

ECONOMIC SCENE

What's the most cost-effective way to encourage people to turn out to vote?

By ALAN B. KRUEGER

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THE filmmaker Michael Moore is stirring controversy by offering "slackers" a three-pack of Fruit of the Loom underwear if they promise to vote. Beyond its comical value, Mr. Moore's campaign raises a serious question for candidates in both parties: What is the best way to increase voter turnout?

Two Yale political scientists, Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, have studied turnout for years. Their findings, based on dozens of controlled experiments done as part of actual campaigns, are summarized in a slim and readable new book called "Get Out the Vote!" (Brookings Institution Press), which is bound to become a bible for politicians and activists of all stripes. The bottom line is that getting out the vote is difficult and costly; only money spent wisely has a noticeable effect.

Though their studies focus mostly on state and local elections -- and the authors take care not to extrapolate beyond the limits of their data -- the research by Professors Green and Gerber probably holds insights for this presidential election as well.

Getting out the vote is big business. Campaigns must decide how much of their limited resources to spend on commercials, leaflets, mass mailings, phone calls, e-mail, door-to-door canvassing and other voter mobilization strategies.

To evaluate the efficacy of these methods, Professors Green and Gerber conducted a remarkable series of experiments in which potential targets of voter mobilization drives were randomly assigned to one of two groups: a treatment group that received a mailing, say, and a control group that did not. The researchers then examined actual voting records to see if turnout increased for the treatment group relative to the control group. The experiments were conducted in conjunction with both partisan campaigns and nonpartisan get-out-the-vote drives.

Which method yields the highest payoff in additional votes per dollar spent? Here are some of their main conclusions:

Door-to-door canvassing, though expensive, yields the most votes. As a rule of thumb, one additional vote is cast from each 14 people contacted. That works out to somewhere between \$7 and \$19 a vote, depending on the pay of canvassers -- not much different from the cost of that three-pack of underwear. Canvassers who matched the ethnic profile of their assigned neighborhoods were more successful.

The effect of leaflets on turnout has not been evaluated as thoroughly as canvassing, but results from two partisan campaigns indicate that one vote was generated for every 66 leaflets hung on doors. In another experiment, just one vote was added for every 200 nonpartisan leaflets. Over all, leafletting costs \$14 to \$42 a vote. (A salutary aspect of the book is that one, two or three stars are placed next to the central findings to signify the degree of confidence the authors have in the results. This is only a one-star result.)

Direct mail is less cost-effective than leaflets. Mailing costs totaled around \$60 for each additional vote cast. Telephone calling is also not highly effective, with the cost per vote ranging from \$200 for heavily scripted calls to \$45 for more personalized calls. Even worse, recorded messages and e-mail had no detectable impact on turnout.

Some candidates mail negative messages to their opponent's supporters to discourage voting. Mailing a negative message depresses votes, but at a very low rate. The cost per vote diminished was about \$300. (This is another one-star

finding.)

In just-completed research, Professor Green and Lynn Vavreck of the University of California, Los Angeles, placed 5,500 get-out-the-vote commercials on cable networks across randomly selected geographic areas in four states shortly before the general elections of 2003. The ads hardly affected turnout, although the estimated impact necessarily entails much statistical uncertainty. A similar conclusion was drawn from a study of ads in the 2000 presidential election. Thus, commercials may persuade viewers to support a candidate, but they do not appear to affect whether they vote.

"The defining feature of this presidential election," Professor Green said, "is the focus on voter mobilization."

Many Republican advisers suspect that Al Gore won the popular vote in 2000, despite polls showing a lead for George W. Bush just before the election, because the Democrats did a better job mobilizing voters. According to news reports, Republican strategists learned from carrying out their own experiments in 2001 that door-to-door canvassing has a high payoff, and used the technique to great advantage in the three days before the 2002 midterm elections.

Major efforts are being mounted to mobilize voters this year. Labor unions, America Coming Together and other groups are working independently of the Kerry campaign to turn out the vote.

The Bush campaign, by contrast, has amassed an enormous war chest to orchestrate its own mobilization effort.

What are the likely implications for turnout on Nov. 2? The following back-of-the-envelope calculation gives an idea. Although the precise figure is not known, it is possible that as much as \$200 million more will be spent on voter mobilization by all parties in 2004 than in 2000. Mr. Green says a reasonable assumption is that one additional vote will be generated from every \$50 spent on the mobilization methods that will be used.

These assumptions imply that the tremendous mobilization efforts under way will increase turnout by about four million people, or 2 percent of eligible voters. Although unseasonable weather or other unforeseen events could throw this forecast off -- and the expected close contest should arouse heightened participation -- this year's turnout is likely to fall between 2000's rate of 54 percent of eligible voters and 1992's rate of 61 percent. This moderate forecast stands in contrast to the image of unprecedented voting implied by reports of record numbers of people registering in many states.

A great deal of knowledge about turnout strategies has been gleaned from experiments in election campaigns, but many gaps remain. Professors Green and Gerber conclude their book in a novel way, by giving office seekers a step-by-step guide on how to conduct scientific experiments on their own. This is not just fanciful thinking: two campaigns have already taken the bait and conducted randomized experiments. The 2004 election promises to be the first to exploit scientific research on voter turnout on a national scale.

Perhaps we are witnessing the rise of what can be called Fisherian Democracy, after the statistician R.A. Fisher, who invented the experimental method.

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Doctoral Thesis Says Rich People Spend More on Conspicuous Things

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