

Rachel Boose

GOVT 310

Dr. Daniel Gade

30 November 2020

Effect of Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) Contact on Participation in the 2016 Election

I. Introduction

In the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton's campaign outspent Donald Trump's campaign nearly "2 to 1" according to OpenSecrets.org, and in total, the presidential election - including the primary election - cost over \$2.4 billion dollars (Ingraham 2017). With such high spending on campaigns, people would expect that the more money a candidate raises (and then spends) the more successful they will be. However, the Cato Institute broke down presidential candidate spending by vote and found that Clinton spent approximately \$9.46 per vote while Trump spent only \$5.32 per vote received in 2016 (Boaz 2017). Campaigns put a significant amount of effort into raising huge amounts of money from interest groups and individual donors, but as Donald Trump's success in 2016 demonstrates, successful campaigns are not necessarily determined by the amount of money raised. Clearly, campaigns need to know how, where, and when to use campaign funds most effectively.

One area where campaigns often choose to dedicate funds, and where outside organizations devote a significant amount of time and money, is voter mobilization or "get-out-the-vote"(GOTV) campaigns. These can range from mailers sent to people with information about how to vote in their area, phone calls made by candidates or volunteers, social media campaigns, going door-to-door asking people to vote, and so on. According to a Trump campaign memo obtained by FiveThirtyEight in the leadup to the primary election for the 2016

presidential election, the Trump Campaign chose to divert a large amount of their efforts to “enfranchising the conventionally low propensity voters that support our candidate” while relying on “free media” such as frequent TV appearances to turn out regular voters (Malone 2016). According to Brad Parscale, Trump’s digital director in 2016, the campaign “spent about \$5m in get-out-the-vote digital advertising targeted in the final few days to Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Florida,” all of which are states that Donald Trump won by small margins (Associated Press, 2016). In 2008, President Obama also relied on voter mobilization campaigns. “We’re going to have to make sure they turn out, or we probably won’t win,” said Steve Hildebrand, a deputy campaign manager for the Obama Campaign in reference to the nearly 300,000 voters in Virginia who registered between January and October of 2008 (Zeleny 2008). Interest groups such as unions also supplement campaign’s voter mobilization efforts, encouraging their members to vote through carpools to polling places and devoting time and money to contacting voters on behalf of candidates they support. Despite being highly critical of Joe Biden, the Sunrise Movement, an organization of youth climate-activists launched an extensive get-out-the-vote campaign for Biden during the 2020 general election. According to a Sunrise Movement press release from October 2020, “since the summer, Sunrise has been deploying money, volunteers, and resources to have a major impact on youth turnout in the 2020 General Election—including reaching approximately 3.5 million unique young voters through our combined coordinated and independent direct voter contact programs” (Sunrise 2020). But are these efforts effective? How much does contact from a campaign or organization encouraging someone to vote actually change whether or not they vote in an election?

Common sense could propose that social pressure motivates people to vote, as could receiving more information on how to register to vote or how to vote on election day. Especially

since voter registration requirements vary significantly across the country, the opportunity to receive more information about how to vote could make a person more able to vote.

Alternatively, simply contacting a person about voting may not be enough to increase voter turnout because the kind of contact (mailer, automated call, advertisement, volunteer door knocking, etc.) may not change how a voter feels about the candidates. Are people choosing not to vote because they forgot or don't know how to, or are they not voting because they have an issue with the candidates or distrust the election system? This question thus inspires the research question: in a study of individuals, what effect does being contacted by a get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort have on whether or not an individual voted in the 2016 election?

II. Previous Research

In their article titled “The Impact of GOTV Depends Upon Campaign Context: A Field Experiment in the 2014 California Primary,” the authors examine the effects of mailing information to voters encouraging them to vote and informing them of changes to the California primary system in 2017. The authors examine a field experiment in which 149,596 mailers were sent directly to registered voters in California ahead of the primary election. These mailers contained information explaining an initiative which had passed the previous year which changed California’s primary system to an open primary rather than a closed primary as well as a call to vote which was distinctly non-partisan. What Hughes et al. found was that generally, mobilization efforts did increase turnout by .5%. They also found that the effect of their GOTV efforts varied based on the competitiveness of the districts voters live in and the amount of spending from campaigns which was directed to voters’ districts. “In districts that are structurally competitive but receive lower than median current campaign spending, our mailer is highly effective, increasing turnout by nearly a full percentage point,” the authors concluded. But in less

competitive districts where voters may already be less likely to vote or in districts that are overwhelmed by campaign spending where voters likely receive a large amount of election related mailers, the GOTV campaign was less effective (Hughes et al., 2017). This study, while limited because they only examined one form of GOTV contact (mailers) and which only observed changes in California, a state which is not likely to be representative of voting patterns for the entire country, suggests GOTV efforts are effective at increasing voter turnout but also highlights some important considerations for controlling variables such as a district's competitiveness and the level of campaign spending it receives.

Marcus Williamson presents similar findings in his paper which analyzed the correlation between partisan campaign contact and voter turnout. Williamson argues that “any campaign contact closer to election day generally improved voting likelihood among aligned partisans...but not with voters registered as unaffiliated or nonpartisan,” (Williamson 2018). These findings offer three key insights into the effects of GOTV efforts. First that it matters if the campaign is partisan or nonpartisan and if that party affiliation aligns with voters' party identity.

Williamson's findings suggest that partisan GOTV efforts may be able to convince voters already aligned with the campaign's party to vote, but may not be able to “pull” voters from the other party. Second, Williamson evaluates the effects of timing of campaign contact and finds that contact closer to the election is more impactful than early contact. Third, Williamson offers an interesting conversation about the use of GOTV strategies based on regionalism; he suggests that the geographic region where voters live and the population density of their area affects how useful certain GOTV efforts are. Continuing Hughes' point that district competitiveness can impact the effectiveness of GOTV efforts, Williamson's findings suggest that whether voters live in urban or rural settings is also important.

Beyond the district competitiveness and the geography of where voters live, another key factor in the effect of GOTV efforts is how voters actually cast their ballots. Arceneaux, Kousser, and Mullin examine the effect of GOTV efforts in districts which have vote by mail (VBM) options to see if these campaigns are more or less effective at increasing participation when voters have the option not to vote in person. The findings from this analysis suggest that GOTV efforts are most effective when people vote in person, likely due to the increased social accountability of being seen at a polling location. While GOTV efforts still increased participation across the study, the authors found that “for medium propensity voters GOTV messages may be less effective in VBM systems” (Arceneaux, Kousser, & Mullin 2012). This analysis not only shows that controlling for how people vote is important in examining the relationship between GOTV efforts and likelihood someone will vote, but also that a voter's “propensity” to vote is important. The authors found that campaign activity may boost voter participation among people who were unlikely to vote otherwise (low propensity voters) but may be less effective at encouraging high propensity voters to participate. The conversation about voters’ propensity to vote also includes how salient the election seems to voters; when people perceive an election as more important they may be more likely to vote and therefore researchers must control for this factor as well in examining the effects of GOTV efforts.

Daniel Bergan and his co-authors similarly discussed the effect of voters’ perceptions of how important elections are in their article examining the effects of a historic increase in grassroots mobilization efforts during the 2004 Presidential election. Using data from the 2004 American National Election Survey, the authors noted that in 2004, both Presidential campaigns significantly increased efforts to talk to voters through door-to-door canvassing, phone calls, and mailers and that voter turnout was shockingly high for the election. However Bergan and his

colleague assert that the increase in grassroots efforts “probably accounted for less than one-third of observed increase in turnout” (Bergan et al.). Rather, the authors suggest that the 2004 Presidential election was viewed as particularly important for voters and also as a “toss up” so voters felt more responsibility to vote. Bergan and colleagues report suggests that GOTV efforts may not actually be as impactful on voters’ decision to vote or not, but rather that their perception of how important their vote is matters more.

However, the claim that GOTV efforts do not motivate people to vote as much as other factors is challenged by Melissa R. Michelson’s paper “Memory and Voter Mobilization,” in which Michelson shows that voters who were contacted by campaigns are more likely to vote than voters who were not. Even if voters do not remember being contacted, Michelson asserts that respondents who were contacted still voted at higher rates than those who were never contacted. These findings suggest that there may be a subconscious influence of GOTV efforts on voters and that simply the act of talking to someone about voting - even if it is forgotten weeks later - makes someone more likely to vote.

However, Michaleson acknowledges a few concerns in her data which also point to flaws in data used for other examinations of GOTV campaigns and voter behavior. First, Michaleson noted that campaign volunteers were likely to over report the number of “contact” they made in their canvassing efforts. There were discrepancies between how long a conversation had to have been to be counted as a “contact” or if simply leaving a flier on a porch was a “contact.” Similarly, voters were likely to underreport being contacted, either because they did not remember the interaction or because peoples’ definitions of “contact” vary substantially. This critique of the data suggests that GOTV contacts do not have to be memorable to be effective,

while also suggesting that the data other researchers are using to measure the number of people who were contacted by GOTV campaigns is inherently flawed.

III. Data and Hypothesis

The key independent variable of interest in this analysis is if anyone talked to the respondent about registering or getting out to vote (also referred to as “get-out-the-vote” contacts). I used data from the 2016 National Election Study (NES) conducted by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. This created a sample size of N=4271 where N=1981 answered no and N= 1668 answered yes.

The key dependent variable of interest in this analysis is whether or not the respondent voted in the 2016 election. The NES asked respondents to answer yes or no to the question, “did you vote in the 2016 election?” This data had a sample of N= 2862 “yes” and N= 787 “no” responses.

Other variables which I controlled for were income, race, respondent’s propensity to vote, education, political party affiliation, and age. Income was divided into five indicator variables with people making less than \$22.5k a year coded as “very low income,” those making between \$22.5k and \$45k a year coded as “low income,” those making between \$45k and \$75k a year coded as “middle income,” those making between \$75k and \$125k coded as “high income” and those making above \$125k coded as “very high income.”

Race was divided into three indicator variables for White, Black, and Hispanic. I recognize that the simplification may fail to capture the many different racial identities held by people in the United States, but it does represent the three largest racial groups in the country. These are also the three racial groups most commonly discussed by political pundits when trying

to predict voting behavior and by candidates targeting campaign activities such as get-out-the-vote efforts.

The respondent's propensity to vote is represented by two different sets of indicator variables: whether or not they voted in 2012 and their self-identified views on voting (if they view it is a "duty" or a "choice"). These two factors may not be an ideal representation of a person's propensity to vote because it only draws on voting history from one other election (which ignores respondents who were not eligible to vote in 2012). Furthermore, someone who views voting as a "choice" may not necessarily vote less reliably than someone who views it as a "duty." Still, given the data collected by the NES, these two variables allow us to control at least a little for respondents' propensity to vote.

Education was divided into four levels: those with a high school degree or less, those with only some college, those with a Bachelor's degree, and those with an Advanced Degree. Political party affiliation was represented by three indicator variables: Democrat, Independent, and Republican. Finally, age was divided into 6 ranges and represented by 6 indicator variables. These ranges were ages 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, and over 70. Table 1 summarizes these descriptive statistics.

Table 1
Summary Statistics

Variables	Mean (N=2815)
Contacted by GOTV efforts	48.37%
Voted in 2016 election	75.96%
Very Low Income	20.97%
Low Income	19.20%
Middle Income	21.14%

High Income	22.25%
Very High Income	16.44%
White	75.27%
Black	11.87%
Hispanic	12.86%
Did Not Vote in 2012	30.60%
High School Education or Less	37.97%
Some College Education	30.15%
Bachelor's Degree	18.76%
Advanced Degree	13.12%
View Voting as a Duty	57.48%
Democrat	35.48%
Republican	28.01%
Independent	36.51%
18 - 29 years old	20.54%
30 - 39 years old	16.73%
40 - 49 years old	15.25%
50 - 59 years old	20.92%
60 - 69 years old	15.37%
70 + years old	11.18%

Given the fact that contact from get-out-the-vote efforts may create a social pressure to vote and may help voters navigate the requirements to vote successfully, we expect that in a sample of individuals, those who were told to register to vote or contacted about voting are more likely to have voted in the 2016 election.

IV. Results

Table 2 shows the effect of the get-out-the-vote contact on whether or not a person voted in the 2016 election. At the .05 level of significance, this data shows no significant relationship between a person being told to register or talked to about voting and whether or not they voted in 2016. However, the coefficient for the variable indicating that a person was contacted by get-out-the-vote efforts has a t-value of 1.68, meaning that there is a statistically significant relationship at the .10 level of significance. Still, that relationship is very small. According to this data, at the .10 level of significance, get-out-the-vote efforts increased a person's likelihood of voting in 2016 by only 2.2%.

This data shows that income level has a statistically significant effect on whether or not someone voted in 2016. Compared to the reference group of people with very low income, those with low income were 6.2% more likely to have voted in 2016, people with at the middle income level were 9.5% more likely to have voted in 2016, people with high income were 12.2% more likely to have voted in 2016, and people with very high income were 9.9% more likely to have voted in 2016. The income coefficients are all significant at the .05 level of significance as the p-value for each coefficient is less than .05 and a t-value greater than the absolute value of 1.96. While there is not a statistically significant relationship between the race variable "Black" and voting in 2016 compared to the race variable "White," Hispanic respondents were 6.9% less likely to have voted in the 2016 election than white respondents.

Education level also has a significant relationship with whether or not people voted in 2016. Compared to those with a High School level education or less, respondents with some college education were 4.8% more likely to have voted, those with a Bachelor's degree were 9.7% more likely to have voted, and those with an advanced degree were 6.2% more likely to have voted in the 2016 election.

Respondent's views on voting and whether or not people voted in the 2012 election (which are the two variables I use to represent respondents' propensity to vote) both also have a statistically significant effect on if they voted in the 2016 election. Those who view voting as a duty are 12.4% more likely to have voted in 2016 than those who view voting as a choice. Respondents who did not vote in the 2012 election were 28.1% less likely to have voted in 2016 than those who had voted in 2012.

As for political party affiliation, this data shows no statistically significant relationship between identifying as a Republican and voting in 2016 compared to people who identify as Democrats. However, those who identify as independents are 7.2% less likely to have voted in the 2016 election compared to people who identify as Democrats.

Looking at the relationship between age and voting in the 2016 election, while there is no statistically significant relationship in the age groups 30-39 and 40-49 compared to the 18-29 age group, the older ranges do show a significant relationship between age and voting in the 2016 election. Respondents ages 50-59 were 8.0% more likely to have voted in the 2016 election than those ages 18-29. Respondents ages 60-69 were 10.4% more likely to have voted in the 2016 election compared to those ages 18-29, and the respondents over 70 years old were 10.7% more likely to have voted in 2016 compared to those ages 18-29.

Finally, this data has an intercept of .65, which can be interpreted as when all the other variables are equal to 0, people voted in the 2016 election 65% of the time.

Table 2

Effects of GOTV Contact and Other Relevant Identities on if a Person Voted in 2016

Variables	Voted in 2016
GOTV_yes	0.0216* [0.0129]

Low income	0.0621*** [0.0202]
Middle Income	0.0949*** [0.0202]
High Income	0.1222*** [0.0206]
Very high income	0.0998*** [0.0233]
Black	-0.0018 [0.0226]
Hispanic	-0.0687*** [0.0212]
Did Not Vote in 2012	-0.2813*** [0.0171]
Some College Education	0.0480*** [0.0169]
Bachelor's Degree	0.0968*** [0.0195]
Advanced Degree	0.0620*** [0.0224]
View Voting as a Duty	0.1245*** [0.0135]
Republican	-0.0036 [0.0165]
Independent	-0.0721*** [0.0157]
30 - 39 years old	0.0214 [0.0222]
40 - 49 years old	0.021 [0.0234]
50 - 59 years old	0.0806***

	[0.0223]
60 - 69 years old	0.1050***
	[0.0228]
70+ years old	0.1074***
	[0.0246]
Constant	0.6485***
	[0.0293]

*Note: Standard error in brackets. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$*

V. Conclusions and Implications

While I expected that voters who had been contacted by get-out-the-vote efforts would be more likely to have voted in the 2016 election, the data does not strongly support that hypothesis. However, the slight positive relationship at the 90% confidence level, suggests that there may be a slight impact of get-out-the-vote efforts on voter turnout. This is consistent with prior findings showing a slight increase in voter turnout after GOTV contacts.

These findings challenge the notion that campaigns and interest groups should devote large amounts of resources to get-out-the-vote contacts, and suggest that there may be a more meaningful way of increasing voter turnout. Due to the limitations of the data set, I was not able to control for some variables which previous research has suggested could be relevant such as district competitiveness (Hughes et al. 2017), whether voters live in urban or rural areas (Williamson, 2018), how voters cast their ballots (Arceneaux, Kousser, & Mullin 2012), or voters views on the importance of the election (Bergen 2005). Additionally, my measure of “voter propensity” as discussed by Arceneaux, Kousser, & Mullin was may be an incomplete measure and therefore not effective as a control variable. I was also unable to take into account Michaleson’s concerns that GOTV contacts are often misrepresented on inconsistently measured, as the NES data set did not explain what type of GOTV contact voters received or detail how it

was measured (Michaelson 2014). Future research should examine the effect of get-out-the-vote efforts on voter participation in elections, better controlling for these conditions. Future research should also consider if the kind of contact (volunteer door to door canvassing, phone calls or texts, mailer, etc.) changes the effectiveness of get-out-the-vote campaigns, and further analyzing what demographic groups may be most effective to target in get-out-the-vote efforts.

References

- Associated Press. (2016). Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton's final campaign spending revealed. The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/09/trump-and-clintons-final-campaign-spending-revealed>
- Arceneaux, K., Kousser, T., & Mullin, M. (2011). Get Out the Vote-by-Mail? A Randomized Field Experiment Testing the Effect of Mobilization in Traditional and Vote-by-Mail Precincts. *Political Research Quarterly*, 65(4), 882-894. doi:10.1177/1065912911421013
- Bergan, D. E. (2005). Grassroots Mobilization and Voter Turnout in 2004. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69(5), 760-777. doi:10.1093/poq/nfi063
- Boaz, D. (2017). Dollars per Vote in the 2016 Election. Cato Institute.
<https://www.cato.org/blog/dollars-vote-2016-election>
- Hughes, A. D., Levitt, J., Hill, S. J., & Kousser, T. (2017). The Impact of GOTV Depends Upon Campaign Context: A Field Experiment in the 2014 California Primary. *California Journal of Politics and Policy*, 9(2). doi:10.5070/p2cjpp9234854
- Ingraham, C. (2017). Somebody just put a price tag on the 2016 election. It's a doozy. Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/04/14/somebody-just-put-a-price-tag-on-the-2016-election-its-a-doozy/>

Malone, C. (2016). *Trump's Campaign Focused On Attracting Unlikely Voters, A Memo Shows*. FiveThirtyEight.

<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/trump-campaign-memo-unlikely-voters/>

Michelson, M. R. (2014). Memory and Voter Mobilization. *Polity*, 46(4), 591-610.

doi:10.1057/pol.2014.21

Sunrise Movement. (2020, October 31). Sunrise Movement's General Election Impact [Press release].

<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/press-releases/sunrise-movements-general-election-impact/>

Williamson, M. P. (2018). *Campaigning in Context: A Practical Statewide Study of Correlations between Campaign Contact Methods, Partisanship, Timing, Frequency, Population Density, and Regionalism on Voter Turnout* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 2018) (pp. 1-94). Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC.

Zeleny, J. (2008). Obama Battles Block by Block to Get Voters to Polls. *New York Times* .
nytimes.com/2008/10/12/us/politics/12ground.html.