initiative efforts have had markedly stronger effects with young people, contradicting conventional wisdom that assumes a lack of political interest among young adults. It remains to be seen whether these findings indicate a shift in the current generation's political outlook, greater youth responsiveness to mobilization in general, or an unanticipated strength of initiative efforts. This will be explored with a public opinion survey of individuals, including some assigned to be contacted and others in the control group, which will be conducted immediately following the November 2008 election. The survey will include questions about political attitudes and will compare respondents from both groups. This will allow for comparisons of the effects of contact on those attitudes among various subgroups, including young adults versus older adults. Full understanding of this aspect of the findings may require future research beyond November 2008. Similarly, subgroup differences within targeted Asian American communities by language of contact (either in English or in an Asian language) and by nativity (immigrants versus native-born citizens) require further investigation to determine the causes underlying observed differences.

Conclusions

In examination of the California Votes Initiative experiments conducted to date, the evaluation team has determined that personal contact is by far the most effective and most reliable method of increasing turnout among low-propensity voters in ethnic communities. This generally means that campaigns ideally should use face-to-face canvassing, but live phone banks may be more efficient in communities where multiple languages are spoken or where registered voters are widely dispersed geographically. In either case, campaigning is also enhanced by the use of volunteers from a community organization with a strong local reputation and by the use of canvassers who live in the neighborhood of interest. While canvassing should not begin earlier than four weeks before Election Day, the organizational efforts that take place between electoral cycles can be important for ensuring the success of get-out-the-vote efforts.

Using canvassers from a local organization to conduct personal canvassing will not guarantee increases in turnout. Campaigns should also be attentive to the quality of their lists of registered voters, to the quality of their canvasser trainings and to the content of their delivered messages. Phone bank lists, for example, should be pre-screened in order to eliminate invalid numbers. Canvassers should be well trained, and training should be ongoing throughout a mobilization campaign. Mobilization messages should focus on the importance of voting and should provide helpful information to targeted voters, including perhaps information about what is being decided in the election. Canvasser training appears to be an important variable among groups with similar experience targeting similar populations.

The California Votes Initiative was designed to increase turnout among low-propensity voters in ethnic communities, reducing the gap between the demographic makeup of California and the demographic profile of those who participate in elections. Experiments conducted under the auspices of the initiative to date have shown that these communities, with perhaps the exception of “habitual non-voters,” can be persuaded to participate with relative ease — through a brief home visit or live phone call. Moreover, many of those mobilized in one election may be then likely to participate in subsequent elections, even without further contact. As more organizations adopt these tactics to increase turnout in their communities, and as California political campaigns reach out more deliberately to these populations, we can look forward to an electorate that more closely reflects the diversity of California.

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THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

575 MARKET STREET
SUITE 3400
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94105

415.777.2244

865 SOUTH FIGUEROA

SUITE 2308

LOS ANGELES, CA 90017

213.236.0552

WWW.IRVINE.ORG