

### Looking Beyond Election Day: Voter Mobilization Experiments and Pre-Election Day Voting

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The literature on voter mobilization is the most developed field experiments literature and the literature showing the most divergence from current trends in politics. The central concern in GOTV field experiments has been how to get voters to the polling place on Election Day. Over the last 12 years, a variety of impressive experiments have investigated the effect of campaign tactics, political messages, and psychological mechanisms to get voters to overcome the costs of going to the polling place on Election Day.

During roughly the same period, there has been a revolution in the way Americans vote. In the 2008 and 2010 General Elections almost one-third of all ballots were cast without going to the polls on Election Day (Early Voting Information Center 2011). Instead, voters cast ballots long before "Election Day" by going to an early voting center or sending a ballot by mail. These changes in the way Americans vote have created a sizable deficit in the GOTV field experiments literature. Whether we measure the importance of pre-Election Day voting by the share of ballots (approximately 30% in 2008 & 2010) or the 32 states that allow it (National Council on State Legislatures 2011), it is quite clear that the attention to pre-Election Day voting in the current GOTV field experiments literature falls woefully short of representing what is happening in American politics. For example, I could find only one experiment on voting by mail Green & Gerber's (2008) review of the GOTV field experiments literature, one experiment on early in-person voting in Morton & Willams's (2010) review of the experimental method in political science, and no references to pre-Election Day voting in the forthcoming Cambridge Handbook on Experimental Political Science (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski and Lupia Forthcoming).

The current GOTV field experiments literature is essentially a search for what makes voters overcome the cost of going to the polls on Election Day. This narrow focus is somewhat understandable, since the process of casting a ballot was a constant for most of the 20th Century following the adoption of the secret ballot.

Pre-Election Day allows new research on variation in the cost, timing, and location of voting. Early in-person voting allows voters to choose when it is convenient to vote over a period of days or weeks and where it is convenient for them to vote. These choices appear to reduce the direct costs and opportunity costs associated with going to a particular polling place during particular hours on a particular Tuesday. For voters who cast their ballot by mail, the voting process is more significantly transformed: "Election Day" is any time day or night over a period of weeks and "polling places" are literally anywhere the voter can fill in the ballot. As a result, the direct costs and opportunity costs of casting a ballot are lower, the social benefits altered (e.g. showing up at the neighborhood polling isn't observed by the neighbors), and vote choices are

an open-book test (plus open-browser, open-newspaper, open-conversation with friends, etc).

These fundamental transformations in the voting process present challenges and opportunities to study the behavioral, psychological, and institutional aspects of voting:

Do the (hypothesized) lower cost of pre-Election Day voting increase turnout? Or is the cost of acquiring information about these new modes of voting a barrier to use, particularly for low propensity voters? What happens if civic and political organizations educate and recruit voters to use the new modes of voting?

What mobilization tactics are the most successful at increasing participation for voting by mail? For early in person voting? Do the same social psychological mechanisms that increase turnout on Election Day work in pre-Election Day voting?

Which mode offers the greatest opportunities for civic groups, political organizations, and/or election officials to increase voting participation? Do voters make separate decisions about whether to vote using each mode or just make one decision despite multiple opportunities? Should civic and political organizations attempt to mobilize voters for different modes as they arise sequentially (i.e. by mail, then early in person, and finally Election Day) or is this a waste of money?

What is the effect of changing voting institutions? How does allowing pre-Election Day voting - especially providing choice among different modes of voting - affect voting behavior? While it is not possible to randomly assign voting laws to jurisdictions, we can get some leverage on the impact of voting reforms by randomly assigning treatments that vary the information provided about voting alternatives.

What happens when jurisdictions conduct elections entirely by mail? Traditional Get-Out-The-Vote is replaced by Get-The-Vote-In-The-Mailbox-On-Time-And-Signed. How do voters learn to correctly use new methods of voting? How can election officials and/or campaigns motivate voters to overcome different barriers from different modes of voting?

The questions above have motivated the research that I (and invaluable co-authors) have done in the last couple of years using more than a dozen large scale

field experiments about voting by mail and early in person voting. Others have begun to conduct field experiments about pre-Election Day voting as well (e.g. Arceneaux, Kousser, and Mullin 2011; Monroe and Sylvester 2011). The results of these experiments provide valuable insight about these modes of voting and voting behavior in general. However, we have just begun to learn from applying the experimental method to the sweeping changes in pre-Election Day voting.

The process of voting is changing rapidly in the United States, and - as the Spanish and German vote by mail campaigns posters in my office attest - in many other countries as well. These changes are a challenge and an opportunity to study the behavioral, psychological, and institutional aspects of voting. A decade ago, field experiments fundamentally changed the study of voting. Now, the far-reaching changes in voting call for a shift in the focus of GOTV field experiments so that we can understand why and how tomorrow's voters will decide to vote.

#### References

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