

# **How different are telephoning and canvassing? A Get Out The Vote field experiment in the UK 2005 General Election <sup>1</sup>**

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Can we generalise the impact of non-partisan ‘Get Out the Vote’ (GOTV) campaigns, which were developed in the United States of America, to a variety of institutional and cultural contexts? A series of field experiments conducted in the USA (Gerber and Green 2000a, b, 2001; Gerber et al. 2003; Green et al. 2003; Green 2004, Nickerson 2006), summarised in Green and Gerber (2004), evaluate the relative impact of different types of interventions designed to raise electoral turnout. The positive results for studies that rely on a field force canvassing the electorates on their doorsteps constitute a powerful battery of evidence that show how face-to-face contact from a non-partisan source can increase voter turnout. In addition, they find that telephoning, especially from non-professional organisations, also has a positive but less strong effect. There are also weaker results for other forms of intervention, such as door postings and leafleting; no impact for e-mail; and negative impacts from rote telephoning. The culmination of these studies means that political scientists may be confident of the impact and hierarchy of these interventions.

So far most of the studies have been carried out in the USA, and even with the variety of groups and locations this country provides, the range of variation in the institutional frameworks and social conditions is limited to the one country case. For a greater degree of universality, interventions in non-US research sites can ascertain whether this novel intervention may be generalised comparatively, to appraise the hierarchy and strength of effects discovered in the US, and find out the extent to which context matters in the efficacy of GOTV campaigns. The UK political system has many core institutional features that are similar to those in the US, such as the dominance of two main parties

and a first-past-the-post electoral system for national and local polls, which make it a good candidate for the replication of the method. On the other hand, the US has a particular tradition of group membership, social organization and styles of campaigning and voter mobilisation, which may mean that the impact of GOTV campaign would vary when applied to other contexts. In addition, its electoral rules differ, such as non compulsory electoral registration, which may mean there are important institutional differences mediating the impact of a GOTV campaign. Thus the question is whether institutions and cultures are so different to make such a programme contingent on a variety of local circumstances or whether the salience of electoral mobilisation techniques transcend these contexts.

To answer this question, this paper reports the effects of two individual-level GOTV interventions on voter turnout in the campaign period before UK General Election of 5 May 2005. The only previous UK study of this kind in the UK was carried out by Bochel and Denver (1971), who canvassed one of two tower blocks on a public housing estate in Dundee on the assumption that their residents were identical, then compared the impact of the canvassing. However, while an interesting and a valuable contribution to the study of campaigning, this study did not meet the requirements of a randomised control trial where the control and treatment groups are allocated randomly. In addition, the innovation of the study is not just in its non-US location, but in the direct comparison of door-to-door and telephone canvassing in the same study design.

## **Study design and methods**

We selected one constituency in which to carry out the research. We opted for Wythenshawe and Sale East on grounds that it was: local – but not proximate – to the University of Manchester and therefore easily accessible but without the potential disadvantages of working in a constituency with a large number of students (e.g. hostility to student canvassers from local residents, a transient population more likely to be registered to vote elsewhere, and large numbers without landline telephone numbers); largely residential and predominantly comprised of housing estates that made it easier to cover the ground; had a turnout in the previous General Election which, at 48.6 percent, was much lower than the national average of 59.4 percent; and most importantly, had a very safe majority for the sitting Labour Member of Parliament, which protected us from any allegation of seeking to influence the outcome – as well as the turnout – of the election in that constituency. On the other hand, a safe seat presents its own problems because, from a short-term perspective, it is not rational for voters to go the polls if the outcome is predetermined, which privileges justifications based on civic duty rather than those that appeal to the likely impact on outcomes. In practice, however, we did not find any voters in Wythenshawe who had thought about this problem directly.

We sourced the names, addresses and telephone numbers of individuals on the electoral register in the constituency from the electoral register, which was matched with BT

OCIS, a central repository database which is updated daily and matches contacts with telephone numbers. We randomly selected three groups of 2,300 from the 9,976 available for the treatment and control groups.

### *Carrying out the interventions*

Having separated our sample into three equal groups, we then sent letters to everyone in the treatment groups: the group selected to receive the telephone call (the telephone group); and the group selected to receive the visit (the canvassing group), to forewarn them of the imminent contact. We had no contact with the control group. In the letters we badged ourselves as the University of Manchester ‘Get Out the Vote Campaign’; a non-party political group supported by the McDougall Trust, interested in increasing electoral turnout. The letters advised recipients that we would be contacting them to discuss voting and provided contact details to enable recipients to register any concerns. We also provided details of the campaign website,<sup>2</sup> which listed reasons to vote and sources of further information and support.

The door-to-door canvassing was coordinated by IPEG. The canvassers were predominantly postgraduate students from the School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester, ensuring a high level of enthusiasm for raising electoral turnout, knowledge of the research topic, and interest in the objectives of the project. We devised a script for the canvassers and callers to work from; this was intended as a guide to be used in a fairly informal conversation rather than a text to which they should rigidly adhere. In the course of the conversation, which was planned to last up to five minutes,

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ipeg.org.uk/getoutthevote.htm](http://www.ipeg.org.uk/getoutthevote.htm)

the callers / canvassers were instructed to ask three questions: generally speaking, do you think voting is important; do you intend to vote; and will you be voting by post?

However, the main purpose of the conversation was to persuade the contact to vote, both by providing reasons why voting is important and by attempting to respond to any concerns about the voting process. The reasons we provided for the importance of voting were:

- It keeps our democratic system working. If not many people voted it could threaten our democracy. Turnout has been falling in recent elections and was only 59 percent in the last general election.
- Earlier generations fought for the right to vote and in many countries people are still fighting for that right.
- Voting gives you a voice and a chance to express your views about issues which affect your life. You *can* influence the outcome and politicians have to listen to communities where more people turnout to vote as their position depends on those people.
- Voting is easy to do. It doesn't take much time or effort but it is your chance to make a difference.

We also invited respondents to add their own reasons.

For twelve days over the two weeks prior to the General Election, canvassers knocked on doors and conducted brief conversations with named contacts in which they attempted to

persuade them of the merits of voting. The results were recorded on the sheets provided. Time and resources permitting, repeat visits were carried out where the initial attempted contact had been unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup>

The telephone calls were conducted by a local survey company, Vision 21, and took place between 20 and 27 April.<sup>4</sup> They used the same script as the canvassers, thus enabling a comparison of the impact of each method. Up to two repeat calls were made for each contact.

### *Collecting and categorising the responses*

Following completion of the canvassing and calling, we coded the contacts into categories to reflect the diverse range of responses we encountered. While the most important distinction for the purposes of the experiment was whether contact had been made or not, there was also a variety of other responses which we felt may prove pertinent, both for our analysis and for coordinating future experiments.

During the survey we encountered families or others who reported the person we were seeking had died. Even with electoral registers updated recently, we were concerned about the quality of this data, and raised the issue with the company that supplied it. Whilst assuring us that the data were up to date, in the end the company supplied a list of people who were registered deceased, admitting that it should have done so in any case.

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<sup>3</sup> Callbacks were made for 21.7% of the sample, with a small number (0.2%) receiving a second callback.

<sup>4</sup> Telephone calls took place between 3pm and 8pm each evening.

However, as the list of responses shows (see Table 1 below), this strategy did not remove all the people who the canvassers found to be dead. We can only speculate why this is case. Do people lie to the canvassers as an easy (if macabre) way of getting rid of them? More likely, the version of the electoral roll which commercial companies use to generate samples like this may be inaccurate or out of date? If these rolling registers are inaccurate, then data quality is a real problem for this kind of research because it affects the response rate. The only way to overcome this would be to carry out a pre-survey of all the respondents, and weed out the dead and others from both the treatment and control groups. But this strategy would risk affecting the control group thus biasing the experiment. In research where it is not necessary to tie together voters with landline telephones, it should be possible to use a more accurate version of the electoral register.

The responses to the attempts to canvass are reported in Table 1. The 28 who had already voted reflect the postal voting system, which can diminish the scope of this kind of intervention. Whether in future it may be possible to canvass those who applied for a postal vote earlier than the others is an issue that needs to be addressed in subsequent UK research.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>. For the final set of responses, we amalgamated some of the codes and removed the registered deceased from the database which reduces the numbers to 2267 yielding the response rate of 48.5 per cent.

**Table 1: Responses to canvassing, per cents**

	N	%
Successful interview	1099	47.8
Successful interview, on deceased list	3	0.1
No response (no answer, not available)	753	32.7
No response, on deceased list	19	.8
Moved	47	2.0
Moved, interviewed someone else	2	.1
Deceased, on deceased list	11	.5
Deceased, not on deceased list	23	1.0
Deceased, not on deceased list, interviewed someone else	4	.2
Respondent not available, interviewed someone else	3	.1
Wrong address	25	1.1
Wrong address, interviewed someone else	7	.3
Refused to participate	72	3.1
Unable to participate, ill	19	.8
Unable to participate, ill, interviewed someone else	4	.2
Unable to participate, deaf	1	.0
Did not attempt, unable to locate	16	.7
Did not attempt, unable to access	5	.2
Did not attempt, did not reach	117	5.1
Did not attempt, no canvassers sign	21	.9
Successful interview, already voted	28	1.2
Requested not to canvass, deceased, not on deceased list	7	.3
Requested not to canvass, not interested	6	.3
Requested not to canvass, elderly	5	.2
Requested not to canvass, ill	1	.0
Requested not to canvass, will vote anyway	1	.0
Requested not to canvass, wrong address	1	.0
Total	2300	100.0

Turning now to the telephone interviews, Table 2 shows a similar pattern but with different responses, reflecting the technology.

**Table 2: Responses to telephone canvassing**

	N	%
Successful interview	990	43.0
Successful interview, on deceased list	31	1.3
No response (no answer / not available)	678	29.5
Moved	8	.3
Deceased, not on deceased list	48	2.1
Wrong address	84	3.7
Number not in service	79	3.4
Refused to participate	382	16.6
Total	2300	100.0

Here the lower response rate of 43 per cent was caused by fewer people being available or answering, as well as a higher number refusing to participate. In addition, some callers have ‘anonymous call barring’. One way to improve the data collection exercise in future would be to, shortly after the election is called, check the telephone numbers in the treatment and control groups, noting down those who have a barring mechanism.<sup>6</sup> There are a number of wrong addresses or numbers not in service, which may be because the respondents have moved, or because of problems with the dataset. It would not be possible to remove these from the whole dataset without being intrusive (but it may be possible to do a telephone survey of both the treatment and the control groups after the election).

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<sup>6</sup>. Note that this would need to be done in a manner that avoids having the telephone actually ringing.

## Results

After removing postal voters, where central records of voting are not kept, checking voting records yielded the following turnout rates, reported for canvassing in Table 3 and for telephoning in Table 4. Both tables contain the same figures for the control group.

<b>Table 3: The effect of personal canvassing on personal turnout.</b>		
Unadjusted Relationship between Actual Contact and Turnout Rate		
	No personal contact	Personal contact
Per cent voting	46.9	62.0
Number of persons	573	664
Unadjusted Relationship between Experimental Subgroups and Voter Turnout		
	Assigned to the control group	Assigned to the treatment group
Per cent voting	51.5	55.1
Number of persons	1273	1237
Contact Rate		53.7
Estimated Effect of Personal Contact on Voter Turnout		
Turnout differential (3.6%) / Contact Rate (53.67%) = 6.7%		
Standard error = 3.7		

**Table 4: The effect of telephoning on personal turnout.**

Unadjusted Relationship between Actual Contact and Turnout Rate		
	No personal contact	Personal contact
Per cent voting	46.9	63.8
Number of persons	670	611

  

Unadjusted Relationship between Experimental Subgroups and Voter Turnout		
	Assigned to the control group	Assigned to the treatment group
Per cent voting	51.5	55.0
Number of persons	1273	1281
Contact Rate		47.7

  

Estimated Effect of Telephone Contact on Voter Turnout

Turnout differential (3.5%) / Contact Rate (46.69%) = 7.35

Standard error = 4.14

Here we find there are large differences in turnout between those contacted and those who had not been contacted, which suggest an impact but also reflects that those who are contacted may be more likely to vote possibly because they are more outward facing. Here is a contrast to the US studies which had turnout rates among the non-contacted at the same rates as the control group. This may reflect the differences in the UK among

voters, who may vary greatly in their propensity to turnout or whose turnout is correlated with the ability to contact them. It may be the case that the large numbers of elderly people in the constituency and in our dataset (possibly caused by linking the electoral registers with landline telephone numbers) encouraged this – people who are ill or immobile may have this tendency. It may also be a feature of our study design whereby the pre-warning letter meant that those who did not want to vote and answer the phone or the door were more able to do than had they been caught by surprise.

The difference in percentage points between the control group and the treatment groups resembles the differences experienced in US studies, at least for the canvassing group. We calculate the estimated effect of personal contact on voter turnout by a well known procedure elaborated by Gerber and Green (2000: 657-8) whereby to find the treatment effect subtract the turnout rate of control group from the turnout rate of the experimental group, divided by the contact rate. The effect of 6.7 per cent from canvassing is in the same margins as the US studies (Gerber and Green 2000: 657), but the effect of 7.3 from telephoning is far in excess of Gerber and Green's original negligible estimates. It is also in excess of the 3.8 percentage points reported by Nickerson (2006: 283) for a series of experiments using volunteer telephoning. The results of these experiments ranged from 0.5% to 9.3%, which makes the Manchester GOTV experiment within the upper range, though on average he concludes that 'volunteer phone calls are roughly half as effective as face-to-face meetings' (2006: 283). Nickerson correctly seeks to revise the expectations of telephoning in the Gerber and Green research by drawing attention to the extensive use of telephoning in the commercial sector and also by focusing on volunteer

telephone banks, so it may not be the case the Manchester GOTV results are as out of line as originally thought. In addition, these results have large standard errors, which also places the results in the US range.

There were also special features of this experiment that may explain the extent of telephoning. Recall that we used a commercial company to make the calls so we should expect results nearer the Gerber and Green than the Nickerson levels, and never at the same level as face-to-face contact. There are two possible inferences to draw from this. One is that our mentoring of the company - a small local company keen to have the work from the university - which involved briefings of the managers and field force not to treat the script as a standard survey, the promise by the company to select their best workers, and monitoring of the phone calls by the researchers, may have created the conditions of a volunteer force, obliging the company to behave in a similar way to the student field force. And, in fact, many of the employees of Vision 21 were students. But even these features of the experiment would not lead us to anticipate equivalent results. The only other explanation may be to do with the sample, which was telephone accessible and therefore arguably ready to be influenced. It may be the case that the UK is not as saturated as the US by telephone calls, both generally and to encourage voting, making citizens less resistant and a telephone based GOTV more viable. Such explanations are, however, speculative and further research is clearly required.

## **Conclusions**

The Manchester GOTV experiment in the 2005 General Election constitutes a successful replication of the method pioneered by Gerber and Green, both in terms of its practical implementation (for more details, see Brannan and John 2006) and in terms of its results. Gerber and Green, and the rest of the experimental voter turnout research community may be assured that GOTV campaigns are efficacious outside the US context in communities with less of a tradition of group politics and volunteer presence, and with different party and electoral systems. Of course, it remains to be seen whether GOTV campaigns may be seen to work outside first-past-the-post electoral systems, but given that the incentive to vote is much higher in those systems, there is no reason why there should not be an impact.

The results for door-to-door canvassing are much the same as the US, but the comparable results for telephoning from a private company are unique in a study whereby the voters were randomised into two comparable treatment groups, so that we can be sure that the results are not an impact of a particular study design. As discussed, there are some features of the University of Manchester GOTV campaign that may explain some of this result, such as the landline accessible nature of the sample and the intensive mentoring of the private company by the GOTV team, but it may also reflect the differing context of the UK which makes telephoning a more feasible method of getting out the vote than in the US. These findings need more research to ascertain the exact causes, but these results are already a useful revision of the lessons of the GOTV studies: different national contexts do not undermine the validity and impact of GOTV campaigns, but they may

alter the hierarchy of the kinds of intervention and give different findings on the level of their impact.

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