

When Reports Depress Rather Than Inspire: A Field Experiment using Age Cohorts as Reference Groups

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Abstract: A large field experiment sent mail to randomly selected low turnout propensity, young, Latino voters in Colorado during the 2008 Presidential election. One treatment reported that 90% of young Latinos intended to vote in the election. A second treatment added the fact that only 20% of young Latinos actually voted in 2006. A third treatment provided the additional fact that 40% of older Latinos voted in 2006. Compared to the control group, the treatment reporting low levels of prior turnout decreased participation in the 2008 election. This unintended consequence of the campaign provides evidence of the effectiveness of descriptive social norms for purposes of electoral mobilization.

Forthcoming in the *Journal of Political Marketing*

Acknowledgments: The authors are deeply indebted to Voto Latino for their active participation in the experiment. The authors would also like to thank Costas Panagopoulos and anonymous reviewers for comments.

Latinos are one of the fastest growing segments of the voting age population in the United States. However, turnout rates among eligible Latinos are lower than turnout rates among Anglos even after controlling for factors such as age and income. Latinos are viewed as a key swing electorate by both political parties, so a key question facing political campaigns and civic organizations dedicated to expanding the pool of voters is how best to mobilize this increasingly important portion of the electorate. This paper reports the effect of mail that was intended to encourage voting among young Latino voters by reporting the disjuncture between stated intention to vote and past rates of voter turnout.

Latinos are often viewed by political parties as a constituency requiring outreach arms and messaging distinct from the generic appeals aimed at the electorate as a whole. Part of this concern is due to the increased likelihood of English-only volunteers encountering language barriers and part of it is the perception from campaigns that Latino voters have different policy priorities than the general electorate (e.g., immigration). However in a review of the literature, Michelson and Nickerson find no evidence that Latinos respond differently to blandishments to vote than Anglo populations (Michelson and Nickerson 2011; Michelson, García Bedolla and Green 2007, 2008, 2009). There exists evidence that particular ethnic based appeals may be more effective than generic appeals (see Michelson 2003; Barreto and Nuño 2011; Ramirez 2005), but just as young people are equally responsive to contact from campaigns as older people (Nickerson 2006) Latinos are merely harder to contact by campaigns rather than less responsive. So tactics that have proven effective on the general electorate are likely to be effective in mobilizing Latinos.

One tactic that has proven especially effective at mobilizing voters is mail aimed at increasing social accountability. While mail is generally an ineffective means of increasing voter turnout (see Green, Aronow, and McGrath 2010), mail reporting a person's voter turnout history or the behavior of neighbors increases turnout much more than typical pieces of mail (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) across a range of elections (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2010). While cost-effective means of voter turnout are certainly enticing, many civic organizations are wary of sending personalized information about turnout for fear of generating backlash. While simply thanking people for voting provides a softer means of increasing turnout (Panagopoulos 2010, 2011), Enos (2010) finds that reporting voter turnout for aggregated ethnically distinct neighborhood units can also increase turnout. The experiment conducted by Voto Latino in Colorado during the 2008 Presidential election among young registered Latinos aimed to provide a similar ethnically based social accountability appeal at the aggregate level.

One danger of targeting low turnout populations with such messages is that organizations run the risk of sending a message that "people like me don't vote." Mobilization messages triggering descriptive social norms of high turnout have been found to increase turnout more than mobilization messages priming social norms of low turnout (Gerber and Rogers 2009). Reporting that only 20% of Latino voters under the age of 35 voted in 2006, may signal to subjects that voter turnout is not required or expected and depress turnout. Descriptive social norms may explain why one of the treatments sent by Voto Latino decreased turnout. However, this depressing effect seems to be reduced by providing a role model cohort of older Latinos with turnout twice as

high as young Latinos. Thus, the experiment described in the next section provides further evidence of the importance of descriptive social norms in voter mobilization.

Experimental Design and Context

The experiment was conducted in Colorado during the 2008 Presidential election by Voto Latino, a civic organization dedicated to increasing political engagement among young Latinos. While lacking a deep national grassroots network, Voto Latino was co-founded by Actress Rosario Dawson, who was prominently displayed on all Voto Latino materials in order to grab the attention of targeted voters. The program officer charged with mobilizing voters wanted to harness social accountability to enhance the effectiveness of mail sent, but did not want to risk backlash from mailing personal details that most people consider private (i.e., turnout history). In the interest of developing best practices for mobilizing their constituents, the organization was eager to cooperate on an experiment and agreed to allow the publication of results unconditionally (Nickerson 2011).

The population targeted for the mailing was registered young Latinos between the ages of 18 and 34, residing in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Jefferson, Pueblo, or Weld counties. In order to reach out to the groups in greatest need of mobilization, they limited this targeted universe to people modeled as having a very low turnout propensity. Households wherein at least one person fit these criteria were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions: 1) a control group that received no postcard (n=20,000 households containing 23,512 individuals); 2) receive a postcard with a baseline message informing the recipient that 90% of all registered Latinos planned to vote in 2008

(n=6,666 households containing 8,839 individuals); 3) receiving a postcard with the with the baseline message plus the information that only 20% of young Latinos voted in 2006 (n=6,667 households containing 7,823 individuals); and, 4) receiving a postcard with the baseline message plus the information that only 20% of young Latinos voted in 2006 whereas 44% of older Latinos did (n=6,667 households containing 7,858 individuals). The postcards arrived at households one to four days before Election Day (see Appendix for the postcards)¹.

The experiment was designed to provide a less upsetting version of shame mobilization treatments (e.g., Panagopoulos 2010). To that end, the baseline treatment condition had the information that while 90% of young Latinos intended to vote in this election, only 20% did in the 2006 election. The 44% of older Latinos treatment was layered on top of the young Latinos fact in order to spark intergenerational competition. Since competition cannot be evoked without direct comparison of the two age cohorts a treatment including only the information about older Latino voters was not included.²

Random assignment assures that in expectation the only difference between treatment and control conditions is the mail sent by Voto Latino. This comparability means that any differences in voter turnout can be attributed to the mail rather than other causes. The observed covariate balance presented in Table 1 offers evidence that the randomization did not go awry. The observed covariate balance also suggests that the analysis requires no adjustments to properly interpret.

¹ A week earlier, a general GOTV mailer was also sent to randomly selected households. The front of the mailer informed people that they could vote early, vote by mail, or vote on Election Day. The back of the mailer contained pictures of three young Latinos and quoted them about why they decided to vote. This mailer showed no effect on turnout and no interactions with the mail reported here (results by request).

² In retrospect, a cleaner test of descriptive social norms would have presented the 44% of older Latinos voted information by itself. However, given the ability to retroactively change the experiment, we would not have applied a treatment that decreased turnout in the first place.

Results

Presidential elections pose a stiff challenge to civic organizations looking to mobilize voters. The high salience of the election and the large number of competing mobilization efforts mean that most people interested in the election will be voting (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009). Targeting low propensity voters (i.e., people who have not voted in past elections) is also challenging since these individuals may be wholly uninterested in the election or perhaps have even moved. As a result, organizations should expect small effects from get out the vote campaigns conducted during Presidential election because the pool of people who are actually mobilizable is relative small (but see Matland and Murray 2010 for an example of a successful mobilization in a non-battleground state).

The organization successfully targeted low propensity voters as evidenced by the fact that only 22% of the control group voted in the election (Table 2, row “Control”). However, looking across the three treatments it appears that the net effect of any piece of mail was to reduce overall rates of voter turnout by -0.7 percentage points. This effect does not quite cross traditional thresholds for statistical significance ($p < 0.09$), but warrants investigation as to which treatment is driving down rates of participation.

The baseline piece of mail that reported “90% of Latinos planned to participate in the historic election” was not the culprit. Voters in households receiving this piece of mail were only 0.3 percentage points less likely to vote than the control group (Table 2, row “Baseline”). While disappointing the null finding is not surprising given the

electoral setting and past performance of mail aimed at increasing turnout (Gerber, Green, and Green 2003).

The mail reporting that only 20% of young Latinos voted in 2006 is the primary cause of the negative effect. Only 21.3% of subjects receiving this mail voted (see Table 2, row “Young”). Thus, the effect of the mail reporting aggregated past levels of turnout was to *decrease* turnout by 1.2 percentage points, an effect size that crosses traditional thresholds for statistical significance ($p < 0.03$). To provide a sense on the magnitude of this effect, leaflets have been found to *increase* turnout by 1.2 percentage points in congressional elections (Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006), so this mail constitutes the inverse a typical turnout effect from leaflets. The fact that this effect was generated in the midst of a hotly contested Presidential election where Latinos were actively mobilized by both sides is an impressive – albeit unintended and unfortunate – feat.

The goal of the third treatment condition was to generate a sense of inter-generational competition or provide a role model effect. There is some evidence that this effort succeeded. While this treatment contained all the information in the “young” treatment condition it also provided a statistic that 40% of older Latinos voted in 2006, which may explain why the decrease in turnout from this treatment was only 0.5 percentage points (see Table 2, row “Young and Old”). This estimate is statistically indistinguishable from both 0 and 1.2 percentage points, but it does suggest that providing a role model may be helpful in establishing positive descriptive social norms around turnout. In this case, it may have ameliorated the negative consequences of priming subjects with low prior turnout for their age and ethnic groups.³

³ Adding covariates to the analysis does not alter estimated coefficients at all and trivially tightens standard errors.

One might expect that the mail might be more effective for women than men given the prominence of Rosario Dawson as a role model on the mail, but no heterogeneity was detected. Similarly, the low turnout social norm implied by the mail may have interacted with subjects' underlying propensity to vote, but no heterogeneity in response to treatment was detected here either. The only moderating variable of note found by researchers was age.⁴ As Table 3 makes clear, the demobilization effect detected is confined almost entirely to voters over the age of 25. Estimated treatment effects for all three conditions were indistinguishable from 0 among Latinos under the age of 25 (see Table 3, column "Under 25"). In contrast, both the "young" and the "role model" treatment decreased turnout by 2.6 and 1.7 percentage points respectively among Latinos between the ages of 25 and 35 (see Table 3, column "25 and Over"). The differences in treatment effects between younger and older Latinos are statistically significant and suggest that older subjects were most responsive to the treatment message. Whether this is due to psychological changes in the cohorts or the fact that voters over the age of 25 are more residentially stable and therefore likely to receive the mail is unknown.

Conclusion

The results from this experiment confirm the importance of descriptive social norms in voter mobilization. Adding the fact that only 20% of young Latinos voted in 2006 caused a one percentage point decrease in turnout. The fact that this demobilization effect occurred in a Presidential election simply highlights the effect descriptive social norms can have on mobilization.

⁴ Age was the third moderating variable tested after gender and vote propensity.

The hint in the data that providing the additional fact that 40% of older Latinos voted decreased the magnitude of the effect is intriguing. The most likely explanation is that the report of higher turnout provided a higher anchor for the descriptive social norm. If true, one would suspect that the effect would have been stronger had the reported rate been above 50%, since 40% conveys that the majority of older Latinos do not vote. However, it is an intriguing second possibility is that the two facts combined generated a role model effect (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007) that conveyed the message “young people may not vote, but older folks do and it is an expected behavior”. Role model effects are usually viewed as involving particular people rather than aggregates, but the inter-generational dynamic of descriptive social norms is worth exploring.

The motivation for the experiment was to soften the relatively confrontational social accountability mail sent by Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) in order to avoid backlash. Messages like “Thank you for voting” (Panagopoulos 2011) is one of the very few accountability oriented messages with demonstrated effectiveness. While the treatments tested in the experiment reported here failed, social accountability remains a potent psychological concept to tap for purposes of mobilizing pro-social behavior.

It should be noted that this experiment was one of many activities that Voto Latino undertook in the 2008 election. The willingness of Voto Latino to try new mobilization tactics and rigorously evaluate their effectiveness should be applauded rather than taken as a sign of organizational weakness. Advances in the field of voter mobilization cannot take place without null findings and even negative findings. By agreeing to partner with academics and push the envelope tactically, Voto Latino helped engage their constituents in the long run.

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Table 1: Observed Covariate Balance Across Treatment Conditions

Condition	Female	Age	Democrat	Household Size	Voted 2006	Voted 2004	Ever Voted
Control	53%	24	40%	1.4	14%	26%	33%
Baseline	53%	24	42%	1.4	15%	26%	33%
Young	53%	24	41%	1.4	14%	26%	33%
Young and Old	52%	24	40%	1.4	15%	26%	33%

Table 2: Effects of Mail on Turnout Among Young Latinos

Condition	N	Turnout	Effect	p-value
Control	27,605	22.5%		
Baseline	7,839	22.2%	-0.3% (0.005)	0.62
Young	7,823	21.3%	-1.2% (0.005)	0.03
Young and Old	7,858	21.9%	-0.5% (0.005)	0.34

Effects are calculated by subtracting turnout in the control group from the turnout in the condition.

Standard errors are clustered by household.

Reported p-values are two-tailed.

Table 3: Treatment Effects by Age Cohort

Condition	Under 25	25 and Over	Difference
Baseline	-0.2 (0.7)	-0.3 (0.9)	-0.1 (1.1)
Young	-0.2 (0.7)	-2.6 (0.9)	-2.4 (1.1)
Young and Old	+0.4 (0.7)	-1.7 (0.9)	-2.2 (1.1)

Numbers in parentheses report standard errors clustered on household.

Baseline rate of turnout is 19.0% for the under 25 sample and 27.6% in the over 25 sample.

Appendix
Mail Piece – Front



PHOTO BY
SHERYL NIELDS

Paid for and authorized by Voto Latino.

REPRESENT AND VOTE!
Election Day is November 4th

Polls are open from 7AM to 7PM

For your polling location visit

www.justvotecolorado.org

If you are a first time voter or have not voted in recent elections, you will need to provide valid identification to vote. For more information please visit www.justvotecolorado.org

QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS AT THE POLLS?
CALL 1866-OUR VOTE (1866-687-8683)

votoLatino
It's your country...represent!

Voto Latino is a 501c3 nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to engage, inform and motivate the new generation of voters.

Mail Piece – Back – Baseline Message



7600 Wisconsin Ave Suite 200
Bethesda MD, 20814

I cofounded Voto Latino in 2004 because I saw a need to encourage young Latinos to get involved in the civic process.

90% of all registered Latinos polled intend to vote this election. Be part of this historic movement!

It's your country so represent by getting out and voting!

Together we can represent and be heard!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rosario Dawson".

Mail Piece – Youth Turnout Message



7600 Wisconsin Ave Suite 200
Bethesda MD, 20814

I cofounded Voto Latino in 2004 because I saw a need to encourage young Latinos to get involved in the civic process.

Only 20% of registered young Latinos voted in 2006.

90% of all registered Latinos polled intend to vote this election. Be part of this historic movement!

It's your country so represent by getting out and voting!

Together we can represent and be heard!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rosario Dawson".

Mail Piece – Back – Youth and Older Turnout Message



7600 Wisconsin Ave Suite 200
Bethesda MD, 20814

I cofounded Voto Latino in 2004 because I saw a need to encourage young Latinos to get involved in the civic process.

Only 20% of registered young Latinos voted in 2006.

In comparison 44% of older registered Latinos voted in 2006.

90% of all registered Latinos polled intend to vote this election. Be part of this historic movement!

It's your country so represent by getting out and voting!

Together we can represent and be heard!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Roberto Dawson".