



# The role of partisan cues in voter mobilization campaigns: Evidence from a randomized field experiment



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## ABSTRACT

The transmission of partisan appeals during election campaigns is widely believed to aid the formation of citizens' candidate preferences, or to serve as rallying cries, thereby increasing turnout. While laboratory and survey experiments show that partisan cues help citizens decide between candidates, and partisan elections see higher turnout than non-partisan elections, it is unclear if party labels and partisan rhetoric cause voters to turn out in higher numbers in real-world elections. We exploit a low-information election in the UK to randomly assign whether campaign phone messages include strong partisan cues or promote the same candidate without such cues. Whereas we find no significant difference in the overall effectiveness of messages with and without partisan cues at increasing turnout, the effectiveness of the former is moderated by party preference: Consistent with the use of acceptance-rejection heuristics, campaign calls with partisan cues are more likely to mobilize party supporters than rival partisans.

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## 1. Introduction

The involvement of political parties in election campaigns is often seen as ameliorating two intertwined collective action problems faced by voters: The individual costs of getting informed about candidates and of turning out to vote, almost always outweigh the benefits of voting (Downs, 1957; Aldrich, 1995; Schaffner et al., 2001). A party provides candidates with a “brand name,” which conveys a great deal of low-cost information and reduces the costs of decision-making (Aldrich, 1995: 49–50; see also Sniderman et al., 1991; Rahn, 1993; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Snyder and Ting, 2002; Arceneaux and Kolodny, 2009). By facilitating decision-making, party labels are then, in a second step, thought to ameliorate the turnout problem (Downs, 1957; Sniderman et al., 1991; Mondak, 1993; Popkin, 1994; Snyder and Ting, 2002). In this paper we address the question whether campaign messages that include strong partisan cues are more successful at increasing turnout than messages without such cues. In addressing this question we make three important contributions.

First, using a field experimental design we test the causal effects of GOTV phone messages including and excluding explicit partisan cues on turnout in a real-world election. The problem of identifying

whether the use of partisan cues in campaign messages increases turnout constitutes a classical problem of causal inference. Much of the empirical evidence that supports the hypothesis that the provision of partisan cues facilitates turnout is based on observational studies of local and judicial elections in the United States, in which candidates are banned from displaying any kind of party affiliation. Evidence from these observational studies is mixed, but most studies find that turnout levels are higher in partisan contests than in similar, non-partisan elections (Alford and Lee, 1968; Karnig and Walter, 1983; Schaffner et al., 2001; Holbrook and Kaufmann, 2012). However, partisan contests differ on many observable and unobservable attributes from non-partisan contests – e.g., competitiveness, campaign intensity or any of the other many factors that are associated with turnout differences – which observational studies have difficulty accounting for (Schaffner et al., 2001; Holbrook and Kaufmann, 2012).

Although there is much lab- and survey experimental evidence that supports the theoretical assumption that the provision of partisan cues helps individuals articulate candidate preferences (Conover, 1981; Rahn, 1993; Druckman, 2001), these effects might only be short-lived in the real-world (Mutz, 2011) and may not translate into higher turnout. Field experiments are a promising means to address the issue of confounding variables in the context of real-world political campaigns. So far though, such experiments have failed to confirm our observational priors about the mobilizing effects of partisan cues. When the results of partisan campaign experiments

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conducted in the US and in European countries (Gerber, 2004; Cardy, 2005; McNulty, 2005; Nickerson et al., 2006; Bailey et al., 2013; Barton et al., 2013; Pons, 2016) are compared to the well-established positive results of non-partisan Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) experiments (for a review see Green et al., 2013), no clear conclusion emerges. If at all, partisan campaign interventions appear less effective at mobilizing voters than non-partisan GOTV efforts (*ibid.*). The heterogeneity across the different studies—in campaign interventions, campaign goals, messages and electoral settings—greatly complicates any attempt at direct comparison. Furthermore, the partisan nature of a campaign is often difficult to manipulate in the context of the same field experiment given extensive media coverage, campaign activity, and the distribution of free electoral materials that characterize most elections. Cognizant of these problems, Panagopoulos (2009) randomly assigned individuals to receive similar partisan and non-partisan GOTV messages within the same field experiment in the context of a low-salience election. He found that neither partisan nor non-partisan appeals significantly boosted turnout, and interpreted this as consistent with previous findings of the inefficacy of commercial phone banks at mobilizing voters.

We build on Panagopoulos's research, but deviate from his design by exploiting a low-information environment that allows us to randomize whether messages campaigning in favor of the same candidate used partisan cues or not.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we can directly test whether campaigns that provide voters with partisan cues boost turnout. This environment was created during a nationwide election for a newly established elected office in England: the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Election, which was first held in November 2012 and can be compared to Sheriff elections in the US. A Labour Constituency Party in Birmingham, England's second largest city, agreed to implement the experiment.<sup>2</sup> Unlike elections that are either clearly partisan and where candidates' party affiliations are widely known, or clearly non-partisan and therefore hardly comparable to partisan elections, the PCC Election provided us with a unique opportunity. Before the elections, parties hesitated whether to field candidates under their party brand, but eventually decided in favor of fielding party-affiliated candidates (Travis, 2011). Importantly, very little information was available to voters about the elections, the candidates and their party affiliation: none of the candidates were incumbents, constituencies were very large and no free electoral materials were available (Garland and Terry, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

Elections such as the PCC Election in which the electorate has little information about the candidates are not uncommon: many local council and mayoral elections in the United Kingdom, the US, and elsewhere can be considered low-information elections. In such elections, it is reasonable to expect that a substantial portion of the electorate is unfamiliar with the candidates, given that research has shown that even in congressional elections in the US about a third to half of the electorate is not able to recall or does not even recognize the name of the candidates (e.g. Stokes and Miller, 1962; Goldenberg and Traugott, 1980; Mann and Wolfinger,

1980). A particular strength of our research design is that we are thus able to test the causal impact of messages employing partisan cues on turnout in a real-world setting; yet the generalizability of our results to high-salience elections is an open question. In elections in which an abundance of information is available to voters, the impact of a single phone call and the partisan cues transmitted via the call might be drowned out by other competing campaign messages. In that sense the Police and Crime Commissioner Election approximates a controlled environment, in which the effect of different messages can be tested in the real-world net of the interference of other factors. The effect sizes that we find in this paper might hence constitute a best-case scenario, in which the effects of partisan cues are isolated. If we do not find that partisan cues boost turnout in this setting, then, arguably, it is unlikely that we would find strong effects on turnout in higher-salience elections. Alternatively, one could imagine a scenario in which voters expect strongly partisan messages in high-information contests, but view the same messages as less appropriate in low-salience contests such as the Police and Crime Commissioner Election. Nickerson has suggested that it is possible that partisan messages are viewed with more suspicion than non-partisan messages due to their greater persuasion component (Nickerson, 2005; Nickerson et al., 2006). If this applies in particular to low-information elections, strongly partisan messages might be less effective at increasing turnout than they would be in high-salience elections.

Our second contribution is that we examine whether the effectiveness of messages at increasing turnout is moderated by the partisanship of the targeted individual. Panagopoulos (2009) examines the impact of partisan (and non-partisan) phone calls on both registered Democrats and Republicans; however, whereas Democrats received a Democratic message, Republicans received a Republican message. This leaves open the question of how partisans respond to messages that cue rival parties. On the one hand, they might use rival party cues as informational shortcuts about which candidate to support, thereby lowering their turnout costs; on the other, they might simply ignore the informational content of messages when these are associated with rival parties. However, while our study design allows us to identify the causal effects of campaign contact including or excluding explicit partisan cues on turnout versus a randomly assigned control group, we prime, but do not randomly assign individuals' partisans preferences. Consequently, we cannot fully rule out that the moderating variable (partisanship) might be confounded by other, unobserved moderators.

Our third contribution relates to the electoral context in which the field experiment was conducted. The vast majority of partisan GOTV studies have been conducted in the US. Ours is the first randomized field experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of a political party's GOTV phone campaign in the UK. The inclusion of rival party supporters in our study is important because, in contrast to some US states, European countries do not require their citizens to publically register their party support, and parties' voter targeting strategies are less sophisticated. In such countries partisan campaigns are likely contacting rival party supporters on a regular basis. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the baseline turnout rate of 13% is not much lower than turnout in many US mayoral and local elections, on which the majority of observational studies about the effects of partisan cues on turnout are based (Maciag, 2014). Our study is therefore conducted in a similar, low salience context as previous observational studies of the same issue.

In what follows we first develop theoretical expectations about how the provision of partisan cues in campaign messages might affect the formation of candidate preferences and the effectiveness of campaign appeals at mobilizing voters to turn out. We then describe the research design and present the results. Our experiment shows that a telephone campaign with strong Labour partisan

<sup>1</sup> Panagopoulos's messages are not candidate-centered. His non-partisan GOTV message appeals to civic duty and his partisan GOTV message targets party supporters.

<sup>2</sup> We gained informed consent from the Constituency Labour Party to conduct this experiment, and the study was approved by the internal review boards of both the University of Oxford and Simon Fraser University.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the government failed to provide funds to the Electoral Commission to distribute leaflets with information about candidates to eligible households (Garland and Terry, 2012: 10). In order to receive information about candidates or the election, potential voters had to actively search the Internet or request a leaflet from the Electoral Commission (2013). As a consequence, the Electoral Reform Society concluded in its report on the election: "Voters were then left in the dark about who they could vote for with a lack of centrally provided candidate information" (*idem*: 7).

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