

Can Face-to-Face Mobilization Boost Student Voter Turnout? Results of a Campus Field Experiment

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Abstract

American colleges and universities have an expanding role to play in nurturing political engagement as more youth attend college. Given low voter turnout among college students yet growing experimental evidence that face-to-face mobilization can boost turnout, the experiment reported in this article examined the impact of a face-to-face college student mobilization effort on a small, private university in Florida. The authors found a non-significant difference in turnout between those students contacted and those not contacted. The findings suggest that although it is generally difficult to mobilize U.S. citizens, it may be especially difficult to mobilize U.S. college students. Brief recommendations are offered for steps university members can take to make elections a more established part of college students' experience.

Introduction

This article reports on the results of an experimental study testing the question: Does face-to-face mobilization boost voter turnout among college students? Given young Americans' lower voting rates and the relative effectiveness of door-to-door canvassing compared with other get-out-the-vote methods in non-campus contexts (see below for more on youth turnout and turnout methods), the authors conducted a field experiment to test the effectiveness of the door-to-door method on a college campus during the 2010 midterm election. The authors employed undergraduates enrolled in a community organizing course taught by one of the authors at Stetson University, a small liberal arts institution in central Florida, to door-knock students in selected Stetson dorms over several weeks prior to the November election.

Participatory democratic theory generally seeks to extend and deepen citizen participation in governance even in modern representative democracies wherein politics has become more and more directed by media, policy, and campaign professionals (*Hilmer, 2010; Pateman, 1970; Skocpol, 2002*). Among other benefits, participation in politics is said to improve political knowledge and interest, trust in government, accountability of elected officials and

state bureaucrats, and even the health of citizens (Hill, Leighley, & Hinton-Andersson, 1995; Pateman, 1970; Putnam, 2000; Sanders, 2001; Tocqueville, 1969). For these and other reasons, scholars (e.g., Macedo et al., 2005; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2008) and pundits (e.g., Blumner, 2011; Mattson, 2003) have expressed concern about the persistent signs of political disengagement in the United States, especially among young Americans—recent spikes in presidential voter turnout notwithstanding.

Evidence suggests that younger Americans (born 1965 onward) are less politically engaged than their generational elders, at least by conventional government and party-oriented measures of voting, partisan affiliation, political knowledge, and party activity (Dalton, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Some scholars find evidence that younger Americans are more civic than political—volunteering at higher rates for community activities not directed at influencing government, like park and river clean-ups, tutoring, and charity runs. These scholars contend that civic activity can lead to political action (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006). However, the decline in conventional political activity among the young, despite the expansion of civic voluntarism in schools since the 1980s, suggests that civic action either has no effect on youths' political actions, or that the civic tends to replace the political (Macedo et al., 2005; Wattenberg, 2008). Further, whatever value non-conventional political actions (e.g., consumer boycotts, online petitions, street demonstrations) may have, they cannot replace the electoral activity that determines who makes the laws that shape everyone's lives.

Political disengagement among young Americans is all the more troublesome given that they are on average better educated than their generational predecessors. Formal education correlates strongly with political engagement in many studies (Campbell, Converse, Stokes, & Miller, 1960; Portney & O'Leary, 2007; Putnam, 2000; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Moreover, higher education institutions can be fertile grounds for student political activism, not just because of any purported youthful idealism, but also because of the greater sociability and information flow on many campuses, as detailed below. Hence, given that education and political engagement are strongly related, that higher education presents an opportunity to instill active political citizenship, and that the proportion of American youth attending college is rising, how college students can become more engaged citizens is an increasingly important question.

Field Testing Face-to-Face Mobilization of College Students

A growing body of election campaign field experiments tests different methods for boosting voter turnout, from postal mailings and e-mails, to radio and TV ads, to phone calls and door-knocking or canvassing, as well as the variable messages used in these and other approaches (Arceneaux, 2010; Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2009; Gerber & Green, 2000; Green, Gerber, & Nickerson, 2003; Nickerson, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Panagopoulos & Green, 2011). The experimental research thus far shows that face-to-face canvassing is among the most effective methods, on a per contact basis, for boosting voter participation (Green & Gerber, 2008). However, to the authors' knowledge, no field experiments testing the effectiveness of face-to-face canvassing have been conducted with college campuses, even though college life presents a distinct and often difficult voting environment for the growing numbers of college students.

College Students as Community Members, in the Biggest Battleground State

The authors view college students not just as members of their campus, but as members of city, county, and state communities for three specific reasons. First, students are as much permanent fixtures as their colleges: the student faces may change, but the student body typically endures longer than even the longest residing resident. Second, students use many of the same services and businesses other community residents use, contributing to economies, especially in smaller towns like DeLand, Florida, where the author's institution, Stetson University is located. Third, city, county, and state government decisions—about education, parking, policing, transportation, zoning, and much more—affect college students regardless of where those students come from. Students and their schools have significant potential power to shape their communities by increasing student voting rates, especially in smaller communities where voting numbers are lower and students comprise a larger proportion of the population that can tip the balance in city, county, and state representative elections. Indeed, voting is arguably the most significant form of community-university engagement insofar as it influences who makes the political decisions that affect everyone. In this context, investigating whether and how more college students can be mobilized to vote matters.

College student turnout has added importance at Stetson University, which lies along Florida's "I-4 Corridor" that stretches

from Daytona Beach to Tampa. The I-4 Corridor constitutes the biggest battleground area in the largest presidential swing state in the nation. Florida is the fourth largest state in the nation in terms of population, after California, Texas, and New York, but it is the largest battleground state in the nation in U.S. presidential elections, as its historic role in the 2000 election underscored. Moreover, given its substantial population growth per the 2010 U.S. Census, Florida gained two more Electoral College votes, for a total of 29, further increasing its influence in presidential elections. In the following report, we review the relevant literature on voting among American youth and college students, then detail our voter turnout experiment on the politically significant student community at Stetson University.

Literature Review

College Student Voting

Young Americans generally express less engagement with politics, and vote at consistently lower rates than all older age groups (Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006). As Panel A in Figure 1 illustrates, among Americans ages 18–24, the voting rate has increased in every presidential election since 1996, but never reached higher than the 52.1% who voted in 1972, one year after the minimum voting age changed from 21 to 18, nor has it matched the levels of older age groups. Like older age groups, in midterm elections, 18–24-year-olds turn out to vote at about half or less the rate they do in higher profile presidential election years (Figure 1, Panel B), and the 2010 midterm election was no exception, with just 19.9% of 18–24-year-olds voting compared with 44.3% in 2008

Figure 1: Panel A, Presidential Elections

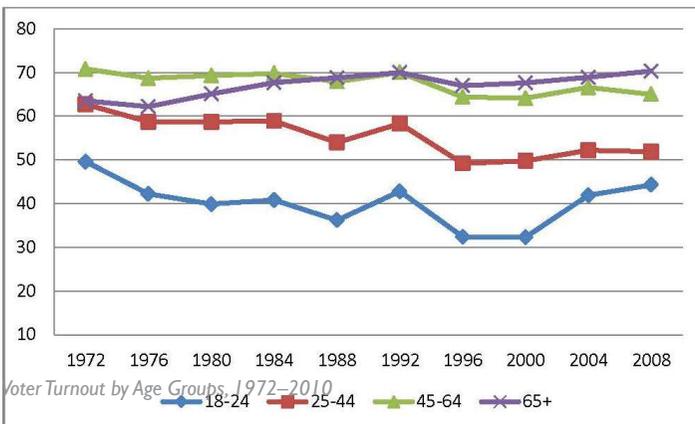


Figure 1: Panel B, Midterm Elections

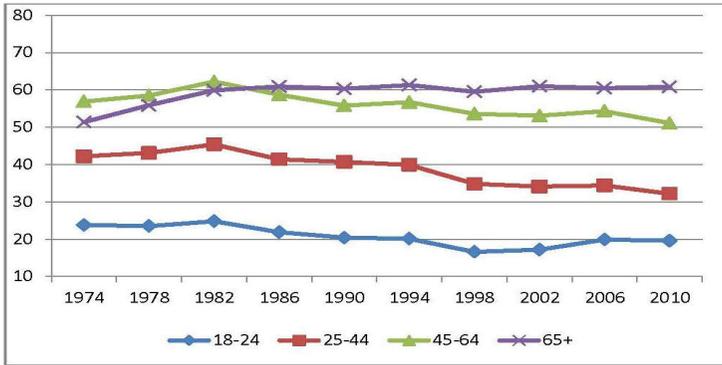


Figure 1. Adapted from: United States Census Bureau. Historical Time Series Tables. Table A-1. "Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2010." <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/historical/>

The preceding discussion is, of course, about all 18–24-year-old American youth, not just those enrolled in a college. Although the percentage of college students (69%) that fell into the traditional college age group of 18–24 was higher in 1970, more than half of college students (56%) were in this age bracket in 2010 (NCES, 2011a). At Stetson University, in fall 2010, 91.8% of undergraduate students were 18–24 years old. Given the strong relationship between education and political engagement, it may come as no surprise that youths in college are more disposed to vote and engage with politics than those not in college (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009; Portney & O’Leary, 2007). One national survey comparing 18–24-year-old youths in college and not in college found significant differences in the percentage who had ever worked or volunteered in a political campaign (24% vs. 15%), participated in a protest march or demonstration (24% vs. 15%), or talked about politics with friends (57% vs. 42%), among other indicators (Portney & O’Leary, 2007). That said, accumulated research on voting patterns shows that U.S. citizens who are older, married, employed, homeowners, long-time residents of their communities, with higher incomes and a bachelor’s degree or more are more likely to vote (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2006; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Most college students, like those at Stetson University, share few if any of these characteristics.

Despite growth in turnout among 18–24-year-olds (as well as older age groups) in presidential elections since 1996, college students are showing markedly less interest in politics much closer to home, in student government elections. For example, the University of California–Los Angeles Freshman Study, which has surveyed American college freshmen annually since 1966, shows a sharp decline over 40 years in the percentage of students who

frequently voted in high school government elections, from 73% in 1966 to 22% in 2006. Even fewer expressed the intent to vote in student government in college—just 8% in 2006, largely unchanged since 2000, when the Freshman Study began asking students about voting in college government (Pryor *et al.*, 2007).

Conditions Influencing Voting on College Campuses

In some ways, colleges and universities are fertile grounds for political mobilization. For example, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) found in their study, *Who Votes?* that “[b]eing part of a college community provides relatively free access to information about politics. Through living groups, extracurricular activities, and classes, [college] students are less socially isolated than non-students” (p. 57). Freer access to information and more social contact means more opportunities for political learning and mobilization. Political organizations may also be drawn to colleges as sources of volunteers, interns, and voters.

However, there are personal and contextual factors particular to college students that can make it difficult to mobilize them to vote. For instance, students are more or less disposed to vote depending on their major, partisanship, and personal interest. Hillygus (2005) found that students in the social sciences were the most politically engaged after college. Niemi and Hanmer (2010) reported that students in math, science, and engineering voted less than students in other majors. Unsurprisingly, they also found that those most partisan and interested in politics were more likely to vote. More generally, most college students are inexperienced with voting and are surrounded by similarly inexperienced peers. Thus, the tasks of registering; determining when, where, and for whom to vote; and in some cases how to get to the polls, can be challenging, especially for students who go away to college in unfamiliar towns and cities. In addition, young people in general tend to be more mobile than older people, so public records of their actual addresses are more likely to be inaccurate, frustrating efforts to mobilize them (Nickerson, 2006). This can be especially true of college students who not only move away to college, but may change addresses from year to year while in college. Further, students who transfer from one college to another, and those who live farther from home, appear less likely to vote (Niemi & Hanmer, 2010).

Three Reasons to Encourage College Student Voting

Despite these difficulties, there are at least three compelling reasons to encourage college students to vote. First, the proportion of Americans going to college is growing rapidly. The percentage of Americans completing 4 years of college or more grew from 11% in 1970 to 30% in 2009. Between 1999 and 2009 alone, enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary schools rose 38%, from 14.8 million to 20.4 million (NCES, 2011b). College students thus form an increasingly significant constituency, and the majority of college students are of voting age. Second, government policies and funding for higher education directly affect college students. Third, as Gerber, Green, and Shachar (2003) document, “voting may be habit forming” (p. 540), with prior voting trumping even the powerful factors of age and education as a predictor of future voting in their analysis (see also Aldrich, Montgomery, & Wood, 2011; Plutzer, 2002). Hence, getting more college students to vote may result in higher voting rates in years to come.

Civic Engagement Initiatives and Research on College Campuses

More colleges and universities have, over the last few decades, expanded service-learning opportunities, given evidence that such service improves student civic attitudes, retention, grades, and self-efficacy, among other benefits (Astin, 1993; Astin, Vogelsang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Keup, 2005; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006). However, despite evidence that political activity in college can be habit forming and that young Americans and college students are pulling away from politics more than civics, most service-learning does not engage students in political action (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Hepburn, Niemi, & Chapman, 2000; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1997; Robinson, 2000). Indeed, the common use in higher education of the term “civic engagement” to refer to both civic and political involvement affirms the primacy of the civic, and obscures the smaller amount of political service-learning going on at American colleges and universities.

There appears, however, to be growing interest in nurturing student political engagement, as evidenced by the proliferation in recent years of research and/or action organizations like the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Campus Compact’s Campus Vote Initiative, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ (AASCU)

American Democracy Project, AASCU's Civic Indicators, and dozens of university centers, programs, and schools devoted at least partly to political education.

Still, despite this mounting interest in the political lives of college students, as recently as 2010, political scientists Richard Niemi and Michael Hanmer (2010) contended that "there is almost no theoretical or empirical work specifically devoted to [voting among] college students" (p. 302). Examples of recent empirical work include evidence that e-mailed links to downloadable voter registration forms did not boost college student registration (Bennion & Nickerson, 2011), but in-class presentations did (Bennion, 2008–2009; Bennion & Nickerson, 2009). Ulbig and Waggener (2011) found that college campus voter registration tables may increase student turnout. However, the authors of this study know of no field experiments that seek to measure the effect of face-to-face mobilization on college students, despite the growing experimental evidence that such mobilization boosts turnout (Bowen & Green, 2003–2004; Gerber & Green, 2000; Green & Gerber, 2008; Green, Gerber, & Nickerson, 2003; John & Brannan, 2008; Michelson, 2003, 2006).

Face-to-face voter mobilization gains larger importance given evidence that the overall decline in turnout in recent decades is due at least in part to the reduction in such mobilization as parties and other political organizations have turned more and more to mass media advertising (Avery, 1989; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Teixeira, 1987, 1992). Accordingly, political scientists Alan Gerber and Donald Green (2000) argued that expanding face-to-face mobilization can help reverse that decline. As they indicated in the second edition of their noted book, *Get Out the Vote* (Green & Gerber, 2008), "[f]ace-to-face interaction makes politics come to life and helps voters to establish a personal connection with the electoral process. . . . A personal invitation sometimes makes all the difference" (p. 45). Thus, the authors pursued this research question: Does face-to-face mobilization increase voter turnout among college students? They tested the hypothesis that face-to-face mobilization increases college student turnout at a small, private, majority undergraduate, highly residential university that holds the Carnegie Foundation's community engagement classification (Carnegie Foundation, 2008). The next section explains their experimental method for testing this hypothesis.

Method

As social scientists who study American politics and as supporters of participatory democratic government, this study's authors—one a sociologist, the other a political scientist—are both keenly interested in increasing citizen political engagement, especially among young Americans. For these reasons, the authors read Green and Gerber's book, *Get Out the Vote* (2008), with enthusiasm for its insistence on methodological rigor in testing common claims about what works and what does not work to raise voter turnout. One of the most common claims made among political activists and campaign professionals is that face-to-face, door-to-door interaction with voters is among the most effective ways, and possibly the most effective, to move voters to the polls. Yet in reviewing the burgeoning experimental research on turnout methods, the authors found no experiments testing face-to-face mobilization on the growing population of college students. Given this literature review and their shared interest in participatory democracy, the authors decided to use one of the authors' courses—a community-based class titled Community Organizing for Social Change (COSC)—to test whether face-to-face mobilization can strengthen turnout among college students, and secured the approval of Stetson's institutional review board to do so.

The authors begin this method section by indicating the location of their study, Stetson University, and its basic demographics. They then explain their data collection method (including specification of the experimental treatment) and sampling process, and conclude with a brief discussion of the methodological strengths and the weaknesses of the field experiment.

Location of the Study and Demographics of Stetson University

The study was conducted at Stetson University. Founded in 1883, Stetson is Florida's oldest private university, with almost 2,300 undergraduates at the time of our study. Most of these students take their courses at Stetson's main campus in DeLand, a town of 25,000 located in central Florida between Orlando and Daytona Beach. Of the nearly 2,300 undergraduates in fall semester 2010, 58% were female, 42% male. Sixty-nine percent defined themselves as White, 14% as Hispanic, 7% as Black, 4% as mixed race, and 2% as Asian (the remainder's race and ethnicity was categorized as "non-resident alien" or unknown). Seventy-eight percent hailed

from Florida. Sixty-three percent lived on campus in dorms or apartments.

Data Collection Mechanism: A Voter Mobilization Project

The course COSC is intended to teach students basic skills in grassroots community organizing, including fund-raising, volunteer recruitment, and media outreach. Students in the course learn these skills through reading, writing, class discussion, and practice in a concrete organizing project (the experiential learning component of the course). In fall 2010, the organizing project was a dorm door-to-door, student-to-student effort to encourage Stetson undergraduates to vote in the November 2010 midterm elections.

The 13 undergraduate students enrolled in COSC in the fall semester of 2010 were a diverse group. Nine were men, and four were women. Seven were White, five Black (two born and raised in other nations), one Indian-American. Three were freshmen; three, sophomores; four, juniors; and three, seniors. Three were majoring in political science, three in psychology, two in business, one each in environmental science, biology, and biochemistry, and the two remaining had not declared a major. Only two of the 13 students had prior experience participating in political campaigns or elections other than by voting.

The 13 COSC students were randomly paired to form six canvassing groups (one group had three students). All canvassing groups received the same instructions and equipment. The equipment consisted of

- clipboard and pens;
- treatment dorm floor walk lists (including the students' names, dorm room numbers, and space for COSC students to make notes based on their door conversations);
- a 4-page dorm knocking guide including the questions to pose to students, and answers to frequently asked questions;
- Florida voter registration forms;
- a Florida League of Women Voters guide (including information on statewide candidates); and
- two informational sheets: Six Reasons Stetson Students Should Register to Vote in DeLand, and 15 Ways "Local" Government Affects Stetson Students.

The canvassing groups were assigned to knock on the doors of undergraduates on selected Stetson residence hall floors four times, once per week for 4 weeks starting the weekend of October 4, and ending November 1, the day before the election. Each time, the COSC canvassers were instructed to ask the students on the selected dorm floors three questions:

1. “Are you registered to vote in Florida? If so, what city?”
2. “Are you planning to vote in this year’s elections? [Whether yes or no] What issues do you care about?” COSC mobilizers were then instructed to give the selected students information on where and when to vote, and who was running for what offices.
3. “[If student plans to vote] Would you like a ride or walk to the polls?” (This question was asked of those students registered to vote in DeLand, Florida, where Stetson is located. Students who answered affirmatively were then asked if they wanted a walk or ride to the polls during the early voting period, or on Election Day).

At the conclusion of a student interview, the COSC canvassers were instructed to assign one of five ranks to each student they reached.

- 1 = definitely voting
- 2 = leaning toward voting
- 3 = undecided
- 4 = leaning against voting
- 5 = definitely not voting

Each of the COSC canvassing groups completed their four dorm walks, except one pair of students who failed to complete their fourth dorm walk.

Sampling

This voter mobilization project focused on the population of undergraduates living on Stetson’s DeLand campus. On campus, the authors decided to sample residence hall floors rather than students or whole residence halls. At the time of the sampling there were 11 dorms at Stetson with a total of 66 floors. Occupancy at that point was 85%, for a total of 1,284 students living in dorms. Sampling floors rather than residence halls better ensured demographically comparable treatment and control groups because at Stetson there is more variation in students across than within residence halls. That is, some residence halls have more athletes,

freshmen, or other categories of students, but students on floors within a given hall tend to be more homogenous. Sampling floors rather than students, in turn, reduced the risk that treatment group students (students the COSC canvassers attempted to canvass) would be mixed with control group students (students the COSC canvassers did not attempt to canvass) on the same floors, if not also in the same rooms. In short, given evidence of the contagiousness of voting (*Nickerson, 2008*), the authors chose to include in the sample students on specified floors rather than all the students in a residence hall.

Exclusions from the sample. The authors excluded from the experiment the one third of undergraduates living off campus (about 750 students), given their scattered locations. Stetson's on-campus fraternity and sorority houses were also excluded because the authors could not ensure comparable control and treatment floors given the peculiar construction of the Greek buildings at Stetson. Nonetheless, 22% of students belonged to fraternities or sororities in fall 2010, but 53% of these Greek students lived in residence halls rather than Greek housing, allowing some representation of Greek students in the sample.

The population sample was thus narrowed to 22 floors in 11 non-Greek residence halls on Stetson's main campus, representing a total of 571 students or about 25% of Stetson's undergraduate population.

Treatment and control floors. One treatment and one control floor were chosen for each of the eleven dorms by a flip of a coin. The authors instructed the COSC canvassers to canvass only those students living on the treatment floors, a list of whose names the canvassers carried with them on their walks. However, even with sampling by floors rather than students, the COSC canvassers could encounter control group students while walking the treatment floors since students socialize across floors and dorms. If control group students were accidentally exposed to all or part of the canvassers' voting discussion, they might be influenced to vote. Thus, in order to reduce (though not eliminate) the risk that the canvassers' activity on the treatment floor would influence students on the control floor in the same dorm, the authors kept one hall or floor between the treatment and control floors.

This sampling method yielded 285 students in the treatment group (22% of students living in Stetson dorms), and 286 in the control group for a total of 571 in the original sample. Each student's registration status was determined by checking the student's county

of residence as well as Volusia County, where Stetson University is located, in the state voter extracts. The voter extracts and voter history files were provided by the Florida Division of Elections.

Further exclusions from the sample. The sampling procedure did not exclude out-of-state and international students. There were 101 out-of-state and 37 international students in the original sample. Once these students were excluded, the authors were left with 221 in the treatment group and 212 in the control group. In addition, because the COSC canvassing efforts took place following the registration closing date in Florida, only those students registered to vote could actually cast a ballot once contacted. This further limited the sample to only those students who stated they were registered to vote in Florida. This left 267 total students, with 138 in the treatment group, and 129 in the control group.

Treatment and control groups compared. The validity of an experiment is dependent upon equivalent treatment and control groups. Table 1 presents a comparison of the composition of each group across a range of characteristics. On four independent variables that affect voter turnout—gender, age, first-generation college student status, and need-based Pell Grant receipt (an income proxy variable)—the two groups were virtually the same. Sixty-four percent of the control group was female, compared with 65% of the treatment group. The median age was 19 in both groups. Fifty-eight percent of students in the control group were first-generation college students, compared with 57% in the treatment group. Forty-four percent of the control group received Pell Grants, compared with 43% of the treatment group.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Treatment and Control Groups

Variable	Treatment Group	Control Group
Gender (% Female)	65%	64%
Age (Median)	19	19
First-Generation Student	57%	58%
Pell Grant Recipient	43%	44%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	78%	67%
African American	6%	11%
Hispanic	11%	13%
Asian	2%	2%
Other	1%	2%
Major		
Business	24%	18%
Humanities	21%	21%
Science	21%	24%
Social Science	21%	30%
Undeclared	13%	6%

There were, however, some noteworthy differences in the composition of the two groups by race/ethnicity and academic major. In the control group, 67% were White, 11% Black, and 13% Hispanic, while in the treatment group 78% were White, 6% Black, and 11% Hispanic. Asians, Native Americans, and those identified as “two or more races” were evenly distributed across the treatment and control groups. Across the five categories of majors—business, humanities, science, social science, and undeclared—there were noticeable differences in the composition of the treatment and control groups. The treatment group was composed of 24% business majors, 21% humanities majors, 21% science majors, 21% social science majors, and 13% undeclared students. The control group, on the other hand, included 18% business majors, 21% humanities majors, 24% science majors, 30% social science majors, and 6% undeclared students. Given that race and ethnicity (*Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995*) and academic major (*Hillygus, 2005; Niemi & Hanmer, 2010*) have considerable effects on political participation, the authors were sensitive to the potential effect of the differences noted above on any observed contrast in the percentage of students voting between the treatment and control groups. Because of this, the authors employed a multivariate analysis to control for the effects of these and other important demographic characteristics.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Field Experiments

Political scientists used experimental methods to study campaign effects on voters as early as the 1920s, but it was not until the late 1990s that researchers began to use experiments more frequently and systematically (*Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2006*). In contrast with surveys, experiments generally offer greater control to determine more precisely the effects of different stimuli. Among experiments, lab, field, natural, and “embedded survey” experiments each have methodological strengths and weaknesses (*see Arceneaux, 2010*). Field experiments tend to cost more time and/or money and to be more difficult to implement. Field experiments also cannot ensure that subjects are given exactly the same treatment, especially if, say, different canvassers carry out the treatment, as was true in this field experiment. However, as Arceneaux (2010) notes, field experiments are more generalizable than lab or embedded survey experiments because they are conducted in real situations, like election campaigns, and the subjects usually do not know they are being studied.

Field experiments have been used successfully to study the effects of mobilization on voter participation (Gerber & Green, 2000; Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008, 2010; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Green & Gerber, 2008; Green, Gerber, & Nickerson, 2003). Because of random assignment, the treatment and control groups should not only be equivalent in terms of important characteristics (age, gender, race, etc.), but also equally likely to be exposed to campaign appeals and messages not related to the experiment. Because of this, the researcher is able to isolate the effect of the treatment (in this case, a face-to-face canvassing effort) on the probability an individual will vote.

Results

At the conclusion of the canvassing project, the authors analyzed the data to answer their research question: Did a student-to-student, face-to-face voter mobilization effort increase turnout among college students in the treatment group? The turnout level of the overall sample of 267 registered students casting a ballot in the November 2010 midterm elections was 27%. (The authors determined whether or not a student cast a ballot by checking the Florida voter history file for the student's name among voters both in Volusia County, where Stetson University is located, and in the student's home county.) Table 2 reveals a small effect of canvassing on student turnout. In the control group, 27.10% cast ballots per Florida State Department of Elections records, while 28.26% did so in the treatment group, for a modest difference of 1.16%. As in most voter mobilization experiments, not all members of the treatment group were successfully contacted. The COSC canvassers successfully contacted 90 of the 138 students in the treatment group (65%), and thus only these individuals contacted actually received the treatment. Within this group, the turnout rate was 31%, which is noticeably higher than that of the control group or the treatment group.

Table 2. Effects of Canvassing on Student Turnout in the 2010 Midterm Elections

	Turnout Rate	Number of Students Registered to Vote	Number of Students Actually Contacted
Raw Turnout Rates			
Treatment Group	28.26%	138	90
Control Group	27.10%	129	0
Estimated Effects of Contact on Turnout			
Treatment Group	Turnout Differential (1.16%)/Contact Rate (65%) = 1.78%; Standard Error = 9.3		

Gerber and Green argue that “if voters who are easier to reach are also more likely to vote” (2000, p. 657), simply comparing the turnout rate of those students contacted and those not contacted potentially overestimates the treatment effect. In order to take this into account and properly estimate the effect of the COSC canvassers’ contact efforts on turnout, the authors separated the treatment effect (only those actually contacted) from the intent-to-treat effect (everyone in the treatment group) by dividing the turnout rate among the total treatment group by the contact rate (Gerber & Green, 2000; Michelson, 2003). Using this estimator ($28.26 - 27.01 \div 65$), the authors found an estimated treatment effect of 1.8 points, which, while not a dramatic increase, is within the range of prior experimental studies of door-to-door canvassing (Green & Gerber, 2008). Unfortunately, the standard error for this effect was quite high (9.3), and the probability that the treatment effect was the result of sampling error was well above conventional standards. Because the sampling was based on floors, the calculation of standard errors must take into account the potential effects of this clustering, and thus the authors used clustered robust standard errors in calculating their estimates in Tables 2 and 3 (see Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2009b).

To this point, the authors had little evidence to suggest that their canvassing efforts led substantially more students to vote on Election Day 2010. Multivariate analysis allowed the authors to provide a more complete examination of their main question by controlling for a variety of covariates that affect voting probability. As noted, however, it is possible that members of the treatment group who were easier to contact were also more likely to vote, and therefore, although contact was potentially related to the probability of voting, it was also correlated with the regression error term. The conventional method for addressing this problem is to find an instrumental variable that is related to the endogenous variable (canvasser contact with student) but not the error term in the model. As Gerber and Green (2000) note, a dummy variable for assignment to the treatment group is related to whether or not an individual is contacted (a student, of course, could not be contacted unless she or he was assigned to the treatment group), but because assignment to the experimental group was random, individuals who were easy to contact should be evenly distributed in the treatment and control groups and the dummy for treatment should not be related to the model’s error term. Because of this, assignment to the treatment group was used as an instrumental variable to replace the dummy for contact in the model. Because

the dependent variable is dichotomous (voted, or did not vote), the authors used instrumental variables probit to estimate the effect of contact on the probability of voting.

Table 3 presents the instrumental variables probit estimates of the probability of voting. The coefficient for contact was not significant, suggesting that when controlling for other variables related to the probability of voting, being contacted as part of the canvassing effort had no effect on the probability of a student voting in the November 2010 midterm elections. In fact, the only two variables significantly related to the probability of voting were the dummy variable for whether or not a student received a Pell Grant and the distance from Stetson to the student's hometown. Pell Grants are need-based aid, and thus a good measure of socioeconomic status. Given the effect of socioeconomic status on voting, the authors would expect students receiving these grants to be less likely to vote. Niemi and Hanmer (2010) found that one of the key factors influencing whether or not a college student will vote was the distance between the student's hometown and the school they attended. The results of the authors' probit analysis confirm this, with the probability of voting decreasing as the distance between Stetson and the student's hometown increased. This finding, perhaps more than anything, highlights the difficulty in successfully mobilizing college students—especially those living far from their hometowns—to participate in elections.

Table 3. Instrumental Variables Probit Estimates of the Probability of Voting

Variable	Coefficient
Constant	-.152 (1.418)
Contact	-.025 (.314)
Distance	-.004** (.001)
Pell Grant Recipient	-.370** (.177)
First Generation Student	.127 (.179)
Age	-.005 (.075)
Gender	-.275 (.214)
Black	-.006 (.375)
Hispanic	.093 (.298)
Asian	.310 (.592)
Other	-.127 (.535)
Social Science	.401 (.326)
Science	.477 (.333)
Humanities	.482 (.328)
Business	.223 (.372)
Log Likelihood	-216.85

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses; ** $p < .05$

Distance is the actual distance between the student's hometown and DeLand, FL; Pell Grant Recipient is coded 0 if the student did not receive a Pell Grant and 1 if the student did receive a Pell Grant; First Generation Student is coded 0 if at least one of the student's parents had a college degree and 1 if neither of the student's parents possessed a college degree. Age is the student's actual age; Gender is coded 0 for males and 1 for females. Race/Ethnicity is measured by dummy variables for White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other (Native American/Pacific Islander; Two or More Races; Unknown).

Academic Major is measured by dummy variables based on the student's declared major at the time of the study.

Discussion

Surveys, for several decades the staple of research on campaign effects on voting, suffer inherent biases in the selection of voters and in voter reports as to whether they voted or not. These biases make it difficult to more precisely determine what spurs people to vote and often lead researchers to overestimate the effects of campaign phone calls, TV advertising, face-to-face canvassing, and other independent variables. Beginning in the late 1990s, Yale University political scientists Donald Green and Alan Gerber applied a methodologically more rigorous experimental method to study which get-out-the-vote tactics do and do not work. They confirmed what some election campaign professionals had long claimed but did not have solid scientific evidence to support: face-to-face canvassing works better than other methods to boost turnout (*Gerber & Green, 2000; Green & Gerber, 2008*).

Dozens of experiments have been conducted testing different turnout tactics since Green and Gerber's original studies. Yet few if any published experimental studies have tested face-to-face mobilization on college campuses, despite the rapid growth in college student populations over the last several decades, and the importance of college to political engagement in the short and long term (*Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, et.al.1995*). As Flanagan and Levine note (*2010, p. 173*), "four-year colleges have become perhaps the central institution for civic incorporation of younger generations."

The experimental test reported in this article using students to mobilize students on a university campus found a small—in fact, statistically insignificant—increase in turnout. The small difference in turnout between the treatment and control groups is sobering. Voter mobilization is hard work, and significantly, the findings suggest that it may be even harder on college campuses. College students are typically inexperienced with voting, and surrounded by others similarly inexperienced. Many students may also be more difficult to contact at home because they do not have regular nine-to-five work schedules and may be out of their dorms studying, socializing, or engaged in the plethora of extracurricular activities universities commonly provide. Further, many live away from home in unfamiliar communities, making it more complicated for them to register and vote. At Stetson, the 267 students the

authors studied were on average 127 miles from home, probably far enough to dissuade many from voting.

The Results in the Context of the 2010 Election in Florida

Arceneaux & Nickerson (2009a, p. 1) contended that “face-to-face mobilization is better at stimulating turnout among low-propensity voters in prominent elections than it is in quiescent ones.” This suggests that face-to-face mobilization would be less effective in a midterm election like that of 2010 than in a presidential election, as in 2008. Yet the 2010 Florida election was a relatively high-profile midterm election in four ways. First, a close gubernatorial race pitted Democrat Alex Sink, who could have been Florida’s first female governor, against millionaire health care executive and upstart Republican candidate Rick Scott, who won with just a 1% edge over Sink after spending \$63 million of his own funds on his campaign (Bender & Smith, 2011). Second, in an unusual U.S. Senate election the once-popular Republican governor Charlie Crist, facing embarrassing defeat to rising star Marco Rubio in his own party’s primary, left his party to run as an independent in the general election, finishing a distant second to Rubio. Third, the state attorney general’s race featured Pam Bondi, an assistant state attorney with a national profile as an MSNBC and Fox News legal analyst. Fourth, the election put a number of major ballot measures before voters—including proposals to relax school class size limits, put land-use plans up for local vote, and reform state legislative and Congressional redistricting—that spurred various interest groups to work to get out the vote. Despite these four factors, just 48.7% of Florida’s 11.2 million registered voters voted, down from 75.2% in 2008, though up from 46.8% in the 2006 midterm election (Florida Division of Elections, 2012).

At Stetson, the student canvassers managed to contact 65% of the treatment students targeted, yet only 31% of these students contacted voted, compared with 27% of control group students. Nationwide, 21% of Americans 18–24 years old voted in the 2010 midterm elections (CIRCLE, 2011). Given that 18–24-year-olds who are college students vote at higher rates than their contemporaries who are not in college, one would expect higher turnout among Stetson students. The 31% treatment group voter rate was far below even the lackluster overall Florida voter turnout rate of 49% in 2010.

Limitations of the Study and Areas for Future Research

The lack of statistical significance is likely largely the result of this experiment's small sample size. Further research with a bigger sample from a larger campus or several campuses would likely provide the confidence necessary for sound conclusions about the effects of a face-to-face canvassing effort. Future research should compare turnout among college students living close to versus far from their hometowns, given this and prior studies' (*Niemi & Hanmer, 2010*) findings showing higher voting rates among students closer to their hometowns.

On the possible effects of canvassers, it is possible that volunteer canvassers intrinsically motivated to boosting voter turnout would have had better success than students required to canvass for a course grade. Few of the thirteen Stetson students enrolled in COSC in 2010 had prior political organizing experience, and most signed up less to persuade their fellow students to vote than to fulfill general education requirements. In addition, COSC offered relatively little in-class or field training in face-to-face canvassing because the course was intended to introduce students to a variety of community organizing tactics. Would politically interested and/or experienced students be more effective canvassers? Would more training to improve the quality of interaction with potential voters improve turnout, as some research suggests (*Nickerson, 2007a*)? These are questions worth pursuing for university faculty and staff interested in improving student voting and political engagement.

There is much opportunity for further research assessing different canvassing tactics on students. For example, there is recent evidence from non-college experiments that promoting an "I am a voter" identity rather than the act of voting (*Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011*) and telling prospective voters that non-voters or voters will be publicly listed after the election (*Davenport et al., 2010; Gerber, et.al, 2008, 2010; Mann, 2010; Panagopoulos, 2010*) can significantly boost turnout. These and other door-to-door pitches should be tested on college students. Other get-out-the-vote tactics (e.g., calling, mail, e-mail, text, social media outreach, election-day festivals, in-class presentations) should also be tested on college students in formal experiments.

Conclusion

Given that the 267 students in the sample were, on average, 127 miles from their hometowns on Election Day 2010—more

than a two-hour drive each way on a school day—registering more students at their campus address may spur higher turnout not only because of the radically shortened distance to the polls but also because having more students registered in one place may attract more on- or off-campus political groups to mobilize them. Florida does not prohibit students from registering at their campus address, but some Stetson students who registered on campus did report that doing so led health insurers to challenge their eligibility for family coverage.

Even if the results of this experiment document the difficulty in mobilizing college students to vote, larger scale experimental evidence suggests that young voters can be just as responsive to election appeals as older voters, but that they are roughly three times more difficult to reach (*Nickerson, 2006*). For these reasons, the authors believe most colleges and universities can do much more to improve student turnout because they know where their students are located and have closer relationships with them than most other institutions. A one-course effort like COSC employing a few students appears insufficient to boost voter turnout appreciably in one election, let alone to widely nurture a voting habit among students on any given campus. The authors sense, however, that an effort involving more students and faculty members as well as university staff and community partners (e.g., student government, student engagement staff, local elected officials and elections staff, political parties, and advocacy groups) stands a better chance of boosting student voter turnout in one election—and in further elections if sustained.

Accordingly, one key to turning politics from the province of a few activists to more of a campus tradition is to institutionalize political engagement. Working together, faculty, staff, students, and community partners can institutionalize political engagement by, for example, conducting annual voter registration drives; widely disseminating election information via website, social media, e-mail, and text; developing a corps of student educators and community leaders to deliver in-class election presentations; and making election day a campus-wide event with time off to vote and free rides to the polls. Such institutional efforts may not guarantee substantially higher student voter turnout, but given the small increase observed from one limited course effort in this study, it would not be surprising to find that a larger effort sustained over years would boost college student voter turnout in the short and long term.

For interested university faculty and staff, a lesson of this study is not to abandon course-driven voter mobilization, but rather to improve and expand it. Faculty members can play a key role in institutionalizing campus political engagement through their courses. Campus-community-engaged courses can help train students enrolled in those courses to become more capable citizens and encourage political engagement in the wider body of students. For faculty members curious about testing different tactics for raising college student voter turnout, the experimental method followed in this study offers a more rigorous way than the common voter survey to determine the precise effects of different get-out-the-vote tactics.

Today, at Stetson University, there is movement to create an interdisciplinary Center for Participatory Democracy that would organize deliberative student and citizen issue forums and advance experimental research, among other efforts to increase political engagement in the student body and wider communities. Such a center, like others being established on campuses across the United States, offers hope in the long term for boosting voter turnout among college students, especially those in their formative youth. College students may be difficult to mobilize to vote, as this experiment suggests, but there is still hope for those who want to nurture political habits among college youth and brighten the future of American democracy.

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