

Teaching voters new tricks: The effect of partisan absentee vote-by-mail get-out-the-vote efforts

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Abstract

In the last few years policy innovators have implemented a variety of new voting reforms aimed at increasing the ways voters can cast their ballot and with it voter turnout. While these efforts have largely suggested that the net effect of these reforms has been minimal, scholars have not analyzed the effectiveness of the use of these methods by partisan campaigns to increase targeted turnout or to change the methods voters use to cast their ballot. In collaboration with a state party organization, I examine the effect of a partisan get-out-the-vote effort using an absentee vote-by-mail push. I find that these get-out-the-vote efforts to target voters using absentee ballot request forms are effective at shifting more voters to vote absentee. However, while pushing absentee vote-by-mail balloting may bank votes for a campaign before Election Day, the overall effect of partisan campaigns' use of absentee ballot efforts to increase turnout appears limited.

Keywords

Absentee balloting, get-out-the-vote, vote-by-mail

In recent years, policy innovations aiming to make voting more convenient have changed the number of ways that voters can cast their ballot. These reforms have been motivated by the perception that the difficulty of voting discourages citizens from participating. The assumption is that offering more convenient means of voting encourages greater participation. For voters this means that they are no longer limited to voting at a polling location on the day of the election: voters in many states can vote early in person, at regional polling stations, or by mail.

For political campaigns, these new voting options have also meant significant changes. Campaigns are increasingly attempting to push voters to these new methods of voting. Because campaign activity is a key component of increasing voter participation among partisans (Bergan et al., 2005; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993), understanding the effect of campaign efforts to encourage individuals to vote using these new methods can help us to understand the full effect of voter reforms. In addition, the ability of campaigns to influence how and when voters cast their ballot can similarly have significant effects on the electoral process. For example, events during the campaign can have a short term effect on voter preferences (Hill et al., 2013; Shaw and Gimpel, 2012). Where early voting is allowed, campaigns can act

to capture votes at these more favorable times during the election cycle.

Theoretically, these policy changes should enable campaigns to run more effective get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns by changing how voters vote and making it easier to mobilize voters. Scholars of voter turnout have long argued that institutional barriers and opportunity costs associated with voting inhibit voter participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Yet, whether these reforms enable more effective partisan GOTV or are effective at getting voters to change the manner in which they cast their ballots vote is unclear.

One reason to be pessimistic about campaign efforts vis-à-vis the new voting rules is that these policy innovations appear to have had little effect on overall voter participation. Implementing policy changes designed to make voting easier such as vote-by-mail may raise turnout slightly (Gerber et al., 2013), but these effects are concentrated

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among those with a higher socioeconomic status and thus are already more likely to vote (Berinsky et al., 2001; Monroe and Sylvester, 2011). Some studies have even found that, in isolation, early voting lowers overall turnout (Burden et al., 2014) and that absentee early voting lowers public confidence in the voting process (Burden and Gaines, 2015). Yet, at the same time, the use of absentee balloting continues to increase and parties have highlighted its importance as a campaign strategy (Republican National Committee, 2013).¹

On the other hand, the overall effect of these policy reforms on voter turnout is not necessarily a reflection on how these changes have influenced the effectiveness of campaign efforts to encourage absentee vote-by-mail voting. Early studies of voters' use of absentee vote-by-mail found that they were more common in partisan strongholds (Patterson and Caldiera, 1985). However, there are few studies on the use of vote-by-mail efforts (and none on their use by partisan campaigns) as a means to increase turnout or even to convert in-person voters to absentee vote-by-mail voters.

This paper tests whether a partisan absentee vote-by-mail effort is effective at encouraging voters to vote absentee by mail and whether this effort has an effect on voter turnout. Working in collaboration with a partisan organization and using a field experiment, I find efforts by party organizations are effective in doubling the percentage of voters who cast their votes by mail relative to a control group. Thus, vote-by-mail is an effective way for campaigns to bank votes prior to Election Day.

The effect on overall participation, however, is limited. While the small sample size of the experimental groups limits the ability to find significant effects on overall voter participation, even if the substantive effect sizes are correct, the effects of partisan absentee vote-by-mail turnout efforts are small (ranging from 0.1 to 3.7 percentage points depending on the model used). Thus, while partisan GOTV absentee vote-by-mail efforts may only have a small effect on overall participation, they do change the nature of how voters participate.

Effects of voting reforms

Advocates of electoral reform have touted absentee balloting and voting-by-mail as a way to reduce the costs associated with casting a ballot. Under one theory of voting, individuals vote when the benefits from voting outweigh the costs (Downs, 1957).² Electoral reforms have the effect of reducing the costs associated with voting, thus theoretically encouraging individuals to vote who might otherwise not turnout.

Practical evidence of the effects of these reforms, most of which focuses on changing all voting to vote-by-mail, is more modest. Several states and locales have switched some or all elections to vote-by-mail elections and evidence

suggests that the effects of such a switch are small at best (Gerber et al., 2013; Gronke et al., 2007; Kousser and Mullin, 2006; Leighley and Nagler, 2013; Richey 2008; Southwell and Burchett, 2000), or possibly non-existent (Gronke and Miller, 2012) if not actually negative (Funk, 2010). In addition, scholars have worried about the deleterious side effects of a downturn in civic engagement that comes from eliminating community polling locations (Thompson, 2004).

In general, in spite of the hype, many of the reforms have failed to encourage new voters to participate (Fitzgerald, 2005). Previous research has suggested that people who take advantage of these voting reforms are already more likely to participate (Berinsky et al., 2001; Monroe and Sylvester, 2011; Patterson and Caldiera, 1985).

All of these studies, however, have looked at the overall effect of electoral reforms and not at campaigns' encouragement of these new voting options. The limited work examining GOTV and voter conversion to alternative forms of voting has examined only non-partisan mobilization efforts (Mann and Mayhew, 2015; Monroe and Sylvester, 2011). These studies have found mixed or null effects for these non-partisan mobilization efforts. While other types of mobilization efforts (e.g. mail reminders and door-knocking) have been shown to be effective (Gerber and Green, 2000, 2001; Gerber et al., 2008), we know little about the effect of efforts to mobilize voters through absentee vote-by-mail, and nothing about how the partisan context affects the success of these efforts.³ This research provides new insight into the effects of these activities when performed by partisan actors.

Partisan GOTV by mail treatments

To test the effect of get-out-the-absentee-vote efforts by partisan actors on turnout and voter conversion to absentee vote-by mail, I paired with a Republican Party organization in a state legislative special general election in early 2016 in Minnesota.⁴ The organization identified 5717 Republicans and independents that leaned Republican who had voted in at least one of the previous four general elections.⁵ Because Minnesota does not collect party registration, party identification was calculated using the party's proprietary data. With this information, we implemented a single factor experiment with three levels in which voters were randomly assigned by household to one of three groups.⁶ Hotelling balance checks on the treatment and control groups revealed no significant differences between the groups in the mean household size, gender, or in past voting history. Further details are available in the online appendix.

The control group received no contact from the party organization. The other two groups received one of two treatments mailed three weeks before the absentee ballot request deadline and a month before the election. Both treatment groups were sent a mailer that encouraged voters not to "let their voter record suffer" and that voting

Table 1. Turnout and absentee mail voting by experimental treatment.

	Control	Generic absentee request	Pre-filled absentee request	Absentee request (combined)
Percentage voting absentee	1.26% (0.3%)	2.05%† (0.5%)	2.57%*** (0.4%)	2.31%*** (0.3%)
Turnout	15.37% (0.9%)	14.75% (0.9%)	16.95% (1.0%)	15.85% (0.7%)
N	1906	1905	1906	3811

*** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < .1$, one-tailed test compared to control group in row.

Robust clustered standard errors account for the clustering of individuals within household, which was the unit of random assignment.

Table 2. Model of effects of partisan absentee ballot get-out-the-vote treatments.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Voted absentee	Voted absentee	Voted	Voted
Sent absentee		0.010* (0.004)		0.001 (0.011)
Generic absentee	0.007† (0.004)		-0.011 (0.013)	
Pre-filled absentee	0.013* (0.005)		0.012 (0.013)	
Observations	5717	5717	5717	5717
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of households	4077	4077	4077	4077
R-squared	0.006	0.005	0.039	0.038

Ordinary Least Squares coefficients. Robust clustered standard errors account for the clustering of individuals within household, which was the unit of random assignment.

Additional covariates include gender, past voting history, and household size.

*** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < .1$, one-tailed test.

absentee was “a great way to make sure your vote counts.” Although the mailer was not overly partisan, the organization did highlight the critical nature of the election to reduce taxes, create new jobs, and support other conservative principles. The mailer also stated explicitly that it was sent by a Republican Party organization. A full version of the mailer is available in the Appendix.⁷

Both treatment groups received a copy of this mailer and an absentee ballot vote-by-mail application. The sole difference between the two treatment groups was that for one group, the absentee ballot application included all of the voter’s personal information necessary to submit the form with the exception of an individual’s social security number or state identification. Because treatments are similar, I also pool the treatments and compare them together to the control group. I measure intent-to-treat effects because there is no way to measure the extent to which our treatment was read by the treatment group (Gerber and Green, 2012).

Results

Following the 2016 special election, I obtained voter turnout data and information about absentee ballot submissions from

public records.⁸ Table 1 reports basic turnout rates and absentee ballot rates for each of the experimental groups with standard errors clustered by household (Arceneaux, 2005).

The results show that 1.3% of the control group voted by mail and 15.4% voted overall. In comparison, 2.1% of those individuals receiving the generic partisan absentee ballot mailer voted by mail but overall turnout was actually slightly lower at 14.8%.⁹ Likewise, 2.6% of those who received the pre-filled absentee ballot request voted by mail and 17.0% voted overall, which is not significantly different from the control group ($p < .12$, one tailed test).¹⁰

Table 2 contains a series of models that also include covariates for voter history, gender, and household size. The first two models predict the likelihood of an individual voting absentee and the next two models use overall turnout as the dependent variable.

Consistent with Table 1, the results in Table 2 show that the partisan absentee ballot vote-by-mail GOTV effort had no net effect on overall voter turnout. The confidence intervals on the point estimates of the effect of vote-by-mail GOTV efforts on overall turnout range from -1.7% to 3.8%. While the pre-filled point estimate is a 1.2

percentage point increase, the point estimate for the two treatments combined is 0.1 percentage points.

What these results do show, however, is that a partisan absentee ballot push does increase the percentage of voters that choose to vote absentee. Individuals who received the pre-filled absentee ballot request forms were significantly more likely to vote absentee by mail than those who received no absentee ballot request. Individuals sent the standard absentee ballot request form were slightly more likely to vote absentee but it is not quite significant at standard levels ($p < .051$, one tailed). On the whole, registered voters who received one of the two absentee ballot mailers were almost twice as likely (1.25 percent compared to 2.31 percent) to vote absentee by mail than those who did not.

Conclusions

Overall, these results show that campaign efforts to encourage the use of absentee vote-by-mail ballots are effective at changing how voters participate; voters who were encouraged by the party organization to vote absentee were significantly more likely to vote absentee. However, the treatments' effect on overall turnout is less conclusive. The sample of voters included in this study is rather small in comparison to studies that have found significant effects of other GOTV efforts that use mail to potential voters (Gerber and Green, 2000; Gerber et al., 2008).¹¹ To detect an increase of the magnitude shown in Column 4 of Table 1 of about a 1 percentage point increase would require a sample more than three times the current sample. Regardless, however, even if this is a true effect, the substantive effect, like other GOTV mail efforts, remains small (with even the most generous interpretation of the confidence intervals would indicate only a 3.8 percentage point increase in turnout for the pre-filled absentee ballot and the point estimate suggesting a much more modest 1.2 percent point increase in turnout). However, given the limited sample size of this study, future studies of the influence of GOTV vote-by-mail efforts on turnout with larger samples and in other contexts undoubtedly remain of interest.

The apparent lack of effect on overall voter turnout, however, is not to say that partisan efforts to encourage voter absentee vote-by-mail balloting do not affect voter behavior. Efforts to encourage absentee vote-by-mail balloting do appear to have a significant effect on the percentage of individuals who cast their ballot by mail. Because absentee vote-by-mail ballots can be cast within a larger window of time, this could conceivably be used by a campaign to their advantage, allowing them to capture votes at a time when they are doing better in the polls and eliminate the influence of subsequent campaign events. Absentee balloting could also free up campaign resources on Election Day to better target more marginal voters. Future research should examine what the effects of these reforms are on campaign strategy as they have fundamentally changed

the way campaigns can be run by opening up a myriad of new strategic considerations. These considerations may explain why campaigns continue to encourage voting before Election Day at record rates even when the overall effect on turnout is small at best.

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Supplementary material

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Notes

1. See Michael P. McDonald's United States Election Project (forthcoming) for more details on increasing absentee ballot use.
2. Recent theoretical considerations of political participation and voter turnout have sought to move beyond the conceptualization of participation as a rational and wholly self-interested decision. Rather than a static calculation of the costs and benefits, some scholars have argued that participation in politics is a form of social expression (Garcia Bedolla and Michelson, 2012; Gerber et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2012). Under this view, participation in politics arises out of a sense of shared identity which motivates participation as part of a group. However, not all groups are equally salient in motivating participation. Partisan efforts to cue party social cues as a motivation to participate have been no more effective than non-partisan social advocacy (Cardy, 2005; Condon et al., 2016).
3. Previous studies of the use of partisan advocacy in other mobilization efforts have been less successful than non-partisan GOTV efforts (Green and Gerber, 2015).
4. A pre-publication agreement allowed for the publication of the results regardless of the outcome (Nickerson, 2011). All randomization and analysis was done by the researcher. The partisan organization provided the voter file and sent the mailings after the list had been randomized. Post-election voter turnout was acquired directly from the Minnesota Secretary of State's office.
5. Minnesota's no-excuse absentee vote-by-mail program was enacted in 2013 (Stassen-Berger, 2014). Because it is relatively new, these effects both could arguably be greater than what would normally be expected because of the novelty of

- the process (Gerber et al., 2013), or could be smaller because of unfamiliarity and lack of trust in the new institution (Burden and Gaines, 2015).
6. Because of concerns about mixing of treatments sent to individuals in the same household, we randomized treatments by household.
 7. As noted, the mailer included a number of social pressure components that were consistent throughout the treatments. Social pressure has been shown to have a strong positive effect on participation compared to GOTV efforts without social pressure (Condon et al., 2016; Gerber et al., 2008).
 8. The election was decided by less than 200 votes out of roughly 5,000 votes cast. The overall turnout rate in the State House district was 19.9 percent in the special election.
 9. Combining both treatment groups into a single group generates an overall turnout rate of 15.9% which is also not significantly different from the control group turnout of 15.4% ($p < .34$).
 10. There is no significant difference between the rate of absentee voting among the pre-filled and the non-pre-filled absentee ballot treatments ($p < .37$, two-tailed test), nor is there is a significant difference in turnout ($p < .11$, two-tailed test). Although the difference in turnout approaches statistical significance, given the small sample, the lack of an effect in the percentage that voted absentee, and the expected size of the effect on turnout of the pre-filled treatment relative to the generic treatment, we should not conclude that this is replicable.
 11. Pre-analysis used to determine power assumed a baseline turnout of 20% and optimistically hoped for a 3% treatment effect given the new nature of absentee balloting in Minnesota and the fact that it was a special election. The organization's desire to include a pre-filled and a standard absentee ballot mandated the use of three groups. Sample size was maximized within the constraints of the organization's desire not to contact Democrats or Democrat leaning independents.
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