

We Know What You Did Last Summer: The Impact of Petition Signing on Voter Turnout

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Abstract: “KnowThyNeighbor,” a public interest group established in 2005, recently grabbed headlines and provoked a high-profile lawsuit for publicizing (or threatening to publicize) the names of hundreds of thousands of registered voters who signed petitions qualifying anti-gay rights measures for state general election ballots in Massachusetts, Florida, Arkansas, Oregon, and Washington. These names, together with the mailing addresses and birthdates of each signator, have long been public information in most states but have not been formatted (i.e., in searchable, online databases) such that they could be accessed and analyzed on a large scale. In this project, we perform multivariate analysis on a random sample of 500 registered Arkansas voters, 500 registered Florida voters, and all 73,000 registered voters in Gainesville, Florida to measure the influence of petition-signing in spurring voter turnout. Although we do not find significant effects for the statewide samples, the educative effect of petition signing in the Gainesville case—an off-cycle, low-profile election—is substantial. Furthermore, the educative effect of petition-signing—even in one of the statewide samples—appears to be stronger for irregular, as compared with habitual, voters. Our findings are consistent with both direct democracy research which reveals a stronger turnout yield for off-year ballot measures and recent developments in the campaign mobilization literature.

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The turnout question has occupied the attention of political scientists for decades. Early scholarship placed a heavy emphasis on resources, i.e., the higher a voter's socioeconomic status, the greater her probability of casting a ballot on Election Day (see, for example, Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Contemporary studies continue to support the significance of resource variables more broadly defined, including marital status, residential stability, Internet access, and more (Leighley and Nagler 1992b; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994; Jackson 1996b; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Institutional conditions, too, because they impact the relative "cost" of voting for individuals, have been demonstrated to boost turnout, although the effects have been small; a longer window of registration, for example, will produce a modest increase in participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1989, 1992; Highton and Wolfinger 1998). The latest barrier-reducing innovations, like centrally-located vote centers and strategically-placed, generic GOTV signs likewise have yielded positive results for improved vote likelihood (Stein and Vonnahme 2008; Panagopoulos 2009).

Of greatest interest recently, however, have been the dynamic factors of the election-specific political environment, especially direct campaign contact and other forms of political communication. They, too, have been demonstrated to have a positive effect on turnout, although the magnitude of that effect seems to depend on both the nature of the appeal and the relative receptivity of the targeted voter (see, for example, Shaw, de la Garza and Lee 2000; Gerber and Green 2000a; Gerber and Green 2000b; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003; Niven 2002, 2004; Hillygus 2005; Nickerson 2005; Parry, et al. 2008; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009). On the first count, as Green, Gerber, and Larimer (2008: 33) have summarized, "personal, unhurried appeals are usually far superior to impersonal, mechanical, and rushed communications." Door-to-door canvassing, in other words, is more effective than a mass mailer. With respect to voter receptivity, a handful of researchers have confirmed what Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992) articulated: that habitual voters will vote whether they are contacted or not, so GOTV efforts are most likely to activate only intermittent or irregular voters (although see Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009).

An important if sometimes incidental form of campaign contact, but one not much explored in the voter mobilization literature, is the petitioning for ballot initiatives that occurs with considerable frequency in about half the states and even more localities (Matsusaka 2004). Using newly-available data that allow us to match individual petition signers with their subsequent election behavior, we explore the role of direct democracy in propelling voters to the polls. First we explore further the traditional campaign contact literature, tying it to scholarship demonstrating the significant “educative effects” of initiatives and referendums (Smith and Tolbert 2004). Then, we present multivariate analysis on a random sample of 500 registered Arkansas voters, 500 registered Florida voters, and all 73,000 registered voters in Gainesville, Florida to measure the influence of petition-signing in spurring voter turnout, analysis that takes into account actual (not self-reported) vote history. Although we do not find significant effects for the statewide samples, the educative effect of petition signing in the Gainesville case—an off-cycle election—was substantial, a finding in line with the turnout boost from off-year ballot measures reported by Smith and Tolbert (2001, 2004, 2005) and others (M. Smith 2001). In addition, and in keeping with the campaign mobilization work of Niven (2004), Hillygus (2005), and Parry, et al. (2008), the effect of petition-signing—even in the statewide samples—seems to be stronger for irregular, as compared with habitual, voters.

Campaign Contact and Voter Turnout

Generally speaking, campaign-related contact motivates voters, a relationship supported by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), Hill and Leighley (1993, 1996), Jackson, Brown and Wright (1998), Brown, Jackson and Wright (1999), Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee (2000), Green and Gerber (2000), Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2003), Hillygus (2005), Green, Gerber, and Larimer (2008) and others. The earliest work on this relationship examined aggregate data and found support for the significance of a competitive partisan environment, the presence of a close race, campaign expenditures, and the stimulus of an up-ticket contest on the same ballot, among other factors (Copeland 1983; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985; Cox and Munger 1989; Jackson 1996a). Support for campaign effects at the individual level has been weaker (Copeland 1983; Caldeira, Patterson, and

Markko 1985), though work focused on campaign contact narrowly-defined offers evidence that campaigns do indeed matter (Crotty 1971; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994; Oliver 1996; Holbrook 1996).

The rise of the large-N experiment has allowed scholars to probe further the importance of the type of contact in the degree of mobilization achieved as well as among whom, “lending precision and nuance to the extensive literature on voter mobilization” (Gerber and Green 2000a, 661; see also Gerber and Green 2000b). Jackson (1993) touched upon such questions in his investigation of the 1986 congressional election. In addition to finding general support for campaign-related factors, he used aggregate data to reveal that high stakes (i.e., heavy expenditure) elections are most likely to increase turnout among those who are highly-educated, but also those of low-income. Niven’s (2002, 2004) analyses of state legislative primary and municipal elections found additional evidence for a campaign’s differential effect. While being contacted increased the likelihood of turnout generally, such increases were most dramatic for those who with undependable voting histories. As Jackson (1993: 1082) proposed, then, we know that “the participatory stimulus provided through a campaign depends on the type of person receiving political information and the nature of this information” (see also Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Hillygus 2005; and Parry et al. 2008).

In terms of the nature of the information (or type of contact), we have learned from a decade’s worth of well-crafted experimental designs that face-to-face appeals have the most utility in mobilizing voters (Gerber and Green 2000a), although direct mail and door-hangers also produce modest effects (Green and Gerber 2000b, Nickerson 2005). And while telephone appeals by professional phone banks—suffering from a stiff, scripted delivery—delivery have no effect (Gerber and Green 2000a), volunteer phone calls (making either partisan or generic GOTV appeals) serve to increase turnout by three or four percentage points (Nickerson 2005, Nickerson 2006). Nontraditional, personalized appeals to both civic duty and threats to make public a voter’s performance likewise have been demonstrated to have powerful motivating effects (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008; Panagopolous 2010). Thus far, shame appears to

exert a stronger influence than pride, although Mann (2010) demonstrates the most heavy-handed punitive treatments may not be necessary.

With respect to the type of person on the receiving end of the contact, it was Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992) who first made plain that we should not expect all potential voters to respond positively to mobilization efforts, whatever their form. Rather, they propose that habitual voters will dutifully appear at the polls regardless of party, candidate, and other messaging while the chronically disaffected are likely beyond the reach of our best efforts. In this area as well, a new wave of scholarship tells us much about which voters, and in what contexts, we should expect to respond to campaign contact. Most notably, Niven's (2002, 2004) innovative analyses of state legislative primary and municipal elections reveal, for example, that while being contacted increases the likelihood of turnout generally, the effect was most dramatic for the intermittent voters who may float in and out of the electorate but have cast at least one ballot in the recent past. Green and Gerber (2000b) made a similar discovery in the New Haven, Connecticut suburb of Hamden in 1998. Most susceptible to their treatment (a single, nonpartisan GOTV mailer) were voters who had participated in the previous election as opposed to those who sat the 1996 contest out. Non-experimental examinations (using panel survey data from high-profile, high-dollar races) likewise find that some voters can be more effectively nudged to the polls than others. According to Parry, et al. (2008) and Hillygus (2005), it is the seldom ("presidential years only" or less) and the self-described "unintended" voter, respectively, who is most likely to be positively impacted by campaign contact. Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009: 3), in their reevaluation of 11 experimental studies, make explicit the significance of the type of election in prompting these differentiated responses, proposing that "the type of voter for whom mobilization is effective is contingent on the electoral context." Indeed, they find that although it is only those least committed to voting who can be drawn into a high-intensity race by GOTV efforts, these same low-propensity voters are also likely to be impervious to invitations to

partake in low-salience elections. It is contests of “middling interest” where mid-propensity voters are most vulnerable to campaign appeals.¹

Direct Democracy and Voter Turnout

While the voter mobilization literature includes scant reference to scholarship on direct democracy, the campaigns supporting and opposing hundreds of measures on statewide and local ballots each year also have been demonstrated to promote voter turnout. Indeed, although early empirical examinations declared no appreciable increase due to the presence of an initiative (Everson 1981, Magleby 1984), it became clear with more sophisticated modeling, and direct democracy’s expanded use, that states tapping the initiative process with the greatest regularity posted consistently higher average voter turnout than states using it less frequently, as well as those that do not make such tools available to voters (Smith 2001, Lacey 2005). The causal mechanism at work is relatively straightforward. By definition, citizen-sponsored ballot measures are likely to address issues that will pique voter interest. These initiatives and referendums “can provide information about and generate interest in elections and thereby lead to higher citizen participation” (Smith and Tolbert 2004: 50; see also Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000, M. Smith 2001, Bowler and Donovan 2002, and M. Smith 2002). In short, increased voter mobilization is an educative by-product of direct democracy, one hoped for by the Progressives and demonstrated by contemporary scholars.

More specifically, Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith (2001, 2005), find that in the aggregate, turnout rates in initiative states from the 1970s to the 2000s were several percentage points higher than turnout in non-initiative states in midterm elections, and even slightly higher in presidential elections. Use county-level data, Boehmke and Alvarez (2005) find a positive relationship between the intensity of the signature-gathering effort in California counties with measures of

¹ In a related integration of the various threads in the campaign mobilization literature, Panagopolous (2010) demonstrates that “shame” GOTV appeals may be more effective than “pride” appeals on average, but this too depends on the recipients. Pride impels compliance with the voting norm only among habitual voters, whereas shame works its magic on both stalwarts and low-propensity voters.

political participation, including registration, turnout, and ballot rolloff. Turnout effects of ballot measures also hold at the individual level. In their studies, Smith and Tolbert (2003, 2004) apply state and national survey data to the question of the individual impact of direct democracy on voter turnout and conclude that citizens in states with more initiatives on the ballot are more likely to report voting, even applying the usual controls.

Political operatives and the political parties have tried to use the educative effects of ballot measures in recent election cycles, hoping specific ballot initiatives would stimulate voter turnout and improve their candidates' prospects. Recent empirical work has confirmed the effectiveness of such maneuvers, as the presence of anti same-sex marriage initiatives in 2004 and minimum wage initiatives in 2006 increased the levels of saliency for the issues and helped Republican and Democratic candidates on the ballot, respectively (Nicholson 2005, Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2009, Smith and Tolbert 2010). Consequently, other "hybrid" candidate-ballot measure campaigns have become even more closely intertwined with exactly this outcome in mind (Chavez 1998, Kousser and McCubbins 2005, see also Garrett 2006).

However, only a handful of early, innovative studies actually tried to tackle the *significance of signing a petition on turnout at the individual level*. Neiman and Gottdiener (1982), for example, obtained a list of registered voters in Riverside, California from 1977 on which marks had been made denoting the approximately 11,000 registrants (of more than 34,000) who signed the petition qualifying the measure for the general election ballot. The team then surveyed two samples—one of signators and one of nonsignators—and uncovered telling differences between the two, including their respective degrees of interest in, knowledge of, and support for the measure in question. Similarly, Pierce and Lovrich (1982) examined an aborted signature-gathering campaign in Idaho that same year, also gathering survey responses from samples of signers and nonsigners. Although they made some interesting discoveries about respondents' ability to recall whether or not they had signed, neither their work nor the Neiman and

Gottdeiner (1982) project, reveals what impact, if any, the act of signing had on the signers' likelihood of turning out to vote.²

Yet, there are compelling reasons to expect that signing a petition to qualify a measure for the ballot will increase the likelihood of turning out to vote in the election. First, being approached by a signature gatherer—to talk, for example, about legalizing marijuana for medical use or holding tax increases to no more than the rate of inflation—seems comparable to the more personal forms of campaign contact demonstrated by mobilization scholars to be powerful turnout motivators. Even more, as Teixeira (1992), Berinsky (2005), and others have argued, one of the key obstacles to voter participation is an individual's motivation and interest in politics. Unlike some electoral reforms, which may serve to “retain engaged voters” as much as “stimulating the unengaged” (Berinsky 2005: 413), the educative effect of signing an initiative petition may “promote a sense that the government is responsive to the ordinary citizen” (Teixeira 1992: 156). The second reason we expect petition signing to boost turnout is that it is now clearly established in the direct democracy scholarship that ballot measures serve to increase the size of the electorate. The aggregate increase is presumed to be a product of the tens of millions of dollars easily spent both in support of, and opposition to, even a single initiative. But that increase may also be a consequence of the way some issues interact with specific candidates to motivate large groups of voters, as noted above with the Bush-marriage example of 2004. Either way, it is also likely that the qualifying stage itself is significant in moving people to the polls, perhaps especially those individuals who “got in at the ground floor” by putting their names on a petition. This may be especially true in city- as compared to statewide settings and/or off-cycle as compared with general election contests because, as Smith and Tolbert (2004) have found, ballot measures exert their strongest effect when other sources of information and mobilization are scarce.

² There is of course good reason little work has been done on matching petition signers with subsequent political activity: save in a handful of freak situations, it has been almost impossible to do. When Pierce and Lovrich (1982: 167), for example, cross-checked just the 31 respondents (out of a sample of 700) who reported signing the Idaho petition against a list of approximately 6,000 validated signatures, they called the effort “a tedious task, to be sure.”

Expectations, Data, and Methods

The literature on voter mobilization in candidate elections together with well-established findings about the role of direct democracy in promoting turnout led us to expect a positive relationship between petition-signing and voting. In the first instance, canvassers seeking to qualify a measure for the ballot can be seen as paralleling the face-to-face contact Gerber and Green and their colleagues have demonstrated to serve most powerfully as agents of political mobilization. In the second case, as Smith and Tolbert and others have demonstrated, direct democracy exerts a significant, independent, and positive influence on voter participation; we examine here if at least some of that influence is a product of the act of signing itself. Further, we expect that the educative effects of signing a ballot initiative petition are likely to have a stronger impact at the local level as compared with the state, and that the mobilizing effect is likely to be most pronounced among registered, but undependable, voters.

In order to test whether or not signing a ballot issue petition increases voter turnout, we created three original datasets. In March 2010, we built two statewide datasets by randomly drawing 500 registered voters from the voter files of Arkansas and Florida, respectively. We then matched those random samples from the statewide voter files with the names of the registered voters who signed valid petitions to qualify an initiative for the ballot in each state. The third dataset is comprised of the complete municipal voter file from Gainesville, Florida, merged with every individual who signed a valid petition to qualify a local initiative for the ballot.

As mentioned previously, in each of these three jurisdictions proponents successfully qualified a controversial social issue for the ballot. In Arkansas's 2008 general election, voters approved Proposed Initiative Act No. 1, a statutory initiative making it illegal for individuals cohabiting outside of a valid marriage to adopt or provide foster care to minors. The action followed several years of attention to the issue prompted by executive, judicial, and legislative action that dealt almost exclusively with the suitability of gays and lesbians as both adopters and foster care providers. Proponents of the initiative, after a lethargic start, eventually collected 85,389 valid signatures, well above the 61,974 valid signatures

needed to qualify the measure for the statewide ballot.³ After a high-profile campaign, in which opponents of the proposal outspent proponents by a wide margin, 57% of voters voted for the ban; only 5% of the almost 1.1 million voters who turned out rolled off on this high-profile measure. After the election, opponents of the Arkansas measure who were affiliated with a Massachusetts-based nonprofit organization, www.KnowThyNeighbor.org, filed a public records request with the Arkansas Secretary of State to obtain the names and addresses of all the registered voters who signed the petition. In April 2009, five months after the election, the group launched www.KnowThyNeighbor.org/Arkansas/, which included a searchable database of the transcribed names and addresses of the registered voters who signed a petition to qualify the initiative for the 2008 general election ballot.⁴

In Florida, voters in the November 2008 election passed Amendment 2, a statewide constitutional initiative banning gay marriage. Three years earlier, the Florida Coalition to Protect Marriage had announced its intent to qualify an amendment to the state constitution banning gay, dubbing it the Florida Marriage Protection Amendment. Although the group failed to meet the deadline to qualify the constitutional amendment for the 2006 midterm elections, it succeeded in qualifying it for the 2008 general election. In February of 2008, the group submitted 649,346 valid signatures from at least 13 of Florida's 25 congressional districts, surpassing the 611,009 valid signatures required to place the issue on the statewide ballot.⁵ The battle over Amendment 2 proved fierce, although spending for and against the measure paled in comparison to the presidential contest in battleground Florida between Barack Obama and John McCain.⁶ Nearly 8.4 million Floridians cast ballots in the presidential contest, and voter rolloff

³ Arkansas Secretary of State: "Secretary Daniels Approves Petitions for Foster and Adoption Ban Initiative," Monday, Aug 25, 2008. Available:

http://www.sosweb.state.ar.us/newsroom/index.php?do:newsDetail=1&news_id=74.

⁴ All the names of those who signed valid petitions are currently accessible in a searchable database at www.knowthyneighbor.org/arkansas. See, also: <http://knowthyneighbor.blogs.com/home/2009/04/press-release-names-of-arkansas-antigay-petition-signers-posted-online.html>.

⁵ Kaczor, Bill. "Initiative On Gay Marriage On Ballot." The Associated Press 2 Feb. 2008, www2.tbo.com/content/2008/feb/02/me-initiative-on-gay-marriage-on-ballot/.

⁶ Campaign Finance Database: Expenditures Records. Florida Division of Elections. 26 Feb. 2009. Available at: <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/campaign-finance/expend.asp>.

on Amendment 2 was slightly less than 6 percent.⁷ Prior to the 2008 election, Know Thy Neighbor Florida, led in Florida by Christ Church of Peace, a non-denominational Christian congregation in Jacksonville, filed public records requests to obtain the name and address of every registered voter who signed a valid petition supporting the Florida Marriage Protection Amendment, and placed online a searchable database of that information.⁸

In order to determine whether signing the petition in Arkansas making it illegal for non-married individuals to adopt or provide foster care to minors or the petition in Florida banning gay marriage had an effect on the likelihood of a registered voter turning out in the 2008 general election, we drew random samples of 500 names from Arkansas' 1.5 million-plus voter file and Florida's voter file of more than 11 million registered voters, respectively. We then cross-referenced the online databases of valid signers of the statewide initiatives in each state maintained by www.knowthyneighbor.org to code whether any of the registered voters in our two state samples were listed as signing a petition.

Our third issue was a proposed amendment to the municipal charter of the City of Gainesville, Florida, placed on the March 2009 ballot. In the summer of 2008, opponents of the city commission's vote to extend antidiscrimination protections to transgendered individuals successfully gathered 6,379 valid signatures—topping the 5,581 valid signatures needed to qualify the measure—to place an initiative on the ballot of the next municipal election. The proposed amendment to the city charter would have prohibited the city from providing certain civil rights not already explicit in the state of Florida's Civil Rights Act. The wording of the amendment was intended explicitly to void any existing city ordinances protecting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and to “prohibit the city from passing or enforcing antidiscrimination categories beyond those currently listed in the Florida Civil Rights Act.” In this case, voters defeated the measure, with 58.3 percent of the electorate voting “no.” A

⁷ See, Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, “Election Results.” Available: <https://doe.dos.state.fl.us/elections/resultsarchive/index.asp>.

⁸ On June 12, 2006, KnowThyNeighbor Florida was launched by the Christ Church of Peace in Jacksonville, FL, and over 400,000 names were posted online. The searchable site is no longer available at <http://www.christchurchofpeace.org/ktnf/>, but it is available at <http://www.knowthyneighbor.org/florida/>.

total of 20,114 votes were cast on Issue 1 out of the 20,232 total votes cast in the desynchronized March 24, 2009 municipal election, an extremely low rolloff rate of less than one-half of one percent. Indeed, Issue 1 had much higher salience level than the two city commission contests on the ballot, including the one at-large seat, which drew a total of only 17,705 votes.⁹ In order to determine whether signing a petition for the local initiative stripping the protections for of gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals in Gainesville had any effect on the likelihood of a registered voter turning out in the March 2009 municipal election, in March 2010 we purchased Gainesville’s complete voter file of 73,301 registered voters residing in the city, and matched the names of the 5,581 valid registered voters who the Supervisor of Elections certified as having signed a petition for the local initiative.

To assess the potential “educative effects” of signing a ballot issue petition on individual turnout propensity, we analyze each of the two statewide initiatives and the one local initiative. Because the dependent variable in all three models is binary—voting in the 2008 general election in Arkansas and Florida, and voting in the spring 2009 Gainesville municipal election—we use logistic regression to estimate the coefficients. Our key independent variable is whether the registered voter signed a valid petition to place the initiative on the ballot in the given jurisdiction. Following the logic of the educative effects of ballot measures, we expect registered voters who signed a referendum petition—controlling for other factors, and irrespective of whether they may have supported, opposed, or were ignorant about the merits of the issue at the time of the signing—to be more likely to turn out to vote in the election in which the measure was on the ballot.¹⁰ We also expect the impact of signing a petition on turnout to be greater among registered voters who are not regularly engaged in the political process than among habitual or “super” voters, as signing a petition may give such voters the extra nudge described by Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009).

⁹ Alachua County Supervisor of Elections, “Official Statement of Votes Cast, Regular Election,” March 24, 2009. Available: http://elections.alachua.fl.us/elections_and_records/raw_results/20090324.html.

¹⁰ In Arkansas, 30 of the 500 (6.0%) randomly sampled registered voters signed a valid petition to qualify Act No.1. In Florida, 19 of the 500 (3.8%) randomly sampled registered voters signed a valid petition to qualify Amendment 2. In Gainesville 5,581 of the 73,301 (7.6%) registered voters residing in the city signed a valid petition to qualify Issue 1.

In all three of our models, we control for as many other factors at the level of the individual voter as possible. Prior research based largely on survey data has shown that some individuals have a higher propensity to turn out than others. While important socioeconomic determinants of voting such as income and education are unavailable in voter files, both states do provide a registered voter's sex and age, and we expect older voters and women, all else equal, to turn out to vote at a higher rate than younger and male voters (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

For the two Florida cases (statewide Amendment 2 and local Issue 1), we are able to control for two additional variables. Because portions of the state fall under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which requires certain jurisdictions to obtain preclearance from the U.S. Department of Justice for any changes to election or voting policy due to historical concerns over the dilution of the strength of minority voters via electoral practices, Florida still requires voters to report their race and ethnicity when registering to vote. As such, we include in our two Florida models a registered voter's race and ethnicity (with dummy variables for black, Hispanic, and other races, and leaving non-Hispanic whites as the reference group). Holding constant other factors, we expect racial and ethnic minorities to be less likely than non-Hispanic whites to turn out on Election Day (Key 1949, Hill and Leighley 1999, Cassel 2002, but see Barreto 2005 for an exception). Second, because Florida is a closed primary state, with voters required to state their party preference at the registration stage, we are also able to control for an individual's reported party affiliation (with dummy variables for registered Democrats and Republicans, and No Party Affiliate (i.e., Independents) and third party registrants grouped together as the reference category). All else equal, we expect registered partisans to be more likely to turn out than third party registrants and those opting not to affiliate with a party.

Finally, and most importantly, in the datasets in both states, we are able to control for a registered voter's actual—not self-reported—voting history. In other studies that draw on actual voter files, prior vote history is a highly significant predictor of voting in the future (Stein and Vonnahme 2008). Unlike other studies, our three databases (state and local) include the vote histories of those who lived in different Arkansas and Florida counties (respectively) over the past three elections, as the voter files are centrally

administered by the state administrative (i.e., the voting history records are portable across counties). For each of the three datasets, we created a voter history index, ranging from “functionally inactive” (a registered voter who failed to turn out in any of the previous three elections) to “super voter” (a registered voter who cast a ballot in each of the three preceding elections).¹¹ In all three models, we expect registered voters who turned out more frequently in immediately prior elections to have a much higher likelihood of turning out to vote in Arkansas and Florida in the 2008 general and in the 2009 Gainesville municipal elections, all else equal.¹² We expect signing a ballot petition (and subsequent voter contact and mobilization related to the issue) will increase turnout among those identified as functionally inactive and occasional voters, more than it does among regular and super voters, all else equal.

Findings

Model 1 of Table 1 reports the logit results predicting voter turnout in the Arkansas 2008 general election. As expected, Model 1 reveals a positive relationship between signing a petition to qualify Act No. 1 for the ballot and turning out to vote, however the relationship fails to meet standard levels of statistical significance (p value = .211). This null finding casts doubt upon the educative effects of signing a ballot petition for a statewide ballot initiative (in this case, banning adoptions by non-married couples), at least in a high turnout presidential election. The model reveals that females are no more likely than

¹¹ In creating the vote history index for the Arkansas and Florida 2008 general election, we coded whether the registered voter cast a ballot in the 2008 statewide primary, the 2008 presidential primary, or the 2006 midterm elections. Recall that Florida’s January 29, 2008 presidential primary was not expected to count towards selecting the Democratic nominee, as the Democratic National Committee had voted to strip Florida of all its delegates to the 2008 national convention because the state’s early primary date violated national party rules. In creating the vote history index for the Gainesville 2009 municipal election, we coded whether the registered voter cast a ballot in the 2008 general election, the 2008 statewide primary, or the 2008 presidential primary. Each registered voter was then given a score from 0 (no prior turnout) to 3 (turnout in three out of three previous elections).

¹² In our Arkansas sample, 390 (78%) of the 500 registered voters in the sample voted in November 2008; 183 (36.6%) were coded as Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3), 133 (26.6%) were coded as Occasional Voter (1/3), 118 (23.6%) were coded as Regular Voter (2/3), and 66 (13.2%) were coded as Super Voter (3/3). In our Florida sample, 331 (66.2%) of the 500 registered voters in the sample voted in November 2008; 262 (52.4%) were coded as Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3), 109 (21.8%) were coded as Occasional Voter (1/3), 118 (18.6%) were coded as Regular Voter (2/3), and 36 (7.2%) were coded as Super Voter (3/3). In Gainesville, 20,232 of the 73,301 (26.9%) registered voters in turned out to vote in March 2009; 29,038 (39.6%) were coded as Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3), 24,125 (32.9%) were coded as Occasional Voter (1/3), 11,495 (15.9%) were coded as Regular Voter (2/3), and 8,643 (11.8%) were coded as Super Voter (3/3).

males to have turned out in the presidential election, and also contrary to expectations, we find that older voters were slightly less likely to turnout, all else equal. As expected, past voting history strongly predicts the propensity to turn out in the 2008 general election, controlling for the other factors.

[Table 1 about here]

Model 2 of Table 1 reports the logit results predicting voter turnout in the Florida 2008 general election. Here too, we find nearly identical results as in Arkansas, even when controlling for other explanatory factors, such as race and ethnicity as well as party registration. Holding all other variables constant, the independent effect of signing a petition for the anti-gay marriage Amendment 2 on turnout, while positive, does not come close to meeting conventional levels statistical significance (p value = .752). We do find, however, that women were more likely to turn out to vote than men, all else equal, and that minorities other than blacks and Hispanics were less likely to turn out on Election Day than non-Hispanic whites. Again, most notably, prior vote history is strongly predictive of turning out to vote in the 2008 presidential contest in Florida, with those who voted in the previous three elections much more likely to cast a ballot than those who decided to skip the polls.¹³

Finally, with respect to the impact of signing a local petition—the Gainesville, Florida measure—on the propensity to turn out for a local election, we find that the educative effects are quite strong. Model 3 in Table 1 reveals that older voters were slightly more likely to turnout than younger voters, though the substantive difference is quite marginal. Although women were no more likely than men to turn out for the Gainesville municipal election, non-Hispanic white voters were considerably more likely to be mobilized to the polls than minority voters. As in the two statewide cases, an individual's previous vote history is strongly predictive of the likelihood of casting a ballot in the municipal election. But even controlling for vote history and the other sociodemographic and party registration factors, registered voters who signed a valid local initiative petition during the previous summer were much more likely to

¹³ To avoid intermediate variable bias, we ran a streamlined model for Florida that was identical to those for Arkansas (controlling only for gender, age, and vote history); there were no substantive or statistical differences from the fully specified Florida model.

turn out to vote in the March 2009 local election, demonstrating a clear turnout effect for signing an initiative petition.

To facilitate interpretation of the three models presented in Table 1, we converted the logit coefficients into expected values (probabilities) of turning out to vote in the respective elections with the initiatives on the ballot. We estimate the probability of turning out to vote for those registered voters who either signed or did not sign a petition, across the four levels of vote history: (Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3 elections), Occasional Voter (1/3 elections), Regular Voter (2/3 elections), and Super Voter (3/3 elections)). For purposes of these simulations, we hold the values of all the other independent variables at their means (see Appendix A for descriptive statistics of the three cases).

The predicted probabilities reported in Table 2 suggest that signing a petition in Arkansas to qualify a ballot measure allowing adoption only by traditionally married couples affects the likelihood of that individual turning out to vote, especially with regard an individual's vote history. In Arkansas, holding age and gender at their means, a registered voter who *did not sign* the anti-gay adoption ballot initiative petition and who did not vote in the 2006 mid-term elections, the 2008 presidential primary, and the 2008 general primary, had a 60.5% likelihood of voting in the 2008 general election. A similar registered voter who *did sign* a petition to qualify Act No. 1 had a 79.8% likelihood of turning out, nearly a 20 percentage point increase, holding other factors (age and gender) constant. By way of contrast, the marginal increase in turnout in the 2008 general election for super voters who signed an initiative petition is less than three percentage points over those super voters who did not sign a petition, controlling for age and sex of the electorate. Of course, we should be cautious interpreting these figures, as the confidence intervals for some of the simulations are quite high.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 reports the predicted probabilities for turnout in Florida in the 2008 presidential election. Recall, that the overall effects on turnout of signing a petition in this statewide sample were extremely weak. With all other variables held constant at their mean, the probability of turnout for a functionally inactive voter who did not sign an Amendment 2 petition is 42.2%, and 46.8% for those who did sign a

petition, with the caveat that the confidence interval for both probabilities is quite large. The confidence intervals are much narrower for super voters, and there is virtually no statistical difference in the probability of voting in the 2008 general election for those who signed or did not sign the Florida petition, holding other predictors constant at their mean. In trying to reconcile the Arkansas findings with this case, we reason that the signature-gathering campaign in Florida was stretched out over a three-year period (2005-2008), potentially dissipating the impact of signing on turnout as well as the inevitable possibility that people who signed the petition died or left the state. To boot, extrinsically, the presidential campaign was far more intense in Florida than in Arkansas (where the total number of visits made by either McCain or Obama was one, by McCain). We should expect the educative effects of signing Florida's Amendment 2, therefore, to be low relative to the saliency of the presidential election.

[Table 3 about here]

Finally, Table 4 presents the predicted probabilities for registered voters who signed valid petitions during the summer of 2008 to place Issue 1 on the 2009 Gainesville municipal election. We find that those registered voters who signed a valid petition, controlling for an individual's age, gender, party registration, and race and ethnicity, were considerably more likely to turn out to vote than those who did not sign a petition. Holding constant at their mean a registered voter's age, gender, race and ethnicity, and party registration, both functionally inactive and occasional voters who signed a valid petition were roughly twice as likely to turn out to vote (16.0% to 7.1%, and 37.4% to 19.3%, respectively) than those who did not sign a petition. Even regular and super voters who signed a petition were more than 20 and 15 percentage points, respectively, more likely to turn out in the municipal election than those who did not sign a petition. These data suggest, then, that at the local level the probability of turning out to vote is considerably higher for registered voters—of all prior voting propensities—who sign an initiative petition. In sum, in an otherwise low turnout, low interest, low salience municipal election, the political activity of signing a ballot measure petition appears to increase voter mobilization for all kinds of vote

histories. All else equal, though, the educative effects of signing an initiative petition are most pronounced for registered voters who rarely, if ever, cast ballots, even in the 2008 presidential election.

[Table 4 about here]

Discussion

For much of the American electorate, becoming mobilized to vote is not a simple feat. As Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet observed long ago in *The People's Choice* (1944), most individuals experience a multi-stage process involving contact with interest-arousing propaganda, a subsequent increase in information acquisition, followed by selective attention to campaign developments, and then—ultimately—a vote choice. We would add that a significant portion of the potential electorate is either never exposed to, or ignores, the “interest-arousing propaganda” stage altogether, rendering the remaining steps moot. Voting, in short, is costly. Yet, in an effort to overcome institutional barriers, socio-economic propensities, and partisan attachments, scholars have pinpointed several dynamic forms of campaign contact and communication that effectively target registered voters, mobilizing them to the polls. Face-to-face appeals, such as door-to-door canvassing, as well as phone banks, door-hangers, mass mailers, and even shaming threats and appeals to civic duty have been shown to have mobilizing effects. Of course, not all potential voters will respond to these and other forms of voter mobilization schemes. But there is considerable evidence that being contacted increases the prospects of registered voters actually casting a ballot; this has been demonstrated to be especially true for intermittent voters who have shown in the past they are not wedded to voting.

To date, scholars who have used experiments to study the effectiveness of various GOTV efforts have not examined the potential impact of ballot measures on electoral mobilization. This omission is striking, as there is an increasingly large body of literature showing that ballot measures have substantial educative effects, effects that include drawing otherwise disinterested citizens to the polls to vote on issues. Direct democracy scholars have found that the placement of measures on statewide or local ballots by fellow citizen-lawmakers does have a mobilizing effect, especially in off-year elections, as certain

citizens become engaged with the prospect of making decisions on a range of issues, many of which are highly salient or controversial.

Our study is the first to use the actual petition-signing *and* voter file records of randomly selected registered voters to explore the impact that signing a ballot petition has on subsequent voter turnout. We find that signing a petition at the local level in particular has a major impact on the likelihood of going to the polls; the effect is especially pronounced for less habitual voters. It should not come as a surprise that the overall turnout effects of signing a ballot petition were weak in the 2008 statewide elections in Arkansas and Florida. The results generally comport with both individual and aggregate level studies that show a considerably more robust turnout boost when citizens are exposed to ballot measures in midterm, rather than in general, elections. It is only when issue campaigns do not have to compete with the sizeable GOTV noise of presidential elections that we should expect to see a sizeable, independent, and positive effect for direct democracy campaigns on a voter's likelihood of turnout out to vote. Luring people—especially those with spotty records of election participation—to the polls with a specific policy question is more easily accomplished when the volume is turned down elsewhere.

Table 1: Educative Effects of Signing a Ballot Petition on Voter Turnout

	Arkansas 2008 General Election		Florida 2008 General Election		Gainesville 2009 Municipal Election	
	Coef. (rob. Std Err)	P-value	Coef. (rob. Std Err)	P-value	Coef. (rob. Std Err)	P-value
Signed a Valid Initiative Petition	.947 (.757)	.211	.189 (.599)	.752	.917 (.036)	.000
Vote History	.900 (.163)	.000	1.967 (.239)	.000	1.146 (.012)	.000
Male	.041 (.073)	.577	-.523 (.224)	.020	.023 (.021)	.277
Age	-.021 (.007)	.002	-.002 (.007)	.805	.014 (.001)	.000
Black			.482 (.378)	.202	-.969 (.029)	.000
Hispanic			.215 (.361)	.550	-.179 (.046)	.000
Other Race			-1.152 (.584)	.048	-.331 (.045)	.000
Republican			.021 (.284)	.941	-.010 (.003)	.000
Democrat			-.489 (.308)	.112	.013 (.004)	.000
Constant	1.447 (.336)	.000	.159 (.370)	.667	-2.879 (.030)	.000
Pseudo R ²	0.109		.267		.276	
Log pseudolikelihood	-234.80		-.234.62		-30591.92	
Wald chi2	37.19		90.28		15736.67	
N	500		500		72,720	

Notes: Unstandardized logistic regression coefficients reported, with robust standard errors in parentheses. **Bold** coefficients indicate observed statistical reliability at 95 percent confidence intervals. Non-Hispanic White, and No Party Affiliation and Independent, omitted as reference categories.

Table 2: Predicted Turnout Effects for Signing a Petition and Voter History, 2008 Arkansas**General Election**

	Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3)		Occasional Voter (1/3)		Regular Voter (2/3)		Super Voter (3/3)	
	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.
Signed a Petition	0.798	[0.5521, 1.0430]	0.907	[0.7836, 1.0293]	0.960	[.9039, 1.0156]	0.983	[.9583, 1.0082]
Did Not Sign a Petition	0.605	[0.5335, 0.6757]	0.790	[0.7475, 0.8325]	0.903	[.8588, 0.9462]	0.958	[.9259, 0.9899]

Table 3: Predicted Turnout Effects for Signing a Petition and Voter History, 2008 Florida General Election

	Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3)		Occasional Voter (1/3)		Regular Voter (2/3)		Super Voter (3/3)	
	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.
Signed a Petition	0.468	[0.1759, 0.7609]	0.863	[0.7265, 0.9995]	0.978	[0.9504, 1.0062]	0.997	[0.9920, 1.0018]
Did Not Sign a Petition	0.422	[0.3570, 0.4865]	0.839	[0.7846, 0.8936]	0.974	[0.9527, 0.9951]	0.996	[0.9915, 1.0011]

**Table 4: Predicted Turnout Effects for Signing a Petition and Voter History, 2009 Gainesville
Municipal Election**

	Functionally Inactive Voter (0/3)		Occasional Voter (1/3)		Regular Voter (2/3)		Super Voter (3/3)	
	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.	Pr	95% Conf. Int.
Signed a Petition	0.160	[0.1498, 0.1696]	0.374	[0.3583, 0.3900]	0.653	[0.6372, 0.6684]	0.855	[0.8458, 0.8649]
Did Not Sign a Petition	0.071	[0.0682, 0.0731]	0.193	[0.1894, 0.1965]	0.429	[0.4226, 0.4357]	0.703	[0.6936, 0.7120]

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