



INSIGHT

Lessons learned from our grantmaking programs

New Experiments in Minority Voter Mobilization

*Third and Final Report
on the California Votes Initiative*

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Foreword

The excitement and importance of the November 2008 presidential election led to a record number of Americans casting a ballot. Yet, in California and elsewhere, gaps remained in voting rates among different segments of the population. Low-income and ethnic voters are less likely to participate regularly in elections and thus their views are not consistently reflected in the important decisions that are determined at the polls. A well-functioning democracy — particularly in a state as diverse as California — depends on a representative electorate.

In 2006, The James Irvine Foundation launched the California Votes Initiative, which aimed to discern and share effective nonpartisan strategies for improving voting rates, particularly among low-income and ethnic communities. In the series of elections occurring between January 2006 and November 2008, nine organizations conducted outreach to infrequent voters in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California and, with a research team, helped produce new insights regarding effective voter mobilization strategies. This is the third and final report in a series that highlights the lessons learned from the California Votes Initiative.

These research findings show that infrequent voters can be encouraged to go to the polls in larger numbers through a variety of specific outreach strategies. It is our hope that civic organizations, the philanthropic community and others who conduct or support nonpartisan voter outreach activities will apply these findings to their efforts, such that the resources dedicated to expanding voter participation may be allocated for greatest impact. By expanding voter participation among traditionally underrepresented communities, we can achieve more representative and therefore improved decision making on important public issues.



James E. Canales

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Executive Summary

Since early 2006 and through the general election of November 2008, the nine community organizations participating in the California Votes Initiative worked to 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. Using a variety of innovative strategies and tactics, the initiative has contributed significant knowledge to the field of voter mobilization, while also substantively increasing turnout in a variety of electoral settings. Preliminary reports regarding initiative results were published in September 2007 and September 2008.¹

Participating community-based organizations directly contacted more than 150,000 low-propensity voters via door-to-door visits and phone calls, and hundreds of thousands more via indirect methods such as direct mail, inspiring many to take part in the electoral process for the first time. The initiative evaluation team worked with those community organizations to imbed field experiments in their outreach efforts, comparing turnout among those targeted for treatment and those assigned to control groups. All of the experiments conducted as part of the initiative used randomly assigned treatment and control groups, allowing for robust statistical evaluation of their impact. The evaluation resulted in strong scientific support for a series of best practices that were outlined in the September 2007 report available at www.irvine.com.

The second phase of the initiative extended this program of knowledge-building research with further field experiments in the February, June and November 2008 elections. The September 2008 report briefly reviews the results from the first phase of the initiative and adds findings from the groups' February and June 2008 efforts. Many findings from the first phase were confirmed, and 2008 experiments provided important and 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 supported nonpartisan voter education and outreach conducted by nine community-based organizations that employed a range of strategies to encourage infrequent voters to participate in elections during 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.
Michelson, Melissa R., Lisa García Bedolla and Donald P. Green. 2008. *New Experiments in Minority Voter Mobilization: Second in a Series of Reports on the California Votes Initiative* (San Francisco, CA: The James Irvine Foundation). Available at www.irvine.org.

This final report summarizes the entirety of the project's experiments and findings and also extends previous reports in two ways. First, it examines the long-term effects of voter mobilization, tracing voters over a series of elections. Second, it examines the effects of mobilization activities, such as canvassing and phone calls, on voter attitudes toward politics and political engagement. Qualitative analyses are used in order to explore more deeply the components that make up a successful get-out-the-vote campaign.

At the same time, findings from the November 2008 election underscore the special challenges of mobilizing voters in the context of a highly and widely anticipated presidential election. Turnout and interest in the Barack Obama-John McCain election was substantially higher than in previous elections. In June 2006, turnout in some communities was below 20 percent; in November 2008, these same communities saw turnout rates between 60 percent and 90 percent. The fact that so many voters cast ballots without encouragement from California Votes Initiative groups meant many voters assigned to initiative control groups were also motivated to participate. Nevertheless, a few efforts did produce statistically significant increases in turnout, a testament to the power of well-conducted get-out-the-vote campaigns and of particular strategies for moving low-propensity voters to the polls, even amid a historic election and a high-energy electoral environment.

Initiative Participation

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

Outreach Organization	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

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Best Practices

Prior to The James Irvine Foundation's launch of the California Votes Initiative, a very limited number of voter mobilization field experiments had been conducted among racial/ethnic voters. Some three years later, initiative results have contributed significantly to this body of knowledge. It is now possible to report with confidence that personal contact, either face-to-face or by phone, can be used to effectively mobilize low-propensity racial/ethnic voters. In addition, evaluators found that personal contacts close to Election Day work best, that volunteer phone-banking using follow-up calls to self-identified likely voters can produce substantial effects, and that outreach from trusted sources — either local canvassers or canvassers representing a trusted local organization — works best. Indirect efforts, such as direct mail and door hangers, have relatively weak effects on voter turnout and are not recommended. And while personal outreach in the form of door-to-door visits or live phone calls is generally a powerful method of moving voters to the polls, the effectiveness of such efforts is dependent upon the appropriate training and oversight of those conducting the canvassing. These best practices are detailed in the discussion that follows.

Best Practices at a Glance

Numerous rounds of voter mobilization experiments revealed a defined set of best practices summarized below and detailed in subsequent sections of this report. Additional findings pertaining to habit formation, attitudinal change and qualitative observer reports are also discussed. The best practices include:

- 1. Two-round phone banks:** Improve the impact of phone bank calling with follow-up calls to self-identified likely voters.
- 2. Canvasser training and supervision:** Increase canvasser effectiveness with training and supervision. Maintain frequent interaction between canvassers and supervisors throughout the campaign.
- 3. Social networks:** Increase trust and effectiveness of campaigns by using canvassers who are either from the same local neighborhood or are personally known to targeted voters.
- 4. Campaign timing:** Improve campaign effectiveness by visiting or calling voters within four weeks of an election.
- 5. Personal contact:** Maximize resources by using mobilization tactics that involve live, personal contact between canvassers and voters.

Two-Round Phone Banks

The most notable finding of this final round of initiative experiments is that phone banking can be made even more powerful than door-to-door canvassing, producing double-digit increases in voter turnout, if follow-up calls are attempted *only* with individuals who indicate during an initial contact that they intend to vote (self-identified “yes” voters). The practice was first tested in an experiment conducted by the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) for the November 2006 election; replication and further investigation followed, with experiments conducted for the June 2008 primary elections by the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA) and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC).

Phone banking produced double-digit increases in voter turnout when follow-up calls targeted only individuals who indicated previously that they intended to vote.

For the November 2006 general election, SVREP targeted low-propensity Latino voters in Los Angeles for a two-stage get-out-the-vote campaign. The effort focused on five city council districts where 48 percent or more of the registered voters were Latino. Phone canvassing was conducted in the three weeks prior to the election. Callers asked contacted voters whether they intended to vote; those who responded affirmatively were contacted a second time the day of or the day before the election and reminded to vote. Comparing those in the treatment group to those in the control group, the campaign increased turnout by 10.3 percentage points, an effect larger than that of most door-to-door efforts.

The same strategy was implemented by OCAPICA for the June 2008 election, focusing on Asian Pacific Islander low-propensity voters in Orange County. Again, self-identified likely voters were significantly more likely to vote, again by 10.3 percentage points. Another experiment with follow-up calls was conducted by APALC, also for the June 2008 election — in this case targeting Asian Pacific Islander low-propensity voters in Los Angeles County. This time, only a random sample of “yes” voters was identified to receive a second call, allowing the evaluation team to determine the effect of each round of calls separately. Comparing treatment and control groups, the first call increased turnout by 4.0 percentage points, and the second call increased turnout by 13.2 percentage points. During the November 2008 campaign, APALC conducted yet another experiment using follow-up calls and increased turnout by 5.7 percentage points. Given the atypical electoral environment of the historic Obama-McCain contest, this is testament both to the effectiveness of the strategy and the value of effective canvasser training and supervision, as detailed later in this report.

In sum, phone bank canvassing that includes a second round of calls, particularly when those follow-up calls focus on self-identified likely voters, results in increases in turnout far beyond the 3 to 5 percentage points that would be expected from an otherwise well-conducted phone bank campaign. The experiments described here offer evidence that such tactics can provide a significant boost to the overall impact of a get-out-the-vote phone campaign, making them potentially more effective than door-to-door canvassing.

Canvasser Training and Supervision

One puzzle that emerged from earlier rounds of initiative experiments was why canvassing efforts that looked identical or very similar on paper resulted in very different treatment effects. In order to better understand what sort of on-the-ground variation was driving these results, dozens of trained student observers were asked to attend initiative group trainings and canvassing sessions. Their feedback led to the conclusion that the most effective get-out-the-vote efforts are those that thoroughly train and supervise their volunteers in an ongoing fashion.

The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) conducted four door-to-door canvassing experiments (June 2006, November 2006, June 2008 and November 2008) as part of the initiative, with dramatically different results. The June 2006 effort, focusing on five precincts in the organization's core neighborhoods in Riverside County, increased turnout by 43.1 percentage points — the largest estimated treatment effect to emerge from a voter mobilization field experiment. However, a larger effort in November 2006 that expanded to 25 additional precincts in San Bernardino County produced far weaker effects. For the June 2008 and November 2008 CCA EJ campaigns, three student observers were asked to take field notes during CCA EJ canvasser training and canvassing sessions. While CCA EJ staff aimed to run identical campaigns in the two geographic areas, analysis of the two sets of field notes indicates that the Riverside County canvassing was of a higher quality than that conducted in San Bernardino. Canvassers in San Bernardino were less able to make efficient use of their walk lists and maps. They were less likely to correctly identify the group for which they were canvassing, or to correctly define the acronym CCA EJ for contacted voters. These differences influenced the effects of the campaigns: voters contacted in Riverside County were much more likely to vote, while the effects in San Bernardino were negligible.

Further evidence of the importance of quality of training and oversight comes from February 2008 election efforts by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) in Kern, Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. While NALEO staff conducted trainings in Bakersfield and trained the supervisory staff for Riverside and San Bernardino, only Los Angeles canvassers were in constant contact with NALEO staff members, who had more extensive knowledge of and experience with phone bank campaigns. This allowed for ongoing adjustments to callers' outreach style as the campaign progressed. These differences are reflected in the estimated treatment effects for each county. In Los Angeles, turnout was increased by 11.4 percentage points; effects in other counties were much smaller.

Analysis of the reports from the initiative's student research observers shows that this result is supported by the experiments of other participating organizations. Groups that undertook training that was more interactive (including role playing) and that fostered a high level of energy among canvassers tended to be more effective in their mobilization efforts overall. Results were further enhanced by groups that brought canvassers together at the end of each canvassing day to debrief on their efforts, tally the number of contacts, and work to develop a sense of collective effort and mutual accountability.

Social Networks and Trusted Sources

Encouragement to vote that comes from a trusted source, such as a friend or neighbor, is more effective at increasing turnout than encouragement that comes from other sources. This was demonstrated in efforts by several community organizations in the initiative.

Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) has spent years recruiting volunteers from the South Los Angeles area who are committed to canvass precincts prior to an election. These canvassers are often residents of the areas slated for campaigning. For the November 2006 election, SCOPE targeted low-propensity voters living within precincts in South Los Angeles where the organization has worked for several election cycles to mobilize voters. While all canvassers were from the same broader South Los Angeles community, some were from the same ZIP code as targeted voters. Comparing the treatment group to the control group, the campaign increased turnout by 6.6 percentage points. Neighbors (canvassers who shared a ZIP code with targeted voters) increased turnout by 8.5 percentage points while non-neighbors increased turnout by 5.2 percentage points, suggesting that using local canvassers is an important way to capitalize upon existing social networks within communities.

Local canvassers are more likely to be trusted by contacted voters, and thus better able to motivate them to turn out. In addition, local canvassers are simply more effective in terms of finding homes and gaining access to them, helping to maintain a high level of morale. Ensuring that canvassers can read their maps, are familiar with their canvassing area, have appropriate transportation, and are able to return to the areas they have previously canvassed — are all important for campaign quality.

Canvassers from the same ZIP code as targeted voters achieved greater turnout than non-neighbor canvassers in the same experiment.

The power of social networks was also tested in a number of innovative phone bank efforts conducted by Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) affiliates in Long Beach and Los Angeles. For the February 2008 election, a PICO affiliate in Long Beach assigned callers to five friends from the congregation, five fellow congregants that they did not know personally, and five individuals from the neighborhood who were strangers. Observed increases in turnout were largest for friends, smaller for fellow congregants, and smaller still for strangers. The Long Beach group again conducted a social networking phone bank experiment for the June 2008 election, assigning callers to contact either personal friends or other members of the congregation. Members of the same congregation were 0.8 percentage points more likely to vote than were individuals in the control group, while individuals personally known to the canvasser were 2.4 percentage points more likely to participate.

For the November 2008 election, social networking phone bank experiments were conducted by a PICO affiliate in Los Angeles and by the California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG). PICO canvassers were assigned lists of voters from their immediate neighborhood, usually encompassing only a few blocks. Comparing the treatment groups to the control groups, the effort increased turnout by 3.3 percentage points, despite the fact that turnout in half of the control groups exceeded 80 percent. The CALPIRG effort targeted students at Los Angeles County community colleges. Canvassers compiled lists of 10 friends and neighbors that were then

randomized into personal treatment and control groups. Overall, individuals in the treatment group were 4 percentage points more likely to vote than were individuals in the control group. These experiments provide further evidence of the power of social networking to increase get-out-the-vote effectiveness.

Campaign Timing

Campaigns that enter the field closer to Election Day are more effective than those that enter too early, as demonstrated by the increased effectiveness over time of the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and efforts by NALEO.²

For the June 2006 election, CARECEN targeted low-propensity Latino voters in Los Angeles' Pico Union neighborhood. The mobilization effort began several months before the election; 48 percent of the treatment group was contacted before May 1, and 72 percent by three weeks prior to Election Day. The effort had only negligible effects on turnout. For November 2006 and later election cycles, CARECEN concentrated its efforts in the four weeks prior to each election, and was able to increase its effectiveness significantly, to 3.4 percentage points for November 2006 and February 2008, and 4 percentage points in June 2008, when the group added a round of follow-up contacts with “yes” voters.

Results from the November 2008 round of campaigns conducted by NALEO also support this best practice regarding timing. For that election, NALEO conducted experiments in the counties of Kern, Fresno, Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange and Los Angeles, but because the Fresno affiliate

One organization launching campaigns in multiple counties found the greatest success with the affiliate whose effort was delayed — supporting other findings that contact made in the week prior to Election Day works best.

was not yet ready to begin making calls, the campaign in that county was delayed and started significantly later than the others. In Fresno, 73.4 percent of initial contacts were made in the week just before Election Day; in other counties about 60–70 percent of contacts were made 2–3 weeks before the election. In all counties, follow-up calls to “yes” voters were made immediately before the election. While the overall campaign had negligible effects on turnout, in Fresno County the campaign increased turnout by 11.1 percentage points. The finding that calls made in the week just prior to an election are most effective is consistent with findings from non-initiative field experiments.³

Personal Contact

While some indirect voter mobilization methods were employed during initiative rounds in 2006 and 2007, by 2008 all participants had shifted almost exclusively to the recommended direct contact methods. Mirroring findings from non-initiative experiments with different target communities, multiple participating organizations demonstrated that door-to-door canvassing is generally the most powerful method of mobilizing voters, followed by live phone banks (though at

² These groups centered their efforts on communities that generally do not vote by mail. Efforts to mobilize communities that include higher proportions of permanent vote-by-mail (PVBM) voters should keep in mind when determining campaign timing that PVBM voters are likely to vote earlier than Election Day, and thus may need to be contacted earlier.

³ Green, Donald P. and Alan S. Gerber. 2008. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

times, live phone banks can be the more effective approach, as described in the best practice section on two-round phone banks).

Several participating organizations, including CCAEJ and SCOPE, used door-to-door canvassing exclusively throughout the initiative, while others shifted their focus to door-to-door canvassing after observing the power of this method in earlier experimental rounds. The experiments conducted by these organizations illustrate the very strong effect on voter turnout that can be achieved using quality face-to-face interactions with voters.

Several initiative grantees (APALC, NALEO, OCAPICA and SVREP) chose to focus almost exclusively on live phone banks. These groups took advantage of one of the major benefits of phone banks, which is the ease of matching the language skills of canvassers to the preferred languages of voters. For Asian Pacific Islander-serving organizations in particular (APALC and OCAPICA), where outreach was attempted in as many as nine languages during a single election, door-to-door canvassing was simply not a feasible option. Instead, voter files were sorted by surname and place of birth into likely national-origin groups, and then targeted by callers with appropriate language skills.

The experiments conducted by PICO best illustrate the benefit of direct efforts as compared to indirect approaches. In the weeks leading up to the June 2006 elections, PICO launched a diverse round of get-out-the-vote experiments. With the exception of live calls made by two affiliates in Stockton, PICO's efforts in June 2006 tended to be those commonly characterized as "indirect," in that they did not involve a person-to-person conversation. The campaigns almost universally had only negligible effects on turnout. After learning of the successful use of door-to-door campaigns by other initiative grantees, however, PICO moved quickly to adopt the strategy. During the weeks leading up to the November 2006 election, four of PICO's affiliates launched door-to-door canvassing experiments, generating 4 percentage point increases in turnout. PICO affiliates conducted 21 door-to-door experiments for the February 2008 election, increasing turnout by 9 percentage points. In subsequent election rounds, PICO continued to focus on door-to-door campaigning, often generating very high contact rates, and often in dozens of cities at the same time.

That PICO affiliates were able to quickly and effectively shift to direct methods illustrates the relative ease with which community organizations with appropriate capacity, reputation, presence and experience with civic engagement can adopt these powerful methods of increasing turnout.

Although indirect methods are typically ineffective at raising turnout, other considerations may recommend their use. Many initiative groups distributed the *Easy Voter Guide* even though a series of experiments indicated that these guides did not increase turnout.⁴ The *Easy Voter Guide* presents shorter and simpler discussions of the major candidates and measures on the ballot. Having access to that information may have improved the quality of voter participation. For example, it could have reduced ballot drop-off (the phenomenon of voters making vote choices only on more salient top-of-the-ticket contests and choosing to not participate in less salient down-ballot contests they know less about), or it may simply have helped voters to make more informed choices.

⁴ García Bedolla, Lisa and Melissa R. Michelson. 2009. "What Do Voters Need to Know? Testing the Role of Cognitive Information in Asian American Voter Mobilization." *American Politics Research* 37, 2 (March): 254-274.

Critical Factors

One major contribution of the initiative is the introduction of qualitative measures of the nature and quality of canvassing efforts. While many academics have worked in tandem with community organizations and political parties during get-out-the-vote campaigns, few have systematically recorded and analyzed what they saw, and not to the extent made possible by the initiative's use of two dozen undergraduate and graduate student observers during the February 2008, June 2008 and November 2008 mobilization campaigns. To the knowledge of the evaluation team, this was the first systematic effort to complement experimental data with in-depth, on-the-ground information. The multilingual team of observers engaged in the initiative submitted hundreds of reports detailing what they saw in the phone banks and door-to-door canvassing efforts that they were allowed to observe. Their analyses helped evaluators move beyond quantitative measures to develop richer and more nuanced descriptions of how these campaigns operated and what contributed to their success or lack thereof.

In addition to the findings included in the descriptions of the five best practices above, examination of this rich data has led evaluators to identify the following factors critical to the quality of canvassing.

Canvasser Experience and Motivation

Maintaining quality and consistency in a campaign relying on volunteers or newly-hired canvassers is probably the greatest challenge faced by organizations undertaking these sorts of efforts. That difficulty is likely compounded in an environment such as that surrounding the November 2008 election, given its salience and the competition that existed among parties and organizations to attract the most motivated and effective canvassers. California Votes Initiative reports for November showed many more problems with canvasser motivation, focus and ability to remain true to the script than in February and June 2008. Many of the organizations seemed to be more dependent on new canvassers for this election than they had in the past. This was likely due to the fact that more experienced canvassers may have chosen to work for the presidential or ballot initiative campaigns rather than for grantee organizations. This scenario suggests that attracting and retaining experienced canvassers may be one additional difficulty faced by nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaigns in high-turnout elections.

Clarity and Simplicity of Message

As initiative evaluators found in previous rounds of voter mobilization, organizations that engaged in ongoing training and supervision had more consistency in the quality of their campaigns. This was true in terms of the canvassers delivering the appropriate message (i.e., staying on script) as well as their accurate provision of contact and other information requested by initiative organizations. In the past, the evaluation team had recommended that scripts be as focused on the get-out-the-vote message as possible. Observations from the 2008 campaigns suggest this is important not only because it makes the objective of the contact more evident to voters but also because having a more focused script makes it more likely that the canvasser will remain on point during the conversation. However, this can conflict with internal goals of community organizations that wish to combine canvassing with communications about services that they offer or that ask contacted voters about their opinions and concerns.

Appropriate Canvasser Language Skills

Given the diversity of California voters, canvasser language skills are very important. Groups should make certain that their volunteers can communicate with targeted voters. For door-to-door campaigns in multilingual neighborhoods, monolingual canvassers should be paired with walkers who speak another language. Similarly, phone bank effectiveness may be affected by canvassers who are much more fluent in one language than another. Groups should be aware of these issues and try to address them as much as possible — understanding, of course, the difficulty of recruiting multilingual canvassers in any electoral context.

Advance and Backup Planning

Canvassing is extremely difficult, requiring significant organizational infrastructure. Much of the “heavy lifting” underlying a campaign happens well before the outreach effort begins. Proper planning — in terms of canvasser outreach, supervisor and canvasser training, the provision of get-out-the-vote materials, the presentation of maps, the assignment of canvassers to particular areas and so on — are crucial to a successful effort. Experience with initiative grantees shows that organizational capacity and planning are reasonable predictors of which get-out-the-vote campaigns will have the greatest impact.

Campaign organizers should plan ahead for how they will respond to logistical problems, glitches or technological failures. How will the campaign be altered if fewer volunteers show up to canvass than were expected? How should canvassers react if it starts to rain? What will happen if the technology used to track voters fails? The California Votes Initiative groups did an excellent job responding quickly and effectively to the problems that did arise. But, their experience should teach us that, even in the most well-planned campaigns, something will go wrong. The most effective organizations are those that ensure they are prepared for just those kinds of eventualities.

Enduring Effects

One of the most important questions regarding voter mobilization is whether its effects endure. Are those who are impelled to vote in a given election also more likely to vote in subsequent elections? Very often, enduring effects are ascribed to the formation of voting habits, the rationale being that people who cast ballots in one election become accustomed to voting and to thinking of themselves as voters. Enduring effects of voter mobilization are also explained in other ways. For example, when those classified as low-propensity voters cast ballots in a low-turnout election, they may be reclassified as middle-propensity voters and therefore attract the attention of campaigns eager to communicate with likely voters. Regardless of the mechanisms at work, the key empirical question is whether those who are randomly induced to vote in a given election are also more likely to vote in subsequent elections.

California Votes Initiative experiments provided an unusually good opportunity to study voting habit formation for several reasons. First, the low-propensity voters targeted by participating organizations did not tend to receive contact from other voter mobilization campaigns. Second, initiative groups did not make a greater effort to contact people who had voted in previous campaigns. In other words, subsequent campaigns did not use turnout results from earlier elections to determine which potential voters should be placed in the treatment and control groups; that assignment was random. These factors allow for the precise measurement of the degree to which turnout boosted in one election persists in subsequent elections. Studying habit formation also requires an effective voter mobilization campaign that is fairly large in scale, so that the number of voters moved to the polls is sufficient to track over time. Fourteen initiative experiments met these criteria: the SCOPE door-to-door canvassing campaign of November 2006, the SVREP phone bank of November 2006, a phone bank conducted by NALEO in February 2008, five national-origin group phone banks orchestrated by OCAPICA in June of 2008, and six national-origin group phone banks orchestrated by APALC in June 2008.

For each of these 14 experiments, individuals moved to vote in the initial experiment were tracked over subsequent elections. For example, following the NALEO campaign, which occurred in the weeks leading up to the presidential primary election of February 2008, the treatment group voted at a rate of 47.8 percent while the control group voted at a rate of 45.2 percent, a difference of 2.6 percentage points. In November 2008, the difference persisted, although it was smaller. The treatment group from the February election voted in the November election at a rate of 71.5 percent versus 70.1 percent in the control group, for a 1.4 percentage-point difference. Dividing the two percentages generates a habit formation statistic of 0.54. In other words, individuals moved to vote in February 2008 were 54 percentage points more likely to vote in November 2008, even when they were not targeted for a get-out-the-vote call in the latter election.

Performing this same calculation for all 14 experiments generates an average habit formation effect of 0.35. Each vote generated in the immediate aftermath of a mobilization campaign produced roughly one-third of a vote in the presidential election. There is no evidence that the habit effect was different from one initiative group to the next.

One possible explanation for why habit formation occurs is that the underlying attitudes of contacted voters have been changed. The impact of initiative campaigns on political attitudes was investigated with a bilingual post-election telephone survey conducted immediately after the November 2008 election.⁵ The sample consisted of individuals from the treatment and control groups for three initiative grantees in Los Angeles: APALC, NALEO and SCOPE. Surveys were conducted in Spanish or English, which meant that the initiative survey of APALC respondents (people of Asian and Pacific Island national origin) was restricted to those who could be interviewed in English. A total of 3,102 individuals were successfully surveyed, with relatively equal response rates among each experimental group.

One question asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “Voting makes a difference.” Of the seven treatment and control group comparisons (five APALC national-origin groups plus one each for NALEO and SCOPE), five showed more enthusiasm about voting in the treatment group. If those contacted by a mobilization campaign are made more likely to believe that voting makes a difference, this would explain not only why an individual is moved to vote in one election but why he or she might develop a persistent voting habit. Additional research is needed to determine whether attitude change in this domain persists over time in a manner that would explain the persistence of mobilization effects.

The enduring impact of voter mobilization has profound implications. First, it suggests that someone who votes in one election is more likely to vote in the next election, while someone who skips an election is less likely to vote in the future. Second, the prospect of habit formation casts a different light on the usual way of evaluating the costs and benefits of a get-out-the-vote campaign. The typical approach is to think only in terms of votes produced in the current election. A more realistic calculation would take into account the future effects of a voter mobilization drive. If a campaign generates 1,000 additional votes at a cost of \$40,000, this price amounts to \$40 per vote for the current election. But if the 350 votes generated in the next election are also included, \$40,000 is divided by 1,350 votes, and the price falls to \$30 per vote. This added efficiency is an important consideration for organizations that have a long-term interest in producing votes.

Convincing a person that voting makes a difference may lead him or her to develop a persistent voting habit.

⁵ The survey was made possible in part by financial support from the Yale Institution for Social and Policy Studies.

Conclusions

In light of dozens of field experiments conducted by community organizations participating in the California Votes Initiative since 2006, the evaluation team has concluded that personal contact by local volunteers or from an organization with a strong local reputation is by far the most effective and most reliable method of increasing turnout among low-propensity voters in ethnic communities. This can take the form of either door-to-door visits or live telephone calls, and the choice between these two recommended methods should take into consideration the geographic and linguistic characteristics of the target population. If voters are widely dispersed or speak multiple languages, phone banking may be preferable. If voters are more densely located and speak only one or two languages, and bilingual canvassers are available, then door-to-door canvassing may be a better choice.

Either way, canvassing is enhanced by following up with those individuals who self-identify as likely to participate in the election, and by conducting the get-out-the-vote canvassing effort closer to Election Day. In general, initiative experiments indicate that efforts are most effective in the four weeks prior to an election; the results from the NALEO experiment in November 2008 suggest that an even shorter timeframe may be even more powerful, but these results await confirmation in a fully randomized experiment. However, while get-out-the-vote activities should be limited to the weeks just preceding an election, organizations should stay active in their local communities and in contact with potential target populations between election cycles in order to maintain the strong reputation that will enhance their effectiveness during future campaigns.

Evaluator review of qualitative field reports from 2008 underscores the importance of quality control in any campaign. Organizations that follow the recommendations in this report and use local canvassers to conduct personal outreach may not have the desired effect on targeted communities if they do not ensure that canvassers are properly trained and supervised. Care should also be taken to maintain high canvasser morale and to cultivate an atmosphere where canvassers feel comfortable bringing their concerns and suggestions to the attention of get-out-the-vote campaign organizers. Because canvassers have direct interaction with voters and with campaign materials (such as handouts and contact scripts), their feedback about what works and what does not can allow a campaign to make ongoing adjustments that might improve effectiveness. For example, canvassers might suggest a need for better maps to help maximize use of their time in the field, or they might call attention to perceived negative reactions by voters to a particular line in a mobilization script.

The California Votes Initiative was designed to increase voter participation among infrequent voters — particularly those in low-income and ethnic communities in the San Joaquin Valley and targeted counties of Southern California — and to determine best practices for doing so that could be shared with interested groups in California and across the country. Results from the experiments detailed here and in two earlier reports show that those goals have been achieved. Tens of thousands of targeted individuals were moved to vote as a result of initiative experiments, with approximately one-third of those individuals moved to continue to participate in later elections without further encouragement. The dozens of initiative experiments conducted from 2006 to 2008 have made significant contributions to our understanding of how to best move these communities to the polls, resulting in best practices that will allow groups throughout the country to continue to work for equal participation by all eligible voters.

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