Latino Mobilization and Voter Turnout: An Overview of Experimental Studies

Latino voters have attracted considerable attention from researchers as well as political candidates and operatives in recent election cycles in the United States. The literature commonly uses the term Latino to describe voters of Latino/Hispanic origin and is being used here as a gender-neutral term. The growth in the Latino population in recent decades, along with corresponding increases in the number of eligible Latino voters, especially in key states, have been accompanied by a rise in mobilization efforts targeting this segment of the electorate. Despite the intensification of Latino outreach in political campaigns, particularly through the use of Spanish-language advertisements, Latinos persistently vote at lower levels compared to other racial and ethnic groups, including African Americans. The wide gap between the number of eligible Latino voters and the number that actually goes to the polls on Election Day continues to disappoint expectations regarding democratic ideals for participation.

A good deal of research has been conducted on Latino voter turnout and mobilization through the analysis of observational data. This body of literature has focused on resource models of participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), examinations of the impact of living in a majority-minority geography (Barreto, Segura, & Woods, 2004; Brace, Handley, Niemi, & Stanley, 1995; Henderson, Sekhon, & Titiunik, 2016; Rocha, Tolbert, Bowen, & Clark, 2010), examinations of the impact of Latino group consciousness (Stokes, 2003), and the impact of co-ethnic candidates (Barreto et al., 2005; Barreto et al., 2007; Barreto, 2010) on turnout, among other approaches. A handful of these observational studies of Latino electoral participation assess the impact of mobilization efforts, including the effectiveness of contact by Latino organizations (Shaw, De la Garza, & Lee, 2000), partisan contact (Nuño, 2007), and the differential effects of direct and indirect contact (Barreto, Merolla, & Soto, 2011).

Recent scholarship has also deployed experimental approaches to study Latino political engagement and participation. These studies, focusing on Latino mobilization in elections, are the focus of this chapter. Next we present an overview of
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Latino turnout in recent election cycles as well as a summary of key findings produced from randomized experiments on Latino mobilization.

LATINO TURNOUT: A STORY OF UNREACHED POTENTIAL

Electoral participation among Latinos in the United States continues to trail voter participation among white and black Americans despite becoming the largest minority group in the country at the turn of the century. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the share of Latino voters nationally grew to 9.2 percent in the 2016 election cycle, up from 8.4 percent in 2012 (File, 2017). Overall, turnout among Latino voters in the 2016 general election was slightly lower than in 2012 (when 23.3 million Latinos were eligible to vote): 47.6 percent compared to 48 percent, respectively. By contrast, 59.6 percent of blacks voted in November 2016 (down from 66.6% in 2012), and 65.6 percent of non-Hispanic whites voted in 2016, slightly higher than in 2012, when 64.1 percent of white voters voted (File, 2017). Excitement surrounding the Obama candidacy helped to drive nearly one in two eligible Latino voters (49.9%) to the polls on Election Day in the 2008 general election (File, 2017). Since 1980, the highest rate of Latino turnout in general elections was registered in the 1992 election, when 51.6 percent of eligible Latinos voted, but even in that election cycle Latino turnout was still lower than for other racial groups (70.2% of whites and 59.3% of blacks voted in November 1992) (File 2017). Relatively lower rates of turnout among Latino voters is also observed in midterm election cycles; in the November 2014 elections, for example, the Pew Research Center found that turnout among eligible Latino voters fell to a record low of 27 percent (Krogtad, et al., 2016).

Still, Latinos continue to be touted as a key electorate in U.S. politics with the potential to be decisive in current and future elections. Three competitive states in the 2016 presidential race, Arizona, Florida, and Nevada, were among the top 10 states with the highest Latino populations in the Unites States (31%, 24%, and 28%), respectively (Stepler & Hugo López, 2016). Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton lost two (Florida and Arizona) of those three states; had she won all three states, she would have won the presidency. According to exit polls conducted by Edison, 66 percent of Latino voters nationally voted for Clinton over Trump in the 2016 presidential election; in Florida, 62 percent of Latino voters supported Clinton. It is conceivable that if Latinos across the country had voted at rates comparable to, or perhaps even higher than, whites or even other racial minorities, it could have been consequential, altering the outcome of the presidential election.

Historically, major party mobilization efforts have largely overlooked Latinos (Hiro et al., 2000; Stevens & Bishin, 2011; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In recent election cycles, the growing number of untapped Latino voters has prompted greater interest from major parties and candidates seeking to mobilize supporters (Abrajano, 2010; Barreto, 2010; De la Garza, 2004). Few studies, however, until recently systematically examined the effectiveness of various mobilization strategies designed to target Latino voters. In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to this enterprise, and some of the more promising findings have been
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yielded by studies that deploy randomized experimentation to test a wide range of strategies, tactics, and approaches.

EXPERIMENTS ON MOBILIZATION IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Experimental methods are widely considered to be the gold standard to demonstrate causal relationships in political phenomena and have become an influential research approach in the discipline of political science. Druckman and colleagues (2006) noted that use of experimental designs has been on the rise since the 1970s as researchers place a premium on approaches that enable them to make reliable claims about causal relationships. Observational studies, such as survey research, can reveal important associations, but they cannot reliably disentangle cause and effect because they cannot rule out the possibility that unobservable factors are driving the results. Experimental approaches that randomly assign units to treatment and control conditions enable researchers to do so because they can be assured that each of these groups is similar, on average, with respect to both observable and unobservable characteristics. In this way, any differences studies reveal between treatment and control groups can only be attributed to an intervention, such as a campaign ad, a visit by a canvasser, or a postcard mailing. Overall, more than 20 studies of which we are aware deploy experimental methods to study aspects of Latino politics.

Experimental methods offer researchers tremendous control over aspects of their studies, including recruitment, random assignment to experimental groups, treatment (administration of stimuli), and measurement of the treatment effect. Some experiments are conducted in laboratory settings, which allow for high levels of control and offer strong internal validity. Other experiments are conducted in the context of surveys. In these, some, randomly selected respondents are exposed to one version of a question while others see a different version, and researchers compare the responses of each group to a common question of interest to determine the effects of this random variation. By contrast, field experiments are conducted in real-world settings where researchers have less control over the conditions in which their experiments occur, but external validity is maximized. Field experiments trade off internal for external validity since the experimenter conducts their research in a natural setting or political context, controlling only for the most central aspects of random assignment and treatment (McDermott, 2002). Field experiments have become increasingly popular to study a wide range of political phenomena, but perhaps especially in the area of voter mobilization in which researchers seek to examine the real-world impact of specific approaches.

Gosnall (1927) conducted the first field experiment testing the effect of mailers on turnout in Chicago. Results from this study showed a positive effect on households that were treated with a nonpartisan message that encouraged them to vote. Nevertheless, few field experiments in the voting domain were conducted in the seven decades that followed. Interest in field experimentation became renewed after the publication of Gerber and Green’s (2000) seminal article that compared effects of different types of voter contact strategies (direct mail, phone calls, and door-to-door
canvassing) on turnout in elections. By documenting the effectiveness of various tactics, this study reinforced conventional wisdom about campaigning, but it also dispelled common misconceptions by showing, for example, that phone calls and even direct mail had only minimal, if any, effects on voting. Researchers quickly followed suit to apply field experimental approaches to study many aspects of voter mobilization and political participation (e.g., Gerber & Green, 2008; Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008; McNulty, 2005; Nickerson et al., 2006; Ramírez, 2005; Wong, 2005). Many of these studies focused on Latino engagement, mobilization, and electoral participation.

**EXPERIMENTS IN LATINO MOBILIZATION**

Scholarship about Latino politics includes field, laboratory, and survey experiments that study a wide range of topics. Laboratory experiments in Latino politics touch on political empowerment (Gutierrez, 1995), co-ethnic voting (McConnoughy, White, Leal, & Casellas, 2010), and attitudes toward government (Trujillo & Levy Paluck, 2012), while survey experiments in Latino politics have investigated group consciousness (Junn & Masuoka, 2008), Latino vote choice (Jackson, 2011; Lavariegas Monforti, Michelson, & Franco, 2013), and candidate evaluation (Adida, Davenport, & McClendon, 2016). When it comes to the study of Latino electoral mobilization, field experiments have dominated inquiries regarding the efficacy of mobilization campaign strategies designed to get members of this pan-ethnic group to the polls. Researchers have leveraged field experiments to examine the effects of varying the type of tactic, the message, the delivery, the source, the language, or other elements that can potentially influence voter responsiveness.

Michelson’s (2003, 2005) work represents the first incursions in the use of field experimental designs to study Latino voter mobilization, focusing exclusively on the use of in-person canvassing as a mobilization tactic. During a 2001 school board election, Michelson (2003) conducted a field experiment in Dos Palos, California, employing a nonpartisan door-to-door canvassing strategy on Latino and non-Latino registered voters. (Canvassing is a campaign tactic that typically refers to individuals visiting voters at their homes to deliver a persuasive message or mobilization appeal). Individuals assigned to the treatment condition received either a civic duty message or an ethnic solidarity message from Latino bilingual canvassers. The civic duty message resulted in a 7.1 percentage point boost in turnout among Latino Democrats, and the ethnic solidarity message resulted in a 10.6 percentage point boost in turnout among Latino Democrats. Canvassing of Latino non-Democrats did not boost turnout. This study was re-published in 2005 along with three additional Latino mobilization field experiments that sought to improve upon the original Dos Palos study. The additional experiments included two canvassing field experiments conducted in Fresno, California, and one in Maricopa County, California. The first Fresno study, conducted in 2002 during a statewide election, tested whether employing canvassers from multiple races and ethnicities had differential effects on Latino turnout, finding that non-Latino canvassers were more effective in mobilizing Latino registered voters than Latino canvassers. The second Fresno study, conducted in 2003 during a gubernatorial recall election, yielded null results and was designed to test how the content of mobilization
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messages—partisan versus nonpartisan—might have contrasting results on Latino turnout. Similarly, the third study conducted in Maricopa County during a recall election in 2003 also tested partisan versus nonpartisan messages in door-to-door canvassing. This time, the use of a partisan message in canvassing increased turnout in Latino households by 6.9 to 8.5 percentage points, while the use of a nonpartisan message increased turnout in Latino households by 8.5 to 14.1 percentage points.

As we noted earlier, field experiments on Latino mobilization have employed many different types of strategies, including door-to-door canvassing (García Bedolla, & Michelson, 2012; Matland & Murray, 2012; Michelson, 2003, 2005, 2006; Michelson et al., 2011), direct mail (Abrajano & Panagopoulos, 2011; Binder et al., 2014; Matland & Murray, 2012; Ramirez, 2005), radio advertisements (Panagopoulos & Green, 2011), and phone banking (Garcia Bedolla & Michelson, 2012; Ramirez, 2005). Only two of these studies used experimental designs to compare the effectiveness of different contact strategies. First, Ramirez (2005) conducted a multisited field experiment across the United States during the 2002 general election. Over 400,000 Latino registered voters in six high-density Latino population areas in California (two sites), Colorado, New Mexico, New York, and Texas were randomly assigned to treatment groups that would receive appeals encouraging voter turnout through one of three modes of communication: direct mail, robotic phone calls, and live calls (bilingual). Ramirez found that prerecorded phone calls (called robocalls) were not an effective mobilization technique, while direct mail and live phone calls by volunteers seemed to be more effective. Phone banking was particularly effective, increasing turnout by 4.6 percentage points on average. Second, Matland and Murray (2012) conducted a field experiment in Brownsville, Texas, where the population was 90 percent Latino during the 2004 general election. The researchers randomly assigned registered voters to canvassing (bilingual), mail, and control groups. Canvassing resulted in a statistically significant increase in turnout of 1.63 percentage points on average, while mailers raised turnout by 2.9 percentage points on average. Latino voters assigned to be canvassed voted at a rate that was 7.3 percentage points higher on average compared to subjects in the control condition. Individuals in both treatment conditions received either a Latino empowerment message or a civic duty message to encourage voter mobilization. The civic duty message was more effective in the direct mail treatment, while the Latino empowerment appeal was more effective when voters were canvassed, but these differences were not statistically significant. These studies suggest that direct mail campaigns, phone banking, and door-to-door canvassing can effectively mobilize Latino voters, particularly when these voters are contacted in person.

Though not exclusively focused on Latinos, Garcia Bedolla and Michelson (2012) explored multiple strategies for the effective mobilization of Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans, including the use of direct mail, leaflets and door hangers, phone banks, and door-to-door canvassing. In their book Mobilizing Inclusion, the authors conducted over 260 randomized field experiments to study the mobilization of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in collaboration with community-based organizations in California. Thirty of those experiments focused primarily on Latino mobilization using phone banking (24 experiments) and
door-to-door canvassing (6 experiments) in both low- and high-salience elections between 2006 and 2008. The authors found that follow-up phone calls to intended voters resulted in a significant increase in voter turnout among Latinos. However, García Bedolla and Michelson found null results in the field experiments that implemented door-to-door canvassing targeting low-income Latinos residing in urban areas. In additional experiments that contacted eligible voters in mixed Latino and African American communities, the authors found that “door-to-door campaigns are effective in getting low-propensity voters from communities of color out to vote” (p. 125).

The use of appeals to co-ethnicity is commonplace in Latino mobilization experiments. In the same vein as scholars of African American politics (Dawson, 2003; Tate, 2003) some scholars use ethnic group identity to explain Latino electoral behavior and partisanship (Barreto, 2007, 2010; Barreto & Nuño, 2011; Nuño, 2007; Shaw et al., 2000). These scholars cite Bobo and Gilliam’s (1990) “empowerment hypothesis,” which predicts increased political involvement of minority voters when viable minority candidates are running for office, and Tate’s (2003) research on how African American mayoral candidates increase voter turnout among African Americans to predict similar results for Latino voters. Following this logic, Binder and colleagues (2014) examined the mobilizing effect of co-ethnic leadership while varying the language of mailers sent to voters during California’s 2010 statewide primaries. The treatment takes advantage of the candidacy of then lieutenant governor Abel Maldonado and his authorship of an initiative that would be on the ballot during the same primary. A total 6,000 postcards were sent to Latino registered voters in San Bernardino County, California, varying the message and the language in which the message was delivered. Findings show that Latinos whose dominant language was English and were assigned to receive English-language postcards experienced a significant boost in turnout, though Maldonado’s co-ethnic candidacy did not result in a significant increase of turnout among Latinos overall.

A variation of the co-ethnic hypothesis of mobilization was implemented in Michelson’s (2006) study of Latino youth mobilization. In this in-person canvassing field experiment, the author targeted a population with very low propensity to turn out to vote. She explains that while Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 already have low levels of participation, Latinos of the same age group turn out at even lower levels, often below 30 percent. The experiment was conducted in Fresno, California, during the 2002 gubernatorial election. Registered Latino voters between the ages of 18 and 25 were randomly assigned to a control group and a treatment group. In the treatment condition, individuals were either contacted by Latino or non-Latino canvassers and they also randomly received either a civic duty message or an ethnic group solidarity message. Latino canvassers were able to contact 13 percent more young Latino registered voters than non-Latino canvassers. This suggests that co-ethnicity between Latino voters and canvassers can facilitate contact, a necessary requirement for communication of get-out-the-vote messages. Canvassing resulted in a statistically significant rise in turnout of 2.4 percentage points on average, even though turnout overall was very low (7% in the control group and 9.4% in the treatment group). Perhaps surprisingly, the experiment also revealed that non-Latino canvassers were more effective than Latino
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canvassers in mobilizing young Latinos, despite the fact that Latino canvassers contacted subjects at a higher rate than non-Latino canvassers. Accordingly, the results do not appear to support the co-ethnic mobilization hypothesis.

Though some experiments provide for Spanish-speaking phone banking volunteers and canvassers as a matter of convenience (Matland & Murray, 2012; Michelson, 2003; Ramirez, 2005), some studies randomly vary the use of Spanish language in their appeals as part of their experimental design (Abrajano & Panagopoulos, 2011; Binder et al., 2014; Panagopoulos & Green, 2011). Panagopoulos and Green conducted a field experiment in which Spanish-language get-out-the-vote radio advertisements were randomly assigned to be broadcasted in 36 congressional districts in 28 states during the 2006 general elections in the United States. The authors argued that Spanish-language radio had the potential to provide a unique opportunity to reach potential Latino voters. These districts were exposed to a 60-second nonpartisan Spanish-language get-out-the-vote advertisement; media buys were varied for exposure (50, 75, and 100 gross ratings points of advertising). The authors found that the purchase of 100 gross ratings points raised turnout among Latinos within the treated districts by 4 to 5 percentage points on average. This study demonstrates that the use of Spanish-language media can be effective in getting Latinos to participate at higher rates in American elections overall, compared to no exposure to such advertisements, but the researchers were unable to compare the effectiveness of similar ads in English.

An experiment designed, in part, to test whether appeals in Spanish or English are more effective in mobilizing Latino voters was conducted by Abrajano and Panagopoulos (2011) in the context of a special election to fill a vacancy on the New York City council in 2009. Either Spanish- or English-language nonpartisan get-out-the-vote appeals were delivered to registered Latino voters living in single-voter households via direct mail. Postcards in both languages raised turnout on average, but the English-language version appeared to be more effective, raising turnout by about 1.6 percentage points on average compared to 0.65 percentage points for the Spanish version. These results confirm the results of other field experiments that found direct mail can be an effective way to mobilize Latino voters (Matland & Murray, 2012; Ramirez, 2005), but the findings also suggest that Spanish-language appeals may not necessarily be superior to English-language appeals in seeking to mobilize Latino voters.

IMPLICATIONS

From a scholarly perspective, the experimental studies summarized here shed a great deal of light on Latino voter behavior. In many ways, Latino voters resemble non-Latino voters in terms of their responsiveness to various mobilization tactics and approaches. But in other ways, Latinos may be unique. There is much still to learn, for example, about if, how, and why they respond differently to messages delivered in Spanish versus English. Insights gleaned from studies that examine these differences systematically may reveal much about the sociopsychology of voting by Latino voters. Moreover, and as many of the details related to the studies described show, Latinos are not a monolithic group of voters. Documenting and
understanding the heterogeneity that exists across subgroups of Latino voters in terms of their responsiveness to political messages and mobilization tactics remains an important, but unfinished, enterprise.

From a practical perspective, the experimental study of Latino mobilization has real-world implications for electoral politics in the United States. The evidence described here can inform decision making in partisan as well as nonpartisan organizations that seek to expand democratic participation among underrepresented groups. Partisan electoral campaigns that seek to target Latinos will surely be interested in implementing the most effective strategies, especially in competitive settings in which Latino votes can be decisive. Experimental findings also enable campaigns to pursue efficient resource allocation by calculating the cost-effectiveness of various approaches. For example, Ramirez (2005) and Panagopoulos and Green (2011) used the results of their experiments to estimate the cost-effectiveness of the campaign strategies tested in their respective studies. Ramirez (2005) calculated the monetary costs per vote that a campaign would incur when using direct mail, robocall, and live phone call campaigns. Live phone calls were the most cost-effective mobilization technique, with a cost of $22 per vote, while robocalls cost $275 per vote and mailers cost more than $600 per vote. Though live phone banking may be an expensive service overall, the evidence shows it is a worthwhile investment, at least compared to robocalls and mailers. In their study, Panagopoulos and Green (2011) calculated that the purchase of 100 gross ratings points, at an average of $88 cost per point in an average-sized district, increased turnout by 978 votes on average, implying a cost of only $9 per vote.

As the number of Latino voters in the United States climbs, we expect scholars will remain interested in the underpinnings of Latino political behavior and continue to deploy experimental approaches, and especially field experiments, to study aspects of Latino participation in elections. Nevertheless, no single experiment, no matter how well designed and implemented, can definitely isolate the impact of any specific approach. Experimentation depends on ongoing replication and extension; in other words, experiments, even identical experiments, need to be conducted over and over again, in similar and different settings and conditions, to get a clear sense of how the results differ in different contexts or when they are conducted among different populations. As a result, researchers have only scratched the surface when it comes to exploring Latino voter mobilization using experimental methods, but the findings to date are promising and intriguing enough to raise many new and fascinating questions that beg for further exploration in their own right.

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FURTHER READING


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