



Contacting Disadvantaged Citizens Turns Them into Voters

Carrie Ann LeVan, Colby College

As 2012 approaches, political parties and campaign managers must decide how to spend scarce resources on advertising, public events, and direct efforts to mobilize voters. *Get-out-the-vote efforts* include phone calls, mailings, and door-to-door canvassing – all for the purpose of persuading potential voters to go to the polls on election day.

Traditional efforts to contact voters focus mostly on relatively privileged Americans, leaving low-income, less educated voters aside. Electoral experience and social science studies document that relatively well-educated and well-off citizens are much more likely to vote than the disadvantaged. Privileged people find it is easier to learn about politics. Family members, friends, and co-workers urge them to vote; and they are more likely to be contacted by parties and election campaigners. For campaign managers anxious to get a good return on dollars spent, why spend dollars to mobilize the disadvantaged, if many of them may not turn out to vote at all?

A vicious cycle results. Campaigns fail to contact disadvantaged citizens, and such neglect further skews turnout. Democracy falters when disadvantaged citizens do not vote; and elected officials pay less attention to those who sit on the sidelines.

Can this vicious cycle be overcome? A recent study in Bakersfield, California, shows that neighborhood canvassing can substantially increase voting by poor whites and Latinos.

Proving that the Personal Touch Works Best

Political scientists have conducted “field experiments” to pin down the effects of different kinds of get-out-the-vote methods. The rate of voting by people who are contacted is compared to voting by other citizens from similar social backgrounds who live in the same area but are *not* contacted during the experiment. Field experiments confirm scientifically what we might expect from common sense: *People respond to human contact*. Simply put, when a canvasser knocks on the door and asks a person to vote in an upcoming election, the person-to-person contact is much more likely to get the voter to the polls than television ads, automated phone calls, or leaflets sent in the mail.

Do disadvantaged citizens also respond to personal contacts? A recent field experiment looks at the effect of canvassing among poor whites and Latinos:

- In the California city of Bakersfield, precincts were identified where poor, less educated whites and Latinos voted infrequently in 1992, 1996, and 2000, at rates well below the rates typical for all citizens of Bakersfield and California.

- Within selected disadvantaged, low-turnout precincts, some voters were personally contacted, while other people with similar characteristics were not contacted, but were used for comparison purposes.
- For several Saturdays and Sundays leading into the 2004 elections, canvassers from the University of California knocked on doors and urged the targeted people to vote (they did not mention specific candidates). Whites did the door-knocking in white neighborhoods, and Latino canvassers worked in the Latino precincts.

A Big Response from Previously Unengaged Citizens

Contacting potential poor voters in Bakersfield was costly because, for safety purposes, canvassers went in pairs and knocked on doors only before dark. But the results were striking:

- Among poor white citizens in Bakersfield, personal contact increased the probability of voting by 19.3 percent.
- Among poor Latinos contacted, voting went up by an even bigger 33.2 percent.

More remains to be learned about what works best to persuade and enable disadvantaged Americans to vote. But these results offer convincing evidence that disadvantaged citizens who have previously not gone to the polls can be mobilized through person-to-person encouragement. Campaigns in 2012 and beyond should note that by reaching out to disadvantaged potential voters, they cannot only help their candidates get elected, but also reinvigorate U.S. democracy.

Read more in Carrie Ann LeVan, "The Vicious Cycle: The Exclusion of Low Socioeconomic Status Voters from Mobilization Efforts," presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, Washington.