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GETTING OUT THE LATINO VOTE: How Door-to-Door Canvassing Influences Voter Turnout in Rural Central California

Melissa R. Michelson

Using randomized experimentation, this study of a municipal election in Central California examines the effects of face-to-face canvassing on voter turnout. This is the first randomized experiment to focus on Latino voter mobilization. Building on previous field experimentation, this study focuses on a local school board election held in Dos Palos, CA. Two kinds of appeals were made to potential voters: one emphasized ethnic solidarity; the other emphasized civic duty. Canvassing was remarkably successful; voters who were contacted were significantly more likely to vote. The mobilization effort had a particularly large effect on the turnout of Latino Democrats.

Key words: Latino; turnout; election; mobilization.

THE LATINO TURNOUT PROBLEM

The Latino population in the United States has grown rapidly in recent years, from 14.6 million in 1980 to nearly 22.4 million in 1990, to over 35.3 million in 2000. Latinos now comprise 12.5 percent of the population, surpassing African Americans as the largest minority group in America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a, 2001b). This growth has not translated into increased political power, however, largely because Latino voter turnout is so low. There is a massive disparity between the size of the Latino population and Latino voting power. Less than a third of Latinos vote in presidential elections, while less than one fourth participate in congressional elections. Many Latinos are young and have low socioeconomic status (SES), and about 40% of Latinos are non-citizens, but studies that control for these variables find that even among citizens Latino turnout lags behind that of the general population (Arvizu and Garcia, 1996; DeSipio, 1996; Hero and Campbell, 1996; Uhlaner, Cain, and

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Kiewiet, 1989; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; but see Calvo and Rosenstone, 1989). Only 45.1% of Latino citizens voted in 2000, and only 32.8% voted in 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a).

More recent studies examine the influence of motivation, opportunity, and mobilization on Latino turnout. Some authors conclude that mobilization works, but that the effect of these variables pales in comparison to the power of SES (Garcia, 1997; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Wrinkle, Stewart, Polinard, Meier, and Arvizu, (1996) find that mobilization is a more powerful predictor of political involvement than SES.¹ Diaz (1996) finds that Latino turnout is significantly affected by organizational affiliation. Hritzuk and Park find that "integration in politically active social networks, exposure to mobilization efforts, and affiliation with at least one organization significantly increase the likelihood that Latinos will participate at higher levels" (2000, p. 164). De la Garza has been arguing for some time that mobilization is critical to Latino voter turnout; his recent work (with various coauthors) tests this hypothesis. DeSipio, de la Garza, and Setzler (1999) argue that targeted mobilization efforts conducted in 1996 effectively boosted Latino turnout. De la Garza and Lu (1999) find that Latino self-reported membership in voluntary groups or organizations is related to higher levels of voter registration and turnout. Shaw, de la Garza and Lee (2000) find that mobilization by Latino groups has a significant effect on Latino turnout, but that mobilization by non-Latino groups does not. Most recently, de la Garza and Abrajano (2002) found that Latino-on-Latino mobilization efforts during the 2000 presidential election worked in some states, but not in others. These survey-based studies suggest that mobilization often, but not always, increases Latino turnout.

The persistent gap between the size of the Latino population in the United States and the low level of Latino voter turnout invites us to ask why Latinos have not been incorporated into politics like previous waves of immigrants, which were mobilized by political machines (Allen, 1993; Handlin, 1941; Krase and LaCerra, 1991; Myers, 1917). Is it the result of a weakening in the party system and a decline in voter mobilization efforts? Gerber and Green note that "during the last half-century, a dramatic transformation has occurred in the manner in which voters are mobilized" (2000, p. 653). Face-to-face contact between voters and those seeking their support has been replaced by modern campaign tactics such as direct mail and telephone calls from commercial phone banks (Broder, 1971; Ware, 1985). If the decline of political machines, and the concurrent decline in traditional voter mobilization tactics, is partially responsible for low rates of Latino political participation, then the use of such tactics should have a significant impact on turnout. This study tests the hypothesis that Latinos can be mobilized through old-fashioned mobilization tactics, providing the first evidence of Latino voter mobilization based on a fully randomized field experiment.

Even assuming that impersonal methods of voter mobilization can be effec-

tive, Latinos have generally been excluded from such efforts and have largely been ignored or taken for granted by the major political parties (Hero, Garcia, Garcia, and Pachon, 2000). Verba, et al. (1995) report that only 1 in 7 Latino men and 1 in 25 Latinas were asked to become politically involved. Furthermore, Shaw et al. (2000) find that the messenger matters. In other words, efforts to mobilize Latinos are most effective when made by Latinos. If this is true, then persistent low levels of Latino voter turnout are also attributable to the demographics of political activists. In other words, Latinos are rarely mobilized by these efforts because few of the individuals making the outreach efforts are Latino. This study tests whether Latino-on-Latino mobilization works.

VOTER MOBILIZATION EXPERIMENTS

Observational (survey-based) studies of voter mobilization of the general population (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Kramer, 1970) and of Latinos in particular (de la Garza and Abrajano, 2002; de la Garza and Lu, 1999; Diaz, 1996; Garcia, 1997; Hritzuk and Park, 2000; Shaw et al, 2000; Verba et al., 1995; Wrinkle et al., 1996) examine the correlation between voting and contact with campaigns and political organizations, but they are often plagued by two problems. First, contact may be endogenous. If campaigns and other political organizations focus their efforts on likely voters, then any observed correlations between mobilization and participation may be spurious. Second, contact may be poorly measured by self-reports from survey respondents. Voters may have vague or distorted recollections of whether or not they were contacted, which can cause bias in estimating the true influence of mobilization efforts.

Experimental studies that randomly manipulate whether voters are asked to vote eliminate these problems of spuriousness and measurement error. Early studies of the effect of face-to-face canvassing found that mobilization works, but they had such small sample sizes that no reliable inferences can be made (Eldersveld and Dodge, 1954; Eldersveld, 1956; Miller, Bositis, and Baer, 1981). Larger studies conducted in various major cities have recently been conducted by Gerber and Green (2000) and by Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2002). These efforts find strong evidence of the effectiveness of face-to-face mobilization campaigns.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Design and Methods

I conducted an experiment that consisted of a door-to-door nonpartisan get-out-the-vote drive for the November 6, 2001, school board election of the Dos Palos-Oro Loma Unified School District, which includes portions of Mer-

ced and Fresno Counties, in Central California. The major population hub in the district, Dos Palos, is about 65 miles northwest of Fresno. The city's median household income is \$29,147, and 19.1% of families live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002b).

Lists of registered voters were obtained from the two county elections offices about 3 weeks prior to the election. In Fresno County, which includes only the easternmost corner of the school district, there were 580 registered voters. In Merced County there were 2,195 registered voters. From the combined list of 2,775 registered voters, 1,709 individuals were randomly chosen to be in the treatment group. Of the 4,581 residents of Dos Palos, a majority (54.2%) are Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002b). However, surname analysis indicates that only a third of registered voters are Latino. (Latino surnames were determined using the 1990 U.S. Census list of Spanish surnames, which is estimated to be 94% accurate; see Word and Perkins, 1996). That voter registration rates lag far behind population figures is not surprising. Nationwide, only 34.9% of Latinos are registered to vote, compared to 65.6% of Anglos. Looking only at citizens, 57.3% of Latinos are registered, compared to 70.4% of Anglos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a).

Canvassers were 30 bilingual students from California State University, Fresno. All of the canvassers were Latinos; 10 were men and 20 were women. Canvassers were recruited on campus using a combination of posted flyers and advertisements in the campus newspaper, and were paid for their work. A training session was held on the Friday before canvassing began, on October 26, during which all canvassers were given instructions on how to approach potential voters, what they could and could not say about the candidates, and how to deliver their motivational messages. The appeals were rehearsed in both English and Spanish. Although the canvassers memorized and practiced specific speeches, they were encouraged to diverge slightly from those speeches when speaking to potential voters in order to maintain the authentic sound of the appeals, and to send the message to potential voters that the canvassers believed what they were saying. In other words, canvassers were instructed to avoid sounding as if they had memorized their speeches, and to sound natural and enthusiastic.²

Canvassing took place during the two weekends prior to the election, Saturday and Sunday, October 27–28 and Saturday–Monday, November 3–5. Canvassing took place from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. on Saturday, October 27, then from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. on Sunday, October 28 and Saturday and Sunday, November 3–4. The earlier stop time after the first day was necessitated by the end of daylight savings time; for safety reasons, canvassers did not work after sundown. On Monday, November 5, canvassing was conducted by only one team of canvassers, from 3–6 p.m. Also for safety reasons, the 30 canvassers were divided into 15 teams of two. Each team was given a “walk list” of

names of registered voters within a small geographic area. This allowed the teams to become familiar with particular parts of the city and to easily revisit addresses where no one was home on earlier attempts. This developed feelings of attachment by each team to their lists and a strong desire to see that all of the registered voters were contacted.³

Each contact began with the canvassers introducing themselves as Fresno State students. This was expected to increase the willingness of individuals to agree to speak with the canvassers, as Fresno State enjoys a very positive reputation in the communities surrounding the campus. One of the canvassers then delivered a mobilization message that encouraged voting in the upcoming election. The registered voter was then asked to commit to going to the polls on Election Day. Each contacted voter received a one-page flyer, which indicated the four candidates, their contact telephone numbers, and the address and telephone number of the voter's polling place. Prior to canvassing, I contacted each of the candidates to ask whether they had any campaign materials that they would like us to distribute, but none of them had any such materials prepared. As canvassers were unable to help voters learn about the candidates, they instead urged interested voters to call the candidates directly. Canvassers specifically refrained from instructing potential voters whom to vote for. As the canvassers were from another town and materials about the candidates were unavailable, this was fairly easy to ensure.

Canvassers visited each address multiple times, as time allowed, to try to contact voters who were not home. Due to the rural nature of the district, many of the addresses were difficult to find. Some houses did not have numbers on them, and some were located far back along dirt roads behind fields, undetectable from the main road. When an address could not be found, neighbors were asked about the location of the registered voter, and some registered voters were contacted in the fields.

The canvassing effort was remarkably successful given these difficulties; overall, 76.7% of voters on the treatment lists were successfully contacted. This is one of the major strengths of this study. This is more than double the contact rate reported by Gerber and Green (2000) and the six-city average of Green et al. (2002). Although this study has a smaller N, this strong contact rate ensured a strong intent-to-treat effect and greater statistical power than previous experiments. The principal complication of experimental studies of voter mobilization is that only some citizens assigned to the treatment group are actually contacted. Comparing turnout among those actually contacted to those not contacted (both those in the control group and those in the treatment groups who were not contacted) overestimates the effect of canvassing, because registered voters who are easier to reach are also probably more likely to vote (Gerber and Green, 2000). Correct estimation of the effect of canvassing must isolate the treatment effect from the intent-to-treat effect by dividing

the intent-to-treat effect by the observed contact rate. This is equivalent to performing a two-stage least squares regression of vote on actual turnout using randomization as an instrumental variable (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin, 1996; Gerber and Green, 2000).

Those chosen for treatment were divided randomly into two groups: Treatment Group A and Treatment Group B. The content of the mobilization message delivered by the canvassers varied according to the treatment group to which the potential voter had been assigned. Treatment Group A received a message that emphasized voting as a civic duty. Potential voters were reminded that voting is an important and patriotic civic duty, that as an American citizen they should fulfill that civic duty, and that voter participation is a crucial part of American democracy. I expected this appeal to be particularly effective given the heightened patriotism of the post-September 11 period, but the events of 9/11 were not mentioned. Treatment Group B received a message that emphasized voting as a tool for ethnic group solidarity. Potential voters were reminded that politicians are more likely to pay attention to groups that vote, that voting in the school board election would send a message to the members of the school board that Latinos in Dos Palos were concerned about education, and that participation would likely improve the education of Latino students. If a potential voter assigned to Treatment Group B was perceived to not be Latino, the message was altered slightly to remove the references to ethnicity. Instead, the message focused on voting as a way to emphasize to the school board that local citizens were concerned about education.⁴

Because the Latinos of Dos Palos are overwhelmingly of Mexican descent, and because the canvassers were all of Mexican descent, it is unlikely that individuals were misidentified as Latino. Still, it is possible that some non-Latinos received the message that emphasized Latino community solidarity and that perhaps these individuals were thereby made less likely to vote. Accordingly, the statistical analysis below was conducted both with and without non-Latinos (as identified by surname analysis, not by the canvassers) in Treatment Group B. Removing these individuals from the analysis did not change the results; in fact, the effect on Latinos is actually slightly stronger.

It is also possible that some Latinos were incorrectly identified by the canvassers as non-Latino and that they then received the treatment message that did not focus on ethnicity but instead noted the importance of voting for community solidarity. They were still asked to participate in a way that should not have offended them or disturbed them in any way, although perhaps in a manner less effective than the intended message would have been. If anything, then, this will slightly weaken the results of the canvassing effort and increases our confidence in the positive effect of the mobilization effort demonstrated below in the statistical analysis. It also reduces the level of contrast between the two messages.

The dependent variable, whether or not each registered voter participated in the election, was constructed with official records obtained from the Fresno and Merced County Elections Offices. In other words, the turnout data is validated, as opposed to self-reported.

Social, Demographic, and Political Context

Voter participation in California elections is “distressingly low,” particularly at the local level (Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch, 2002, p. 1). Turnout in local elections around the country often falls below one quarter of eligible voters; anecdotal evidence suggests that turnout in California may be even lower (Bridges, 1997; Hampton and Tate, 1996; Morlan, 1984). Accordingly, turnout in the Dos Palos-Oro Loma Unified School Board election was expected to be low. An election-day story in the *Fresno Bee* noted that turnout was expected to be less than 20%—low even compared to turnout in previous elections for the same school board (Kennedy, 2001). There are seven seats on the board, and members are elected for terms of 4 years. All of the seats are at-large positions, and the elections are nonpartisan. Every 2 years, either three or four of the seats are up for reelection. The three incumbents up for reelection in 2001 had been elected most recently in 1997; four other incumbents had faced the voters in 1999. In the November 2, 1999, election, the four incumbents (faced with one challenger) were all reelected with a turnout rate of about 26%.⁵

The nonpartisan election was not salient to voters. In part, this was due to the nature of the candidates. All three incumbents were running for reelection, and there was one challenger. Conversations with registered voters during the canvassing indicated that many felt that the three incumbents would easily be reelected and, therefore, there was little reason to participate. Others voiced resistance to participating because they did not have children in the public schools. No other races or issues were on the ballot. The election received perfunctory attention from the press. The week before the election, the weekly local newspaper, the *Dos Palos Sun*, ran a front-page story that noted the upcoming School Board election and featured photographs of the four candidates along with answers to a standard set of questions to which the newspaper had asked each candidate to respond (Borboa, 2001).

Of the candidates running, two of the incumbents were Anglos; one incumbent was African American. The challenger was of South Asian descent. This lack of a Latino candidate was expected to further depress Latino turnout, as recent evidence indicates that the presence of a viable Latino candidate increases Latino turnout (Arteaga, 2000).

That so little attention was being paid to the election by others gave us the opportunity to conduct an experiment with the absence of contamination by competing mobilization efforts. In other words, potential voters were not be-

ing mobilized by the local media, by other organizations, or even by the candidates themselves. No mailings or other campaign efforts were waged by the candidates, with one exception. The one challenger spent the last weekend before the election going door-to-door, and posted several signs around town (on lawns and in store windows). This increases our confidence in the experiment's results.

RESULTS

Intent-to-Treat Effects

Effects were analyzed by dividing registered voters into four groups: Latino Democrats, Latino Non-Democrats, Non-Latino Democrats, and Non-Latino Non-Democrats. Because all of the canvassers were Latino, it was expected that there would be substantial differences in effects among Latinos and non-Latinos. I expected that Latinos would be more receptive to the mobilization effort than non-Latinos. Differences in effects between Democrats and non-Democrats were anticipated in the wake of interactions between canvassers and contacted registered voters that took place during the experiment. It is well known that most California Latinos are Democrats, in part due to the anti-Latino and anti-immigrant policies supported by former Republican Governor Pete Wilson. Comments made to the canvassers by some contacted registered voters indicated that they assumed that the canvassers were Democrats. Consequently, I expected that registered Democrats would be more receptive to the mobilization effort than non-Democrats. Members of the four groups are dispersed evenly around the school district; there are no distinct ethnic or partisan neighborhoods. Statistical analysis (not shown) confirms that there were no significant differences in turnout between those living in the center of town and those living in the surrounding farm areas.

I found significant and interesting differences in effects among the four groups. Intent-to-treat effects, comparing those in the treatment groups to those in the control group, are shown in Table 1. Among Non-Latino Democrats, turnout increases by 3.9 percentage points from the control group to the solidarity treatment group (28.3% vs. 32.2%) and 1.3 percentage points from the control group to the civic duty treatment group (28.3% vs. 29.6%). Among Non-Latino Non-Democrats (mostly Republicans), turnout increases by 3.1 percentage points from the control group to the civic duty group (23.9% vs. 27.0%), and 1.5 percentage points from the control group to the solidarity group (23.9% vs. 25.4%). By far, the largest effect is found among Latino Democrats. Turnout for these voters increases by 7.1 percentage points from the control group to the civic duty group (14.6% vs. 21.7%) and 10.6 percentage points from the control group to the ethnic solidarity group (14.6%

vs. 25.2%). Among Latino Non-Democrats, however, there is some hint of a boomerang effect—that if one makes an ethnic appeal to a Republican Latino, that they are actually less likely to participate. Although these differences are suggestive, they fall short of statistical significance.

Message Effects

Turning to those who were successfully contacted, I examined the differential effect of the two mobilization messages. Examining turnout among those who heard the canvassers' messages casts doubt on the view that the message matters, as shown in Table 2. Among Non-Latino Democrats, turnout is only 1.4 percentage points higher among those who received the solidarity message than among those who received the civic duty message (35.5% vs. 36.9%), and among Non-Latino Non-Democrats turnout among those receiving the civic duty message is only 1.9 percentage points higher than turnout among those who received the solidarity message (31.0% vs. 29.1%). Among Latinos Democrats, those receiving the civic duty message were only one percentage point more likely to vote than were those receiving the ethnic solidarity message (28.7% vs. 29.7%). The largest effect was among Latino Non-Democrats: turnout among those receiving the civic duty message was 7.5 percentage points

**TABLE 1. Turnout by Canvassing Message and Political Party
(percentage voting)**

	Civic Duty	Ethnic Solidarity	Control
<i>Intent-to-Treat Effects</i>			
Non-Latino Democrats	29.6	32.2	28.3
(N)	(84/284)	(83/258)	(93/329)
Non-Latino Non-Democrats	27.0	25.4	23.9
(N)	(93/344)	(90/354)	(102/427)
Latino Democrats	21.7	25.2	14.6
(N)	(30/138)	(35/139)	(25/171)
Latino Non-Democrats	14.3	8.6	12.7
(N)	(12/84)	(9/105)	(16/126)
<i>Contact Rates</i>			
Non-Latino Democrats	75.4	75.6	
(N)	(214/284)	(195/258)	
Non-Latino Non-Democrats	79.7	80.5	
(N)	(274/344)	(285/354)	
Latino Democrats	68.1	72.7	
(N)	(94/138)	(101/139)	
Latino Non-Democrats	81.0	75.2	
(N)	(68/84)	(79/105)	

higher than among those receiving the ethnic solidarity message (17.6% vs. 10.1%), but even this difference fails to reach statistical significance.

Mobilization Effects of Actual Contact

The effects of actual contact are tested by comparing members of the two treatment groups to the control group, taking into account the contact rates for each group. This is accomplished using two-stage probit, a method similar to two-stage least squares but more appropriate for a model with a dichotomous dependent variable. The regression models (shown in Table 3) assume that both mobilization messages were equally effective. Intent-to-treat is used as an instrumental variable for actual contact. This means that the instrumental variable is correlated with the included independent variables (as being in a treatment group increases the likelihood that one was contacted), but is not systematically related to the regression error, as treatment group status was determined randomly. Variables are included to test for effects by ethnicity (Latino or non-Latino) and registered political party (Democrat or non-Democrat). In two of the models, independent variables are added to control for whether or not the registered voter was a frequent voter, gender, and age. The frequent voter variable was calculated using voter history from the 1998 general elections, the 2000 presidential primary, and the 2000 presidential elections. Each registered voter was given a score of 0–3, based on how many of those three elections they had participated in.

Results from Table 3 show that the mobilization effort had a large and statistically significant effect on voter turnout among Latino Democrats. Those who were contacted by the canvassers were more likely to participate. Age and whether or not the individual was a frequent voter also had a statistically significant effect on likelihood of participating in the school board election. There were no statistically significant gender differences.

TABLE 2. Voter Turnout Rates Among Those Contacted by Canvassers (percentage voting)

	Civic Duty	Ethnic Solidarity
Non-Latino Democrats (<i>N</i>)	35.5 (76/214)	36.9 (72/195)
Non-Latino Non-Democrats (<i>N</i>)	31.0 (85/274)	29.1 (83/285)
Latino Democrats (<i>N</i>)	28.7 (27/94)	29.7 (30/101)
Latino Non-Democrats (<i>N</i>)	17.6 (12/68)	10.1 (8/79)

TABLE 3. Two-Stage Probit Regression of Voter Turnout

	Model 1	(s.e.)	Model 2	(s.e.)	Model 3	(s.e.)
Latino Democrats contacted	.404*	(.208)	.406*	(.239)	.405*	(.239)
Anglo Democrats contacted	.061	(.124)	.121	(.140)		
Latino Non-Democrats contacted	-.197	(.254)	.009	(.271)		
Anglo Non-Democrats contacted	.056	(.106)	.106	(.119)		
Others contacted					.108	(.086)
Frequent Voter			.505*	(.034)	.512*	(.033)
Gender			.029	(.060)	.028	(.060)
Age			.007*	(.002)	.008*	(.002)
Latino Democrats	-.343*	(.135)	-.234	(.155)	-.223*	(.145)
Anglo Democrats	.135 ⁺	(.099)	.029 ⁺	(.112)		
Latino Non-Democrats	-.431*	(.157)	-.151	(.171)		
Constant	-.710*	(.067)	-2.251*	(.162)	-2.323*	(.152)

Note: $N = 2,759$ (Model 1), 2,555 (Models 2 and 3).

⁺ $p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$ (one-tailed).

Looking at Model 1, which does not include voter history, the coefficient of .404 for contacted Latino Democrats is both statistically significant and substantively large. If a Latino Democratic voter has a 34% chance of voting, then being contacted elevates that individual's likelihood of voting to 50%. The coefficient estimates for other contacted groups, Latino Non-Democrats, Non-Latino Democrats, and Non-Latino Non-Democrats, all fail to reach statistical significance. In other words, the Latino Democratic canvassers only successfully mobilized Latino Democrats.

Looking at Model 2, which includes the control variables, the coefficient estimate for Latino Democrats is basically the same, at .406. Although the standard error is slightly larger, the coefficient still easily reaches statistical significance. It is logical that adding voter history does not substantively change the results, because individuals were randomized into treatment and control groups without reference to their voter history. That the effect for Latino Democrats persists when age is included as an independent variable ensures that contact is not acting as a surrogate for age.

Because the initial two models showed that the mobilization effort did not have an effect on individuals who were not Latino Democrats, the other three categories of Dos Palos voters (Latino Non-Democrats, Non-Latino Democrats, and Non-Latino Non-Democrats) were all combined into a single group: Others. The model was then run again comparing Latino Democrats to Others. This produced a statistically significant coefficient estimate for contacted Latino Democrats of .405. This result confirms that there was a large effect on Latino Democrats but not on other Dos Palos voters.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the experiment was remarkably successful, and several important findings were obtained. Most importantly, the experiment provides solid evidence that face-to-face canvassing can have a statistically significant and substantively large effect on voter turnout when the canvasser and the targeted voter share ethnicity and political partisanship. That shared ethnicity matters confirms theories long held by de la Garza and others that Latino activists can effectively mobilize the Latino vote. That shared political partisanship (or at least perceived partisanship) is important is more complicated.

The election and the get-out-the-vote campaign were both completely nonpartisan. Canvassers were not given information about the partisanship of individuals on their walk lists and were instructed to decline to state their partisanship if asked. However, the results suggest that much more was assumed about partisanship than was actually known. In other words, it seems that the residents of Dos Palos assumed that the canvassers—young Latinos from the local university—were all Democrats. That Democrats were more likely to be influenced by the mobilization effort suggests that Democratic registered voters assumed a shared group membership with the canvassers; that Republicans were less effectively mobilized suggests that Republican registered voters dismissed the canvassers as members as an opposition group.

A second important finding, although one that deserves further investigation before any definitive conclusions can be made, is that altering the content of the delivered message does not significantly effect the power of the mobilization effort. In other words, Latino Democrats receiving either mobilization message (civic duty or ethnic group solidarity) were more likely to vote than were Latino Democrats who were not contacted, but neither message was significantly more effective than the other. This suggests that it is not so much a matter of convincing Latinos that it is important for them to participate but that they need only to be asked. Rather than trying to find the message that when broadcast through the mass media or direct mail to the Latino community will successfully bring Latinos to the polls, those interested in increasing Latino voter participation might simply need to change their method of delivering that message from one of indirect, impersonal contact to one of face-to-face personal outreach.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides valuable new information about how to increase Latino voter turnout, while also demonstrating the effectiveness of personal voter mobilization efforts. Scholars have argued that declining voter turnout since the 1960s may be due to a shift in how campaigns are conducted. Party activ-

ists making face-to-face contacts have been replaced by mass media advertising, direct mail, and telephone calls (Gerber and Green, 2000). Putnam (2000) reports a steady decline in recent decades in the proportion of the public working for political parties as well as a decline in the size and vitality of nonpartisan organizations, which historically have helped to mobilize voters. By demonstrating that voter turnout can be boosted significantly through personal outreach, this study confirms theories about how the shift to less personal campaigning over the last 50 years has depressed political participation. While Gerber and Green have shown that face-to-face canvassing is effective in an urban environment, where voters can get to the polls relatively easily, results from this experiment indicate that personal canvassing can also have an impact in a small, rural community where polling places are often distantly located. Confirming the findings of Shaw et al. (2000), this study shows that the messenger matters: canvassing by Latino Democrats increased turnout most significantly among Latino Democrats.

Even after controlling for citizenship, Latinos in the United States tend to vote less often than do non-Latinos. In a low-turnout local election such as the school board contest in Dos Palos, where a majority of residents are Latino but a majority of voters were non-Latino, this can have serious consequences.⁶ Disparities in voter turnout may skew policy outcomes if the political preferences of Anglo voters differ in important ways from those of nonvoting minorities (Casel, 1986; Guinier, 1994; Hajnal et al., 2002; Verba et al., 1995). At the national level, there are no major differences in the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters (Teixeira, 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). At the local level, however, where turnout is much lower and more likely to be skewed by race/ethnicity and SES, differences in political preferences are likely to be much greater (Alford and Lee, 1968; Hajnal et al., 2002; Wattenberg, 1998). This means that the nonparticipation of Latinos, whether or not they comprise a majority of a local population, has serious consequences in that the policy preferences of Latinos are unlikely to be taken into account by local elected officials.

Over half a century ago, V. O. Key noted: "The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote" (1949, p. 527). More recently, Burnham summed up the problem with "if you don't vote, you don't count" (1987, p. 99). Recent empirical studies have found compelling evidence that unequal turnout rates are associated with public policies that favor affluent voters over underprivileged nonvoters (Hicks and Swank, 1992; Hill and Leighley, 1992; Leighley, 1995; Mebane, 1994). The clear implication is that if Latino voters do not participate in local politics, then local elected officials are unlikely to pay heed to the political preferences of Latino residents.

This study indicates that one approach to the problem of low Latino voter

turnout is a return to old-fashioned personal canvassing efforts. Latinos are more likely to vote if asked to do so. The problem is that usually no one asks.

APPENDIX: CANVASSER SCRIPTS

Opening

“Hi, my name is _____ and I’m a student at Fresno State. I’m here to talk to you about the upcoming elections on Tuesday, Nov. 5.”

Civic Duty

“As you know, voting is an important and patriotic civic duty. The whole point of democracy is that citizens are active participants in government. Our ability to vote is what makes America a great democracy. Exercising your responsibility to vote helps keep America strong.”

Ethnic Group Solidarity

“When Latinos don’t vote, it sends a message to politicians that they can ignore the Latino community and concentrate their energies elsewhere. You can help make sure that doesn’t happen by joining your neighbors and voting on election day. Send a message to our elected leaders that you care, and that they should care about the concerns of Latinos.”

Closing

“Can I count on you to vote next Tuesday?”

NOTES

1. However, their model is likely tainted by endogeneity (Hritzuk and Park, 2000).
2. The scripts used by the canvassers can be found in the appendix.
3. The feelings of attachment and investment in their lists were clear in speaking to the students during the wrapup sessions at the end of each canvassing day. Students spoke enthusiastically about how close they were to checking off all of the names on their sheets, and discussed strategies with one another for reaching elusive voters.
4. The two messages as delivered compare the more general goal of helping the American polity with the more specific goal of empowering a local community. It is assumed that each of the components of the two messages are complementary, although it is possible that for individual voters particular components of each are more important than others. While future researchers may wish to unpack the messages, for example testing messages that emphasize patriotism against messages that emphasize civic duty, this experiment makes more general comparisons.
5. In 1997, the candidates up for reelection in 2001 had won in an election with a turnout rate of almost 50%; however, the 1997 election was unusual in that there was a strong amount of

- competition, with eight candidates vying for the three available seats (Merced County Elections Office, personal communication, 11/14/01).
6. This problem also exists at the statewide level in California. In 2000, 72% of voters in California were Anglos, but Anglos comprise only about half of the state's population (Hajnal et al., 2002).

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