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Promoting Voting Behavior Among Low Income Black Voters Using Reminder Letters: An Experimental Investigation

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A controlled experimental design applied in a field setting was used to determine the effectiveness of a bipartisan mailed letter reminding registered low income black voters to participate in the 1988 Presidential election. Each member of three groups of approximately 85 voters received either one, two or three such reminder letters shortly before the election. A fourth, control group of voters did not receive any letters. Statistical analysis revealed that the reminder letters appeared to have no effect on voting behavior.

The last twenty-five years have seen a general decline in the numbers of eligible voters who exercise their ballot in national elections. The participation of the electorate has declined 30% from the 1962 high of 72.8%, although there have been elections in which the number of voters has increased. Seventy-five million voters in the 1984 election, and more than 107 million voters in 1986, failed to cast their ballot (cf. Piven & Cloward, 1988a, 1988b).

Social workers have a vested professional interest, as well as a philosophical one, in encouraging the right to vote among all members of society, but especially among the consumers of social welfare services. Traditionally the poor, the handicapped, racial and ethnic minorities and other members of oppressed groups have had relatively low levels of participation in national elections (Piven & Cloward, 1988a). In part, such failures to vote are attributable to both inadvertent and intentional obstacles to

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the free exercise of the ballot. In the past, such intentional obstacles have included unconstitutional voter literacy requirements and psychological and physical intimidation intended to discourage both voter registration and the act of voting. Possibly inadvertent obstacles include the amounts of time required to register or to vote, the inconvenient location of polling places and voter registration sites, the inattention of politicians to the poor and oppressed, the hours of operation of polling places, and the days on which elections are held.

Data have clearly shown that voter participation is a function of socio-economic status. The higher the level of education, income or occupation, the greater the voter turnout. In the upper-class voting group, voter turnout is comparable to the rates of many European countries, 75–85% (Piven & Cloward, 1988a). "Today, barely two-fifths of voters among the bottom segments of the working class and among the unemployed vote, even in presidential elections. The class gap during the 1980s has been 40% or more. It follows . . . that the lower the general level of turnout, the larger the class gap grows" (Piven & Cloward, 1988a, p. 30). In the 1988 presidential election, the United States witnessed the lowest voter turnout, only 50% since 1924.

Social workers and other human services professionals have designed a number of interventions for the purpose of registering voters and/or to encourage already registered voters to exercise their ballot (Fawcett, Seekins, & Silber, 1988; Harvey, 1983; Kuttner, 1987; Shearer, 1988; Tharp, 1984; Waters, 1984). A common (but under-researched) method of encouraging citizens to cast their ballots is through the use of mass media programs designed to either remind people to vote (and usually who to vote for) or to motivate them to vote through some informational strategy such as reiterating the importance of the issues being voted on in the imminent election or of the importance of exercising the democratic right to vote in maintaining the viability of a free society. Literally hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year by local politicians, political organizations, parties and lobbying groups, and public interest organizations for these purposes. Among the approaches employed are television and radio advertisements, display ads in magazines and newspapers, and in political mailings. These resources seem to

be expended on the basis of the intuitive appeal of the value of such informational programs, as opposed to any significant empirical research demonstrating their value in achieving selected political ends. We undertook the following study to investigate the value of one type of strategy aimed at promoting voting behavior, the political mailing flyer.

Methodology

Sample of Voters

This study was conducted in the fall of 1988 in Dublin, Georgia, a town of approximately 17,000 citizens located in a predominantly rural portion of the state. Voting Precinct #1 was intentionally selected for our study because it contained the largest concentration of government subsidized housing projects within the city, and, we inferred, contained a large number of low income registered voters. Precinct #1 consisted of 2473 registered voters and had a racial composition of approximately 90% blacks and 10% whites.

A master voting registry was obtained from the office of the Registrar of Voters. This list, obtained in the form of computer-printed address labels, consisted only of those persons who were already registered to vote and who had participated in a city or county election within the past three years. The voter roster of 2473 names may be considered the 'population' of this study. Four groups of approximately 100 voters each were randomly selected from the larger population. Each of these four groups was randomly assigned to receive one of the following conditions:

- Group 1 — Voters assigned to Group 1 were to receive one reminder letter (described below) a few days before the presidential election on November 4th.
- Group 2 — Voters assigned to Group 2 were to receive two identical reminder letters, one the same time as Group 1, and the second a week earlier, around October 27th.
- Group 3 — Voters assigned to Group 3 were to receive three reminder letters, two at the same time as Groups 1 and 2, and the third about October 21st.

Group 4 — Voters assigned to Group 4 did not receive any letters reminding them to vote.

This above approach involving the random selection of a sample of voters from a larger population of interest (Precinct 1) and their subsequent random assignment into four conditions (three 'treatment' groups and one 'no-treatment' group) thus conforms to the requirements of a posttest-only control group design with random selection and random assignment (Grinnell & Strothers, 1988), and thus may be viewed as a true experimental field study conducted under natural conditions.

Independent Variable

The voting promotion intervention (independent variable) employed in this study was a bipartisan letter sent to the members of groups 1–3, encouraging them to vote. Statements were included reminding them of the privilege and responsibility of all registered voters to participate in the voting process. To add credibility to the letter it was endorsed by the authentic signatures of the local county chairpersons for the Democratic and Republican parties. Each letter was printed on plain light blue paper (a copy of this letter is available from the corresponding author).

The mailings took place over the three week period described above. Each letter was mailed first class in a plain white envelope and labeled with the senior author's name and return address.

Dependent Variable

The outcome measure (dependent variable) in this study was the determination of whether or not a given registered voter actually voted in the election of November 4th, 1988. Following the election, a master poll list was obtained from the Office of the Registrar of Elections, which contained the names of all registered voters of Precinct 1 along with an indication of whether or not they had voted. This information, along with the roster itself, is a matter of public record. How they voted was of course not indicated. A cross check was made from this master list

against the members of groups 1–4, permitting a determination of the numbers of each group who actually voted.

Results

Letters that were not deliverable (e.g. addressee unknown, unable to forward, forward time expired, insufficient information to deliver, deceased, etc.) were returned to the senior author through the usual postal delivery system. If any one mailing sent to a member of groups 1–3 was returned, that name was purged from his/her respective group's membership.

Of the 104 original voters assigned to Group 1 (those who received one letter), 18 names were excluded from the study because of undeliverable letters, leaving a final presumptive sample of 86 voters. Of these 86, 49 (57%) were found to have actually voted; 37 (43%) did not vote.

Of the 104 original members assigned to Group 2 (those who received two letters), 24 names were excluded from the study because of undeliverable letters, leaving a final presumptive sample of 80 voters. Of these, 54 (68%) had voted and 26 (32%) did not vote.

Group 3 originally had 103 members, but 20 voters were excluded because of undeliverable letters. Of the final sample of 83 presumptive voters, 45 (54%) voted and 38 (46%) did not vote.

With respect to the 103 voters originally assigned to Group 4 it was not possible to determine the actual pool of potential voters since we could not exclude names on the basis of undeliverable mail. Of the 103 presumptive members, 57 (55%) did cast their ballots in the election and 46 (45%) did not vote.

These data were analyzed using a one (voting status) by four (group assignment) chi-square analysis. The results failed to uncover any statistically significant differences in the voting patterns across the four groups [$X^2(3)=5.6$; $p<.30$]. A comparison of the rate of returned letters from each group showed no statistically significant difference, thereby permitting the conclusion that the number of returned letters per group had little or no bearing on the apparent outcomes of voter participation [$X^2(<1)=1.9$; $p<.50$]. Another comparison was conducted to determine if the combined voter percentage from the three groups that received letters varied from the percent of voters in

Group 4, those who did not receive reminder letters. Again there was no statistically significant difference [$X^2(<1)=1.9;p<.50$]. These results argue strongly in favor of the contention that with this sample of voters the receipt of bipartisan letters reminding them to participate in the forthcoming election had little if any effect on their voting behavior.

Discussion

The results of the present investigation on the effects of reminder letters on voting behavior among low-income registered voters are subject to several interpretations. One explanation would suggest that political mailings have little influence at the ballot box, but our data clearly do not permit this conclusion. The bipartisan nature of our letter may have mitigated *against* the promotion of voting in that significant issues were ignored in favor of generalized statements about the importance of every eligible voter participating in the election. It is possible that a more partisan or heated mailing would have exerted a stronger effect.

Within the limits of our sampling procedure we believe it is justifiable to conclude that the particular letters we employed had no apparent influence in promoting voting among low income and minority voters. We have no way of ascertaining the representativeness of our sample of voters with respect to other citizens as whole, hence the uncritical extrapolation of our results to other groups of voters should be undertaken with caution.

Because we limited sending our reminder letter to citizens who were *already registered* to vote, and who had actually voted within the past three years, it is possible that we were tapping a pool of the electorate who had already demonstrated their commitment to the ballot process by undergoing the voting registration procedure. The lack of difference in voting behavior among our four groups may be attributable to a form of 'ceiling effect' in that the maximum practicable number of voters who could vote were already intending to do so, and that little influence could be expected from our reminder letters. Another potential confounding variable in the effectiveness of political mailings is the literacy level of the recipient. We have no way of

ascertaining the extent to which this factor may have attenuated the efficacy of the reminder letter. We are aware of no reason to believe, however, that literacy levels systematically varied across our four groups, given the randomized assignment procedure we employed.

We do believe that our outcomes, coupled with the paucity of well designed and conducted empirical investigations on the efficacy of alternative means of promoting voting behavior, argue strongly in favor of social workers and other human service professionals committed to promoting the participation of poor, minority and other oppressed groups in the electoral process, to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of such voting promotional programs. As an empirically-based discipline, we recognize that controlled field research provides the best means of identifying practicable methods of engaging the consumers of social welfare programs in the political process. The procedure employed in the present study, obtaining the names and addresses of registered voters, implementing some type of voting promotion intervention, and the subsequent determination of actual voting patterns, provides a useful model for the conduct of experimental field research in an area lacking well controlled outcome studies.

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