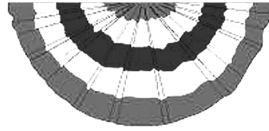


## CHAPTER ONE



# Introduction: Why Voter Mobilization Matters

**T**he 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?

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 Kansas State 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 Kansas State 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.

As politics in the United States has grown more ideologically polarized, victories by one party or the other cause abrupt policy shifts. The narrow victories by Republican presidential candidates in 2000 and 2016 led to dramatic changes to the tax code a year later. An analysis of hundreds of close gubernatorial elections finds that Democrats who won close elections presided over increases in spending on education, health, and public safety.<sup>1</sup> A similar study of nearly 1,000 close mayoral elections reveals that narrowly-elected Democrats presided over a sizable increase in municipal spending.<sup>2</sup>

The ability to mobilize supporters can be decisive in close elections, and close elections are plentiful. In 2018, the margin of victory separating Democratic and Republican candidates for the House of Representatives was under 1 percent in nine districts and under 2 percent in ten more. Granted, many House constituencies are uncompetitive, but 89% of Americans live in jurisdictions where at least one close election for some federal or state office occurs over the course of six years.<sup>3</sup> This share grows even larger when we consider the many offices that are contested in primary or municipal elections, where the margin of victory is often less than 500 votes. 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.

## 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 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 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.

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. When they cite scientific evidence (such as the studies we have

conducted), they do so selectively to portray what they are selling in a positive light. In this book, we make a concerted effort to incorporate the results of every experimental study of which we are aware.

## **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.

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 strategy, 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 assumptions that often hinder informed GOTV decisionmaking. One such assumption is that 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. A third 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.<sup>4</sup>
- ✓ Experts frequently adduce dubious statistics purporting to show the effectiveness of their campaign efforts. 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 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. This method has been used hundreds of times to evaluate GOTV campaigns.
- ✓ 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 rarely get 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 offer is a synopsis of scientifically rigorous evidence about how well various GOTV tactics worked in specific contexts. Thanks to our experience conducting experiments, as well as our immersion in the published and unpublished literature, we are better positioned than other authors of how-to books on campaigns to describe the experimental findings.

## 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, 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 re-

search. 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.