

HOW TO INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT IN COMMUNITIES WHERE PEOPLE HAVE NOT USUALLY PARTICIPATED IN ELECTIONS

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Voter turnout among members of different groups of Americans varies widely, with Latinos and Asians generally lagging behind other groups. Blacks usually fall in between, with turnout usually ahead of other minorities 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. In addition, recent trends indicate that Latinos, 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 activists striving to boost Democratic Party prospects in Texas are spending tens of millions of dollars registering eligible Latinos. 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 blacks, Latinos, Asians 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. However, such nonpartisan experiments have not shown that messages designed to appeal to ethnic or racial solidarities are any more effective than general appeals to “civic duty” or other broad concerns. For example, experiments conducted in cooperation with community organizations using “Green Jobs” or other non-racial issue-based appeals have successfully mobilized African American voters, while another experiment that stressed racial solidarity produced negligible increases in turnout.

- Phone bank calls using the languages of targeted citizens have successfully mobilized Asian American voters. Sometimes the group making such calls is labeled the “Asian American Voter Project,” but appeals that stress ethnic community empowerment have proven no more effective than general messages telling people how to go about voting.
- Dozens of randomized experiments using door-to-door personal contacts, calls from phone banks, and postcards have effectively mobilized Latino voters with a variety of appeals. General citizen appeals often work, but recent work I have done with Ali Valenzuela in

California and Texas suggests that appeals to ethnic solidarity can be more effective for certain Latinos. Ethnic appeals do best at reaching people who are less incorporated into the broader American culture and who have stronger ties to their Latino identity.

- 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, even though the ethnic content of messages does not matter.

The Special Power of Personal Contacts

New research suggests the special power of repeated personal contacting. 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 contacting works to persuade people to vote regularly even though the interactions do not increase voters' resources and have little or no impact on their underlying attitudes about public issues. It is the social interaction itself that seems to matter. As we see it, interactions serve 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 or telephone 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.

In short, as candidates and community organizations gear up for the 2014 midterm and 2016 presidential elections, recent scholarship provides clear direction on how best to move Latinos 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).