What We’ve Learned from 49 Experiments: The Persuasive Effects of TV, Digital, Mail, Phone, and Canvass Programs

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What We Did and Found

• Working America conducted 9 new experiments in 2016 using a new method to measure persuasion

• Combined these with re-analysis of all ~40 academic experiments on persuasion (as conducted via many modes)

• Sobering result: Generally find small to no effects on vote choice in general elections, but there is important exception: use of EIPs to find targets
Key Take-Aways

1. We’re recently gotten much better at measuring persuasion.

2. Current general election campaign tactics usually do not persuade large numbers of voters.

3. Don’t be fooled by evidence early in a cycle that suggests persuading voters is easy.

4. EIPs can facilitate effective persuasion.

5. Optimal allocation of spending to registration, GOTV, and persuasion still not obvious.
We’re recently gotten much better at measuring persuasion.
Repeated Online Panel Experiments (ROPEs)

- New innovation in measuring persuasion: enroll voters in repeated online surveys (see Broockman, Kalla, and Sekhon 2017, PA)

- Allows for much more precise experiments, especially with canvass and phone: can now detect effects of ~3% instead of ~17%

- Canvassing can be implemented in just a few days, allowing for rapid answers about who is persuadable
## Example Costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mail Experiment</td>
<td>$215,000</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powered for 3pp</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Canvass Experiment</td>
<td>$1,750,000</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Powered for 4pp</td>
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</table>
Working America used this new method to conduct new experiments that increase (academic) knowledge about persuasion by 10x.
2. Current general election campaign tactics usually do not persuade large numbers of voters.
What persuades people?

- Reasons people are persuaded, broadly speaking...
  - Reason 1: Teach people something new (new information).
  - Reason 2: Elevate salience of existing beliefs.
Why is persuasion hard?

• But, in general elections…

• Hard for Reason 1 to operate (new information):

  • Near election day, voters will already have the information they care to retain from the media, contact from other campaigns, etc. ("saturation")

  • (People also forget new information they don’t care about.)

• Shrinking numbers of “cross-pressured” voters in partisan general elections, and hard to identify them from model scores alone (Hersh 2015)
Why is persuasion hard?

• Hard for Reason 2 to operate (elevate salience of existing beliefs).

• These effects diminished...
  • …in competitive or saturated environments.
  • …when clear cues (e.g., party) are present.

• Why we still expect effects in primary and ballot measure elections — saturation alone not the whole story.
## Predictions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Partisan Race</th>
<th>Close to Election</th>
<th>Persuasive Effects</th>
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<tbody>
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Note: no prediction for effects of media environment, campaign “narratives,” or candidate positions. These are outside of our scope.
Our Paper

• Two new forms of evidence

  1. Meta-analysis of 40 academic experiments.

  2. 9 original experiments in 2015 and 2016 from Working America, \textit{increase statistical precision of evidence on personal contact by 10x}.

    (Every single study Working America did is more precise than the entire body of academic work on personal contact in general elections before it.)

• What all these experiments tell us: effect of an \textit{additional} contact.
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General elections: treatment within 2 months of election day

Best guess: 0.11pp
General election, treatment within 2 months of ED

General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured immediately

General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured later

Primary election

Ballot measure

General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, extant lit

General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, with new studies
# Predictions

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Prediction: Persuasion early in general elections; effects decay by election day

Best guess for effects **early**: 3.16pp

Best guess for **persistence**: -0.59 pp
In experiments that measure decay and treat again: 1) early persuasion works immediately; 2) then it decays; 3) closer to election, same tactic stops working.

![Graph showing treatment effect (CACE) across different conditions: Early Treatment, Immediate Measurement; Early Treatment, Late Measurement; New Sample Close to Election.]

- **Early Treatment, Immediate Measurement**
- **Early Treatment, Late Measurement**
- **New Sample Close to Election**

Experiments:
- Doherty and Adler (2014)
- Gerber et al. (2011)
- OH Senate (2016)
- WA State Legislator (2015)
General election, treatment within 2 months of ED

General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured immediately

General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured later

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General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, extant lit

General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, with new studies
3. Don’t be fooled by evidence early in a cycle that suggests persuading voters is easy.
2. Current general election campaign tactics do not persuade large numbers of voters.

(Primaries and ballot measures are different.)
## Predictions

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Persuasion occurs in primaries and ballot measures

Best guess for effects in **primaries**: 4.51pp

Best guess for effects in **ballot measures**: 3.23pp
Random Effects Estimate

- General election, treatment within 2 months of ED
- General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured immediately
- General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured later
- Primary election
- Ballot measure
- General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, extant lit
- General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, with new studies
Might personal contact be an exception?

- One alternative explanation: persuadable voters do not receive messages in the first place (e.g., don’t watch TV, read political mail)

- Personal contact: can verify the message was delivered

- GOTV literature: personal contact has largest effects

- Also, is less saturated… (see next slide)
In-Person Campaign Contact is Less Saturated
Might personal contact be an exception? Evidence from existing studies...

Best guess: -1.89pp(!)
General election, treatment within 2 months of ED

General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured immediately

General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured later

Primary election

Ballot measure

General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, extant lit

General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, with new studies
New Working America studies

- PA Mayoral Primary, 2015
- WA State Leg. Special Election, 2015
- OH Senate, June 2016
- OH Senate and Presidential, September 2016
- NC Senate and Presidential, October 2016
- FL Dem Candidates, October 2016
- MO Governor, October 2016
- Validations of targeting in OH, NC races
Persuasive Effects of Personal Contact in General Elections

Extant Lit Meta–Analysis

Original Study – FL Experiment – Dem Candidates – Canvass

Original Study – MO Experiment – Governor – Canvass

Original Study – NC DID – Governor – Warm Lit Drop

Original Study – NC DID – President – Canvass

Original Study – NC DID – Senate – Canvass

Original Study – NC Experiment – Governor – Warm Lit Drop

Original Study – NC Experiment – President – Canvass

Original Study – NC Experiment – Senate – Canvass

Original Study – OH DID – Governor – Warm Lit Drop

Original Study – OH DID – President – Canvass

Original Study – OH DID – Senate – Canvass

Original Study – OH Experiment Election Day – President – Canvass

Original Study – OH Experiment Election Day – Senate – Canvass

Overall Meta–Analysis
General election, treatment within 2 months of ED
General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured immediately
General election, treatment prior to 2 months before ED, measured later
Primary election
Ballot measure
General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, extant lit
General election, personal contact, treatment within 2 months of ED, with new studies
...but that is not the whole story.
4. EIPs can facilitate effective persuasion.
Experiment Informed Programs (EIPs)

- Zero overall effect often = mix of positive effects and backlash (although hard to predict in advance who will react positively and negatively)

- EIPs (“experiment informed programs”): use an experiment to find which subgroups are persuadable and which are producing backlash

- In Working America studies in NC and OH, we found responsive voters… (next slides)
Working America EIP **Examples** and Validation

- North Carolina Governor’s race experiment: HB 2 and business community created persuasion opportunity…. among African-Americans.

- Ohio: found responsive subpopulation based on model scores.
Working America EIP Examples and Validation

- Validation: difference-in-differences

- Enrolled NC and OH voters in target universe in surveys conducted both before and after Working America attempted to contact each voter.

  - Compare change over time for contacted versus uncontacted.

    - Note: Not just comparing contacted vs. uncontacted. Not just comparing before vs. after for contacted. Comparing difference in the difference.

- Same effects appeared in this difference-in-differences.
The Power of EIPs: Working America Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Effect on Vote Margin in First Experiment</th>
<th>Effect on Vote Margin in Validation Study with Targeting</th>
<th>Votes Gained from Targeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NC Presidential</td>
<td>-2.6pp</td>
<td>1.4pp</td>
<td>2,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC Senate</td>
<td>4.4pp</td>
<td>9.3pp</td>
<td>3,317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC Governor</td>
<td>7.4pp</td>
<td>12.8pp</td>
<td>3,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OH President</td>
<td>0.8pp</td>
<td>5.6pp</td>
<td>5,171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 14,885 votes
4. EIPs can facilitate effective persuasion.
5. Optimal allocation of spending to registration, GOTV, and persuasion still not obvious.
Big picture on GOTV vs. persuasion...
Effects on Candidate Vote Margin of...

Contact Within 60 Days of Election Day
(Academic Studies Only)

GOTV

Persuasion – No EIP

Persuasion – With EIP

Average Effect on Vote Margin, Percentage Points

Caveat 1: only a small share of voters may be good GOTV targets!

Caveat 2: only small share of voters may be good EIP targets!

Caveat 3: only conducted when persuasion possible in initial experiments.

Based on data from Gerber and Green (2015) for GOTV. Combines all modes. Presidential and midterm general elections only. Discounts GOTV and persuasion by expected turnout and support levels. Persuasion conducted within 60 days of a general election only. EIP includes Rogers and Nickerson (2013).
Key Take-Aways

1. We’re recently gotten much better at measuring persuasion.

2. Current general election campaign tactics do not persuade large numbers of voters.

3. Don’t be fooled by evidence early in a cycle that suggests persuading voters is easy.

4. EIPs can facilitate very effective persuasion.

5. Optimal allocation of spending to registration, GOTV, and persuasion still not obvious.
Caveats to Our Conclusions

• The least evidence on TV and digital video.

  • Essentially no rigorous studies near election day in a general election. But such studies are eminently feasible.

• These are effects of marginal, additional contacts; does not speak to average effects of all contacts. (E.g., “what is the effect of sending the 10th mailpiece to a voter?”; not “what is the effect of mailpiece 1?”)

• No evidence on candidate quality, campaign “message,” “narrative,” or earned media. (But such studies are possible, too!)

• Other messages and messengers might work better. A rethinking of campaign messaging seems in order.
Thanks!

Questions? Comments?
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No Evidence of Treatment by Partisanship Interactions on Vote Choice

<table>
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<th>Study Description</th>
<th>Interaction Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – OH Experiment May – Senate – Canvass</td>
<td>-0.50 [-3.48, 2.48]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – OH Experiment August – Senate – Canvass</td>
<td>1.64 [-0.43, 3.70]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – OH Experiment August – President – Canvass</td>
<td>0.44 [-1.11, 1.99]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – OH Experiment Election Day – Senate – Canvass</td>
<td>-0.56 [-3.02, 1.91]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – OH Experiment Election Day – President – Canvass</td>
<td>-1.53 [-3.34, 0.27]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – NC Experiment – Senate – Canvass</td>
<td>2.59 [-1.38, 6.57]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – NC Experiment – President – Canvass</td>
<td>1.81 [-0.47, 4.10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – FL Experiment – President – Canvass</td>
<td>3.04 [-1.11, 7.18]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Study – MO Experiment – Governor – Canvass</td>
<td>0.90 [-1.89, 3.69]</td>
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RE Model: 0.71 [-0.42, 1.84]
No Evidence of Treatment by Partisanship Interactions on Turnout