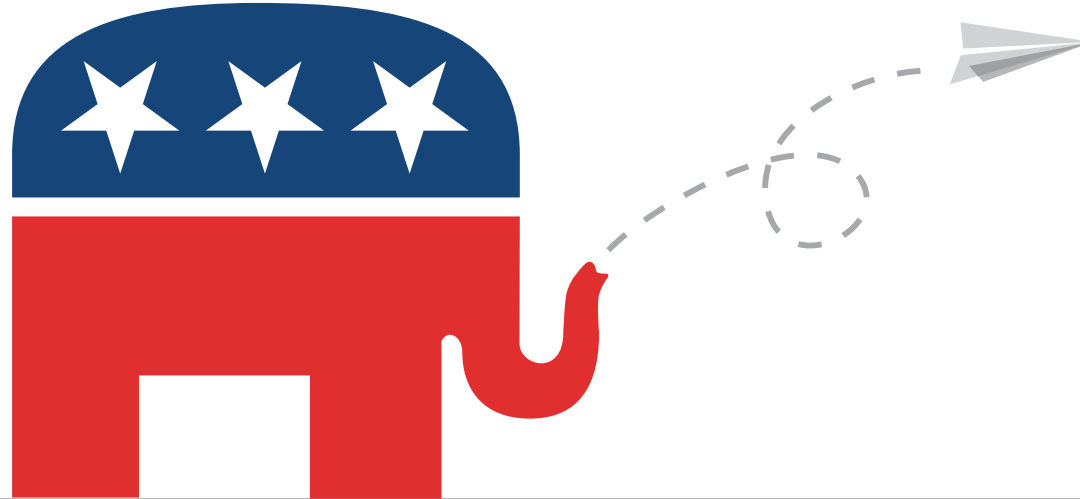


Mailbox Metrics:

The data-driven impact of campaign direct mail

By Dr. George Hawley, Assistant Professor of Political Science, The University of Alabama



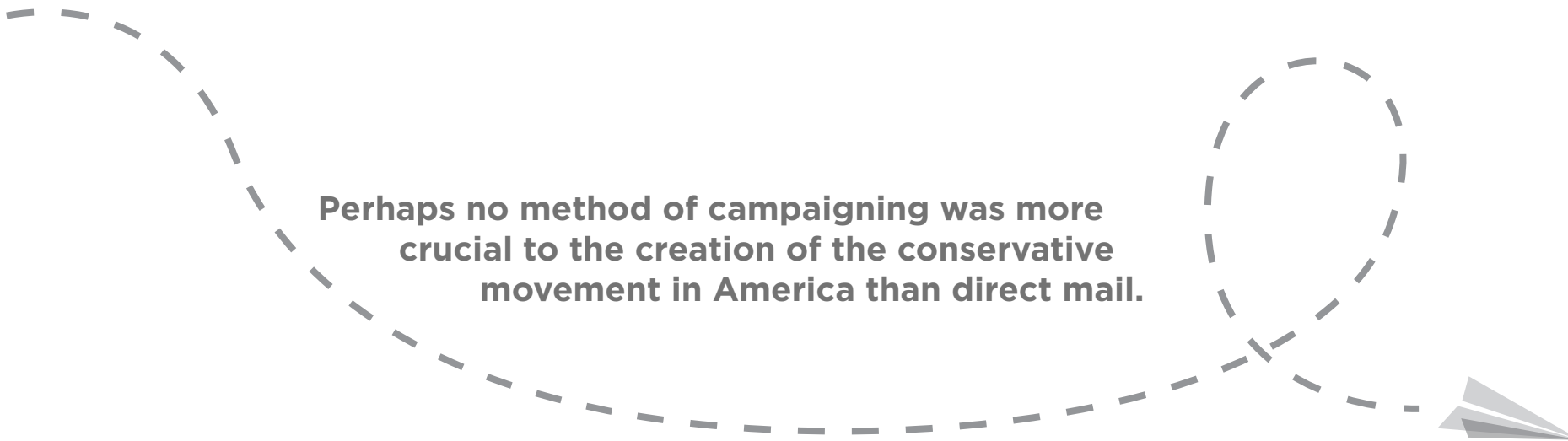
Direct Mail

Perhaps no method of campaigning was more crucial to the creation of the conservative movement in America than direct mail. Even in today's environment, when virtually all American voters have access to e-mail or telephones, campaign appeals in the mail remain a crucial element of successful campaigns.

Direct mail is not cheap. Furthermore, with so much junk mail arriving in the average American's mailbox every day, you can expect a large percentage of your mailings will be immediately deposited in the trash. Because of the costs associated with large mailings, it is easy to see the appeal of relying primarily on online

or telephone appeals. When conducted correctly, however, a direct mail campaign can make the difference between victory and defeat.¹

Political scientists have long studied the efficacy of direct mail, as have campaign professionals. While there is widespread agreement that direct mail is important to campaigns, it is more important for fundraising than for voter turnout. In fact, there are few studies indicating that direct mail is an effective method for getting voters to the polls – though some evidence suggests it can be an effective method of voter persuasion.



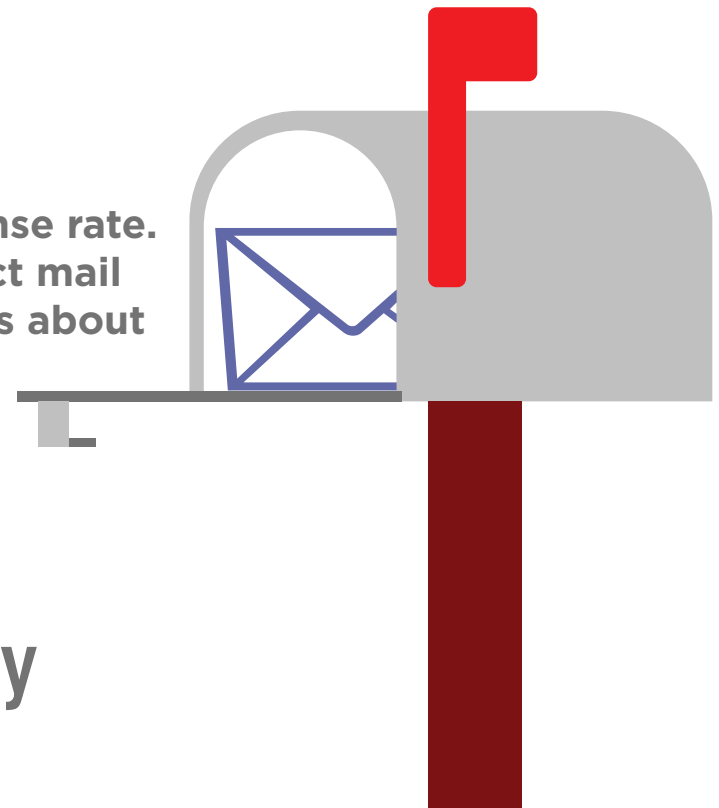
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Direct mail and the conservative movement

When a conservative Republican utilizes direct mail for fundraising and voter mobilization, that candidate is following in the footsteps of some of the most celebrated figures in the movement's history. In the aftermath of Barry Goldwater's crushing defeat by Lyndon Johnson in 1964, conservatism in America appeared to be down for the count. One prescient conservative saw a silver lining to Goldwater's disastrous campaign: it showed which Americans were committed to Goldwater's conservative values, and could be relied upon in the future to build the movement. In the run-up to the 1964 election, thousands of individual donors gave money to the Goldwater campaign. When the campaign ended, Richard Viguerie correctly intimated that these people would be willing to give again, if they were asked. At the end of 1964, Viguerie went to the office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives. He then copied by hand 12,500 names and addresses of people who gave Goldwater \$50 or more.²

From this relatively small list, Viguerie began the work of asking for additional donations for various conservative causes. Viguerie played a role in building prominent conservative organizations like the National Rifle Association, The Conservative Caucus, the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, *Human Events*, and several dozen others.³ Republicans and conservative organizations continued to have an advantage over Democrats and liberal organizations in direct mail fundraising for decades to come, and it remains a crucial source of funds for the conservative movement.

It is important to understand that direct mail, while important, can be frustrating and have a low-response rate. Thus, it is important to be realistic about what direct mail can accomplish, and know what the research tells us about maximizing the effectiveness of direct mail.



There is only weak evidence that direct mail boosts voter turnout

In their book, *Get out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, Donald Green and Alan Gerber provided a survey of the major research conducted in recent decades on the degree to which direct mail can increase voter turnout.⁴ They found little compelling evidence that direct mail can bring massive numbers of voters to the polls. Some studies have demonstrated

the efficacy of nonpartisan mail when it comes to voter turnout; Gerber and Green's analysis of all the major studies of nonpartisan mail suggested that this type of mail will lead to one additional vote for every 200 recipients who receive the nonpartisan mail.⁵ However, mail that is explicitly partisan or issue-related does not appear to boost voter turnout.



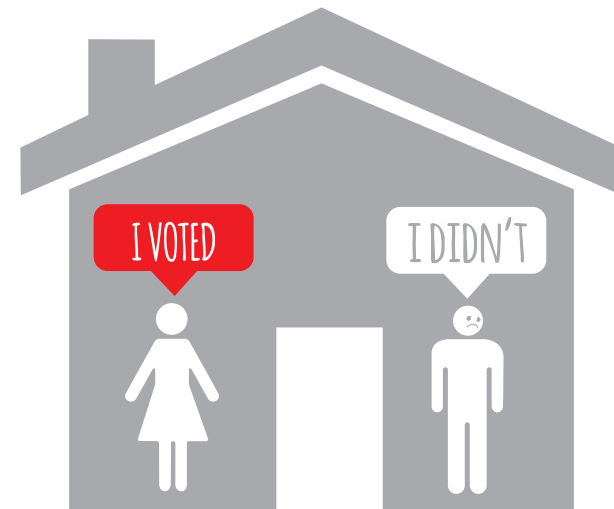
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Direct mail that uses social pressure may increase voter turnout

In a large study designed to determine whether or not voters respond to social pressure to vote, conducted in Michigan in 2006 during the party primary elections, Gerber, Green, and Larimer found that direct mail informing recipients of the fact that individual voter turnout was a matter of public record, and further told them that their behavior would be studied after the election, led to a greater boost in voter turnout than direct mail that did not use this language. An even greater boost was observed when the direct mail specifically noted whether the recipient had voted in the previous election. The greatest boost in voter turnout was found when the direct mail listed the members of the recipient household that voted, as well as the voting records of the recipients' neighbors.⁶ Other scholars have found similar results, and further noted that the use of social pressure to encourage voting does not have to be heavy handed in order to be effective.⁷



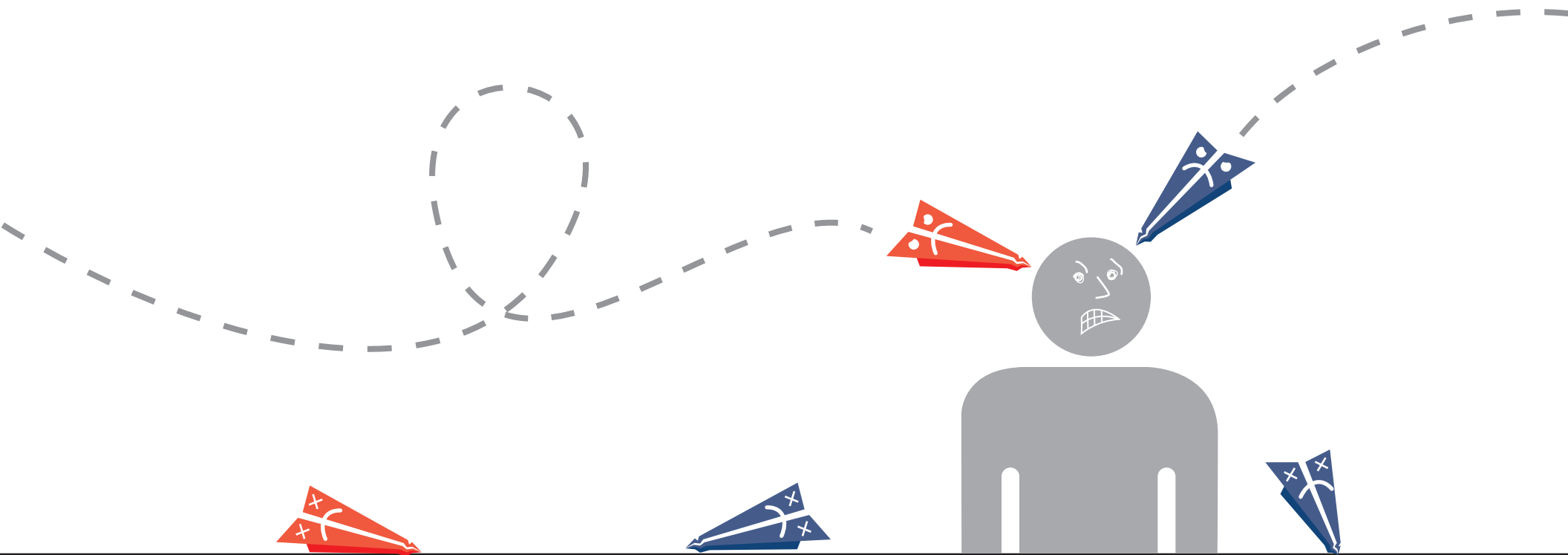
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Partisan direct mail that is decidedly negative has (at best) no effect on turnout, and many actually drive it down

A series of field experiments conducted during state and municipal elections in 1999 attempted to further discern the effectiveness of direct mail campaigns on voter turnout.⁸ As was the case with other studies, it found little evidence that direct mail was an effective way to boost turnout. In fact, it found modest evidence that direct mail that was negative in its

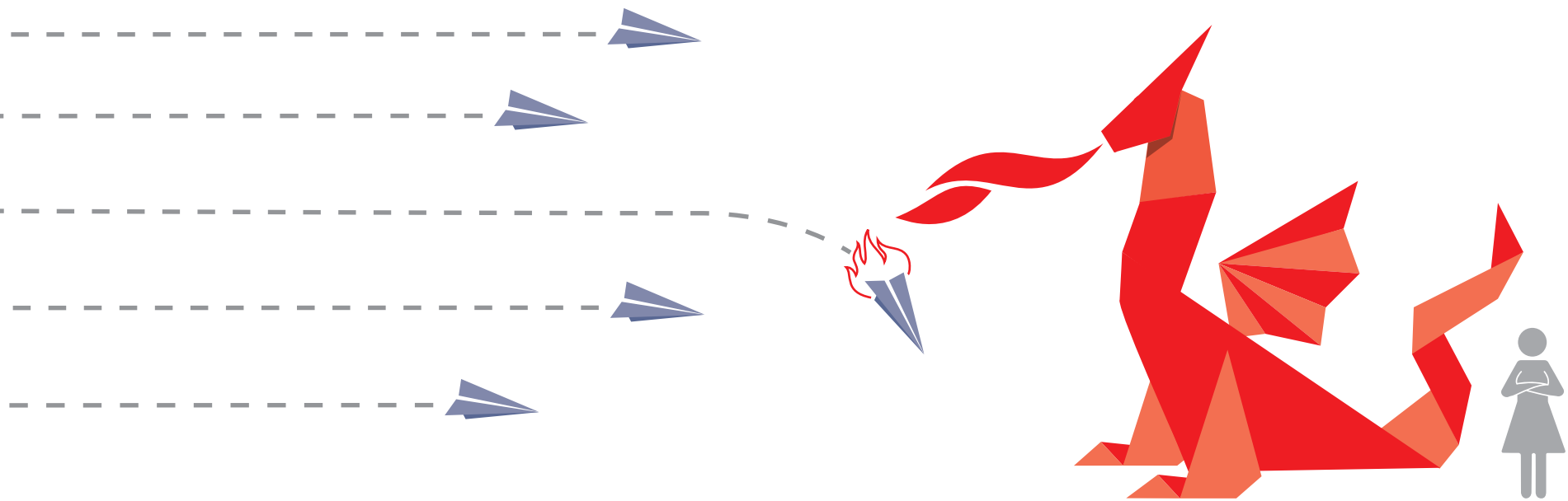
tone actually *decreased* turnout – though this result was not statistically significant, so we cannot claim to know this with certainty. This does not mean that campaigns should never send out negative mail (it may serve some other important purpose), but campaigns should be aware that this is probably not an effective way to increase turnout.



Direct mail may weaken the effectiveness of your opponent's attacks

Pfau et al. found that a well-timed and orchestrated direct mail campaign can decrease the persuasiveness of an attack campaign on a candidate.⁹ Specifically, they found that direct mail can “inoculate” a potential voter against potentially-damaging attacks. If a candidate knows that his or her opponent is going to raise specific issues and make specific attacks, it may be in the candidate’s best interest to address

these issues first via direct mail, and present the information in the most favorable light possible. Inoculation techniques furthermore seem to be effective whether they are targeted at people who already agree with a position or argument, those who are neutral, or those who oppose a position or argument.¹⁰



Organizations share (or sell) their donor lists more frequently than you think

The effectiveness of a direct mail campaign will be largely determined by the quality of a campaign's address list. Carpet bombing an entire community with advertising in the mail is expensive, and may even be counterproductive; sending GOTV appeals to voters who will support your opponent is a less-than-worthless expense. It is important to know where campaigns can find useful and up-to-date voter lists. Koger, Masket, and Noel conducted an innovative study in 2004 to examine the degree to which parties, partisan media, and non-profit groups combine their efforts when it comes to fundraising.¹¹ Specifically, they wanted to know the degree to which these different groups shared their donor mailing lists. To consider this question, they made

up fifty unique names, provided an address for those names, and from those names they made donations to different political organizations (parties, ideological media, and other political organizations). They then waited to see whether direct mail solicitations from different organizations came to each specific name and address. This was a clever methodology, as the use of different names allowed the researchers to know exactly who was sharing each name, and with whom they were sharing it.

This study demonstrated that both liberal and conservative organizations, media, and parties share donor information with ideologically like-minded groups and campaigns.

If you donate money to a political organization, it is a good bet that your name will end up on someone else's list of potential donors. Similarly, if you are looking for a list of potential donors in your area, you can likely find an organization willing to share or sell you that information.

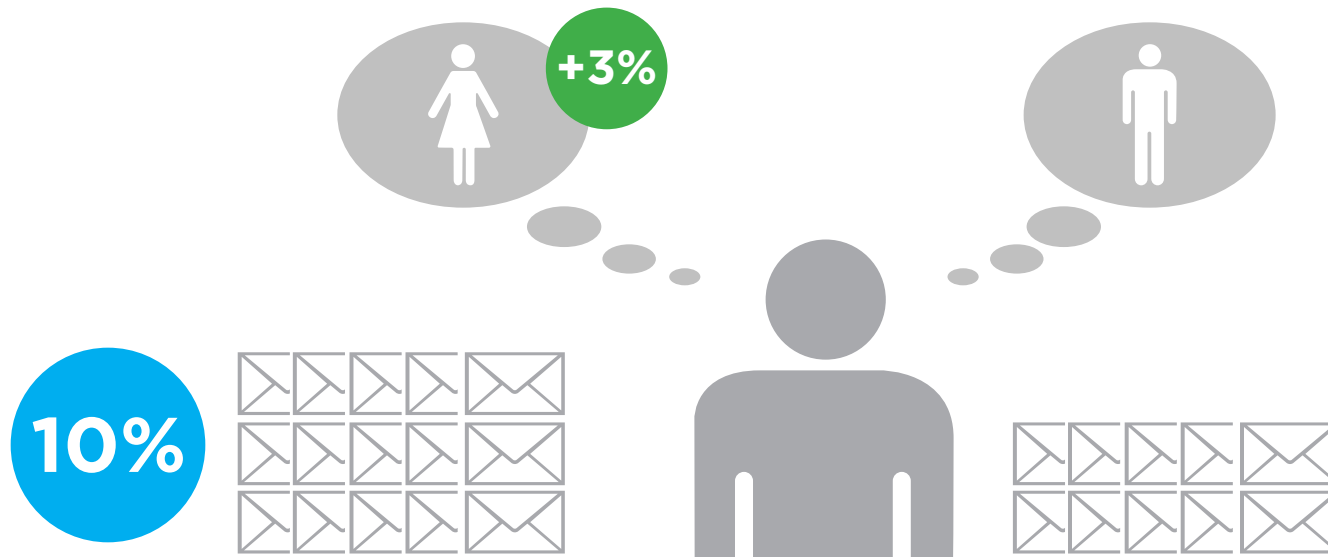


Direct mail may shape vote choice

While direct mail may not be a particularly effective method for bringing your voters to the polls, it may be an effective means of persuading undecided voters to vote for a particular candidate.¹² A study that examined the 2006 attorney general election in Kansas found that direct mail had a direct impact on vote choice. That is, people changed their vote based on the direct mail they received. The effect was sizable. This

study indicated that a ten percentage point increase in the amount of direct mail sent to a precinct increased the vote share of the candidate promoted by that direct mail by three percentage points.

Not all research is in agreement on this issue, however, and other studies have suggested that direct mail has a negligible influence on vote choice, and may have no effect at all.¹³

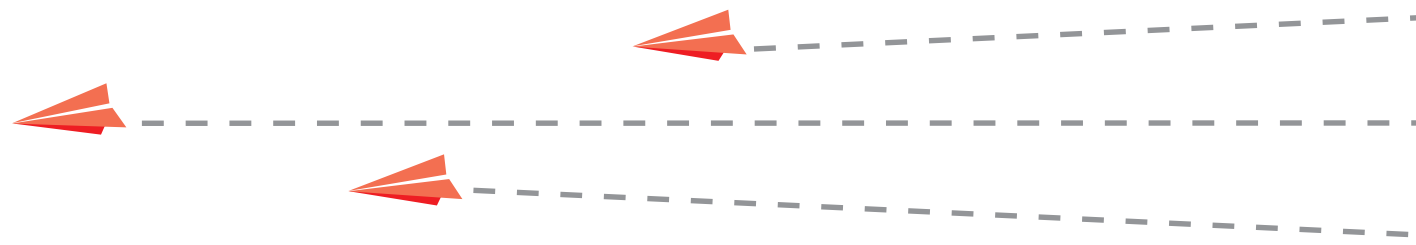


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Who gets targeted?

Huge majorities of voters will receive some form of political solicitation in the mail, either seeking to persuade them to vote for a candidate, to turn out on Election Day, to make a monetary donation, or some combination of the three. According to the 2012 American National Election Survey, more than 85 percent of all respondents reported receiving some form of political contact in the mail. However, the costs associated with repeatedly contacting a potential voter are high, and thus campaigns must be careful to target the correct potential voters and donors.

In 2004, the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy conducted the Campaign Communications Survey. This survey asked respondents to note all of the campaign communications they received during the final three weeks of the presidential election campaign, including political mail. Using this data, Hassell and Monson examined patterns in solicitations for campaign donations.¹⁴ Many of their findings were unsurprising – for example, political campaigns are more likely to target individuals with more education and higher incomes. More importantly, this study showed that campaigns understand a fundamental rule of fundraising: a giver will give again. Previous contributors received, on average, seven times as many requests as non-contributors. Campaigns were also more likely to target voters with stronger partisan affiliations.



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Some campaigns will rely on direct mail more than others

Writing in *Winning Elections*, Rich Savage said campaigns and candidates with the following characteristics will need to rely particularly heavily on direct mail:



- You're expecting a low voter turnout



- Your district encompasses only a small portion of a major media market and/or is spread over several counties



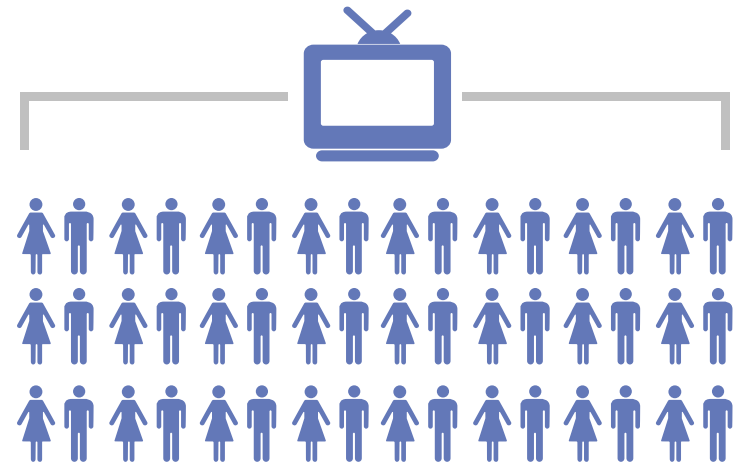
- Your race is a down-ballot campaign in a major market that you would have to sell your house and your children just to get a sufficient TV time buy to get your message across.

If so, then direct mail should be at the top of your list of campaign weaponry.¹⁵

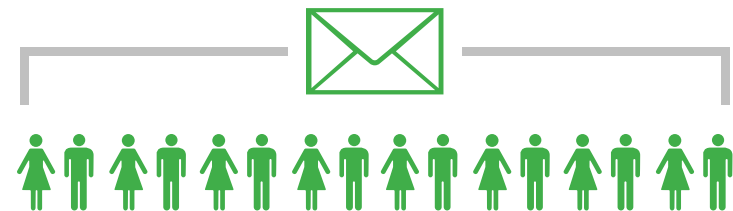
In some contexts, television may be cheaper than direct mail

Virtually all forms of advertising cost money. Some are extraordinarily expensive. While we typically think of television advertising as being one of the most costly forms of campaigning, in some circumstances it may be more cost effective than direct mail. According to Hal Malchow, the cost for reaching each registered voter is typically much lower for television advertising than it is for direct mail.¹⁶

In elections where you can anticipate a large number of undecided and persuadable voters, television may be your best bet for reaching a wide audience.



On the other hand, if you expect that few voters are undecided, and you can effectively target those voters, then direct mail may be a better use of your resources.



People find direct mail annoying, but it often works anyway

No one likes to come home to a mailbox full of junk mail, and some may even view direct mail solicitations as an invasion of privacy. Tens of billions of advertisements and solicitations are sent to Americans in the mail every single year. A substantial percentage of the population will receive more than 1,000 solicitations for charitable donations within a single year.¹⁷ For this reason, one might be justifiably concerned that voters may become overwhelmed by campaign material and tune everything out entirely. There is little evidence that this occurs, however. A study conducted in 2009 reached the following conclusion: while people find direct mail solicitations annoying, that annoyance does not stop them from sending donations.¹⁸

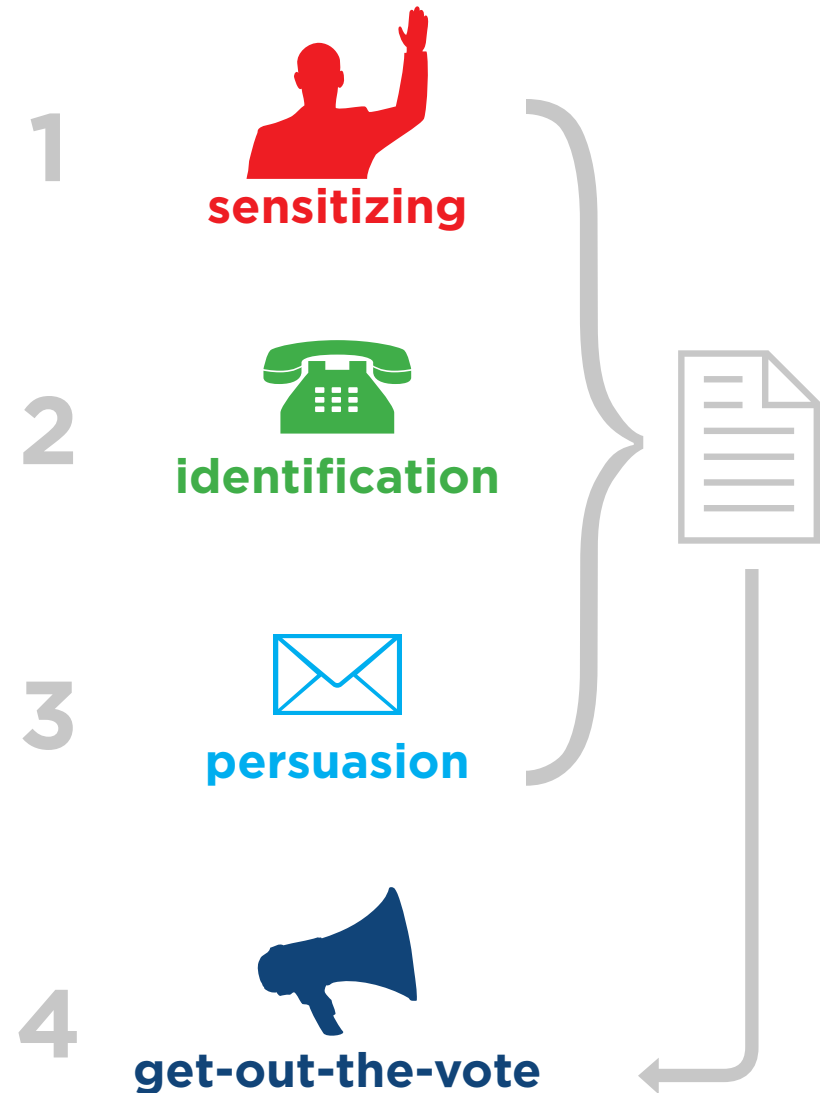
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The four phases of a direct mail/telephone campaign

According to Walter and Anne Clinton, a well-executed direct mail and/or telephone campaign follows four phases.¹⁹ The first phase, which they call the “sensitizing” phase, informs the voter about the candidate’s existence. During this phase targeted voters should receive a substantive piece of mail from the campaign that deals with issues expected to resonate with that voter. The “identification” phase follows. In this phase, phone calls are used to identify potential voters and label them as favorable, unalterably opposed, or persuadable. All voters, except those identified as unalterably opposed, should then receive targeted, personalized mail addressing their specific concerns. This begins the “persuasion” phase. Finally, the list of voters generated from the previous phases should be aggressively targeted for “get-out-the-vote” efforts.



Conclusion

Direct mail is an important element of campaigning, but it is expensive. In order to make direct mail worth the expense, it is important to be realistic about what it can do, and what can be better accomplished via other campaigning methods, such as door-to-door canvassing. Direct mail is probably not your best bet for ensuring high turnout among your voters, but it can be an effective way to raise money, and it may be an effective means of voter persuasion. However, to maximize effectiveness, direct mail campaigns should be carefully targeted.

About the Author

George Hawley is an assistant professor of political science at The University of Alabama. He received his PhD from the University of Houston. His research interests include demography, electoral behavior, political parties, immigration policy, and the U.S. Congress, and his doctoral dissertation and first book, *Voting and Migration Patterns in the U.S.*, focused on migration and the geographic partisan sort in the United States -- that is, he examined the degree to which migration is leading to an increasing number of politically homogeneous geographic units throughout the United States. His forthcoming book, *White Voters in 21st Century America*, examines the voting behavior of non-Hispanic whites, and speculates on how the changing demographic profile of the United States will influence American politics in the decades ahead.

He earned BA degrees in journalism and political science at Central Washington University, and earned his MA in political science at the University of Houston. He also has years of work experience in Washington, DC.

Dr. Hawley is a proud native of northwest Washington State, but presently enjoys life in Alabama with his wife and son.

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Voter Gravity is a campaign technology company that brings a powerful voter database, voter acquisition technology and a user-friendly mobile canvassing solution to campaigns and advocacy groups. Voter Gravity integrates innovative voter contact tools, an extensive voter database, and a user-friendly dashboard to capture voter contact information. For further product features, visit Voter Gravity's features page at www.VoterGravity.com/features.

