


RESEARCH ARTICLE

If We Build It, Only Some Will Come: An Experimental Study of Mobilization for Seattle’s Democracy Voucher Program

Geoffrey Henderson^{1,2,*}  and Hahrie Han^{2,3}

¹Department of Political Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA, Twitter: @geoffhenderson9, ²Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA and ³Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA, Twitter: @hahriehan

*Corresponding author. Email: ghenderson@ucsb.edu

Abstract

Seattle, Washington instituted a new “democracy voucher” program in 2017 providing each registered voter with four \$25 campaign finance vouchers to contribute to municipal candidates. Prior research shows that without efforts to mobilize voters, electoral reforms like the voucher program are often insufficient to increase participation among underrepresented groups. We examine how mobilization affects the voucher program’s redistributive goals – does it increase participation among infrequent voters, or does it engage regular participants in politics? In the 2017 election cycle, we partnered with a coalition of advocacy organizations on a field experiment to estimate the effects of providing voters with information about democracy vouchers through door-to-door canvassing, texting, digital advertisements, and e-mails. While mobilization increased voucher use and voter turnout, responsiveness was greatest among frequent voters. As our findings suggest that transactional mobilizing is insufficient to engage infrequent participants, we posit that deeper organizing is necessary to fulfill the program’s redistributive goals.

We would like to thank our research partners the Win/Win Network, Washington Community Action Network, and Fuse Washington for implementing the field experiment and providing the data necessary for the analysis reported in this paper. We also wish to acknowledge the Analyst Institute, whose open-source R package entitled aiRando we used for the randomization procedure. Christopher Mann provided invaluable advice on research design and analysis at an early stage of the project, and Patrick Hunnicutt provided helpful input on the implementation of the randomization procedure and the analysis. Our paper has also benefited from comments from Mark Buntaine and David Doherty, as well as from participants in the Field Experiments course at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB); the ENVENT Lab at UCSB; and the American Politics Workshop at UCSB. Last but not least, we thank the anonymous reviewers for the Journal of Experimental Political Science for their thoughtful advice. Geoffrey Henderson received a stipend of \$6,500 from the Win/Win Network for his work on this project. The pre-analysis plan for this study can be accessed at <https://osf.io/dtgjq/>. The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available at the *Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse* within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: doi: 10.7910/DVN/VPIZA.

© The Author(s), 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Experimental Research Section of the American Political Science Association

Keywords: field experiment; voter mobilization; democracy vouchers; inequality; campaign finance; political participation; local politics

Introduction

Worsening political inequality, reflected in unequal rates of participation and governmental responsiveness, is one of the most pressing issues facing our democracy today (Bartels 2008; Garcia Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Hill and Leighley 1999; Leighley and Oser 2018; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). At the core of the debate around political inequality are persistent disparities in campaign contributions, which largely flow from the wealthiest citizens and offer them disproportionate access and influence (Kalla and Broockman 2016; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012).¹

Of the reforms enacted around the country to address this inequality (see Malbin and Parrott 2017), among the most innovative is Seattle, Washington's democracy voucher program. Enacted via ballot initiative in 2015, this program gives each registered voter four \$25 vouchers per election cycle to contribute to campaigns for city council and city attorney (Berman 2015).² The idea behind democracy vouchers, first proposed in a 2011 op-ed by law professor Lawrence Lessig, is that "more money can beat big money" (Lessig 2011). However, prior research indicates that electoral reforms are often insufficient to engage people in politics who have rarely participated before (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007). We present the results from the first experiment to examine how outreach to encourage participation in Seattle's democracy voucher program affected inequalities in political participation.

Seattle's 2017 municipal election presented voters with their first opportunity to contribute their democracy vouchers to candidates (Berman 2015).³ To conduct this study, we partnered with a coalition which sought to engage voters from underrepresented populations in the program. This coalition, the Win/Win Network, brings together advocacy and community organizations in Washington state to promote civic engagement, improve representation, and work toward social justice. We set up a field experiment which randomly assigned voters to a control condition and a treatment condition involving multiple modes of outreach encouraging voters to use their vouchers.

Results from our experiment show that the mobilization treatment – which included door-to-door canvassing, texting, e-mails, and digital advertisements – significantly increased the rate of voucher use, though this effect was greater among those who were

¹For a discussion of how the average campaign donor differs from the average voter in terms of policy priorities and preferences, see Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012). Campaign contributions have a strong positive association with income (Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). According to [OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org), less than half of one percent of Americans contributed \$200 or more to political candidates in 2018 ([OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) 2019). The Sunlight Foundation reports that in the 2012 election cycle, 28% of all money contributed to campaigns came from a group of just 31,385 people (Drutman 2013).

²Non-registered voters do not receive democracy vouchers automatically but can apply for them.

³Voters could contribute these vouchers to any qualifying candidate who opted into the program, which requires candidates to adhere to limits on contributions and spending, contest several debates, and refuse contributions from outside groups such as PACs (Kelley and Christ 2018). A candidate was eligible to receive vouchers if they cleared minimum thresholds for contributions and signatures (Beekman 2018).

already frequent voters. Mobilization also increased voter turnout, but only among regular voters. We posit that deeper efforts to build persistent relationships with low-propensity voters will be necessary to engage people who participate infrequently in politics and ameliorate inequalities in campaign contributions.

The mobilization effort in our experiment contributed to a trend of expanding participation in Seattle's campaign finance system. In 2017, the city's donor base more than tripled, with 84% of voucher contributors making their first-ever political donations. Moreover, the donor base became substantially more diverse in terms of age, race, class, and gender (Falk 2017; Friedenbach 2017). However, overall participation was low; only around 3% of Seattle voters who received vouchers contributed them to candidates (Kliff 2018). With more competitive races and reforms such as an online portal for voucher submission and grants to community organizations working to increase participation, voucher use more than doubled from nearly 70,000 in 2017 to over 147,000 in 2019, and candidates were unable to accept additional vouchers after reaching their spending limits (Friedenbach 2017; SEEC 2019a). These numbers represent a promising departure from the state of campaign finance in Seattle prior to the voucher program – small-dollar donors have substantially increased as a share of contributors to city council candidates over the past two election cycles, making electoral coalitions more egalitarian (Heerwig and McCabe 2019).

Electoral reform and mobilization as responses to inequality

Existing research raises questions about the ability of Seattle's democracy voucher program to ameliorate inequality. This research shows that election reforms which make participation easier are often insufficient to engage infrequent participants.⁴ While voting by mail, for instance, has been shown to modestly increase turnout, this effect is largely concentrated among regular voters in low-salience races (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007; Gronke and Miller 2012). In a mail-in voucher system such as Seattle's, then, we might expect higher participation and responsiveness from frequent voters. To address the gap between reforms' intended impact and the actual outcome, some scholars have argued that mobilization can aid electoral reforms in democratizing the active public (Mann 2014; Stein, Owens, and Leighley 2003).

However, most experimental research examining the effects of mobilization – which largely focuses on efforts to get out the vote (GOTV) – finds that GOTV is most effective in activating those who are already likely to participate in politics (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2014). Personal forms of contact such as canvassing and volunteer phone calls tend to be most effective (Green and Gerber 2015). The effects of GOTV on low-propensity populations vary by the salience of the election (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009) and people's embeddedness within social

⁴Evidence is mixed as to whether early voting, liberalized absentee balloting, and vote-by-mail increase turnout, and regular voters are most likely to take advantage of these reforms (Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007; Southwell and Burchett 2000). One exception is Election Day Registration, which has been shown to produce turnout gains in the electorate at large and reduce turnout gaps by age, race, income, and education (Alvarez, Ansolabehere, and Wilson 2002; Brians and Grofman 2001; Leighley and Nagler 2013; Rigby and Springer 2011).

networks (Sinclair 2012). In general, however, high-propensity voters are most responsive to mobilization efforts.⁵ While Seattle's democracy voucher program was adopted to address inequality in campaign contributions, mobilization may be necessary to make it work. We ask whether mobilization can indeed reduce inequality in one of the most unequal areas of public life.

Previous work suggests that mobilization efforts which entail building an enduring relationship with low-propensity communities might stand a better chance of activating this population around election time. This research finds that GOTV efforts among members of civic organizations can significantly increase participation among low-income, minority, and low-propensity voters (Davenport 2010; Garcia Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Wong 2004). Association members may be more likely to accept a mobilization treatment or more familiar with the organization delivering the treatment. Alternatively, due to stronger political interest, efficacy, civic skills, or relational ties, members may develop a stronger predisposition to comply with requests to participate in political activity (Han 2014; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Sinclair 2012; Warren 2001).⁶ In other words, a higher propensity to vote could be a mechanism through which organization membership increases responsiveness to mobilization. If this were the predominant mechanism, we would find an interaction between treatment assignment and vote history, but not between treatment assignment and organization membership.

We propose the following hypotheses for our study:

- H1: Mobilization will increase the use of democracy vouchers.
- H2: The effect of mobilization on voucher use will be greater among high-propensity voters.
- H3: The effect of mobilization on voucher use will be greater among members of the organizations affiliated with the Win/Win Network.

In addition to testing these hypotheses regarding voucher use, we examine whether mobilization increased voter turnout, and whether this effect was greater among high-propensity voters and Win/Win organization members.

Experimental setting and design

The November 2017 general municipal election in Seattle offered a chance to estimate the effect of mobilization on participation in the city's new democracy voucher

⁵There are several potential reasons why voter mobilization tends to activate high-propensity voters. Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009) argue that voter mobilization activates high-propensity voters in low-salience elections because these are the voters for whom (ex ante) the costs of voting are only slightly greater than the benefits. Alternatively, Bolsen, Ferraro, and Miranda (2014) posit that frequent voters are more susceptible to appeals to participate in collective action due to an internalized pro-social preference. A third potential explanation, originating with Moe (1981), is that people are more likely to participate in collective action when they have strong feelings of efficacy. Many voters believe that their votes will not matter because special interests and large donors have an outsized influence on electoral and policy outcomes.

⁶Additionally, in the context of our study, we were more likely to have contact information for members of the organizations in the coalition, increasing the likelihood that members would be reached.

program. Beyond the city council and city attorney races for which voters could contribute vouchers, the mayor's race headlined the ticket. Voting occurred largely by mail, and about 49% of Seattle voters cast their ballots by Election Day. Each registered voter in the city received a set of four democracy vouchers on January 3, 2017, along with prepaid postage to encourage voters to send the vouchers in to the city government for distribution to candidates. Of the 17 primary election candidates, six qualified to receive vouchers by meeting the program's requirements. In the general election, all but one of the six candidates used vouchers to finance their campaigns. In a sign of the program's viability, a candidate using vouchers won each of the three races for which vouchers could be used (Friedenbach 2017).⁷

In collaboration with the Win/Win Network, we conducted a field experiment which randomly assigned a multifaceted mobilization effort providing information about the democracy vouchers. We assembled the experimental universe through a two-stage sampling procedure. First, we identified the precincts in the southern half of the city – which is more racially diverse than the northern half of the city – with at least 20% people of color. Figure 1 maps the precincts included in the sample. Second, within these precincts, we sampled people of color and people under the age of 35 from a voter file provided by Win/Win.⁸ This sampling procedure facilitated Win/Win's efforts to increase participation among underrepresented communities in the city. As the intervention was designed to encourage people to use their vouchers, we dropped from the experimental universe anyone who had used a voucher before we selected our sample on July 31, 2017.

We used block random assignment, clustered by household, to assign voters to treatment and control groups.⁹ To combine clustered random assignment with blocking, we first randomly selected one individual per household to stand in for the household in the random assignment process. We then stratified this subsample into blocks based on a set of voter characteristics. To help assess our core hypotheses, the random assignment process blocked on voting history and membership in a Win/Win partner organization.¹⁰ To improve precision, we also blocked on whether the voter shared a household with other voters in the experimental universe, reachability by cell phone, reachability by e-mail, and – among members of the Washington Community Action Network (Washington CAN) – reachability by landline or cell phone.¹¹ In total, voters in the subsample were sorted into 124

⁷Eight candidates opted into the voucher program for the primary election.

⁸Win/Win assembled this voter file using publicly available data on voter registration and voter turnout, internal data on organization membership, and commercially available data on voters' demographic characteristics.

⁹The randomization procedure was conducted using the *aiRando* package in R.

¹⁰The measure of voting history we used for the random assignment procedure differed from the voting history variable we used for the analysis. The former, provided by the Win/Win Network, had a more leptokurtic distribution, with less than 1,000 voters each in the high- and low-propensity categories. The advantage of using this measure for blocking was that the highest-propensity voters—those who were the most likely to use their vouchers—were evenly distributed between the two experimental groups.

¹¹We created these strata to allow for the possibility of phone banking among Washington CAN members. Ultimately, we decided not to incorporate a phone bank into the experiment.

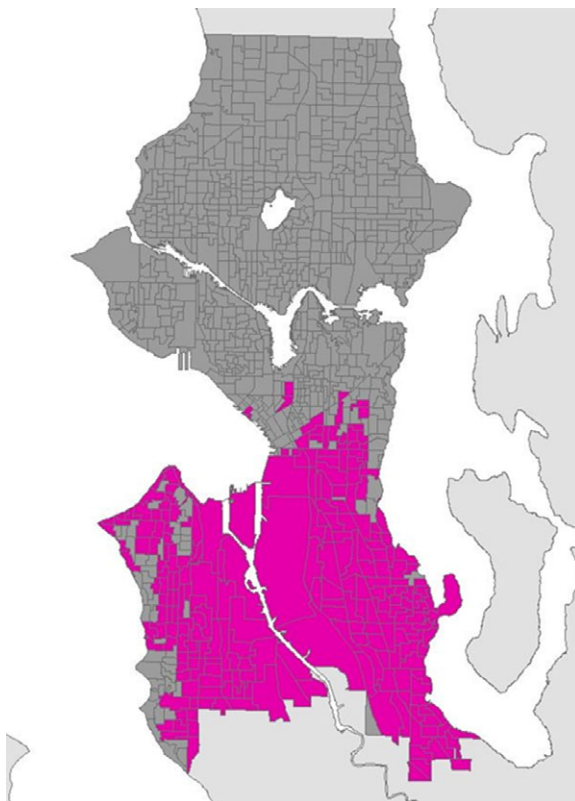


Figure 1 (color online)

Precincts in the Experimental Universe.

Notes: Pink shading indicates that a precinct was included in the experimental sample. This map was provided by the Win/Win Network.

separate strata representing distinct combinations of voter characteristics, and random assignment to the treatment and control groups occurred separately within each stratum. Following random assignment, we conducted balance checks on age, race, sex, income, and education level, re-randomizing if imbalance reaching at least borderline levels of significance ($p < 0.1$) was found. Next, we assigned each individual sharing a household with a subject in the subsample to the same experimental group as their selected housemate. After removing households with eight or more voters, we were left with a sample of 41,414 voters. Our final sample is 30.88% Asian/Pacific Islander, 21.63% Black, 8.24% Latinx, and 34.18% White; 59.69% of our sample is under 35.¹²

¹²Table AB1 reports the sample's descriptive statistics, including demographic characteristics and voting history.

Win/Win coordinated several organizations to deliver four modes of outreach to voters in the treatment group.¹³ The voter contact methods included door-to-door canvassing, text messages, e-mail messages, and digital advertisements delivered through Facebook.¹⁴ Each of these methods provided information about the democracy vouchers and reminded voters to contribute their vouchers to municipal campaigns. The door-to-door canvassing script also included a message intended to frame the voucher program as a means of empowering ordinary voters:

“The idea is that people in our community, no matter how big their wallets are, should be able to contribute to campaigns, and that elected officials should be accountable to us—not just wealthy special interests that make big donations.”

As is increasingly common in mobilization efforts, the canvassing script incorporated questions intended to prompt the voter to make a plan to send in their vouchers (Nickerson and Rogers 2010). Canvassers also delivered literature to each household they visited regardless of whether a voter answered the door. Win/Win followed up with voters who responded to the text messages to provide information about how to use the vouchers.¹⁵

Win/Win provided us with data on covariates¹⁶ and contact rates.¹⁷ Fourteen percent of voters had a conversation with a canvasser, 25% received texts, and

¹³Win/Win partnered with Hustle to send text messages, Washington Community Action Network (Washington CAN) conducted a door-to-door canvassing drive, Fuse Washington distributed digital advertisements, and several organizations in the Win/Win Network e-mailed their members. Groups sending e-mails as part of the experiment included One America, Planned Parenthood, Washington Conservation Voters, and Washington Environmental Council. In delivering a multifaceted treatment, we sacrifice some internal validity—we cannot identify complier average causal effects, and we cannot determine which element of the treatment had the greatest effect. However, the loss of internal validity comes with a gain in external validity—in partnering with a group of organizations to deliver various forms of outreach, our study more closely approximates coalitions’ real-world strategies. As we are interested not in the effect of any given mode of outreach but rather the effect of a mobilization effort in general, we believe that the advantages associated with greater external validity are worth the cost.

¹⁴Win/Win’s multifaceted voter outreach campaign ran from early August until late September of 2017. Several Win/Win partner organizations sent e-mails to their supporters in the treatment group during this period. Win/Win used Hustle to send texts to voters in the treatment group during the month of August. Fuse Washington delivered digital ads to treatment group voters from August 9th through September 20th. Washington CAN conducted its canvassing effort from August 11th through September 5th.

¹⁵A source of non-compliance in this experiment is that many of the phone numbers of Seattle residents that were purchased from a vendor were incorrect. As a result, text messages were likely sent to a significant number of voters who were not intended to receive them. However, inaccuracies in contact information are not unique to this study, and we consider it unlikely that this non-compliance substantially altered the results.

¹⁶These covariates included subjects’ demographic characteristics and voter turnout records. From these data we created categorical variables for age, income, educational attainment, and voting history. Win/Win supplemented these data with records indicating whether subjects were members of Win/Win partner organizations.

¹⁷Although our analysis simply examines the effect of being assigned to the treatment group, as opposed to the effect of the treatment on the treated, we collected data on contact rates to understand how effectively the campaign reached voters. Contact rates can also help to provide a sense of which elements of the treatment did not likely have a strong influence on the intent-to-treat effect. Washington CAN canvassers recorded which voters they were able to speak to, Hustle provided data on the number of individuals who received texts, and

1% received e-mails, while the contact rates for the digital ads ranged from 23% to 37%.¹⁸ After the election, Win/Win obtained data on voucher use and voter turnout from the Public Disclosure Commission and the Washington Secretary of State, respectively (Henderson and Han 2020).

Using publicly available data, we construct four categories of voting history. We tally how often each person voted over the four previous general elections (2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016) and divide this figure by four. We code voters with perfect voting records or who missed one election as high-propensity voters, while those who voted in two of four elections are medium–high-propensity voters. Those who voted just once are medium–low-propensity voters, while those who did not vote at all are low-propensity voters.¹⁹ We drop voters ages 21 and younger from the analyses involving voting history, as these voters were ineligible for at least one of the past four elections.

Analysis

Our analysis estimates the degree to which mobilization increased participation in the voucher program in the aggregate. The purpose of this research is not to examine the effects of particular kinds of treatments (e.g., door-to-door canvassing versus texting), but rather to understand whether mobilization in general can significantly increase participation in the program. Consistent with similarly designed mobilization studies, our estimand is the intent-to-treat effect (ITT) on voucher use (see e.g., Garcia Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Green and Gerber 2015).²⁰ Rather than the effect of receiving the treatment – known as the treatment-on-treated effect (TOT) – the ITT represents the effect of being *assigned* to receive the treatment. An advantage of estimating the ITT is that it incorporates noncompliers into the estimate, thus accounting for the challenges that mobilization efforts face in reaching voters. A TOT estimate would indicate the intervention’s effect only on

Fuse Washington provided data on reach rates for the digital advertisements. The data on digital advertisements indicated the share of the experimental universe receiving each advertisement, but not which voters specifically received them. Each Win/Win partner organization that sent e-mails to its members in the treatment group provided data on the number of individuals who opened these e-mails.

¹⁸Substantial numbers of voters were reached through door-to-door canvassing, texts, and digital ads, while few voters received e-mails. The share of voters in the treatment group who had a conversation with a canvasser was 13.99%. To the degree that these voters informed their housemates about such conversations, the indirect contact rate could be appreciably higher. The text messages reached 24.58% of voters in the treatment group. The digital ads consisted of two videos and five graphics. The videos reached 34.37 and 36.93% of voters assigned to treatment, respectively, while the graphics’ contact rates varied from about 23 to 26%. Finally, only 1.44 percent of voters assigned to treatment received e-mails, as e-mails were sent only to those who were members of certain Win/Win partner organizations.

¹⁹Our measure of voting history differs from vote propensity measures used in past research (e.g., Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009; Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2014) in that it does not incorporate demographic characteristics. Our experimental universe was designed to include only people whose demographic characteristics are associated with a lower likelihood of voting, and we sought to understand specifically how people’s voting records moderated the effect of the mobilization effort.

²⁰Given our bundled treatment design, moreover, identifying the treatment-on-treated effect is not feasible without making the assumption that digital advertisements have no marginal or interactive effect on voucher use. As we do not have data on which voters in the treatment group were reached via digital ads, we cannot isolate the effect of the ads nor the effects of the other modes of outreach.

compliers, which is less informative from the perspective of evaluating the intervention’s effect on the composition of the active public.

First, we estimate the mobilization campaign’s effect on voucher use. To test H1, we fit a linear probability model with standard errors clustered by household and block fixed effects. Model 1 takes voucher use as the dependent variable and treatment assignment as the explanatory variable, and Model 2 adds a series of demographic covariates. These covariates include a discrete variable for age (A), an indicator for female (F), ordinal variables for education (E) and income bracket (I), and indicators for Asian American/Pacific Islander (P), Black (B), and Latinx (L).

We test H2 and H3 by adding interactions between treatment assignment and an indicator of high-propensity voter, and between treatment assignment and an indicator of Win/Win partner organization membership, to the two previous models (see Model 3). Model 4 adds demographic covariates; the full model is shown below:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * D_i + \beta_2 * H_i + \beta_3 * W_i + \beta_4 * D_i * H_i + \beta_5 * D_i * W_i + \beta_6 * A_i + \beta_7 * F_i + \beta_8 * E_i + \beta_9 * I_i + \beta_{10} * P_i + \beta_{11} * B_i + \beta_{12} * L_i + \gamma_i + \epsilon_i$$

In the above model, D_i is a binary indicator of treatment assignment, H_i is a binary indicator of high-propensity voter, and W_i is a binary indicator of Win/Win organization membership. The ITT estimate is provided by β_1 , β_4 provides an estimate of the interactive effect of treatment assignment and high-propensity voter on voucher use, and β_5 provides an estimate of the interactive effect of treatment assignment and organizational membership. Block fixed effects are represented by γ_i and ϵ_i represents the error term.

For each hypothesis test, we conduct randomization inference as a robustness check to account for the effect of re-randomization on the sampling distribution from which our permutation of the random assignment was drawn. As further robustness checks, we estimate heterogeneous treatment effects by voting history using both OLS regression and randomization inference. Finally, we replicate our analyses with voter turnout as the dependent variable.

Mobilization increases voucher use largely among frequent voters

The rate of participation in the voucher program among voters in our experimental universe was 1.45%, well below the city’s overall rate of voucher use, 3.3% (Kliff 2018). However, voucher use appears to increase with past voting. Among high-propensity voters in our sample, the rate of voucher use was 3.18%, more than twice the rate among the experimental universe as a whole. Medium-high-propensity voters contributed vouchers at a rate of 2.31%, compared to 1.23% among medium-low-propensity voters and 0.52% among low-propensity voters. While 1.83% of newly registered voters contributed their vouchers, none of the more than 3,000 unregistered voters in the experimental universe contributed a voucher. The rate of voucher use was also higher among members of the organizations comprising the Win/Win Network – 2.8% of members used their vouchers, more than twice the rate (1.2%) among non-members (Table 1).

Our analysis estimates the effect of mobilization on voucher use and how this effect varied by voting history and organizational membership. First, we find that

Table 1
ITT Effects of Voter Mobilization on Voucher Use

	Dependent variable: Voucher use			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Without covariates	With covariates	Without covariates	With covariates
Treatment assignment	0.004*** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
High-propensity voter			0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)
Win/Win organization member			0.013*** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.004)
Treatment assignment*High-propensity voter			0.011* (0.006)	0.013** (0.006)
Treatment assignment*Win/Win organization member			0.003 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)
Educational attainment		0.002** (0.001)		0.002* (0.001)
Income		0.002** (0.001)		0.002 (0.001)
Age		-0.000 (0.000)		-0.000 (0.000)
Female		0.001 (0.001)		0.000 (0.001)
Asian		-0.003* (0.002)		-0.003 (0.002)
Black		-0.002 (0.002)		-0.002 (0.002)
Latinx		-0.003 (0.002)		-0.003 (0.003)
Block fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.053*** (0.018)	0.046** (0.019)	0.043** (0.019)	0.037* (0.020)
N	41,414	37,511	38,135	34,737
R ²	0.018	0.018	0.019	0.019

NOTES: We fit four linear probability models to estimate intent-to-treat (ITT) effects – the effects of treatment assignment (rather than receipt of the treatment) on the likelihood of voucher use. We cluster standard errors by household and add block fixed effects to account for the treatment assignment process, which randomized households within blocks. Models 3 and 4 exclude voters below the age of 22, as these voters were ineligible to vote in at least one of the elections that we use to operationalize the high-propensity voter variable. ***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1, two-tailed test.

assignment to the mobilization effort significantly increased voucher use. Model 1, without covariates, shows an ITT of 0.37 percentage points. Given that the baseline rate of voucher use in the control group was 1.26%, this effect represents a substantial 29.57% increase in voucher use. Controlling for age, gender, race, education, and income (Model 2), assignment to treatment increased voucher use by 0.35 percentage points. We thus find support for H1. As a robustness check, we test H1 using randomization inference. This procedure adjusts the standard errors on our point estimates by accounting for the permutations of the random assignment procedure which were precluded by our design. Replicating the test of H1 using this procedure does not substantially alter our results.

Second, the effect of mobilization was 1.11 percentage points greater for high-propensity voters. Consistent with H2, we find a positive interaction between treatment assignment and high-propensity voter (Model 3). This effect is significant at conventional levels using a one-sided test, which is appropriate given that we hypothesized a positive relationship. Adding demographic covariates (Model 4) does not substantially alter the results. As a robustness check, we estimate the interaction between treatment assignment and high-propensity voter with regression-adjusted randomization inference, using the specification from Model 3. Using this approach, the interaction of treatment assignment and high-propensity voter becomes significant at conventional levels using a two-sided test.

Our analysis of heterogeneous treatment effects offers further support for our hypothesis that mobilization is more effective among more frequent voters.²¹ We find that mobilization increased voucher use by 1.51 percentage points among high-propensity voters, roughly four times the effect among the whole experimental universe. While treatment assignment may have increased voucher use among medium–high-propensity voters, we lack the precision to be certain of this result. However, perhaps because there are more medium–low-propensity voters in the dataset, we find a significant treatment effect for this subgroup. Among these voters, mobilization increased voucher use by 0.35 percentage points, comparable to the effect among the broader experimental universe. Finally, we do not find a significant effect among low-propensity voters (Figure 2).²²

²¹The pre-analysis plan did not specify that heterogeneous treatment effects (HTEs) would be estimated for each voting history category. We estimate HTEs to determine the strength of the treatment effect among each of the categories. Specifically, we estimate HTEs on voucher use for high-propensity voters, medium-high-propensity voters, medium-low-propensity voters, and low-propensity voters. While these estimates offer corroborating evidence, they are not intended as the primary means of testing our hypotheses.

²²As we estimate intent-to-treat effects, it is possible that the heterogeneous effects reported here result from systematic differences in compliance across voting history categories. Indeed, contact rates increased with past voting; the campaign reached 16.3% of high-propensity voters through door-to-door canvassing, but just 11.03% of low-propensity voters. Additionally, voters with more robust voting histories were more likely to be reachable by cell phone, a necessary condition for receiving the text messages. However, it seems unlikely that these differences fully account for variation in the treatment effect. Substantial shares of voters in the lower brackets of voting history received the door-to-door canvassing and text message treatments, yet these treatments appear to have had much smaller effects, if any, among these voters. Contact rates by voting history subgroup could not be calculated for the digital ads and contact rates for the e-mails were so low that it seems unlikely that the e-mails contributed substantially to the treatment effect.

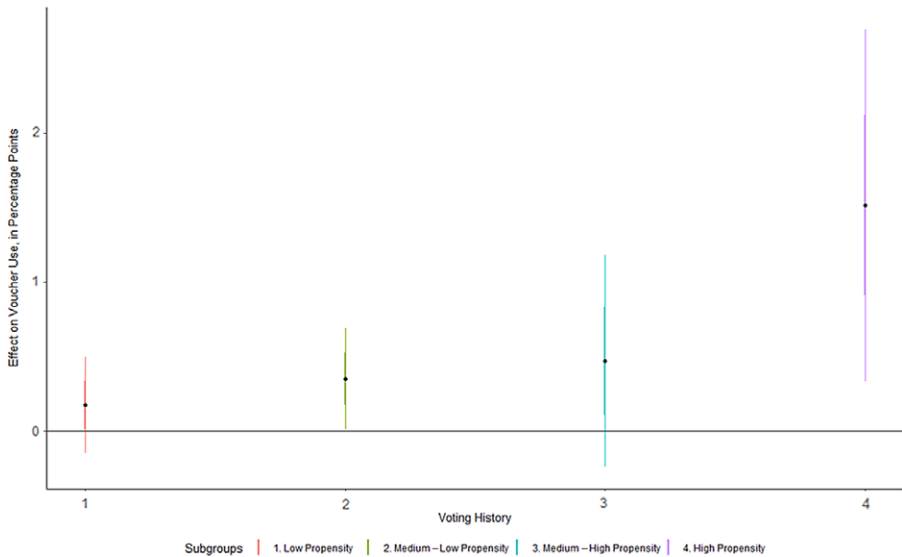


Figure 2 (color online)
ITT Effects by Voting History.

Notes: This figure illustrates heterogeneous treatment effects by voting history category. Each model includes block fixed effects and clusters standard errors at the household level. The dots in the figure represent point estimates. The thick error bars span one standard error above and below the point estimate, while the thin error bars represent the 95% confidence interval estimated using a two-tailed test.

Third, we examine whether treatment effects varied by organizational membership. Contrary to H3, we do not find an interaction between treatment assignment and membership in a Win/Win partner organization (see Model 3). Adding controls to the interactive model does not substantially alter the results (see Model 4).

Finally, our analysis of voter turnout finds a pattern resembling the results for voucher use. While we do not find an effect of the mobilization effort on turnout overall, mobilization was significantly more effective among high-propensity voters, by nearly 4 percentage points (Table AJ1). Mobilization significantly increased voter turnout only among high-propensity voters; those assigned to treatment were 3.68 percentage points more likely to vote (Table AK1). We again fail to reject the null hypothesis that organization membership increased responsiveness to mobilization.

Discussion

The democracy voucher program has expanded and diversified participation in Seattle's campaign finance system. Yet our data suggest that transactional approaches to mobilization for voucher contribution will activate those who regularly vote, rather than engaging new participants in the political system. While the mobilization effort increased voucher use in underrepresented communities, this increase was significantly greater among frequent voters than among the rest of

the electorate. In the same vein, mobilization increased voter turnout only among regular voters.

Among the barriers to broadening political participation is a widespread feeling of political inefficacy. As one disaffected Seattle resident put it, “maybe [vouchers] would do some good, but politicians don’t want to listen to us” (Cohen 2017). Another voter added that “[o]ur little voucher would be so small compared to corporate America’s donations.” The canvassing message in this study similarly emphasized how vouchers could counter the influence of “wealthy special interests that make big donations”; perhaps by reminding voters of powerful impediments to democracy, the message dampened the effect of mobilization among those who were less predisposed to participate (Levine and Kline 2019). Further, many Seattle residents had simply misplaced or forgotten about their vouchers by the time of the election (Kliff 2018). This challenge speaks to a deeper problem – relatively low levels of political engagement outside of election season.

On the other side of the coin, voters with a strong voting record across election cycles may be those who have an interest in local government. These voters may have been more likely to retain their vouchers when they received them in the mail and to have them ready to use after receiving a blandishment to participate. While the 2017 Seattle election experienced high turnout for a local contest held off-cycle (Anzia 2013), it is still worth noting that this study was conducted in a relatively low-salience election. As mobilization has been shown to activate lower-propensity voters in higher-salience elections (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009), it seems plausible that if a similar voucher program were adopted for state or federal elections, a mobilization effort such as the one reported here could significantly increase participation beyond the most politically engaged voters.

We posit that efforts to engage infrequent political participants in the voucher program will need to go beyond traditional voter mobilization tactics. As the language barrier could help explain the lower treatment effects among lower-propensity voters (Garcia Bedolla and Michelson 2012), outreach in multiple languages could help address disparities in participation. Further, a large body of research documents how community organizations have fostered high levels of political engagement among low-income, majority–minority communities (Christens, Peterson, and Speer 2011; Christens and Speer 2011; Osterman 2006; Speer et al 2010; Tesdahl and Speer 2015; Warren 2001). Fortunately, Seattle has launched a program to provide grants to community organizations in underrepresented areas of the city working to increase enrollment and participation in the democracy voucher system, including by “distributing translated program materials” for non-native English speakers (SEEC 2019b). A complete vision of a democratic polity involves a robust civil society mediating between the people and their representatives, yet we are in the midst of a decades-long decline in civic organizations and communal activities (Putnam 2000; Schlozman et al 2015; Skocpol 2003). These collective contexts, if revitalized, may hold the key to unlocking the potential of Seattle’s democracy voucher program, and other reforms like it, to reshape representation in American democracy.

Supplementary Material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2020.32>.

References

- Alvarez, R. Michael, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Catherine H. Wilson. 2002. Election Day Voter Registration in the United States: How One-Step Voting Can Change the Composition of the American Electorate. *Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project*: 1–34.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, John M. de Figueroa, and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2003. Why is There so Little Money in U.S. Politics? *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17(1): 105–30.
- Anzia, Sarah F. 2013. *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arceneaux, Kevin and David W. Nickerson. 2009. Who Is Mobilized to Vote? A Re-Analysis of 11 Field Experiments. *American Journal of Political Science* 53: 1–16.
- Bartels, Larry M. 2008. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. New York and Princeton: Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press.
- Beekman, Daniel. 2018. Seattle council approves changes to first-in-the-nation ‘democracy vouchers’ program. The Seattle Times, June 25. Retrieved from <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-council-approves-changes-to-first-in-the-nation-democracy-vouchers-program/>
- Berinsky, Adam, Nancy Burns, and Michael Traugott. 2001. Who Votes by Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-Level Consequences of Voting-By-Mail Systems. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65: 178–97.
- Berman, Russell. 2015. Seattle’s Experiment with Campaign Funding. The Atlantic, November 10. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/seattle-experiments-with-campaign-funding/415026/>
- Brians, Craig Leonard and Bernard Grofman. 2001. Election Day Registration’s Effect on U.S. Voter Turnout. *Social Science Quarterly* 82(1): 170–83.
- Bolsen, Toby, Paul J. Ferraro, and Juan Jose Miranda. 2014. Are Voters More Likely to Contribute to Other Public Goods? Evidence from a Large-Scale Randomized Policy Experiment. *American Journal of Political Science* 58(1): 17–30.
- Christens, Brian D., N. Andrew Peterson, and Paul W. Speer. 2011. Community Participation and Psychological Empowerment: Testing Reciprocal Causality Using a Cross-Lagged Panel Design and Latent Constructs. *Health Education and Behavior* 38: 339–47.
- Christens, Brian D. and Paul W. Speer. 2011. Contextual Influences on Participation in Community Organizing: A Multilevel Longitudinal Study. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 47: 253–63.
- Cohen, Josh. 2017. ‘Democracy vouchers’ aim to amplify low-income voices, to conservative ire. The Guardian, July 7. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/07/democracy-vouchers-seattle-politics-low-income-homeless>
- Davenport, Tiffany C. 2010. Public Accountability and Political Participation: Effects of a Face-to-Face Feedback Intervention on Voter Turnout of Public Housing Residents. *Political Behavior* 32(2): 337–68.
- Drutman, Lee. 2013. The Political 1% of the 1% in 2012. The Sunlight Foundation, June 24. Retrieved from <https://sunlightfoundation.com/taxonomy/term/political-donations/>
- Enos, Ryan D., Anthony Fowler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2014. Increasing Inequality: The Effect of GOTV Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate. *The Journal of Politics* 76(1): 273–88.
- Falk, Gene. 2017. Do Seattle’s Democracy Vouchers Work? New Analysis Says Yes. The Seattle Times, October 13. Updated October 15, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/do-seattles-democracy-vouchers-work-new-analysis-says-yes/>
- Friedenbach, Laura. 2017. Seattle’s Democracy Vouchers Reduce the Power of Big Money and Expand Political Participation. Every Voice, November 15. Retrieved from <https://everyvoice.org/press-release/report-seattle-democracy-vouchers-success>
- Garcia Bedolla, Lisa and Melissa R. Michelson. 2012. *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate Through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. New York and Princeton: Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press.
- Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I. Page. 2014. Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics* 12: 564–81.
- Green, Donald P. and Alan S. Gerber. 2015. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, Third Edition. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

- Gronke, Paul, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Peter A. Miller.** 2007. Early Voting and Turnout. *PS – Political Science and Politics* 40(4): 639–45.
- Gronke, Paul and Peter Miller.** 2012. Voting by Mail and Turnout in Oregon: Revisiting Southwell and Burchett. *American Politics Research* 40(6): 976–97.
- Hacker, Jacob and Paul Pierson.** 2010. *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Han, Hahrie.** 2014. *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heerwig, Jennifer and Brian J. McCabe.** 2019. High-Dollar Donors and Donor-Rich Neighborhoods: Representational Distortion in Financing a Municipal Election in Seattle.” *Urban Affairs Review* 55(4): 1070–99.
- Henderson, Geoffrey and Hahrie Han.** 2020. Replication Data for: If We Build It, Only Some Will Come: An Experimental Study of Mobilization for Seattle’s Democracy Voucher Program. *Harvard Dataverse*, V1. doi: [10.7910/DVN/VPIZA](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VPIZA).
- Hill, Kim Quail and Jan E. Leighley.** 1999. Racial Diversity, Voter Turnout, and Mobilizing Institutions in the United States. *American Politics Quarterly* 27(3): 275–95.
- Kalla, Joshua L. and David E. Broockman.** 2016. Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment. *American Journal of Political Science* 60(3): 545–58.
- Kelley, Catherine Hinckley and Maggie Christ.** 2018. In Just One Election Cycle, Vouchers Have Changed Campaign Finance in the City of Seattle. Campaign Legal Center, August 13. Retrieved from <https://campaignlegal.org/update/just-one-election-cycle-vouchers-have-changed-campaign-finance-city-seattle>
- Kliff, Sarah.** 2018. Seattle’s radical plan to fight big money in politics. Vox, November 5. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/5/17058970/seattle-democracy-vouchers>
- Leighley, Jan and Jennifer Oser.** 2018. Representation in an Era of Political and Economic Inequality: How and When Citizen Engagement Matters. *Perspectives on Politics* 16(2): 328–44.
- Leighley, Jan and Jonathan Nagler.** 2013. *Who Votes Now: Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lessig, Lawrence.** 2011. More Money Can Beat Big Money. New York Times, November 16. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/opinion/in-campaign-financing-more-money-can-beat-big-money.html>
- Levine, Adam Seth and Reuben Kline.** 2019. Loss-Framed Arguments Can Stifle Political Activism. *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 6(3): 171–79.
- Malbin, Michael J. and Michael Parrott.** 2017. Small Donor Empowerment Depends on the Details: Comparing Matching Fund Programs in New York and Los Angeles. *The Forum* 15(2): 219–50.
- Mann, Christopher B.** 2014. Mail Ballots in the United States: Policy Choice and Administrative Challenges. In *The Measure of American Elections*, eds. Burden B. and Stewart C. III. New York: Cambridge University Press, 113–40.
- Moe, Terry M.** 1981. Toward a Broader View of Interest Groups. *The Journal of Politics* 43(2): 531–43.
- Nickerson, David W. and Todd Rogers.** 2010. Do You Have a Voting Plan? Implementation Intentions, Voter Turnout, and Organic Plan Making. *Psychological Science* 21(2): 194–99.
- Osterman, Paul.** 2006. Overcoming Oligarchy: Culture and Agency in Social Movement Organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 51: 622–49.
- Putnam, Robert D.** 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rigby, Elizabeth and Melanie J. Springer.** 2011. Does Electoral Reform Increase (or Decrease) Political Equality? *Political Research Quarterly* 64(2): 420–34.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Philip Edward Jones, Hye Young You, Traci Burch, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady.** 2015. Organizations and the Democratic Representation of Interests: What Does It Mean When Those Organizations Have No Members? *Perspectives on Politics* 13: 1017–29.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady.** 2012. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC).** 2019a. Democracy Voucher Program: Program Data. Last updated December 3rd, 2019. Retrieved December 11, 2019 from <http://www.seattle.gov/democracy/voucher/program-data>

- Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC).** 2019b. Democracy Voucher Program: Request For Proposals. Retrieved December 11, 2019 from <https://www.seattle.gov/democracvoucher/info-for-organizations/request-for-proposals>
- Sinclair, Betsy.** 2012. *The Social Citizen: Peer Networks and Political Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Skocpol, Theda.** 2003. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Southwell, Priscilla and Justin Burchett.** 2000. Does Changing the Rules Change the Players? Vote by Mail and the Composition of the Electorate. *Social Science Quarterly* 81(4): 837–45.
- Speer, Paul W., N. Andrew Peterson, Allison Zippay, and Brian Christens.** 2010. Participation in Congregation-Based Organizing: A Mixed-Method Study of Civic Engagement. In *Using Evidence to Inform Practice for Community and Organizational Change*, eds. Roberts-DeGenaro M. and Fogel S. J. Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc, 200–17.
- Stein, Robert, Chris Owens, and Jan Leighley.** 2003. Electoral Reform, Party Mobilization, and Voter Turnout. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the MPSA, April 3–6, 2003.
- Tesdahl, Eric A. and Paul W. Speer.** 2015. Organization-Level Predictors of Sustained Social Movement Participation. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 55: 48–57.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady.** 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Warren, Mark R.** 2001. *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wong, Janelle.** 2004. Getting Out the Vote among Asian Pacific Americans: The Effects of Phone Canvassing. *AAPJ Nexus: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Policy, Practice, and Community* 2: 49–66.

Cite this article: Henderson G and Han H (2022). If We Build It, Only Some Will Come: An Experimental Study of Mobilization for Seattle’s Democracy Voucher Program. *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 9, 131–146. <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2020.32>