

# **The University of Manchester ‘Get Out the Vote’ Experiment: background and research methods<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper is a preliminary summary of a project aiming to evaluate interventions designed to improve voter turnout in the UK General Election of 2005. The paper is not in a traditional academic format; but is more a record of what we achieved, paying particular attention to the research methods we used. It will be the basis for our report, and then we will use part of it for two academic papers: one an analysis of the results; another examining the methodological challenges of transferring a US-designed research programme to the UK context. Whilst the two academic papers will be journal-style in format and content, this paper aims to be more discursive, telling the story ‘warts and all’

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<sup>1</sup> The project was run by the University of Manchester, through a collaboration between the Institute for Political and Economic Governance (IPEG) and the discipline area, Government, International Politics and Philosophy (GIPP). It was funded by the School of Social Sciences, IPEG, and the McDougall Trust. We thank the three funders, and also the voters and non-voters of Wythenshawe and Sale East, who patiently permitted us to telephone them and call by their houses (excepting the charming citizen who e-mailed us with a promise to ‘set his dogs’ on us). We thank our student workforce who diligently carried out the daunting task of canvassing, and for their good spirits and enthusiasm. We are also grateful to Vision 21, the company that carried out the telephone survey and supplied the data, and who responded to our numerous requests. We greatly appreciated the comments from the members of an impromptu workshop of the Governance, Representation and Public Policy Group who gave useful advice at an early planning stage, and to Chris Roberts (Manchester Division of Epidemiology & Health Sciences) and Don Green (Yale) for their comments and ideas. And lastly, but not least, we thank the staff of IPEG who piled in at a crucial moment to mail out the letters.

for the purposes of clearly understanding our research instrument and exploring its strengths and weaknesses.

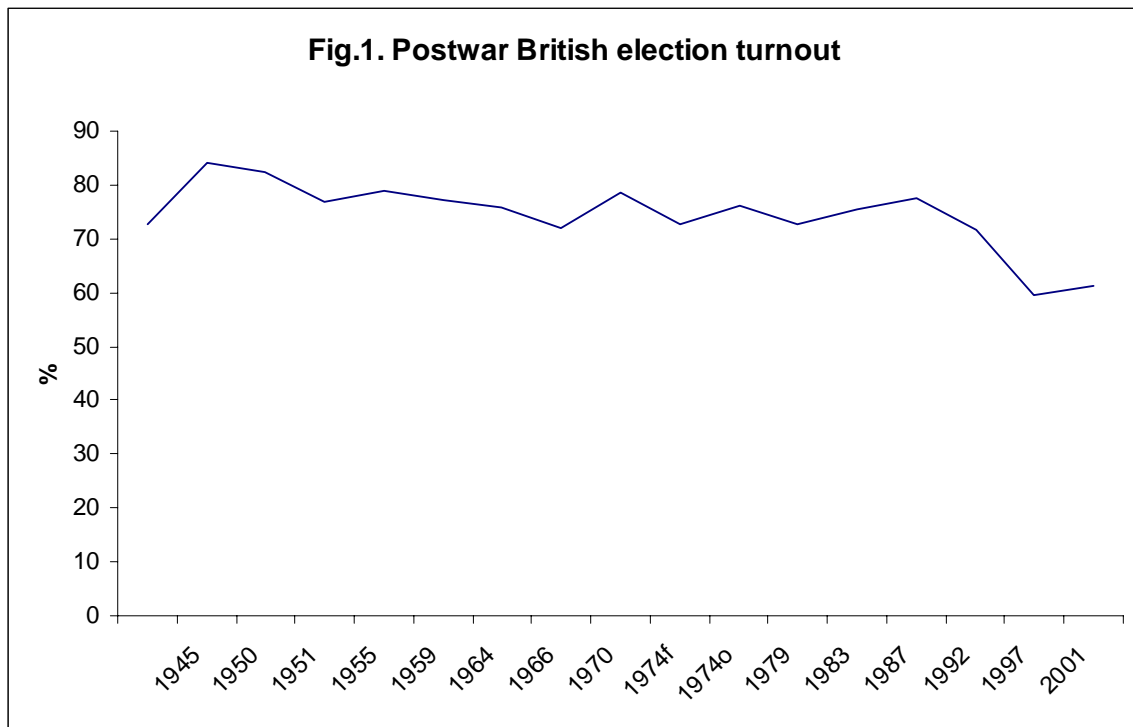
### ***The Aims of the Research***

The intention of this research project is to measure the effects of two individual-level interventions on voter turnout. More generally, we are interested in finding out whether personal contact from a non-partisan source encouraging electors to vote in the UK General Election of 5<sup>th</sup> May 2005 would have the desired effect. Our research drew inspiration and was modeled on a series of experimental studies conducted in the USA at Yale University (Gerber and Green 2000a, b, 2001; Gerber et al. 2003; Green et al. 2003; Green 2004), summarised in Green and Gerber (2004), which evaluated the impact of different types of interventions on electoral turnout. Their research aimed, firstly, to apply an experimental methodology to social science research; and, secondly, to evaluate the claims made by organisations that carry out interventions to encourage voters to go to the polls (whether party-political or non-partisan). Our interest in this research is likewise both methodological and outcome-based. We are also enthused and challenged by the prospect of attempting to replicate in the UK context an experimental methodology developed in the USA. And one theme of this paper is that the UK electoral and registration systems present a number of issues for this kind of research.

### ***Why Turnout Matters***

Our project is relevant because turn out in elections is no longer to be taken for granted. In successive national elections turnout has been falling reaching its nadir (59 per cent) in

2001 (Figure 1). In 2005 it was up slightly to 60.9 per cent, but that is still way off the turnout in the 70 percentile that occurred in the mid part of the twentieth century, with over 82 per cent doing so in the elections of 1950 and 1951. The decline has caught the attention of the politicians who worry that it signals that the voters have turned off them as well as the political institutions.<sup>2</sup> Public organisations are also concerned about the decline and fund initiatives aimed at increasing turnout. The issue has also attracted the attention of a number of scholars, resulting in a steady stream of recent publications on the problem, its consequences, and potential solutions (for a recent selection, see Blais 2000; Franklin 2004; Norris 2003; Wattenberg 2002).



<sup>2</sup> For example, the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee on Public Administration declares that, ‘Not since the extension of the suffrage in 1918 has there been such a low level of participation in the electoral process. The reasons for it may be debated, but not its seriousness for our democracy.’, and called for the establishment of a democracy commission (Press Notice No. 5 of Session 2001-02, dated 6 November 2001).

Needless to say, the arguments for increasing turnout are complex, partly because the electorate can reasonably believe that it may not be rational to turn out to vote, especially if the results has been predetermined in advance, or they live in a safe constituency. In the main we shall leave these arguments to one side on the basis that turnout is important because it indicates a healthy democracy, and that it shows attachment, support, and the giving of legitimacy of the citizens to the political system. After all, the basis of the republican tradition, which is much in fashion among political theorists, is that the citizens' duty is to vote; it is part of the understanding of what makes a citizen. Not voting also means giving strategic power to other actors, who are often more powerful in other ways. And even safe seats can be become unsafe, particularly if the party in power is complacent, as the Conservatives found in 1997 when Labour wiped out many Tory strongholds in the South-East.

***Turnout and voter contact: the rationale behind this project***

Policy-makers and academics in the UK are undecided over which factors can affect turnout. The main research comprises statistical analysis of cross-sectional data, which usually comes up with some plausible reasons about what causes some voters to turn out or not, which can run together such factors as institutional rules (including the electoral system; cf. Lijphart 1999), or marginality and citizen interest (Whiteley et al. 2001). But such studies do not tell policy-makers what to do to increase turnout, except perhaps introduce a fairer electoral system or one that ensures that contests are more intense (e.g. because outcomes are less clear cut). One less discussed line of argument suggests that

voters are more likely to participate when they are mobilised or engaged (\*\*\*\*\*ref.?), which requires the intervention of an outside body, whether it is groups (Leighly 1996), party machines or public bodies. One of the main sources of mobilisation is the political parties, whose party machines have suffered from reduced membership (Seyd and Whiteley 2004), suggesting that the lack of mobilisation has caused declining turnout. The argument also implies that an intervention based on mobilising voters can work (see also Wattenberg 2002).

What model of the individual is the mobilising account based upon? It is possible that some non-voters have a residual set of values that predispose them to vote, but where the practice of doing so has declined in recent years. Here a contact from an external source, especially a non-partisan one, may return them to the voting habit (see Green and Shachar 2000 for an analysis of the importance of voter habit). It may also be the case that voters need to be persuaded that it is in their interest to vote; and in this case, a citizen's vote may have resulted from the persuasion of an enthusiastic canvasser. This last factor may explain why more professionalised and routine forms of canvassing do not appear to work so well, especially telephone canvassing (Green and Gerber 2004: 92).

In order to appraise the mobilization model, and its different theoretical foundations, there would be a variety of methods at work, such as a longitudinal examination of campaign or a comparison between areas which have high and low campaign resources, using advanced statistical models to generate the necessary controls. But these methods have great difficulty in understanding the causal effects, and may rely on imperfect

research instruments, such as survey reports. In order to produce incontrovertible evidence of the impact of these interventions, unencumbered by issues of selection bias, unknown variables, and the absence of a counter-factual, we used a randomised controlled trial (RCT) as adopted by the US studies. This approach, employed widely in medical research but seldom in political science, uses the random selection of subjects into treatment and control groups to test the impact of an intervention. This procedure ensures that the control and treatment groups differ only by whether they received an intervention, and which one they received, not in other ways which would have to be controlled for (such as age, class or geography). Thereby researchers can evaluate the impact of the intervention. Contrary to many other studies, the impact of the intervention (electoral turnout) is verified not by asking respondents whether they voted (a method which is unreliable), but rather by checking the marked electoral registers, both postal and ballot.

A number of interventions were open to us – leafleting, e-mail contact, telephoning, canvassing, and mailshots, which are popular methods of contacting voters and encouraging voting. We decided to evaluate two of them – canvassing and telephoning – on the grounds that the 2005 election had seen a massive increase in the use of telephone canvassing, whereas parties were increasingly moving away from door-to-door approaches, except in the marginal seats. The research is, therefore, aimed at evaluating two research issues:

- whether the interventions work,
- and whether one method is more efficacious than the other.

### *Selecting the Sample*

Having defined our objectives and methodology, we selected a constituency in which to carry out the research. We opted for Wythenshawe and Sale East on the grounds that it was (a) 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); (b) largely residential and predominantly comprised of housing estates that made it easier to cover the ground; (c) 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, (d) 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.

This last factor is especially important given that traditionally Labour voters are less likely to turn out, and so the party would, at least in the eyes of our potential critics, be the beneficiaries of a get out the vote campaign.<sup>3</sup> In a safe seat, we did not expect the political parties to object to our study because politicians from all hues would not contest the aim of raising turnout.<sup>4</sup> The choice of a safe constituency also meant that our study

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<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that the effect of GOTV campaigns benefits one party as it may be just as likely that GOTV campaigns may affect groups with a higher propensity to turn out, but where the habit has fallen off whereas low turnout groups may have less initial disposition to turn out.

<sup>4</sup> After some deliberation we decided not to inform the local political parties about our study. We took advice from the Electoral Commission and also from the legal department of Manchester City Council about who to inform about the study. Ultimately it was the acting returning officer who was formally notified that we were in the field.

would not be likely to encounter the campaigns of the political parties as these tend not to be extensively carried out in safe seats. Political campaigns are interested in turnout as well as votes for a particular party, which would confound the study or make it hard to separate our efforts from those of other groups. 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 commissioned Vision 21, a company that carries out social and political survey research, to source the names, addresses and telephone numbers of individuals on the electoral register in the constituency. These were supplied by a data verification company, originating from the electoral register and matched with BT OCIS, a central repository database which is updated daily and matches contacts with telephone numbers. To ensure random selection of subjects into treatment and control groups whilst still enabling us to carry out the telephone part of the experiment effectively, the sample was confined to those on the electoral register for whom we were able to obtain landline telephone numbers. We randomly selected three groups of 2,300 from the 9976 available for the treatment and control groups, using Microsoft Excel. The remaining 3076 individuals were not included in the study.<sup>5</sup>

### *Carrying out the interventions*

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<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the sample size was in large part determined by budgetary constraints.

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>6</sup> which listed reasons to vote and sources of further information and support. The objectives of sending the letters were at least twofold: they facilitated the job of the callers and canvassers; and they allowed people to contact us to advise us that the intended recipient was deceased or did not live at that address, thus saving us time and resources incurred by calling or canvassing them. The letter is an innovation on our part as the US studies did not carry this out. It creates a unique double treatment given that it may be seen as part of an intervention in which we clarified in advance the purpose of the visit. Moreover, some of our voters will have received the letter, but have not been canvassed.

The door-to-door canvassing was coordinated by the Institute for Political and Economic Governance (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

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<sup>6</sup> [www.ipeg.org.uk/getoutthevote.htm](http://www.ipeg.org.uk/getoutthevote.htm)

the objectives of the project.<sup>7</sup> We also recruited three canvassers from Vision 21's workforce, who had been fully trained in interview techniques, thus ensuring a combination of skills and knowledge in the campaign team as a whole. The telephone calls were administered and carried out by Vision 21.

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 five minutes, the callers / canvassers were instructed to ask three questions:

- Generally speaking, do you think voting is important?
- Do you intend to vote?
- 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.

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<sup>7</sup> They were paid at the rate of £10.69, which they regarded as a good rate of pay for this kind of work.

- 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. The long list of options reflected the pilot nature of this study: we did not have a large enough sample size to vary the responses by civil duty or instrumentality so as to compare them as in the US studies. We adopted a 'scatter gun' approach, designed to find the reason that would work with the voter. Future studies, using large sample sizes, will vary the responses, though in practice the US studies have not found differences on this dimension (Gerber and Green 2000: 658).

Suggested responses to likely questions or comments were also supplied, at all times avoiding discussion of individual parties or policies. In addition to suggesting reasons why respondents should vote, canvassers were equipped to provide information and advice about the practicalities of voting. They were able to provide details of the voting process, such as the opening hours of polling stations and the alternative methods of voting, and refer contacts to sources of further advice and support. By so doing, the campaign aimed to overcome both psychological and practical obstacles to voting.

Both canvassers and callers received a brief training session during which we explained the objectives of the exercise and the process for carrying out the work. In particular, we emphasised the importance of conducting ‘interviews’ only with the named contact and of keeping accurate records. As part of the training process, we carried out a pilot of the script outside the target constituency and used the feedback from canvassers and callers to make minor amendments to it.

Each evening of the canvassing period,<sup>8</sup> meeting in a central location (the café of a local sports centre), we provided canvassers with lists of the names and addresses of individuals to contact, together with maps detailing walking routes. The complexity of this exercise should not be underestimated as routes needed to be feasible, have enough addresses to call by in the planned period, be accessible by the mode of transport the canvasser had, and then updated each day to include call backs. The canvassers also wore campaign badges and carried identification. They were required to complete recording sheets detailing: date and time of contact; whether contact was successful or unsuccessful; whether contact was with someone other than the intended respondent; any reasons for unsuccessful contact (such as intended respondent deceased or moved away); and the responses to the three questions posed.

We were concerned that a poor constituency with high proportions of public housing and some acute social problems would be hard to canvass, and we anticipated that some residents would be hostile to our student canvassers, given the social disorder and lack of

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<sup>8</sup> Initially, canvassing took place between around 3.45 and 8pm each evening but analysis of the response rates about half way through the study led us to amend this to between 4.45 and 8.30pm. Canvassing also took place between 11.15am and 3.30pm on one Saturday.

civility in some English urban areas. For these reasons we were extra-vigilant about security: providing alarms; ensuring that the canvassers worked in pairs; checking they had a mobile phone; giving them a list of contacts to call; making sure one of the main team was 'on call'; and trying to ensure that men canvassed with women. Bar a few low-key encounters with young adolescents, there were no problems of this kind, and the canvassing proceeded smoothly. There was a considerable positive spirit among the canvassers, who believed in the aims of the project, and who took pleasure in seeking to encourage waverers to vote.

For a total of 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>9</sup> a process facilitated by the information provided on the recording sheets.

The telephone calls were conducted by Vision 21 staff and took place between 20 and 27 April.<sup>10</sup> They used the same script as the canvassers, thus enabling a comparison of the impact of each method. Results were recorded electronically. Up to two repeat calls were made for each contact.

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<sup>9</sup> Callbacks were made for 21.7% of the sample, with a small number (0.2%) receiving a second callback.

<sup>10</sup> Telephone calls took place between 3pm and 8pm each evening.

### *Collecting & categorising the responses*

Following completion of the canvassing and calling, we inputted all information into a spreadsheet. We coded the contacts into categories to reflect the diverse range of responses encountered and also to enable us to carry out a range of analyses of the data (see details below). 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 may prove pertinent, both for our analysis and for coordinating future experiments. The responses to the questions posed were likewise coded.

During the survey we encountered families or others who reported the person we were seeking was deceased. With electoral registers updated the previous autumn, we were concerned about the quality of the data we had, 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 it should have done in any case. But as the list of responses shows (see below), this strategy did not remove all the people who the canvassers were found to be dead.

**Table 1: Responses to canvassing (%)**

	N	%
successful interview	1099	47.8
successful interview, on deceased list	3	.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

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, is the electoral roll simply inaccurate? If so, data quality is a real problem for this kind of research because it affects the real response rate especially if we are not in a position to remove the deceased from the control group. The only way to do this would be to carry out a post-election survey of all the respondents, and weed out the dead from the control group. But this strategy would create a risk here of treating the control and treatment groups differently with no guarantee of an adequate response to the survey.

The responses to the questions posed are listed in Table 1. The complex set of codes reflects both the different types of responses to canvassers' calls, and also errors on the part of the canvassers when interpreting their brief, which were entirely understandable given the demands of pleasing the general public on the doorstep. Some responses are

clear, however, such as the successful contacts at 47.8 per cent and the ‘no response’.

What is puzzling is the three successful interviews when the person is registered dead! It is possible that the canvassers had an interview with another family or household member, which raises the possibility that this happened in other cases where we do not have a check. The numbers that have moved is not surprising given high mobility rates in Britain, though it is puzzling why the canvassers interviewed someone else in two cases, perhaps out of a sense of obligation. The 25 wrong addresses may be the result of the inaccurate register with the named contact never having lived at the address or having moved to another address. The 72 persons who refused to participate is not a surprising figure; nor are the number who were reported ill. The cases where respondents did not canvass are probably due to the inaccessibility or location of the property, or deterrents such as dogs or hostile notices. 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>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For the final set of responses, we amalgamated some of the codes and removed the registered deceased from the database, generating a simpler table (yielding the response rate of 48.5 per cent) as follows:

	N	%
Successful interview	1099	48.5
no response	753	33.2
Moved	49	2.2
deceased, not on deceased list	27	1.2
respondent not available	99	4.4
wrong address	32	1.4
did not attempt	180	7.9
successful interview, already voted	28	1.2
Total	2267	100.0

Turning now to the telephone interviews, in Table 2 we can observe a similar pattern but with responses reflecting the different technology.

**Table 2: Responses to telephone canvassing**

	N	%
successful interview	990	43.0
successful interview, on deceased list	1	.0
no response (no answer / not available)	678	29.5
Moved	8	.3
deceased, on deceased list	27	1.2
deceased, not on deceased list	48	2.1
deceased, on deceased list, interviewed someone else	3	.1
wrong number	84	3.7
number not in service	79	3.4
refused to participate	283	12.3
anonymous call barring	91	4.0
unable to participate, deaf	8	.3
Total	2300	100.0

Here we have a lower response rate of 43 per cent caused by less people being available or answering as well as a higher number refusing to participate. 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 barring mechanism.<sup>12</sup> There are a number of wrong numbers, 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

<sup>12</sup> Note that this would need to be done in a manner that avoids having the telephone actually ringing.

whole dataset without being intrusive (but it may be possible to do a telephone survey post the election).<sup>13</sup>

**Table 3: Intentions to vote by group**

			GROUP		
			Canvassing Group	Telephone Group	Total
May I ask if you are intending to vote?	Yes	Count	945	843	1788
		% within GROUP	83.9%	85.1%	84.4%
	Probably	Count	6	0	6
		% within GROUP	.5%	.0%	.3%
	Don't know / not sure	Count	30	60	90
		% within GROUP	2.7%	6.1%	4.2%
No	Count	146	88	234	
	% within GROUP	13.0%	8.9%	11.0%	
Total	Count	1127	991	2118	
	% within GROUP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Although the questions were mainly designed to stimulate conversation, we also recorded responses to them, especially regarding intentions to vote and postal voting. Table 3 deals with the first of these items, revealing the high percentage of respondents who said

<sup>13</sup> In a similar way to the door-to-door canvassing, it is possible to present the data more economically, as follows:

	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

they were going to vote. Though there is a statistically significant difference between the responses, in part this may be due to the different styles of interviewing, as suggested by the finding that the telephone group reported a higher figure. If the 'Yes' and 'Probably' categories are amalgamated, and also the 'DK / Don't knows' and 'No's', the two by two table is hardly different and is not statistically significant.

**Table 4: Intentions to vote by post by group**

			GROUP			
			Canvassing Group	Telephone Group	Total	
Do you mind me asking if you will be voting by post?	Yes	Count	363	299	662	
		% within GROUP	37.0%	33.1%	35.1%	
	Don't know / not sure	Count	12	78	90	
		% within GROUP	1.2%	8.6%	4.8%	
		No	Count	606	526	1132
		% within GROUP	61.8%	58.3%	60.1%	
Total	Count	981	903	1884		
	% within GROUP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		

Table 4 shows that the canvassing group appeared more likely to vote by post, perhaps because the telephone postal voters tended to be too busy to reply to the telephone. But this difference reduces if the codes ‘No’ and ‘DK /Not sure’ are put together, and this 2 by 2 table is not statistically significant.<sup>14</sup>

### *Costs of the Project*

The cost of the project was £18,687, which was higher than the proposed budget, by about £3,000, largely caused by a late decision to increase the sample size. This makes a cost of £8.945 per successful interview if you average all the costs, which is a quite a sum, though the costs for canvassing are cheaper. If you add together the direct costs of each category of canvassing and share the fixed costs between the two, telephoning costs

<sup>14</sup> We were concerned that on occasions we may have canvassed individuals in the same household. Such a problem emerged in the US studies. We checked for this by controlling for duplicate postcodes across the entire dataset. There were no occurrences of this kind, probably because of the sampling method. As each individual had to have a landline, and that is usually registered in one person’s name, it is unlikely that we would select a second person in the same household.

£10.73 as opposed £7.33 for canvassing. In future projects, we may not need to use a professional survey company, which will reduce the costs of the telephone element.

### *Issues raised by the research*

The feedback from the canvassers was generally very positive, and most of them felt it had been an enjoyable and exciting experience. We certainly felt that there were tangible benefits in involving students in our research and enabling them to derive a sense of contributing to something new and worthwhile. Whether that enthusiasm turns into results, we will find out later.

On the whole, respondents engaged willingly and freely in conversations about voting. The general public seemed to enjoy talking about politics as much as the canvassers, which contrasts with the general view about apathy and cynicism about politics. The public particularly welcomed the contact as they said they had not heard from the political parties for some time, which reflects the calculations the political parties make about 'safe' constituencies, but also gives food for thought to those who may worry about the long-term implications of the neglect.

Inevitably, some respondents were not willing to participate and some expressed concerns about invasion of privacy. In addition, some concern was expressed by the group undertaking the telephone calls that respondents already intending to vote were less amenable to discussing reasons for voting. There was also some initial difficulty in introducing the questions and reasons for voting while maintaining a relaxed and conversational manner. However, these problems were overcome by practice and advice from the coordinators and from the other canvassers.

Another issue arose where the named respondent was deceased, unavailable or had moved away. In some cases, it proved difficult to restrict the interview to the named respondent and an interview was conducted with someone else. This was a far more prevalent concern amongst the canvassers due to the face-to-face nature of the contact. Where the named respondent is unavailable, the individual interviewed may subsequently influence the voting behaviour of the respondent. In this case, the fact that someone else had been interviewed was recorded and separate response codes created, enabling this group to be filtered in or out of our analysis (see above).<sup>15</sup>

The research generated a number of ethical considerations. As discussed, we sought to overcome any issues about influencing the outcome of the election by conducting the research in a very safe constituency and in distancing the campaign from parties or party-political issues. But subsequent research, in a wider selection of locations, would have to consider this issue. Using our respondents as the subjects of an experiment, without first seeking their consent, raises a classic question of ethics. But had we sought consent we would not only have biased our sample through self-selection, but would have undermined the intervention and threatened the results of the research. Therefore, we presented ourselves as a campaign rather than a research group but did explain, where questioned, that we were carrying out some research into increasing electoral turnout. In addition, we felt that our genuine concern with increasing turnout did reduce, if not completely dispel, these ethical issues. A related concern was our consultation of the

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<sup>15</sup> In addition, we checked the names and/or addresses of those interviewed in error against the other treatment group and the control group to ensure there had been no cross-contamination.

marked electoral registers to check whether the subjects of the research had voted. We felt that this was unavoidable for reasons of reliability outlined above and justifiable on the grounds that the marked registers are in the public domain and used legitimately by a variety of groups.<sup>16</sup>

The process of coordinating and carrying out the work, particularly the canvassing, was both resource- and labour-intensive and there were considerable logistical issues to be overcome. The lack of precedent in the UK necessitated some degree of experimentation with the methodology and amendments were made as the project progressed. However, ultimately the research was always envisaged as a pilot on whose lessons we would draw in future such research. At present, we are waiting for the marked electoral registers to become available before we will have any indication of the impact of our interventions. However, regardless of the results, the achievements of the research lie in a number of its components: the process of learning for those involved; the trialing of an experimental methodology; the campaign to increase voter turnout and the interaction this entailed; the involvement of research students in a practical and innovative project; and the ability to mobilise enthusiasm and resources behind the research.

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<sup>16</sup> We sought and obtained ethical approval for the project from the university's ethics committee.

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