The Challenge of Bringing Voter Mobilization "To Scale":

An Evaluation of Youth Vote's 2002 Phone Banking Campaigns[1]

Donald Green
Alan Gerber
David Nickerson

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1. Introduction

Research dating to the 1940s has consistently shown that young citizens vote at lower rates than older citizens and are less likely to feel connected to the electoral process (Highton and Wolfinger 2001). Low voter turnout among young citizens has grown more acute since 1972, when the nationwide voting age was lowered to 18. According to figures compiled by CIRCLE researchers, the proportion of eligible citizens age 18-24 who went to the polls declined from 55% in 1972 to 42% in 2000 (CIRCLE 2003). This low and diminishing level of involvement reflects something of a vicious cycle. Because young people vote at low rates, they are less likely to be courted by campaigns (Bennett 1991). As campaigns attend to other constituencies, young voters are neither central to the framing of campaign issues nor the object of voter mobilization efforts. As the proportion of the voting electorate below the age of 26 declines, young people are at risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant to campaigns and elections.

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Concerned about the implications of low voter turnout among youth, the Youth Vote coalition was formed with the aim of increasing the presence of young people in all facets of politics, including elections. In 2000 and 2001, a variety of field experiments were undertaken to examine whether and how young voters could be mobilized. The experiments conducted in 2000 demonstrated that local phone banks staffed by Youth Vote volunteers could successfully mobilize young voters living on or nearby college campuses (Green and Gerber 2001). Sites in Albany, Stony Brook, Boulder, and Eugene varied in the effectiveness of their phone banking efforts, but on average they succeeded in raising turnout by 5 percentage-points, a statistically significant finding. The 2000 campaign also featured door-to-door canvassing, which increased turnout markedly and to a statistically significant degree. Because the door-to-door canvassing experiments were somewhat smaller in size than the phone banking studies, they were the focus of the 2001 Youth Vote campaign, which attempted to raise turnout in municipal elections held in Bridgeport, Columbus, Detroit, Minneapolis, Raleigh, and St. Paul. The results confirmed earlier findings suggesting the importance of personal interaction with young voters: over all of the sites, turnout increased 7.1 percentage-points as the result of canvassing. By contrast, impersonal approaches, such as a pre-recorded phone calls reminding people to vote, had no effect whatsoever (Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2002).

In 2002, Youth Vote sought to learn whether GOTV efforts, phone banking efforts in particular, could be employed on a much larger scale than had been attempted in previous years. The challenge of increasing the scale of local, volunteer phone banks is one of preserving the chemistry that enables them to motivate voters. We know from other experiments (Gerber and Green 2001) that large scale commercial phone banking efforts in which callers read scripts in a perfunctory manner have no effect on turnout. The danger in taking local phone banking operations “to scale” is that the sheer volume of these calls will result

in increased reliance on paid temporary workers, greater problems of training and supervision, and lower quality calls.

Recognizing that there is a realistic upper limit on the number of calls that its local volunteer phone banks may carry out even under ideal circumstances, Youth Vote also hired a commercial phone bank to conduct tens of thousands of calls across its various sites. The challenge was to conduct these calls in such a way as to avert the failure that had befallen other commercial phone banking efforts (Gerber and Green 2000, 2001; Green 2003). The strategy Youth Vote pursued was to make the commercial phone banking calls as chatty and personal as possible. As we note below, the script used was much longer than the typical script used by commercial phone banks. Accordingly, Youth Vote paid $1.50 per call rather than the more conventional rate of $0.50 per call.

Another variant on the local vs. commercial phone banking theme was to train and supervise a local commercial phone bank as though it were a local volunteer phone bank. This approach was used in the Denver/Boulder site, in which the Youth Vote organizer restricted the pool of callers to young people, gave them an indoctrination talk about the importance of getting young people to vote (even going so far as to distribute Youth Vote buttons and paraphernalia), and supervised the calls carefully to ensure that the lengthy script was delivered in a sincere manner.

Thus, we have four alternative models for nonpartisan voter mobilization by phone:

1. Commercial phone banks delivering short GOTV scripts.
2. Commercial phone banks delivering lengthy GOTV scripts.
3. Local commercial phone banks, closely supervised, delivering lengthy GOTV scripts.

4. Local phone banks staffed largely by paid volunteers, delivering lengthy GOTV scripts.

The experiments we report were designed to explore the conditions under which phone banks succeed in mobilizing young voters. We sought to answer a variety of questions. For instance, can the ingredients of successful volunteer phone banks – chatty, informal, unhurried conversations by enthusiastic and committed canvassers – be incorporated into commercial phone bank efforts?

In the process of sorting out which phone banks are effective, we also shed light on the question of how best to time the GOTV calls. Is it better to call early or late in the campaign? Is it worthwhile to speak with voters repeatedly? We discovered that the most effective calls – indeed, the only calls whose effects achieved statistical significance – were those conducted during the final week of the campaign.

The methodology employed in this study is randomized field experimentation. Lists of registered voters were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Treatment groups were called during the days leading up to the election. Control groups were not contacted. After the election, we obtained voter turnout records from each county and calculated the turnout rates in each control and treatment group.[2] This report begins with a brief overview of our statistical model and estimation procedure. Next, we describe the experiments conducted at each of the phone canvassing sites. We then analyze the voter turnout results and examine the results of a post-election survey that interviewed respondents from treatment and control conditions. We conclude by discussing the cost effectiveness of youth-oriented GOTV campaigns.[3]

[2] Three sites located in Iowa, Texas, and Florida were also party of this experiment. We are still in the process of assembling voter turnout data for these sites.

[3] Our evaluation focuses on the effectiveness of the GOTV campaign. It should be noted that we do not assess other potentially important Youth Vote coalition activities, such as hosting public debates and distributing voter education materials.

2. Research Design and Underlying Statistical Model

Unlike observational studies of voter mobilization (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Kramer 1970), which examined the correlation between voting and contact with campaigns, experimental studies randomly manipulate whether voters are approached by campaigns. Experimental control eliminates two problems associated with observational data. First, if campaigns target voters who are especially likely to go to the polls, then the observed correlation between contact and voter turnout may be spurious. We might observe a strong correlation even if GOTV efforts were ineffective. Second, if respondents' recollection of whether they were contacted is vague or distorted, the correlation between self-reported contact and turnout will misrepresent the true causal influence of contact.

The principal complication that arises in experimental studies of voter mobilization is that only some citizens assigned to the treatment group can actually be reached by phone. We must therefore distinguish between the intent-to-treat effect and the effects of actual contact. The intent-to-treat effect is simply the observed difference in voter turnout between those assigned to the treatment and control groups. If everyone in the treatment group is actually contacted, the intent-to-treat effect is identical to the actual treatment effect. In practice, however, contact rates are lower than 100%.

In order to calculate the effect of the treatment on those actually treated, we must adjust the intent-to-treat effect. Consider the linear probability model

$$Y = a + bX + u,$$

where Y is a dichotomous {0,1} variable indicating whether a citizen cast a vote, and X is whether he or she was actually contacted by a phone canvassing campaign. The coefficient *b* is the treatment effect, the boost in turnout caused by contact with the mobilization campaign. Contact is itself a function of whether a person was assigned to the treatment or control condition of the experiment. Let the variable Z, also a dichotomous {0,1} variable, represent the random assignment to one of these experimental groups, such that

$$X = cZ + e.$$

To estimate the actual treatment effect (b) given a contact rate (c), we must adjust the intent-to-treat effect (t) as follows:

$$t/c \Rightarrow b.$$

In other words, to estimate the actual treatment effect, we take the intent-to-treat estimate and divide it by the observed contact rate.

This estimator is equivalent to performing a two-stage least squares regression of vote (Y) on actual turnout (X) using randomization (Z) as an instrumental variable (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin 1990; Gerber and Green 2000). So long as we have information about the probability with which subjects assigned to the treatment group were actually contacted, we can accurately estimate the effects of contact with a sufficiently large number of subjects. In our model, which is estimated by two-stage least squares, the independent variables are whether a person was (1) contacted by a volunteer phone bank, (2) contacted by a local commercial phone bank, and (3-6) contacted by a the national commercial phone bank in weeks 1, 2, 3, and 4. The instrumental variables were whether a voter was assigned to one or more of these seven treatments.

The set of independent and instrumental variables also included dummy variables marking each of the Youth Vote sites.

3. Phone Canvassing Sites

> Hello, may I speak with (name of person) please.
>
> Hi. This is (caller's name) calling from Vote 2002, a non-partisan effort working to encourage citizens to vote. We just wanted to remind you that elections are being held this Tuesday**.** The success of our democracy depends on whether we exercise our right to vote or not, so we hope you'll come out and vote this Tuesday. Can I count on you to vote next Tuesday?

(1) Two large commercial firms conducted "standard" GOTV phone banking campaigns in Iowa and Michigan during the final weekend before the election. These calls were not an explicit part of the Youth Vote campaign but rather serve as a benchmark for comparison. The authors monitored the calls, encouraging supervisors to make sure that readers were reading the scripts accurately. These calls cost approximately 50 cents per completed call. As the script makes apparent, the calls did not have a conversational style. No information was provided, and callers paused only to ask for a commitment to vote. These calls were brief, to-the-point reminders to vote.

(2) Another large commercial firm conducted calls with longer, more conversational scripts. Youth Vote staff worked with phone bank supervisors, who encouraged callers to slow down and pause to ask and answer questions. Calls were conducted during the last three weeks of the campaign, but for purposes of comparability with other sites, we focus only on those called just once during the last week. These calls cost approximately $1.50 per completed call. Calls were conducted in Ann Arbor, Boston, Cambridge, Denver, Durham, Kansas City, Little Rock, Oakland, Portland, St. Louis, and the Twin Cities.

National Phone bank script:

-Hi, can I speak to (fullname)?

-Hello, this is _____ calling on behalf of the Youth Vote Coalition (pronounce slowly and clearly .. it is hard for most folks to understand the first time they hear it). Youth Vote Coalition is a nonpartisan organization that encourages young people to vote. I'm not calling to ask for money or to sell anything.

Split script 1 (one script per night)
-*a) It took hundreds of years for women and African Americans to gain the equal right to vote. And, it wasn't until 1971 that 18 years olds got the right to vote. (50%)

-*b) On September 11th, 2001, we all witnessed one of the most tragic days in American history. The terrorists tried to take from us the very freedom that makes America great. In response, we should exercise our most basic freedoms, like voting. (25%)

-*c) Politicians listen to the people who vote. You can determine what decisions they make by voting for elected officials who care about the same things that you do. You can make the youth vote the most powerful one in America. (25%)

End split script 1

Split Script 2 (15% of contacts)
-* Your polling location is (POLL ADDRESS), and here's a number to confirm the address (POLL PHONE).

End split script 2

Would you like to know how to get nonpartisan information on the races in your area? If Yes: You can call a toll free number 1-888-Vote-Smart (1-888-868-3762) or visit www.youthvote.org.

-Can we count on you to vote on November 5th?

If NO: well, we hope that you will vote, remind others to vote and help get out the youth vote!

If YES: Great! We hope you will remind others to vote, and thank you very much for getting out the youth vote!

The slower pace of these calls was intended to increase the likelihood of their effectiveness, making them seem more personal and authentic. Callers paused to offer information to respondents. This phone bank was assigned a series of randomly selected voter lists to be called between one and four times during the final four weeks of the

campaign. Varying the timing and frequency of calls helps us to isolate the most productive calling schedule.

(3) As noted above, a local commercial phone bank in the Denver area received special supervision from Youth Vote staff. The callers, all of whom were young adults, received extensive training and coaching, during which they were told about the mission of Youth Vote and given Youth Vote buttons to wear. They called young voters in the Denver area at a rate of approximately $1.00 per completed call. This model is the hybrid model – making use of the experience, facilities, and efficiency of a telemarketing firm, but trying to imbue it with enthusiasm for voting and giving callers permission to slow down their pace. In terms of reading time, this script was the longest used in any site, mentioning, among other things, the voter's polling location.

The highly coached script went as follows:

-Hi, can I speak to (full name)?

-Hi (first name), my name is (your full name) and I'm calling on behalf of the Youth Vote Coalition (pronounce slowly and clearly as it is hard for many people to understand "Youth Vote" the first time they hear it). This is not a sales call, and we are not affiliated with any particular political party or candidate. Youth Vote is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization composed of diverse groups all working together to increase voter turnout among 18-30 year olds.

The reason we are contacting you is to thank you for registering to vote. You have taken the first crucial step in giving yourself the power to make your voice heard in our democracy. However, even more important than that is the fact that you actually DO vote on Election Day. This year's Senate race in Colorado is especially important, and could have national implications in determining the balance of power in Congress. It is expected that less than 500 votes may determine the outcome of this race. Your vote can make a difference. Thus, we encourage you to take the tie to vote in the upcoming election on TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5th between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm.

Have you received your voter registration card in the mail?

*If yes – "Ok, that tells you where your polling location is. But just so you know, your polling location is at (name of place and address, which will be provided to you)."

*If no – "Ok, well your polling location is at (name of place and address)."

Again, you can vote between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm, and will need to show your voter registration card, and/or a government-issued picture id.

Lastly, we would like to provide you with a toll-free phone number and websites for obtaining non-partisan information on the candidates and issues in your area. The number is 1-888-Vote-Smart (1-888-868-3762), and the websites are www.vote-smart.org (make sure you say vote-dash-smart.org) and www.youthvote.org.

Well (person's first name), I'd like to thank you for your time. Again, remember to mark your calendar to vote on Tuesday, November 5th, and encourage your friends and family to vote, too. Have a good evening.

(4) Youth Vote coalition members, working with a combination of paid and unpaid volunteers, conducted calls in the same sites

assigned to the commercial phone bank in model (2). Different lists were assigned to each type of phone bank. However, we also created a list that overlapped between local coalition chapters and the commercial phone bank in (2). The question addressed by this overlapping treatment is whether multiple treatments are worth the extra effort.

Results

The population for each of the experiments comprised registered voters whose year of birth was 1976 or later. (Some people born in 1976 had not yet reached their 26th birthday by Election Day.) Phone numbers for these people were obtained from a commercial list vendor. In instances where the voter file showed more than one voter living at a given address (other than dorms or large group quarters), a single voter was selected to be placed in the treatment or control group. Thus, the observations in each study are from distinct households, and there is no need to correct for clustering among individuals. For each site, voter turnout records were obtained and matched to our pre-election data file using voter identification number, address, and name.

The experimental results suggest the following conclusions:

1. The commercial phone banks delivering GOTV messages in a standard fashion proved wholly ineffective at mobilizing young voters.

In this experiment, 103,121 people were in the control group and 3,306 in the treatment groups. One phone bank contacted 24% of the voters it sought to reach, while the other contacted 41%. In neither case did the treatment group vote at higher rates than the control group. For both phone banks combined, the

estimated effect was -2.6 percentage-points, with a 2.3 percentage point standard error. Since our hypothesis was that encouragement to vote would increase turnout in the control group, we interpret this statistically insignificant negative effect to mean that these calls did nothing to increase turnout among young voters.

2. The commercial phone banks that delivered longer, more conversational scripts proved much more successful.

In this experiment, 27,142 people were in the control group, and 54,804 in the treatment group. The success did not derive from the phone banks' ability to contact voters. Across all of the sites, over a four week calling period, these phone banks contacted at least once approximately 39% of the voters they sought to reach; during the last week, this rate was 26%, which is not much different from the other commercial phone banks. However, the calls proved much more effective in terms of mobilizing voters. Although the calls during the first three weeks of the calling campaign had no effect on turnout, the last week of calls significantly increased voter participation. Successful contact with voters increased turnout by 5.1 percentage-points (standard error is 2.1 percentage-points, significant at $p<.001$).

If one were to focus solely on the last week of calls, one would conclude that this commercial phone bank proved as effective as the average local volunteer phone bank in 2000. A more conservative estimation approach would be to parameterize the effects of the calls as a smooth function of time, in which case the final week's calls would appear to have increased turnout by approximately 4 percentage-points. However one chooses to model the data, the conclusion emerges that this type of commercial phone banking campaign substantially increased voter participation and did so to a statistically significant degree.

3. The closely supervised local phone bank in the Denver area also generated impressive results.

In this experiment, 2,424 people were in the control group. Of the 4,849 people in the treatment group, 31% were successfully contacted. Its calls increased turnout by 5.6 percentage-points (standard error is 3.0 percentage-points, significant at $p<.05$). The statistical precision of these estimates does not allow us to conclude that this phone bank outperformed the commercial phone bank in (2), but it seems clear that the local commercial phone bank produced a comparable increase in voting at substantially lower cost.

4. The volunteer phone banks produced disappointing results.

Despite contacting 46% of the 49,045 people in the treatment group (the control group is 27,142, the same as in (2)), these phone banks increased turnout by just 0.5 percentage-points (standard error is 0.6 percentage-points, not significant). When we restrict attention to the subjects who were not also called by the commercial phone bank, this effect rises to 1.7 percentage-points with a 0.9 percentage-point standard error. This estimate remains unchanged when one includes statistical controls for past voter turnout, age, and the number of registered voters in the household. Although statistically significant at the .05 level, the estimated treatment effect falls below the expectations generated by the 2000 experimental results.

4. While variation in the length of script seem to matter, variations in the content of those scripts made little difference.

The successful commercial phone banks in (2) delivered one of three scripts. One version emphasized the historic fight for the right to vote; a second stressed the importance of civic duty in the wake of September 11, and the last one urged recipients to make youth a more powerful political voice. These messages were developed based on a private consulting firm's extensive focus group interviews with young voters. As it turned out, each of the scripts performed equally well. Among 6,339 people who were contacted by the phone bank during the last week, turnout rates among those hearing the three scripts were 45.0%, 45.4%, and 44.5%, respectively. This pattern is consistent with earlier experimental findings, which failed to detect differences among alternative scripts of equal length (Gerber and Green 2001).

Conclusion

The results in this report underscore the importance of training and supervision. A commercial phone bank's success in mobilizing young voters hinges on its ability to communicate in an authentic and unhurried fashion. Calls that briefly remind young people to vote appear to be ineffective. Mobilizing voters requires a more conversational approach. Commercial phone banks are capable of staging these conversations, albeit at a premium price. The precise details of what is said are less important than the manner in which the appeal is delivered.

As for volunteer efforts, their comparative effectiveness remains something of a mystery. The ambitiousness of the mobilization campaign seems to have overtaxed the Youth Vote sites' ability to attract motivated volunteers. One site was forced to hire temps; another turned to out-of-town staff calling in on their cell phones. Indeed, one of the reasons that the Denver/Boulder site turned to a local commercial phone bank was the difficulty of recruiting sufficient numbers of enthusiastic volunteers. Finding the right

ingredients for a successful volunteer phone bank – particularly one that can meet the goal of reaching thousands of young voters – is not easy, particularly prior to a midterm election. It appears that taking volunteer phone banks "to scale" diminishes their effectiveness.

Given these organizational challenges, Youth Vote was fortunate to find ways of generating strong results from commercial phone banks. It is far easier to generate a nationwide phone banking campaign using commercial telemarketing firms than it is to develop a decentralized network of local phone banks using paid volunteers. While the four-week commercial phone banking effort was quite expensive when viewed on a cost-per-vote basis, the final week considered on its own was reasonably cost effective. Using an estimate of 20-25 contacts per vote, the commercial phone bank's fee of $1.50 per contact translates in to $30.00 to $37.50 per vote. The local commercial phone bank's cost per contact was $1 apiece, which at 20 contacts per vote comes to $20 per vote. This figure may be a bit optimistic, since the local commercial phone bank was tested in just one site, and the 20 contacts-per-vote estimate is estimated with a margin of statistical uncertainty. Nevertheless, even taking the higher estimate of $37.50, we would conclude that 50,000 additional young voters could be encourage to vote with an expenditure of less than $2 million.

Now that a method has for successful commercial phone banking has been developed, the next challenge will be to develop a more comprehensive and up-to-date phone list for young voters. To mobilize 50,000 voters requires something on the order of 1.25 million contacts. Because young voters change residences frequently and increasingly rely on cell phones rather than conventional land lines, it is challenging to supply a commercial phone bank with a sufficiently large list of young target voters. Prior to the 2002 campaign, Youth Vote obtained approximately 550,000 million names of young registered voters across its various sites, but only 150,000 could be matched to phone numbers. If phone banks are to be a

viable means of generating noticeable increases in the electoral participation of youth nationwide, it will be necessary to develop new ways of obtaining phone numbers for this elusive demographic group.

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Table 1: Two-Stage Least Squares Estimates of the Effectiveness of Alternative Phone Banking Efforts

Phone Bank	No Covariates	Restricted Model	Controls for Age, Past Voting, and Number of Voters in Household
National: Contacted First Week	.014 (.019)		.019 (.019)
National: Contacted Second Week	-.014 (.015)		-.013 (.015)
National: Contacted Third Week	009 (.015)		.007 (.015)
National: Contacted Fourth Week	051* (.021)	.053* (.012)	.052* (.020)
Local Commercial: Denver/Boulder	.056* (.030)	.057* (.030)	.055* (.029)
Local Paid Volunteers	.005 (.006)	.005 (.006)	.005 (.006)
Adjusted R^2	.03	.03	.08

N=108,463

* $p < .05$, one-tailed test.

Notes: All models include 16 dummy variables marking all but one of the sites and sub-sites: Ann Arbor, Boston, Cambridge (2 sub-sites), Denver (2 sub-sites), Durham (4 sub-sites), Kansas City, Little Rock, Oakland, Portland, St. Louis, and the Twin Cities (2 sub-sites). These site dummies are used as both instrumental variables and covariates. Instrumental variables also include assignment to the treatment group (as distinct from actual contact) for the national phone bank (week 1, week 2, week 3, and week 4), the local commercial phone bank, or the local paid volunteer phone banks.