



Introduction: Why Voter Mobilization Matters

The United States has the busiest election calendar on earth. Thanks to the many layers of federal, state, and local government, Americans have more opportunities to vote each decade than Britons, Germans, or Japanese have in their lifetimes. Thousands of Americans seek elective office each year, running for legislative, judicial, and administrative posts.

Given the frequency with which elections occur and the mundane quality of most of the contests, those who write about elections tend to focus exclusively on the high-visibility contests for president, senator, or governor. This focus gives a distorted impression of how election battles are typically waged. First, high-profile races often involve professionalized campaigns, staffed by a coterie of media consultants, pollsters, speechwriters, and event coordinators. Second, in order to reach large and geographically dispersed populations, these campaigns often place enormous emphasis on mass communications, such as television advertising. Third, the importance of these races calls press attention to the issues at stake and the attributes of the candidates.

The typical election, by contrast, tends to be waged on a smaller scale and at a more personal level. Few candidates for state representative or probate judge have access to the financial resources needed to produce and air television commercials. Even long-standing incumbents in state and municipal posts are often unknown to a majority of their constituents. The challenge that confronts candidates in low-salience elections is to target potential supporters and get them to the polls, while living within the constraints of a tight campaign budget.

A similar challenge confronts political and nonpartisan organizations that seek to mobilize voters for state and local elections. Making scarce campaign dollars go as far as possible requires those who manage these campaigns to think hard about the trade-offs. Is it best to assemble a local phone bank? Hire a telemarketing firm? Field a team of canvassers to contact voters door-to-door? Send direct mail and, if so, how many pieces of direct mail?

This book offers a guide for campaigns and organizations that seek to formulate cost-effective strategies for mobilizing voters. For each type of voter mobilization tactic, we pose two basic questions: (1) What steps are needed to put it into place, and (2) How many votes will be produced for each dollar spent? After summarizing the “how to do it” aspects of each get-out-the-vote (GOTV) tactic, we provide a scientifically rigorous assessment of whether it has been shown to produce votes in a cost-effective manner. We discuss some high-tech campaign tactics, such as voter mobilization through social media, some low-tech tactics, such as door-to-door canvassing, and some high-priced tactics, such as television and radio. The concluding chapter discusses the uncharted frontiers of GOTV research and guides readers through the process of conducting their own experiments to evaluate the effectiveness of their campaigns.

Does Voter Mobilization Matter?

The sleepy quality of many state and local elections often conceals what is at stake politically. Take, for example, the 1998 Kansas State Board of Education election that created a six-to-four conservative majority. This election featured a well-organized campaign that used personal contact with voters to mobilize hundreds of churchgoers in low-turnout Republican primaries. This victory at the polls culminated a year later in a dramatic change in policy. In August 1999 the Kansas State Board of Education voted six to four to drop evolution from science education standards, letting localities decide whether to teach creationism in addition to or instead of evolution. The story of hard-fought campaigns for the Board of Education does not end there. In 2000 moderates regained the majority and reinstated evolution into the science education standards. The 2002 election resulted in a five-five split between moderates and conservatives, and 2004 put conservatives back in control of the Board of Education. The conservative majority approved the teaching of “intelligent design” as an alternative to evolution (which could now be taught as a theory but not a scientific fact). Power switched once again in 2006,

and moderates repealed science guidelines questioning evolution. With an eight-to-two majority, moderates in 2013 adopted K-12 curriculum standards that treat evolution (and climate change) as fact.

These elections and their policy implications attracted national attention and renewed debates about science curricula and religious conviction. But what occurred in Kansas is a story not only about clashing ideologies but also about how campaigns work to get voters to the polls. We suspect that very few Kansans changed their mind about the merits of evolution and creationism over the course of these election cycles. What changed over time was who showed up to vote.

Although Americans often take a cynical view of state and local elections, supposing that it makes no difference which candidate fills a given office, the Kansas example is not as exceptional as it may seem. During the 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down many states' system of legislative representation as inconsistent with the principle of "one man, one vote." Before the Supreme Court's rulings, several states assigned equal representation to all counties, which meant that rural voters were heavily overrepresented in proportion to their share of the population. Once state legislatures were reorganized according to the "one man, one vote" principle, the share of government funds flowing to rural counties dropped dramatically.¹ Voting power matters. When groups such as conservative Christians or elderly Americans vote in large numbers, policy-makers have an incentive to take their concerns to heart. By the same token, elected officials can afford to disregard groups who vote at low rates, such as southern blacks before the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Largely excluded from the electorate by racially biased voter registration practices, southern blacks saw their needs for schooling, transportation, and jobs go unheeded by state and local government.

The Kansas State Board of Education elections also illustrate the power of small numbers in elections where turnout is low. The ability to mobilize a few hundred supporters can prove decisive when only a few thousand votes are cast. Knowing what it takes to generate votes can be extremely valuable. It can be valuable not only for a specific candidate conducting the voter mobilization campaign but also for all of the candidates who share similar party labels. Mobilizing 500 Republicans to support the GOP nominee in a state assembly race furnishes votes for Republican candidates up and down the ticket.

Even when turnout is high, as in presidential elections, the capacity to mobilize large numbers of voters can be decisive. Looking back at presidential contests over the past two decades, it appears that the 2004 election marked a turning point in campaign strategy. Before 2004 presidential

contenders primarily sought to persuade undecided voters. In 2004 both major candidates' campaigns, sensing that the electorate had largely made up its mind, poured unprecedented resources into voter mobilization in so-called battleground states. Roving armies of canvassers went door-to-door, while vast numbers of callers implored battleground residents to come out to vote in support of a candidate. According to the American National Election Study survey, voters in battleground states were more likely to report having been visited or called by the campaigns in 2004 than in any previous national election going back to 1948. Although the impact of this activity on the ground is hard to measure precisely, it appears to have contributed significantly to the dramatic surge in voter turnout in battleground states that occurred between 2000 and 2004.² This trend continued in 2008, as the Obama for America campaign funneled unprecedented resources into voter mobilization. In 2012 both sides mounted substantial ground campaigns. According to the American National Election Survey, more than 40 percent of adults reported receiving some kind of personal contact with campaigns in 2004, 2008, and 2012, whereas this figure never exceeded 30 percent between 1956 and 1996. One careful analysis contends that on-the-ground campaign activity in presidential battleground states nowadays raises turnout by more than 10 percentage points.⁵

Getting Advice on Getting Out the Vote

Campaigns vary enormously in their goals: some are partisan, some non-partisan; some focus on name recognition, some on persuasion, and some on mobilizing their base of loyal voters. Some campaigns seek to educate citizens, some to register citizens, and some to motivate citizens. But varied as they are, campaigns have important and obvious commonalities. As Election Day approaches and campaigns move into GOTV mode, their aims become quite similar and their purposes very narrow. By the week before the election, they are all homing in on one simple task: to get their people to the polls. Each campaign struggles with the same basic challenge: how to allocate remaining resources in order to turn out the largest number of targeted voters.

Ask around and you will receive plenty of advice on the best way to mobilize voters in those final days or weeks. You may hear that it is one part mailings to three parts phone calls for an incumbent race. You may hear that, regardless of the office, you should build your campaign around

Box 1-1. Dubious Evidence

Many campaign services can be purchased from private vendors. These vendors often present evidence about the effectiveness of their products in the form of testimonials. Here is one example from the website of a leading commercial phone bank:

On June 5, Election Day in Los Angeles, at 5 p.m. EST, [our phone bank] received a telephone call from the James Hahn for Mayor campaign. Voter turnout was heavy in precincts of his opponent, and the Hahn campaign had to get out more of his voters.

In one hour, [our phone bank] had perfected a script, manipulated voter data to match phone numbers, and programmed the calls. By the time the polls closed, our firm had placed 30,000 live GOTV calls and reached 10,000 targeted voters.

James Hahn was elected mayor with almost 54 percent of the vote.

For all we know, this phone bank did a splendid job of mobilizing voters. And, in fairness, this firm does not claim credit for Hahn's 54 percent share of the vote; the fact is simply allowed to speak for itself.

When reading this type of testimonial, it is important to bear in mind that there is no control group. How many votes would Hahn have won had his campaign not conducted this eleventh-hour calling campaign?

It is also useful to keep things in proportion. This phone bank spoke with 10,000 voters, but Hahn won the election by a margin of 38,782 votes.

phone calls and, if you can afford it, buy radio airtime. You may even hear that, for a nonpartisan GOTV campaign, you should try door-to-door canvassing but fall back on leafleting if you run short on campaign workers. Much of this advice is based on conjecture—conjecture drawn from experience perhaps, but conjecture nonetheless (see box 1-1).

What sets this book apart from the existing “how to win an election” canon is the quality of the research on which it relies. The studies reported in this book use *randomized experiments* to assess the effects of GOTV interventions. These experiments divide lists of potential voters into a *treatment group* that receives some kind of campaign intervention and a *control group* that does not. After the election is over, researchers examine public records to see who voted and then tabulate the results to determine

whether those assigned to receive the GOTV treatment voted at higher rates than those assigned to the control group. Although these experiments still leave room for interpretation, their scientific rigor goes a long way toward replacing speculation with evidence.

Another aspect of our work that contributes to our objectivity is that we are not in the business of selling campaign services. In the past, scanning for truth about the effectiveness of various GOTV strategies was like having to consult with salespeople about whether to purchase the items they are selling. Many campaign consultants have financial interests in direct mail companies, phone banks, or media consultancy services. In this book, we make a concerted effort to incorporate the results of every experimental study, even studies that are not (yet) in the public domain.

Two constraints of this work must be acknowledged at the outset. First, high-profile campaigns, such as U.S. Senate races or presidential races, have rarely conducted experiments. Although we believe that the findings discussed here are relevant to such large-scale campaigns insofar as they rely on GOTV tactics such as phone banks or direct mail, few studies assess the effectiveness of mass media, on which these large-scale campaigns rely heavily.⁴

Second, although they are of obvious importance, GOTV strategies are not the only factors at play in an election. When we speak of the effectiveness of GOTV techniques, we have in mind the percentage increase in voter turnout that can be attributed to professional phone callers or direct mail, for instance. Using the most effective get-out-the-vote strategy will not guarantee victory. All the other factors that shape the electoral fortunes of a candidate—personality, platform, party, and campaign management—are relevant as well (see box 1-2). Voter mobilization campaigns are sometimes derided as “field goal units,” adding only a few percentage points to a candidate’s vote share. Although few GOTV campaigns are capable of reversing the fortunes of an overmatched candidate, field goals do win close games.

GOTV Research and Larger Questions about Why People Do Not Vote

Political observers often turn to broad-gauge explanations for why so few Americans vote: alienation from public life, the lack of a proportional representation system, the failings of civic education, the geographic mobility of the population. Many books written by academics focus exclusively on these broad cultural or institutional explanations.

Box 1-2. Generating Votes: Mobilization versus Persuasion

In order to see how GOTV fits into campaign strategy, imagine that you are a Republican candidate running for local office. There are 8,000 registered voters, and Election Day is approaching. The 2,000 registered Republicans favor you 80 versus 20 percent, but ordinarily only half of them vote. The remaining 6,000 people in the electorate favor your opponent 67.5 versus 32.5 percent; one-third of them can be expected to vote. So, with 800 votes from registered Republicans and 650 from the rest of the electorate, you are in danger of losing 1,450 to 1,550:

<i>Intent</i>	<i>Voters</i>		<i>Nonvoters</i>	
	<i>Registered Republicans</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Registered Republicans</i>	<i>Others</i>
Intend to vote for you	800	650	800	1,300
Intend to vote for your opponent	200	1,350	200	2,700

Thinking about how to win in this situation is really a matter of thinking about where to find at least 100 additional votes. All the factors that got you those 1,450 votes—your good looks, your record in office, and so forth—are important in shaping the eventual outcome of the election, but the strategic decisions from this point forward must focus on what you will do now to change the expected outcome.

A GOTV strategy aims to transform nonvoters into voters. If you can identify the 2,100 abstainers who would vote for you, try to get at least 100 of them to the polls. Voter identification (ID) programs use brief polls to identify these potential supporters, who will later be targeted for mobilization.

Voter ID programs require planning and money, however. A simpler approach is to focus GOTV attention solely on Republicans. Bear in mind that if you attempt to mobilize some of the 1,000 Republicans who otherwise would not vote, you will need to get at least 167 to the polls because you only gain sixty net votes for every 100 Republicans you mobilize.

Alternatively, a persuasion strategy attempts to convert some of the 1,550 opposing voters into your supporters. Conversions rapidly close the margin of votes between you and your opponent. Just fifty successes would make the race a dead heat. It is also possible to blend persuasion and mobilization strategies, for example, by appealing to the 2,000 Republicans in ways that both mobilize and persuade them. By focusing primarily on voter mobilization, this book understates the number of net votes generated by tactics that simultaneously mobilize and persuade.

This book, in contrast, is concerned with factors that affect turnout over the course of a few days or weeks. We do not discuss the ways in which political participation is shaped by fundamental features of our political, social, and economic system, although we agree that structural and psychological barriers to voting are worthy of study and that certain reforms might raise turnout. In the concluding chapter, we describe research that might be useful to those interested in learning more about how voter turnout relates to these broader features of society. The focus of this book is quite different. Our aim is to look closely at how GOTV campaigns are structured and to figure out how various GOTV tactics affect voter participation. This close-to-the-ground approach is designed to provide campaigns with useful information about the effectiveness of common GOTV techniques. With six weeks until an election, even the most dedicated campaign team cannot reshape the country's culture, party system, or election laws. What a campaign can do, however, is make informed choices about its GOTV plans, ensuring that its resources are being used efficiently to produce votes.

Evidence versus War Stories

Before delving into the research findings, we want to call attention to a cluster of assumptions that often hinder informed GOTV decisionmaking. One is the belief that the experts know best. People who have worked with a lot of campaigns are assumed to know which tactics work and which do not. Campaign professionals often speak forcefully and authoritatively about what works. On the other end of the spectrum is the assumption that no one really knows what works because no one can adequately assess what works. There is no way to rerun an election using different GOTV methods, no parallel universe in which to watch the very same campaign focusing its efforts on mass mailings, then on phone banks, and then on television ads. The final assumption is that if everybody is doing it, it must be useful: thousands of campaigns can't be wrong about prerecorded calls!

The following chapters respond to these misguided assumptions. In short,

✓ Experts, be they consultants, seasoned campaigners, or purveyors of GOTV technology, rarely measure effectiveness. Hal Malchow, one of the first campaign professionals to embrace experimentation, reports that

his calls for rigorous evaluation often go unheeded, notwithstanding the large quantities of money at stake.⁵

✓ Experts may report speculations in the guise of “findings,” but without a rigorous research design, those “findings” are suspect. People who manage campaigns and sell campaign services have a wealth of experience in deploying campaign resources, formulating campaign messages, and supervising campaign staff. But lacking a background in research design or statistical inference, they frequently misrepresent (innocently in many cases) correlation as causation. They might claim, for instance, that a radio GOTV campaign is responsible for increasing the Latino vote in a particular media market. In support of this assertion, they might point to lower Latino turnout in a previous election or in a neighboring media market. But are the two successive elections truly comparable? Are the neighboring media markets truly comparable? If not, this style of proof-by-anecdote is potentially misleading.

✓ There is an accurate way to assess the effectiveness of GOTV techniques, namely, through experimental research. Randomly assigning a set of precincts or media markets to different campaign tactics makes meaningful and even-handed evaluation possible.

✓ Last, our results may surprise you. Just because everybody is doing it does not necessarily mean that it works. Large sums of money are routinely wasted on ineffective GOTV tactics.

We will count ourselves successful if you not only learn from the experimental results we report but also become more discerning when evaluating claims that rest on anecdotes and other nonexperimental evidence. The recurrent theme of this book is the importance of adopting a skeptical scientific attitude when evaluating campaign tactics.

Preview of Our Findings

The overarching conclusion that emerges from rigorous voter turnout research may be summarized as follows: the more personal the interaction between campaign and potential voter, the more it raises a person’s chances of voting. Door-to-door canvassing by enthusiastic volunteers is the gold-standard mobilization tactic; chatty, unhurried phone calls seem to work well, too. Automatically dialed, prerecorded GOTV phone calls, by contrast, are utterly impersonal and, evidently, wholly ineffective at getting people to vote.

Here is the trade-off confronting those who manage campaigns: the more personal the interaction, the harder it is to reproduce on a large scale. Canvassing door-to-door is therefore not the answer for every GOTV campaign. That is why we consider this book to be a “shoppers’ guide.” No candidate or campaign manager can read this book and, without considering his or her own circumstances, find the answer. The key is to assess your resources, goals, and political situation and then form a judgment about what tactics will produce the most votes at the lowest cost. What we do is provide a synopsis of scientifically rigorous evidence about what has worked in other campaigns.

Structure of the Book

We begin the book by explaining why experimental evidence warrants special attention. Chapter 2 discusses the nuts and bolts of how randomized experiments are conducted and why they are better than other approaches to studying the effectiveness of GOTV tactics. Chapters 3 through 9 present our evaluations of GOTV mobilization techniques: door-to-door canvassing, literature and signage, mail, phone calls, e-mail, social media, campaign events, and communication through the mass media. Chapter 10 assesses the vote-producing efficiency of registration drives, whether conducted in person or by mail. These chapters discuss the practical challenges of conducting these campaigns and provide a cost-benefit analysis of each GOTV tactic. To help readers make informed decisions about which kinds of messages to deploy, chapter 11 summarizes existing theory and evidence about various GOTV appeals. Chapter 12 wraps up by discussing some of the many unanswered questions in GOTV research. In the interest of helping you to customize research for your own purposes, the concluding chapter also gives some pointers about how to conduct experimental studies of voter turnout. Experimentation is not some special form of sorcery known only to college professors. Anyone can do it, and several innovative mobilization experiments have been conducted by readers of previous editions of this book.