



The Analyst Institute conducts randomized controlled experiments to determine what works and what does not in voter contact and communication strategies. For more information please visit www.analystinstitute.org

Voter Registration Literature Review

This document is a review of research on voter registration experiments. The findings presented in this paper should not be viewed as definitive or as best-practices, but rather as a foundation for future experimentation, replication, and best practice development. For more information on the research underlying these findings, or for more information on experimental testing and best practices, please contact experiments@analystinstitute.org.

Introduction

Academics and political researchers have conducted experiments in recent years to test methods for increasing voter registration rates. Below is a summary of the research involving randomized experiments looking at voter registration. This is all of the research of which the Analyst Institute is aware. Unfortunately, this research primarily explores tactics to maximize the number of registration applications or cards collected, and rarely addresses the net impact on actual registration rates or voting behavior. More research is badly needed on this topic. We especially want to encourage research on how to maximize the number of actual votes cast that would not have been cast without the voter registration efforts being studied.

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Canvassing

Door-to-Door Canvassing Increased Registration Rates and Votes Cast

Nickerson, 2010

Method: Canvassers paid by a local non-partisan organization contacted all the homes on randomly selected streets in 6 cities to encourage and assist with voter registration. A total of 620 streets were targeted, half of which did not receive the canvass registration attempts and were in the control group. The target elections spanned multiple types, from Presidential to Congressional. Both net registrations and voter turnout were examined.

Summary: Overall, the canvassing efforts increased the registration rate of residents on those streets by an average of 5 percentage points compared to streets that were not canvassed. Nickerson then determined the number of votes cast by any newly registered voters. Those who lived on canvassed streets were 2-3 percentage points more likely to have cast a vote, or over 3 extra voters per street. However, turnout among those registered through the canvassing was still low (about 32% voted) particularly compared to residents who had already been registered to vote.

College Classroom Registration Presentations Increased Registration Rates

Bennion and Nickerson, 2009

Method: Experiments were conducted at 37 public college campuses during the 2006 election cycle. Classrooms were randomly assigned to get no contact, or a registration presentation given by either a professor or a student.

Summary: Both types of in-person presentation significantly increased voter registration rates, and there was not a statistically meaningful difference in their effectiveness. The presentation by professors resulted in a 6.3 percentage point increase in registration rates compared to the no contact group, and the no presentation by students achieved a 4.0 percentage point increase compared to the no contact group.

Canvassed Precincts Increased Democratic Registrants, Some Voted Republican

Gertzog, 1970

Method: Precincts in San Diego County, CA that were not believed to be targeted by Republicans were randomly assigned to be the target of a Democratic Party registration drive, or remain in a control group.

Summary: Comparing the increase in these party-registered voters, the experimental precincts exhibited 12% more new Democratic registrants on the voter rolls than control precincts. However, one third of party-registered Democrats later reported voting for the Republican gubernatorial candidate (Ronald Reagan), compared with less than one fourth of self-registered Democrats. There was no difference between the choices of self- and party-registered voters for local races.

C(4) Canvass Message Increased Cards Collected (and Increased Dem Registrants) Vs. C(3) Message

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Hispanic neighborhoods in Denver were randomly assigned to receive either c(3) or c(4) voter registration site-based canvassing scripts. The c(3) script encouraged people to join their fellow Americans in voting in the next election. The c(3) t-shirt was a plain red t-shirt that read "Register to Vote!" The c(4) script encouraged people to register because Democrats are working hard to improve Hispanic communities with a t-shirt that read "Vote Democrat! Register to Vote!"

Summary: The c(4) messaging was significantly more effective than the c(3) messaging for collecting registration cards. The c(4) messaging collected an average of 1.05 cards per canvasser hour, versus 0.95 cards per canvasser hour for c(3) messaging, a 10 percent difference. For every c(3) canvasser hour a 0.33 Democratic registration card advantage was generated, whereas for every c(4) canvasser hour a 0.42 Democratic registration card advantage was generated.

Pro-Obama Site Canvassing Message Showed Non-significant Improvement Over Anti-McCain Message

Analyst Institute, 2008

Method: Hispanic voters in New Mexico and Colorado were site-based canvassed prior to the 2008 general election with one of three different scripts: a partisan pro-Obama message, a partisan anti-McCain message, or a non-partisan message.

Summary: Although there was a directional effect suggesting that the pro-Obama message outperformed the anti-McCain message in registering a greater proportion of this population, no significant differences between the scripts were perceptible.

Mail

Neutral Mail Produced Greatest Number of Registration Cards Returned

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Previously registered Hispanic voters who had moved since the 2008 election were randomly assigned to receive one of six messaging treatments. The different messages were enclosed on the inside of a plain exterior, except for the final condition that was designed to test the effect of an alternative exterior. The messages tested were neutral, convenience, anger, change, and social norms. This experiment leveraged WVWV's experience with mail registration.

Summary: The neutral message outperformed almost every other interior message in a statistically significant way. These results suggest that the effectiveness of neutral messaging goes beyond its ability to facilitate the opening of mail, since the exterior of these treatment conditions were all identical.

College Mail Did Not Increase Registration Cards Returned

Bennion and Nickerson, 2009

Method: Mail experiments were conducted at 8 public college campuses during the 2006 election cycle. Students were randomly assigned to a control or treatment group. The treatments differed by campus, but the mailing typically contained a letter of encouragement and a registration card.

Summary: Results showed no increase in registration among those who were sent mail.

Official Looking Government Mail Generated the Most Registration Cards Returned¹

Women's Voices Women Vote, 2008

Method: Registration mailers with four different messages and graphics (White House, Iraq, Government, and Super Government) were randomly assigned to be sent to young unregistered women.

Summary: The Super Government mailer increased registration rates by around 3 percentage points over the other creatives. WVWV also found that "Voter Participation Center" is a better return address than WVWV, an in-state PO Box increased response rates by almost 20%. Additional findings uncovered that sending mail during the holiday season decreases the effectiveness of the treatment.

Ballot Box Mail Generated the Most Registration Card Returns

Women's Voices Women Vote, 2008

Method: Women turning 18 were mailed a voter registration application within two months of their 18th birthday. WVWV tested different messages to improve response rates: a list of things you can do when you turn 18, a gift box graphic, and a government ballot box. Targets were assigned to receive one of those three messages or to an untreated control group.

Summary: The response rate (application return rate) among those getting the "things you can do" list was 4.7 % "gift" had a 5.9% response rate and ballot box had a 6.4% response rate.

Phone Calls

Pre-mail Phone Calls to Recent Hispanic Movers Did Not Increase Registration Rates

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Hispanic voters who had moved since the 2008 election were all sent a neutral mailing with a registration card (that was previously found to be effective). In addition, targets were randomly assigned to either receive no phone call, an automated call informing them the registration application was in the

¹ Note that WVWV has conducted several other voter registration by mail experiments. Analyst Institute is attempting to systematically compile this information, and will update this review as soon as the information is available.

mail and asking them to look for it, an automated call before the form arrived that asked the target to press 1 if they would look for it in the mail, or a live phone call asking the individual to watch for it before the form arrived.

Summary: There were no statistically significant differences between the control group and any of the various phone treatments, nor were there significant difference when the phone conditions were compared to each other. However, a small sample size limited statistical power.

Pre-mail Phone Calls to Non-registered Hispanics Did Not Increase Registration Rates

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Non-registered Hispanic voters in Nevada and Colorado were all sent a neutral mailing with a registration card (that was previously found to be most effective). In addition, targets were randomly assigned to either receive no phone call, an automated call informing them the registration application was in the mail and asking them to look for it, or a live phone call asking the individual to watch for it before the form arrived.

Summary: Neither phone pre-treatment was found to be significantly more effective than the control.

Robo-call Increased Registration Rates

Analyst Institute, 2008

Method: Young voters were randomly assigned to receive a robo-call, a live phone call made by a professional, or no contact.

Summary: The robo-call was significantly more effective at encouraging registrations than the live call. When control covariates (race, party, gender, and vote history) are included, robo-calls were associated with a 1.7 percentage point increase in registrations and live calls were associated with a 0.8 percentage point increase in registrations.

Email

Email Reminders Did Not Affect Voter Registration

Bennion and Nickerson, 2010

Method: Students at public universities were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: no email, three emails from a university administrator, or three emails from a student body leader. The email text was brief and contained a link to the Rock the Vote online registration tool.

Summary: Bennion and Nickerson examined the registration rolls after the election and found no effect from the series of administrator emails.



Neutral Email Message Increased Registration Forms Collected Over Social Norms Email

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Targets were on the *Rock The Vote* email list. They were randomly assigned to receive one of three types of email messages: (1) Neutral (Official looking), (2) High Registration rate (with RTV logo), or (3) Low Registration rate (with RTV logo). Information was gathered from unique URLs on registration rate, as well as open rate and clickthrough rate.

Summary: The Neutral message proved to be almost twice as effective as the High and Low Registration rate treatments in terms of open rates, and close to ten times more effective in terms of clickthroughs and registration forms collected.

Emails Were Not Effective At Generating Registrations

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Emails from *Rock The Vote Action Fund* were sent to Hispanic movers. Targets did not necessarily have a prior relationship with *Rock the Vote Action Fund*. Each target was randomly assigned to receive one of seven types of email messages. Information was gathered from unique URLs on registration rate, as well as open rate and clickthrough rate.

Summary: The overall rate of email opens, clickthroughs, and registrations for this experiment was very low. Overall, just 0.15% of people were recorded as having opened the email, less than 1 out of 700. Only three registered online, less than 1 in 10,000. This study showed no significant increase in registration cards collected across conditions.

Emails Did Not Generate New Registrants On The Voter File

Analyst Institute, 2008

Method: The population of young people who had moved since they registered came from 18-29 year olds listed on the National Change Of Address (NCOA) directory. They were randomly assigned to receive an email reminder to re-register, or no contact. This test was conducted by Rock the Vote.

Summary: Results indicate that the rates of actual registrations on the voter file after the election were not statistically significantly different across the two groups.

Emails Did Not Increase Registration or Turnout Rates

Nickerson, 2007

Method: A total of 13 email experiments in three different elections were conducted by three non-partisan organizations, using varied populations and messages. Participants were randomly assigned to receive a series of emails, or no contact.

Summary: Both overall and for all but one of the experiments, there was no effect of the email contacts on either registration or turnout.

Online Advertising

Varying Social Norms Banner Ads Did Not Impact Clickthrough Rates

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Banner ads emphasizing that not enough people are registered, that many people are registered and a generic registration ad were randomly assigned to Hispanic-oriented websites.

Summary: Overall, the Not Enough Are Registered treatment was the most successful, generating a 0.092% clickthrough rate. This was higher than the Many Are Registered treatment and the generic condition, but the difference is not statistically significant, and therefore only directionally suggestive.

Text

Text Reminders Increased Registration Rates Among Those Who Had Downloaded a Registration Form

RTV 2008

Method: Those who downloaded registration forms from the Rock the Vote website, were registering in Pennsylvania or Indiana, and agreed to receive text messages were then randomly assigned to receive a text message reminding them of the deadline to mail in their forms.

Summary: Individuals who received the text reminding them to turn in their forms were 4 percentage points more likely to turn in their forms than those who downloaded the forms but did not receive a text reminder.

Online Voter Registration System

Online Voter Registration System Increased Registration Rates

Bennion and Nickerson, 2011

Method: Students at 25 campuses in 8 states with fully online voter registration (OLVR) were randomly assigned to receive either: no contact, an email with a link to the online registration system, or an email with a link to a traditional downloadable form.

Summary: Those sent emails linking to downloadable forms were 0.2 percentage points more likely to register to vote than those sent no email, which was not statistically significant. However, those sent emails linking to the OLVR were 0.9 percentage points more likely to register, significantly greater than both no email and the other downloadable form email, ($p < .01$).

Method Comparisons

Canvass + Mail Was Most Effective

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Hispanics were randomly assigned to receive one of three treatment conditions: mail-only, door-to-door canvass-only, or a combination of both mail and canvass. The mail was a WVWV neutral letter and registration form. The canvassing was performed by Democracia staff who encouraged all who answered the door at the address to register.

Summary: The combination of mail and canvass together was significantly better than the alternatives. It was five times more effective at registering voters than mail alone and over ten times as effective as canvass alone.

Combining Tactics Increased Response Rates

Rock the Vote, 2008

Method: Voters who had provided their contact information on the Rock the Vote website when they downloaded a registration form, were randomly assigned to text only, mail only, email only, email + text, mail+ text , or mail + email+ text.

Summary: The highest performing contact combinations were email + text and mail+ text at 7% and 8% response rates and mail+ email and mail + email+ text both at 12% response rate

Hispanic Voter Identity

Neutral Mail Messages for Non-registered Hispanics Was Most Effective

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Non-registered Hispanics in Nevada and Colorado were randomly assigned to one of nine WVWV mail pieces, each modifying slightly the message on the inside of the form. Along with a neutral message, there were messages mentioning factors such as: low registration, high registration, American identity, Hispanic identity, Pro-Democrat, Anti-Republican, a neutral message from a Hispanic oriented organization, and an immigration message from a Hispanic oriented organization.

Summary: The neutral message significantly outperformed most other treatments. In direct comparisons, it was about 0.3 percentage points more effective than the messages mentioning Low Registrations, High Registrations, and the neutral from a Hispanic oriented organization, and 0.7 percentage points more effective than the messages mentioning American Identity, Hispanic Identity, Anti-Republican, and immigration message from a Hispanic oriented organization.

Non-Celebrity Email Sender Was Most Effective

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Hispanics who had moved since the 2008 election and were on Rock the Vote's email list were randomly assigned to receive one of three messages, all of which linked to the RTV's voter registration website. A neutral registration encouragement was compared to one that was from a Celebrity endorsement and highlighted their American Identity, and one that was from a Celebrity and highlighted their Hispanic Identity. In addition to registrations, open and clickthrough rates for each email were examined.

Summary: The neutral message (from a non-celebrity sender) was found to be significantly more effective on all counts. It was almost twice as effective at generating opens, and close to ten times more effective at generating both clicks and registrations.

Unsolicited Emails for Nonregistered Hispanics Was Most Effective When Paired with Celebrity Messages and Hispanic Identity

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Hispanics who had moved since the 2008 election and were on Rock the Vote's email list were randomly assigned to receive either one of eight emails with messages that had different focuses: a deadline, a general reminder, a celebrity plus Hispanic identity, a celebrity plus American identity, a celebrity with a social norm of low registration, and a celebrity with a social norm of high registration. Only data regarding clicks and registrations was available.

Summary: The overall rate of clicks was very low (0.07% click rate) and was highest from emails focusing on a celebrity and the recipient's Hispanic Identity (0.19% click rate). A post-hoc test comparing the click rate from this condition to the others indicated this was a statistically significant difference. There were not enough registrations to draw meaningful conclusions on that factor.

Banner Ads With Celebrity Pictures Were Most Effective

Analyst Institute, 2010

Method: Five banner ad messages were randomly assigned to be displayed to visitors of Hispanic websites varying two factors. One of the five was a neutral message, highlighting neither identity nor celebrity endorsement. Of the remaining, half the ads encouraged viewers to register "as an American" and the other half "as an Hispanic". And, in a crossed design, half the ads contained a generic image, and the other half featured a Hispanic celebrity.

Summary: Emphasizing Hispanic identity was more effective at encouraging registration among Hispanics than emphasizing no identity, but not significantly different from emphasizing American identity. Ignoring the neutral message, the ads featuring the celebrity significantly outperformed those that did not.

Social Service Agencies

NVRA Trainings on Voter Registration Increased Registration Rates

Hess, Hamner, and Nickerson, 2010

Method: Social service agency personnel in 120 Virginia jurisdictions were randomly assigned to complete an online training module about the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) either in August or November.

Summary: The jurisdictions which received the training had overall higher registrations in October and September than those who had not received the training (but not in November, as expected). However, Hess, Hamner, and Nickerson, noted that the increase was primarily attributable to areas with the highest levels of prior registrations, suggesting that the results may be confounded.

Public Assistance Reminder for North Carolina State Board of Elections Increased Voter Registration Applications

Nickerson, Hamner, and Hess, 2010

Method: Public assistance offices in 93 North Carolina counties were randomly assigned to be sent an email encouraging compliance with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA). There were two emails, one a "plain" encouragement, and one with an extra statement about "performance", stating how many applications were recently processed from that county and suggesting an attempt to beat that number.

Summary: Researchers determined that the effect of the email reminder depended on the pre-treatment compliance of the office. Only offices which submitted applications on a regular basis had a sizable increase in voter registration applications, and only for the month after the emails. There was no clear effect of adding the "performance" trigger.