Turnout Nation: A Pilot Experiment Evaluating a Get-Out-The-Vote "Supertreatment"

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Abstract: Prior to municipal elections in November 2019, the nonpartisan group Turnout Nation conducted a randomized evaluation of its "captain" model of promoting voter turnout, which focuses on contacts between people who belong to the same social network – friends, family, acquaintances, or neighbors. For each of 43 captains in four states, lists of socially proximal voters were randomly divided into target lists and control lists. Voters on the target lists were contacted by captains, often on multiple occasions and via live communication. Turnout was assessed using official voter records. Turnout rates are 13.2 percentage points higher in the randomly assigned treatment group than the randomly assigned control group, the largest intent-to-treat effect documented by an experimental GOTV study over the past two decades. This promising get-out-the-vote approach merits further research and development.

One of the most exciting challenges in get-out-the-vote (GOTV) research is the development and implementation of unusually powerful methods of increasing turnout, which Green and Gerber (2019, p.187) refer to as "supertreatments." An especially promising avenue for research and development, they suggest, is organizing within one's own social networks:

> On the frontier of GOTV research lies the investigation of other social influences, such as the effects of friends and family members communicating the importance of voting... A related topic is the study of how social networks can be used as mobilizing agents. Can workplaces, religious groups, online communities, and other social ties be used to bind people together into blocs of voters? In the heyday of machine politics, it was common for "block captains" to mobilize a specific list of voters. The idea of recruiting people to be responsible for turning out a small group of friends, neighbors, parishioners, or coworkers is essentially an attempt to harness the formidable social influence that peers exert on each other.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate one such effort, conducted by the organization Turnout Nation. Like previous "relational organizing" campaigns, Turnout Nation attempted to mobilize voters through personal interaction among relatives, friends, and acquaintances. But unlike previous friend-to-friend messaging campaigns, which are often lightly coordinated or supervised (and therefore often have low follow-through rates), the organizing principle that undergirds Turnout Nation is a network of "captains" who are responsible for getting a specific batch of voters to the polls. The captains are supervised by organizers who recruited them to their GOTV charge, and captains in turn try to recruit other captains who will extend the GOTV work to new voters.

This decentralized approach to voter mobilization attempts to overcome three impediments to high quality, scalable GOTV work. The first is the inability to contact voters. As people become increasingly adept at dodging telemarketing calls, door-to-door fundraising appeals, and unsolicited texts, campaigns find it increasingly difficult to contact strangers using traditional modes of communication. One key advantage of mobilizing within a social network is

that barriers to communication are minimal – one can ordinarily visit, call, email, or text one's friends without impediment; moreover, their contact information tends to be far more up-to-date and reliable than would be the case for a list of strangers. Second, whereas GOTV contacts typically come from campaign workers or activists, here the message is delivered by someone who is known to the voter and presumably more credible when emphasizing the importance of the coming election. Third, to the extent that a GOTV appeal calls on voters to pledge to vote, mobilization by a friend or acquaintance introduces an extra layer of accountability, since the voter is likely to interact with the mobilizer sometime in the future.

The theory underlying this approach seems intuitive; the question is whether in practice mobilizers follow through and indeed get their targets to cast ballots. Because implementation is crucial, this evaluation benefits from the fact that different sites had rather different organizing approaches.   The campaign in Ohio, which was led by a long-time grassroots organizer, was carried out with a high degree of structure. Captains were encouraged to interact with their target voters in specific ways and on multiple occasions. To quote the organizer:

> I sent these ten names back to the captains and asked them to reach out to these friends and tell us which ones had agreed to vote on Nov 5th. I asked the captains when they would make their first contact and how they would choose to contact them. I would ask if I could check in with them in a couple days to hear how it went. When checking in on them I would ask individually about each of the ten people on their list, ask whether or not that individual agreed to vote, record the answers and ask when the captain would get to each of the others on their list.

> For the ten days before the election I sat down at least once a day and went through my list of captains, calling, e-mailing, texting or messaging those captains whom I had not talked to within the past couple days. At times it felt like I was badgering them and sometimes I would need to be creative about why I was e-mailing them for the fifth time in five days.

By contrast, the other sites (San Francisco, Connecticut, and Colorado) were run more informally and with fewer check-ins, with captains being instructed to use any means they thought appropriate to get their friends and family to vote. Both approaches share many common elements; the appendix presents Turnout Nation's instructions to captains and to organizers.

Study Design

As mentioned above, the evaluation took place in four sites, all of which featured municipal elections. The largest two sites were Ohio (which featured city council and school board elections in the rural and suburban precincts in the vicinity of Oberlin College) and San Francisco. Two smaller sites were Connecticut (in the suburban and semi-urban precincts near Wesleyan University) and Colorado (in Aurora, a suburb of Denver). Across all sites, the turnout rate in the control group was 32%, where turnout is defined as casting a ballot in one of four geographic areas covered by the study. Those voters who were found to be registered outside the counties within which the elections took place were excluded from the analysis, since they were ineligible to vote. We did not exclude the relatively small number of people who were not found on county registration lists; doing so increases the magnitude of the effects we report below.

After the captains agreed to participate, they proposed approximately 20 names of friends or relatives who would be eligible to vote in the coming election.[2] In Ohio, the names of acquaintances were selected from lists of registered voters that were presented to the captains, usually in the immediate vicinity of the captain's home. In other sites, captains proposed names that were not necessarily of people registered locally. Regardless of where the list of (approximately) 20 names came from, half of these names were randomly assigned to a GOTV target list that each captain was responsible for; the other half was randomly assigned to a no-contact control group. This experimental design amounts to a block-randomized experiment in which the blocks are the lists of names proposed by each captain.

A total of 43 captains participated. (The evaluation includes data from one captain from Connecticut whose target list was randomized but apparently never contacted, as he/she dropped out of communication with the organizer). Of the captains, approximately 23% are African-American and another 17% are Latinx.

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[2] In a few instances, captains proposed fewer than 20 names and/or insisted on a proportionally smaller control group. Of the 43 captains in this study, 29 had exactly 20 names divided in half.

The outcome is each voter's turnout in the 2019 election as verified by official records kept by the local registrar of voters in each jurisdiction. As noted above, this voting tally ignores votes cast outside the geographic jurisdictions covered by the study. Our failure to observe votes cast elsewhere does not materially affect the study's results, as we are interested in the difference in turnout between treatment and control groups, and it is unlikely that captains affected the share of votes cast outside the local jurisdiction. Excluding a handful of voters registered outside the relevant jurisdiction, the denominator in our turnout calculation is the total number of voters assigned to treatment or control.

For each captain, the difference between the turnout rate in the treatment list and the turnout rate in the control list provides an estimate of the *intent-to-treat effect*, i.e., the average effect of assignment on voter turnout. Note that this approach turns a blind eye to whether captains successfully reached everyone on their target list; it focuses solely on whether turnout rates increase when a captain agrees to mobilize those on the target list. The intent-to-treat effect is an informative quantity in program evaluation because it describes how results change in the wake of an organization's attempt to implement a given intervention. In this case, we want to know how Turnout Nation's program affects turnout, recognizing that the intent-to-treat effect may be attenuated if captains fail to follow through.

For purposes of comparison, it is useful to note that GOTV efforts often produce relatively small intent-to-treat effects. Green and Gerber (2019) point out that text-messaging campaigns, for example, tend to produce intent-to-treat effects of less than half a percentage point. The same is true for Facebook's acclaimed daylong GOTV campaigns that show users whether their friends have voted. GOTV calls orchestrated by commercial phone banks often produce intent-to-treat results of approximately one percentage point or less. Canvassing door-to-door sometimes produces strong effects among those who answer the door, but contact rates of under 30% typically cause the intent-to-treat effect to fall below three percentage points. Certain kinds of relational volunteer phone-banking campaigns and hard-hitting direct mailing have been known to generate larger effects, but none as large as the results presented below.

Statistical Results

Across all four sites, 43 captains sought to mobilize 387 voters. Another 386 voters were assigned to the control group. To estimate the average intent-to-treat effect across all sites while taking into account the slightly different probabilities of treatment from one captain to the next, we apply inverse probability weights to the following regression:

$$Y_i = b\,T_i + c_1\,B_{1i} + c_2\,B_{2i} + \ldots + c_{43}\,B_{43i} + u_i \,. \tag{1}$$

Here Y_i represents turnout for voter I; T_i is an indicator variable scored 1 if a given voter is assigned to the treatment group and 0 otherwise; b represents the average intent-to-treat effect; the B_{ki} denote indicators for each of the k captains; and u_i represents unobserved causes of turnout. The weights may be written

$$W_i = T_i\,/Pr(T_i{=}1) + (1{-}T_i\,)/(Pr(T_i{=}0)) \,. \tag{2}$$

This weighting scheme makes regression an unbiased estimator of the average intent-to-treat effect in situations where probabilities of assignment vary by block.

Table 1 presents regression estimates for three different groups. Column (1) presents results for all captains in all regions. The estimated intent-to-treat effect is 13.2 percentage points with a standard error of 3.2 percentage points. This estimate is statistically significant by even the most demanding standard, since the probability of observing an estimate this large by chance is less than 0.001. The substantive magnitude of this intent-to-treat effect is extraordinary, exceeding estimates from any other randomized trial on voter turnout, including a study in which door-to-door canvassing was paired with social pressure (Davenport 2010) and a study with multiple door-to-door visits by local party organizers (Lenoir and Green 2015).

We partition the data by geographic region to illuminate the effects of supervisory rigor. Column (2) presents results for captains operating under the highly structured supervisory regimen of Ohio. The estimated intent-to-treat effect is 17.1 percentage points with a standard error of 4.7 percentage points. For purposes of comparison, column (3) reports results for all captains outside of Ohio. The estimated intent-to-treat effect outside Ohio is 9.5 percentage points with a standard error of 4.5 percentage points. The difference between effects found in Ohio and elsewhere is 7.6 percentage points with a standard error of 6.5 percentage points, so the statistical evidence that supervision increases captains' effectiveness is suggestive but not decisive.

Table 1:

Estimated Intent-to-treat Effect of Turnout Nation's Mobilization Campaign, 2019

	All Sites	**Ohio Only**	**Outside Ohio** (California, Connecticut, Colorado)
Estimated Effect	13.2	17.1	9.5
Standard Error	3.2	4.7	4.5
Two-sided *p*-value	Less than .001	Less than .001	0.03
N	773	378	395

Note: Estimates obtained from weighted least squares using the model described in equation (1) and the weights described in equation (2). Estimates are expressed in percentage points.

Conclusion

The Turnout Nation experiment breaks new ground. It is the first to test the effectiveness of a decentralized mobilization model in which "captains" target family, friends, and acquaintances. Although prior studies have attempted to orchestrate and test friend-to-friend mobilization, mobilizers did not assume the role of captains and take on the responsibility of getting a targeted list of voters to the polls. Perhaps as a result, friend-to-friend efforts have tended to produce disappointing effects due to a lack of follow-through. The present study suggests that this model can work, especially when supervisors ensure that captains make the efforts necessary to repeatedly contact everyone on their target list. In the Ohio sites, where supervision was especially well-organized and proactive, the results are truly remarkable: assigning a voter to a captain raised the probability of turnout by 17.1 percentage points.

Like any pilot study, this one requires extensive further testing. The present study took place in the low-salience context of municipal elections. Many people who think of themselves as voters fail to vote in this kind of election, and it may be that the captain model worked especially well at drawing episodic voters to the polls. A presidential election may be quite different, both in terms of the baseline probabilities with which people vote and the kinds of appeals that draw people to vote in a high-salience election. It may be that to achieve the effects obtained here in a presidential election context, one must deploy captains in social networks with

a preponderance of low and medium propensity voters.

Another important extension to this line of research is to explore the role of supervision. The present study took advantage of geographic differences in supervisory approach. This geographic contrast is informative but should be seen as an exploratory step en route to a more rigorously controlled experimental design in which the type of supervision is randomly assigned within geographic locations. Ideally, this kind of experimental research program would discover the optimal balance between resources devoted to supervision and resources devoted to recruitment of ever-larger numbers of captains.

More generally, a large-scale test is needed to gauge the cost-effectiveness of the volunteer-driven Turnout Nation organizing model. In principle, the elastic, decentralized structure of mobilization within social networks allows for rapid expansion in the lead up to a presidential election, but the planning challenge is to anticipate the costs of infrastructure to maintain adequate supervision and quality control.

References

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TURNOUT NATION

Through Turnout Nation's method, each aspiring Captain will engage ten of their friends, family members, classmates, acquaintances--anyone they know --and ensure that they are registered, have a plan to vote, and actually cast their ballot. We define a Captain as someone who 1) has successfully identified and submitted ten voters who they will do their best to encourage to vote and who 2) has joined us on our communication platform to remain in contact. Until those two tasks are completed, we call those individuals aspiring Captains. We also encourage Captains to recruit more captains from their voter pool or among other contacts.

Captain Responsibility Breakdown

1) **Choose ten friends.** Think of ten people you know and input their names. These individuals can be friends, family, coworkers, neighbors-- any contact. Ideally, they would be all from one state, as Captains will need to be familiar with voting regulations and timelines in each state in which they have a voter. But they can be from several states too. If you are part of a randomized control trial, you will need to find a bigger group of potential voters, and then we will randomly tell you which among those you will encourage to vote, so those two groups can be compared with each other.

2) **Get on our communication platform.** We've selected a social media platform over others for its privacy and user data protection--something we take very seriously. Be sure to download it on your phone so you will get notifications and check in frequently, each day if possible, to see updates and track progress.

3) **Contact all eligible voters as soon as you become a Captain.** Reach out to eligible voters as quickly as possible to help resolve any issues with registration and to identify who might be interested in becoming Captains themselves. Speed is important, a day or two is ideal, but not longer than one week from becoming a Captain. Tailor an outreach message that works for you and for your voter. Remember, we don't contact your voters, that's up to you. Our goal is for your voters to vote, regardless of who they vote for, so be sure not to mention a candidate or party. If voters ask who you are voting for, you can tell them, but emphasize that Turnout Nation is a non-partisan organization. Any eligible voter is free to participate. Meeting your voters in person is the most effective strategy we've found, phones call being the next best option because this allows you to listen to your voters and identify their worries or issues together. Text, email, and social media can be effective,

but might require more consistent follow up to ensure a potential voter follows through. Encourage them to promise that they will vote, or at least commit to you that they will.

4) **You will receive voter information specific to your state.** Turnout Nation will send out information on voter registration, early voting, absentee voting in the relevant state or states, and all that a Captain's voters will need to know to vote successfully. We promise we will keep it concise and not spam you!

5) **Send reminders before early voting starts.** Help your voters make a plan--this is extremely important. Creating a plan with your voter will ensure you're working through any questions or identify difficulties ahead of election day. Encourage your voters to vote early if your voters' state allows it.

6) **Ask for a post-vote selfie!** Have your voters send a selfie after they vote and encourage them to post it on social media where they might be able to inspire others to do the same. Keep a running tally of your ten voters to know who has voted and who you need to follow up with.

TURNOUT NATION

Turnout Nation Organizer Training

We define an Organizer as any Captain who recruits another Captain. Some Captains would rather not recruit or try to recruit any other Captains, and that's ok. However, we have found in the past that usually among the ten voters a Captain has chosen, at least two or three will be interested in the opportunity to become a Captain, often more. For Captains who have already taken care of their most important responsibility of contacting their ten voters, many want to extend the effort and opportunity to others and we very much support that. There is no limit to how many Captains an Organizer can recruit and motivate. Organizers can use the platform to communicate with their Captains as a group or individually. Turnout Nation will also be communicating with those Captains about their responsibilities, but we hope Organizers will too.

Organizer Responsibility Breakdown

1) **Verify Captains are aware of their responsibilities.** Be sure that each Captain knows what they need to do. To be a Captain, an individual will need to choose and submit their ten voters and get on our communication app. After that, some Captains will have difficulty or lack motivation to communicate with their voters. As an Organizer, you'll

play a pivotal role in helping Captains communicate quickly with their voters so the Captain can be sure each of their voters is registered and ready. Touch base with each Captain to see how their conversations are going and if they have been able to recruit any new Captains.

2) **Encourage Captains to move fast at the start.** Unlike traditional "Get out the Vote" efforts that tend to ramp up in the weeks just before elections, Turnout Nation requires some effort as soon as Captains sign up; to select voters, get lines of communication set up, clear up those voters whose registration status is not yet certain, to help those who are unregistered, and to recruit some new Captains. The quicker those are done, the better. When those things are accomplished, things for your Captains can calm down until early voting starts. For an Organizer, the most important part of the recruitment of a new Captain is not that the new Captain agrees, but getting them fully onboard!

3) **Ensure Captains are informed and prepared.** Turnout Nation will help Captains know regulations and deadlines in their local, state, and national elections. Partner with Captains to make sure they have watched all of the training and informational videos from Turnout Nation and get answered any questions they may have.

4) **Schedule a time to touch base.** You should try and connect with each of your Captains regularly to gather updates about progress and answer any questions or concerns they might have, to brainstorm and strategize. It's important to space these conversations evenly before the election and not rush to connect at the last minute, or just issue commands. Identify difficulties and solutions together and encourage them often. Ask if they have been able to get promises or at least commitments to vote. Promises to friends really work!

5) **Follow up after the vote!** You'll get results from all of your Captains after the elections. Ask Captains about their predictions for their ten voters and then follow up after the elections to hear the results. Talk with your Captains about things they feel worked well or what could have gone better.