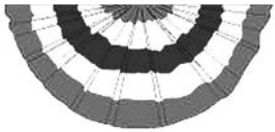
CHAPTER ONE



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 lifetime. 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 form of voter mobilization, 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 an impartial, scientifically rigorous assessment of whether it has been shown to produce votes in a cost-effective manner. The chapters that follow cover the staples of state and municipal election campaigns: door-to-door canvassing, leafleting, direct mail, and phone banks. We also discuss some newer campaign tactics, such as voter mobilization through e-mail. The concluding chapter discusses other forms of GOTV activity and the research that is currently under way to evaluate their effectiveness.

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 elections 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. This move 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. Very few Kansans changed their mind about the merits of evolution and creationism over the course of the election campaign. What changed in 1998—

and in subsequent elections, as countermobilization campaigns caused conservatives to lose their majority—was who showed up to vote.

Although Americans often take a cynical view of state and local elections, supposing that who fills a given office makes no difference, 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." Prior to 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, policymakers have an incentive to take their concerns seriously. By the same token, elected officials can afford to disregard groups that vote at low rates, such as southern blacks prior to 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 a few hundred votes in a reliable way can therefore 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.

Getting Advice on Getting Out the Vote

Campaigns vary enormously in their goals: some are partisan, some nonpartisan; 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 question: How should remaining resources be allocated in order to turn out the largest number of targeted voters?

Ask around and you will receive plenty of advice on what is 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, it is two parts television and radio, if you can afford it, to two parts phone calls. You may even hear that, for a nonpartisan GOTV campaign, it is four parts door-to-door canvassing, but you will never be able to get enough canvassers, so it is best just to make phone calls. Almost all 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 five years of rigorous scientific research. Every study reported in this book used a *randomized experimental design*, which is a research methodology that produces a reliable way to gauge effects—in this case, the effects of GOTV interventions. In a nutshell, the experiments we report divide lists of registered voters into a group that receives the intervention in question and a group that does not. After the election is over, researchers examine public records to see who voted and then tabulate the results in order to determine whether those assigned to receive the GOTV treatment voted at higher rates than those assigned to the control group. Although these field experiments still leave room for interpretation, they go 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 or not 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 conducted since the mid-1990s, not just the ones that are congenial to a particular point of view.

Two constraints of this work must be acknowledged at the outset. First, we have not yet looked at high-profile campaigns, such as U.S. Senate races or presidential races. Although we believe that the findings

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.

discussed here are relevant to such large-scale campaigns insofar as they rely on GOTV tactics such as phone banks or direct mail, we have yet to conduct experiments that speak directly to the effectiveness of mass media, on which these large-scale campaigns rely heavily.

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—persona, platform, party, and campaign

management—are relevant as well. A spectacularly successful GOTV campaign might lift an overmatched candidate from 28 to 38 percent or a competitive candidate from 48 to 58 percent. Often, winning elections is possible only when voter mobilization strategies are combined with messages that persuade voters to vote in a particular way (see box 1-2).

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. We might call these long-term—very long-term—GOTV considerations. Many books written by academics focus exclusively on these explanations.

This book, in contrast, is concerned with GOTV considerations in the short term. 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 large-scale reforms might well be beneficial. 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 on the effectiveness of common GOTV techniques. With six weeks until an election, even the most dedicated campaign team will not be able to reshape the country's basic constitutional framework or the political culture of American society. 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 what works: that knowledge

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:

	Voters		*Nonvoters*	
Intent	*Registered Republicans*	*Others*	*Registered Republicans*	*Others*
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 "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.

Conversely, a demobilization strategy strives to transform voters into nonvoters. You could accomplish this by scaring or demoralizing some of the 1,550 people who would otherwise cast votes for your opponent.

Finally, a persuasion strategy attempts to convert some of these 1,550 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 solely on voter mobilization, this book understates the number of net votes generated by tactics that simultaneously mobilize and persuade.

is, after all, what makes them the experts. Someone with a lot of campaign experience *must* know which tactics work and which do not under assorted circumstances. On the other end of the spectrum is the idea that no one really knows what works because no one can adequately measure 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: 5,000 campaigners can't be wrong about prerecorded calls!

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

✔ Experts, be they consultants, seasoned campaigners, or purveyors of GOTV technology, rarely, if ever, measure effectiveness. Hal Malchow, one of the few consultants to embrace experimentation, reports that his calls for rigorous evaluation repeatedly go unheeded. Notwithstanding the large quantities of money at stake, Malchow observes that "no one really knows how much difference mail and phone GOTV programs make."[2]

✔ Experts may report speculations in the guise of "findings," but without a rigorous research design, those "findings" are suspect. Those 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 the lack of change in the Latino vote in a neighboring media market. Because it is difficult to know whether the two media markets are truly comparable, we find this form of proof-by-anecdote unpersuasive.

✔ There *is* an accurate way to measure the effectiveness of GOTV techniques, namely, through experimental research. Randomly assigning a set of precincts or media markets to different campaign tactics makes meaningful causal inferences possible.

✔ Lastly, our results may surprise you. Just because everybody is doing it does not necessarily mean that it works. It appears that 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.

Preview of Our Findings

The Kansas State Board of Education election mentioned at the outset of this chapter illustrates the central finding in our studies across eighteen states and five election years: *A personal approach to mobilizing voters is generally more effective than an impersonal approach*. That is, 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 friends and neighbors 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 look at 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 7 present our evaluations of GOTV mobilization techniques: door-to-door, leaflets, mail, phone calls, and e-mail. These chapters discuss the practical challenges of conducting these campaigns and provide a cost-benefit analysis of each GOTV tactic. Chapter 8 wraps up by

discussing the state of evidence concerning other types of voter mobilization campaigns, such as civic education programs in high schools and televised public service announcements. 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. The experimental study of voter mobilization is not some special form of sorcery known only to Yale professors. Anyone can do it. We close by discussing the role that scientifically rigorous GOTV research may play in encouraging greater levels of voter participation.