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Voter Turnout in a Low Interest, Off-Year Election: A Field Experiment

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VOTER TURNOUT IN A LOW INTEREST, OFF-YEAR ELECTION: A FIELD
EXPERIMENT

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Zachary T. Miller

* * * * *

Western Kentucky University
2016

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis on the effects of a low cost get out the vote (GOTV) effort through direct mail on a low interest, off year election. By conducting a field experiment divided into two stages, this project measures the effects of direct mail contact on voter turnout in the state of Kentucky. Postcards were sent during the final week of both the 2015 primary and general elections. The expectation is that those who received a postcard will be more likely to vote than non-recipients.

Using data provided by the Kentucky Board of Elections, a data set was created analyzing whether or not a subject received a postcard, the age and sex of the voter, which election they voted in, party of affiliation, and whether or not they voted. Receiving a postcard did increase the chances of a subject voting by approximately 2%. Age, party affiliation and the election type also had an impact on a person's likelihood to vote.

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FIELDS OF STUDY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, campaigns have begun to focus on two distinct areas in the hope of being able to influence the outcome of elections. In an effort to achieve this level of influence, campaigns have focused their abilities on two forms of voter contact: voter persuasion and mobilization. Voter persuasion involves using contact with voters to encourage them to vote for or against a specific party or candidate. For the most part, these efforts have been found to have achieved limited effectiveness in changing the mind of voters. On the other hand, success has led to a recent increased emphasis on voter mobilization. This form of contact has been found to have impact on turnout levels during elections, leading to a focus on using data to identify registered voters and encouraging them to turn out on Election Day. Increased accuracy and scope of studies, revolutionized by researchers Donald Green and Alan Gerber, have led to increasingly important findings for the future of voter mobilization. These researchers have specifically led to an important breakthrough, the use of field experiments, as the primary method of studying get out the vote tactics (GOTV). These field experiments consist of testing the effects of different forms of contact in the real world instead of in a controlled environment. Using field experiments, researchers are now able to test subjects during actual election cycles and use data to find exactly the effect their method had on turnout. With campaigns leading the way, specific areas of voter contact have become the

increasing focus of campaigns of all sizes throughout the United States. This research has focused on three main areas of voter contact: canvassing, direct mail, and telephone interactions.

Extensive research has found that differing forms of contact may affect elections at differing levels. This research is conducted for both academic purposes and from the stand point of the practitioner attempting to obtain an edge in an election. For example, the Obama campaign in both 2008 and 2012 focused large amounts of their campaign money identifying and mobilizing potential voters. By conducting field experiments on the national level, they were able to compile mass amounts of data, allowing them to fine tune their grassroots level GOTV efforts. This focus on field experiments led to record increases in voter turnout, and showed the effect voter mobilization may have on an election. Americans for Prosperity, a non-profit political organization, also uses field experiments to increase their effectiveness during elections. Using data compiled throughout their efforts, they are able to more effectively produce results when focusing in on a particular issue or candidate.

Through these studies, researchers can identify important statistics in regards to their GOTV efforts. In field experiments, both academics and practitioners can identify how many voters need to be contacted to produce an additional vote, and how much that additional vote costs the campaign. This data has begun to revolutionize how campaigns are able to spend money in ways that produce different outcomes at a more cost efficient rate. More recently, research has begun to focus in on more complex campaign subjects, such as the social-psychological effects on voting, and the psychological effects of an increased sense of civic duty (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013). By exploring these

topics, researchers have been able to change the campaign field, producing studies from many different viewpoints that measure the value in using a specific strategy to get out the vote. Not only do these field experiments determine whether or not an effect has occurred, they are also able to measure how much of an effect has occurred, and which types of voters specifically have been impacted. With this in mind, I briefly review these methods of voter mobilization, and the effect that previous research conducted through field experiments has had on GOTV efforts.

This thesis is split into three sections. The first is a review that describes previous research conducted on get out the vote methods, and how different modes of turning out vote may have differing levels of impact. The electoral context section describes both the 2015 primary and general gubernatorial elections in the state of Kentucky, and how that may have impacted the results of our studies. The experimental design describes the process used to conduct the research, and how subjects were selected for this study. One field experiment was conducted with two stages testing the effects of direct mail contact on a voter's likelihood to actually vote. The final chapter discusses what was found in this experiment, both for the groups as a whole and for subgroups developed for the study. Finally, I discuss potential explanations for the results found in this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As discussed in the introduction, increasing levels of research in the field of voter contact for purposes of mobilization has led to ample evidence indicating their effectiveness. These findings have focused on three areas of voter contact: canvassing, direct mail, and telephone interactions. Within these areas, researchers have conducted field experiments to find how voter contact may increase turnout, and how cost effective these efforts can be. In this chapter, I will provide a general overview of previous research conducted in this field. It will discuss how different methods of contact have effects on elections, and to what extent these effects are made. This overview will also discuss changes in messaging, including applying forms of social pressure, which may produce different results.

Canvassing, also referred to as going door-to-door, has generally been found to be one of the more effective and cost efficient forms of increasing voter turnout when compared to others. This increased effectiveness may be attributed to the differences between personal and impersonal forms of political contact (Gerber and Green 2000). In a study conducted using canvassing, direct mail, and telephone calls as the forms of contact in New Haven, it was clear that the impersonal forms of contact fell short. Face-to-face contact was found to increase turnout by 9.8 percentage points, while both of the other impersonal forms of contact increased turnout by less than 1 percentage point

(Gerber and Green, 2000). Replicating this study, researchers in Britain chose Manchester as their target, an area that did not reach the national average of turnout. Three groups were selected, with one receiving phone calls, one receiving a visit, and the third group being the control. This study found a significant increase in turnout due to canvassing, finding that it increased turnout by 6.7%, similar to the results produced by Gerber and Green (John and Brannan 2008). More specifically, studies have found that face-to-face canvassing conducted in the last two weeks before an election can be potentially even more effective in turning out the vote. A study conducted by Green and Gerber found that canvassing this close to an election could produce an increase of 7-12% points (Green and Gerber 2004). By continually replicating this large effect on voter turnout, canvassing continues to hold an advantage over other forms of GOTV contact.

Other studies have focused on more specific ideas about the effects of canvassing, including how it may effect those not directly contacted. David Nickerson (2008) found when researching this topic that his primary effect remained similar to those found in previous studies, but also found a secondary effect increasing turnout by 5.5% among the second member of the household who was not directly contacted. However, in a group of studies targeting low propensity voters, door-to-door canvassing was found to have a more significant impact than the previous study (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013). This effect shows the practicality of canvassing in regards to turning out low propensity voters, and it is clear that canvassing can produce an effect on election turnout. In regards to canvassing, the message itself may not be as important as the actual primary contact. A study focused on gaining a commitment to vote at the door while canvassing found that a

percentage point was gained when commitments to vote were taken at the door (Green and Gerber 2004).

This type of effort has also shown to be valuable on a much smaller scale, including local elections. Using six separate cities voting on smaller scale elections, including mayoral and municipal runoffs, results continued to demonstrate that canvassing is the most effective and cost efficient form of turning out the vote. On average, these canvassing efforts increased turnout among those treated by 7.1% (Green, Gerber and Nickerson 2003). Due to these findings, canvassing has also been proven to be one of the cheaper forms of non partisan voter mobilization contact. This method, while paying workers \$16 an hour at a rate of 12 contacts per hour, resulted in one produced vote costing \$19 (Green 2003). However, most canvassing efforts involve using volunteers as opposed to paid workers, which would lower the cost of canvassing significantly. Combining all of the previous research on the topic of canvassing, it is clearly the most effective form of increasing voter turnout across all elections and different electoral contexts.

Calling is a second staple of GOTV efforts, and consists of phone banks contacting voters in high volume. When reviewing GOTV studies on the impact of phone calls, they fall into three categories of contact: pre-recorded, live calls from commercial phone banks, and live calls from volunteer phone banks (Green McGrath, and Aronow 2013). In most studies, it has been found that phone calls are consistently the least effective form of getting out the vote. One study accounted for the differences between the likelihood to vote based on how easy the subject is to contact in order to provide a fair chance to produce results. This is done by only using those subjects who are confirmed to

receive the phone call instead of combining results with those who did not answer. However, the GOTV phone script was not found to have a statistically significant effect on turnout (Gerber and Green, 2001). Other studies have focused on the effects of pre-recorded phone calls on voter turnout. Pre-recorded phone calls can include recordings of a politician, celebrity, or local clergy. However, when excluding studies using pre-recorded social pressure messages, which usually consist of a message urging others to vote using an appeal to voters socially, the treatment effects of this tactic are minimal (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013).

Commercial phone calls, a second form of phone contact, are contracted out to phone banks who are not personally involved in the election. These callers usually receive little training in the area. Because of this, many studies have shown commercial phone banks do increase turnout, but on a minimal level (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013). One study contracted their get out the vote script to a national phone bank and found similar results. These paid contractors were given a non-partisan script to read to voters, giving them the date of election and asking if they can be counted on to vote. Doing a cost analysis of this study, it was found that one vote was added for every 250 calls, with each call costing 50 cents, totaling \$125 per vote (Arceneaux, Green and Gerber 2006). When compared to the cost of other phone contact, these tend to be the least effective, totaling a higher cost per vote generated.

Volunteer phone calls, when compared to both commercial and pre-recorded calls, seem to be the most effective. Studies focusing on volunteer calls showed the highest level of turnout increase, and were more likely to produce a positive outcome (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013). These calls tend to be more effective due to the

nature of volunteer callers. Volunteers tend to be more invested in the campaign, and are more likely to care about the result of their calls. By using volunteer callers over a commercial phone bank, GOTV efforts may result in one vote per 35 contacts, putting these calls close to canvassing in levels of effectiveness (Green and Gerber 2004). Due to the nature of volunteer work, these calls are also the cheapest form of contacting voters over the phone. However, smaller campaigns may find it difficult to locate enough volunteers to produce the high volume of calls needed to impact an election.

Other studies focusing on phone calls have attempted to determine whether this highly ineffective form of turning out the vote can be amplified through partisan messaging. Conducting a study on get out the vote efforts by phone, researchers divided these calls into three separate scripts advocating for different issues in the election. The first script advocated a specific issue, another was scripted as a completely nonpartisan effort, and the last script focused specifically on the Democratic Party. Results showed no statistically significant difference in turnout on those who were encouraged to vote for Proposition D in California, proving this type of call resulted in no increase in turnout among those who were contacted (McNulty 2005). However, the nonpartisan effort to get out the vote by phone during the final days before the election showed an overall treatment effect of nine percent (McNulty 2005). Interestingly, the final study conducted with a partisan script urging Democratic voters to elect their party's nominee for city council showed a statistically negative effect (McNulty 2005). Although a negative effect was shown, it is not believed that this phone call truly effected voters in a negative way, but that it was by chance of those selected to receive the call. This study of three different forms of messages was consistent with other findings, showing that nonpartisan GOTV

tactics tend to have the highest level of impact. These studies combined show the minimal to no impact effect a get out the vote by phone effort can have on an election.

Direct mail represents the third method of voter contact. This method involves sending different forms of postcards or letters by mail in order to encourage voting. Direct mail may vary in message, and can focus on different aspects, including information and social pressure. In evaluating direct mail as a GOTV tactic, many different factors have resulted in results showing varying levels of value. Many studies find that messaging matters when sending mail, and can be the determining factor on how much influence the contact has on voters. Researchers began by studying the effects of a general message through direct mail on voter turnout. This effort began by focusing on ‘conventional’ mailings, which can be defined as those that do not use social pressure, and also do not thank voters for their previous voting record (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013). This research effort supported previous findings, demonstrating a marginal effect of direct mailing on voter turnout. Although these findings do not prove a major impact for this type of direct mail on the majority of voters, research has also shown that those that are not affiliated with a major party may be more responsive to these minimal effort GOTV tactics. This may be explained by the lack of stimulation from high spending parties, resulting in a more amplified effect from one mailing (Gerber and Green 2000).

Studies have also looked at the effectiveness of nonpartisan mailing or leaflets during an election. These studies highlight the positives of conducting a GOTV effort by mail, which include the low cost nature. In one study conducted by Gerber (2000) and Green, card costs were as low as \$0.30. However, this low cost does not always produce

the most cost efficient method of contacting voters. In this study, it was found that nonpartisan forms of direct mail may cost around \$67 per vote added (Green 2003). Building off of these findings, research has also indicated that receiving multiple mailings leading up to an election may have an increasing impact on a subject's likelihood to turn out to vote. Using either one, two or three mailings sent to subjects in intervals, it was found that the likelihood of a person to vote may increase by 0.6 percentage points per mailing received (Gerber and Green 2000). In regular campaign practices that include anywhere from four to nine mailings, this tactic may produce substantial results that have yet to be seen in experimental direct mailing efforts.

With nonpartisan basic messaging, direct mail seems to have a very minimal effect on voter turnout. Studies have shown that this form of GOTV contact only effects one out of every 200 recipients (Green and Gerber 2004). This current lack of effectiveness contrasts studies dating back to 1925, in which direct mail sent by Howard Gosnell increased turnout by 9 percentage points (Gosnell 1926). Some have offered an explanation for this decline by pointing to the current oversaturation of direct mailing. By flooding voters with increasing amounts of mail, a diminishing effect on voter turnout has been noticed for each individual piece (Gerber and Green 2000). As this trend continues, partisan mail will be unlikely to have a substantial effect on turning out the vote, or on voter persuasion. In fact, "the 31 advocacy mailings have negligible effects on turnout: an estimated effect of -0.123 with a 95% interval of (-0.515, 0.088) (Green, McGrath, and Aronow 2013).

For the two focus areas of GOTV efforts, the consensus seems to be that these mailings have a very minimal effect. In a study conducted on partisan mailing, Cardy

(2005) focused in on a state-wide democratic primary. This field experiment sent multiple mailings with different scripts, but all mailers had a clear partisan bias focusing in on issues including women's rights and abortion (Cardy 2005). Upon evaluating the results of this direct mailing study, it was found that the turnout rate was not high enough to produce a value more than could be attributed to chance (Cardy 2005). With multiple contact through phone and mail, it estimated that it would cost roughly over 100 dollars to produce one vote, making this tactic highly inefficient (Cardy 2005). With a potential negative effect, it is clear that nonpartisan messaging by mail produces a higher outcome than other forms of direct mail.

Beyond a meta-analysis of GOTV research, studies generally focus in on more specific areas of interest, including messaging. Researchers have explored how social pressure could affect the likelihood that someone will cast a vote. In a study done by Green, Gerber and Larimer (2008), the hypothesis revolved around conducting an experiment designed to force voters to think about their civic duty while at the same time applying social pressure in order to pressure them to fit this norm. When discussing social norms, this research describes them as both the recognition of a norm and the acceptance of norms as being applicable even if a cost is imposed (Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008). In order to test their theory that applying pressure to these norms would induce voting, households were randomly assigned one of four different messages that applied different levels of pressure. These were separated by level of pressure, ranging from a message that simply asked individuals to remember their right to vote to a message claiming to share voting records with neighbors, revealing who had and had not voted in the primary (Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008).

Results closely matched the researchers' original hypothesis. All four social pressure mailings had a higher percentage turnout than the control group, with turnout in the most severe "neighbor" mailing reaching 37.8%, which suggests a 8.1 percent increase in turnout rate (Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008). This implies that the most severe mailing could increase turnout compared to those who did not receive a mailing by around 8 percentage points. These results demonstrated the effectiveness of releasing voter information, and opened up a new area for researchers and campaign strategists to consider (Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008). Based on previous basic research, door-to-door canvassing had been found to be the most cost efficient form of GOTV efforts for campaigns to pursue. However, this new study found mailings that exert social pressure out perform door-to-door canvassing (Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008). This research was trailblazing, finding results in the 5% to 8% range. These type of results have never been previously observed, even in a multi-piece mail program (Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008). In this field, a 5 to 8 percentage point increase in voter turnout is very influential when compared to other forms of direct mailing.

Other experiments have focused on the similar hypothesis of increased social pressure and appealing to social norms and have produced similar results. Mailers sent to voters indicating their voting record, similar to the study conducted by Green and Gerber, were shown to have an impact on voters (Murray and Matland, 2014). Using two separate scripts indicating that someone had voted in the last election and one indicating that the subject had not voted, it was found that the latter script produced a higher result of a 6.4% increase (Murray and Matland, 2014). In another effort to appeal to social norms, two phone scripts were used indicating whether the upcoming election would be high

turnout or low turnout (Gerber and Rogers, 2009). By appealing to the person's inner need to conform to the social norm, it was found that the script indicating high turnout outperformed the other indicating low turnout, producing an increase of 7% in voting (Gerber and Rogers, 2009). Using this sample of messages that attempt pressure and conformity, it is clear that this type of messaging can increase the impact of usually low impact methods of getting out the vote, including phone banks and mailing.

In other field experiments, researchers have begun to dig into the specifics of a basic GOTV effort. Arcenaux and Nickerson (2009) conducted research focusing on the environment of an election, and how a different electoral context can decide who should be mobilized. This theory of contingent mobilization believes that in low-salience elections, only high propensity voters will be likely to respond to GOTV efforts (Arcenaux and Nickerson 2009). Low salience elections can be defined as those that produce little interest among voters due to lower level candidates being the only on the ballot. On the other hand, high-salience elections leave GOTV efforts to focus on low propensity voters who are not as likely to have already committed to voting (Arcenaux and Nickerson 2009). Finally, elections of middling interest, or those that fall between low and high salience, are more likely to turnout those who are in the middle range of the voter spectrum (Arcenaux and Nickerson 2009). This is due to high-propensity voters being likely to already have a commitment to voting, and low-propensity voters being unlikely to be swayed to go to the polls (Arcenaux and Nickerson 2009). This theory predicts that GOTV efforts will be more effective if they are focused on a specific group of voters based on the salience of the election (Arcenaux and Nickerson 2009).

Results aligned with the aforementioned theory of contingent mobilization. In low-salience elections, door-to-door canvassing is more likely to boost turnout among high-propensity voters but not low-propensity voters (Arecenaux and Nickerson 2009). It was also found that high propensity voters are not as likely to be effected during high-salience elections, as it is believed that many of them were previously committed to voting (Arecenaux and Nickerson 2009). This research produces another example of improving cost efficiency, as money can be wasted attempting to turn out those who are either already committed or have no interest in going to the polls. These researchers found that by focusing on the wrong type of voters, campaigns may in turn spend excessive amounts of money to turn out each vote. “In elections that generate little interest, a campaign fitting our description would spend approximately \$93 per vote on average if it targets low-propensity voters, but only a modest \$16 per vote if it focuses on high-propensity voters” (Arecenaux and Nickerson 2009). This research has the potential to change the future electorate, and this method of GOTV effort could increase turnout substantially over a longer period of time.

Studies have also attempted to determine which types of elections are more likely to turn out voters. When researching this topic, the question being asked is why does the level of turnout shift dramatically from election to election, and why do some voters vote in one election but skip the next one (Jackson 2002)? After studying this question, Jackson concluded that the stimulus of the overriding election is important for the turnout that year. This “high stimulus” environment can be described as high spending races, which were found to increase a citizens’ turnout probability by around 18 points compared to similar subjects voting in an election without a gubernatorial or senate

election (Jackson 2002). This research provides a lens to look through when conducting future research. Future research in this area may focus even further on what types of elections effect different types of voters (Jackson 2002). When using different social or economic factors to review voter turnout, it may be beneficial to also consider the level of stimulus provided by the campaign taking place that year, providing even more data than previously recorded.

Other research describing the future of the field focuses specifically on timing, and how different propensity voters may be effected differently by the timing of a message. A study by Costas Panagopoulos focused on primacy and recency effects among different propensity voters. This study found that “approximately 60% of the 940,755 airings of political commercials in federal and gubernatorial elections that appeared in the nation’s top 75 media markets in 2000 aired in the last 6 weeks of the election cycle” (Panagopoulos 2011). It was clear that campaigns believed later messaging produced higher increases in turnout, leading Panagopoulos to conduct his study to determine the different levels of effect that can be had on voter turnout based on the timing of the contact compared to Election Day (Panagopoulos 2011). This experiment focused on the primacy and recency effects of messaging on both low and high propensity voters in an attempt to see which effort would mobilize the different groups more effectively (Panagopoulos 2011).

This experiment was conducted during the 2005 municipal elections in Rochester, New York, and was designed to compare the effects of different timing using nonpartisan messages professional phone banks (Panagopoulos 2011). Registered voters were selected randomly and divided into four groups, a control, group receiving a phone call

four weeks prior to election day, another receiving the same call two weeks prior to Election Day, and the final group receiving the call three days before Election Day (Panagopoulos 2011). When conducting a phone experiment, not all those on the list are guaranteed to be accessible through this form of contact, leaving those who are contacted as the group to be studied. In this scenario, numbers must be adjusted as all groups are not reached equally. Panagopoulos's study showed upon completion that different propensity voters responded favorably to messages received at different times leading up to an election. High-propensity voters were more responsive to phone calls received 4 weeks prior to Election Day, while low-propensity voters were responsive to messages delivered closer to the election (Panagopoulos 2011). This data suggests that timing may truly be impacted by the type of voter receiving the message, and questions the stress placed on ads close to Election Day (Panagopoulos 2011). Previous studies in this area have focused on low-propensity voters, while this new study has shown that these results may not be generalizable to the electorate as a whole (Panagopoulos 2011). Research done by Panagopoulos (2011) combined with the previous research on propensity and electoral climate may lead to a whole new area in the field of GOTV research. Researchers may begin to study the primacy and recency effect on low and high-propensity voters based on the climate of the specific election. These could result in an enlarged impact on voter turnout, and shows that the field of GOTV efforts are constantly evolving.

As the way ballots are cast evolve, new voters and larger pools of voters are brought into elections. Although the area of vote-by-mail precincts are fairly new, research conducted in this area has begun to show that GOTV efforts will continue to

keep up with the latest innovations. When reviewing the reasons citizens give for voting, we are reminded that the social function of voting weighs into their final decision. A recent study demonstrated this when voters in Switzerland were shown to be less responsive to GOTV efforts when the social incentives had been removed through a complete vote by mail system (Arcenaux, Kousser, and Mullin 2012). Using this idea, researchers designed an experiment to test the level of increase in turnout using door-to-door canvassing as a GOTV method in both VBM and traditional precincts.

After conducting this experiment, the difference between the two precincts presented itself the clearest among medium propensity voters. Among medium-propensity voters, voters in traditional precincts that were contacted were 3.1 percentage points more likely to vote than those living in the control group. In contrast, those in treated VBM precincts were actually less likely to turn out than those in the control group (Arcenaux, Kousser, and Mullin 2012). With these results, this experiment produced a new outlook toward the future of GOTV methods as casting a ballot potentially evolves everywhere. This study offers a potential new area of research by proving that how voters cast their ballot may also impact how they turn out, combined with many of the traditional factors (Arcenaux, Kousser, and Mullin 2012). With this group of future research, it is clear that almost every aspect of a campaign can be studied and can drastically change the course of an election. This makes understanding these niche areas of GOTV efforts even more important for both researchers and political candidates.

While the goal of this study is less ambitious than some other studies of mobilization efforts, it clearly fits with recent efforts to assess the effectiveness of voter mobilization techniques. More specifically, this study explores whether low cost efforts,

both in expenditures of time and money, to mobilize voters can influence turnout in a low turnout election. While not as grand in scope as some other studies, it clearly represents the situation that many candidates and campaigns find themselves. Many candidates run short on time, money and technological resources to drive sophisticated GOTV efforts. In this specific field experiment, we measure the ability of a simple postcard to drive voter turnout in an off year gubernatorial primary and general election.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project explores the ability to influence voter turnout in a moderately low interest election. In this case, the focus is on Kentucky's 2015 primary and general gubernatorial election. A GOTV field experiment was conducted, with separate sections for both the primary and general elections. Kentucky is one of a handful of states that holds odd year elections. After changes made during the 1990s, voters now only elect statewide officials during odd year elections. In addition to electing their governor, Kentuckians also elect five additional statewide officials including secretary of state, auditor, treasurer, commissioner of agriculture, and attorney general. Since the changes made over twenty years ago that moved legislative and local elections to even years, Kentucky has been plagued by low turnout in odd year elections. For example, turnout for the 2011 primary was a paltry 10.4%. Even year primary elections tend to have higher voter turnout including 26.9% in 2014. General election turnout also suffers in odd year elections. The 28.6% turnout in the 2011 general election barely topped the 2014 primary turnout.

The 2015 election cycle provided an opportunity to explore voter mobilization in a low interest election with modest turnout levels compared to even year elections. The 2015 primary featured a handful of competitive contests. Voters were able to choose between candidates for governor and lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney

general, along with local offices varying by county. Most notably, there was a reasonably contentious three-way battle for the Republican Party nomination for governor.

Republican voters were also able to select a nominee for attorney general, treasurer, and commissioner of agriculture. Republican gubernatorial candidates Matt Bevin, James Comer, and Hal Heiner reinvigorated the Republican base of voters, leading to an election that came down to the final weeks, and ultimately very few votes. Although Democrats did technically have a gubernatorial primary, it was not competitive, nor seriously contested. Candidate Jack Conway faced the challenger Geoffrey Young in a race where it was clear to many that Jack Conway was the outright front runner. The most competitive primary on the Democratic side was for treasurer, but Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes did face a token primary challenge as well. This lack of contested races on the Democratic side may have led to a lack of enthusiasm in their base, ultimately leading to lower levels of turnout. For our purposes, the 2015 Kentucky primary election provided an outstanding opportunity to evaluate the ability of a simple postcard to influence voter turnout in what was expected to be a low interest, low turnout election.

In Warren County, turnout numbers in the 2015 primary cycle remained similar to the average seen across the state of Kentucky. Overall, Warren County voters turned out at a rate of 12.7%. There is also a gap between turnout on the Democratic and Republican side, similar to that shown across the state. Republicans turned out at a much higher rate, totaling 18.6% compared to the Democrats' 10.4%. In the Republican Primary, candidate James Comer won Warren County by a total of over 1,000 votes to the second place Matt

Bevin. Democrats in Warren County experienced a near uncontested primary, with Jack Conway winning by nearly 2,000 total votes over the challenger Geoffrey Young.

In addition to the 2015 primary election, Kentucky's statewide general election provided another unique opportunity to study the effect of mail on a low interest election. Once again, this off year election proved to continue the trend of low turnout, with a total percentage of 30.6%. Looking at this election, it is clear that Republican voters were more enthusiastic about their candidates across the board, leading to a surprising win for Republican Matt Bevin in the gubernatorial election and Democratic incumbent Allison Lundergan Grimes facing an unplanned contested election. This likely reflects the overall turnout and difference between parties. Republicans had a marginally higher rate of turnout, totaling 32.6% across the state of Kentucky, while Democrats turned out around 31.2%.

Most notably for our research, Warren County voters turned out at a rate lower than the statewide average, totaling only 29.6%. This number matched the exact percentage turnout in the 2011 gubernatorial general election, and shows a consistent level of low turnout during these off-year elections. Similar to the primary cycle, Warren County once again experienced a higher turnout rate among Republican than Democrats. Republicans turned out at a rate of 33.3%, while Democrats only reached 29.2%. The context surrounding this election provides a low interest, low turnout election in Warren County.

Experimental Design

With this in mind, a field experiment was developed in order to measure the impact of a well-timed direct mail contact with voters. This field experiment consisted of

two separate stages: the primary and general 2015 gubernatorial elections. The goal of this field experiment is simple: to determine if a single postcard sent to voters during the final week of a low salience election will increase voter turnout among recipients. The working hypothesis is that the postcard should, in fact, lead to higher turnout. To test this basic hypothesis, a field experiment was conducted in Warren County, Kentucky.

Warren County is the fifth largest county in Kentucky with an approximate population of 120,000. The experiment consisted of a single mailing of one of two nonpartisan GOTV postcards. Subjects were selected to receive this postcard using the Secretary of State's voter file, where we were able to access addresses and names of registered voters in Warren County. The postcards were mailed from the printer on the Wednesday prior to the primary election. The goal was to reach low to moderate propensity voters. Voters who voted in the 2014 general election, but did not participate in the 2014 primary were the population of interest for this study. These subjects were seen as those who had previously shown the propensity to vote, but were less likely to vote in lower interest elections like the 2015 cycle. Due to budgetary constraints, the study was limited to 16 (out of over 70) precincts in Warren County. We received funding from both FUSE Grants and Honors Development Grants, which were provided by Western Kentucky University. Approximately 2400 postcards were mailed to households in those precincts. In total, there was a total population of 4500 voters in those precincts who met the criteria of participating in the 2014 general, but not voting in the primary that year.

Two different scripts were sent to voters chosen at random. Copies of both scripts can be found in the Appendix. One script was largely informational. The intent was to remind voters of the upcoming election and to provide additional information related to

the election. This script included information on what races there would be primaries for, poll hours, and where to find information on their voting location. On the other hand, the second script attempted to apply moderate levels of social pressure. The script indicates that they voted in the previous general election, but did not participate in the previous primary. In addition to appealing to an inherent civic duty, this script highlights that the right to vote is not enjoyed in all nations. Both scripts indicated that they were sent for research purposes, and gave an email address where they could contact the sender.

The second section of our field experiment was conducted during the 2015 general election, with a similar experimental design. However, the target subjects considered low to moderate propensity voters in this context differed from the first experiment conducted. During the general election, the target was once again on low to moderate propensity voters, but for our purposes this included subjects who participated in the 2012 presidential election but did not vote in the 2011 governor's race. These races were chosen due to the overall turnout levels reached in Warren County. Warren County reached a turnout level of 61.6% during the 2012 presidential general election, and a significantly lower 29.6% in the 2011 gubernatorial general election. The experiment once again consisted of a single mailing of one of two nonpartisan GOTV postcards. These mailings were sent from the same printer the week before the general election.

For the general election, two separate scripts were sent to a total of 2,000 voters in Warren County. Copies of both scripts can be found in the Appendix B. Both scripts indicated that they were sent for research purposes, and gave an email address where they could contact the sender. The first script was again largely informational, but had a minor appeal to their civic duty to vote as a citizen of the United States. This script included

information including what offices were being elected, polling date and hours, and a link to a website where they could find their polling location. On the other hand, the second script again applied moderate levels of social pressure. We define this as moderately low due to the lack of any real threats when compared to previous research in this area. This script indicated that the voter had participated in the 2012 presidential election, but did not vote for the governor in 2011. In addition to this appeal to civic duty, this script reminded voters that citizens of all countries do not have the right to vote.

DATA AND HYPOTHESIS

In order to analyze the effect of the postcards on the registered voters selected, data was gathered from the Secretary of State's voter file. Information found in the voter file included the voter's name and address as previously discussed, previous voting record, the registered party, sex of the voter, and birth date. The information from the voter file makes it easy to develop a multivariate model to explain voter turnout.

Our model for voter turnout remained similar to that used in previous GOTV studies. Whether or not a subject voted was used as the dependent variable, and coded as a 0 for those who did not vote and a 1 for those who did. The independent variable of focus was whether or not a person received a post card during either election. This variable was coded as a 0 for those who did not receive any postcard, and a 1 for those who received either of the two scripts. This interaction led to the hypothesis of most interest. We hypothesize that those who received a form of direct mail contact in the week prior to either election were more likely to vote than those who were selected but received no form of contact.

The Secretary of State's voter file provided the information to add several different control variables. This included the ability to test the effect of other independent variables on the dependent variable of voting. Age, our next independent variable, was determined by subtracting the year of birth from the year of the election. Building off of previous studies, we hypothesize that older voters will be more likely to vote. Party registration, our next independent variable, was coded using a 1 for Republican voters; otherwise 0. After reviewing this election cycle, it was clear that the Republican base was energized by their candidates, leading to a tightly contested primary and the Republican candidate Matt Bevin winning the general election. With this in mind, Republican voters were more likely to vote than those registered to other parties. We also believe that the type of election will likely have an impact on turnout. This was coded using a 1 for the general election and a 0 for the primary election. Using previous analysis, we believe that turnout will be at a higher rate during the general than in the primary.

With the information gathered for our research, we were also able to include the sex of the voter as another independent variable. This was coded using a 1 for female voters and 0 for male voters. Although this information was included, we did not have any underlying assumptions about the effect of sex on the likelihood of a person to vote. Information provided in the voter file also allowed us to include an interaction variable based on being a registered Republican and voting in the primary election. Using the analysis previously discussed on the Republican Party during this election, we believe the closely contested primary may have had an effect on voters. This was coded as a 1 for Republican voting in the primary election; 0 for all others. We hypothesize that due to

this close race, Republican voters in the primary election were more likely to vote than other groups voting in either election.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The primary focus of this study was to measure the impact of a nonpartisan direct mail piece sent during the final week before the election to voters we defined as low to moderate propensity. Results from the field experiment generally support the expectation described in the previous chapter that the postcards are effective in increasing voter turnout.¹ For those studied, voters from households who received postcards voted at a 2% higher rate than those who did not receive the postcard. For the primary election, the difference between percentage of voters among recipients and non recipients was 2.1%. This difference represents a non-trivial increase in turnout rate. This especially holds true considering the overall turnout rate for the primary election in Warren County was 12.7%, with a statewide average turnout of under 13%. This is consistent with previous findings that the quality, timing and delivery of messages are typically more important than content. However, the expectation that the 2nd script that attempted to exert social pressure would outperform the informational script was not significant.

In the second stage of this experiment conducted during the 2015 general election, the average 2 percent increase holds true. During this stage, recipients of the post card were 2.2% more likely to vote than those non-recipients in the study. The estimated cost of producing one additional vote in this experiment was approximately \$14-\$23, depending on the cost of the mail press. As mentioned in previous chapters, it was

assumed that the script exerting low levels of social pressure would produce a larger increase in voter turnout than the purely informational script. After analyzing the results, this did not prove to be the case. Overall, there was a fraction of a percentage difference between the impact of the two scripts. If anything, the first informational script performed slightly better than the social pressure script. This outcome led to the combining of the two scripts into one dichotomous variable for the rest of our analysis, allowing us to test for the effect of receiving any form of script. Either the voter received a postcard or they did not.

We also test the impact of postcards on voter turnout in a simple logistic regression model. While the field experiment was conducted in two stages, the characteristics of the data allow the general and primary date to be combined in one model. The dependent variable for the model is whether or not the prospective voter ultimately voted in the 2015 primary and general election. While whether or not the voter received a postcard is the independent variable of greatest interest, five additional independent variables are included in the model. As discussed in the previous chapter, age and the sex of the voter, party identification, whether the election of interest is the primary or general, and the interaction of party identification and voting in the primary election were all used as control variables. Overall, the results generated from running logistic regression support the expectation that postcards increased voter turnout in the 2015 primary. As expected, our data shows that the receipt of a postcard had a positive impact on voter turnout. This relationship was statistically significant at the .10 level.

Table 1 about here

The age, party, and type of election variables also performed as predicted in the previous chapter. Older voters were found to be more likely to turn out than those who are younger. Subjects who were registered Republicans were more likely to turnout than those registered to other parties. All subjects were more likely to vote in the general election than in the primary election. Finally, our interactive variable hypothesis also proved to be true. Republicans were more likely to vote in the primary than any other groups. All of these results were found to be statistically significant at the .001 level.

To put the impact of the postcards into a more practical context, predicted probabilities were generated for both stages of the field experiment. Table 2 shows the predicted turnout for voters who did and did not receive postcards for four categories for both the general and primary elections. In regards to the control variable based on sex of the voter, the impact of the postcards on voter turnout was limited to just under one percent when the voters were either male or female non-Republicans. On the other hand, the largest predicted impact of the postcard occurred with male Republican voters. The predicted turnout for non-recipients of the postcard during the primary election was 16.2%, while the predicted turnout for male Republican voters who received the postcard was 18.3%. The relationship was similar for female Republicans. Female Republicans who received the postcard were predicted to have a turnout rate that was 1.7% higher than those that did not receive the post cards in the primary election. These numbers held true in the general election, averaging close to a 2% increase among female and male Republican voters who received postcards compared to those non-recipients in the same categories. This impact is believed to be seen on Republican voters due to the highly contested primary, along with the eventual victory in the gubernatorial general election. It

was clear that Republicans were more likely to turnout than other voters, and this effect was amplified by the receipt of a GOTV postcard. Overall, postcards were most effective when paired with other factors that already made voting more likely.

Table 2 about here

The results from this field experiment reaffirm previous findings that have shown that it might be possible to nudge voter turnout. Low turnout elections provide particularly good opportunities to increase voter turnout. There exists a readily available pool of voters that have shown the propensity to vote previously. Perhaps more importantly, the relatively modest scope of this study suggests that even smaller campaigns might have options available to them to help increase voter turnout.

However, this study also reaffirms previous findings that GOTV efforts may only impact results at the margins of elections. Our study highlighted the uphill battle that campaign organizations face when trying to impact turnout of a race, specifically with limited budgets and levels of influence. In this context, it seems that GOTV efforts have minimal impact on most electoral races where the margins are simply too great. In a close race that can be decided in the margins, these types of efforts may be able to produce the difference between winning and losing.

When discussing the marginal effects of these types of efforts, it is clear that these low cost efforts will tend to have little impact on most elections. For example, in the 2014 elections in the state of Kentucky, an overwhelming majority of elections were decided by large enough margins that a GOTV effort with effects similar to our field experiment would have had no impact on the outcome. Out of 52 state House elections and 8 Senate general elections, one race clearly fell within the margin of where a post card sent by

direct mail, similar to the one discussed previously, would impact results. However, in races with highly contested outcomes, field experiments like the one conducted in the 2015 Kentucky primary and general races seem to show that influence on the marginal level may play a role in deciding a winner.

One specific example of this type of race can be found by looking at the 2014 state representative race in the 91st District between Cluster Howard and Gary Herald. In Breathitt, Estill, Lee, Madison and Owsley County, a total of 13,860 votes were cast to decide the next representative. Cluster Howard won with a total of 6,937 votes, while his opponent Gary Herald received 6,923. With a margin of victory of 14 total votes, this election clearly fits the mold for one that is decided around the margins, making it easily influenced by a low cost GOTV effort. Using our previous analysis, we found that our field experiment could turn out one additional vote for every 48 voters contacted at a cost of \$23 per additional vote generated. Using partisan specific GOTV efforts in an election such as the one found in the 91st District could have easily swayed the margins of turnout, and influenced the final outcome. This type of effort would also be at a reasonable cost, potentially allowing an investment of roughly \$1,000-\$2,000 influence the final results.

More examples of potential impact have occurred at the state level. In the 2015 gubernatorial primary election, the Republican race was closely contested between candidates Matt Bevin and James Comer. Matt Bevin received a total of 70,480 votes, allowing him to receive the Republican nominee, while James Comer finished in a very close 2nd totaling 70,497 votes. At the state-wide level, this election was decided by a total of 83 votes, making it another election that could have easily been swayed one way using a marginally effective GOTV effort similar to our field experiment. However, with

an increase in the scope of the race also comes an increase in the cost of turning out votes. Based on our pool of voters selected, there would be roughly 200,000 Republican voters for a campaign to target. At 30 cents per contact, this effort would cost potentially \$60,000 while also potentially producing roughly 4,000 votes.

Continuing with this state level analysis, Kentucky's 2015 Attorney General general election provides another example of an election decided at the marginal level. Candidate Andy Beshear edged out Whitney Westerfield by a margin of 2,201 votes with a total of 956,933 votes cast. This low turnout election decided by a small margin once again shows that smaller scale GOTV efforts can produce outcomes either way for a candidate. This type of effort would require a much wider spread direct mail effort, drastically increasing cost. In order to produce results that could sway enough voters to change the outcome, campaigns could target a pool of roughly 400,000 voters that voted in 2012 but not in 2011. At 30 cents per contact, roughly \$120,000 would need to be spent in order to turnout 8,000 votes.

Using these elections as examples, it is clear that although efforts like our field experiment may not be relevant to all campaigns, they can be useful to those elections settled at the marginal level. Straying from the large scale efforts of the past conducted by researchers including Green and Gerber, we have been able to find a niche area in smaller scale elections in which campaign GOTV efforts can still have a relevant impact. By targeting GOTV efforts towards those more likely to vote in your favor, these smaller level, low funded campaigns could have impacted the final outcome of each of these elections. Moving forward, these low interest, low turnout elections will continue to

provide examples in which our field experiment's results show that an impact could have been made.

This study, while different from the massive field experiments conducted previously, has found relevancy within a different group of elections. As discussed in the examples above, there have multiple occasions when elections have been decided in the margin at the local and state level. By conducting a low cost field experiment during a low interest election, we are able to present data that is more easily replicated by smaller campaigns. Using research similar to ours, campaigns in closely contested races will be able to target groups in which they are more likely to see an increase in turnout at a more cost efficient rate. Low cost GOTV efforts similar to this in the future may be able to impact the outcomes of elections that would have previously been decided in the margins. This type of research will continue to grow, providing more information to those campaigns who cannot afford the massive scale GOTV efforts produced by President Obama or Americans for Prosperity. With this new information, smaller campaigns will be able to refine their process and become more of a factor in driving turnout in lower interest elections.

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Appendix A

Primary Election Post Cards

Script #1 (on left side of post card back)

Dear Voter,

Records indicate that you voted in last year's general election, but did not participate in the primary election. In countries like China and Cuba, citizens do not have the opportunity to participate in free elections. Your next opportunity to exercise your constitutional right to vote will be on Tuesday, May 19th. Poll locations will be open from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. You can verify your voting location for Tuesday's election by visiting the Kentucky Voter Information Center at:

<https://vr.sos.ky.gov/vic/>

Note: This postcard has been mailed by the WKU Voter Mobilization Project which is funded by a WKU FUSE grant. If you have any questions, please e-mail WKUMobilizationProject@gmail.com.

Script #2 (on left side of post card back)

Dear Voter,

Please remember to exercise your constitutional right to vote in the upcoming primary election on Tuesday, May 19th. Republicans will be able to vote for their nominee for governor, attorney general, treasurer, and agriculture commissioner. Democrats will be voting for their nominee for governor/lt. governor, secretary of state, and treasurer. Poll locations will be open from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm on Tuesday, May 19th. You can verify your voting location and find a sample ballot for Tuesday's election by visiting the Kentucky Voter Information Center at:

<https://vr.sos.ky.gov/vic/>

Note: This postcard has been mailed by the WKU Voter Mobilization Project which is funded by a WKU FUSE grant. If you have any questions, please e-mail WKUMobilizationProject@gmail.com.

Appendix B

General Election Postcards

Script #3 (on left side of post card back)

Dear Voter,

Please remember to exercise your constitutional right to vote in the upcoming gubernatorial election on Tuesday, November 3rd. You will have an opportunity to elect Kentucky's next governor and other statewide officials including attorney general, treasurer, agriculture commissioner, and secretary of state. Candidates for governor are Democrat Jack Conway, Republican Matt Bevin, and Independent Drew Curtis. Poll locations will be open from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm on Tuesday, November 3rd. You can verify your voting location and find a sample ballot for Tuesday's election by visiting the Kentucky Voter Information Center at:

<https://vrsws.sos.ky.gov/vic/>

Note: This postcard has been mailed by the WKU Voter Mobilization Project which is funded by an Honors Development Grant. If you have any questions, please e-mail WKUMobilizationProject@gmail.com.

Script #4 (on left side of post card back)

Dear Voter,

Records indicate that you voted in the 2012 presidential election, but did not vote for governor in 2011. In countries like China and Cuba, citizens do not have the opportunity to participate in free elections. Please do not throw away your opportunity to make a difference. Your next opportunity to exercise your constitutional right to vote will be on Tuesday, November 3rd. Poll locations will be open from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. You can verify your voting location for Tuesday's election by visiting the Kentucky Voter Information Center at:

<https://vrsws.sos.ky.gov/vic/>

Note: This postcard has been mailed by the WKU Voter Mobilization Project which is funded by an Honors Development Grant. If you have any questions, please e-mail WKUMobilizationProject@gmail.com.

Table 1

Logistic Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	Statistical Sig
Postcard	0.125	0.074	.093
Age	0.017	0.002	.000
Female	-0.115	0.067	.086
Republican	0.205	0.093	.027
General	1.584	0.103	.000
Primary*Republican	0.837	0.138	.000

N = 6715

Table 2

Predicted Probabilities for Impact of Postcard on Voter Turnout in Primary

Election

	No Postcard	Received Postcard
Female, Non-Republicans	5.7%	6.4%
Male, Non-Republicans	6.4%	7.2%
Female, Republicans	14.6%	16.3%
Male, Republicans	16.2%	18.0%

Table 3

Predicted Probabilities for Impact of Postcard on Voter Turnout in General Election

	No Postcard	Received Postcard
Female, Non-Republicans	22.8%	25.1%
Male, Non-Republicans	24.9%	27.3%
Female, Republicans	26.7%	29.2%
Male, Republicans	29.0%	31.6%