

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA: What really drives voters to the polls?
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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. On this episode Brookings Press Director Bill Finan sits down with Donald P. Green, the J.W. Burgess Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. Dr. Green is co-author with Alan S. Gerber of *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, now in its fourth edition from The Brookings Press.

In *Get Out the Vote*, Green and Gerber take a scientific approach to the challenge of voter mobilization and examine new data on the efficiency of various campaign tactics, including door-to-door canvassing, email, direct mail, and telephone calls.

Also on the program a new edition of Wessel's Economic Update. Senior Fellow David Wessel discusses whether the crisis in state and local pensions we so often hear about is really a crisis at all.

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And now, here's Bill Finan with Donald Green.

FINAN: Thank you, Fred. And Don, hello.

GREEN: Hello. Thanks for having me.

FINAN: And thanks for joining us today. And congratulations, also, on the fourth edition of *Get Out the Vote*. The first edition appeared about 20 years ago?

GREEN: 2004.

FINAN: 2004, so 15. Why this new edition?

GREEN: I would say that we like to keep up with the literature and continue to freshen things up. We don't want the reader to think that our awareness of the literature has grown stale over time or that

we've become complacent. So it's maybe a compulsive activity on our part, but we're back at it every few years.

FINAN: No, I'm glad that we were able to bring out a new edition, too, especially since you were able to incorporate the 2016 election and we're coming out just before 2002. This is a really good book. It's well worth the read in understanding why voting matters so much.

And for me, one of the most important anecdotes that show that is at the very beginning of the book when you tell the story of the elections for the Kansas State Board of Education, that those elections decided whether Creationism would be part of the school curriculum or not, whether Intelligent Design would be part of the school curriculum or not. And you make this point, you and your co-author make this point, at the very end, "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 is who showed up to vote."

It just seems so essential to underscore that point, that your vote matters. You don't have to change anyone's mind. You can change what has to change with your vote alone.

GREEN: That's right. I think that it's especially poignant in the context of relatively small-scale elections or low-ceiling elections where the already small electorate has shrunk to vanishingly small proportions. That would be typical for municipal elections, off-year elections. The United States has the most frequent elections in the world and many of them scarcely attract a crowd.

FINAN: I think something that many folks won't recognize from the book's title is that it's really a how-to book in many ways. It's a how-to book with intellectual backbone. And unlike many of those who you mentioned in the book, you aren't in it for the money, to see a campaign strategy. What you have to say about what works is based on the studies that have been carried out and, as you note with this edition, been refreshed, too, to the most recent studies, not how much someone is willing to pay for a strategy is not the guidance here on how to get out the vote.

And you identify a number of strategies to get out the vote and I'd like to talk about some of them today. One that you put particular stock in is canvassing, the technique of visiting voters in their homes. What is it about canvassing that makes it especially effective?

GREEN: I think part of it has to do with the personal connection that a canvasser might make with a person at the door. You know, particularly if they can have a kind of meeting of the minds that allows the person at the door who might be on the fence about voting to feel as though there's been an authentic personal invitation. Somebody is concerned enough about the election to come around and invite that person to cast a ballot to make his or her voice heard.

There are different kinds of canvassing, of course. The easiest kinds of canvassing have to do with kind of this nonpartisan, make your voice heard appeal. Some of the more difficult are the canvassing efforts that are trying to mobilize a like-minded co-partisan. So if I know you're a Republican and I'm a Republican, and we can rev each other up and get each other enthusiastic about voting, that's a somewhat more difficult task only because you're not sure if we're like-minded Republicans until into the conversation. So you have to build rapport with the respondent.

And then the most difficult kind of canvassing is where you're trying to reach over to the other side and trying to not only convince him or her to vote, but also convince him or her to vote for your preferred candidate. And that can lead to some awkward or slams in the face. It's a much more grueling activity, but potentially more valuable for a campaign. If they can succeed, they can get not only a person to vote, but they can subtract a vote from the other side.

FINAN: You make the point, too, that it's one of the more cost-effective ways of getting voters to the polls, too.

GREEN: That's especially true if you have a group of genuinely committed either volunteers or paid volunteers, lightly paid volunteers, since nobody's going to make a fortune doing this kind of work. It tends to pay off in other ways, too, insofar as you can build voting habits that might endure over time,

so there are some good things to it.

The bad things are associated with the logistics of recruiting and supervising volunteers, training them, calling them day after day, and getting them to work at a scale sufficient to have an impact on an election. It's just not easy work. And it's also not very profitable work for campaign consultants. And so this tends not to be their preferred activity vis-à-vis, say, direct mail or robocalls or other kinds of things that can be mass produced.

FINAN: Yeah. No, that was interesting to me that it's fallen out of favor in some ways just because it isn't as profitable as some of these other ways, which we'll get to in a moment.

So the book is a how-to book. But as I said, it's more than a how-to book. It has intellectual backbone. How did you approach your research for this book?

GREEN: That's right. I think the thing that sets this book apart from other how-to books is that it focuses only on scientific evidence of the highest standard. The most rigorous scientific evidence is that of a randomized controlled trial akin to what you would see in pharmaceutical research to evaluate a new drug, for example. Here vast numbers of voters are randomly assigned to either a treatment group where they're canvassed or they're called or they're mailed or something to encourage them to vote and the control group is left alone. And then at the end of the election public records are consulted in order to examine the voting rates in treatment and control.

So these are very large randomized trials conducted again and again. There are hundreds of them summarized in the book. And I would say that although this book is not necessarily a traditional political science book, it's not written for academics, in some ways it's based on an unusually political science-y base of evidence.

FINAN: It's very much a book that puts the science in political science.

GREEN: Yeah. Yes. Sometimes we joke call a political scientist as kind of like a gag line. You know, no one would call a political scientist ordinarily. But this is one of those cases where political

science has actually changed the way in which campaign craft operates in the United States.

FINAN: How did the canvassing work in the 2016 presidential election? There seems to be a conventional wisdom that the Trump campaign did not have a ground game, yet it still won -- well, it didn't win the national popular vote, but it did win the Electoral College. But is it true that the Trump campaign didn't have a ground game?

GREEN: It was kind of a mixed bag. You know, I think that much of the Trump ground game was a kind of peer-to-peer relationship exercise. Even if they didn't necessarily have armies of people knocking on doors, they certainly had social networks mobilizing members. And again, you see that not only on Facebook chat groups, we see that in terms of ways in which congregants in conservative Christian communities were interacting with one another and so on and so forth. And so I think that you can achieve a lot of the same things that one would achieve with traditional canvassing through more informal conversations within the household, the family network, and so on.

FINAN: The book divides itself into, as I said, it's a how-to book, so it divides itself up into very practical strategies. And there's a chapter devoted to signage, those signs, the signs, those ubiquitous signs.

GREEN: Yes.

FINAN: How well do those work?

GREEN: Sort of. I think it's kind of half-full, half-empty kind of thing depending on whom you talk to. If you talk to a sign enthusiast, they love that chapter because they think, oh, we're finally vindicated. We are actually generating votes. But if you talk to a sign detractor, they say, well, it doesn't do that much. And I think that they're both right.

You can't win an election if you're an overmatched candidate by planting signs. On the other hand, if you're hoping that every vote counts in a close election, it can make a difference. So it's not nothing, but it's not going to be a night or day effect either.

What's kind of comical about that chapter is the lengths to which people go to sabotage other candidates' sign campaigns. So I encourage voters to Google "Candidate arrested for stealing law signs" for some amusing anecdotes of that sort. It's not a scientific testimony to the effectiveness of lawn signs, but it certainly does attest to the psychological significance.

FINAN: And then there's a chapter on direct mail, sending all those letters that appear in our mailbox. How effective is that?

GREEN: Well, you know, I'd say that the ordinary reminder to vote is pretty darn ineffective. Other kinds of relatively bland encouragements that provide information about when and where to vote are minimally effective, probably less than a half a percentage point. Somewhat more effective are more forceful assertions that people should do their civic duty and vote and so much of that chapter and a subsequent chapter is devoted to different kinds of messaging campaigns, some having to do with social norms and social pressure, others having to do with gratitude, expressions of gratitude.

So there are different flavors of messages depending on how much a flack a campaign wants to take in return for somewhat hard-hitting messages. The bottom line is that direct mail doesn't do a whole lot, but it does do something if the messaging has been scientifically evaluated in a way that shows it's working and that kind of messaging can be deployed again and again to good effect.

FINAN: So anyone who's in the printing industry is not going to be very happy with what we're finding here so far.

GREEN: They've been pretty happy, though. Over the years I think we've probably been a net boon to the printing industry because our initial experiments suggested that the typical piece of direct mail was worthless. And then as experiment after experiment zeroed in on the kind of mail that works, we became the little darling of the mail industry, although we're certainly not getting any kickbacks.

FINAN: No. Then there's the phone calls, too, the robocalls, the calls from the local party phone bank. They're effectiveness?

GREEN: Diminishing. Low and diminishing. I would say that the more call resembles the kind of thing that you would get from a commercial phone bank, the less effective it is and has become. So much so that actually that line of campaigning is starting to diminish a bit. It's getting harder to orchestrate a phone bank now that rules about calling cellphones forbid the automatic dialing of cellphones. And so nowadays you see split phone banking efforts where commercial phone banks will still call the traditional landline numbers, which are rapidly diminishing, and then by-hand phone banks will be doing cellphones. Not everybody welcomes a cellphone call from a stranger, and so that whole tactic is starting to be upended.

That said, you know, to the extent that there's any payoff at all from these kinds of efforts it tends to be disproportionately in favor of volunteer phone banks, relatively unscripted and authentic.

FINAN: And then there's social media. And before reading your book I had high hopes for emails and text messaging, how they might penetrate and create greater turnout. But no, I find out, especially for email. Can you explain why email isn't taking the place of direct mail or phone calls?

GREEN: Email is remarkably ineffective. Remarkably because it's ineffective even from the standpoint of things like registration. You would think that sending someone an electronic link to a voter registration site would increase registration, but actually no. It's as though people get lost in a kind of vortex of procrastination or something and they don't end up registering at higher rates than the treatment group. So that's kind of disappointing.

The thing that email is good for is for organizing and so are outreach efforts of all sorts. They're really, really good for, you know, drawing a crowd together. But in terms of voting, not so much. There's very, very little evidence that it works.

Other things, like text messaging --

FINAN: Right.

GREEN: -- seem to be more effective, perhaps because the things that cause your phone to

chime gets your immediate attention, but their effectiveness should not be overstated. Massive one-to-one text messaging experiments that were conducted in 2016 suggest on average an increase in turnout of roughly 3 percentage points or about 3 additional votes per 1,000 recipients.

FINAN: Are there restrictions on text messaging as there are with calling cellphones?

GREEN: Yes, and they have to do with, you know, whether people are part of an opt-in list or a not opt-out list. And I think that that loophole has been exploited to the hilt and now millions and millions of people who kind of unwittingly don't opt out are now subject to these kinds of one-to-one text messaging campaigns, often to their irritation because once you're a part of one, you often get a slew of them.

FINAN: There's also Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the impact they've had. I mean, obviously everyone wants to think that Facebook had a very large role in the last election.

GREEN: You know, it's funny because although one can certainly imagine a case whereby Facebook contributes to organizing and other kinds of political activities, the track record with respect to either persuasion or voter mobilization is incredibly poor. As far as I know, I think that Facebook experiments have a perfect record of showing that Facebook never works. In the persuasion experiments it's zero and in the mobilization experiments, some of which were done on a very grand scale, a very elegant research design.

And so I have no particular dog in the fight about whether Russian interference had an effect through Facebook or any other medium. If you had to read straight off the scientific literature on this topic, I think you'd be skeptical.

FINAN: No, that's interesting. Most of it seems to be based on anecdote rather than data and it's nice to see that there's some data here.

GREEN: Or maybe the thing is that they're based on the supposition that if umpteen million people are exposed to the ad, surely it must have had some cumulative effect. But, you know, that's not

an assumption that's warranted by the scientific literature because some of that is based on very, very large scientific studies with randomized treatment and control.

FINAN: You have an entire chapter dealing with traditional mass media and a similar argument could be made there, too. You argue that it appears cost-effective, but the overall sense I got from the assessment is that you are not firm believers in this medium as the primary source of creating voter turnout.

GREEN: Right. I think that the impact that we're talking about is probably fairly modest and probably ephemeral. The kinds of studies that have been done seem to suggest that the effects of any kind of media advertising dissipate rather quickly. And so, while that might be good news to a state that has early voting such that ads could propel people to vote or vote in a particular direction and immediately, by and large those results suggest that the typical ad dollar that's spent well in advance of the election has lost its effectiveness by the time the election rolls around.

FINAN: One of the more entertaining parts of the book was the discussion of festivals, especially those that were convened in the 19th century before, as you point, the progressives changed voting behavior, men, white men, congregating in saloons to vote and whiskey flowing freely.

GREEN: Yes.

FINAN: You point out that that's when we saw our highest voter participation rates, too, in the country historically.

GREEN: That's right. And progressives were none too happy about it either because they thought elections should literally be sober affairs and they didn't like party bosses or employers or anybody else getting close to voters as they voted. They wanted to institute the secret ballot. And the combination of the 50-foot rule plus the secret ballot made voting a much less interesting affair for the people who came to see and be seen and to enjoy a day full of whiskey along the way. And then turnout plummeted.

And so the modern study, the scientific study of Get Out the Vote activities really dates back to the mid-1920s when people all across the political spectrum were becoming quite concerned about the big dramatic drop in voter turnout from roughly 80 percent to below 50 percent.

FINAN: The large gatherings that Donald Trump has had and had in 2016 and continues to have now, do you think they had an effect on voter turnout for his campaign?

GREEN: It's a little hard to say. I think it's ambiguous. Even the days of the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign large rallies of that sort would essentially be leveraged in order to create kind of instant pop-up Get Out the Vote campaigns because people would literally go from a rally directly to a phone banking operation and call their friends to share the enthusiasm. And I think that that is now relatively unorganized as far as the Trump campaign, although it might be more organized as an activity as we move into 2020.

FINAN: At the end of the book you offer some pointers on how to mobilize voters and they seem very simple and real. Make them feel wanted at the polls. Build on their preexisting motivation to vote. Emphasize that voting is a civic duty. How did you come to these conclusions?

GREEN: Well, these are based on lots and lots of randomized experiments over more than 20 years gauging what works and what doesn't work. And so while none of that seems totally counterintuitive, you have to remember that we winnowed out a lot of things that also seemed like intuitive methods for mobilizing voters, like stressing the issues that are important to them and things like that, or providing them a ballot guide and other things that are demonstrably ineffective.

And so to the extent that there's a message in the book, it's if you're wondering whether, say, your 19-year-old newly registered voter is going to vote, it's going to really come down to the social milieu in which that person approaches that election. If that person's surrounded by people who are enthusiastic about voting and who maybe bring or her along to the polls, yes, with a high probability. But if, on the other hand, they're sort of left to their own devices, maybe they will, maybe they won't

because they're largely going to be outside the fray of the elections. Campaigns tend to give relatively heed to voters who have a poor record of voting in the past because they think of them as low propensity voters.

FINAN: Don, thanks for joining us to talk about your new book and give us these pointers on how to get out the vote. We'll be seeing how it works in just a year or so.

GREEN: My pleasure, Bill. Thanks for having me.

DEWS: You can find the book *Get Out the Vote* on our website or wherever you like to get books.

Here's senior fellow David Wessel, director of the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update.

One of the cool things about working at Brookings is that your colleagues often challenge you to rethink conventional wisdom. Like other people, I've heard a lot about the crisis in state and local pension funds. Then came my colleague Louise Sheiner with a very different take.

Most analyses of state and local pension funds focus on valuing the benefits promised to retirees and comparing those to the funds' portfolios of stocks and bonds. The gap between the present value of those liabilities and assets, sometimes called unfunded pension liabilities, is often huge and scary. The size depends on the discount rate you use to calculate the liabilities over time in the future and the rate of return you expect to get on your growth and assets. But the implicit assumption is that pension plans should set aside enough money to cover, or they call it "pre-fund," all the pension funds they've promised to pay in the future.

Now, Louise and her co-author, Byron Lutz of the Federal Reserve Board, say that may not be the best way to look at this. They took a sample of 40 state and local pension funds and looked at their cash flows over time to determine when, or even if, they'll require outside funding to pay benefits. The

way they see it, a government with an unfunded pension liability is like a government having debt outstanding. And a government's debt is sustainable as long as its size relative to the economy isn't constantly increasing.

Their message is that for most, though certainly not all, state and local pension plans there is no imminent crisis in the sense that the plans are not likely to exhaust their assets over the next few decades. That said, many plans are not stable and adjustments, either higher contributions or reduced benefits, will be needed. The trick for these economists is to figure out how large that adjustment is and how urgent it is to address it.

Now, Louise and Byron's argument sounds jarring at first, dangerously complacent, you might say. But actually, state and local pension funds have traditionally operated short of full funding. And setting aside enough money today to pay all future pensions may not actually make current and future taxpayers and pension beneficiaries better off.

State and local governments have been ramping up pension plan contributions substantially over recent years, and that means they spend less on education and health and infrastructure as a consequence. And that can have negative consequences for future economic growth and increases in living standards.

Now, of course, there are thousands of state and local pension funds across the United States, so any generalization is risky. Some of them can go for a long time without requiring an injection of money, some of them are dangerously near the abyss. Cities with shrinking population and tax bases that are shrinking are a special case. Cutting public services to make pension funds stronger and thereby making the city a less attractive place to live is not a great strategy. These funds will simply need bailouts from outside.

Sometimes overlooked in the overheated public debate is that governments have been chipping away at the generosity of their employee pension plans. Seventeen of the 40 plans that Louise and

Byron have examined have made their cost of living adjustments less generous since 2007. That holds down benefit costs in the future.

Other plans have been made less generous for newly hired workers or they change the formula for calculating benefits. So even though the number of retirees in these plans is rapidly rising because baby boomers are beginning to retire, benefit costs as a share of their economy are increasing only slightly in the next couple of decades and then they begin to fall as a result of these reforms.

Now, how fragile a pension fund is depends on what you assume, especially what you assume you'll get on your portfolio, stocks, and bonds. The higher the rate of return, the less money it'll take to fully fund your pension fund. That's kind of arithmetic. But Louise and Byron make another important and interesting point.

If you assume a low rate of return, say, only 1-1/2 percent after inflation, there's little advantage to beginning the process of stabilizing a pension fund now versus a decade or two in the future. Neither the level at which the debt stabilizes as a share of the economy nor the contribution needed to achieve stabilization increases much if you wait a bit to solve the problem. And if interest rates are assumed to be higher, then there's a somewhat greater benefit to acting sooner, but the problem is smaller, so you need less action.

But here's the point. When you see all those headlines about the crisis in state and local pensions and you see state and local officials struggling to make pension contributions so their pension funds are stronger, you need to ask an important question. What is the trade-off? What are you giving up to make your pension fund stronger? And is that a really good deal for today's taxpayers, taxpayers in the future, and future retirees?

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide

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