

'Mobilization fatigue' leads to diminishing returns for labor-backed voter turnout drives

April 18 2016, by Phil Ciciora



Repeated voter contact across multiple election cycles can eventually lead to "mobilization fatigue," says new research from U. of I. labor professor Ryan Lamare. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Between now and the presidential election in November, political

pundits of all stripes will be trumpeting the importance of voter turnout for both political parties. But according to a new paper from a University of Illinois labor expert who studies unions and politics, repeated voter contact across multiple election cycles can yield diminishing returns and eventually lead to "mobilization fatigue" if voters are contacted too often.

Ryan Lamare, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois, found the effects of continued voter mobilization by organized labor groups eventually yields turnout results that grow at a declining and then insignificant marginal rate.

"If you contact a registered voter three, four or five times, that person will go to the polls and vote in the election. But they're no more likely to vote than someone who was contacted only once or twice," Lamare said. "People appear to get tired of always getting asked over and over again to go out to the polls."

The study, published in the journal *Industrial Relations*, examined a sample of more than 85,000 individual registered voters in Los Angeles over the 14 months prior to each of five consecutive elections in which as many as five contacts could occur before each election. In each election, labor and community organizations attempted to increase turnout by phoning and visiting both union members and other registered voters. Voter turnout was measured through public records rather than survey responses.

Lamare found that three or more contacts by organized labor yielded no more [voter turnout](#) than one or two contacts.

"Mobilization beyond two contacts was inefficient, though the costs of voter canvassing, both in terms of contact opportunities lost and resources drained, remained high," he said.

For organized labor and its substantial get-out-the-vote ambitions in elections, it all comes down to strategic resource allocation, Lamare said.

"The question organized labor needs to ask when they're spending their limited pool of money is, 'Should we strategically invest in making a fourth or fifth contact, or do we invest anew in someone whom we've not contacted before?'" he said. "From my analysis, it would appear that they're better off knocking on a new person's door. Unions certainly won't be penalized for knocking a third, fourth or fifth time on someone's door, but there is a marginal loss in doing that relative to what they might have gained by canvassing someone new."

The timeliness of contact also matters. Lamare also found that recent voter contact was more effective than contact that occurred in a previous election cycle.

"You do get different responses over a five-election cycle," he said. "If you contacted someone once five elections ago, that's not going to generate the same effect as contacting someone once in the immediate prior election. So one shouldn't assume that just because you contacted someone a year and a half ago, it will be just as effective as going out and getting someone that first time around in the most recent election. The timing of the contact makes a difference."

The findings may be of strategic relevance to a labor movement heavily involved with the U.S. political process and increasingly invested, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, in voter mobilization.

"If [unions](#) aspire to influence U.S. politics and a key facet of their influence is an investment in voter mobilization, then they might be better off strategically targeting a broader spectrum of voters only once or twice across multiple rapid-succession elections rather than returning to the same narrow groups of individuals repeatedly," Lamare said.

In an economic and political climate in which every dollar counts, the findings may hold considerable sway in the calculus of creating voter-mobilization strategies, Lamare said.

"Unions serve a pretty unique function in politics. They're not just another special-interest group," he said. "They have very unique access and resources that they can use to contact and canvass voters over multiple rounds of elections. They have members that they can contact and canvass in multiple election cycles, whereas many parties and interest groups don't have that sort of access to that sort of consistent cohort of potential voters that they can tap into."

Another reason to study canvassing by labor groups is that unions can be considered a far-reaching voice for "nonelites" within the political process and a crucial counterweight to the influence of big business and other moneyed interests, Lamare said.

"Unions can't match the aggregate contributions of corporations, but relative to any individual investment made on either side of the political spectrum, unions can orchestrate a significant investment that does stand in opposition to what big business might be interested in."

But if they invest unwisely, if they get those resource allocations wrong, then unions can be seen as "fumbling their responsibilities as a counterbalance to the elites," Lamare said.

"So it's about resources and resource scarcity. With increasing resource scarcity, these types of questions become increasingly important for unions, who can't afford to be inefficient with how they allocate their limited resources," he said. "By understanding how voters respond and the mobilization fatigue phenomenon, labor unions can make better use of lean resources."

More information: J. Ryan Lamare. Labor Unions and Political Mobilization: Diminishing Returns of Repetitious Contact, *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/irel.12137](https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12137)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: 'Mobilization fatigue' leads to diminishing returns for labor-backed voter turnout drives (2016, April 18) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-04-mobilization-fatigue-diminishing-labor-backed-voter.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.