



November 2004 Newsletter

## ***The Science Behind Successful Get Out the Vote Programs***

By Amy Showalter

Virtually every organization with any stake in the 2004 election conducted a voter registration and/or Get Out the Vote (GOTV) effort. Now that the elections are over, it's time to evaluate whether our well-intended efforts produced the results we wanted. We may have had great intentions, but if our prospects didn't register to vote, or registered but did not vote, or didn't vote for the candidates that support our organizations' interests, it just doesn't matter.

Changed behavior is the ultimate result. Remember the highly touted effort to increase the youth vote in this year's presidential election? Their participation remained the same as in 2000, at 17%. They may have registered lots of voters, but they obviously didn't go to the polls. Registration and voting are two different roads.

### **Why push members to vote?**

It's important not only for our desired election results, but also for our internal organizational respect and support, to develop and maintain a strategic, results-oriented voter registration and GOTV drive. Without it, we risk the skepticism of our co-workers and even PAC and grassroots network members who may believe that it's just another *flavor-of-the-month* program rather than one that delivers benefits to our organization.

Even though the 2004 elections are over, it's not too early to begin preparing for the next election cycle. In fact, reviewing what worked—for ourselves and for others—during previous voter registration drives can help us plan a new strategy for the next election.

### **What really works?**

Campaign professionals can tell stories about GOTV tactics used by their candidates that helped them win an upset election. However, these anecdotes do not allow us to *isolate* the influence of any particular tactic. A healthy skepticism should cause us to ask whether the direct mail piece, Web site, etc., really caused the increase in voter turnout—or might something else in the campaign have caused the turnout?

Large nonpartisan voter registration drives voice-unsubstantiated claims as well. Press releases announce that thousands of people were registered as a part of this or that

campaign. As Donald Green and Alan Gerber state in their must-read book, *Get Out the Vote*:

“As exciting as it may be to register large numbers of people, *registration is not the same as voting*... [T]he people who were registered as part of a big drive might have registered anyway on their own. Nonpartisan voter registration campaigns sometimes register large numbers of people and yet fail to raise either the registration rate or the voting rate. . . Even fancy statistical analysis of survey data or historical voting patterns cannot overcome the basic principle that *correlation is not causation*.”

Gerber and Green’s book is a rigorous, *research-based* approach to validating various voter registration and GOTV drives. The authors conducted their experiments over several years in federal midterm elections, state and municipal elections, the 2000 presidential election, and various nonpartisan voter mobilization efforts.

More than 29 findings were ranked on a three-star system. A tactic that received a three-star rating was deemed most effective, meaning that the finding was implemented with a large number of voters and implemented by different groups in a variety of settings.

The findings in Gerber and Green’s research can help us develop realistic expectations about our campaigns. They cite the most effective tactics as well as the cost-effectiveness of those tactics.

**1. Personal contact is important.** Door-to-door canvassing is a much better tactic of getting out the vote than Internet messaging, according to Gerber and Green. They found that knocking on doors drove up voter turnout by 8 to 10 percent, while leaflets, direct mail, and e-mail yielded increases of less than 1 percent. In fact, they found that one additional vote is produced for every 14 people who are contacted by volunteer canvassers.

While it’s probably not practical for your association to go door-to-door, you should consider what your organization is doing to increase the *personal* contact with those individuals you want to get to the polls. The turnout of the “values – driven” voters in the 2004 presidential election has caused many to take notice of their tactics. While they used many tactics for voter registration and GOTV, an immutable characteristic of this group is their personal contact through church and religious events that go beyond asking someone to make sure she votes.

In an organizational setting, you can set up voter registration booths with real people to answer questions. You can also appoint GOTV or voter registration captains who can wear a lapel pin or promotional T-shirt to publicize your effort and encourage conversation and follow-up activity. Research from a BIPAC post-election survey showed that in a recent Ohio election, more than 50 percent of the voters who were personally contacted by a labor union representative voted.

The demonstrated effects of door-to-door canvassing suggest that other face-to-face tactics may stimulate better turnout. When candidates visit your facility, encourage one-on-one interaction between candidates and your members and leadership. Make sure that your captains help facilitate personal contact with the candidate. Ask them to serve as hosts to introduce employees and association members to the candidate.

**2. Ask for commitment from potential voters.** Commitment coincides with the influence principle of *consistency*. Humans have a natural drive to be consistent with prior statements and commitments, particularly if those statements and commitments are made in public. Gerber and Green found that the message does not matter as much as asking citizens whether they can be counted on to vote and providing them with the location of their polling place. They claim that they have not isolated these factors with great precision, but “they seem to be worth incorporating into most canvassing campaigns.” Engage the consistency principle by asking potential voters if they will vote on Election Day.

**3. Assess behavioral change.** An association’s final arbiter of a successful voter registration effort is voter behavior. Do you know if your members are even considering a candidate’s position on your issues when they enter the voting booth?

When I led the Nationwide Insurance Civic Action Program (CAP), we compared the voting behavior of the employees who enrolled in our grassroots program versus those of the employees who were not CAP members. It was gratifying to learn that 69 percent of the CAP members took into consideration a candidate’s position on insurance issues in the voting booth. Even 50 percent of the nonmembers examined a candidate’s insurance views before they voted. I suspect most organizations would covet half of their employees being so informed.

Why did they think about issues that impacted their job before voting? Because we had in place a consistent grassroots communications and social capital structure. Discussion of civic and legislative issues was encouraged and vigorously facilitated. I consider this one of the most valuable benefits of an internal grassroots program. When our grassroots communications are affecting voting behavior, we are truly making a difference.

### **Additional findings of interest**

*Nonpartisan* e-mail has negligible effects. Is this heresy in today’s world of hyperabundant e-mail mobilization efforts? No, it’s scientifically proven. Although thousands of e-mail recipients followed links to sites where they could register online, registration rates for the treatment and control groups were almost identical. This means that even without the e-mail campaign, those who registered online would have registered anyway.

The key distinction above is *nonpartisan*. Much of the electronic voter registration efforts successful in the 2004 campaign were partisan efforts, which Green and Gerber did not analyze.

The evidence regarding personal contact can enhance electronic GOTV tactics. E-mails sent from personal friends, or from individuals who share commonalities with the intended audience, may increase turnout. Gerber and Green believe these *supertreatments* of the basic findings represent a new frontier in GOTV research.

Frequent voters are most responsive to GOTV requests. This is a critical finding for organizations with ballot issues and elections in non-presidential election years.

Target frequent voters for your off-year ballot or special elections. The content of the nonpartisan message does not matter so long as it is not outlandish. Gerber and Green found that telling people “one vote can make a difference” when the election is anticipated to be a blowout is completely ineffective. What does help spur turnout is information on the location of polling centers and poll hours.

With the 2004 elections behind us, it’s time to evaluate what worked—and what didn’t work—in our organizations’ GOTV drives. We can use that information, paired with the tips discussed above, to begin creating successful campaigns for the next elections. It’s never too early.

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