Election Festivals and Voter Turnout: An Overview of Recent Research

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Abstract

This memo summarizes results from four randomized experiments conducted between 2016 and 2018 that evaluate the effectiveness of election festivals—also referred to by organizers as "celebrations" or "parties"—including festivals held in early voting centers in advance of Election Day. The results suggest that festivals are an effective and cost-effective means for raising voter turnout, especially in the context of early voting sites and presidential elections. We also find evidence that festivals can have "downstream" effects on turnout in subsequent elections; sites that hosted festivals in 2016 saw higher turnout in the 2018 midterm election.

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Although contemporary turnout in the U.S. lags behind that of other developed democracies, low turnout has not always been the norm. In the late 19th century, three-quarters of eligible voters routinely turned out to vote in U.S. presidential elections. What accounts for this extraordinary rate of turnout? In addition to a greatly restricted franchise, 19th century elections differed markedly from modern elections. Voters came to the polls in part to socialize with friends, have a free drink (or several), and enjoy the entertainment that parties would provide. Polling places were deliberately located in areas that were conducive to social activity, such as saloons. The historical record suggests a strategy for increasing turnout: attract voters to the polls by accentuating the social aspect of civic participation.

Researchers have long been intrigued by the possibility of attracting voters to the polls via festivals held at or near polling locations. Addonizio, Green, and Glaser (2007) conducted an early randomized study that found Election Day festivals increased turnout in low and medium salience elections in 2005 and 2006.[3] Recently, the pace of research has quickened thanks to a collaboration between researchers and groups such as Civic Nation's #VoteTogether initiative. The present report describes the design and results from these studies. The results from all randomized trials are then summarized in the form of a meta-analysis in order to provide our best guess about the effects of festivals on voter turnout.

Study Design

All of the studies summarized here share the same basic design features. Well before Election Day, local organizations selected voting sites that were potentially suitable for festivals and sought permission to hold festivals there. Each site was associated with a particular precinct or election district. From this pool of potential sites, researchers randomly selected half (or approximately half) as treatment locations, where festivals occurred. Local groups would then

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[3] Addonizio, Elizabeth M., Donald P. Green, and James M. Glaser. "Putting the party back into politics: an experiment testing whether election day festivals increase voter turnout." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 4 (2007): 721-727.

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advertise the upcoming festival in the selected location; the festival itself featured free food and drinks as well as entertainment. Festivals were open to everyone, regardless of whether they voted or were eligible to vote. The non-selected locations served as the control group.

Statistical Analysis

Table 1 summarizes the locations and context of each of the five evaluations. The initial study dates back to the 2005 and 2006 elections, several of which were primaries or municipal elections. The more recent studies evaluated festivals in the context of the 2016 presidential election, 2017 statewide elections, and 2018 midterm elections. The latter featured two separate evaluations, one of festivals in early voting sites prior to Election Day and another of festivals held on Election Day. The studies varied in size, with some featuring fewer than ten festivals and others more than fifty.

Outcomes were assessed by comparing voter turnout rates in treatment locations as opposed to control locations. In order to facilitate a direct comparison across studies, we estimated the effects of festivals using the same statistical method (ordinary least squares regression) in order to compare turnout rates in treatment and control sites, controlling for past voter turnout rates. For the two studies with small numbers of experimental sites (2016 and 2018 early vote), we adjusted for past turnout using voting patterns observed in non-experimental precincts within the same county so as to conserve degrees of freedom.[4] The 2005-2006 and 2016 analyses include all registered voters in each precinct. For the later festivals in 2017 and 2018, we restrict the analyses to voters registered prior to September of the election year, in order to eliminate potential registration effects of festival outreach.

Results

The statistical results presented in Table 1 indicate that festivals increased turnout, sometimes substantially.[5] In 2016, turnout rates were on average 3.79 percentage points higher

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[4] We updated our preliminary report on Election Day festivals in 2018 by including one additional pair of precincts. The treatment precinct held its festival at an early voting site but on Election Day.

[5] Tables presenting each analysis summarized in Table 1 can be found in Appendix A, Tables 1-6.

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in the treatment locations than in control locations. Despite the relatively small number of sites in this study, the apparent effect is statistically significant in the sense that there is less than a 5% chance that chance alone would produce an estimate this large. The mobilizing effects of Election Day festivals were weaker in 2017 and 2018, perhaps reflecting the fact that rain soaked 87% of festival sites in 2017 and 75% in 2018. However, early voting sites in 2018 raised turnout in precincts targeted for festivals by 3.47 percentage points; this estimate is statistically significant at the 5% level.

One way to summarize a series of similar randomized trials is by way of meta-analysis. Random effects meta-analysis generates a pooled estimate (a weighted average of the individual study results) that represents a best guess of the interventions' average effect across different contexts (including rain). The weights discount studies that have large standard errors (i.e., less statistical precision) while also allowing for random study-to-study variation due to differences in location and context. This procedure generates a pooled estimate of 1.66 percentage points with a standard error of 0.81 percentage points. We will use this pooled estimate below when calculating the approximate cost-per-vote associated with election festivals.

The third column of Table 1 reports the "downstream" effects of 2016 festivals on turnout in the 2018 midterm election. The estimate of 3.92 percentage points is estimated imprecisely but hints that a festival-induced increase in turnout during a presidential election leads to increased turnout two years later. Further research is needed to isolate the downstream effect with more precision, but the results suggest that precinct-level festivals may have long-term effects that elude ordinary cost-per-vote calculations, which focus on the short term.

Summary and Implications

Looking ahead to 2020, the results offer reasons for optimism about festivals as a get-out-the-vote tactic. First, the strong 2016 results suggest that the presidential election context is one in which festivals attract those who would otherwise not vote. Second, the strong early voting results suggest a tactic with wide application given the large number of states that allow for early voting or that conduct elections solely via mail-in ballots.

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Gauging the cost-per-vote of festivals involves a certain amount of guesswork, as the cost inputs vary depending on the extensiveness of pre-election publicity for the festival as well as the accouterments of the festival itself. Suppose a festival costs an average of $2,094 for an average precinct comprising 2,632 registered voters. Pooling over all five studies (in columns 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6) using random effects meta-analysis, we surmise that on average festivals generate a 1.66 percentage point increase in turnout. That in turn implies that festivals generate approximately 43.7 votes per precinct at $48 per vote, which is quite good by the standards of rigorously evaluated get-out-the-vote programs.

Table 1

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of Festivals on Turnout

	Percentage Point Increase in Turnout					
	2005-2006	2016	Downstream Effects for 2016 Festivals	2017	2018	2018 Early Vote
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment effect	2.51	3.79	3.92	0.47	-0.18	3.47
	(1.19)	(1.55)	(3.02)	(0.47)	(0.5)	(1.15)
Cost Per Vote	$29.45	$23.60	-	$183.48	-	$16.34
States	CA, CT, FL, ME, MN, NH, OR, PA, TX, WI	CA, OH, NC, TN, TX	CA, OH, NC, TN, TX	OH, NJ, TX VA	FL, MD, NC, OH TN, TX, VA	FL, NC, TN
N	38	18	18	104	114	14

Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses.
Cost per vote is calculated by dividing the average festival cost for each experiment by the average number of votes generated by a festival in that experiment.

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References

Addonizio, Elizabeth M, Donald P Green and James M Glaser. 2007. "Putting the party back into politics: an experiment testing whether election day festivals increase voter turnout." PS: Political Science & Politics 40(4):721–727.

Green, Donald P and Oliver McClellan. 2017. "The Effects of Election Festivals on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment Conducted During a Presidential Election." Available at SSRN.

Green, Donald P and Oliver McClellan. 2020. "The Effects of Election Festivals on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment Conducted During the 2017 General Election." Available at SSRN.

Green, Donald P and Oliver McClellan. 2020. "The Effects of Election Day Festivals and Early Voting Center Festivals on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment Conducted During the 2018 Midterm Election." Available at SSRN.

Appendix A

Table 1

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of 2005-2006 Festivals

	Festival Year Turnout Percentage Regression Including Past Voter Turnout
Treatment	0.025**
	(0.012)
Previous turnout rate	0.766
	(0.114)
Block variable	Yes
N	38
R^2	0.960

$^*p < .1;\ ^{**}p < .05;\ ^{***}p < .01$

Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses. Robust standard errors are estimated to be smaller.

Table 2

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of 2016 Festivals

	2016 Turnout Percentage Regression Including Past Voter Turnout
Treatment	0.038**
	(0.016)
Block variable	Yes
N	18
R^2	0.948

$^*p < .1;\ ^{**}p < .05;\ ^{***}p < .01$

The outcome in this regression is adjusted for past turnout using voting patterns observed in non-experimental precincts.

Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses. Robust standard errors are estimated to be smaller.

Table 3

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of 2016 Festivals on turnout in 2018

	2018 Turnout Percentage Regression Including Past Voter Turnout
Treatment	0.039
	(0.030)
Block variable	Yes
N	18
R^2	0.865

$^*p < .1;\ ^{**}p < .05;\ ^{***}p < .01$

The outcome in this regression is adjusted for past turnout using voting patterns observed in non-experimental precincts. Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses. Robust standard errors are estimated to be smaller.

Table 4

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of 2017 Festivals

	2018 Turnout Percentage Regression Including Past Voter Turnout
Treatment	0.005
	(0.005)
2016 Turnout Percentage	0.528
	(0.118)
2014 Turnout Percentage	0.079
	(0.268)
2013 Turnout Percentage	0.446
	(0.223)
Block variable	Yes
N	104
R^2	0.984

$^*p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$

Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses. Robust standard errors are estimated to be smaller.

Table 5

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of 2018 Festivals

	2018 Turnout Percentage Regression Including Past Voter Turnout
Treatment	-0.002
	(0.005)
2016 Turnout Percentage	0.871
	(0.145)
2014 Turnout Percentage	0.620
	(0.146)
2012 Turnout Percentage	-0.546
	(0.137)
Block variable	Yes
N	114
R^2	0.975

$^*p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$

Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses. Robust standard errors are estimated to be smaller.

Table 6

OLS Regression Estimates of the Effect of 2018 Early Vote Festivals

	2018 Turnout Percentage Regression Including Past Voter Turnout
Treatment	0.035**
	(0.012)
Block variable	Yes
N	14
R^2	0.999

$^*p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$

The outcome in this regression is adjusted for past turnout using voting patterns observed in non-experimental precincts.

Conventional OLS standard errors in parentheses. Robust standard errors are estimated to be smaller.