

Analysis of Actual Election Data Indicates Serious Shortcomings For Targeting Only Past Election Voters

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QUESTIONS ABOUT FREQUENT VOTERS

Past Vote History is an increasingly popular method for targeting which voters to contact, canvass, or mail in low turnout elections. In this method the universe of voters to be contacted is diminished by selecting only those who have voted in a prior, similar election(s). Although it is consistently found that those voting in one low turnout election are more likely to vote in the next similar election than the entire universe of registered voters, there are three important questions about the consequences of the method which may reveal some problems, if not dangers, in restricting campaign activities to persons defined as "high propensity voters"

solely on the basis of prior vote history.

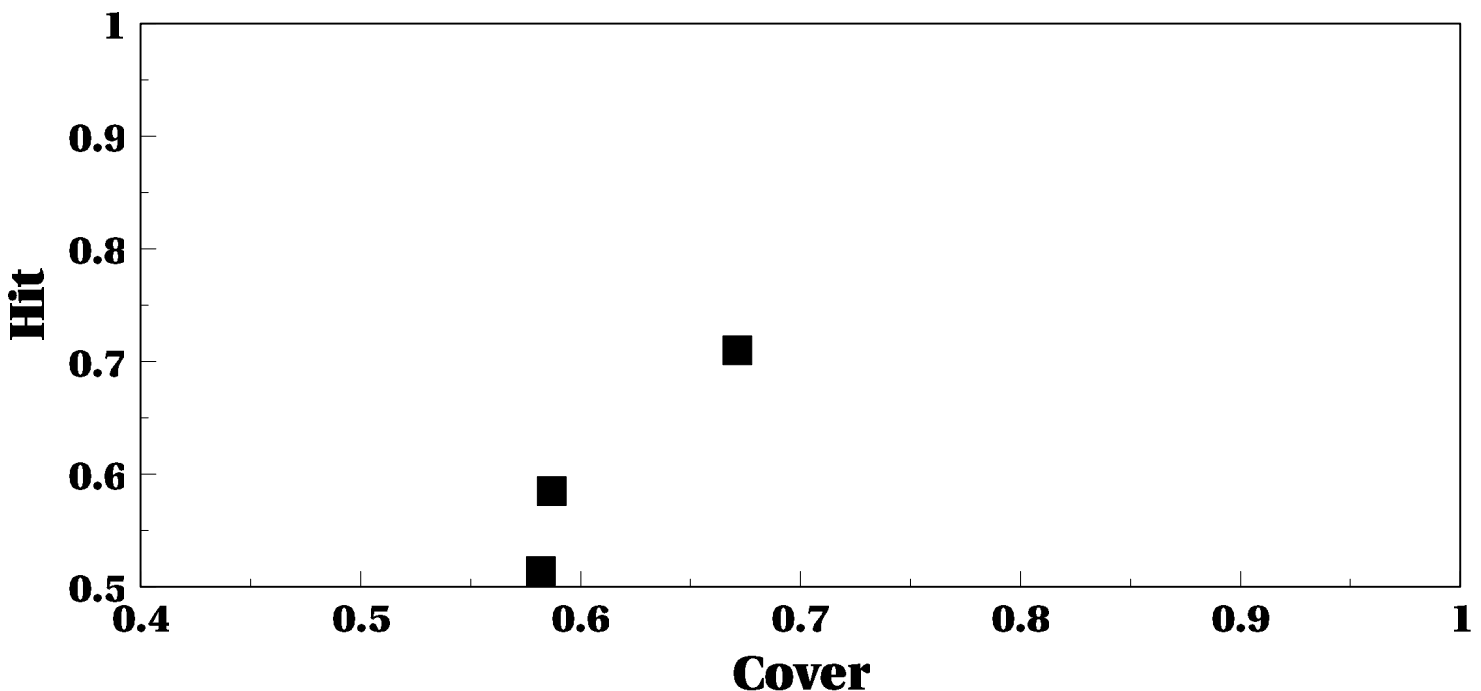
1. Although voting at a higher rate than all voters, is the actual rate of turnout among this diminished universe of voters (hit rate) great enough to justify concentrating campaign resources on only them?

2. Are those who vote in a low turnout election also these who voted in a prior similar low turnout election (cover rate) to an extent which justifies not directing campaign resources to those who did not vote in a prior similar election?

3. Do high propensity voters vote consistently in all low turnout elections, or are they just a group of voters who tend to vote at a proportionately higher rate in each election than other voters? (consistency rate)

Some answers to these questions are provided by data on vote history in two similar consecutive low turnout elections in three different jurisdictions. This data was obtained from the VCS National

Figure I: Hit/Cover For First Election Target



On-line Political Database. These findings clearly indicate there is substantial danger in restricting campaign contact to "high propensity" voters.

ACTUAL VOTING BEHAVIOR

Vote history was obtained for two consecutive low turnout elections in each of three political jurisdictions (1) A Mayoral - Council election (March, 1991) and run off (April, 1991) in the city of Pomona, CA (2) The Presidential Primary (March, 1992) and the Primary for State Offices (August, 1992) in Denver, CO (3) The same Colorado elections for El Paso County.

The elections in Pomona were held six weeks apart, strongly contested, and included extensive walk, absentee, and GOTV efforts. The run off was decided by less than 100 votes.

The two primaries in Colorado also featured strong candidates and campaigns on the Democratic side, with Tsongas, Clinton and Brown well organized for the presidential primary, and Campbell, Lamb, and Heath running strong campaigns for U.S. Senate. Denver is predominately Democratic and turnout in these primaries was higher than "usual".

El Paso County is predominately Republican. The majority of voters in this County reside in Colorado Springs, which is host to many politically active, evangelical Christian organizations. There were no meaningful statewide Republican primaries but there were a number of "stealth" candidates sponsored or supported by the religious right for state assembly and senate seats. The Data Table presents voting rates in each election for the three jurisdictions.

In the Table, the "first election" for Pomona is the general, while the second is the runoff, and for the two counties in Colorado the "first" is the presidential primary and the "second" is the primary for state offices. The turnout in each of the six elections is less than 25%, ranging from a low of 18.4% for El Paso county in the second election to a high for Denver of 24.8% for the same election.

FINDINGS

QUESTION #1: HIT RATE?

In the Table, for those who voted in the first election, the percent voting in both is the percent of those voting in the first who also voted in the second ("hit" rate.) For Pomona, with the elections six weeks apart, two of the same candidates, and strong GOTV efforts, 71% of those voting in the first also voted in the second. This is substantially higher than the 21.7%

turnout for all voters for the second election. For Denver 58.5% of those voting in the first voted in the second, compared to 24.8% of all voters, while the respective numbers for El Paso are 51.4% and 28.5%.

Clearly those who vote in one low turnout election are substantially more likely than the general electorate to vote in the next similar election. However, it must be noted only about half did so in the consecutive primaries in Colorado, and less than three fourths in Pomona, which is certainly the "best possible case".

PROBLEM #1!

Although those voting in one low turnout election are more likely to vote in a subsequent similar low turnout election than are all registered voters, from one fourth to one half of them do not. These findings do not support the assumption that all or most of those voting in one low turnout election can be expected to vote in the next.

QUESTION #2: COVER RATE?

In the Table, for those who voted in the second election, the percent who voted in both is the cover rate, i.e., the percent who voted in the second election who also voted in the first.

For Pomona almost one third (32.9%) of those actually voting in the second election would not be covered by targeting only those voting in the first election, while in Denver and El Paso this figure increases to 41%. Given the similarity of the races, and the proximity in time, the extent of the contribution to the overall turnout rate by those who did not vote in the immediately prior election is truly surprising.

PROBLEM #2!

In these studies at least one-third of those voting in a low turnout election were those who did not vote in a similar, prior, low turnout election. These findings indicate that exclusive reliance on past vote history might overly restrict the universe of voters to be contacted and exclude a dangerously high number of potential voters from campaign activities.

QUESTION #3: CONSISTENCY RATES

In the Table, consistent voters are the percent of those who voted in either low turnout election who

voted in both of them. Voting in either might qualify one as a "high propensity" voter, which really means being placed in a group which has a marginally higher voting rate than the general electorate. It is clear from the table that even among high propensity voters, consistency is another matter, with rates ranging from a low of 37.5% in El Paso County to 52.6% in Pomona.


PROBLEM #3!

High propensity voters are not necessarily consistent voters. At best only about one-half of those voting in either of two low turnout elections voted in both. Clearly those not identified as high propensity voters make substantial contributions to turnout and may be decisive in election outcome, suggesting there is great danger in restricting campaign contact to only those who voted in an immediately prior similar election.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Using vote history to establish a diminished universe of voters to target for campaign contact does provide the advantage of identifying a group of voters with a marginal voting rate significantly higher than the general electorate. Relying only on past vote history includes substantial dangers because many who vote in one low turnout election do not vote in the next similar election, and many who vote in a low turnout election

did not vote in the immediately prior similar one. The nature and extent of interaction between successfully identifying a group with a high voting rate (hit) and successfully identifying a large proportion of those who actually vote (cover) is summarized in Figure I. The proportion of all registered voters who vote "all the time" in low turnout elections is very small and is at best only about one-half of those who vote in any two consecutive, similar, low turnout elections.

Clearly vote propensity is not uni-dimensional. One part of propensity, and a strong one, is a pattern of behavior which can be identified by past vote history. However, this dimension accounts for, at most, about half of those who voted in two consecutive similar low turnout elections in this study. Other factors must influence the likelihood of voting among persons who do not vote consistently in low turnout elections but may comprise one-half or more of those who do vote in any one particular low turnout election. Failure to analyze these other factors, and to include them in the model for selecting groups of voters to be contacted, may prove especially costly in low turnout elections. Elections with a traditionally low rate of participation are precisely the ones in which the outcome is most vulnerable to the influence of highly motivated voters with minimal prior involvement in politics. This group of key voters could easily be ignored and excluded from campaign contact when the definition of propensity is restricted to include only past vote history. This could be costly to the campaign. 

	Pomona		Denver		El Paso County	
Total Voters	40,150		259,716		197,536	
Voted 1st Election	8,255	20.6%	64,155	24.7%	39,089	20.8%
Voted Only 1st	2,397	29.0%	26,430	41.2%	18,991	48.6%
Voted Both	5,858	71.0%	37,725	58.5%	20,098	51.4%
Voted 2nd Election	8,728	21.7%	64,294	24.8%	34,544	18.4%
Voted Only 2nd	2,870	32.9%	26,569	41.3%	14,446	41.8%
Voted Both	5,858	67.1%	37,725	58.7%	20,098	58.2%
Voted in Either	11,125	27.7%	90,724	34.9%	55,535	28.5%
Voted Only 1st	2,397	21.6%	26,430	29.1%	18,991	35.5%
Voted Only 2nd	2,870	25.8%	26,569	29.3%	14,446	27.0%
Voted Both	5,858	52.6%	37,725	41.6%	20,098	37.5%

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❖ "Relying only on past vote history includes substantial dangers because many who vote in one low turnout election do not vote in the next similar election... "

Comments and inquiries regarding this article may be addressed to the author at 3259 Austin Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80909 or 1-719-634-5352.

Interested readers will find a more detailed treatment of these data in an upcoming edition of Campaigns and Elections.

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