Do get-out-the-vote interventions really increase turnout inequality?

A conceptual and empirical reassessment

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Motivation: Turnout inequality

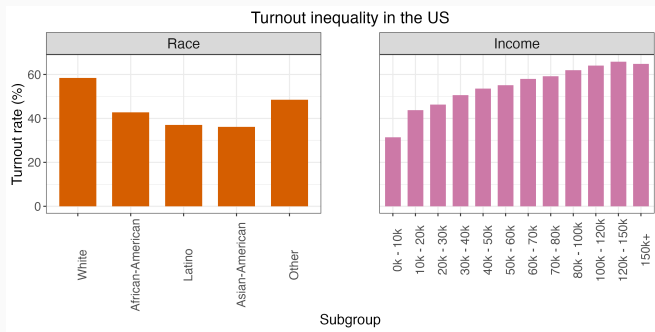Turnout inequality is pervasive in Western democracies: Across multiple dimensions, disadvantaged groups vote less.

Figure 1: Turnout inequality (pooled ANES data; validated turnout)

This can affect party support and a range of political and policy outcomes.

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GOTV and turnout inequality

Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) interventions aim to increase electoral participation. They are a cornerstone of modern campaigning and the most studied randomized interventions across political science (Gerber and Green 2000; Green and Gerber 2018; Jacobson 2015)

However, GOTV interventions can also affect the **composition** of the electorate (Foos and John 2017):

- Pooling multiple experiments, Enos, Fowler and Vavreck (2014) find that GOTV campaigns are more effective on high-propensity voters (see also: Niven, 2001, 2004; Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008; Abrajano and Panagopoulos, 2011; Malhotra et al., 2011).

- EFV and other scholars of campaigns and research ethics have interpreted this finding to mean that GOTV increases turnout inequality (Jacobson, 2015; McDermott and Hatemi 2020; Bryan, Tipton and Yeager 2021)

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This paper

Differential mobilization and **increasing turnout inequality** are conceptually and empirically different:

- Differential mobilization: heterogeneity in GOTV effects by voting propensity

- Increasing turnout inequality: high-voting-propensity citizens would be over-represented under GOTV intervention compared to non-intervention

- Need to compare turnout inequality in a world where GOTV happened to turnout inequality in a world where GOTV didn't happen (luckily the control group is a random sample of this counterfactual world).

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Illustration

Imagine the following counterfactual, given a GOTV intervention with a constant ITT of 6pp:

Voting propensity	Control share of citizens	Control turnout	Control share of voters	Treatment turnout	Treated share of voters
0%-20%	50%	10%	16.67%	16%	22.22%
20%-40%	20%	30%	20%	36%	20%
40%-60%	15%	50%	25%	56%	23.33%
60%-80%	10%	70%	23.33%	76%	21.11%
80%-100%	5%	90%	15%	96%	13.33%

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Two interlinked research questions

❶ Differential mobilization: Are GOTV interventions more effective on higher voting propensity citizens?

- Re-analyze 122 experiments and meta-analyze conditional intent-to-treat effects of 256 treatments across voting propensity bins
- Bigger sample + new methods to relax linearity assumption
- GOTV works best on **intermediate-propensity citizens**

❷ Does GOTV increase turnout inequality?

- Novel gini-based measure of turnout inequality
- Meta-analyze the effect on turnout gini of 256 GOTV treatments
- On average, GOTV **reduces turnout inequality**

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Data collection

1. Compile a large database of around 400 GOTV field experiments
2. Match them with individual-level data from replication archives
3. Contact 68 authors to ask for additional replication datasets
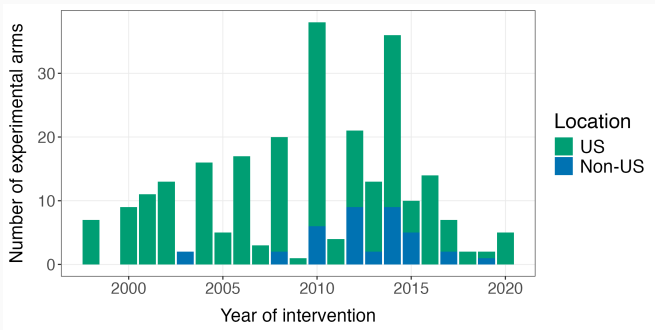4. Output: individual-level data of 122 experiments (256 treatments)

Figure 2: Descriptives: Sample composition across time and space

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Statistical methods

1. Separately for each experiment, use logistic regression to predict turnout in control group on the basis of socio-demographic covariates and past voting.

2. Separately for each experiment, predict probability of voting for all individuals. Classify individuals into 5 bins by fixed intervals.

3. Estimate conditional ITTs for each bin-treatment.

4. Meta-analyze conditional ITTs by bin, allowing correlation in effect sizes.

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Results: Differential mobilization

GOTV is most effective on citizens with intermediate voting propensities.
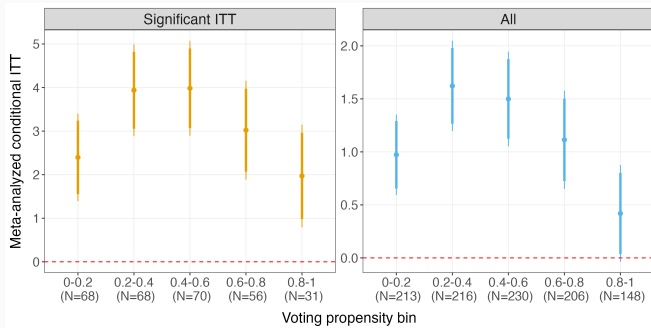
Figure 3: Main results: conditional ITT across bins

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Results: Mechanisms behind differential mobilization

Contact rate monotonically increases with bin. LATE is lowest in top bins.

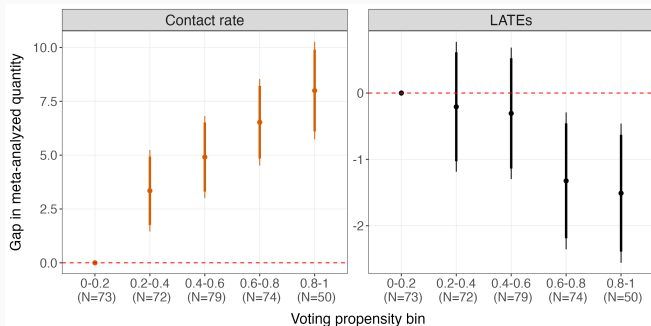Intermediate-propensity citizens lie at sweet spot for mobilization.

Figure 4: Contact rates and CACEs across bins

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Contextual moderation: US vs non-US interventions

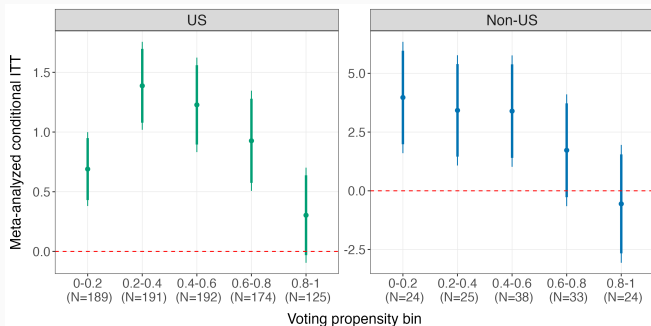The pattern of hump-shaped effectiveness only holds in the US

Figure 5: Conditional ITT by voting propensity bins in US vs non-US interventions

▸ Details

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Conceptualizing and measuring turnout inequality

- What do these results imply for turnout inequality?

- To answer, we need a measure of turnout inequality, to identify the effect of GOTV on it

- We conceptualize turnout inequality as the over-representation of high-propensity citizens among a population of eligible voters.

- Our turnout gini compares the distribution of voting propensities for actual voters vs for voting-eligible citizens.

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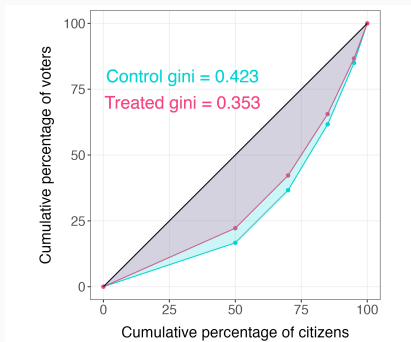○○○○○○

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Back to our example

Figure 6: Turnout gini under a hypothetical intervention with an effect of 6pp

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Implications of our inequality measure

Against common assumptions, we simulate that:

1. Interventions with constant effects typically decrease inequality

2. Interventions can decrease inequality even if they are more effective on high-propensity citizens ▸ Example

3. The same intervention can have opposite effects on inequality depending on the distribution of citizens' voting probability ▸ Example

The relationship between differential mobilization and turnout inequality can be counter-intuitive.

Results: GOTV reduces inequality

- For each treatment (N=256), we implement the procedure above.

- We then meta-analyze these estimates, gauging uncertainty with bootstrapping.

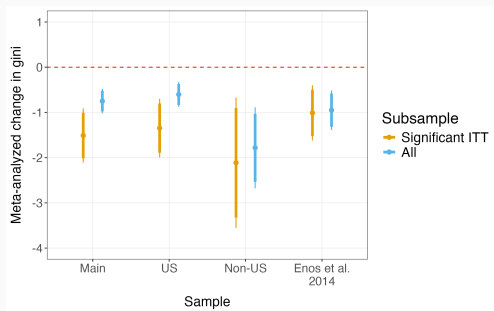- On average, GOTV **decreases turnout inequality**.

Figure 7: Meta-analyzed changes in turnout gini induced by GOTV

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Additional results on turnout inequality

- GOTV reduces inequality more outside the US

- GOTV reduces inequality more where inequality was higher in first place

- More effective GOTV interventions reduce inequality more: no trade-off between increasing turnout and decreasing inequality

- If anything, GOTV reduces racial disparities in the electorate, increasing the share of non-white subjects out of all voters.

  ▸ Regression table

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Conclusion

- Questions about differential mobilization and turnout inequality are **fundamentally different.**

- We conduct the largest individual-data meta-analysis ever in GOTV research, pooling evidence from 122 experiments with 256 treatments.

- Relaxing linearity assumptions, we show that GOTV campaigns are most effective on citizens with **intermediate voting propensities**. These citizens lie at a sweet spot for mobilization.

- Using a novel measure of inequality, we show that GOTV actually **reduces turnout inequality**, against widespread assumptions.

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Thank you!

Contact me at: f.foos@lse.ac.uk

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Additional results

- Bigger gaps between bins for interventions with larger effects ▸ Details

- No changes over time in the gaps between propensity bins ▸ Details

- No difference in results for high- vs low-salience elections ▸ Details

- GOTV is similarly effective on white vs non-white citizens ▸ Details

- GOTV is similarly effective on men and woman ▸ Details

- GOTV most effective on those aged 55-75, with hump-shaped effectiveness ▸ Details

▸ Robustness checks

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Additional results: US vs non-US interventions

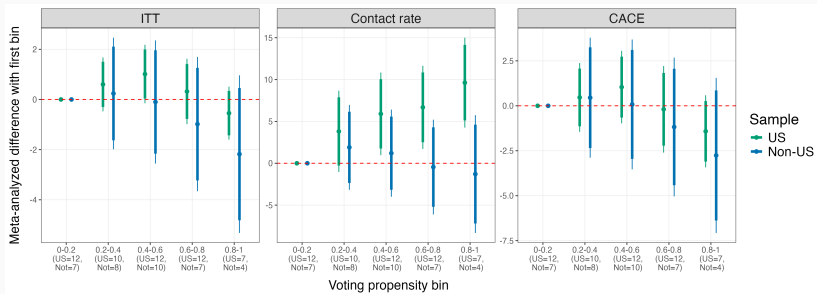This is partly because contact is more structured by voting propensity in the US than elsewhere

Figure 8: Contact rate and CACE by voting propensity bins in US vs non-US interventions
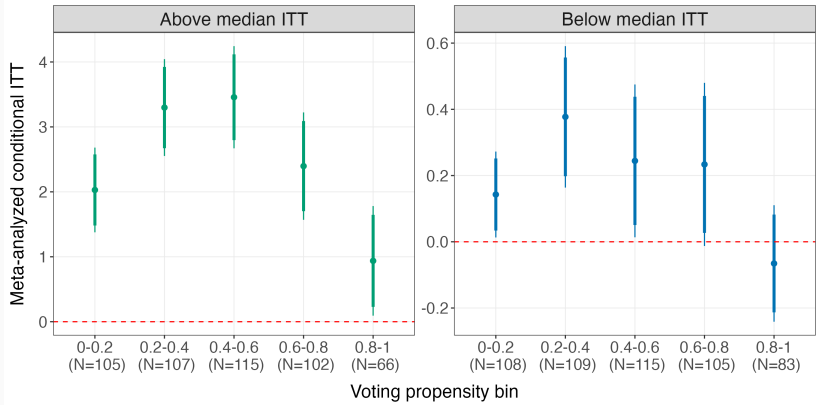
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Differential mobilization by ITT

Figure 9: Conditional ITT by average effectiveness (ITT)

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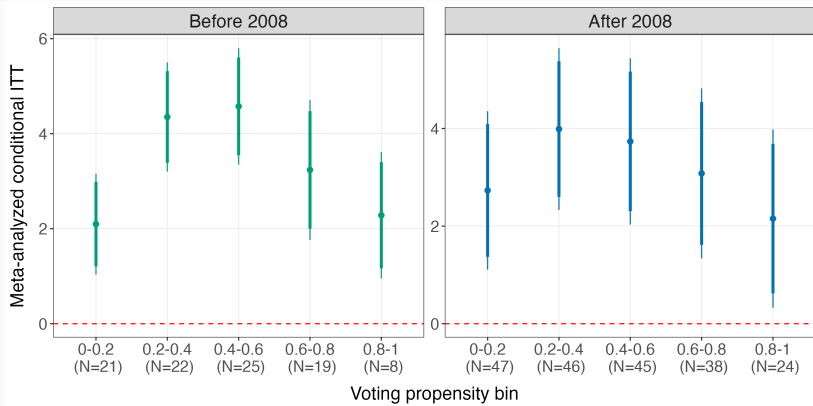
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Differential mobilization by time of intervention

Figure 10: Conditional ITT by time of intervention

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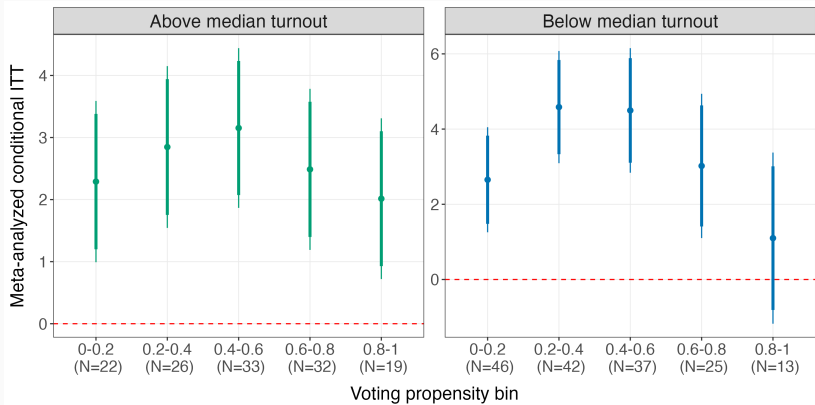○○○○○○

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Differential mobilization by salience

Figure 11: Conditional ITT by election salience (proxied by control turnout)

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Differential mobilization by race and gender
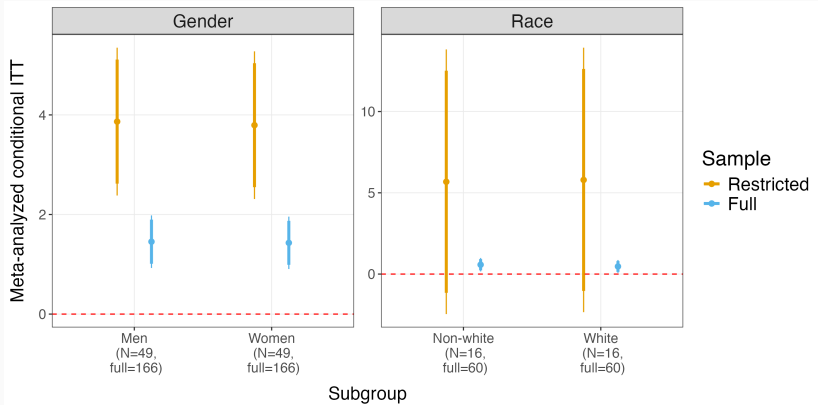
Figure 12: Conditional ITT by race and gender group
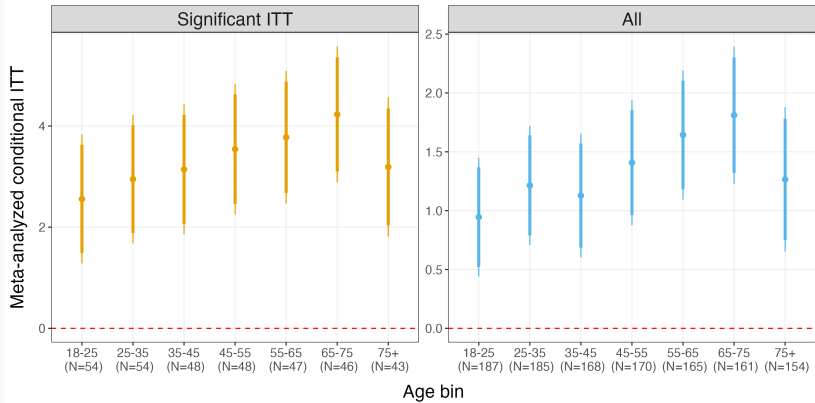
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Differential mobilization by age

Figure 13: Conditional ITT by age group

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Robustness checks

- Fixed effects meta-analysis

- Limit sample to studies with subjects in all bins

- Jackknife individual studies

- Bin by quintiles rather than fixed intervals

- Bootstrap over the entire process (including generation of the voting propensities)

- Generate voting propensities using lasso

- Generating voting propensities on half the control

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Differential mobilization vs inequality reduction

Intervention 1: gini decreases from 0.401 to 0.423

Intervention 2: gini increases from 0.401 to 0.437

Voting propensity	Proportion of eligible citizens	Control: Turnout rate	Intervention 1: conditional ITTs	Intervention 2: conditional ITTs	Int c
0-0.2	50%	10%	2%	0%	
0.2-0.4	20%	30%	2.5%	0%	
0.4-0.6	15%	50%	3%	5%	
0.6-0.8	10%	70%	3.5%	5%	
0.8-1	5%	90%	4%	5%	

Table 1: Inequality under three alternative hypothetical interventions

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Inequality effect depends on propensity distribution

Scenario 1: gini decreases from 0.145 to 0.131.

Scenario 2: gini increases from 0.257 to 0.262.

Voting propensity	Scenario 1: Proportion of eligible citizens	Scenario 1: Proportion of eligible citizens	Control: Turnout rate	Intervention: conditional ITTs
0-0.2	1%	24%	10%	0%
0.2-0.4	1%	24%	30%	1%
0.4-0.6	49%	49%	50%	3%
0.6-0.8	24%	1%	70%	1%
0.8-1	24%	1%	90%	0%

Table 2: Inequality under two alternative hypothetical citizen distributions

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Additional results on turnout inequality

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
			Dependent variable:			
			Change in turnout gini (0-100)			
US	0.542	1.500*	0.969*	0.884**	1.05**	0.663*
	(0.829)	(0.860)	(0.589)	(0.421)	(0.431)	(0.353)
Year: 2008-2012	−1.131	−0.641	−0.487	−0.068	−0.0136	−0.350
	(1.071)	(0.956)	(0.600)	(0.381)	(0.379)	(0.290)
Year: 2013-2020	−0.324	0.503	−0.268	−0.322	−0.257	−0.485*
	(0.792)	(0.786)	(0.521)	(0.327)	(0.325)	(0.249)
Control turnout (pp)		0.038**	0.016		0.011	−0.003
		(0.017)	(0.011)		(0.007)	(0.006)
ITT (pp)			−0.396***			−0.320***
			(0.058)			(0.038)
Control gini (pp)			−0.056***			−0.034***
			(0.013)			(0.009)
Sample	Restricted	Restricted	Restricted	Extended	Extended	Extended
Observations	79	79	79	252	252	252
R^2	0.004	0.020	0.281	0.028	0.050	0.141
Note:						*$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

Table 3: Regression analysis of the contexts where GOTV increases or decreases turnout inequality