

Partisan mobilization of campaign activists: a field experiment in the Swiss Canton of Ticino

Giordano Neuenschwander, University of Zurich

Introduction

- Partisan mobilization as a two-stage process [1][2]:
 1. Direct: party contacts supporters
 2. Indirect: supporters contact general population
- Communication between parties and their core electorate is therefore a central aspect of politics
- Can parties shape passive supporters into activists?



- **Contribution:** several studies have been conducted to assess the success of *nonpartisan* campaigns aimed at increasing *voter turnout*, but very little research on:
 - Partisan campaigns
 - Other forms of participation (e.g. activism)

- **Research question:** *can phone calls by political parties in the context of electoral campaigns affect the opinions and campaign activism of their core supporters?*

Research design

- Embedded field experiment in cooperation with the Socialist Party (SP) of the Canton of Ticino, Switzerland, during the April 2015 cantonal elections.
- A study population composed by N=292 members and sympathizers of the party was *randomly* divided into a treatment and a control group.
- Subjects in the treatment group were called by party volunteers, who delivered them two messages:
 - a) *Your personal contribution to the campaign is important*
 - b) *Try to convince relatives and friends to vote for the SP*
- Dependent variables (opinions and self-reported campaign activism of subjects) were monitored using an online survey.

Why a randomized field experiment?

Relying on random assignment as an identification strategy ensures that there are no systematic differences between treatment group and control group beside the treatment itself. This procedure allows to draw *causal inference*, as it ensures that the observed difference between the two groups can be attributed solely to the phone calls, and not to unobserved factors [3].

Results

- The experiment was carried out successfully; the phone call delivery rate in the treatment group was 85%
- The measure of interest is the difference in average outcomes between treatment and control groups, which estimates the *effect of the campaign*
- Against expectations, the phone calls are found to have a small *negative* effect on campaign activism and opinions of supporters (backfire?)
- All but few of the results are not statistically significant and the null hypothesis of no treatment effect cannot be discarded

What was the effect of phone calls on the opinions of supporters?

Subjects in the treatment group had a more negative opinion regarding the importance of the individual contribution to the campaign than subjects in the control group.

→ The effect of the campaign is *negative* (opposite to the desired effect)

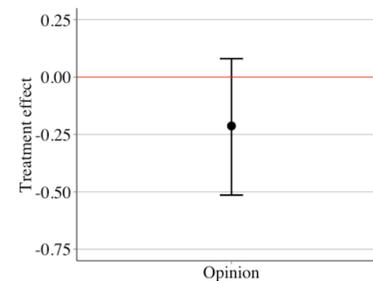


Figure 1: Effect of the campaign on opinion, measured on a 7-point scale, with 95% confidence interval.

What was the effect of phone calls on the self-reported activism of supporters?

- Subjects in the treatment group reported having contacted and persuaded *less* friends and relatives than subjects in the control group
- *Negative* effect of the campaign on activism variables too

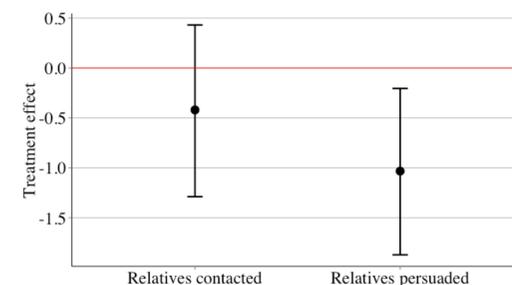


Figure 2: Effect of the campaign on the number of *relatives* the subjects report having contacted, respectively persuaded to vote SP, with 95% confidence intervals.

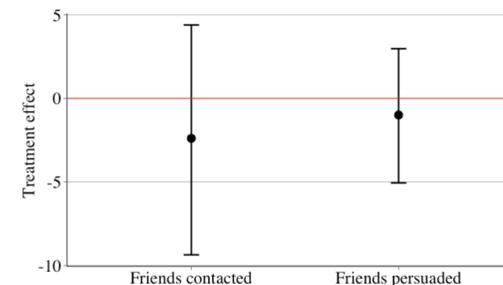


Figure 3: Effect of the campaign on the number of *friends* the subjects report having contacted, respectively persuaded to vote SP, with 95% confidence intervals.

Conclusions

- I found *negative*, albeit not statistically significant effects of phone calls on both the opinion of supporters regarding their importance in the campaign and the number of friends and relatives they talked to.
- Keeping the uncertainty surrounding the results in mind, I offer two explorative interpretations:
 - The phone calls really had a negative effect; recent studies have found canvassing may backfire [4]
 - Phone calls made recipients more conscious of their campaign activism and therefore prone to providing more reliable answers
- Even though the observed negative effects may very well be due to chance, the fact that the estimated effects for every outcome measure were at odds with what expected raises questions.
- *Can mobilization efforts really backfire or were the small negative effects due to chance?*
- Further research on this topic should find measures of activism that do not rely on self-reported data.

References

- [1] Huckfeldt, Robert and John Sprague (1992): Political Parties and Electoral Mobilization: Political Structure, Social Structure, and the Party Canvass. *American Political Science Review* 86(1), 70-86.
- [2] Rosenstone, Steven and John M. Hansen (1993): *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan.
- [3] Gerber, Alan S. and Donald P. Green (2012): *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- [4] Bailey, Michael A., Daniel J. Hopkins, and Todd Rogers (2013): *Unresponsive, Unpersuaded: The Unintended Consequences of Voter Persuasion Efforts (August 8, 2013)*. Available at: http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/todd_rogers/files/unresponsive.pdf.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the *Sezione ticinese del Partito Socialista Svizzero* and all the volunteers for making this study possible. Thanks, in particular, to Gina La Mantia, Carlo Lepori, Matthias Neuenschwander, Antonella Steib Neuenschwander, and Pálma Pestoni. I am also grateful to my coordinator Florian Foes for the precious advice and support provided.

Contact information

Giordano Neuenschwander
giordano.neuenschwander@uzh.ch
Tel. +41 79 358 97 34