Get-Out-The-vote (GOTV) Targeting and the Effectiveness of Direct Voter Contact Techniques on Candidate Performance

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Abstract

In political campaigns the strategic use of resources, including time and money, are often critical in optimizing performance. It will not always be the difference in winning and losing, but it is often the most important factor in running an effective campaign. Specifically, within field operations, the area in which the campaign directly connects with the voter, and a Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) operation, the trade-offs between seemingly miniscule choices can mean the difference in the ultimate success or failure of a political campaign.

Using data from the 2010 Lexington Mayoral campaign of challenger Jim Gray, this study evaluates the effectiveness of GOTV targeting using a pro bit model and the individual and overall effectiveness of the field techniques or elements utilized with a liner regression model. Within the pro bit model, there are two dependent variables. The first is the designation by the Jim Gray campaign of precincts as “Get Out the Vote” target precincts. Of 285 precincts with this information, 105 were so designated. The second is the change in the percentage of votes received by Jim Gray in the runoff. The linear regression has five measures for field operations: Staff/Volunteer canvass, paid employee canvass, staff/volunteer Get Out the Vote activity, paid employee Get Out the Vote activity, and whether a house party was conducted.

The pro bit model showed the best predictor of a GOTV target precinct was an Isaac precinct with a predicted effect of 5 percentage points per point of Isaac’s primary percentage and a large z score of 6.45 (p<0.001). Closely following the Isaac precinct score, was a Gray primary precinct with a predicted effect of 3.5 percentage points per point Gray’s primary percentage and a large z score of 5.92 (p<0.001).

On the question of what characteristics tended to make a precinct targeted, the results show very clearly that the precinct being one in which Teresa Isaac was successful in the primary election mattered a lot. This reinforces, on a scientific level, the perception held among informed political observers; that the endorsement of Teresa Isaac had a major impact on her supporters, who did turn out and vote for Jim Gray in the general election.

In terms of the effectiveness of the field operations, the results are somewhat surprising, given the review of literature. None of the individual field elements meet the minimum scores for significance, nor did they collectively. The larger take away suggests that voters were going to vote how they were going to vote, regardless of any contact from the campaign.
I. Introduction

In political campaigns the strategic use of resources, including time and money, are often critical in optimizing performance. It will not always be the difference in winning and losing, but it is often the most important factor in running an effective campaign. Candidate campaigns at almost any level will consist of several main components: communications, finance, and field operations. Communications handles the campaign message and its delivery, finance raises the funds necessary to conduct the work of the campaign, and field operations are charged with managing individual voters, or subsets of voters.

While the other components are critical, the focus of this study is to examine and understand the strategy involved with conducting effective field operations (field). The broad goal of field is to identify and turnout the supporters of an issue or candidate. Depending on the scope and budget of a given campaign, this goal is approached in a number of ways. Generically, field will consist of administering and recording direct voter contact (DVC) via phone banking and door-to-door canvassing, handling the distribution of yard signs, and conducting the voter turnout operation on, or in the days leading up to, the actual election day, often called Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV).

In terms of the strategic, targeted use of resources within a field operation, the challenge is to identify and turnout the number of supporters necessary to win an election within a limited time-frame and budget. Therefore the need to target specific voters or subsets of voters is paramount to success. Targeting can be determined at the individual and voter subset level by demographics, voting history, already defined preferences or any other number of characteristics depending on the campaign, its budget, or its ability to access, analyze and apply data or information that are relevant or actionable.

Most field operations will conduct some sort of major effort on, or in the days directly leading up to, election day. Most often this element of a field operation or program is referred to as its Get-Out-The-Vote operation, or GOTV. Campaigns will seek to contact their supporters one or more times in the final days before an election with a message reminding supporters to vote. Subsequently, a GOTV operation is developed to be as robust as possible. The most effective GOTV operations require extreme organization, strong managers, a large and well-trained volunteer base and excellent targeting. These operations are intense and their success can often mean the overall success or failure of the entire campaign. A spectacularly successful GOTV campaign might lift an overmatched candidate from 28 to 38 percent or a competitive candidate from 48 to 58 percent. (Green and Gerber 2004)

In terms of the specific, actual contact with the voter, there is some debate, on a cost-benefit basis, as to whether a GOTV contact (a single campaign supporter or staff member contacting a single voter at their door) is most effective when it is an actual door knock and short conversation with a supporter, or if simply leaving a door hanger or other piece of campaign literature is a sufficient method to employ. Additionally, most large and financially successful campaigns, will supplement the GOTV efforts of volunteers with paid canvassers, paid live or automated phone calls, and/or direct mail with a GOTV message.
In addition, a GOTV operation relies on the field operation’s previous direct voter contact work. The recruitment and training of capable volunteers, the location of supporters or strong subsets of support, an accurate database of voters, and tested systems to support contacting large number of supporters in a small time-frame are all essential. Within campaigns, the sophistication and modernization of direct voter contact work is rapidly evolving with the addition of web-based voter contact systems which support phone banking, door-to-door canvassing, and other voter contact work. They can produce the tools and support the reporting necessary to a successful field operation. Candidate campaigns of the highest order, the presidential-level, use databases like the Voter Activation Network or Voter Vault and highly trained operatives to conduct professional field operations expending millions and millions of dollars in a single state to do so. The questions surrounding the most effective manner in which to allocate field resources, and which methods or techniques will yield the best result, are of vital importance to campaigns and their field practitioners.

In 2010, Vice Mayor Jim Gray and Mayor Jim Newberry of Lexington, Kentucky faced off in a non-partisan general election for the office of Mayor. These candidates were the top vote-getters from the primary the previous May. In that primary, Newberry advanced with 21,648 votes or 44 percent, and Gray advanced with 17,703 or 36 percent. Former Mayor Teresa Isaac trailed with 8,216 votes, or 17 percent. At the conclusion of the most expensive campaign for Mayor of Lexington in history, Jim Gray defeated Jim Newberry. The final numbers had Gray defeating Newberry 53% to 46%. Based on the extensive data on hand from the field operations of Jim Gray, the following study will assess the effectiveness of his GOTV targeting and whether or not the field operations had a statistically significant impact on Gray’s performance.

II. Literature Review

The academic research surrounding these critical questions is somewhat limited, however it does exist. One of the most notable researchers on the topic is Dr. Alan Gerber. In examining the field and GOTV operations, Gerber and Green (2000) have tested the effectiveness of various types of campaigning. Their work in 2000 supports the allocation of campaign resources to direct voter contact. Yes, voter turnout was increased substantially by personal canvassing. Research by Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009) concluded, “Yes, face-to-face canvassing is effective with conditions.” Gerber and Green (2000) go on to say that their “findings support that the long term retrenchment in voter turnout is partly attributable to the decline in face-to-face political mobilization.” Overall researchers have been finding that personalized approaches are a far more effective way to mobilize voters than some of the more dominant, impersonal methods used in recent decades. (Reed 2007)

To the question of the most effective technique to be utilized in GOTV operations, Gerber and Green (2000) “have found that the way in which a turnout appeal is delivered has a critical effect on the effectiveness of the appeal. Personal, unhurried appeals are usually far superior to impersonal, mechanical and rushed communications.” This finding is relevant not only to the technique utilized by a
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volunteer or campaign representative at the door of a supporter, but to the question of the effectiveness of automated or live paid telephone calls for GOTV efforts.

In the realm of voter targeting, the existing research informs on the type of voter who is the most likely to respond to a GOTV message. Gerber and Green (2000) conclude that these efforts "increase turnout mostly by enticing those who are on the cusp of voting." In econometric terms, that would be translated as a possible voter with probability near 50%, which suggests a probit model, which is used below. More sophisticated campaigns will account for this by targeting voters with an inconsistent voting history. Arnceneaux and Nickerson (2009) offered "that the type of voter for whom mobilization is effective is contingent on the electoral context. In a low-salience election, where few people in the electorate are either aware of or interested in the campaign, only high-propensity voters will be receptive to canvassers' blandishments to vote." They go on to say that a campaign will be wise to contact only "cusp" voters in campaigns that are intensely covered, as their messages to vote will be wasted on high-propensity voters in this type of election.

Additionally, researcher Hillygus finds that "voting cannot be mobilized by campaigns". Hillygus used a dichotomous system to distinguish regular voters from those voters who are not. “In contrast, Niven (2001, 2004) directly tests and finds support for the curvilinear treatment effect hypothesis. Niven argues that politically disengaged individuals will quickly forget campaign messages, while those who regularly vote will not require any persuasion to turnout.” While the debate continues, most practitioners target so called “drop off voters” or those voters who vote in presidential elections but not in the off-year elections. At this point, it can be considered the best guess.

Ultimately, the challenges associated with testing direct voter contact and GOTV operations and delivering conclusions that are both scientifically sound and relevant to campaign practitioners or observers are great. The type of campaign, candidate or issue, the characteristics of the electorate, the size of a campaign budget, the candidate or issue, the political environment, the makeup of the election itself, the evolution of the campaign, the lack of solid, specific measurable data and any other number of factors make these types of studies difficult. Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009) attempted to take on this challenge. “In their study of the research and findings of Eldersveld 1956, Gosnell 1927, Miller, Bositis and Baer 1981, among others used random assignment to construct comparable treatment and control groups, and produce convincing evidence that door-to-door Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) drives increase turnout 7 to 10 percentage points (Gerber and Green 2000; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003).” This is some of the strongest evidence of the effective of field operations on voter turnout.

Additionally, Green and Gerber in their 2004 book, “Get Out The Vote”, performed a comprehensive study of numerous other electoral campaign studies and at almost every level of government, in an attempt to come up with some more definitive, scientific answers to the effectiveness of field operation tactics and techniques for practitioners to apply in the field. They noted “The rigorous scientific study of voter mobilization requires something more than reams of data and impressive-sounding correlations. It requires a method for making fair comparisons between instances where a campaign tactic was or was not used.” (Green and Gerber 2004)
In the book, Green and Gerber concluded that door-to-door canvassing with volunteers as the lowest per vote cost among several other commonly used campaign techniques. In a table on page 94 of the book, the dollar cost per vote for a number of campaign tactics was presented as follows for non-partisan elections (given a set of basic, reasonable assumptions) were: Door-to-Door Canvassing $19/vote, Leafleting $43/vote, Direct Mail $67/vote, Volunteer Phone Bank $35/vote, Commercial Live Calls with no special coaching $200/vote, and Commercial Live Calls with coaching $45/vote. (Green and Gerber, 2004) In terms of specific increase in turnout rates, Green and Nickerson 2003 found that turnout increased from 44% in the control group to 53% among those canvassed. (Green and Nickerson 2003). In the context of the struggle of campaigns to optimize resource use among a large set of competing and viable alternatives, this information, though not universally accepted, is extremely helpful.

To the question of the contact technique to be utilized in field operations and GOTV operations, the book said, “Mobilizing voters is not merely a matter of reminding them that election day is near. Prerecorded messages reminding people to vote do little, if anything, to raise turnout, even when the prerecorded voices are those of well-known and credible people. Mobilizing voters is not simply a matter of engaging their attention. Live calls from commercial phone banks typically have weak effects.” (Green and Gerber 2004) David Nickerson has added to the technique debate with his 2006 journal article on the topic of volunteer phone calls, finding that, at a level quality and personalization, phone calls boosted turn out 3.8 percentage points. (Nickerson 2006)

III. Econometric models, variables, and hypotheses

To study the results of a political campaign, it is ideal to have data from small areas, with good control variables. Some of the studies described above used controlled experiments, but in the absence of that, an adequate set of explanatory variables in a regression can permit a test of the effectiveness of Get Out the Vote efforts. The present study concerns a Mayoral election in Lexington, Kentucky, with data from 287 precincts, of which 264 have all necessary variables. This provides a detailed breakdown of votes in a single metropolitan area.

There are two dependent variables. The first is the designation by the Jim Gray campaign of precincts as “Get Out the Vote” target precincts. Of 285 precincts with this information, 105 were so designated. The second is the change in the percentage of votes received by Jim Gray in the runoff. Gray had been second of three candidates in the primary, won the runoff, and thus had a large increase in percentage of votes received.

The model to be applied to targeting is probit, which is a model of the propensity to do something designated as a variable equal to 1 (yes) or 0 (no). The model assumes an underlying continuous normal propensity which is observed as yes or no, a discrete outcome. The model estimates the effects of explanatory variables on the propensity to declare a precinct a target, then the marginal impact calculation shows the estimated effect in percentage points on the probability.
The model to be applied to the percentage change is linear regression, with appropriate explanatory variables.

The explanatory variables include the following variables from each precinct from the primary, which control for conditions in the precinct before any Get Out the Vote efforts or designation as a target. Jim Gray's percentage of the primary vote controls for existing support for the ultimately successful candidate. In the context of Lexington, Teresa Isaac's percentage of the primary vote is particularly important, as she is a former Mayor who placed third in the primary and subsequently endorsed Jim Gray over the incumbent. Controlling for general politics, the historical Democratic performance by precinct should code the political culture of each precinct.

The effectiveness of the field operations is then measured through a number of precise measures of activity. First, the designation as a target precinct is a dummy variable (0=no, 1=yes). Regardless of that, there might be activity in the precinct, and there are five measures: Staff/Volunteer canvass, paid employee canvass, staff/volunteer Get Out the Vote activity, paid employee Get Out the Vote activity, and whether a house party was conducted (dummy variable, 0 = no, 1 = yes).

Table 1 shows the summary statistics for the dependent and explanatory variables. Jim Gray increased his percentage by an average of 91% in going from second of three in the primary to the winner of the general election. The amount of field activity varied a lot by precinct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>observations</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>min</th>
<th>max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get Out the Vote designation</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray percentage change</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>91.43</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>-100</td>
<td>1160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray primary percentage</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>34.22</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac primary percentage</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>18.87</td>
<td>11.37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic performance</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>51.76</td>
<td>12.27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout percentage</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>43.52</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff/volunteer canvass</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>22.02</td>
<td>52.82</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid canvass</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>31.65</td>
<td>73.30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff/volunteer GOTV</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>55.45</td>
<td>103.62</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid GOTV</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>70.89</td>
<td>166.81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House party</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Gray percentage change is very large in several very small precincts.

The expectation would be that GOTV activity would increase Gray's percentage of the vote, and that the Isaac percentage would also do so, because she endorsed Gray. All candidates are Democrats in this non-partisan election, so the effect of Democratic performance is unpredictable, and the effect of Gray's primary percentage is similarly unpredictable. Success in the primary might indicate that Gray had successfully attracted voters he could attract already, or could signal further possible gains.
IV. Results

On our first question, the level at which a Gray, Isaac, Dem History or Turnout Percentage precinct predicted a precinct to be a GOTV target or not, the following was estimated. See Table 2 for the probit coefficients (predicting propensity) and Table 3 (marginal impacts on the probability of designation).

|                               | Coefficient | Standard Error | Z Score | P>|z| |
|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------|---------|------|
| Gray Primary PCT              | 9.34        | 1.58           | 5.92    | <0.001 |
| Isaac Primary PCT             | 13.21       | 2.05           | 6.45    | <0.001 |
| Dem History PCT               | 4.85        | 1.63           | 2.98    | 0.003  |
| Turnout PCT                   | 0.75        | 1.36           | 0.55    | 0.583  |

|                               | Coefficient | Standard Error | Z Score | P>|z| |
|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------|---------|------|
| Gray Primary PCT              | 3.54        | 0.60           | 5.95    | <0.001 |
| Isaac Primary PCT             | 5.01        | 0.81           | 6.21    | <0.001 |
| Dem History PCT               | 1.84        | 0.62           | 2.95    | 0.003  |
| Turnout PCT                   | 0.28        | 0.52           | 0.55    | 0.584  |

The best predictor of a GOTV target precinct was an Isaac precinct with a predicted effect of 5 percentage points per point of Isaac's primary percentage and a large z score of 6.45 (p<0.001). Closely following the Isaac precinct score, was a Gray primary precinct with a predicted effect of 3.5 percentage points per point Gray's primary percentage and a large z score of 5.92 (p<0.001). The Democratic History precincts also were more likely to be targeted, but here the effect is predicted to be 1.8 percentage points per point of Democratic support in the precinct. This is also statistically significant (z = 2.98, p=0.003). The Turnout Percentage has a small and statistically insignificant effect. The actual designation in this case was done by people in the Gray campaign with a weight that they chose, but the above probit shows the best estimate of the implicit process of selection. In particular, strong Isaac districts, strong Gray districts, and to some extent, relatively Democratic districts are targeted, but turnout, whether intentional or not, played no statistically significant role in selecting precincts.

The second question is the effectiveness of the field operations, both individually and collectively, controlling for primary results. The linear regression provided the following estimates. See Table 4.
Table 4—Regression predicting Percentage Change in Gray Vote

| Variable                | Coefficient | Standard Error | T Score | P>|t| |
|-------------------------|-------------|----------------|---------|-----|
| Isaac Primary PCT       | 5.17        | 1.46           | 3.53    | <0.001 |
| Gray Primary PCT        | -5.60       | 0.87           | -6.47   | <0.001 |
| Dem History PCT         | 2.78        | 0.84           | 3.32    | 0.001 |
| Turnout PCT             | -1.69       | 0.71           | -2.38   | 0.018 |
| Staff/Vol Canvass       | 0.0006      | 0.0007         | 0.83    | 0.408 |
| Paid Canvass            | 0.0007      | 0.0011         | 0.63    | 0.531 |
| Staff/Vol GOTV          | 0.0010      | 0.0011         | 0.90    | 0.367 |
| Paid GOTV               | -0.0002     | 0.0005         | -0.34   | 0.733 |
| House Party             | -0.0013     | 0.1230         | -0.01   | 0.992 |
| GOTV Target             | -0.3056     | 0.2241         | -1.36   | 0.174 |

The primary controls predict strongly the gains by Jim Gray. Higher Isaac support is associated with gains of five percentage points per point of Isaac support in the primary (z=3.53, p<0.001). The regression cannot show whether this was a result of endorsement by Teresa Isaac, information provided by Teresa Isaac to the Gray campaign, or just the act of Isaac voters themselves switching to Gray. Whichever of these (or several) matters, the effect is very large. Gray primary support is associated with much smaller gains, by five percentage points per point of primary support. This could be a result of changes in political position in a general election as opposed to a primary or a result of lesser gains available on the margin or both. Heavily Democratic districts are associated with higher gains (z=3.32, p<0.001). Districts with higher primary turnout percentage also had lower gains for Jim Gray, perhaps because the margin for gains was smaller with an already higher turnout.

The analysis finds the t scores for none of the specific field operations [Staff/Volunteer Canvass, Paid Canvass, Staff/Volunteer GOTV, Paid GOTV, House Party, nor GOTV Target] meet the minimum level of statistical significance. The t scores are as follows: Staff/Volunteer Canvass 0.83, Paid Canvass 0.63, Staff/Volunteer GOTV 0.9, Paid GOTV -0.34, House Party -0.01, and GOTV Target -1.36. Table 5 shows a test of all of these together, and they are statistically insignificant. Collectively, the analysis of all field operations did not reach the minimum level of statistical significance, with an F value of 0.63, and a p-value of 0.7037. There is no statistical evidence of an effect of these operations, net of other factors. This means that there is no statistical evidence that the level of field operations, or being designated a target precinct, changed Jim Gray’s vote percentage controlling for the primary results and Democratic history.

Table 5—Test of Collective Field Operations

| F (6, 252) | 0.63 |
| Prob> F    | 0.7037 |
This result would undoubtedly be disappointing to those working to increase Gray's vote, but it indicates that other factors, perhaps the endorsement by Teresa Isaac, had already done much of the work. With 13,197 door knocks and 31,976 GOTV touches completed during the campaign, there is an undoubtedly some impact, but for the purposes of this study the impact was not found to be statistically significant. The goal of the operation also might have been more insurance or guarding against a close outcome, which in the event, did not occur: Gray won by a large margin.

V. Conclusions

On the question of what characteristics tended to make a precinct targeted, the results show very clearly that the precinct being one in which Teresa Isaac was successful in the primary election mattered a lot. This reinforces, on a scientific level, the perception held among informed political observers; that the endorsement of Teresa Isaac had a major impact on her supporters, who did turn out and vote for Jim Gray in the general election.

Looking further, the results of the GOTV analysis tell us that the performance by Gray in the primary was matched in the general election. Gray was able to maintain his base of support, while building on it among Isaac supporters. This is important because the campaign selected a more fiscally conservative message, and there was concern that some of the more liberal or progressive base Gray had previously gained might be lost. Per these results, this did not occur. But note that strongly Gray precincts had lower gains, so the change in message might have been manifest there. Finally, precincts with a history of being more democratic than republican did indicate a GOTV precinct. This is less important because all candidates are registered democrats, and the race is non-partisan. Nonetheless, the data again suggest Gray held his base.

Moving into the second question, the effectiveness of the field operations, the results are somewhat surprising, given the review of literature. None of the individual field elements meet the minimum scores for significance, nor did they collectively. The larger take away suggests that voters were going to vote how they were going to vote, regards of any contact from the campaign. In light of the fact that the candidates had run against one another in May, and the race was a local affair, this can also be understood, despite the review of the literature. Note that the results are not evidence that field operations are ineffective, only the absence of evidence that they are effective.

There are a number of limitations to be considered in this study. First, with a small campaign window, a limited budget and a volunteer base that was robust but not sufficient to cover the entire jurisdiction, not all precincts were touched and others not at the level which might be preferred given their importance. The decisions of strategy and to which precincts to send canvassers are often one of choosing between precincts of high importance and high importance. Of course, both factors are almost always the case in a campaign, but it is worth noting for the purposes of better understanding the results here.
Other factors to consider in examining and understanding the results, though unable to measure, are the national political mood, the other campaign activities, including the campaign work of Mayor Isaac, and the other races on the ballot. It is tough to believe that the overall, strong anti-incumbency mood of the electorate didn’t negatively affect the incumbent Newberry, and assisted Gray, especially with his message of an outsider and business man, not politician. It almost certainly did. Additionally, the Gray campaign had a significant presence on TV, sent targeted direct mail, and supported Mayor Isaac in activating her political base. Finally, the ballot included a United States Senate race and contested Congressional race, which conducted their own campaign activities and turned out voters outside of the norm.

On the other hand, the detailed information and local setting of this Mayoral election allow this data set to comment on Get Out the Vote and field operations effects in a very specific election.

References


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Samuel Taylor Coots

University of Kentucky
Introduction

- In any political campaign, candidate, issue or otherwise, the strategic, targeted use of campaign resources, time and money mostly, is critical in optimizing performance.
- Candidate campaigns at almost any level will consist of several components: communications, finance, and field operations.
- Communications handles the campaign message and its delivery, finance raises the funds necessary to conduct the work of the campaign, and field operations are charged with managing individual voters, or subsets of voters.
Introduction

- In terms of the strategic, targeted use of resources within a field operation, the challenge is to identify and turnout the number of supporters necessary to win an election within a limited time-frame and budget.
- Most field operations will conduct some sort of major effort on, or in the days directly leading up to, election day. Most often this element of a field operation or program is referred to as its Get-Out-The-Vote operation, or GOTV.
Introduction

- In addition, a GOTV operation relies on the field operation’s previous direct voter contact work. The recruitment and training of capable volunteers, the location of supporters or strong subsets of support, an accurate database of voters, and tested systems to support contacting large number of supporters in a small time-frame are all essential.

- The questions surrounding the most effective manner in which to allocate field resources, and which methods or techniques will yield the best result, are of vital importance to campaigns and their field practitioners.

- In 2010, Vice Mayor Jim Gray and Mayor Jim Newberry of Lexington, Kentucky faced off in a non-partisan general (or run-off from the primary) election for the office of Mayor. At the conclusion of the most expensive campaign for Mayor of Lexington in history, Jim Gray defeated Jim Newberry.

- Based on the extensive data on hand from the field operations of Jim Gray, the following study will assess the effectiveness of his GOTV targeting and whether or not the field operations had a statistically significant impact on Gray’s performance.
Review of Literature

- The academic research surrounding these critical questions is somewhat limited, however it does exist. One of the most notable researchers on the topic is Dr. Alan Gerber. In examining the field and GOTV operations, Gerber and Green (2000) have tested the effectiveness of various types of campaigning.
- Their work in 2000 supports the allocation of campaign resources to direct voter contact. Yes, voter turnout was increased substantially by personal canvassing.
- Research by Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009) concluded, “Yes, face-to-face canvassing is effective with conditions.”
Review of Literature

- Overall researchers have been finding that personalized approaches are a far more effective way to mobilize voters than some of the more dominant, impersonal methods used in recent decades. (Reed 2007)
- In the realm of voter targeting, the existing research informs on the type of voter who is the most likely to respond to a GOTV message. Gerber and Green (2000) conclude that these efforts “increase turnout mostly by enticing those who are on the cusp of voting.”
Review of Literature

- Ultimately, the challenges associated with testing direct voter contact and GOTV operations and delivering conclusions that are both scientifically sound and relevant to campaign practitioners or observers are great.

- The type of campaign, candidate or issue, the characteristics of the electorate, the size of a campaign budget, the candidate or issue, the political environment, the makeup of the election itself, the evolution of the campaign, the lack of solid, specific measurable data and any other number of factors make these types of studies difficult.

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- Additionally, Green and Gerber in their 2004 book, “Get Out The Vote”, performed a comprehensive study of numerous other electoral. They noted “The rigorous scientific study of voter mobilization requires something more than reams of data and impressive-sounding correlations. It requires a method for making fair comparisons between instances where a campaign tactic was or was not used.” (Green and Gerber 2004)

- In the book, Green and Gerber concluded that door-to-door canvassing with volunteers as the lowest per vote cost among several other commonly used campaign techniques: Door-to-Door Canvassing $19/vote, Leafleting $43/vote, Direct Mail $67/vote, Volunteer Phone Bank $35/vote, Commercial Live Calls with no special coaching $200/vote, and Commercial Live Calls with coaching $45/vote. (Green and Gerber, 2004)

- In terms of specific increase in turnout rates, Green and Nickerson 2003 found that turnout increased from 44% in the control group to 53% among those canvassed. (Green and Nickerson 2003). In the context of the struggle of campaigns to optimize resource use among a large set of competing and viable alternatives, this information, though not universally accepted, is extremely helpful.
Econometric models, variables, and hypotheses

- The present study concerns a Mayoral election in Lexington, Kentucky, with data from 287 precincts, of which 264 have all necessary variables.
- There are two dependent variables. The first is the designation by the Jim Gray campaign of precincts as "Get Out the Vote" target precincts. Of 285 precincts with this information, 105 were so designated.
- The second is the change in the percentage of votes received by Jim Gray in the runoff. Gray had been second of three candidates in the primary, won the runoff, and thus had a large increase in percentage of votes received.
Econometric models, variables, and hypotheses

- The model to be applied to targeting is probit, which is a model of the propensity to do something designated as a variable equal to 1 (yes) or 0 (no). The model assumes an underlying continuous normal propensity which is observed as yes or no, a discrete outcome.
- The model estimates the effects of explanatory variables on the propensity to declare a precinct a target, then the marginal impact calculation shows the estimated effect in percentage points on the probability.
- The model to be applied to the percentage change is linear regression, with appropriate explanatory variables.
Econometric models, variables, and hypotheses

- The effectiveness of field operations/GOTV is then measured through a number of precise measures of activity:
  - First, the designation as a target precinct is a dummy variable (0 = no, 1 = yes).
  - Regardless of that, there might be activity in the precinct, and there are five measures:
    - Staff/Volunteer canvass,
    - Paid Employee canvass
    - Staff/volunteer Get Out the Vote Activity,
    - Paid employee Get Out the Vote activity
    - House party conducted (dummy variable, 0 = no, 1 = yes).
Results

One the question of what predicts a GOTV Target Precinct, the results were:

Isaac is by far the best predictor, with a Gray precinct second.
Results

No field technique by itself had a statistically significant impact on Gray’s performance, nor did they collectively.
Conclusions

- In the probit model, the results show very clearly that the precinct being one in which Teresa Isaac was successful in the primary election mattered a lot. This reinforces, on a scientific level, the perception held among informed political observers; that the endorsement of Teresa Isaac had a major impact on her supporters, who did turn out and vote for Jim Gray in the general election.

- Looking further, the results of the GOTV analysis tell us that the performance by Gray in the primary was matched in the general election. Gray was able to maintain his base of support, while building on it among Isaac supporters.

- Finally, precincts with a history of being more democratic than republican did indicate a GOTV precinct.
Conclusions

- On the effectiveness of the field operations, the results produce a somewhat surprising result, given the review of literature. None of the individual field elements meet the minimum scores for significance, nor did they collectively. The larger take away suggests that voters were going to vote how they were going to vote, regards of any contact from the campaign.

- Note that the results are not evidence that field operations are ineffective, only the absence of evidence that they are effective.
Conclusions

- As a limitation of the study, the small campaign window, a limited budget and a volunteer base that was robust but not sufficient to cover the entire jurisdiction, not all precincts were touched and others not at the level which might be preferred given their importance.
- Other factors to consider in examining and understanding the results, though unable to measure, include:
  - The national political mood,
  - The other campaign activities, including the campaign work of Mayor Isaac, and the other races on the ballot.
  - The overall, strong anti-incumbency mood of the electorate didn’t negatively affect the incumbent Newberry, and assisted Gray, especially with his message of an outsider and business man, not politician.
  - Additionally, the Gray campaign had a significant presence on TV, sent targeted direct mail, and supported Mayor Isaac in activating her political base.
- On the other hand, the detailed information and local setting of this Mayoral election allow this data set to comment on Get Out the Vote effects in a very specific election.
References


