

Quality Is Job One: Professional and Volunteer Voter Mobilization Calls

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Campaigns rely upon both paid and volunteer phone calls to mobilize voters. Past field experiments show calls from volunteers to increase turnout and paid calls to be wholly ineffective. This article argues that the quality of phone calls rather than the presence or absence of a payroll explains this regularity. Three aspects of quality are considered: monitoring pace and interactivity, timing, and message. A fully randomized field experiment with over 100,000 subjects comparing professional and volunteer phone banks simultaneously was conducted during the 2002 congressional elections to test this hypothesis. The experiment discovers precisely the opposite relationship of prior research: effective professional phone banks and inefficient volunteer phone calls. The experiment also finds substantial temporal decay. The specific messages appear less important than tone or timing. The implications for the role of campaign consultants, replacing social capital, voter psychology, and the capacities of civic organizations are discussed.

During the 2004 presidential election, millions of phone calls were made to voters in swing states by both presidential campaigns (Polman 2004). In the 96 hours leading up to Election Day, both parties claimed to make nearly 400,000 phone contacts each day nationwide to ensure supporters turned up to vote on Election Day (Balz and Edsall 2004). A major difference between the Bush and Kerry campaigns during this final push was the source of the labor for these calls. The Bush campaign drew upon an army of 85,000 in-state volunteers to make the bulk of its carefully coordinated Get Out The Vote (GOTV) calls in Ohio (Farhi and Grimaldi 2004). In contrast, Kerry was forced to rely upon 527's, such as America Coming Together who brought in paid activists from outside states to work in Ohio (Carlisle 2004), unsupervised Democratic volunteers from around the country, and paid phone canvassers to make up the difference in available labor power. With an extremely close election in a number of states, such strategic decisions can be consequential.

Past field experiments would suggest that Bush pursued the optimal strategy and Kerry was left at a disadvantage. Volunteer phone banks have been shown to be extremely good at mobilizing voters in both parti-

san (Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006) and nonpartisan settings (Nickerson 2006a). In contrast, professional phone banks have proven no efficacy whatsoever (Gerber and Green 2000a, 2001, 2005; McNulty 2005). If the results from past experiments are applicable, the 1.9 million calls by Bush volunteers during the last few days of the campaign in Ohio generated 57,000 votes. If the Republican targeting was accurate and prior experimental results held, the volunteer phone GOTV tactic accounted for more than one-third of the 130,000 vote margin of victory in Ohio.

However, the existing literature on the effectiveness of phone calls at increasing voter turnout suffers from two primary defects. First, there is no good theory as to why volunteers effectively move voters to the polls while professional phone banks are a waste of money. To the extent that an explanation is provided, it is that volunteers are able to make an organic connection with voters in a manner impossible for professional callers. Given the presumed advantage of professional callers with regard to talent, training, and experience, this finding is somewhat surprising.

The second defect of the existing literature is that volunteer and professional phone banks have not been tested

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simultaneously on identical populations. Each of the separate experiments conducted in the past are unbiased, but in order to compare the magnitude of the treatment effects, one would need to assume constancy across time, place, electoral setting, and subject population. Far more satisfying would be an experiment where a single pool of subjects is randomly assigned to receive professional or volunteer phone calls, thereby obviating any concerns about context when comparing mobilization strategies.

This article corrects both problems in the existing literature while advancing the argument that it is the quality of the phone call that determines effectiveness rather than the presence or absence of a payroll. Three particular attributes of high-quality phone calls are analyzed: delivery, timing, and content. A conversational tone and pace is important when delivering blandishments to vote. The reason that volunteer phone banks have proven effective is because the callers care and take the time to connect with the voter. In contrast, professional callers have an incentive to finish the call as quickly as possible and move on without regard to the voter on the other end of the line. By altering these incentives, one could mobilize voters successfully using professional callers.

Similarly, it is reasonable to believe that entreaties to vote are increasingly effective as Election Day nears. The voter mobilization literature has been largely silent on when one should contact voters to maximize the boost in turnout, instead painting a static picture of mobilization. Well-organized campaigns move into the field many months prior to an election. Knowing when to shift the emphasis from persuasion to turnout would be valuable information for political campaigns at all levels.

Finally, high-quality calls should use well thought out and tested scripts to maximize resonance with voters. Conducting focus groups and testing messages through surveys is expensive and time consuming, but should result in more persuasive messages that increase voter turnout. Thus, the argument presented is that payment is irrelevant and any calling campaign can be effective if it is high quality.

To demonstrate that quality is not inherently tied to being paid or not, a field experiment randomly assigned over 100,000 registered voters to one of four conditions: control, called by the professional phone bank, called by the volunteer phone bank, and called by both phone banks. The timing of the calls and the scripts used were also randomized. In keeping with the principle of maximum difference, the professional phone bank was paid a premium and carefully monitored to engage potential voters in a conversational way, while the cooperating volunteer phone bank was under a great deal of pressure to make as many calls as possible and adhere to a script.

That is, the professionals behaved like volunteers and vice versa. This design isolates the issue of pay in the effectiveness of a phone-based GOTV campaign. While I find that improving the quality of delivery and timing boosts the effectiveness of phone calls, it does not appear that script wording has much effect.

The article begins by presenting hypotheses and describing the experimental protocol, context, and actors. The following section lays out the method for analysis and presents the results. The article concludes by discussing cost-effectiveness and implications for theories of social capital, principal/agent models of elections, the role of political consultants in campaigns, and political psychology.

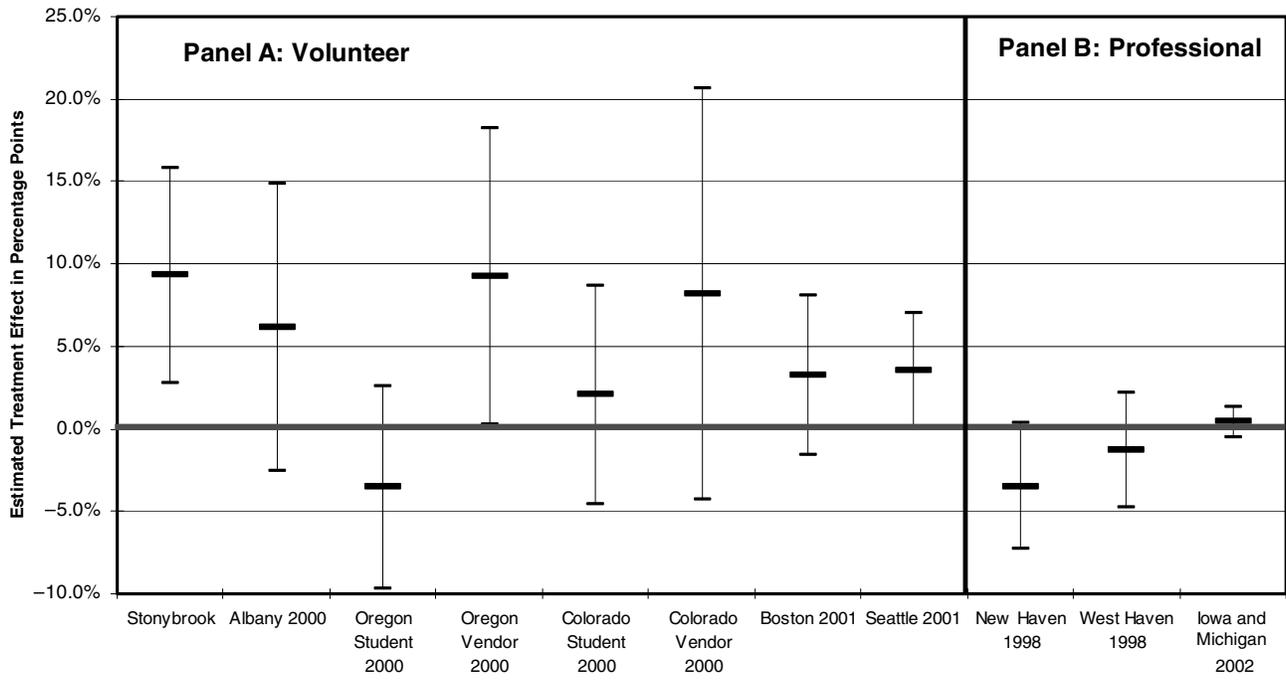
Hypotheses

The first wave of large-scale voter mobilization experiments pronounced telephones ineffective at moving voters to the polls (Gerber and Green 2000a, 2001). However, subsequent experiments uncovered substantively and statistically significant increases in turnout resulting from calling campaigns (Nickerson 2006a; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006). The most obvious difference between the two sets of experiments is that the former were conducted by professional phone banks and the latter were volunteer phone efforts. Figure 1 depicts this empirical regularity with volunteer phone banks in Panel A and professional phone banks in Panel B.

Theoretical explanations have not been offered for this finding, but constructing a plausible narrative is not difficult. Workers in professional call centers are given instructions to complete as many calls as possible and to complete hundreds of calls over the course of a shift with the assistance of automated dialers. Call centers are typically paid by the completed phone call in voter mobilization. That is, call centers only receive payment once the entire script with the intended recipient has been terminated. Hang-ups and messages left are typically not compensated. Thus, callers are given an incentive to read through the script rapidly, but little incentive to engage the voter on the other end of the line. In contrast, calls soliciting donations and sales are paid a commission for each dollar donated or sold, which gives callers a strong incentive to really engage and persuade the potential customer. Constructing a similar incentive for GOTV efforts is not possible, so professional campaigns are likely to fail.

Professional Null Hypothesis: The incentive structure makes professional GOTV calls only marginally effective.

FIGURE 1 Results from Prior Phone GOTV Field Experiments with 95% Confidence Intervals



In contrast, volunteers care about the substance behind the calls and want to do a good job. Leisure time could be spent on a wide variety of enjoyable activities, but the volunteer opted to spend resting hours on phone calls encouraging strangers to vote. The activity is unnatural and a little uncomfortable for most volunteers. Engaging voters in casual conversation makes the process more palatable and reminds the volunteer of the overall purpose of the campaign. Thus, conversations with volunteers appear genuine and organic to voters and are maximally effective.

Volunteer Null Hypothesis: The type of committed person who volunteers to make calls will be effective at mobilizing voters.

On the other hand, there is a curious aspect to the fact that volunteers have outperformed professionals. Professionals are better trained and possess more experience than volunteers in speaking to strangers over the phone. Furthermore, campaigns rarely turn away volunteer labor whereas call centers winnow through applications and fire ineffective employees, so the professional talent pool should be superior to the volunteer talent base. Intuitively, it should be possible to harness the higher quality labor supply to mobilize voters. That is, the difference in performance between professionals and volunteers is not

constitutive of the source of labor but is a function of the quality of the conversations.

Quality control for professional phone banks entails making the calls sound conversational and from a concerned peer. The scripts provided should be interactive, ask questions, and identify places for short pauses. While the incentive structure cannot be radically changed, organizations hiring call centers can carefully monitor calls for pace and tone.

Professional Quality Hypothesis: Careful monitoring and script writing can allow professional callers to sound conversational and mobilize voters.

If the quality of the conversation matters more than the source of the labor, then volunteers may not be effective in all cases. Volunteers may be equally committed and concerned when reading from a script, but the call will be less conversational and engaging to voters. Organizations that push volunteers to complete as many calls as possible will further decrease the efficacy of the mobilization effort by rushing conversations.

Volunteer Quality Hypothesis: Despite the ideological commitment of volunteers, quality matters and not all volunteer GOTV will be successful.

These hypotheses were tested in the multilayered voter mobilization experiment described in the next section.

Actors, Setting, and Protocol

The Youth Vote Coalition (YVC) was a nonpartisan organization devoted to increasing turnout among citizens under the age of 30.¹ Prior campaigns were successful but small in scale and viewed as pilot studies to establish the cost-effectiveness of grass roots voter mobilization. The Pew Charitable Trusts (PCT) wanted to see whether the YVC could conduct operations on a larger scale by contacting one million young voters during the 2002 election cycle and boost their turnout by 3 percentage points. Such an undertaking was an order of magnitude larger than anything YVC had previously attempted, and it was unclear whether YVC possessed the organizational infrastructure necessary for the task.

Eighteen counties across the United States were targeted by the YVC.² The selection was based upon the number and density of residents under the age of 30, the presence of a coalition member in the area, and geographic diversity.³ The end result is that the YVC targeted major cities and their surrounding areas. Some areas, such as Pulaski County, AR, contained few college students. Other regions, such as Cambridge, MA, contained primarily college students.⁴ However, most of the regions contain a large and diverse mixture of young voters. Table 1 provides

¹The coalition had used field experiments to test its use of volunteer phone banks in 2000 and face-to-face canvassing in 2001, so it was familiar with experimental design and how to implement protocols.

²Three areas not listed in Table 1 were excluded from the experiment for reasons of data availability: Miami-Dade County, FL; Harris County, TX; and Polk County, IA.

³Oregon is the only state with a vote by mail system. Timing a mobilization strategy in a setting where voters can mail in ballots over a two-week period is extremely difficult. Calls made after the ballot has been sent in cannot mobilize voters, so one would expect the estimated effectiveness of GOTV calls to be somewhat muted. Since subjects who have already voted are equally likely to be assigned to the treatment or control conditions no bias is introduced. The results from Multnomah County were consonant with the overall findings and near the average of all fifteen sites. That is, the last calls in the campaign were the most effective. This finding suggests that young voters waited until near Election Day to cast ballots.

⁴Ironically, phone numbers were not available for students living on campus, so subjects residing in college towns tended to be graduate students living off campus and noncollege youths.

some background statistics on each area contained in the experiment.⁵

Registered voters age 26 or younger with phone numbers were randomly divided into four equal groups: (1) control; (2) called by the volunteer phone bank; (3) called by the professional phone bank; (4) called by both phone banks.⁶ This classic Latin Squares design allows the two mobilization technologies to be tested simultaneously and directly compared in regression analysis.⁷ Unlike observational studies that may suffer from bias resulting from a correlation between a subject's exposure to campaign contact and her underlying propensity to vote, the random assignment ensures that exposure to the two treatments is unrelated to all observed and unobserved causes of voter turnout.⁸ In contrast to prior randomized field experiments, the two competing strategies are being tested simultaneously, so subjects from the same sample population stand an equal chance of being assigned attempted contact from volunteer or professional phone banks.

A script was constructed for the professional phone bank containing numerous pauses and places for feedback from the subject (see Appendix A). The goal was for the caller to appear unhurried and genuinely interested in the subject. YVC paid a call center a sizable premium for callers who would speak slowly. Typically, GOTV calls cost only \$1 or even 50 cents per completion. For the purposes

⁵The coalition members in North Carolina had numerous disagreements and found it more expedient to conduct completely separate and parallel mobilization efforts, one targeting black residents and the other targeting whites, Asians, and Hispanic residents. The racial identification on the North Carolina voter file facilitated the split.

⁶For each area, the list of registered voters was obtained and then matched against a consumer database to update addresses and append phone numbers. The match rates for each community are reported in column 5 of Table 1. Only a fraction of the young residents are registered to vote in the area and an even smaller fraction of those individuals have a phone number in the consumer database. The lack of accurate contact information provides some idea of how hard it is for parties and organizations to mobilize young voters. The lack of phone numbers for the majority of targeted individuals caused local organizers to focus on door-to-door tactics. However, 108,734 individuals evenly divided between treatment conditions still constitutes one of the most powerful randomized phone experiments ever conducted.

⁷The phone numbers were given to each phone bank in a random order as suggested by the rolling experimental protocol (see Nickerson 2005); however, each of the campaigns called through the entire list so there was no efficiency gained.

⁸Randomization checks were conducted by regressing assignment to the treatment condition on age and past voter history for each of the experiments. No systematic correlation was detected between treatment assignment and observed characteristics. Chi-square tests analyzing the distribution of age and past voters across treatment conditions also failed to reject the null hypothesis of random assignment.

TABLE 1 Description of Sites

Site	Population	Population 18–24	Registered Voters 26 and Under	Registered w/ Phone numbers	Percent Residents White
Pulaski County, AR	361,474	34,474	23,348	8,939	64%
Alameda County, CA	1,443,741	136,565	75,131	12,883	49%
Boulder County, CO	291,288	38,599	38,436	3,729	89%
Denver County, CO	554,636	59,398	46,359	5,968	65%
Boston, MA	589,141	95,693	63,282	13,134	54%
Cambridge, MA	101,355	21,627	8,960	1,581	68%
Somerville, MA	77,478	12,576	6,729	1,557	77%
Washtenaw County, MI	322,895	54,586	32,280	7,677	78%
Hennepin County, MN	1,116,200	108,437	34,335	7,165	81%
Ramsey County, MN	511,035	57,192	37,026	9,487	77%
Kansas City, MO	441,269	42,497	21,426	3,759	61%
St. Louis, MO	348,189	36,738	22,362	4,142	44%
Durham County, NC	223,314	28,586	20,204	4,398	51%
Wake County, NC	627,846	67,128	52,073	17,577	72%
Multnomah County, OR	660,486	67,157	35,501	6,738	79%
Totals	7,670,347	861,253	517,452	108,734	66%

of this experiment, the YVC paid \$1.50 per completion. The call center manager conducted a special training with employees to stress the need to speak slowly and the mission of the calls. YVC staff monitored the calls remotely throughout the campaign to ensure that the instructions were being followed. In short, the phone calls conducted by the professional phone bank occurred at the pace of normal conversation.

In contrast, the volunteer phone banks had great difficulty achieving a semblance of calm and normalcy. Looming over each organizer’s head was the national one million contact quota, and most local organizers hired by YVC had little experience managing a large number of workers.⁹ As a result, volunteers were placed on phones after brief training sessions and told to get through as many numbers as they could in the evening.¹⁰ Furthermore, the callers were instructed to rigidly adhere to a script in order to avoid rogue callers running afoul of election laws. The script used by local volunteers in all but two sites is included in Appendix B. The emphasis was clearly on quantity over quality with the volunteers,

and the net result was to make the calls appear less than personal.

The two sites that did not use the local volunteer phone script eschewed volunteer phone banks altogether. Instead, the organizer in Denver and Boulder, CO, decided to devote all volunteer energies on door-to-door canvassing and hire a local professional call center to take care of the phoning. The call center typically made telemarketing calls for local businesses and charged the YVC \$1 per completion. The local organizer personally oversaw the training of the callers and monitored the calls in person each night to answer questions as they arose. Callers were explained the YVC mission and given YVC T-shirts and buttons to wear while making the calls to boost enthusiasm for the project. By all accounts, these efforts at increasing buy-in worked and the employees welcomed the change from cold call sales. The script supplied to the local call center was detailed, conversational, and unusually long (see Appendix C). It should also be noted that the employees of the call center tended to be young residents of the area, exactly the type of people organizers were attempting to use for volunteer phone banks across the country. The key difference between the employees of the local call center and local volunteers was that the employees of the call center had a great deal of experience interacting with people over the phone, were highly trained, and were carefully monitored. In other words,

⁹Recruiting labor was difficult since congressional campaigns were competing over the same labor pool.

¹⁰An additional problem was that most of the volunteers were tired from working a full day either as students, canvassing for YVC, or at regular employment.

the local professional phone bank in Denver and Boulder epitomized every aspect of an ideal volunteer phone bank.¹¹

Taken altogether, the three types of phone banks provide a compelling experiment testing the importance of personalization of phone calls for GOTV work. It is possible to accurately gauge and compare the effectiveness of all three types of phone banks employed by the YVC, because assignments were made from the same subject pool. Unlike prior professional phone bank voter mobilization experiments, the professional calls tested in this article were unhurried, interactive, and conversational in tone. And in contrast to prior volunteer phone bank voter mobilization experiments, the volunteer callers were under pressure to meet quotas and instructed to stick to scripts. In other words, the YVC professional phone banks behaved like past volunteer phone banks and the YVC volunteer phone banks behaved like past professional phone banks. The experimental design employs the principle of maximum difference to isolate the importance of personalization and payment for phone calls encouraging voter turnout.

Two other experiments were incorporated into the design of the YVC study. The first is the timing of the GOTV calls. Like many partisan political campaigns, YVC sought to make multiple contacts with its target population. Every subject assigned to be called by the national professional phone bank was meant to be contacted during the week of Election Day.¹² But was it possible that earlier calls could further motivate voters to head to the polls? To answer this question, subjects assigned to the national professional phone bank group were randomly divided into four groups: (1) receive no call prior to the week prior to Election Day (i.e., 10/30–11/05); (2) receive a call a week or two prior to the election (i.e., 10/21–10/28); (3) receive a call two to three weeks prior to the election (i.e., 10/14–10/20); and (4) receive a call three to four weeks prior to the election (i.e., 10/7–10/13). This design provides insight into whether earlier calls do anything to enhance voter turnout.

The final subexperiment concerns the content of the conversation with voters. Subjects to be called by the pro-

fessional phone bank were randomly assigned to hear one of three scripts (see Appendix A). One script emphasized the history of civil rights in the United States, another focused upon the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the final message exhorted subjects to make their generation's voice heard. The goal was to determine the most successful message to raise turnout among young citizens.

There are a variety of theoretical reasons one might expect the messages to differ in efficacy. However, these three messages were chosen for purely empirical reasons. Prior to the start of the campaign, the PCT hired a high-profile and well-respected political consulting firm to develop and test messages for the YVC. Messages were crafted after speaking with focus groups participants, and new focus groups were convened to test these messages. The results of the focus groups were then tested on a much larger nationally representative survey of youth. Among every subpopulation in the analysis, the historical message was rated by far the most persuasive. Conversely, the September 11 message was deemed the least persuasive by most respondents. The message urging young people to make their voice heard was deemed moderately effective and inoffensive by most individuals—firmly in the middle of the road. According to the focus groups and survey, voter turnout rates should be highest among those subjects exposed to the historical message and lowest among the subjects hearing the September 11 message.

Turnout was measured for all three experiments by checking official voter turnout records, so self-reporting bias is not a concern for the analysis. Since all of the subjects were registered voters, the identification numbers used by county clerks facilitated a high-quality match. Name and date of birth were also used to double-check the results of the matching exercise and to detect individuals who moved and may have been listed on the voter file twice. Any remaining measurement error should be equally divided between the treatment and control group and therefore not bias estimates. The next section describes the estimation procedure and presents the results from each of these experiments.

Estimation and Results

The quantity one would like to know is the average boost in turnout a person gets from receiving a phone call from a particular type of phone bank. Unfortunately, a person's ability to receive a phone call may be associated with a host of traits that are also linked with propensity to vote (e.g., health, employment status, income, willingness to answer

¹¹Strictly speaking, the Denver and Boulder experiments, being performed by paid professionals, contribute nothing to the study of volunteer phone banks. However, the Colorado phone banks differed markedly from the national phone bank with regard to script, timing, labor pool, and cost. Thus, these two experiments should be considered a third type of phone bank.

¹²The volunteer and local professional phone banks only operated during the final week of the campaign. This time frame was used in the past volunteer phone bank experiments and was deemed the best period to move voters to the polls.

the phone, travel, etc.). Thus, even given random assignment to treatment conditions, one cannot simply regress voter turnout on contact from the national phone bank and local phone bank without risking bias (see Arceneaux, Gerber, and Green 2006). Any analysis must be based on the initial assignment to treatment conditions, which are fully random and uncorrelated with all possible confounding factors.

Two-stage least squares can estimate the object of interest (i.e., the effect of contact) and take advantage of the randomized nature of the experiment by using the assignment to treatment conditions as instruments for contact from the appropriate phone bank. The assignment to treatment conditions is a theoretically perfect instrument for campaign contact and satisfies all of the exclusion restrictions (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin 1996; Gerber and Green 2000a). For instance, the assignment to be called by the national professional phone bank is highly correlated with actual contact from the professional phone bank, but is completely uncorrelated with all other observed and unobserved factors that cause voting. Thus, two-stage least squares using the treatment assignment as instruments for actual contact serves as an unbiased estimator of the degree to which professional and volunteer phone contact boosts turnout.¹³

Table 2 presents the estimated effect of being contacted by each type of phone bank on a subject's voter turnout. All of the organizational problems the Youth Vote Coalition encountered with volunteer quality, capacity, and organization resulted in a minimally effective phone campaign where each completed call boosted turnout by only 0.5 percentage points. That is, a person who was 40% likely to vote prior to the call would be 40.5% likely to vote after receiving the volunteer call from the YVC. From the campaign's perspective, a mobilization effect of 0.5 percentage points translates into one new vote generated by every 200 completed calls. By any measure, the volunteer phone calls conducted by YVC appear ineffective, contradicting the *volunteer null hypothesis* and supporting the *volunteer quality hypothesis*.

In contrast, all the effort in making both professional phone banks appear conversational and engaging paid off handsomely. Contrary to all prior professional phone bank experiments, each completed phone call

TABLE 2 Efficacy of 2002 YVC Phone Calls at Boosting Turnout

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Volunteer	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)
Local Professional	0.051* (0.028)	0.050* (0.027)
National Professional	0.031*** (0.007)	0.029*** (0.007)
Voted 2000		0.220*** (0.003)
Age (years)		-0.001** (0.001)
Site Dummies	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.250*** (0.004)	0.185*** (0.014)
N	108734	108649
Adj-Rsq	0.04	0.09

Estimates derived from 2SLS using treatment assignment as instruments for campaign contact. Dependent variable is voter turnout in 2002 Congressional Election. Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors. Using a two-tailed test, * means $p < 0.1$; ** means $p < 0.05$; *** means $p < 0.01$.

boosted turnout by 3 percentage points for the national professional phone bank and 5 percentage points for the local professional phone bank. Put another way, the national phone bank generated one new vote for every 33 phone calls it completed, and the local professional phone bank created one new vote for every 20 calls it completed. Controlling for past voter history and age does nothing to change this picture (see Table 2, model 2), so the *professional null hypothesis* should be rejected in favor of the *professional quality hypothesis*. The magnitude of these effect sizes is very similar to those reported by past volunteer phone experiments (Nickerson 2006a; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006). Thus, it appears that the quality of a campaign's phone call is more important than the type of phone bank making the call. Professional phone banks can be conducted in an effective manner and volunteer phone operations can run into sufficient hurdles to render them less useful.

It would be tempting to conclude from Table 2 that the local professional phone bank utilized in Boulder and Denver was more successful than the national professional phone bank. However, the local professional phone bank only called during the week prior to Election Day, while the national phone bank phoned during the month prior

¹³The only downside of the two-stage least-squares estimator is that it is linear and voter turnout is a dichotomous dependent variable. In instances with a single experimental assignment and treatment, a two-stage probit estimator can be utilized. However, our present purposes have multiple variables that must be instrumented, so two-stage least squares is a necessity. The linearity assumption is not a major concern since the average turnout for each site is squarely between 0.20 and 0.50, and thus, safely away from the edges of the distribution.

TABLE 3 Effect of Timing on Boost of Voter Turnout from Phone Calls

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Volunteer	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.062)
Local Professional	0.052* (0.028)	0.051* (0.027)
National Professional Election Week	0.052** (0.020)	0.051*** (0.020)
National Professional One Week Before the Election	0.009 (0.015)	0.006 (0.015)
National Professional Two Weeks Before the Election	-0.015 (0.015)	-0.014 (0.015)
National Professional Three Weeks Before the Election	0.013 (0.020)	0.018 (0.019)
Voted 2000		0.220*** (0.003)
Age (years)		-0.001** (0.001)
Site Dummies	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.248*** (0.004)	0.183*** (0.014)
N	108734	108649
Adj-Rsq	0.04	0.09

Estimates derived from 2SLS using treatment assignment as instruments for campaign contact.

Dependent variable is voter turnout in 2002 congressional election.

Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors.

Using a two-tailed test, * means $p < 0.1$; ** means $p < 0.05$; *** means $p < 0.01$.

to the election. Heterogeneity in the treatment effect over the length of the national calling campaign might mask the true effectiveness of the national professional phone bank during the last week. Table 3 disaggregates the time periods for the national campaign using the assignment to be called during the week as an instrument for actual contact during the week.

Unsurprisingly, phone calls made during the final days prior to the election are most effective, but the swiftness of the drop-off in efficacy is unexpected. Phone calls made by the national professional phone bank during the final week boosted voter turnout by roughly 5 percentage points—equal to the performance of the local professional phone bank during the same period. But just the week prior in the campaign, the phone calls appear to have a diminutive and statistically insignificant effect of roughly 0.8 percentage points (i.e., 0.9 without covariates and 0.7 with covariates). The two weeks prior to that have a precision weighted average of -0.5 percentage points

with a standard error of 1.2 percentage points, thereby implying that there is no mobilization effect from phone conversations conducted more than a fortnight prior to Election Day. Controlling for prior voter turnout and age does nothing to alter these results (see Table 3, model 2).¹⁴ Thus, phone calls, even from professional phone banks, may be an effective mobilization tool the week of the election, but are of limited or no value two weeks out from the election (see Figure 2).

If the timing of phone calls matters a great deal, the content of the conversation appears to matter a great deal less. Despite stark differences between the three messages in stated preference by focus group and survey respondents, all three messages appeared equally effective at mobilizing voters (see Table 4). Whether one looks at the entirety of the calls completed by the national professional phone campaign (top panel) or only the calls completed during the final week (bottom panel), there appears to be no statistically relevant difference between the messages in moving voters to the polls. If anything, the September 11-based message that was ranked dead last by both the focus groups and the survey respondents appears to slightly outperform the history-based message that was ranked as the most effective. In other words, the message developed by focus groups and surveys did little to enhance voter turnout.

One implication of this finding is that the specific content of the conversation a caller has with a potential voter is less important than the timing and quality of the phone call in boosting voter turnout. The timing of the campaign contact moved the mobilization effect from 5 percentage points to essentially zero, but the difference between the specific scripts was no more than 1 statistically insignificant percentage point (Table 4, lower panel). Thus, a campaign would be well advised to worry less about specific message development and concentrate more on the training of volunteers and workers who call on its behalf.

Table 4 also questions the whole practice of convening focus groups and message testing via surveys. Clear differences were found when testing the messages, but the

¹⁴The negative coefficient for age is not surprising given the truncated nature of the age distribution. The difference in civic maturity between the ages of 18 and 25 are unlikely to be significant. However, subjects between the ages of 18 to 22 in this sample are more likely to be college students and, hence, more likely to vote. The higher propensity to vote may be due to socioeconomic factors or the high activity of civic groups on campuses. Since age is exogenous to the treatment conditions, the negative coefficient has no implications for a subject's response to the phone calls. It should also be pointed out that the age difference detected may be statistically significant but is not substantively important. In this sample, 18-year-olds are only 1 percentage point more likely to vote than 26-year-olds.

FIGURE 2 2002 YVC Field Experiment Directly Comparing Volunteer and Professional GOTV Phone Calls with 95% Confidence Intervals

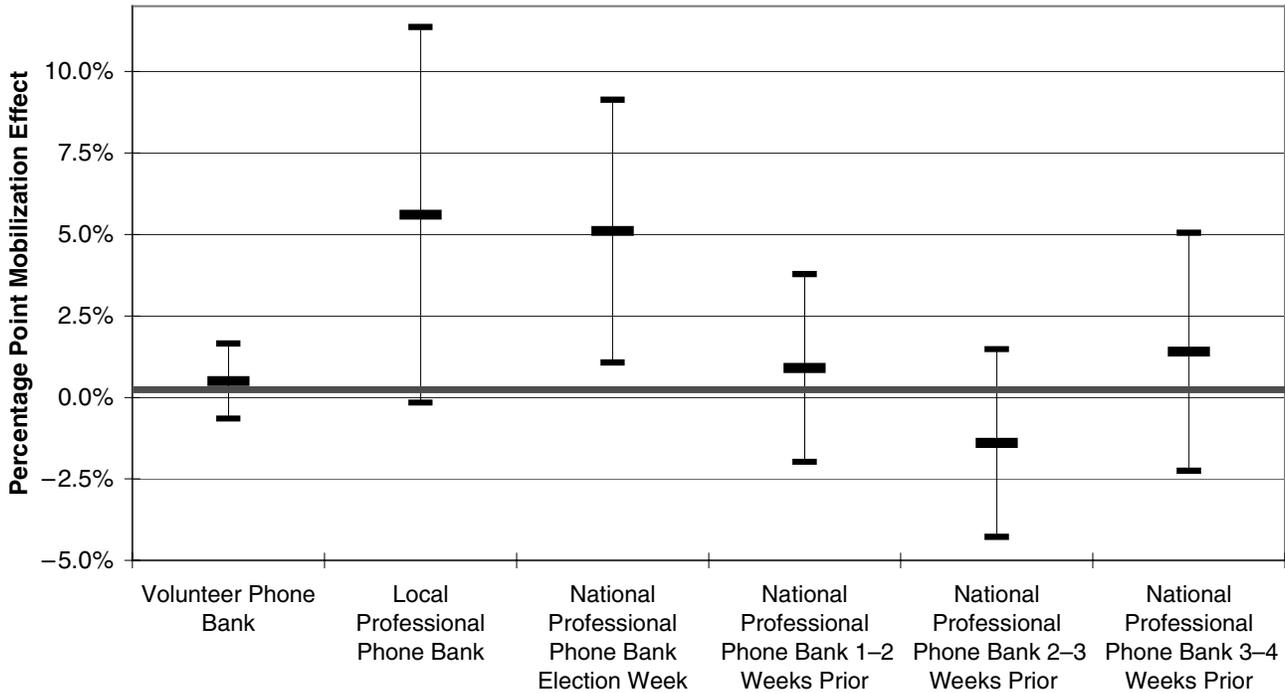


TABLE 4 Messaging Experiment Among Subjects Contacted by Professional Phone Bank

Message	Number of Subjects	Percent Voting
Entire Campaign		
Historic	9183	41.3%
September 11	6177	41.9%
Voice	6177	41.5%
Chi-square p-value = 0.78		
Final Week		
Historic	5993	44.9%
September 11	4118	45.3%
Voice	4020	44.4%
Chi-square p-value = 0.71		

results discovered in the field were precisely the opposite. The artificiality of the focus group may account for this unexpected result. The focus group participant is providing a much more considered and reflective opinion about a message than is a person who picks up the phone on any given night prior to an election. A somewhat brash and aggressive appeal to 9/11 might appear coarse when

given serious thought, but could be precisely the type of attention-grabbing message that is necessary to engage voters amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life. At the very least, Table 4 suggests that testing messages in the field may be more effective than convening focus groups and conducting surveys.

Discussion

The central finding of this article directly contradicts the empirical regularities of the voter mobilization literature. Contrary to all prior experiments, professional phone banks were shown to be effective at encouraging people to vote. Also contrary to prior findings, the volunteer phone calls in this experiment were not effective at mobilizing voters. The magnitude and scope of this experiment should not be forgotten by the reader. All 108,734 subjects in this experiment stood an equal probability of being assigned to control, professional, or volunteer conditions, meaning that it is possible to hold political context constant when comparing across technologies. Thus, the YVC 2002 experiment offers a superior design to prior field experiments testing voter mobilization campaigns via phone.

The lesson to be drawn by practitioners and academics alike from the findings is that the quality of the phone conversations matters and not all phone campaigns are created equal. Many professional phone banks are ineffective at motivating voters, but there is no inherent reason that the technology cannot be usefully put towards this goal. Similarly, many volunteer phone banks are highly efficient at increasing voter turnout, but the technique has its limits and care must be taken to ensure that callers are trained sufficiently to sound knowledgeable, concerned, and unhurried. The script used should include places for interaction so that the call seems more like a conversation and less like a commercial. These differences need not take more than an extra five seconds, but the five seconds can make an important difference in the mind of the voter.

The experiment also indicated that only calls made during the last week of the campaign are effective at increasing turnout. Prior phone calls may be able to persuade an individual to vote for a candidate, donate money, or volunteer time, but there appears to be no significant boost in participation through voting from these earlier calls. This finding combined with the disjuncture between the focus group, a more considered opinion, and the messaging results for subjects in the field strongly suggest that the psychological change created by voter mobilization outreach is not deep.

Professional Get Out The Vote calls performed during the last days of the campaign are cost competitive with other forms of voter mobilization (see Table 5). Even at the

premium price of \$1.50 a completed call, the national professional phone bank generated a vote for every \$29 spent. This dollar per vote amount is comparable to both door-to-door canvassing (\$31) and leafleting (\$32). The local phone bank offers an even better bargain at \$1 a completion, or \$19 per vote, comparable to the cost-efficiency of past volunteer phone campaigns. In contrast, the volunteer phone effort tested in this experiment proves to be an extremely expensive means of increasing turnout, generating one vote for every \$150 spent. This price outstrips even direct nonpartisan mail (\$67) for its inefficient use of campaign funds, but falls short of the impersonal professional phone banks tested by Gerber and Green (\$500). The bottom line is that campaigns ought to emphasize the quality of the phone calls over the quantity of the phone calls.

The failure of the volunteer phone banks should not be taken as an indictment of the Youth Vote Coalition organizers in 2002. Indeed, YVC was the organization that proved cost effective in the 2001 canvassing experiments (Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003) and 2000 volunteer phone banks (Nickerson 2006a). The problems facing the volunteer phone campaign may be endemic to small volunteer organizations seeking to scale up their operations to handle hundreds of thousands of individuals rather than mere thousands. The increased investment from the primary financial backer led to increased scrutiny and a demand to rigidly adhere to a script. The vastly increased size of the operations taxed the organization's capacity for

TABLE 5 Cost-Effectiveness of Voter Mobilization Techniques

Technology	Source	Effect	Cost per Contact	\$ per Vote
Personalized Professional Phone Bank (National)	YVC 2002 study	5.2%	\$1.50	\$29
Personalized Professional Phone Bank (Local)	YVC 2002 study	5.2%	\$1.00	\$19
Volunteer Phone Bank [20 contacts per hour]	YVC 2002 study	0.5%	\$0.75	\$150
Prior Volunteer Phone Banks [20 contacts per hour]	Nickerson 2006a	3.8%	\$0.75	\$20
Prior Professional Phone Banks	Gerber and Green 2000a; Gerber and Green 2001; Gerber and Green 2005	0.2%	\$1.00	\$500
Door-to-Door Canvassing [6 contacts per hour]	Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003	8.0%	\$2.50	\$31
Leaflets [40 contacts per hour]	Gerber and Green 2000b; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006	1.2%	\$0.38	\$32
Direct Mail	Gerber and Green 2000a	0.6%	\$0.40	\$67

Volunteer wage rate assumed to be \$15 an hour.

volunteer recruitment, training, and oversight. As a result, the quality of the product suffered. Such results are common in commercial businesses, so it should come as no surprise that the results also hold for nonprofit civic organizations. Quality control throughout the mobilization process, from worker recruitment to actual conversations with voters, is essential.

Political consultants may not guarantee the level of quality control necessary for effective voter mobilization. Focus groups are a standard (and expensive) tool political consultants charge their clients for, but focus groups failed to generate a script that outperformed the script it predicted to be the worst at increasing voter turnout. Political consultants provide a large array of services, many of which are invaluable to clients. This small study provides a hint that the most valuable service political consultants provide clients are the organizational, managerial, and oversight skills they bring to the table and that new standards of evaluation should be used in message development.

The results also offer a glimpse of the decay of political habits and intents. The vast majority of analyses of voter mobilization view the interaction between citizen and campaign as static. Once the contact has been made, the person is more likely to vote by a certain margin, and this is captured in a static regression model (e.g., Kramer 1970; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The true picture is far more dynamic and interesting. The initial contact may boost intention to turnout, but the effect quickly wears off and the subject is no more likely to vote after a couple of weeks than she would have been had she received no contact at all. The measures of time in this experiment are too coarse to precisely model treatment decay, but hint at a fascinating area of future study for the fields of voter mobilization and political psychology.

The juxtaposition of professional and more organic volunteer mobilization efforts should also be of interest to the literature on social capital and social movements. To the extent that social capital has declined, mass-based organizations like political parties will have to augment dwindling supplies of volunteers with paid labor. The fact that the professional mobilization campaign generated a large number of votes while the volunteer component was ineffective speaks of the importance of oversight and accountability in organizations. But it also suggests that the individuals to be mobilized were unable to distinguish between the professional and volunteer campaigns. That is, the organic nature of volunteer campaigns can be replicated successfully by professionals.

Several important questions remain unanswered. Chief among them is the external validity of these results. Given that the campaign studied was nonpartisan,

the applicability of the findings to partisan campaign settings is an open question. However, there is good reason to believe that partisan phone campaigns behave no differently. The partisan voter mobilization campaigns evaluated experimentally have shown no systematic difference in efficacy from nonpartisan campaigns (Gerber, Green, and Green 2003; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006). When partisan and nonpartisan messages were compared head-to-head in a randomized experiment, the two treatments exhibited equal treatment effects (Panagopoulos 2006). This similarity may be attributable to how partisan campaigns target their GOTV efforts. At the end of campaigns, candidates only seek to mobilize supporters and generally move away from persuasive efforts. Thus, the messages used are focused solely on turnout and are very similar in tone to nonpartisan messages. That said, it is possible that partisan messages behave differently, and further experiments should be conducted.

Similarly, the 2002 YouthVote experiments contained only subjects under the age of 26. This population is inherently interesting because it is a traditionally low turnout group and difficult to mobilize because of transience. Furthermore, voting has been demonstrated to be habit forming (Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Green and Shachar 2000; Plutzer 2002). Increasing turnout early in the political life cycle can lead to greater participation over the decades that follow. While there is no reason to believe that mature individuals respond differently from younger people to blandishments to vote, it is possible. A reanalysis of six door-to-door voter mobilization field experiments found age to play no role in the responsiveness campaign outreach encouraging turnout (Nickerson 2006b). If the door-to-door findings pertain to phone calls, external validity is unlikely to be a concern with regard to age. However, the question is empirical and should be tested in future research.

The nature of the phone conversations appears to be decisive, but this experiment manipulated the incentives and monitoring of the phone banks rather than the attributes of the calls themselves. The YVC aimed to construct calls that sounded like a friendly conversation between peers. To that end, scripts were constructed with short pauses and places for interaction and feedback. These characteristics add only a few seconds to the call, but engage the voter in a way that simply reading through a script cannot. However, these attributes of a conversational call were not directly manipulated by the experiment, so it is impossible to be sure how much pauses and pace matter. Constructing an experiment where the number of words per minute uttered by callers was randomly varied would be daunting, but possible given sufficient resources. Randomly varying the number of interactive

points in the script (e.g., “How are you today?” or “Have you moved in the past year?”) would perhaps be an easier experiment to conduct. Creative experiments along these lines could lead to a fruitful research agenda.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of the article, contra prior research, the findings here suggest that labor supply was not the cause of any competitive disadvantage faced by Kerry with regard to the phone calls made during the final mobilization push in Ohio. Paid callers can be effective, but interactive scripts and conversational tone are essential. Furthermore, volunteer phone banks appear every bit as variable and heterogeneous as professional phone banks. However, the research suggests an alternative advantage enjoyed by Bush. The Bush reelection campaign was centralized and coordinated, whereas election laws forbade coordination between the Kerry campaign and the 527 surrogates responsible for much of the ground war. If monitoring and oversight were lacking (e.g., phone calls made by MoveOn.org members from home), the calls made in support of the Democratic side could be less effective. When comparing the endgame strategy of Bush and Kerry on the phones, it is the nature and quality of the calls made that matters and it is insufficient to simply compare whether professionals or volunteers were used.

Appendix A

National Professional Phone Bank Script

-Hi, can I speak to (full name)?

-Hello, this is _____ calling on behalf of the Youth Vote Coalition (pronounce slowly and clearly . . . it is hard for most folks to understand the first time they hear it). Youth Vote Coalition is a nonpartisan organization that encourages young people to vote. I’m not calling to ask for money or to sell anything.

Split script 1

-*a) It took hundreds of years for women and African Americans to gain the equal right to vote. And, it wasn’t until 1971 that 18-year-olds got the right to vote. (50%)

-*b) On September 11th, 2001, we all witnessed one of the most tragic days in American history. The terrorists tried to take from us the very freedom that makes America great. In response, we should exercise our most basic freedoms, like voting. (25%)

-*c) Politicians listen to the people who vote. You can determine what decisions they make by voting for elected of-

ficials who care about the same things that you do. You can make the youth vote the most powerful one in America. (25%)

End split script 1

Split Script 2 (15% of contacts)

-* Your polling location is (POLL ADDRESS), and here’s a number to confirm the address (POLL PHONE).

End split script 2

Would you like to know how to get nonpartisan information on the races in your area? If YES: You can call a toll-free number 1-888-Vote-Smart (1-888-868-3762) or visit www.youthvote.org.

-Can we count on you to vote on November 5th?

If NO: Well, we hope that you will vote, remind others to vote, and help get out the youth vote!

If YES: Great! We hope you will remind others to vote, and thank you very much for getting out the youth vote!

Appendix B

Local Volunteer Phone Bank Script

-Hi, can I speak to (full name)?

-Hello, this is _____ calling on behalf of the Youth Vote Coalition (pronounce slowly and clearly . . . it is hard for most folks to understand the first time they hear it). I’m not calling to ask for money or to sell anything. Youth Vote Coalition is a nonpartisan organization that encourages young people to vote.

Have you heard of the Youth Vote Coalition? If YES or NO: We are a national nonprofit organization established to increase participation, build responsive government, and promote awareness of the power of young people voting.

Would you like to know how to get nonpartisan information on the races in your area? If YES: You can call a toll-free number 1-888-Vote-Smart (1-888-868-3762) or visit www.youthvote.org.

Optional topics:

*Have you received your voter card in the mail? If NO: Do you know what ID you will need to show when you go to vote on Nov. 5? (Make sure you have your state’s requirements handy.)

*Do you know how to find your polling location?

*If they ask you about the research you are doing or why you are doing this, please mention that in the past Youth

Vote has shown that just asking youth to vote makes them 8–11 percentage points more likely to do so.

REMEMBER: You can discuss issues with people generally, in terms of pointing them towards websites or local media that will tell them more about it, but you must take a “hands-off” nonpartisan approach. DO NOT MENTION CANDIDATES. Try to listen to what the person is saying is important to them and link it to nonpartisan websites (www.vote-smart.org, www.dnet.org) that can give them more information on the candidates’ stands. If someone is really asking you who you are going to vote for, please explain that Youth Vote is completely nonpartisan and you just can’t talk about who to vote for; the most important thing is that they vote.

End with:

-Can we count on you to vote on November 5th?

If NO: Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope that you will vote, remind others to vote, and help get out the youth vote!

If YES: Great! I hope you will remind others to vote, and thank you very much for getting out the youth vote!

Appendix C

Highly Coached Local Professional Phone Bank

-Hi, can I speak to (full name)?

-Hi (first name), my name is (your full name) and I’m calling on behalf of the Youth Vote Coalition (pronounce slowly and clearly as it is hard for many people to understand “Youth Vote” the first time they hear it). This is not a sales call, and we are not affiliated with any particular political party or candidate. Youth Vote is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization composed of diverse groups all working together to increase voter turnout among 18–30-year-olds.

The reason we are contacting you is to thank you for registering to vote. You have taken the first crucial step in giving yourself the power to make your voice heard in our democracy. However, even more important than that is the fact that you actually DO vote on Election Day. This year’s Senate race in Colorado is especially important, and could have national implications in determining the balance of power in Congress. It is expected that less than 500 votes may determine the outcome of this race. Your vote can make a difference. Thus, we encourage you to take the time to vote in the upcoming election on TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5th between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm.

Have you received your voter registration card in the mail?

*If yes – “Ok, that tells you where your polling location is. But just so you know, your polling location is at (name of place and address, which will be provided to you).”

*If no – “Ok, well your polling location is at (name of place and address).”

Again, you can vote between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm, and will need to show your voter registration card, and/or a government-issued picture ID.

Lastly, we would like to provide you with a toll-free phone number and websites for obtaining nonpartisan information on the candidates and issues in your area. The number is 1-888-Vote-Smart (1-888-868-3762), and the websites are www.vote-smart.org (make sure you say vote-dash-smart.org) and www.youthvote.org.

Well, (person’s first name), I’d like to thank you for your time. Again, remember to mark your calendar to vote on Tuesday, November 5th, and encourage your friends and family to vote, too. Have a good evening.

Optional info, if asked of you:

*Youth Vote’s local phone # and email (Tim Taylor & Phil Winters):

303-534-5798, x.308; co1@youthvote.org

*What groups are part of the Youth Vote Coalition?

Over 100 national organizations, and over 1,500 state and local organizations have signed on. Groups such as Project Vote Smart, Rock the Vote, and National Association of Secretaries of State are involved. The Coalition Board members are:

ACORN, Black Youth Vote, EnviroCitizen, Leadership Conference Education Fund, Leadership Institute – Campus Leadership Program, League of Women Voters Education Fund, National Council of La Raza, Organization of Chinese Americans, Rock the Vote, Third Millennium, Student PIRG, US Student Association, Youth Service America.

*“I’m not going to be here on Nov. 5th. Can I still vote?”

Yes – you may vote early. In fact, even if you are here on Nov. 5th you can vote early. Early voting can be done at the following location if you are a Denver County resident:

Denver Election Commission office

303 W. Colfax Ave., Ste. 100 (across from the Denver Mint)

Dates: 10/21–10/25 (M–F), and 10/28–11/1 (M–F)

Hours: 8 am–5 pm.

Additionally, if you have an ABSENTEE BALLOT, you may drop it off at the Denver Election Commission office,

or at one of the following grocery stores on 10/26/02 (Sat.), and 10/28–11/1 (M–F) from 10 am–6 pm:

Safeway, 6460 E. Yale Ave. – corner of Yale & Monaco
Safeway, 1955 S. Sheridan Blvd. – corner of Jewell & Sheridan

Safeway, 3800 W. 44th Ave. – corner of 44th & Lowell
Safeway, 6220 E. 14th Ave. – corner of 14th & Krameria
Safeway, 4884 Chambers Rd. – corner of 48th & Chambers
Safeway, 2660 Federal Blvd. – corner of 26th & Federal
King Soopers, 890 S. Monaco Pkwy. – corner of Leetsdale & Monaco

*How do I get a mail-in ballot, and where do I send it?

Mail-in ballots for Denver County residents can be obtained at www.denvergov.org/electioncommission by clicking on “Forms.” Additionally, you can call the Denver Election Commission at 303-640-2351 to have one sent to you. The completed form can be sent to the Denver Election Commission office (address above). Please note that mail-in ballots must be received in the Denver Election Commission office by 5 pm on Nov. 5th (not postmarked).

REMEMBER: You can discuss issues with people generally, in terms of pointing them towards websites or local media that will tell them more about the issues (Vote Smart, for example), but make sure you take a “hands-off” nonpartisan approach. **Do not advocate any candidates or political parties.** Listen to what the person is saying and try to link it to getting them to vote. For example, if someone says, “I’m concerned about the environment. Who should I vote for?” you cannot tell them who to vote for. You can, however, say, “If you are concerned about the environment, you should vote,” and refer them to the Project Vote Smart phone number/website to obtain information on candidates and the environment. In the end, the **most important thing is that they simply vote.**

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