

Engaging a Young, Diverse Electorate in Central Washington

Lessons from a randomized-controlled trial in Sunnyside, Washington's 2023 General Election

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Summary

Community-based organizations have been leaning into mailers as the bulk of their civic engagement work in recent years, despite a lack of evidence showing a positive impact on voter participation. Here, we collaborated with a group of five organizations to conduct a randomized-controlled trial in Sunnyside, Washington, comparing the efficacy of mailers and in-person outreach on voter turnout in the 2023 General Election. Turnout of voters who received mailers alone was no different than turnout of voters who received no outreach (17.3% vs 18.0%), but turnout of voters who received in-person outreach was significantly higher (32.5%). These results indicate that mailers alone are ineffective but in-person outreach is particularly effective at mobilizing young voters of color in South Central Washington.

Background

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across communities in 2020, many community-based organizations (CBOs) were forced to rapidly restructure their civic engagement programs, shifting energy and resources away from traditional outreach methods – particularly door knocking and in-person events – in favor of socially-distant, indirect outreach methods – particularly text messages, mailers, and digital ads. This pivot paid dividends for civic engagement programs in 2020, with voter turnout in the 2020 General Election breaking records across most of the nation. The takeaway for many CBOs was pretty simple: indirect outreach methods are far more scalable than traditional methods and enable a small team of organizers to reach many times more individuals in a single volunteer shift, so future civic engagement programs should continue to prioritize these methods over traditional in-person outreach. By 2022, the need for social distancing had largely waned, yet many CBOs have continued investing in indirect outreach methods for civic engagement work, with texting and mailers accounting for more than 67% of all voter outreach by Washington-based 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 CBOs in the 2022 election cycle.

Unfortunately, recent research suggests that the benefits of indirect voter outreach – particularly text messaging – have been diminishing over time, and the adverse consequences may be overshadowing the benefits. First, the net impact of texting on voter turnout has been steadily declining over time. Nationally, texting increased voter turnout by +1.0% in the 2018 midterm election, by +0.7% in the 2020 presidential election, but

only by 0.2% in the 2022 midterm elections. Texting from Washington's CBOs in the 2023 municipal elections was a bit more effective, with an average increase in turnout of +9% (range: -2% to +38%). However, less than 1% of initial text messages received a response, making texting a particularly ineffective tool for engaging voters.

Secondly, texting has become a preferred method of outreach by political parties and PACs, causing voters to become inundated with a constant deluge of texts that all follow the same formula (e.g., along the lines of "This is the most important election in our lifetime and you need to vote"). In the last three months of the 2020 presidential election, more than 11.6 billion political text messages were sent to voters, and estimates suggest that number has only increased since then. If a voter receives the same type of messaging from a small CBO that they are getting from these large political entities, the line between local CBOs and other institutions begins to blur, potentially eroding trust between individual voters and CBOs.

After texting, mailers have accounted for the largest share of voter outreach in recent years. Unlike texting, however, quantifying the impact of mailers on voter outreach has been more challenging. Measuring the impact of a texting program on voter turnout is as simple as taking the universe of voters who were sent texts, grouping based on the result of the initial text, and comparing turnout between groups. Since the result of mail outreach is simply "Mailed" and there is no way to separate folks who read the mailer from folks who immediately tossed it in the trash, quantifying the impact of mailers on voter turnout requires the inclusion of a control group, typically done with a randomized-controlled trial (RCT). Meta analyses from the Analyst Institute on the efficacy of mailers on voter turnout are largely inconclusive, due to the variability of with mail programs, which could include voter registration postcards, get-out-the-vote (GOTV) flyers, or candidate endorsements.

Despite the lack of evidence showing any positive impact of mailers on civic engagement, mailers continue to be an extremely popular tool used by Washington-based CBOs, accounting for more than 60% of all outreach done in 2023. To test the impact of this outreach on voter turnout, the Washington Community Alliance Data Hub partnered with five CBOs – Common Power, ELLA, Nuestra Casa, Poder Latinx, and Washington Conservation Action Education Fund – to run an experiment comparing the efficacy of different outreach programs in Sunnyside, Washington in the 2023 General Election.

Methodology

Drawing from our group's overarching goals around civic engagement, Sunnyside, Washington was chosen as the location for our RCT for a number of reasons. The electorate in Sunnyside is relatively young (42% of all voters are under the age of 35) and racially diverse (>80% of all voters are Hispanic or Native), and voter turnout in Sunnyside is historically among the lowest in the state, with just 17.9% of Sunnyside voters casting a ballot in the 2023 Primary Election. Sunnyside's entire electorate includes ~5,200 voters, with 73% falling into our group's target universe of voters (young voters, voters of color, and newly registered voters). This universe was divided into a control group ($n = 1,200$ voters) and an experimental group ($n = 2,691$ voters) that were age-, race-, and sex-matched, ensuring that any differences we identified were not due to innate demographic differences.

Voters in the control group received no outreach during the 90 days leading up to 2023 General Election, serving as a baseline for voter turnout in Sunnyside. A subset of voters in the control group ($n = 473$ voters) ended up receiving GOTV phone calls and text messages from other Washington-based CBOs during this period, so those voters were excluded from all analyses.

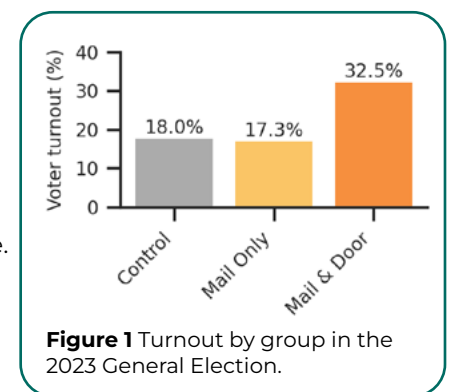
Voters in the experimental group received multilayered outreach during the 90 days leading up to the 2023 General Election. First, these voters received two mailers, including (1) a formal positive social pressure piece encouraging the individual to join their community in being a voter, signed by a trusted community messenger, and (2) a postcard urging the individual to return their ballot by Election Day, with details on how to vote by mail and where to return a ballot in-person (**Figure 2**). Voters in the experimental group also received in-person outreach from canvassers and volunteers using a standard GOTV script that focused on asking the individual to make a plan and pledge to vote (**Figure 3**). Canvassers also invited voters to attend community events, including ballot parties, voter registration drives, and candidate forums. Importantly, all mailers and canvassing scripts were bilingual, with copy and content in both Spanish and English.

After Election Day, voters in the experimental group were divided into two final groups: "Mail & Door", including any voters who were successfully canvassed with in-person outreach ($n = 209$ voters); and "Mail Only", including voters who only received the mailers and were unable to

be contacted with in-person outreach ($n = 2,482$ voters). The demographic composition of the three final groups ("Control", "Mail Only", "Mail & Door") was similar to the original universe, suggesting that contact rates from in-person canvassing did not differ by demographics. Ballot tracking data from the Secretary of State's office (the "Matchback" report) was matched onto the voter file, accessed via the State Voices' Voter Activation Network (VAN), and turnout in the 2023 General Election was compared between groups using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (i.e., 95% confidence that any observed difference between groups was not due to chance).

Results


Statistical analysis found a significant effect of group on voter turnout in the 2023 General Election, specifically for the "Mail & Door" group (**Figure 1**). Turnout of voters in the "Mail & Door" group was significantly higher than among voters in the "Control" group (32.5% vs 18.0%, $p < 0.0001$) or the "Mail Only" group (32.5% vs 17.3%, $p < 0.0001$), indicating a specific positive impact of in-person outreach on turnout of voters in Sunnyside. Notably, turnout of voters in the "Mail Only" group did not differ from voters in the "Control" group (17.3% vs 18.0%, $p = 0.97$), indicating that mail alone was not effective at mobilizing voter turnout.



Conclusions

These results suggest that (1) mailers alone are ineffective for engaging a young, diverse electorate in Sunnyside, and (2) in-person outreach has a strong positive impact on engaging these voters. Importantly, this RCT had a relatively small sample size and focused on a single community in Washington, so caution should be used in interpreting and applying these findings elsewhere. Moreover, while mailers may not be particularly effective at turning out voters, they may be useful at persuading voters who are already planning on voting to vote for a particular candidate/issue. Nevertheless, these results offer important insight into the efficacy of different outreach strategies for engaging a young, racially diverse electorate, and should be considered when developing outreach programs in 2024 and beyond.

Supplemental Info




Dear <mfirrst>.

Thank you for being a registered voter. Voting is important for Washington and our entire nation. Voting allows you to make choices that shape our democracy. We appreciate you taking your civic responsibility seriously. We hope the public record after the election will show that you took the time to vote this year. No matter which candidates you choose, your vote will be important to our future.

Gracias por ser un elector registrado. Votar es importante para Washington y para toda nuestra nación. Votar le permite tomar decisiones que conforman nuestra democracia. Agradecemos que tome en serio su responsabilidad cívica. Esperamos que el registro público muestre después de las elecciones que usted se tomó el tiempo para votar este año. Independientemente del candidato que elija, su voto será importante para nuestro futuro.

Sincerely,



Caty Padilla
Executive Director, Nuestra Casa

P.S. Even though whether you vote is a matter of public record, who you vote for is always secret. No one can know who you vote for.

P.D. Aunque su participación en las elecciones es publica, su voto siempre sera secreto. Nadie sabrá por qué candidato votó.

For more information/Para más información: sos.wa.gov/elections

Make a plan to complete your ballot by Nov. 7
Cree un plan para completar su buleta antes del 7 de noviembre

When will you complete your ballot?
How will you return your ballot?

Drop box Mailbox (no stamp needed)

¿Cuándo completara su boleta electoral?
¿Cómo devolverá su boleta electoral?

Una electoral Buzón (no necesita estampilla)

Drop box locations/Ubicación de las urnas electorales
S 8th St & Edison Ave – Open 24/7 until Election Day in the parking lot between the Post Office

Hi, is [VOTER NAME] available?

Hi [VOTER NAME], I'm [YOUR NAME] and this is [PARTNER'S NAME] with [ORGANIZATION]. We're visiting community members in Sunnyside to make sure our voices get heard in the upcoming November 7th election.

Q1: Are you excited to vote in the upcoming General Election? {Yes, Maybe/ Undecided/No}

IF YES: That's great! I'm glad to hear you are excited to vote. There are many issues to consider when voting. [GO to Q2]

IF NOT YES: We understand it can be difficult to feel excited about voting, but there's a lot at stake and your vote can determine the future of our city. [GO to Q2]

Q2: What issues are most important to you when you vote? {Don't list the options, listen and mark "Yes" for any issues they mention; track data for: Immigration, Education, Environment, Economy, Public Safety, Healthcare}

Thanks for sharing! This is helpful for us to know what's important to our community and what information voters want to know. {Have a conversation about their top issues, GO to Q3}

Q3: Will you fill out a Pledge to Vote card today? {Yes, Maybe/Unsure, No}

IF YES: That's great, thanks for much for pledging to be a voter! {Give pledge card, GO to Q4}

IF NO: No problem! [GO to Q4]

IF MAYBE/UNSURE: A pledge to Vote Card is a commitment to vote. It is also a reminder to submit your ballot so it is not turned in late or even forgotten. It's free and available in English and Spanish. {Mark YES or NO, GO to Q4}

Q4: Your ballot should arrive the week of October 17th, and you can return it by dropping it off in a designated ballot drop box or by mailing it in the enclosed prepaid envelope. What is your plan to return your ballot this November? {MAIL, DROPBOX, UNSURE, NOT VOTING}

IF MAIL or DROPBOX: Perfect! Keep an eye out for your ballot, and be sure to return it by November 7th. [GO to Q5 or CLOSING]

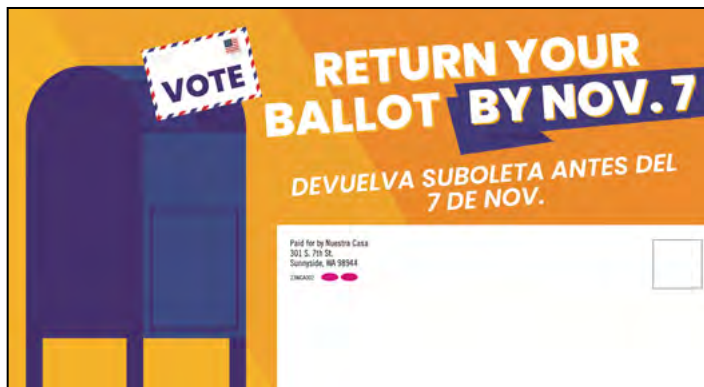
IF UNSURE: You can return it by mail, but be sure it gets postmarked by Election Day on November 7th. You can also drop your ballot in the 24 hour red dropbox between the Post Office and Fire Department on S. 8th Ave and Edison Ave anytime between now and Election Day, or in the dropbox at Neighborhood Health Sunnyside at 617 Scoon Road on Election Day. [GO to Q5 or CLOSING]

IF NOT VOTING: [GO to CLOSING]

Q5: We believe all Sunnyside voices should be heard and want to get to know our community better. Do you mind if we ask you a few more questions about yourself? {YES, NO}

IF YES: What is your preferred language? What race do you identify as? What ethnicity do you identify as? [GO to CLOSING]

CLOSING: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We are hosting [EVENT#1 INFO] and [EVENT#2 INFO]. You're welcome to invite other voters and learn about what's on the ballot this season. Thanks again, and we hope to see you at [EVENT].



RETURN YOUR BALLOT BY NOV. 7
DEVUELVA SUBOLETA ANTES DEL 7 DE NOV.

Paid for by Nuestra Casa
301 S. 7th St.
Sunnyside, WA 98044



RETURN YOUR BALLOT BY NOV. 7
DEVUELVA SUBOLETA ANTES DEL 7 DE NOV.

Voting by mail is easy, simply follow these steps:
Votar por correo es muy sencillo, sólo siga estos pasos.

- 1.** Complete your entire ballot in blue or black ink. Complete toda su boleta con tinta azul o negra.
- 2.** Place your completed ballot in the secrecy envelope and both in the return envelope. Introduzca su boleta completada en el sobre de seguridad y ambos en el sobre de devolución.
- 3.** No stamp is required. Simply put your signed ballot in the U.S. mail or nearest drop box. No necesita estampilla postal. Simplemente deposite su boleta firmada en la oficina de correos de EE.UU. o en el buzón más cercano.

DROP BOX LOCATIONS /UBICACIÓN DE LAS URNAS:

- S 8th St & Edison Ave
Open 24/7 until Election Day in the parking lot between the Post Office and the Fire Station
- 617 Scoon Road
Open on Election Day at Neighborhood Health Sunnyside

Questions/Preguntas? sos.wa.gov/elections

Figure 2 Mailers sent to voters in the experimental group, sent on October 23rd, 2023.

Figure 3 Script used for in-person canvassing to voters in the experimental group.