



ACTIVATING VOTERS OF COLOR:

POWER, PLACE, AND PARTICIPATION

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This project was funded by the Civic Participation Action Fund (CPAF), a non-partisan 501(c)(4) fund committed to creating a policy environment at the state level that is more responsive to voters of color. Created in 2015 by a grant from the Atlantic Advocacy Fund, the 501(c)(4) arm of The Atlantic Philanthropies, CPAF is a limited life initiative that supports high-impact civic engagement efforts addressing racial and economic disparity. <http://cpafc4.org>

INTRODUCTION

This analysis is based on my review of the literature on mobilization among voters of color that is available from academic journals, research reports, and the Analyst Institute website. That search yielded 278 experiments conducted over the past two decades and twenty additional studies looking at how institutional and other factors had a causal impact on voter turnout among voters of color.

It is important to note that by talking about “voter of color,” “Black” or “Latinx” voter turnout, I am not claiming that these are monolithic groups, nor that any similarities we find in voting patterns are the product of some kind of inherent (e.g., biological) trait. Instead, I am defining each of these racial groups as a social group, “a collective of persons differentiated from others by cultural forms, practices, special needs or capacities, structure of power, or privilege”. In other words, defining African Americans, Latinxs, Asian American/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans as social groups does not mean that we need to assume that the members of these groups are all the same, share the same experiences, or have the same goals or aspirations.

Each of these groups include members who arrived at different points in American history, were forcibly brought to the United States (or were already here), live in different geographic settings, and have been treated in disparate ways by the United States law and government policies. These groups’ experiences vary by geographic location, class status, nativity, generation, gender, sexual orientation, and other factors. Despite this heterogeneity, what is similar about their experiences is where they were placed in the U.S. racial hierarchy and how that placement has affected their social, political, and economic opportunity structures. But, the effects of that placement are not always the same.

As an example, a recent study by the Topos Partnership¹ explored Latinx voting patterns and found that confidence and believing one’s voting matters were critical to their participation. They also found “the intersection of confidence and belief that my vote matters results in four distinct voter profiles, each with different challenges and engagement opportunities.” Those profiles include:

TRUE BELIEVERS: those who are highly confident and believe strongly their vote makes a difference;

BELIEVERS: those who are less confident but believe in the efficacy of voting;

SKEPTICS: those uncertain about voting mattering and lacking confidence in their own knowledge about politics;

REJECTERS: those who do not believe voting matters and are not interested in gaining more information about the topic.

Obviously, one strategy will not mobilize these very different types of Latinx voters. The Topos analysis and other studies have shown that we should not automatically assume that group members will behave the same politically, or that they will be mobilized effectively by the same tactics. That is why it is important for studies to consider heterogeneous treatment effects — the possibility that the same treatment will have different effects within and across groups, which I discuss in greater detail below. It is with this in mind that the following analysis should be interpreted.

WHAT WE KNOW

The analysis of this research makes clear that many analyses of voter engagement efforts suffer from a few **critically flawed assumptions**:

1. All voters are created equal

- The emphasis on analyzing average treatment effects (ATE) and privileging generalizable results means that the focus is always on those voters that sit in the middle of the normal curve. These approaches can impede our understanding of the variation across voters that is actually of interest. For example, individuals for whom the ATE is significantly lower or higher than the average effect.
- By searching for interventions that have the same impact on everyone, these studies assume there is nothing significantly different about voters that could affect their responsiveness to a particular intervention. Yet we know from history that individuals engage with politics differently along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, geography, and the intersections of these factors. Looking only at ATE elides those differences that we know exist and that have been politically meaningful throughout U.S. history.
- This is why the many studies that included voters of color within the target universe are not included here. In most cases, those voters are folded into the analysis that reports the ATE across the entire universe rather than looking for heterogeneous treatment effects within the universe.²

2. The electoral/institutional environment and the voter's past experiences don't matter

- Most studies treat voters like a *tabula rasa*, meaning that the current intervention is “clean” rather than something that will be understood and interpreted based on the individual's life experiences and/or the particular electoral and/or institutional environment within which they are situated.
- A secondary point to this is that not all voters will interpret information the same way, particularly if they have fundamentally different life experiences. Take as an example the differences in how whites and Blacks understand the fairness of the criminal justice system.
- This is another place where the focus on generalizability can lead to deeply flawed approaches. Using past experience as a guide without considering the social position of the voter and the specifics of the particular election in question can lead to ineffective, or even counterproductive interventions.

(continued)



3. Power and trust are not parts of the equation

- › Engaging in politics requires two things: (1) that individuals feel they have the power and capacity to engage; and (2) that they feel that they can trust U.S. democratic institutions to serve their interests if they engage. Both of these are necessary precursors to engagement. Yet few interventions take these factors seriously. They see these precursors as given and use marketing tactics in order to move those who can be moved.
- › If we are serious about engaging voters of color, we have to consider the historical and structural reasons why they might not feel powerful or trustful within the political sphere and how those experiences affect their understanding of politics. Their participation levels, if low, should not be interpreted as an individual-level pathology but rather as a logical outcome of their histories and life experiences. Our current approaches rarely frame individual-level engagement in this way.

A MORE EFFECTIVE APPROACH

The studies analyzed here make clear that we need a **new set of assumptions** in order to change voter of color engagement within the electorate. These are:

1. People make sense of the world through the lens of their life experiences

- › A successful strategy needs to “meet people where they are at” and tell a story that resonates with the world as they have experienced it.

2. Context matters (or all politics is local)

- › Institutional structures, electoral context, and past history all affect people’s sense of power, trust, and place within politics. Any approach to engage them must be sensitive to those contextual factors.

3. Accountability matters

- › Transactional requests for support that do not result in policy changes that make a difference in people’s lives will undermine future efforts. Voters need to feel they have a voice and matter to elected officials in between campaign cycles. Doing otherwise only leads to greater cynicism and makes future engagement efforts more difficult.

HOW TO DESIGN A SUCCESSFUL VOTER ENGAGEMENT EFFORT FOR VOTERS OF COLOR

1. Building trust and relationships is necessary before moving people to action

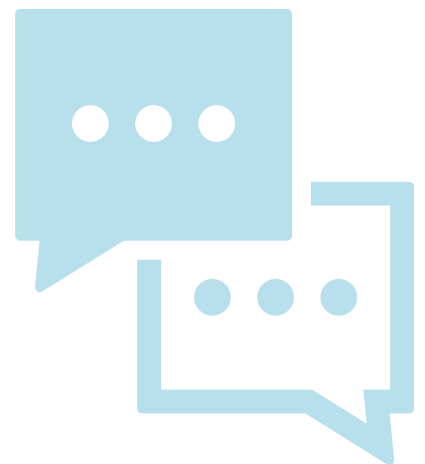
- Canvassers should be similar to the target voter (from the neighborhood, with a similar background, etc.).
- Canvassers from organizations with connections to the community are more effective.
- Initial conversations cannot be seen as transactional or manipulative, but rather and authentic engagement between similarly-situated individuals.
 - » Start with issues, not candidates.
 - » The script must be sensitive to the local history and context.

2. Culturally competent political (re)education is required

- People need to be taught why politics, particularly at the local and state levels, is relevant to their lives.
- People need to be taught that people like them have the power to make positive changes (with real impact on their lives) through the political system.
- The framing of this (re)education must be sensitive to the target voter's social position and the political history of their neighborhood/city/state.

3. Feedback/accountability loops are key to building power, both within the campaign and after

- Canvasser feedback from the field should be collected systematically and used to refine/adjust the script and targeting approach.
- Target voters need to know that their vote mattered, that policies have changed, or that they need to remain engaged in order to have an impact on the things they care about. This is why between-cycle work that deepens voter (re)education and provides opportunities for additional engagement are key to building power.



WHAT STRATEGIES TO PURSUE

1. Use local canvassers from a trusted local organization

- › Not only will the effort be more successful, but the leadership development the canvassers experience has spillover effects within their households and their social networks, enhancing their impact beyond any particular campaign.

2. Use social networks to recruit canvassers and access voters

- › Contact rates have declined dramatically over the past ten years, from upwards of 50% to around 10%. Groups need to find more creative and effective ways to contact voters. Recruiting well-connected local community members as canvassers is a promising approach.

3. Meet voters where they are

- › Messaging and policy goals need to be aligned with the needs of the target voters. Campaigns need to know the community, its history, and its needs in order to ensure that their approach is in alignment.
- › This requires non-transactional conversations and deep listening before developing campaign strategy.
 - ›› Only with long-term investment and a data collection infrastructure that allows for this information to be collected, analyzed, and used for subsequent efforts will such an approach be possible.
 - ›› Canvassers can be used as daily/weekly focus groups that can help with this refinement and adjustment of campaign strategy.

4. (Re)educate voters

- › Education is the key to transformative change.
- › Changing the electorate requires a shift in voters' sense of power, trust, and place. That requires the development of a new narrative, one that makes clear their ability to help accomplish that change.
- › Stories of success, particularly those led by similarly situated people, are effective parts of a voter (re) education program.

5. Continue to (re)educate and engage voters between electoral cycles

- › This helps to decrease voter cynicism, ensures electoral accountability, and ensures that voters will be engaged during the next election.
- › This allows groups to not have to start from zero with every campaign, but rather continue to build on the momentum from earlier efforts in order to reach scale and enhance impact.

The following sections summarize the findings related to particular strategies, including door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, text messaging, mail outreach, radio, and digital ads. Each section summarizes the relevant literature and provides a set of suggested best practices for each strategy. I should note that the amount of information available for each strategy is uneven, so the validity of the existing knowledge needs to be interpreted with care.

DOOR TO DOOR CANVASSING



Door-to-door canvassing is the most effective approach for mobilizing voters of color. It works best when it is carried out by **local canvassers** from **trusted organizations** who meet voters where they are.

My meta-analysis of the 62 door-to-door studies analyzed here had an overall effectiveness of five percentage points, making this by far the most effective strategy for mobilizing voters of color.³ Because mobilizing voters of color requires the shift in a sense of personal power and trust discussed above, it follows that strategies that allow for meaningful conversation and relationship building are the most effective for bringing voters of color into the electorate.

But, door-to-door canvassing is the least common approach used by campaigns because it is seen as the least efficient in terms of cost per vote. I would argue that a cost per vote frame is inappropriate when considering how to change political behavior among low propensity voters of color. By definition, any approach that needs to accomplish fundamental change, such as moving a habitual non-voter to becoming a voter, is going to be more costly initially but potentially more impactful in the long run because studies have found that voting is habit forming. As an example, the low propensity voters of color mobilized through the California Votes Initiative using door-to-door contact or live phone banks from June 2006 to June 2008 were twenty-three percentage points more likely to vote in November 2008, even without direct mobilization during that election.⁴ Thus, although the initial cost of moving a non-habitual voter may be higher using an in-person approach, the subsequent benefit needs to be an important part of the calculation. The key is to find how to make in-person interactions more efficient.

The most effective door to door campaigns:

- used local canvassers that were similarly situated as target voters;
- made certain canvassers could talk to voters in their preferred language (which can be a challenge in door to door efforts);
- were implemented by trusted local organizations with high capacity;
- incorporated strong canvasser feedback loops;
- used scripts that engaged voters on the issues they cared most about and made connections between their concerns and the issue at stake in the election;
- in partisan efforts, starting the conversation about the issues rather than the candidate was most effective;
- used language that helped voters see their engagement as something that could make change regarding the things that they cared about. Success stories were very useful in this regard.

For references on door to door canvassing, see page 20

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Local canvassers are more effective

Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) tested the effect of neighbor-on-neighbor canvassing in the November 2006 election (Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson, 2013). This effort was limited to low-propensity voters, including individuals who had voted only occasionally in the past or who were newly registered. The campaign targeted 11,789 registered voters in fifty precincts in South Los Angeles. Overall, 5,341 individuals were successfully contacted, for a contact rate of 45.3 percent. Looking at neighbor-to-neighbor contacts, which were defined as those between canvassers and targeted voters living within the same ZIP code, the study found that neighbors increased turnout by 8.5 percentage points (SE = 3.0), while non-locals increased turnout by 5.2 percentage points (SE = 2.9). For the campaign overall, the intent-to-treat effect was 3.0 percentage points; the treatment-on-treated effect was a significant 6.6 percentage points (SE = 2.1). Therefore, although the door-to-door canvassing in general had a powerful effect in this campaign, canvassing by individuals working their home ZIP codes had an even bigger effect, suggesting that this is an important way to capitalize upon existing social networks within communities.

PHONE BANKING



Phone banking is the second most effective strategy for mobilizing voters of color. It is especially useful for targeting voters that are not geographically concentrated. It is **most effective when canvassers call back voters who say they will vote.**

Phone banks allow campaigns to reach a larger number of target voters within a shorter period of time than they would in a door-to-door effort (one need only imagine the time difference required to dial a phone number versus walking to a neighbor's house). But, even though phone banking provides voters with the live, in-person contact that studies have found is especially important to mobilizing voters of color, their impact is less than a face-to-face contact at the door. A high-quality phone banking effort can be expected to increase turnout by 3 to five percentage points.⁵ My meta-analysis across all the phone banking studies focused on voters of color found a statistically significant 2.7 percentage point effect.⁶ Here again we see that the outreach strategies that are effective for voters overall are just a bit less effective with voters of color, many of whom in these studies were low propensity voters of color.

This analysis suggests that there are ways to improve the effectiveness of a phone bank effort. Two-stage phone banks — a strategy where an initial call is used to determine whether a person plans to vote and the second call is only placed to those who answered “yes” in the initial call — were found to have a robust effect on turnout among Asian Americans and Latinx voters.⁷ These effects were especially large among Asian Americans, with some important national origin differences. This finding supports the more nuanced strategy encouraged by the 2018 Topos Partnership report on Latinx turnout. In it, they found that

there are a group of Latinx voters — the “Rejecters” — who simply do not believe voting matters. One can imagine those voters are likely to say “no” when a canvasser asks them if they plan to vote. Focusing only on those voters who reply “yes” to that question allows the campaign to focus on those target voters who are most responsive to the message, and therefore more likely to turn out to vote.

The most effective phone banking campaigns:

- called back only those voters who said they planned to vote. This strategy was most effective when the call back was made by the same canvasser who made the initial call;
- used bilingual callers and sorted the lists according to language preference (when possible);
- used scripts that engaged voters on the issues they cared most about and made connections between their concerns and the issues at stake in the election;
- used language that helped voters see their engagement as something that could lead to changes regarding the things that they cared about;
- maintained good quality control to ensure canvassers remained on script;
- incorporated strong canvasser feedback loops to continually improve the scripts and outreach strategies.

[For references on phone banking, see page 21](#)

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Two-round phone banks can have double digit results

Two-round phone banks can be as effective as a door-to-door canvass. In 2008, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC — now Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Los Angeles) tested the impact of a two-round phone bank targeting California voters who were Asian/Pacific Islanders (Michelson, García Bedolla, and McConnell, 2009). Their strategy was to call back with a GOTV message only those voters who answered “yes” to the question: “Do you plan to vote?” in an initial call. The APALC effort increased target voters’ vote propensity by 13 percentage points. In this study, the researchers randomized who received the second GOTV call, showing that the first-round call had a 4-point effect on voter turnout, a result consistent with other phone bank studies. It was the second call that made the real difference. This finding was replicated in campaigns conducted by SVREP and NALEO, targeting Latinx voters, and OCAPICA, who also targeted API voters, demonstrating its effectiveness across many different types of voters (García Bedolla and Michelson 2012).

TEXT MESSAGING



Text messaging works with voters of color in **high salience elections** and with more **frequent voters**. Text messaging is most effective, even with infrequent voters, when there is an interactive relationship with the canvasser.

Few text messaging studies have focused on voters of color, exclusively. Those that did include voters of color in their targets rarely analyzed the effects separately by group. I therefore limit my analysis to nine SMS text message experiments that were conducted with voters of color and one study that used propensity score matching to examine the effect of the peer-to-peer texting program Relay. Four of the SMS text experiments analyzed here were layered on top of an in-person canvassing effort; target voters who opted into being contacted on their cell phones received get-out-the-vote (GOTV) text messages from the organization that had originally contacted them. That analysis then explored the degree to which the text message made a difference, above and beyond the initial canvass contact.

Overall, the effects of these text efforts were not strong; my meta-analysis shows a 0.4 percent effect across the nine experimental studies, but it does not reach statistical significance. Only two of the experiments had a statistically significant effect on voter turnout. Both of those were multi-racial efforts undertaken by organizations located in the San Francisco bay area and during high salience elections. One used multiple texts to turnout out voters in a very high-salience local electoral context, the other peer-to-peer text contact in the 2016 presidential election. Peer-to-peer texting does seem to mirror a “live” conversation with a canvasser and seems to have a greater impact on turnout than SMS texting.

Given the small number of studies, these findings should be seen as preliminary. But they do suggest that for voters who are habitual non-voters, a text message is unlikely to be sufficient to move them to vote. In a similar vein, for habitual voters in high salience electoral contexts, texting may be an effective “reminder” to vote that allows a campaign to focus its in-person efforts on less habitual voters. As GOTV texting has become more “normal,” its impact may be diminishing. The effectiveness of new technological outreach tactics may change dramatically from election to election. Peer-to-peer contact seems to be the most promising form of texting, but people must respond to the initial text in order to have a canvassing “conversation”. Unfortunately, response rates have been declining steadily since these platforms were introduced in 2016.

The most effective text efforts:

- used canvassers that were connected to the targets in some way;
- included an initial text that encouraged target voters to respond;
- had canvassers using peer-to-peer programs respond to the initial text within 24 hours (otherwise the thread seems to go “cold”);
- trained canvassers to keep the conversation going by customizing the responses to the target voter’s questions/ needs so the interaction did not feel scripted.

For references on text messaging, see page 22

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Text messages work in the right contexts and with regular voters

Texting can be effective in mobilizing voters of color in high-salience, high turnout elections. Oakland Rising’s 2014 effort is instructive. That year, the Oakland ballot included a competitive mayoral race and two important ballot initiatives — a local measure to raise the minimum wage and Proposition 47, an initiative that recategorized many non-violent offenses from felonies to misdemeanors. Both initiatives were high-profile in Oakland, making that election very high salience, particularly among its voters of color, leading to a turnout rate 18 points higher than the statewide average. Oakland Rising capitalized on this context and sent its target voters six texts designed to educate them about what was on the ballot and excite them about voting on Election Day. The texts attempted to tap into their identities as “Oaklanders” and emphasized their ability to help their communities with their vote. These texts were phenomenally successful, with an 11-point effect on voter turnout. This makes clear that texting can be an effective GOTV strategy for voters of color if they are regular voters and the election is seen as high stakes.



Social pressure and information-rich mail can turn out voters of color, but the **magnitude of the effects** is often **smaller** than with white voters. It is important that mail be provided in voters' preferred language.

Among the studies analyzed here, the most successful mail efforts had an effect of around 1 percent. In terms of social pressure, the two studies focused on Latinxs did find that these types of mailings were effective, but with an effect size of just under 1 percentage point. Similar to the other tactics explored here, mail efforts were effective among voters of color but significantly less so than among the general voting population.

The mail efforts I analyzed ranged from sending hand written notes from fellow congregants to postcards with polling place information to social pressure mailings that included voting rights information. Of the 108 studies analyzed, only 20 (19%) had a statistically significant result. Because about a third of those studies did not report their standard errors or precise effect sizes, I did not conduct a meta-analysis since the results would likely be biased.

Mail outreach is popular because it is relatively inexpensive and can easily be done at scale. It is, however, a “status quo” approach to mobilization. While some small movement may arise from a well-designed mail piece, its relatively small impact on voters of color suggests that it is not a tactic than can be expected to change voters' perceptions of their own power within the political system, which is a key precursor to mobilizing those voters. We will not fundamentally change the electorate through the mail.

Mail is most effective when:

- it is used to provide high-quality information to voters, such as the League of Women Voters' *Easy Voter Guide*. Simple polling place information does not seem to be sufficient in this regard;
- it uses social pressure messaging. However, there has been much pushback on this tactic and it is unclear whether in the long term these sorts of pressure messages have negative effects on voting, particularly among naturalized voters who may have reason to fear government surveillance. Given TOPOS' finding that Latinx voters often said fear of making a mistake was why they did not vote, it is reasonable to assume that social pressure messaging might lead to greater fear among Latinx voters, possibly depressing their turnout in the long term.

For references on mail and pledge cards, see page 23

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Social pressure mail can work but the magnitude is small (and the potential for backlash is real)

Social pressure mail has been found to be effective with Latinx voters. In June 2016, Mi Familia Vota (MFV) conducted the first large-scale field experiment to test the impact of “role model” social pressure versus traditional social pressure on voter turnout among Latinx targets. Analyst Institute randomly assigned 310,000 Latinx voters in California to one of five conditions: (1) an English-only role model social pressure GOTV mailer; (2) a bilingual role model social pressure GOTV mailer; (3) an English-only traditional social pressure GOTV mailer; (4) a bilingual traditional social pressure GOTV mailer; or (5) no mail at all. The mailers took the shape of a “voter report card”, with voters’ grades (A to F) based on their turnout in the previous four statewide

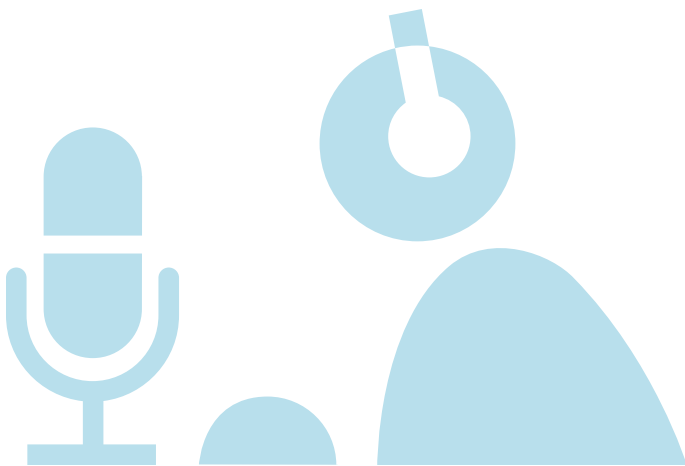
elections. All of the mailers also told target voters that whether an individual votes is public record. In the role model mailer, the message emphasized the importance of setting a good example for “the children who look up to us.” The traditional social pressure mailer contained a civic participation message. Both the role model and social pressure mailers increased turnout by a statistically significant 0.9 percentage points. There was no significant difference in effectiveness between the English-only and bilingual mail. Thus, although social pressure mailers have been found to be effective with Latinx voters, it is important to note that the magnitude of the effect is somewhat smaller than for White voters and that there remains a risk of backlash.



There is **some evidence that radio advertising works** for voter turnout, particularly among Latinx voters when outreach is in Spanish. Ads need to be **targeted and culturally competent**.

There have been five studies looking at the impact of radio ads on voter turnout among voters of color. A national effort using Spanish language outreach to target Latinx voters within particular congressional districts is the only study that found that radio ads had a statistically significant impact on turnout. Digital ads using Pandora and Spotify and Native-American-focused ads on indigenous radio stations failed to move a significant number of voters to the polls. Since there are so few studies, a meta-analysis would not be appropriate.

It is estimated that 60 million people of color receive their news and information from ethnic media.⁸ Given its prominence, we need to learn more about how radio, particularly ethnic radio, can be used to turn out voters of color. Because these are impersonal, often general messages, it is unlikely that radio is a strategy that will effectively move habitual non-voters to the polls or be effective during low salience campaigns. However, radio could be useful for educating voters about voting and for cultivating a more positive narrative about civic engagement within particular communities. This may help to address the skepticism and lack of faith in the political system that is common among U.S. voters generally and voters of color particularly.



For references on radio ads, see page 22

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Spanish-language radio ads can be effective with Latinx voters

There is some evidence that targeted Spanish-language radio ads can increase turnout among those Latinx voters who listen to Spanish-language radio. Panagopoulos and Green (2011) conducted a large-scale, national field experiment testing the impact of nonpartisan Spanish-language radio advertisements on Latinx voter turnout in the 2006 congressional elections. They chose uncompetitive congressional races and purchased ad time to air 60-second ads that were non-partisan and aimed at getting out the Latinx vote. In the ads, voters were urged to vote on Election Day. The ads also included the names, incumbency status, and party affiliations of the major-party candidates in each congressional race. The messages were strictly non-partisan. The ads were aired during peak commute times (morning and evening) as well as throughout the day. Additional ads were aired on the weekends. They found the ads increased Latinx turnout between 5.3 and 4.3 percentage points (SE = 1.9 -1.7). Since many Latinx voters in the district will not have been treated, they argue that these results likely underestimate the impact of these ads on turnout among these Latinx voters.



There is **weak evidence that digital ads effectively mobilize** voters of color. When they have worked, the impact on voting rates has been small — around 1 percentage point.

Despite all the drama around digital advertising and its impact on the 2016 election (e.g., the role of Cambridge Analytica and Russian-sponsored mis-information campaigns), we know little about how effective these ads are and with whom. In general, the major media platforms have made it difficult to conduct research on these strategies or even to know whether the person targeted with the ad saw the ad or, more specifically, whether they matched the correct target demographic.

Since 2012, there have been a number of studies that have tested the impact of digital ads on voter turnout.⁹ Despite James Fowler's landmark finding in 2012 that social networks boosted turnout by approximately 1 percentage point, almost all subsequent digital ad tests have not found that these types of ads have a significant impact on voter turnout.¹⁰ I found only four digital ad tests that focused on voters of color. Two of those, which were conducted in 2014 by Planned Parenthood and Progress Texas, had a significant impact on turnout, specifically among Latinx

voters. Turnout increased by 1 percentage point overall and by 1.4 percentage points among Latinx voters. Other tests, including an MFV test that randomly assigned millions of Latinx voters in California to see GOTV Facebook ads in 2014, found these ads have a negligible effect on turnout (Abrajano, Garcia Bedolla, and Junn 2015).

Research looking at social media use and voter turnout suggests that campaigns that target an individual's friend network with social pressure messages do have an effect on turnout.¹¹ Another recent study found that targeted digital ads that included information and voting reminders increased millennial turnout in a high salience municipal election, but only among voters in competitive districts.¹² None of this work has looked specifically at digital ads' impact on turnout among voters of color. The findings thus far suggest that this approach would, like text messaging, likely be effective with habitual voters and less so among low propensity voters, given the intervention is fairly superficial and not interactive.

For references on digital ads, see page 24

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Planning plus pressure can make digital ads effective, but the effects remain small

The 2014 Progress Texas test used customized Spanish language ads that were aligned with the user's browser settings. The ad included plan making and social pressure. The treatment included just under 200,000 mid-propensity voters (matched to Catalist media segments). The two-part campaign included a video ad with plan making and social pressure and then banner ads with the same message. The result was a 1.4 percentage point increase in Latinx voter turnout.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO LEARN?

This review should make clear that there is much we need to learn about how best to activate political engagement among voters of color. At a minimum, we need more studies that self-consciously adopt a non-biological and intersectional understanding of race in U.S. politics. This should lead to research designs that:

- do not treat groups as monolithic. Therefore, studies should expect heterogeneous treatment effects along the lines of gender, class, sexuality, geography, nativity, et cetera;
- consider factors beyond voting within definitions of “engagement” in order to capture the full range of activities target voters are engaged in;
- include large enough samples to be able to break out the analysis intersectionally in order to be able to see how the interaction of race and gender, as an example, influences political behavior;
- include longitudinal analysis in order to better understand the process of engagement (or disengagement) rather than focusing on a one-time snapshot of behavior and using that to generalize across all groups and electoral contexts.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Topos Partnership. 2018 "Confidence and Community: Tapping into Latino Power." Washington, DC: Civic Participation Action Fund
- 2 For a summary, see Donald P. Green and Alan Gerber. 2015. *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- 3 I should note that almost all of the efforts summarized here were non-partisan. Unfortunately few partisan efforts have been made public.
- 4 García Bedolla, Lisa and Melissa R. Michelson. 2012. *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get Out the Vote Campaigns*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 5 See Donald P. Green and Alan Gerber. 2008. *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- 6 Given the significant differences across these canvassing efforts in terms of target groups, timing, messaging, etc., this meta-analysis was conducted using random effects. The meta-analysis only includes the 89 studies that included standard errors in their reporting of results. It also excludes the Michelson 2003 study which reports turnout results only for contacted voters rather than treatment on treated (TOT) effects.
- 7 Michelson, Melissa R., Lisa García Bedolla, and Margaret McConnell. 2009. "Heeding the Call: The Effect of Targeted Two-Round Phonebanks on Voter Turnout." *Journal of Politics* 71(4): 1549–1563.
- 8 Matsaganis, Matthew D., Vikki S. Katz, and Sandra Ball-Rokeach. 2010. *Understanding Ethnic Media: Producers, Consumers, and Societies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, p. 3.
- 9 I would note that how digital ads affect attitudes towards candidates and vote choice is a separate question beyond the scope of this review.
- 10 To see the Fowler study, go to: <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature11421>
- 11 Haenschen, Katherine. 2016. "Social Pressure on Social Media: Using Facebook Status Updates to Increase Voter Turnout." *Journal of Communication* 66(4): 542–563.
- 12 Haenschen, Katherine and Jay Jennings. 2019. "Mobilizing Millennial Voters with Targeted Internet Advertisements: A Field Experiment." *Political Communication* 36(3): 357–375.

(continued)

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