

Nonprofits Strengthening Democracy: Key Findings from an Agency-Based Voter Mobilization Experiment

by Kelly LeRoux¹
University of Illinois at Chicago

Background and Study Purpose

The political participation gap among the socioeconomic classes has been well documented, revealing that citizens with greater resources of education and money participate at higher levels in virtually every aspect of the political process, including voting. Based on the assumption that nonprofits could help reduce this participation gap, the 1993 National Voter Registration Act² made it possible for nonprofit social service organizations to conduct nonpartisan voter registration campaigns with the aim of making the process easier and more accessible for low income and disadvantaged citizens. Although more than 15 years have elapsed since this important reform was enacted, there have been no studies to date determining whether agency-based voter mobilization efforts will actually lead to higher rates of voter turnout.

Nonprofits are uniquely suited to the task of engaging under-represented groups in the electoral process. Nonprofits are trusted institutions within the communities they serve with extensive personal contact with lower voting populations. We know from past research on nonpartisan canvassing that personal contact is highly effective in encouraging voter turnout. The trusting relationships and sustained contact that many low-income citizens have with nonprofit staff suggests that the voter registration and education information transmitted by these staff may be especially instrumental in promoting voter participation among underrepresented citizens. Our study set out to answer these basic questions: Do nonpartisan voter engagement efforts undertaken by nonprofit service organizations lead to an actual increase in voter turnout among nonprofit clients? Which voter engagement strategies are likely to be most effective?

Methodology

We set out to answer these questions through an experimental research design, involving seven nonprofit organizations in the Detroit area (at nine sites). The Michigan Nonprofit Association was instrumental in assisting us in identifying and inviting agencies to participate. The seven participating nonprofits were chosen first on the basis of their mission (human service organizations serving low-income clients and neighborhoods). Nonprofits participating in this study had to be community-based service providers and their voter registration and Get Out the Vote (GOTV) activities had to be conducted “in-agency” as opposed to the door-to-door voter registration and GOTV strategies typically used by campaigns or advocacy nonprofits. A second consideration in choosing agencies to participate in this study was a willingness and commitment to executing the various components of the study over a three month period from September 1st to November 30, 2010.

¹ A longer version of this report with more in-depth details pertaining to the statistical analysis is being prepared for publication later this year. In the meantime readers are encouraged to contact the author with any questions about information contained in this report at kleroux@uic.edu, or 312.355.2672.

² NVRA allowed mail-in voter registration and community-based voter registration drives. It also required registries of motor vehicles and certain federal agencies giving public assistance to offer voter registration.

The study conformed to a quasi-experimental control group design, taking advantage of naturally occurring activities performed by these organizations to measure outcomes of their voter engagement efforts. Each of the seven organizations (nine sites) was asked to select 70 clients and apportion into three groups: 1. a *control group* of 20 clients that would receive no contact whatsoever about voting from the agency, 2. a treatment group of 20 clients that would be provided with voter registration assistance (*Treatment Group 1*), and 3. a treatment group of 30 clients that would receive help with voter registration, plus one or more forms of voter education and a voting reminder contact (*Treatment Group 2*). The clients served by the agencies were “low-income” below or near the poverty line. The study tracked other demographics such as level of education and age that are known to influence voting. The agencies were asked to select clients for each group that they were most likely to be able to sustain contact with throughout the duration of the study. To achieve this, most of the groups were constituted on the basis of existing program or group boundaries. For example an agency might offer parenting education classes at three different locations, or on three different days of the week, so whenever possible the control and treatment groups were constituted on the basis of these naturally occurring distinctions. Thus, individuals were not “selected” in the traditional sense to receive the treatment or not, but rather the treatment occurred as part of normal service delivery within the agencies.

All participating organizations and staff were provided with training by the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network and the study leaders on how to perform nonpartisan voter engagement activities, where to submit completed voter registration forms, and other logistical details. Clients that were in *treatment group 1* were asked if they wished to receive assistance registering to vote. Those that indicated they were already registered were offered help with verifying their voter registration status through an online tool available on the Michigan Secretary of State’s website, and assistance submitting a change of address if needed. Clients that were in the *treatment group 2* were asked about voter registration as in the treatment group 1, but were also provided with anywhere from 1-4 additional forms of encouragement including help finding polling location, being given a sample ballot, notified of a candidate forum, or being contacted with a reminder to vote.

Each participating site was required to administer a post-election survey to their selected clients, which asked whether or not the client voted, and also captured client demographic data. In administering the post-election surveys, agencies were instructed on how to track whether the client was in the *control group* (no voter assistance), *treatment group 1* (voter registration assistance only), or *treatment group 2* (voter registration plus one or more voter education contacts). A total of 505 surveys were completed after the November 2nd election for a response rate of 83%. The respondents were 61% female, 39% male, ranged in age from 18-88, and 63% reported a high school diploma or less as their highest level of education. African Americans comprised 68% of the sample, Caucasians 14%, Arab Americans 9%, Latinos 4%, Asians 2%, and 3% identified themselves as “other.”

Results

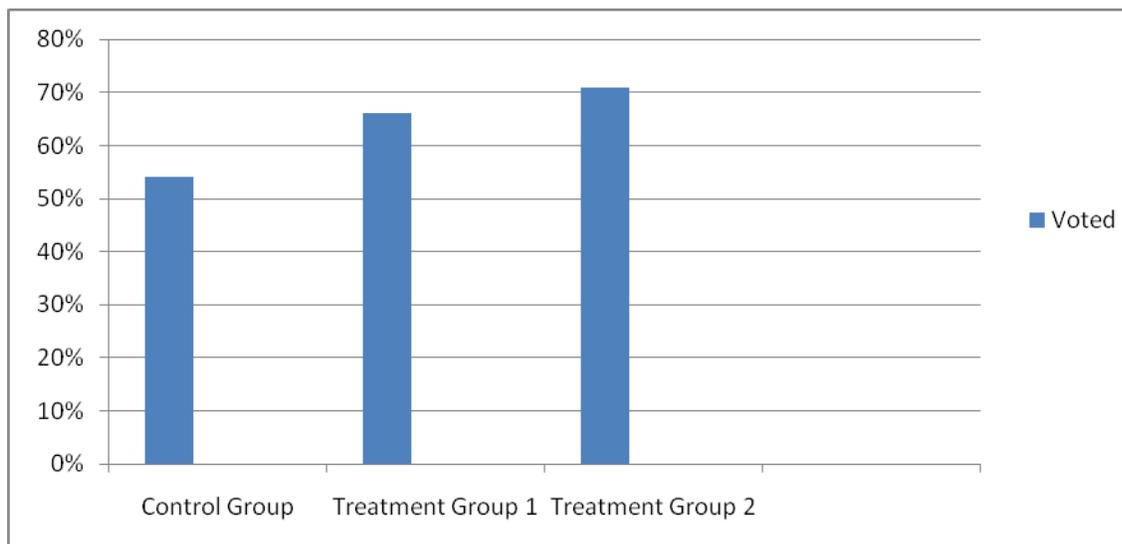
The study results provide clear and consistent evidence that nonprofits’ voter engagement efforts

lead to increased voter turnout among nonprofit clients. This section details the findings from our study, which are summarized here into a few key “take away” points:

- Clients in both treatment groups had a higher likelihood of voting than those in the control group.
- The likelihood of voter turnout increases proportionally with the nonprofits’ level of voter engagement effort.
- The reach of nonprofits’ voter engagement work may extend beyond the clients themselves - clients in both treatment groups were not only more likely to vote, but also more likely to encourage their family and friends to vote.
- Among all forms of voter assistance nonprofits provided, new voter registrations and voting reminders were the two forms of contact that make the biggest difference in increasing voter turnout.

Key Finding #1: Clients in both treatment groups had a higher likelihood of voting than those in the control group. Table 1 below shows the percentages of voter turnout among the three groups. Among the clients in the control group who had no contact about the election with their nonprofit service agency, 54% voted on Election Day. By contrast, clients in the first treatment group who were provided with voter registration assistance had a 66% rate of voter turnout. Clients who were in the second treatment group received both voter registration assistance and one or more voter education and/or voting reminder contacts had the highest rate of voter turnout at 71%. An independent samples difference of means test shows that these differences in voter turnout rates among the groups are statistically significant.

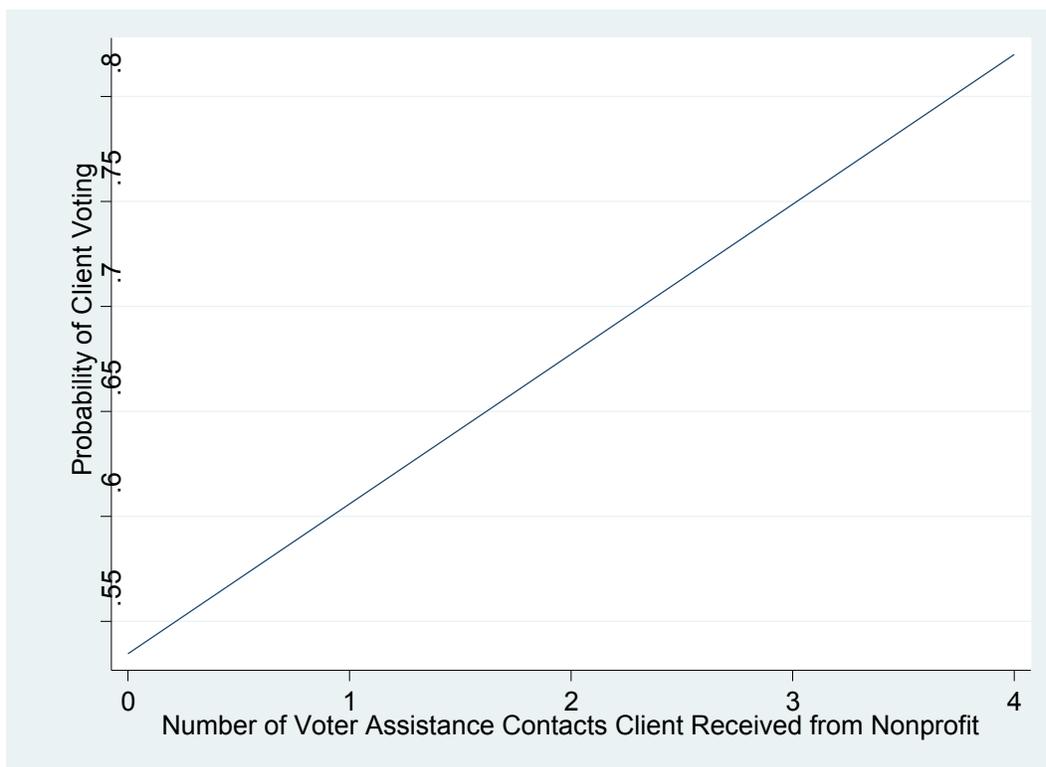
Table 1: Percentages of Voter Turnout by Group



Key Finding #2: The likelihood of voter turnout by nonprofit clients increases proportionally

with the nonprofits' level of voter engagement effort. Table 2 shows the predicted probability of voting with increasing levels of voter assistance. The probability of a client voting ranges from 0 to 1 and the number of voting-related contacts received by clients in our study ranged anywhere from 0 (in the control group) to 4 contacts. When a client receives 0 voting related contacts from his or her nonprofit service agency, the probability of voting is just below .50. With just one contact from his or service agency offering voter registration assistance, clients' probability of voting increases to almost .60, and with two contacts (voter registration plus a voter education or voting reminder contact), the probability of voting approaches .70. Using regression analysis³, we found that clients' probability of voting increased by approximately 9.3 percentage points with each additional voting-related contact clients received from their service agency, even after controlling for other factors known to influence voting such as age and educational attainment. This finding indicates that nonprofits' *level* of voter engagement effort is important, with greater efforts leading to higher rates of voter turnout.

Table 2: Probability of Voting Increases with Each Additional Voter Assistance Contact

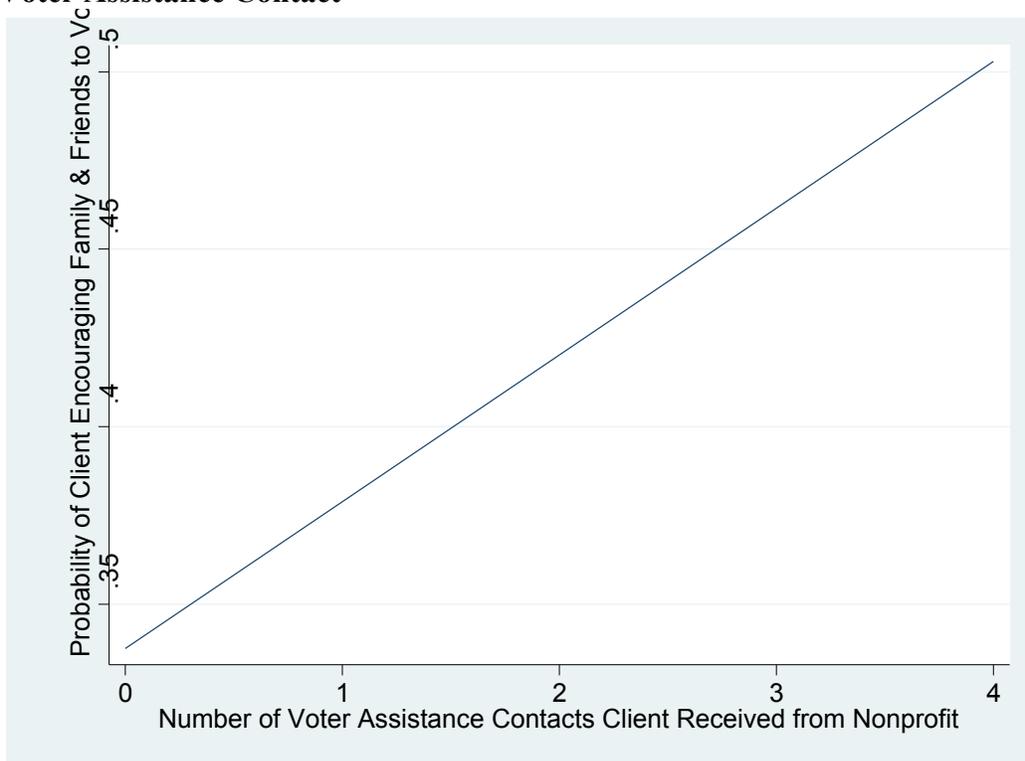


Key Finding #3: The impact of nonprofits' voter engagement work may extend beyond the clients themselves, as clients in both treatment groups were not only more likely to vote, but

³Model was estimated in Stata using probit analysis, and robust standard errors were used. Independent variables included age, education, gender, and number of voter assistance contacts provided by the nonprofit. Age, education, and level of nonprofit voter assistance contact were statistically significant at the .01 level, having a positive effect on the probability of voting. Our findings that age and education are linked to higher rates of voting is consistent with previous studies, yet our results show that nonprofit provided voter assistance contacts have a greater substantive impact on voter likelihood than either age or education.

also more likely to encourage family and friends to vote. Below, Table 3 shows the predicted probabilities of a client encouraging their family and friends to vote, at increasing levels of voter assistance provided by nonprofits. With no voting-related contact from their nonprofit, the probability of a client encouraging family or friends to vote is just over .30. With just one nonprofit contact offering voter registration assistance, the probability of encouraging family and friends to vote increases to almost .37, and with two contacts (voter registration plus a voter education or voting reminder contact), the probability of mobilizing family and friends rises to about .42. Again, we used regression analysis⁴ and found that even after controlling for age, education, and gender, the probability of nonprofit clients encouraging family and friends to vote increases by roughly 4.8 percentage points with each additional voting-related contact the client received from his/her nonprofit. This finding is important as it suggests nonprofit's voter engagement efforts may have a broader, community-wide impact.

Table 3: Probability of Encouraging Family and Friends to Vote with Each Additional Voter Assistance Contact

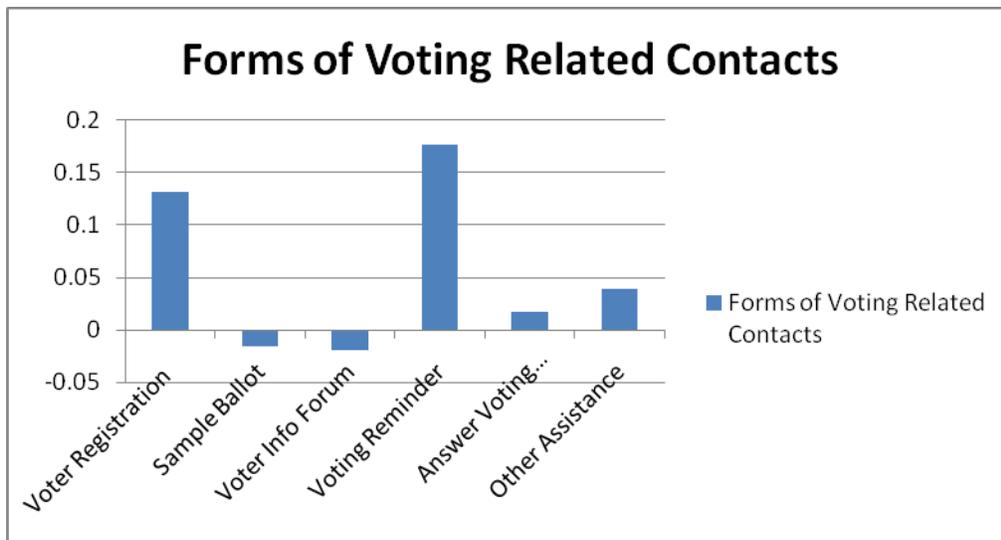


Key Finding #4: Among all forms of voter assistance nonprofits provided, new voter registrations and voting reminders were the two forms of contact that make the biggest difference in increasing voter turnout. While there are many forms of information, education, or assistance nonprofits might provide to encourage their clients to vote, we asked our study participants

⁴ The same method of estimation reported in Table 2 was used here. All the independent variables are the same, and all have a positive effect on the probability of encouraging family and friends to vote. Age and education variables are significant at the .01 level, while gender and voter assistance contacts at .05 level. Thus, not only do age, education, and nonprofit voting-related contacts increase the likelihood of clients mobilizing family and friends, but gender also provides part of the explanation with females being more likely than males to encourage family and friends to vote.

to document all applicable forms of contact provided to clients in treatment group 2, from among the following categories of assistance: voter registration, given a sample ballot, given information on a voting event or forum, voting reminder contact, answered a question about voting from the client, and any other form of assistance. To determine whether any of these forms of contact had a greater impact, we used regression analysis and Table 4 provides a visual representation of the results⁵. As the tall bars in Table 4 would suggest, voter registration contacts and voting reminder contacts have the largest impact on voter turnout. With the probability of voting ranging from 0 to 1, a clients probability of voting increases by .13 as a result of receiving a voter registration contact. Voting reminders have an even larger impact, raising the probability of voting by .17.

Table 4: Effects that Various Forms of Nonprofits’ Voting Related Contacts have on the Probability of Voter Turnout among Clients



⁵ Analysis was estimated in Stata using probit regression, and robust standard errors were used. In addition to the variables noted in Table 4, we controlled for age, education, gender. Age, education were statistically significant at the .01 level, having a positive effect on voter turnout while none of the other forms of voter assistance had a statistically significant effect on voting.