



How to Increase Voter Turnout in Communities Where People Have Not Usually Participated in Elections

Melissa R. Michelson, Menlo College

Voter turnout among members of different groups of Americans varies widely, with Latinx and Asian participation generally lagging behind that of other racial groups. Black Americans usually fall in between, with turnout usually ahead of other marginalized communities but behind Whites – although Black participation surged in 2008 and 2012 in response to the historic candidacy of Barack Obama. Additional segments of the American public also **vote less** than they might, including lower-income citizens and youth.

Low levels of voting matter, because election results are supposed to reflect the preferences of all Americans. Recent trends indicate that Latinx citizens, if they vote at their full potential, have considerable capacity to **influence election outcomes**, increasingly at the national as well as state and local level. Getting out the Latino vote was a crucial part of the **Obama 2012 reelection strategy**, and Texas may be on the verge of turning blue – by 2022, there will be **more Latinx than White Texans**. Democrats are **hard at work in the Lone Star state**, hoping to capitalize on demographic trends and generate change. Understanding how to motivate voting by Latinos and other under-engaged citizens is thus of concern to candidates and parties as well as scholars.

How Can Reluctant Voters be Mobilized?

Since 2000, researchers have turned to **field experiments** to study ways of increasing voting in communities with a history of low participation. Studies have been conducted by academics and their students, sometimes in partnership with non-partisan community-based organizations. These randomized field experiments – in which some voters are contacted in particular ways, while others are not – allow for robust tests of mobilization theories.

Field experiments have discovered the best ways to get Black, Latinx, Asian, and young people to vote – and they have demonstrated repeatedly that people who have not participated much before can be moved to go to the polls.

- Dozens of randomized experiments using door-to-door personal contacts, calls from live phone banks, and postcards have effectively mobilized Latinx, Black, and Asian voters with a variety of appeals. When reaching out to historically marginalized communities, it is often the message of inclusion that matters more than the specific script used in the reminder to participate.
- Outreach to low-turnout voters works best when the efforts are seen as authentic and come from trusted messengers. This includes the cultural competency of how to adjust a script when speaking to older voters, and the ability to use in-language appeals when mobilizing Asian and Latinx voters who prefer to communicate in a language other than English.
- Older experiments exploring how to increase Latinx turnout found little difference between the effectiveness of messages designed to appeal to ethnic or racial solidarities compared general appeals to “civic duty” or other broad concerns, but some newer work finds that **Latinx voters with stronger ties to their Latinx identity** and who are less incorporated into the broader U.S. culture are more receptive to a message about getting out the Latino or Hispanic vote.
- Additional studies I have done reveal that **text messages** and **emails** from trusted sources can mobilize voters, even for low-salience elections. Other scholars have found that Spanish language messages in texts, emails, postcards and radio advertisements can move Latino voters to the polls, although some more recent experiments suggest monolingual English mailers may be more effective than bilingual ones.

The Special Power of Personal Contacts

In our book *Mobilizing Inclusion*, Lisa García Bedolla and I describe 268 get out the vote experiments conducted repeatedly across six electoral cycles from 2006 to 2008. We worked with community groups in California, evaluating and improving their efforts after each election.

Our analysis shows that citizens who have not shown much propensity to vote in the past can be inspired by well-organized get-out-the-vote efforts that rely either on door-to-door visits or on live phone calls. Tellingly, our research shows that such contacts, especially if repeated, can produce habitual voters. Phone banks from which callers contact the same potential voters twice are especially effective in creating committed voters. Door-to-door campaigns also showed strong results, with one such effort increasing voter turnout by more than 40 percentage points. (To be sure, most get-out-the-vote campaigns produce smaller gains).

Personal contact serves as a kind of political “speed bump” – a brief disruption to reluctant citizens’ entrenched understandings of themselves as disengaged from the polity. For most Americans – and especially for low-income citizens of color – it is very rare to have someone knock on the door for the sole purpose of urging them to vote. When such an unexpected interaction occurs, it can be very meaningful – and jolt people into a new way of thinking about themselves as citizens.

Personal contact to urge voting can be enough to cause many low-income minority people to see themselves anew, as the sorts of people who regularly go to the polls on Election Day. In turn, voting even once can become habit forming, reinforcing self-identification as “a voter” long after the initial conversation with a canvasser. What is more, voter contacts have strong spillover effects within households, boosting participation by others as much as 60 percent.

The results from that book have been confirmed and expanded upon by more recent experiments, and in states around the country. Although caller ID has made phone bank efforts less effective and more expensive, door-to-door canvassing – particularly by trusted sources – remains a powerful method of increasing turnout among Latinx, Black, Asian, and other low-turnout populations.

In short, as candidates and community organizations gear up for the 2020 presidential elections, recent scholarship provides clear direction on how best to move Latinx and other reluctant potential voters to the polls. Moreover, everyone who cares about full participation in American democracy can take hope from the finding that, if mobilization happens through social contact with reluctant voters even once, the ongoing impact on election participation and outcomes can be quite dramatic.

Read more in Melissa R. Michelson and Lisa García Bedolla, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Redefining Citizenship through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (Yale University Press, 2012).