

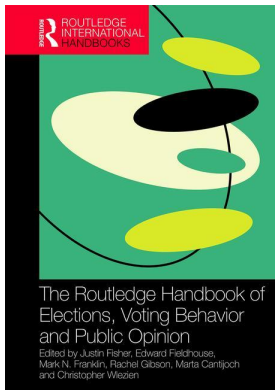
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FIELD EXPERIMENTS IN
POLITICAL BEHAVIOR*Donald P. Green and Erin A. York*

The study of political behavior is broad in scope, encompassing both conduct in political settings and the psychological, sociological, and economic precursors that lead people to value different things, harbor different beliefs, and pursue different objectives. Much of the scholarship in this domain is descriptive. Researchers measure quantities such as the proportion of the public that feels a sense of attachment to a political party, assess whether these proportions have changed over time, and estimate correlations among variables such as conservatism and party affiliation. Other scholarly investigations focus on cause-and-effect relationships. For example, does exposure to political campaigns make voters more knowledgeable about the candidates' stances on policy issues?

During the latter half of the twentieth century, both descriptive and causal questions such as these were addressed using a single research method: opinion surveys. For example, Huckfeldt and Sprague used panel surveys of residents of South Bend, Indiana during the 1984 election campaign to demonstrate that people hold political attitudes that are correlated with those held by others in their social network, a descriptive fact that they interpret causally to mean that "vote preferences are socially structured . . . by the characteristics and preferences of others with whom the voter discusses politics," such as an individual's friends and family (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995: 189). Similarly, Almond and Verba (1963: 133) and Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 17) observe a strong correlation between education and participatory attitudes and voting, respectively, and both argue that this correlation reflects the causal influence of education and the outlook and skills that it imparts.

Although these authors make cogent arguments on behalf of their causal interpretations, the survey evidence they adduce is subject to competing interpretations. The correlation between the political views among those in the same friendship or family networks that Huckfeldt and Sprague observe might arise if members of these networks share unmeasured attributes, such as similar pre-adult socialization experiences (Fowler et al. 2011). Education might be predictive of participatory orientations not because schooling imparts them but rather because education is a marker for other unmeasured attributes, such as social position or norms conveyed by parents, that are causal. The correlation that Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) observe between voter turnout and reported exposure to mobilization activity may reflect the fact that strategic campaigns target likely voters for persuasive communication; we might observe this correlation even in the absence of any mobilizing effects.

One way to overcome the concern that “correlation is not causation” is to study propositions such as these using experimental designs. We use the term experiment to refer to studies in which subjects are randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions (Gerber and Green 2012). Random assignment implies that subjects in the treatment group have the same expected potential outcomes as subjects in the control group. Any given random assignment may produce groups that differ in some measured or unmeasured way, but there is no systematic tendency for one group to be favored over the other in terms of outcomes, as may be the case when subjects self-select into the treatment group or are targeted for treatment by strategic actors.

The 1980s and 1990s saw increasing use of experimental designs in studies of political behavior. Technological developments, such as computer-assisted interviewing, allowed survey researchers to randomly manipulate question wording, order, and response options. Survey experimentation, which had been used sporadically to settle debates about over-time trends in survey responses (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1978) and required years of data collection (Schuman and Presser 1981), now became an area of rapid growth, especially as a tool to explore hard-to-measure attitudes on subjects such as race (Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997). Use of survey experimentation was spurred by further developments, such as the advent of cooperative surveys that subsidized researchers’ access to experimental opportunities (Mutz 2011) and online survey platforms that allowed researchers to make inexpensive use of nonprobability samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). This era also witnessed new interest in laboratory experimentation, which had largely been the province of psychology. An especially influential study was Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982), which recruited participants from the New Haven community to view a series of doctored news broadcasts that randomly stressed different national issues (inflation, defense, and environmental pollution). The researchers found that the treatments had no detectable effect on subjects’ policy views but did change the importance that they accorded different issues. Evidently, news broadcasts do not change what people think but do affect what they think about (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982: 852). Subsequent lab experiments have used this research paradigm to study the effects of negative advertising (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997), confrontational public affairs programs (Mutz 2015), and ideologically slanted news (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Many recent experiments blend ingredients from lab and survey experiments, such as studies in which subjects deliberate over policy questions (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker 2012; Farrar et al. 2010), sometimes after discussion with public officials or policy experts (Minozzi et al. 2015).

Survey experiments and lab experiments have many attractive features but also some important limitations. The principal advantage is that random allocation allows researchers to draw unbiased causal inferences that are free from “omitted variables bias.” Another advantage is that the researcher is (usually) in full control of the stimuli that subjects receive and may deploy creative and carefully controlled interventions across multiple treatment arms in order to isolate causal mechanisms (Druckman et al. 2011; Gerber and Green 2012). Finally, the logistics of executing a study are typically manageable. Noncompliance with the assigned treatment, missing outcome data, and contamination across treatment conditions rarely afflict lab experiments. On the other hand, survey and lab experiments are often criticized for features that limit the generalizations that can be drawn from the results. Subjects in lab experiments are often college undergraduates (Sears 1986). The treatments that subjects receive are often contrived (e.g., campaign advertisements by hypothetical candidates), and the same may be said of the context in which subjects receive the treatment (e.g., amid an opinion survey or, in lab studies, in a faux living room where subjects are asked to watch television programs – without a remote control). Finally, outcomes tend to be measured shortly after the intervention occurs, usually at the end of the survey or lab session.

Field experimentation represents an attempt to address these concerns. Ideally, field experiments deploy interventions and measure outcomes in a manner that is both realistic and unobtrusive. The subjects are the very people who would ordinarily be targeted for an intervention; the treatment is the kind of intervention that would ordinarily be deployed in the real world (e.g., an actual political ad); subjects receive the intervention in a naturalistic context; the intervention and outcome measurement are unobtrusive in that subjects are unaware that their behavior is being studied. In practice, field experiments vary in terms of the extent to which they satisfy these criteria. On the ideal end of the spectrum are studies such as Rogers and Middleton (2015), in which persuasive mailings concerning five ballot propositions were sent by an advocacy campaign to randomly assigned voting precincts prior to an election. Outcomes were assessed unobtrusively using precinct-level voting returns. Somewhat more obtrusive are studies such as Gerber et al. (2011), in which a gubernatorial campaign deployed television ads in randomly assigned media markets, but voters' preferences in each market were assessed using opinion surveys. In this case, subjects were unaware of the connection between the media campaign and the survey. More obtrusive is Paluck's (2009) experimental evaluation of a Rwandan radio soap opera. Rwandan villages were randomly assigned to listen to an ethnic reconciliation soap opera or a control radio program that focused on health. Villagers were brought together every few weeks to listen to the radio programs and interviewed at the end of the year. Here, the treatment is a real program broadcast in the rest of the country, but the context in which the audience listened to the shows was somewhat lab-like, and it is possible that some respondents saw the connection between the content of the radio intervention and the end-line survey.¹

The use of field experiments in political science is by no means new. The pioneering work of Gosnell (1927) and Eldersveld (1956) used controlled experiments to assess the effectiveness of voter mobilization tactics. The pace of field experimental developments slowed, however, after the 1950s, and only a handful of field experiments found their way into print during the remainder of the twentieth century (see Green and Gerber 2002a, 2002b). Remarkably, not a single field experiment appeared in any political science journal during the 1990s.

The current wave of field experimentation in political science began at the turn of the twenty-first century, reflecting the "credibility revolution" that was brewing across the social sciences. The large-scale voter turnout experiments conducted by Gerber and Green (2000) not only revived interest in randomized experimentation in real-world settings; this study also ushered in an era of growing methodological sophistication in analyzing field experiments, especially regarding issues posed by noncompliance, spillovers, and attrition.

Field experimentation may therefore be viewed as a two-pronged strategy to improve the credibility of causal inferences: experimental assignment is used to isolate cause-and-effect by eliminating systematic differences between treatment and control groups, and unobtrusive field-based designs narrow the gap between the research protocol and the political world to which the research is applied. The challenge is, of course, to design and execute this kind of research in a way that is theoretically illuminating. To do so requires an extensive research program that not only tests the effects of different interventions on a given subject pool and political setting but also tests whether the results hold across different subject pools and political settings. The remainder of this chapter therefore devotes special attention to the growth and development of the field experimental literature, which started with studies of voter turnout in the United States but rapidly branched out to other forms of political behavior and to a variety of political contexts. Accordingly, we begin our literature review by discussing voter mobilization experiments and then turn our attention to studies of persuasive messaging, attempts to induce non-electoral participation, and efforts to bolster the accountability of public officials through anti-corruption

initiatives and mobilization of underserved populations. We conclude by speculating about the future of field experimentation in political behavior, discussing the growing body of work that focuses on the behavior of elites.

Voter turnout

Since the 1920s, scholars have sought to understand the conditions under which people vote. Scholarly interest in this question reflects a combination of political, normative, and theoretical motivations. Many political scientists have worked closely with political campaigns, and their research on voter mobilization grew out of efforts to gain a competitive advantage during an election campaign (Issenberg 2012). Others are drawn to the study of voter turnout on account of its distributive implications. In countries such as the United States, the socioeconomic and ethnic composition of the voting electorate often differs markedly from that of the eligible electorate, especially in low-salience elections where overall turnout rates tend to be well below 50 percent. Many scholars have expressed concern that affluent whites have disproportionate influence on politics due to their relatively high voting rates (Bedolla and Michelson 2012). Voter turnout also represents a theoretical puzzle for rational choice models of political behavior. In any large electorate, a given voter has an infinitesimal chance of casting the decisive vote; the instrumental value of voting is therefore negligible even when the election has enormous political implications (Downs 1957). To the extent that rational actors cast ballots, they must do so because of what Olson (1965) calls “selective incentives,” the utility they receive from the act of voting itself. These selective incentives could include outright bribes, but in the contemporary American context more often comprise the intrinsic satisfaction voters receive from doing their civic duty and the social approbation they receive when others see them vote (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Drawing on this theoretical framework, much of the experimental literature has probed the extent to which turnout is affected by interventions that affect the direct costs and benefits of voting. Conversely, in an effort to critically evaluate the assumptions of this theoretical model, many researchers conduct experiments designed to emphasize the closeness of the election or its importance for policy, two factors that should be irrelevant in a model where citizens rationally weigh the costs and benefits of voting.

Experiments on the costs and benefits of voting fall into four broad categories. First, several studies conducted in collaboration with non-partisan organizations have sought to raise turnout by lowering information costs.² In these experiments, voters are reminded by mail, phone call, email, or text message that Election Day is approaching, and in some cases they are also provided information about the location of their polling place. The many experiments that have sent reminders via mail or email have uniformly found null effects (Green and Gerber 2015: 58, 99). Brief recorded phone call reminders have also proven ineffective; live reminder calls have fared slightly better, generating a modest turnout increase among those who are successfully reached by phone (Green and Gerber 2015: 82–83). The one mode that seems to generate reliable effects is text messaging. Messages from a non-partisan group to an opt-in list of recipients raised turnout by about four percentage points in an early study (Dale and Strauss 2009); messages from the local registrar of voters generated a small percentage-point increase in turnout but one comparable to Dale and Strauss (2009) in percentage terms (Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela 2012); and a series of large-scale experiments in Denmark found statistically significant effects among the young voters targeted by the campaign (Bhatti et al. 2014). Although Dale and Strauss (2009) attribute these effects to the fact that text messages are “noticeable reminders,” it remains unclear why these reminders are so much more effective than those delivered via a live phone call. Another interesting puzzle concerns the fact that turnout does not respond

in any consistent way to the content or urgency of the message. Bhatti et al. (2014), for example, find that messages delivered a few days prior to Election Day are more effective than those delivered on Election Day itself.

A second line of research assesses whether turnout rises when voting is made more convenient. Several experiments in the United States assess whether turnout increases when eligible citizens are encouraged to register as “permanent absentees,” which means that the ballot is mailed to them weeks in advance of the election. Another set of experiments test whether turnout rises when voters are reminded that their jurisdiction allows for early in-person voting, enabling them to vote when it suits their schedule. Results seem to suggest that these appeals do induce recipients to cast ballots using more convenient options, but the net turnout rate rises only slightly (Mann 2011; Mann and Mayhew 2015). The lack of effect calls into question the hypothesis that low turnout rates in the United States reflect onerous registration requirements (Piven and Cloward 1989; Powell 1986), although experimental evidence does suggest that encouraging registration increases turnout in both the United States (Nickerson 2015) and France (Bracconier, Dormagen, and Pons 2017).

A third line of research offers people direct incentives to vote. Surprisingly, some state and municipal laws in the US permit cash inducements to vote in non-federal elections provided that recipients are not encouraged to vote for any particular candidate or cause. Panagopoulos (2013) randomly varied the incentives offered to voters from zero to \$25 in two experiments conducted in municipal elections and found overall that turnout rises 1.5 percentage points for every \$10 offered (roughly 15 to 20 percent of the control group voted in these elections). Although statistically significant, this estimated effect is not particularly large, perhaps because voters were incredulous about whether they would actually be paid.

A final strand of this literature focuses on social incentives. Here, the core proposition is that voters widely subscribe to the prescriptive social norm that one ought to vote and that one can induce compliance with this norm through social pressure. Social pressure may be exerted through the forceful assertion of norms (“Do your civic duty and vote!”), by monitoring of compliance with the norm, and by promising to disclose future (non)compliance to others. In the context of voter turnout, monitoring and disclosure are facilitated by the fact that voter turnout is a matter of public record – some states even post this information online. Experiments testing the turnout effects of social pressure date back to Gosnell (1927) and Gross et al. (1974); this research agenda was revived by Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008), who showed that turnout rises substantially as larger doses of social pressure are applied via direct mail. The strong effects of social pressure seem to hold across an array of low- and medium-salience elections (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2010; Mann 2010; Panagopoulos 2010; Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson 2013), but the effects appear to be much weaker in high-salience races (Rogers et al. 2017), perhaps because non-voters in such elections tend to be less sensitive to the enforcement of voting norms. Interestingly, the effects also appear to be weaker when voters are presented with their record of past turnout but not scolded to do their civic duty (Murray and Matland 2014).

Social incentives arguably play a role in two related experimental literatures. The first concerns the effects of door-to-door canvassing. Dozens of studies in the United States (see Green and Gerber 2015: 31–35) as well as studies in the United Kingdom (Foos and de Rooij 2013; John and Brannan 2008; John and Foos 2014), China (Guan and Green 2006), Pakistan (Giné and Mansuri 2011), Sweden (Nyman 2017), and Italy (Cantoni and Pons 2016) show that turnout increases when canvassers converse with eligible voters. Interestingly, these settings are ones in which door-to-door mobilization is a common political practice. Comparable studies on the European continent where canvassing is uncommon have failed to find effects; see Pons

(2016) on turnout effects in France, Ramiro, Morales, and Jiménez-Buedo (2012) in Spain, and Bhatti et al. (2016) in Denmark. Another experimental finding that suggests the role of social incentives concerns volunteer phone-banking campaigns in which, several days before the election, voters are urged to vote and asked whether they can be counted on to vote on Election Day. Voters who pledge to vote are called back on the eve of the election and reminded to make good on their promise to vote. The results from three such experiments seem to suggest strong mobilization effects (Michelson, Bedolla, and McConnell 2009).

Overall, the literature offers a mixed verdict on efforts to change voting rates by altering the costs and benefits. Some evidence suggests that voting rates can be increased through cash payments and text message reminders, but other forms of reminders produce disappointing results, and offering more convenient voting options seems to do little to lure non-voters to the polls. The most powerful effects seem to stem from social pressure, especially when stern admonitions are coupled with monitoring and disclosure, suggesting that the costs that matter most are those that are socially imposed. At the same time, more gentle messages that urge voting face-to-face or through repeated interaction with voters who have pledged to vote also raise turnout substantially – at least in politics where such practices are common.

Persuasion

Non-partisan information

A growing body of scholarship addresses the impact of non-partisan information provision on electoral accountability. Interventions in this area are motivated by the theoretical assumption that limited political knowledge reduces voters' ability to hold politicians accountable, which in turn contributes to low-quality politicians and poor performance while in office (Pande 2011). A large formal literature on the link between information and voting behavior predicts that voters should punish politicians who do badly and reward good performers with another term in office (Besley 2006). However, the difficulty in identifying the impact of information has led to an increasing focus on experimental treatments that augment what voters know about public officials and the electoral process.

One strand of this experimental literature distributes non-partisan information about candidate performance. These interventions often involve the development and distribution of politician "report cards" intended to grade their integrity or performance while in office. Incumbents might be judged according to their attendance in lawmaking sessions or productivity in office. An analogous approach, intended to address corruption in office, provides voters with reports on candidates' inappropriate behavior, such as irregularities in spending or allegations of criminal conduct. Outcomes are often measured using hard electoral indicators, such as vote shares or incumbent reelection rates.

The several experiments conducted in this category have found effects that often vary depending on the context in which the information is deployed. An early natural experiment taking advantage of randomized rollout of municipal audits in Brazil found that reelection rates were sensitive to incumbent performance: for incumbents with few violations, electoral outcomes improved, while for incumbents with many violations, likelihood of reelection was reduced (Ferraz and Finan 2008). The impact of revelation varied according to the level of media present in a municipality; effects were larger where results could be disseminated via local radio.

Some findings have conflicted with theoretical predictions. In another experiment in Brazil, Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kasahara (2010) distributed fliers informing voters that the incumbent

and challenger in a mayoral election had been cited for corruption convictions. The results suggest that this type of information can have different effects for different politicians: exposing bad behavior by the incumbent had no effect on his vote share, but the challenger's prospects were reduced by the intervention. In a similar field experiment implemented in Mexico, Chong et al. (2015) found that distributing fliers detailing mayoral corruption had the effect of reducing votes for *both* the incumbent and challenger party (producing an overall decrease in turnout). Finally, a report card experiment conducted in Uganda suggests that while effects of positive and negative information are in the predicted directions, their impact is short-lived in practice: an information treatment had large effects when administered via survey experiment but no discernable impact on electoral returns (Humphreys and Weinstein 2012).

Another line of research addresses the methods by which voters obtain information, studying the impact of different types of citizen–candidate interactions on a set of outcomes including turnout, candidate vote share, or voter knowledge. In these studies, the intervention is typically implemented with the cooperation of politicians, and the treatment involves some deviation from a normal campaign strategy in a given context. The motivation for this research stems in part from the politics of developing countries, where voters tend to be less informed about candidates and political campaigns often revolve around the distribution of private goods rather than policy platforms (Keefer and Khemani 2005).

This line of research was inspired by an early study that randomly varied campaign platforms in Benin (Wantchekon 2003). In these studies, researchers often coordinate directly with political parties in order to devise and deliver varying campaign messages. The deviation from “politics as usual” is expected to change voter perceptions of the candidates or parties involved in some context-specific manner. For example, voters may derive additional information about the options on the ballot by observing candidate performance in debates, which allows for more complex interactions between politicians. This in turn should cause them to reward strong performers and punish those who do poorly. Testing this hypothesis in Sierra Leone, Bidwell, Casey, and Glennerster (2015) randomly vary voters' exposure to candidate debates in the 2012 parliamentary elections. The authors found that watching the debates increased citizens' knowledge of candidates and their policy platforms and produced a bump in vote share for the debate “best performers.” MPs involved in the debates also exhibited strengthened constituent engagement once in office.

This ambitious line of research offers new opportunities to learn about the relationship between voter knowledge and political outcomes, particularly in the developing world. At the same time, experimental interventions are difficult to implement with fidelity to random assignment when researchers depend on the cooperation of political actors, whose incentives may not be fully aligned with the goals of the study.

Persuasion designed to build voter support for a candidate or cause

A small but growing literature examines the extent to which voters' preferences for candidates or policies change in the wake of communication from campaigns. Several experiments focus on the effects of the face-to-face communication that occurs when canvassers visit voters at their doorstep. Some of the early studies looked at the persuasive effects of canvassing by advocacy groups (Arceneaux 2005; Nickerson 2007) and political campaigns (Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006), sometimes featuring canvassing by candidates themselves (Arceneaux 2007). This literature has grown rapidly outside the United States, with large-scale experiments conducted in Benin (Wantchekon 2003), Canada (Dewan, Humphreys, and Rubenson 2014), France (Pons 2016), and Italy (Cantoni and Pons 2016; Kendall, Nannicini, and Trebbi 2015). Many

of the more recent studies have looked at large-scale persuasion efforts using direct mail (Rogers and Middleton 2015), Facebook advertising (Broockman and Green 2014), automated phone messages (Shaw et al. 2012), or television commercials (Gerber et al. 2011). Results from these studies have ranged widely. Rogers and Middleton (2015) found their mailings to have a strong effect on vote outcomes (but see Cubbison 2015 and Doherty and Adler 2014); Broockman and Green (2014) found Facebook ads to have no effect; and Gerber et al. (2011) found televised ads to have a strong initial effect that dissipated quickly.

In sum, recent years have seen rapid growth in the rigorous evaluation of persuasive communication. This line of research is branching out to different countries and modes of communication. At this stage, it is too early to say why certain kinds of advertising campaigns tend to be more persuasive than others. A simple dichotomy between personal and impersonal seems not to work as an explanation: personal tactics such as canvassing sometimes produce weak results, while impersonal tactics such as direct mail sometimes produce substantial effects. Systematic variation of factors such as source credibility (see, for example, Shaw et al. 2012) and “dosage” of communication (Cubbison 2015) have sometimes also produced counterintuitive results, with endorsements from credible sources and high volumes of mail failing to shift vote preferences. Another interesting puzzle is that persuasive communications typically fail to increase voter turnout even when the persuasive effects are large (see, for example, Rogers and Middleton 2015). One of the more intriguing experimental results suggests that one-sided persuasive communication from a single campaign fails to increase turnout, but two-sided communication from opposing campaigns does raise turnout (Loewen and Rubenson 2010).

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a brief overview of the main lines of field experimental research in political behavior, notably studies of voter turnout and persuasive communication. Many other lines of inquiry have been given short shrift, and we conclude by describing several important and growing areas of investigation.

Field experiments are increasingly directed at forms of political participation other than voting in elections. Early studies of contributing to campaigns or political organizations (Miller and Krosnick 2004) paved the way for similar experiments in economics (Rondeau and List 2008; Perez-Truglia and Cruces 2017) and political science (Green et al. 2015; Schwam-Baird et al. 2016), with increasing emphasis on head-to-head comparisons of different kinds of messaging appeals. Another form of participation less specific to the American context than fundraising is participation in political meetings and rallies. Recent works in the US and Honduras have accentuated the role of social ties in promoting this form of participation (McClendon 2014; Stafford and Hughes 2012).

Another important strand of experimental inquiry focuses on the behavior of public officials rather than voters. Several studies have borrowed the “audit study” paradigm commonly used to study the labor market or housing discrimination to assess whether public officials respond differently to requests made by majority or minority constituents (Butler and Broockman 2011; Butler 2014; Distelhorst and Hou 2014) or by citizens inside or outside their own constituency (Broockman 2014). The question of differential treatment also pertains to the question of whether campaign donors enjoy greater access to public officials than ordinary constituents (Kalla and Broockman 2015). Other recent studies have sought to assess the effects of fact-checking (Nyhan and Reifler 2015), lobbying by citizen organizations (Bergan 2009), or providing information about constituent opinion on pending legislation (Butler and Nickerson 2011). The growing use of experiments to study elite behavior complements the growing use

of naturally-occurring randomizations, such as lotteries that determine seniority on legislative committees (Broockman and Butler 2015; Kellerman and Shepsle 2009), term length (Tituniuk 2016), or the ability to offer legislative proposals to the Canadian House of Commons (Loewen et al. 2014). Although elite behavior remains less widely studied than mass behavior, field experiments have brought about something of a renaissance of research on elites, and the years to come are likely to see growing use of this research approach in studies of comparative politics.

Notes

- 1 Paluck points out that it is common for Rwandans to listen to radio in groups. This study also featured unobtrusive outcome measures that were reported in Paluck and Green (2009).
- 2 A related hypothesis is that turnout increases when voters become informed about the stakes of an upcoming election. A noteworthy leafleting experiment randomly varied the distribution of persuasive messages by one or both sides of a referendum campaign (Loewen and Rubenson 2010) and found that only two-sided communication raised turnout.

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