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Evaluating a Voter Outreach Initiative

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Key Points

- This article describes an initiative designed to increase voting rates among low-income and ethnic groups in southern and central California communities.
- A rigorous evaluation demonstrated that participation rates could be increased by up to 10% among these groups.
- Using local, well-trained canvassers and making contact during the four weeks preceding the election were some of the more effective practices.

Purpose and Practice of the California Votes Initiative

In 2006, the James Irvine Foundation launched the multiyear California Votes Initiative to improve voter participation among low-income and ethnic communities and increase the attentiveness of policymakers and political candidates to these populations. The initiative was also designed to understand what works in voter mobilization within these communities and to share that knowledge with the civic engagement field in California and across the country.

Irvine engaged nine community-based organizations serving central and southern California to help design and conduct a series of outreach efforts to encourage new and infrequent voters to participate in the electoral process. Organizations employed a variety of outreach strategies, including door-to-door canvassing, phone bank calling, and the distribution of nonpartisan voter infor-

mation materials (Gerber & Green, 2000; Green & Gerber, 2004).

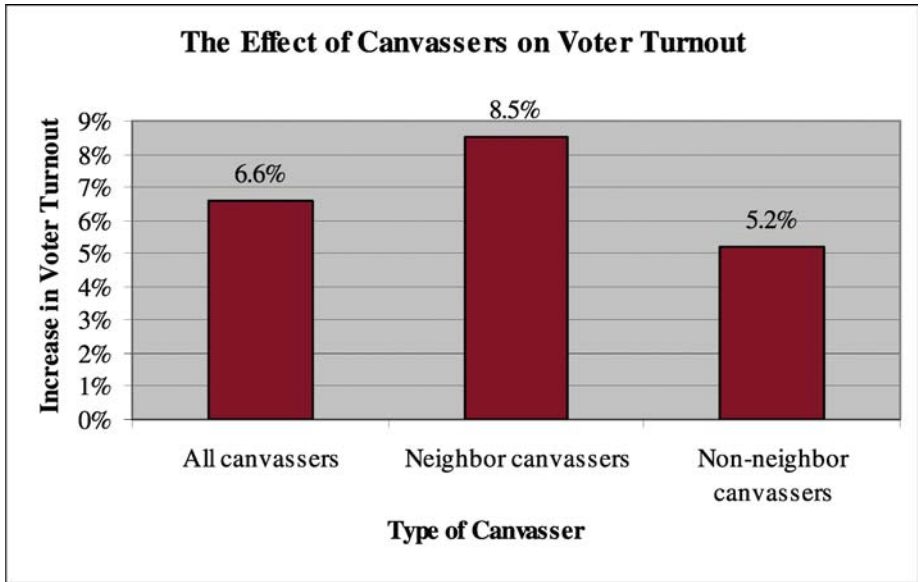
An initiative evaluation team worked closely with the community organizations to embed field experiments into their outreach efforts, comparing turnout among those targeted for contact and those assigned to control groups. The evaluation team consulted with the organizations throughout the initiative to guide the development of their outreach strategies, determine the scope of voters contacted, establish the control group that would not be contacted, provide guidance on data collection and reporting, and observe the outreach operations as they were implemented. After each election cycle, the evaluation team secured data from the county registrars to determine which voters cast a ballot and tabulate the participation among those who had been targeted for contact and those in the control group.

Results and Effective Practices

Recruit Canvassers Close to Home

Effective practice. Canvassers should ideally be drawn from the local community, either residents of the same neighborhood or representatives of a local organization or religious institution. Canvassers sharing such a background with targeted voters are particularly effective at increasing turnout (Michelson, 2003; Shaw, de la Garza & Lee, 2000).

Findings. June and November 2006 mobilization campaigns conducted in South Los An-

FIGURE 1 The effect of canvassers on voter turnout

geles by Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education illustrate the value of using local canvassers. Comparing those in the treatment group to those in the control group, there was a 6.6-percentage-point increase in voting. Examining the effect of contact separately for those canvassing their own neighbors and those canvassing elsewhere revealed that neighbors increased turnout by 8.5 percentage points, while those living outside the neighborhood increased it by 5.2 percentage points (Figure 1). While door-to-door canvassing in general had a powerful effect in this campaign, canvassing by individuals working in their home ZIP codes made the effect significantly greater.

Invest in Canvasser Training

Effective practice. Good canvassing practices can enhance the effectiveness of a campaign. Groups that train to increase canvasser comfort with the script seem to be most effective in their outreach efforts. This training helps ensure that interactions between canvassers and voters are conversational as well as informative (Michelson, García Bedolla, Medina, et al., 2009; Nickerson, 2007).

Findings. The importance of training for a successful phone bank is evidenced by results from

an experiment conducted in four counties for the February 2008 election by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO). In Kern County, NALEO staff trained local affiliates on how to conduct phone bank caller training. In Riverside and San Bernardino counties, NALEO staff traveled to the local affiliates' offices and conducted the caller trainings themselves. In Los Angeles, NALEO's home base, NALEO staff not only conducted the same training as in the other counties but also conducted "refresher" trainings before each day of canvassing and made on-the-spot suggestions to canvassers during phone banking. Overall, NALEO's efforts in February 2008 increased turnout by 8.2 percentage points. But in Los Angeles, where the quality of training was highest, this figure increased to 11.4 percentage points. Effects were smaller in Riverside and San Bernardino counties and the weakest for Kern County.

Work the Final Four Weeks

Effective practice. Going to the field too early can decrease a campaign's effectiveness. Canvassing should not begin more than four weeks before Election Day (Michelson, García Bedolla, & Green, 2007).

Findings. The finding that campaigns starting too early are less effective than those that wait to

TABLE 1 Canvassing Results

Type of personal contact	Increase in turnout
Door-to-door canvassing	9.0%
Door-to-door canvassing, followed by live phone calls	12.9%

contact voters until fairly close to Election Day is illustrated by comparison of June 2006 outreach efforts conducted by Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCAIEJ). CARECEN conducted a voter mobilization campaign for the June 2006 election that began several months before the election. This campaign had an estimated effect of only 0.6 percentage points. In contrast, CCAIEJ organized for the same election but limited its outreach to the two weeks prior to the election for a 33.6-percentage-point effect on turnout. Even recognizing that the organizations were not entirely similar in terms of the voters targeted, the strong differences in impact indicate that timing may have been a factor. For the November 2006 and February 2008 elections, CARECEN did not begin canvassing until closer to Election Day and achieved improved voter mobilization effects.

Make Personal Contact

Effective practice. Campaigns should ideally use face-to-face canvassing, although phone banks can be preferable for turning out widely dispersed or multilingual populations (García Bedolla & Michelson, 2009; Michelson, García Bedolla, & McConnell, 2009).

Findings. The power of door-to-door canvassing is well evidenced by the experience of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO). During the June 2006 campaign, PICO’s affiliates worked to increase voter turnout in various low-propensity communities throughout the state using a variety of indirect methods, such as mailers and leaflets. These efforts were largely ineffective despite including a number of innovations designed to make those indirect methods more personal. For the February 2008 election, PICO affiliates con-

ducted 21 door-to-door experiments that resulted in greater effects on voter turnout. Pooled across sites, the campaigns increased turnout by an average of 9 percentage points (Table 1). A saturation campaign in the city of Winters, where voters not successfully reached at the door were then targeted for live phone calls, increased turnout by 12.9 percentage points. This demonstrates the power of personal contact and also the ability of community organizations with little or no experience in direct get-out-the-vote methods (live phone banks and door-to-door canvassing) to quickly become effective practitioners of these methods.

Prescreen, Personalize, and Conduct Follow-Up Phone Calls

Effective practice. Phone bank calling is enhanced by prescreening lists for working numbers (this increases efficiency and helps maintain canvasser morale) and by making follow-up calls to those who earlier expressed an intention to vote. While many communities can be targeted by English-speaking or bilingual English-Spanish speakers, effective phone bank calling in most Asian American communities requires a multilingual approach (García Bedolla & Michelson, 2009; Michelson, García Bedolla, & McConnell, 2009; Michelson et al. 2007).

Findings. Canvassers in a June 2006 live phone bank by NALEO found it frustrating to call non-working numbers, and results were disappointing. Contact rates varied from a low of 9.2 percent in Fresno County to a high of 12.4 percent in Los Angeles. In response, NALEO began its fall 2006 campaign with a round of calls designed to screen its telephone list for invalid numbers. Canvassers then called the remaining list of working numbers. The result was an overall contact rate more than double that of the previous election, from 20 percent in San Bernardino to 41 percent in Fresno County, suggesting that a preliminary round of calls is an effective and inexpensive way to improve the efficiency of a live phone bank. Phone lists can also be cleaned using a commercial vendor to screen lists of registered voters. This strategy was employed by several California Votes Initiative organizations, including the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC), which

consistently achieved strong contact rates during initiative phone bank campaigns, ranging from 13.6 to 33.8 percent among various national origin groups for the June 2006 election and 26.9 to 39.5 percent for the November 2006 election.

Experiments conducted by the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA), and APALC found that follow-up calls increased the power of phone bank campaigns. SVREP targeted low-propensity Latino voters in Los Angeles using a multistage get-out-the-vote campaign for the November 2006 general election. (Michelson, García Bedolla, & McConnell, 2009). Callers asked voters whether they intended to vote; those who responded affirmatively were contacted a second time (by the same caller in many cases) and reminded to vote the day of or the day before the election. The effect among those contacted was 10.3 percentage points. OCAPICA mobilized voters through a phone campaign in November 2006, achieving a 4.2-percentage-point effect among those reached. APALC operated phone bank campaigns in June 2006 and November 2006 and achieved 2.5- and 3.7-percentage-point effects for those two election cycles. Both Asian American-serving organizations segmented lists of targeted voters by national origin and then assigned the lists to canvassers who called voters on weekday evenings and weekend afternoons.

For the June 2008 election, both OCAPICA and APALC made follow-up phone calls to individuals who had previously indicated that they planned to vote. OCAPICA targeted all of these “yes” voters for a second call, generating a 10.3-percentage-point effect on those contacted at least once (Table 2). APALC targeted a randomly selected sample of “yes” voters in order to allow the evaluation team to disaggregate the effect of each round of calls (Figure 2). The first call increased turnout by 4.0 percentage points among those contacted, while the second call increased turnout an additional 13.2 percentage points, controlling for voter history. These results are comparable to the impact of a high-quality door-to-door canvassing effort and stand out as possibly the

TABLE 2 Follow-up Phone Call Results

Follow-up phone calls (election date)	Increase in turnout
SVREP (November 2006)	10.3%
OCAPICA	
One call (November 2006)	4.2%
With follow-up call (June 2008)	10.3%
APALC	
One call (June 2008)	4.0%
With follow-up call (June 2008)	13.2%

strongest effects for live phone calls ever to be observed in large studies. By comparison, a recent literature review of studies conducted prior to this set found that volunteer phone banks produce, on average, one additional voter for every 38 contacts (Green & Gerber, 2004).

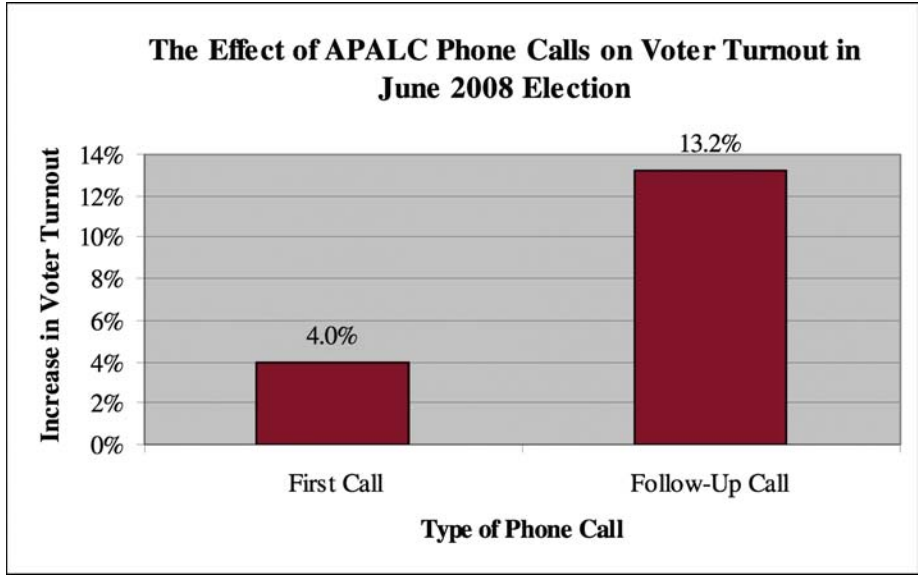
Although Asian Americans constitute a large and growing segment of the population in California, they are generally excluded from get-out-the-vote campaigns because of the organizational challenges of conducting a multilingual campaign. Several experiments conducted as part of the California Votes Initiative demonstrate not only the feasibility of using phone banking to reach out to low-propensity Asian American voters but also that phone calls can move many of those voters to the polls. These findings are also important for groups interested in mobilizing populations, such as Asian Americans, that are not sufficiently concentrated geographically to make door-to-door canvassing feasible.

Key Lessons in Implementation

Getting Started

In considering how to address most effectively the disparities in voting rates within California’s population, Irvine recognized that conducting voter outreach to all the state’s infrequent and new voters would require resources beyond its own. Thus, Irvine determined that a key benefit of its work would be to identify and share insights gleaned from an evaluation of its large though limited outreach so as to inform the voter mobi-

FIGURE 2 The effect of APALC phone calls on voter turnout in the June 2008 election



lization activities undertaken by many other civic organizations.

As the first step in implementation, Irvine developed the initiative’s evaluation plan and identified an evaluation team through a request-for-proposals process. With the evaluation team and plan in place, the Foundation issued a request for proposals inviting organizations to participate in conducting the voter outreach. Irvine sought to support organizations that did the following:

- Demonstrated commitment to nonpartisan voter education and mobilization
- Had a positive track record in the target communities
- Had experience in conducting voter education and mobilization or similar community outreach efforts
- Proposed to utilize outreach strategies that reflect effective practices in nonpartisan voter education and mobilization
- Committed to participate fully in the initiative’s evaluation component

Soon after the initial grants were approved, Irvine scheduled individual meetings with the research team and each grantee organization. These initial meetings did the following:

- Provided an opportunity for everyone involved to develop a shared understanding and expectations for working together on the project
- Enhanced the Foundation’s understanding of which grantees came to the project with substantial experience in working with evaluators and which had none
- Allowed grantees to express hesitations and questions regarding the evaluation process
- Revealed organizations’ capacity-building needs related to, for example, limited experience in managing large quantities of data and a lack of particular types of technological infrastructure

During these initial meetings, some grantees expressed concerns about the extent to which the data on the outcomes of their outreach efforts would be used as criteria for future grants from Irvine. Similarly, some wondered whether the published reports on the initiative’s outcomes might influence their prospects for grants from other foundations. The Foundation assured grantees that it would consider multiple criteria in determining whether to recommend continued funding after the initial 18-month grants. Such criteria included the outcomes of the voter outreach as well as the extent of grantee efforts, their adherence to a nonpartisan approach, their

cooperation with the evaluation process, and their adaptation of outreach approaches according to the evaluation findings, among other factors. Regarding the publication of results, Irvine offered to cite all grantee results anonymously. By the time of publication, however, all grantees expressed comfort with identifying their organizations by name.

In retrospect, the outreach organizations may have been further helped by having a more specific idea of the time required to participate in the evaluation. The Foundation had been hopeful that the evaluation would cause limited disruption to grantee outreach plans, but in reality, the data collection, plus communications and coordination with the evaluation team, placed demands on project leaders that, in some cases, surpassed initial expectations of the Foundation and grantees.

Evaluation Design and Preparation

The initiative's evaluation was constructed with an experimental design; that is, the researchers would examine voter participation levels within a set of voters targeted for outreach and compare those participation levels with a control group of similar voters. This approach allows for a robust analysis of the impact of the voter outreach efforts.

While all involved understood that the evaluation would utilize an experimental design, a number of variables remained to be determined once the evaluation process was under way. Such variables included the extent of the population covered and how the control groups would be determined.

In some instances, it became apparent that the best way to construct a control group from the evaluation team's perspective was problematic from the perspective of a particular outreach organization. For example, when the evaluation team suggested randomly selecting congregations within a geographic region that would be targeted for voter outreach, the outreach organizations were concerned that they would encounter problems with some local pastors through that approach, as some of the pastors had expressed earlier a particular interest in participating in the project. Ultimately, the evaluation design was

negotiated between the community organizations and the evaluators, with Irvine staff engaging in the discussion when helpful. In general, the Foundation aimed to resolve these issues with deference to the outreach groups' organizational needs and preferences while maintaining the integrity of an experimental design.

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As the voter outreach and accompanying data collection got under way, Irvine realized the importance of absolute clarity with regard to data collection processes and requirements. All aspects of the data collection process — including the timing of recording data, the importance of standard notations, and the need for comprehensive and clear records — needed to be communicated in writing and shared with all those involved. Voter outreach campaigns are characterized by the involvement of numerous staff and volunteers, so thorough training of all involved and clear communications about data collection are especially important to the success of the evaluation component. Irvine found that effective approaches in this arena include the following:

- Communicate to participants the value of the evaluation for their organizations and the broader field
- Provide grantees with clear, simple instructions regarding data collection
- Share ideas for training staff and volunteers on data collection
- Communicate the importance of regular supervision of those collecting the data
- Check data reports early and offer constructive feedback

Value of a Multiyear Evaluation

The California Votes Initiative covered outreach conducted prior to five California elections: June 2006, November 2006, February 2008, June 2008, and November 2008. (One organization also conducted outreach prior to a municipal election in March 2007.) This work over multiple elections allowed all involved — the grantees, evaluation team, and Irvine staff — to learn from the evaluation process in the earlier stages and make improvements in later cycles. Improvements were achieved in the consistency of data collection, the quality of communications between grantees and the evaluation team, the sharing of information and advice among grantees, and other aspects. Perhaps most important, the span of multiple election cycles allowed the evaluation team to test and repeatedly refine over time various hypotheses about effective voter outreach approaches.

Many of the grantees have taken the time to provide valuable technical assistance to their colleagues. These connections are expected to endure beyond completion of the California Votes Initiative

Emerging Evaluation Questions

As the initiative got under way, several new questions about these voter outreach efforts emerged. In the later election cycles of the initiative, researchers sought to explore more deeply, for example, the effectiveness of repeated contacts, differences resulting from the kind of information provided in the outreach contacts, and the impact of campaign management and training.

With regard to campaign management and training, initial research findings had shown dissimilar results for outreach efforts that were seemingly similar in terms of the kind of organization conducting the outreach and the population targeted. This led the researchers to conclude that it would

be helpful to have the opportunity to view more closely and regularly the voter outreach operations. The researchers suggested that a set of student observers might help uncover qualitative information about the features of effective outreach campaigns. Understanding that the presence of student observers could seem somewhat burdensome to the organizations, Irvine and the research team introduced this new aspect of the evaluation through the following approach:

- The research team sought to select graduate students who had experience working with community organizations and who had multilingual capacity, enabling them to understand conversations with a range of voters.
- Students were introduced to the campaign staff through in-person meetings prior to their observations.
- The community organizations selected the dates on which the student observers would be present.
- The community organizations were encouraged to share feedback on their experience with Irvine and/or the research team.

In addition, midway into the evaluation, Irvine realized that it would be valuable to understand more clearly the kinds of costs involved in changing voter participation rates and that other audiences would be interested in this information as well. Grantees sought to be cooperative with this additional midcourse request for specific cost information, yet their differing approaches to tracking costs by category meant that exact comparisons across organizations were infeasible.

Legal Training and Support

From its outset, the California Votes Initiative included an annual grantee training on legal issues and the year-round availability of the Foundation's legal counsel for individual grantee questions concerning the implementation of their nonpartisan outreach campaigns. The annual legal training served as a valuable reminder to organizational leaders and also informed new staff about important parameters of their work. Grantees used the individualized legal counsel to build their understanding on topics such as how to host a nonpar-

tisan candidate forum, suitable language for voter outreach scripts, and how best to respond to voters' questions about specific ballot initiatives. Both Foundation staff and the grantees appreciated having access to this service.

Legacy of a Learning Community

While many of the interactions among the research team, Irvine, and the grantees occurred in the context of the outreach activities of individual organizations, the initiative also included annual convenings and a listserv through which the organizations could consult with one another and share ideas and experiences. Increasingly, the organizations sought out one another to learn from others' approaches in a variety of facets of the work. As a group, they came to understand which of their colleagues had experience operating a successful phone bank, which had been able to recruit and train numerous volunteers to conduct door-to-door canvassing, which had experience operating software to develop detailed walk lists, and more. Many of the grantees have taken the time to provide valuable technical assistance to their colleagues. These connections are expected to endure beyond completion of the California Votes Initiative, thereby strengthening the capacity of organizations in the civic engagement field and the effectiveness of their work.

Conclusion

The California Votes Initiative experience generated evidence regarding effective practices for increasing turnout among low-propensity voters in ethnic communities. Experiments conducted under the auspices of the initiative have shown that these communities, with perhaps the exception of "habitual nonvoters," can be persuaded to participate with relative ease — through a brief home visit or a live phone call. Many of those mobilized in one election may then be likely to participate in subsequent elections, even without further contact. As more organizations adopt these tactics to increase turnout in their communities and as political campaigns reach out more deliberately to these populations, we make progress toward an electorate that more closely reflects the diversity of the full population.

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APPENDIX A To Implement the California Votes Initiative, Irvine Engaged the Following Community Organizations

Outreach organizations	Geographic outreach areas
Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC)	Los Angeles County
California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG)	Los Angeles County
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ)	Riverside and San Bernardino counties
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)	Los Angeles County
National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO)	Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties
Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA)	Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties
Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO)	San Joaquin Valley; Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties
Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP)	Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties
Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE)	Los Angeles County

The California Votes Initiative was evaluated by a research team led by the following individuals:

- Melissa R. Michelson, California State University, East Bay
- Lisa García Bedolla, University of California, Berkeley
- Donald P. Green, Yale University