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Partisan and Nonpartisan Message Content and Voter Mobilization

Field Experimental Evidence

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This article reports the results of a randomized field experiment designed to compare directly the mobilization impact of partisan versus nonpartisan messages delivered via commercial phone banks. The experiment, conducted during the November 2005 municipal elections in Albany, New York, incorporates a series of design innovations to improve on extant research and to assuage skepticism about the internal and external validity of previous studies conducted along these lines. The author finds that partisan messages delivered by professional call centers are no more effective than nonpartisan messages in mobilizing voters.

Keywords: *campaign communications, grassroots mobilization, commercial phone banks, field experiments, message content, partisan and nonpartisan appeals*

Federal candidates, party committees, and independent groups devoted 7 percent of overall expenditures—nearly \$130 million in total—to acquire phone services in the 2004 elections, more than twice the amount spent on polling, for example (Bergo, Armendariz, and Perry 2006). Roughly estimated, the presidential campaigns and allied organizations made more than 120 million phone calls to mobilize voters in 2004 (Bergan et al. 2005). Indeed, political campaigns at all levels routinely invest considerable sums to contact voters via telephones, despite the fact the most existing studies suggest phones' capacity to mobilize voters is limited.

Early studies concluded that phone canvassing elevates turnout, reporting effects that ranged from 9 to 26 percentage points (Eldersveld 1956; Miller, Bositis, and Baer 1981; Adams and Smith 1980). These results were based on small sample sizes, however, and subsequent research based on randomized field experiments with much larger samples has tempered considerably the conclusion that phone calls stimulate turnout (Gerber and Green 2005). In recent studies, scholars that evaluate the mobilizing impact of phone calls distinguish between volunteer calls and calls delivered by commercial phone banks. Experimental evidence reveals that volunteer phone banks generally boost turnout by 3 to 5 percentage points (Nickerson 2004, 2005a; Wong 2005; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006; Ramirez 2005), but phone appeals delivered by commercial phone banks, which are

far more common in real-world campaign settings, turn out to have almost no impact on turnout (McNulty 2005; Gerber and Green 2000, 2005; Green and Gerber 2004; Cardy 2005).

One explanation advanced to account for the inefficacy of calls placed by commercial phone banks is that these communiqués are typically “low quality”—that is to say they are often delivered mechanically or rushed and do little to engage voters on the other end of the line. Volunteer callers, by contrast, are more committed to the cause, and their conversations come across as more genuine and engaging (Nickerson 2007). In a recent study, Nickerson (2007) found that professional phone banks can mobilize effectively when callers are trained and monitored to engage voters and to deliver “high-quality,” nonpartisan get-out-the-vote (GOTV) messages. Contrary to all prior professional phone bank experiments, Nickerson observed statistically significant treatment effects ranging from 3 to 5 percentage points.

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Critics who take issue with the finding that phone calls are ineffective offer an alternative explanation—rooted in message content—for these null results. They argue principally that the inability to detect turnout effects is an artifact of the experimental designs. Most of the experimental studies of phone calls have relied on nonpartisan GOTV appeals, a design element critics believe lacks external validity (Grenzke and Watts 2005; Nickerson 2005a; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006). Grenzke and Watts (2005, 81) contended that nonpartisan phone studies fail to replicate real campaign settings and “betray basic misunderstandings about why and how GOTV efforts are conducted. . . . Effective GOTV campaign messages are [written for] and aimed at partisan audiences.”

Such criticisms call attention to the distinction between nonpartisan messages that appeal to people to vote on the basis of civic duty, and partisan messages, used broadly to mean appeals attempting to persuade people to vote a particular way. This distinction about the nature of the appeal has also been advanced amongst academics.

Researchers have formulated several hypotheses about why partisan may be stronger. Nickerson (2005a, 11), for example, argued that “nonpartisan blandishments to vote might not approximate the efficacy of partisan messages.” Appeals to voters’ “abstract duty” to vote may not be as motivating or persuasive as a concrete cause or personality (Nickerson 2005a). Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King (2006, 86) argued that “voters may respond differently to partisan appeals [that] may provide an additional boost to turnout by providing something for which to vote. . . . [P]arty labels may also provide the get-out-the-vote campaigns additional legitimacy because political parties are salient and voters will have knowledge of the organization.”

This study does not investigate differences between volunteer and commercial phone banks. Instead, the main objective is to test two claims implied by the discussion above. The first hypothesis I investigate is that professional phone banks that deliver partisan appeals will mobilize voters effectively. The second hypothesis posits that partisan phone scripts will mobilize voters more effectively than nonpartisan scripts.

In a series of recent studies, scholars have begun to probe these questions by designing phone experiments that include partisan components (Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006; Nickerson 2004; Cardy 2005; McNulty 2005; Michelson 2005). Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King (2006) reported findings from a series of randomized partisan field experiments that

targeted young voters with pro-Democratic appeals during the 2002 gubernatorial election in Michigan. The authors found that after adjusting for contact rates, the estimated treatment effect of receiving a partisan, volunteer call is 3.2 percentage points, an increase roughly comparable to 3.8 percentage points suggested by previous experiments using nonpartisan volunteer phone calls (Nickerson 2004). Based partly on these results, Nickerson (2005a, 13) concludes that “partisan and nonpartisan campaigns are equally effective at boosting turnout” (Nickerson 2005a, 13). In contrast, McNulty (2005) revealed no evidence that partisan volunteer phone appeals resulted in detectable turnout increases. Similarly, Cardy (2005) reported no impact from partisan phone calls delivered by a commercial phone bank to Democratic voters during a 2002 gubernatorial primary.

Forays into studying the effects of partisan mobilization on turnout help us to gain further leverage on the effect of phone calls, but the debate, as the summary of recent work presented above suggests, is far from concluded. A lacuna in the extant literature leaves key questions about the impact of phone calls and message content on voter turnout largely unanswered. One constraint is that no randomized field experiment has provided a direct test of the impact of partisan versus nonpartisan phone calls. To compare the magnitude of the treatment effects, analysts need to assume constancy over time, place, electoral setting, and subject population. As Nickerson (2007, 270) pointed out, a controlled experiment that randomly exposed a single pool of subjects to either a partisan or nonpartisan appeal would obviate concerns about context when comparing mobilization strategies. To date, no such study has been conducted using professional phone banks.¹ Early emphasis on nonpartisan messages has subsided, yet no experimental study of partisan phone campaigns has included partisans of both major parties. Recent partisan experiments have targeted primarily Democrats² (Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006; Cardy 2005).

In this study, I incorporate experimental design innovations to address many of these limitations and to enhance both internal and external validity. I focus on the impact of standard (“low-quality”) mobilization appeals delivered via commercial phone banks, which are far more ubiquitous than either “high-quality” professional calls or volunteer phone banks in contemporary political campaigns. I also include partisans of both major parties. The experiment breaks new ground to shed light on two different but related questions about

commercial phone banks' ability to stimulate turnout and about the effectiveness of partisan messages relative to nonpartisan communications. It is the first commercial phone bank experiment to advance a direct test of partisan versus nonpartisan appeals.

I proceed as follows. The next section describes the details of my experimental procedures. Following, I present and discuss the experimental results. The conclusion offers some brief remarks intended to situate the findings of this study in the broader experimental literature on the mobilization effects of telephone calls and partisan campaigns.

Experimental Design

In this article, I report the findings of a randomized field experiment conducted during the 2005 municipal elections in Albany, New York. The 2005 general election in Albany featured contests for mayor and members of the city council as well as county clerk, president of the council, treasurer, city court judge, and members of the Board of Education. There were also two statewide proposals on the ballot. The top-of-the-ticket mayoral contest pitted the popular three-term Democratic incumbent Gerald "Jerry" Jennings against Joseph Sullivan, leader of Albany's Republican Party, and Alice Green, the Green Party candidate. Jennings ultimately defeated his opponents in the general election by capturing 68.5 percent of the vote.³ Conducting the experiment during a relatively low-salience election with few competing campaign messages allows us to isolate the effect of the intervention with greater ease.

A random sample of 24,308 voters registered as either Republicans or Democrats was stratified and matched by previous voting history and then randomly assigned to one of three experimental groups.⁴ The randomized block design protocol I follow matches subjects (in this case on past voting behavior) and divides these subgroups into treatment and control groups before conducting the experiment in order to improve statistical efficiency and to increase the precision of the estimates of the treatment effects (Mead 1990; Nickerson 2005b). In addition, limiting the sample to partisans permits me to explore the well-established relationship between partisanship and turnout and can shed light on the interpretation of this connection. A total 2,486 voters (672 Republicans and 1,814 Democrats) were assigned to a treatment group that received a partisan appeal encouraging them to vote on Election Day. To maximize external validity, the phone scripts were developed in collaboration with leading

communications professionals from both major parties.⁵ Registered Republicans received a Republican message, and registered Democrats received a Democratic message. A total of 2,472 voters (651 Democrats and 1,821 Republicans) were randomly assigned to a treatment group that received a nonpartisan GOTV appeal. The remaining 19,350 voters in the sample (5,349 Republicans and 14,001 Democrats) were assigned to the control group and received no message. Phone calls were conducted by a large and well-known national commercial phone bank firm on November 6 and 7, 2005. Following are the scripts delivered to subjects in the corresponding treatment groups:

Partisan Script:

Hello, may I speak with [registered voter]? My name is [name] and I'm calling on behalf of the Civic Engagement Project to remind you that the [Democratic/Republican] Party in Albany needs you to vote in your local elections on November 8.

Our local [Democratic/Republican] leaders have fought for generations to protect and restore American values and to create a world in which our children can prosper. Please join the [Democrats/Republicans] in their efforts. Your vote is essential.

Nonpartisan Script:

Hello, may I speak with [registered voter]? My name is [name] and I'm calling on behalf of the Civic Engagement Project to remind you to vote in Albany's local elections on November 8.

Our local government is in charge of things that affect our lives every day. From fire departments to police protection to libraries and safe drinking water, it's all part of local government. Please take part in shaping our city's future. Be sure to vote on November 8th.

I conducted a series of tests to ensure that the stratification and randomization exercises resulted in treatment and control groups that were balanced with respect to a variety of observable characteristics including propensity to vote and partisanship. Regressing assignment to the treatment group on prior voting and on partisanship yields an *F*-statistic of 0.44 ($p = .90$) and reveals no effect.⁶ Outcome measures for the experiment were obtained from official voter turnout records.

Table 1
Partisan versus Nonpartisan Get-Out-the-Vote Messages and Turnout

	<i>N</i>	Turnout	Intent-to-Treat Effect	Contact Rate	Treatment-on-Treated Effect
All subjects					
Partisan	2,486	54.4%	-0.4 (1.1)	59.1%	-0.6 (1.8)
Nonpartisan	2,472	55.3%	0.5 (1.1)	60.4%	0.8 (1.8)
Control group	19,350	54.8%			
Democrats only					
Partisan	1,814	54.2%	-1.0 (1.2)	57.9%	-1.7 (2.1)
Nonpartisan	1,821	56.0%	0.7 (1.2)	59.4%	1.2 (2.1)
Control group	14,001	55.2%			
Republicans only					
Partisan	672	54.9%	1.3 (2.0)	62.3%	2.1 (3.3)
Nonpartisan	651	53.5%	-0.1 (2.1)	63.3%	-0.3 (3.3)
Control group	5,349	53.6%			

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

Experimental Results

Randomized field experiments can assuage concerns about external validity because they are conducted under natural conditions. In such a scenario, however, successful contact with subjects assigned to each treatment group is not guaranteed. In this experiment, 59.1 percent of subjects assigned to the partisan treatment group and 60.4 percent of subjects assigned to receive the nonpartisan message were successfully contacted. To obtain an accurate estimate of the direct effect of contact, it is necessary to divide the intent-to-treat effect by the contact rate. This is essentially equivalent to performing a two-stage least squares regression of vote on actual contact using randomization as an instrumental variable (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin 1996; Gerber and Green 2000, 2005). Assignment to treatment conditions is a perfect instrument for contact because assignment causes contact but is uncorrelated with other causes of voting behavior. This estimator also permits the additional inclusion of control variables to correct for imbalances between experimental groups due to chance (Nickerson, Friedrich, and King 2006).

The top part of Table 1 presents the overall experimental results. Contrary to the expectations that emerge from criticisms of nonpartisan randomized phone experiments, I find no support for the hypothesis that professional phone banks that deliver partisan messages boost turnout. The findings do suggest there may be differences in the treatment effect that can be attributed to message content, but it is not partisan messages that seem to be more effective overall.

In fact, the results suggest that the turnout rate in the sample that was exposed to nonpartisan phone messages was actually higher (55.3 percent) than both the control group (54.8 percent) and the group that received partisan messages (54.4 percent). Thus, one may be tempted to conclude that, if anything, nonpartisan GOTV appeals delivered by professional call centers boost voter turnout while partisan appeals depress turnout.⁷ Yet the treatment estimates and the corresponding standard errors imply that neither partisan nor nonpartisan messages delivered via commercial phone calls mobilize voters effectively.

The results of multivariate regression analyses presented in Table 2 corroborate these findings. Both in model 1 (that includes fixed effects for the experimental strata described above but no covariates) and in model 2 (that includes only covariates), I find no statistically significant intent-to-treat (ITT) effects for either partisan or nonpartisan messages. In models 3 and 4, I estimate average treatment-on-treated (ATT) effects using two-stage least squares (2SLS) analysis in which individual turnout is regressed on actual contact and random assignment is the instrumental variable (Gerber and Green 2000). The estimated treatment effect for partisan appeals yielded by model 4 is -.003 percentage points with a standard error of .014; the estimated treatment effect for nonpartisan messages is .010 (standard error = .014). These estimates and the corresponding confidence intervals imply that the treatment effects I observe do not include the "big" effects reported recently in other GOTV experiments (Nickerson 2007). Consistent with most previous experimental studies,

Table 2
Partisan versus Nonpartisan Get-Out-the-Vote Message and Turnout:
Multivariate Analysis (Dependent Variable: Voted in 2005)

Independent Variable	Model 1: Intent-to-Treat (ITT) Effect (No Covariates)	Model 2: ITT Effect (With Covariates)	Model 3: Treatment-on-Treated (ATT) Effect (No Covariates)	Model 4: ATT Effect (With Covariates)
Partisan treatment	-.002 (.008)	-.002 (.008)	-.004 (.014)	-.003 (.014)
Nonpartisan treatment	.005 (.008)	.006 (.008)	.009 (.014)	.010 (.014)
Fixed effects for strata	Yes	No	Yes	No
Voted (1998) ^a		.062* (.007)		.061* (.007)
Voted (1999) ^a		.067* (.007)		.067* (.007)
Voted (2000) ^a		-.005 (.008)		-.006 (.008)
Voted (2001) ^a		.167* (.007)		.167* (.007)
Voted (2002) ^a		.160* (.007)		.160* (.007)
Voted (2003) ^a		.203* (.007)		.203* (.007)
Voted (2004) ^a		.235* (.007)		.235* (.007)
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	.39	.38	.38	.39

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 24,308$.

a. General election.

* $p < .01$.

the findings overall reveal no effect for phone calls delivered via commercial phone banks, regardless of whether they convey partisan or nonpartisan messages.

Because the experiment included both Democrats and Republicans, I am able to investigate whether differences in the treatment effects emerge across partisan types. The main results described above persist, but there appears to be a hint of partisan difference. Table 1 also presents the experimental results by party. The data suggest that Republicans may be more responsive to partisan rather than nonpartisan appeals; turnout among Republicans assigned to the partisan treatment condition was higher (54.9 percent) than both the nonpartisan treatment group (53.5 percent) and the control group (53.6 percent). Conversely, nonpartisan messages appear to stimulate turnout amongst Democrats more so than partisan appeals; Democratic turnout amongst voters assigned to the nonpartisan treatment group was 0.8 percentage points higher than turnout in the control group (56.0 to 55.2 percent, respectively), while only 54.2 percent of voters assigned to the partisan treatment group voted. These findings suggest the effects of partisan and nonpartisan messages may differ across parties and electoral contexts, but the differences are not large enough to reject the null hypothesis that the results are the same across parties. Thus, these conclusions remain speculative because the effects and interactions fail to achieve significance at conventional levels.

Discussion and Conclusions

The core hypothesis of this article emerged from an ongoing debate in the experimental literature on voter turnout: do partisan scripts mobilize voters more effectively than nonpartisan scripts? A related debate surrounds explanations for the inefficacy of phone appeals delivered by commercial phone banks. The results of this experiment suggest the failure of studies to detect turnout boosts from commercial phone banks is not necessarily rooted in the nonpartisan nature of the appeals generally communicated to voters. Calls delivered professionally fail to mobilize effectively even when appeals are partisan. Moreover, I find scant evidence that partisan scripts delivered by commercial call centers fare better than nonpartisan appeals in getting voters to the polls on Election Day. While no single experiment can settle these questions definitively, the innovations I incorporate in the experimental design permit me to speak directly to these issues and advance our understanding beyond the ad hoc interpretation of disjointed experiments. An accumulation of experimental evidence examining these questions could potentially yield additional insights, but this first-of-its-kind study represents an important benchmark against which subsequent work can be evaluated. Moreover, the research paradigm used in this experiment is a systematic and reproducible method that can be applied to further research. Leverage on a variety of additional hypotheses can be gained by a more nuanced line of

experiments that compare the effects of partisan and nonpartisan appeals delivered via different modes of contact, at different points during a campaign, by different messengers, and in different electoral contexts.

Despite the uncertainty associated with treatment effects I report, the estimates are useful in situating the experimental results in the context of related studies. The standard errors (.014) I report for the treatment-on-treated results (Table 2), for example, are small enough to rule out some of the large (3 to 5 percentage points) effects that other analysts have found recently for other kinds of phone banks (Nickerson 2007). If we consider a 5 percent effect to be “big,” then the effects I report are about three standard errors away from “big.” Too often, such results are dismissed out of hand. But even null findings can be theoretically meaningful, and they can inspire scholars to advance directed studies that explore the implications of this work more systematically and comprehensively. The possibility of differing effects for Democrats and Republicans unearthed by this experiment, for example, is both novel and compelling. One explanation for this finding is that Democrats and Republicans may respond differently to partisan and nonpartisan appeals. Republicans may be “hardwired” to be more responsive to partisan appeals, for instance, while nonpartisan appeals that invoke notions of “civic duty” are more likely to induce Democrats to action. An alternative possibility is that lopsided electoral contexts, which are quite typical in municipal settings, may account for the results we observe. Albany, New York is, by and large, a Democratic town. It is conceivable that partisans of the dominant party, virtually assured of electoral victory, would be motivated more so by nonpartisan than partisan appeals. Out-party members, on the other hand, could be stimulated more effectively by appeals to partisan goals, perhaps by tapping into expressive intents, despite the inevitability of electoral futility. Further experimentation is necessary to investigate these competing possibilities head-on.

More generally, the results described in this study suggest we may need to reconsider the extent to which voters need to connect with the partisan elements of a campaign in order to vote. The findings indicate this is not necessarily the case. It may well be that the long-established relationship between partisanship and turnout has more to do with interest in the campaign or, just as likely, interest in politics or governance or civics in a general sense. The intriguing implications posited by this study will likely serve as valuable catalysts for subsequent theoretical and empirical work that explores the normative and political importance of these results in greater detail.

Critics’ claims notwithstanding, the conventional wisdom that has emerged from the experimental literature is that changes of message do not usually alter the effectiveness of various forms of contact (Levine and Lopez 2005, 187). The medium, as Levine and Lopez (2005, 187) argued, matters more than the message. This study corroborates this conclusion, at least with respect to any differential effects between partisan and nonpartisan appeals delivered via commercial phone banks, and offers guidance to both scholars and practitioners who seek to understand how message content affects political behavior. The findings reported in this study put the onus on those who believe partisan scripts in the hands of commercial phone banks to be superior to nonpartisan appeals to produce evidence for this claim.

Appendix Balance of Past Voting Behavior in Treatment and Control Groups (Percentage Voted in General Elections)

Past Election	Experimental Groups			<i>P</i> = χ^2 ^a
	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Control	
Voted (1998)	58.2	58.3	58.4	.974
Voted (1999)	44.0	43.8	43.6	.949
Voted (2000)	70.6	70.9	71.2	.834
Voted (2001)	46.7	46.7	46.8	.998
Voted (2002)	63.2	63.3	63.4	.957
Voted (2003)	38.1	37.9	37.7	.931
Voted (2004)	78.3	78.7	79.2	.526
<i>N</i>	2,486	2,472	19,350	

a. *p*-value for chi-square test.

Notes

1. A series of partisan experiments along these lines were conducted by Michelson (2005) in central California over a three-year period in a variety of electoral settings. Michelson’s experiments included partisans of both parties and divided subjects into treatment groups that received either partisan or nonpartisan messages. Although Michelson found no mobilization effect that could be attributed to message content, these experiments used door-to-door canvassing as the mode of contact and targeted only Latinos, thus leaving open questions about the effects of phone calls.

2. McNulty’s (2005) experiment, conducted explicitly in opposition to a 2002 municipal proposition in San Francisco, targeted “decline-to-state” (unaffiliated) voters but excluded Republicans due to technical limitations.

3. The selection of this electoral context does little to compromise the broad applicability of the experimental results. In fact, the electoral context in which the experiment was conducted is quite typical in the United States. Municipal elections routinely feature overmatched challengers or candidates with significant partisan advantages. Moreover, the impact of a broad range of get-out-the-vote (GOTV) tactics, including phone calls, does not appear to vary systematically with the salience of electoral settings (Green and

Gerber 2004). Still, subsequent experimentation can be advanced to replicate this study in more competitive electoral settings.

4. The stratification procedure proceeded as follows: each voter was assigned a voting profile to correspond with the voter's participation in general elections between 1998 and 2004. A total of 122 voting profiles existed. Within each voting profile (stratum), subjects were randomly assigned to the partisan treatment (10 percent), the nonpartisan treatment (10 percent), or to the control group (80 percent).

5. I am grateful to Ray Strother and to Tom Edmonds for their assistance in crafting the scripts used in this experiment. I rely on their extensive expertise in message development. Both Strother (D) and Edmonds (R) are among the nation's leading political consultants, each with more than four decades of career experience. Both are former presidents of the American Association of Political Consultants. Scripts were developed carefully after extensive consultation and discussion, and they were designed to invoke partisan or nonpartisan cues respectively. The key, active ingredient in the partisan treatment was the explicit inclusion of party labels. Elements in the partisan script were designed to appeal broadly to both Democrats and Republicans on the basis of shared values and beliefs or ideological affinity with their party's candidates and to stress "partisan duty," while the nonpartisan script invoked notions of "civic duty."

6. The appendix provides additional details and confirms balance of past voting behavior across treatment and control groups.

7. Based on volunteer calls conducted in experiments in Berkeley, McNulty (2005) obtained a similar result implying that nonpartisan calls are more effective than partisan ones.

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