How Low Turnout Is Turned Around: International Best Practice in Voter Turnout Campaigns
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A healthy democracy is built on the political participation of its citizens. Elections not only give governments legitimacy, but also create the incentive for politicians to respond to voters’ interests.

In many countries, however, electoral participation is lower than ever. This trend reflects long-term political and social shifts, though a particularly salient election can create a spike in engagement\(^1\). But effective communication can boost turnout.

This report distils key lessons on increasing voter participation, combining behavioural theories with insights from practitioners who have led some of the most successful turnout campaigns in recent years.

Context and culture matter enormously. We draw on experiences from Australia, Canada, the EU, India, New Zealand, Tunisia, the UK and the USA. The lessons learned apply in most democracies, but should always be highly localised.

These recommendations are for non-partisan bodies responsible for increasing turnout – typically electoral commissions and parliaments. Some political parties have also developed highly effective strategies that could have non-partisan application elsewhere and so we include them – notably Obama’s 2008/2012 Operation Vote.

Successful turnout campaigns share some common approaches:

1. Deep data and insights into citizens’ voting barriers, values and attitudes.
2. Clear strategic decisions about which citizen segments to focus on, and how.
3. Campaigns with a nuanced, evidence-based choice of message and channel.

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\(^1\) For example, voter turnout was over 80% for the September 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (http://www.bbc.co.uk/events/scotland-decides/results)
Many of the most effective strategies and tactics were based on a behavioural approach. We therefore begin with a brief look at the academic literature on voting behaviour and what it tells us about people’s voting patterns, different types of non-voters and their response to a number of mobilisation strategies.

**Key Voting Patterns**

- Voting behaviour can be understood as an acquired habit
- First elections matter; early experience has a lasting impact
- Turnout campaign strategies should differentiate between habitual and intermittent abstainers
- There is evidence backing tactics such as invoking the self, forming implementation intentions and using social pressure

**Voting is a habit**

Numerous academics argue that voting is habit-forming and so people who have voted in the past are more likely to vote in the future. The very act of voting increases the likelihood of participation in future elections, while not voting depresses subsequent turnout. (Coppock and Green, 2013; Meredith, 2009; Fujiwara et al., 2013).

Turnout is lower among people who first became eligible to vote in the run-up to a (low salience) EU election as opposed to a national election.

Comparing Californians just over and under 18 at the 2000 presidential race: those eligible to vote in 2000 were more likely to vote in 2004.

People who are induced to vote in a low salience election are especially likely to vote subsequently.

The turnout impact of precipitation (a shock to turnout) on election day persists to future elections.

Some scholars, however, question whether this pattern is universal. They argue that the impact of past voting on turnout, whilst clear-cut in the US, varies across contexts and, for instance, is mainly negative in Scandinavia. They point to the ‘first-time boost’ or ‘hype’: second-time voters may know more about voting but also be less enthusiastic.

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How do people develop a voting habit?

Generally, a habit is formed when people learn context-response associations and these settle in memory to guide their future responses. In other words, people learn to behave in certain ways when presented with particular cues or triggers.

The literature sees repetition and context stability\(^4\) as individually necessary and jointly sufficient to form a strong voting habit. How does this work?

- Everyone starts off with no voting habit.
- Turnout becomes automated through behavioural repetitions made in very similar contexts. It means that a voter begins by consciously weighing various factors. If these calculations are embedded in a stable context and repeatedly result in voting, then people will apply less and less careful consideration.
- Once the habit has formed, people will turn out to vote even in the absence of supporting goals and emotions (e.g. when they do not value particular elections).
- Habitual voters can be triggered to vote by stable cues (e.g. candidate signs, media coverage, unchanged polling stations, ‘I voted’ stickers, evidence that others have voted).
- On the other hand, when a voter moves, the context could be sufficiently disrupted (e.g. a new polling place must be found, information flow and social ties weaken) so their decision is no longer based on contextual cues that stimulate a habit.

There is no consensus on the reason for repeated behaviour and the theory of habitual turnout needs further research. Two potential explanations are a psychological and an institutional mechanism.

Under the fairly universal psychological mechanism\(^5\), voting reinforces feelings of civic-mindedness and makes people increasingly perceive themselves as voters, understanding turning out to vote as ‘what people like me do on Election Day’. This should always – even if slightly – affect a citizen’s probability of voting in future elections.\(^6\)

Under the institutional mechanism\(^7\), voting provides citizens with experience and information applicable in subsequent elections (e.g. information about registration, the voting procedure, a polling station or political parties). As a result, future voting is less costly and more likely, but the effect depends on personal characteristics and the context. The impact is likely to be less significant in the case of older and more frequent voters and when voting procedures are easy.\(^8\)

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4 Aldrich et al., 2010, “Turnout as a Habit”, Polit Behav DOI 10.1007/s11109-010-9148-3
If voting really is a gradually acquired habit, then early experience is likely to have a lasting effect. Some argue that the first three elections in which a person is eligible to vote will define whether they become a habitual voter or non-voter.\(^9\)

Having been successfully mobilised to vote once, a citizen may also become more susceptible to subsequent mobilisation efforts than a non-voter or a first-time voter.

**How can citizens be mobilised to vote?**

To design effective turnout campaigns, it is important to understand the different types of potential non-voters, their barriers and drivers, and mobilisation tactics that work. For **habitual non-voters**, the primary goal is typically to create a desire to vote. For **intermittent non-voters**, the objective is to facilitate voting by removing barriers.

Some studies argue that mobilisation is best directed towards the so-called ‘fence-sitters’ whose propensity to vote is near the indifference threshold set by the general interest in the election. In other words, the electoral context matters and for instance, low-propensity voters can be effectively mobilized only in high-salience races.

Now, let’s take a closer look at some of the evidence of successful interventions that could be adapted to local circumstances.

### Effective Voter Mobilisation Techniques

#### Language of Identity

- Framing voting as a means of shaping your identity can be used to motivate socially valuable behaviour.
- A small change in wording that framed voting as an expression of self rather than as behaviour (e.g. ‘being a voter’ versus ‘voting’) increased voter turnout.

#### Voting Plan

- Phone calls to help people make a voting plan (forming implementation intentions) increased turnout. People are more likely to perform an action if they have visualized doing it.
- This only worked among those living alone. Multiple-eligible-voter households – probably more likely to make a plan on their own – were unaffected.
- Neither calls to remind people of the election nor self-prediction calls (i.e. calls reminding people of the election and asking them whether they intend to vote) had a significant impact.

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12 Nickerson and Rogers, 2010, “Do you have a voting plan?”, Psychological Science 21(2) 194 –199
### Effective Voter Mobilisation Techniques

#### Voter Report Cards

- A pre-election mail-out including the voting history of a voter and their neighbour was ten times more effective at increasing propensity to vote than a standard pre-election mail out.
- Even a softer tone (e.g. expressing gratitude for past voting without mentioning neighbours) combined with a message that voter habits are being monitored was effective (e.g. “our records indicate that you voted in 2008 and we hope to be able to thank you in the future for being a good citizen”).

#### Door-to-door canvassing

- In-person canvassing had a greater impact on voter participation than direct mail, e-mail or phone calls.\(^{14}\) A standard phone call reminding people of the election and their duty to vote had no effect at all.
- Voting is highly contagious. A person who might be 25 percent likely to vote would become 85 percent likely to vote if a cohabitant decides to vote because of door-to-door canvassing. The reason is unknown, with lowered cost of voting and social pressure possible explanations.\(^ {15}\)

#### Group Mentality

- Voters respond better to ‘everyone-is-doing-it’ messages (e.g. “turnout is going to be high today”) than to ‘don’t-be-part-of-the-problem’ messages about expected low turnout.

#### Trustworthy Messengers

- Voters responded better to letters in less ‘shiny’ envelopes, similar to what they may expect from a tax authority.
- E-mails and text messages with less lively ‘from’ fields (e.g. Election Centre) also do better, according to Rock the Vote.

The impact of social media on voter turnout remains under-researched. Some academics found that users who received a social message (such as a Facebook reminder, a link to the local polling station and profile pictures of friends who had voted) were more likely to cast their ballot than users who received a purely informational message or users who received nothing.\(^ {18}\)

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18 Fowler, 2012, in http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/pressrelease/facebook_fuels_the_friend_vote
Voter Turnout Campaigns in Practice

We have seen evidence that effective communication can improve voter turnout. Now, we turn to the practice of running such campaigns. How do these approaches work in the field? What do successful campaigns have in common? Based on conversations with expert practitioners, we will now look at four key areas.

Research & Segmentation

Strategic decision

Campaign

Evaluation

What works depends enormously on the local context. Therefore, this section does not recommend specific messages or channels but looks at what expert practitioners believe makes a difference.

1. Deep Data and Insights

The role of data and insights in voter turnout campaigns

- Understand voting habits and identify potential non-voter segments
- Understand the propensity of each potential non-voter segment to be mobilised, to inform the strategic decision about who to target
- Discover and test which mobilization techniques are most likely to work for each segment
- Shape and test campaign themes and messages
- Inform choice of channels and platforms
- Target individuals with the messages most likely to be effective for them
- Continuously monitor engagement and effectiveness of content and messages

Most successful campaigns are built on deep data and insights, continuously mined to inform decisions. In this section we look both at the methods used to gain data and insights and how they were used.

Uncovering the unknown

Penn Schoen & Berland’s Alex Braun underlines the need to first understand historical data about voter turnout for a particular type of election, citizens’ voting habits in other types of elections as well as their current interest in voting. Demographic and psychographic segmentation is also part of the initial work.

These surveys take a broad perspective and avoid assumptions that could predetermine the range, type and quality of data obtained.
Beyond Demographics
In most settings, citizens’ values and attitudes are a more helpful guide for communications than standard demographic groups. However, there are exceptions where demographics are very powerful, mainly where there are strong ethnic divisions within the voting public.

Even if demographics such as age, income, ethnic group or education are strong predictors of who will vote, campaigns need to understand why some people are unlikely to vote. Benenson Strategy Group’s Daniel Franklin explains the need to ‘peel off the layers’ to get truly useful insights: What are the main barriers behind citizens’ reluctance to vote? What are their concerns? What do they care about most?

Combining quantitative and qualitative research
The 2014 EU parliamentary election turnout campaign dug deep into both quantitative and qualitative research. Eurobarometer (the pan-European social attitudes survey) ran a 2009 post-electoral survey into why Europeans had or had not voted. In addition, the team carried out desk research and uncovered three distinct groups of non-voters (impulsive, considered and unconditional) and their reasons for abstention. They then added another layer of data – opinion surveys – which gave a more nuanced view of attitudes towards the European Parliament, key EU values and policy issues. Finally, qualitative research (focus groups) of abstainers enabled the team to pinpoint barriers and drivers to voting. This thorough analysis informed which segments to target as well as the design and themes of a three-phase campaign.

Beyond Elections
Some practitioners suggest going beyond elections. Benenson Strategy Group’s Daniel Franklin explains the need to change the conversation and connect with the electorate’s future vision in qualitative research: What are their connections to the democratic process? How do they define their relationship to public life? What are their aspirations in this area?

Digital data-gathering
Traditionally, campaigns started with research to inform strategy and messaging. But nowadays, digital enables campaigns to simultaneously gather deeper insights about audiences and engage with them. An example is the ‘Ladder of Engagement’ approach used by Blue State Digital (see below).

The extent to which such approaches are appropriate will depend on citizens’ attitudes to sharing personal data, which varies significantly between countries.

Changing the Conversation
To understand what drives political choices, Benenson Strategy Group adopted an unconventional approach during the 2012 Obama campaign. Instead of asking voters about politics, the team focused on their lives – satisfactions, disappointments, hopes and fears. The research revealed an important shift in the middle class mind-set (stability and security as key new values) which later translated into a winning messaging strategy.

In turnout campaigns, you need to know how people define their relationship to the public life and democratic process. Imagine a bridge across the river. First you need to know where it is people want to go. Then you can connect respective neighbourhoods.

Daniel Franklin, Benenson Strategy Group

The Ladder of Engagement
Obama’s campaigns moved supporters up a ‘ladder of engagement’, prompting them to take a series of small but increasingly significant actions.

For example, people may start with signing up to an email list or following on social media, then share content, with the ultimate the goal of converting them to donors or volunteers and more high barrier actions.

Whilst this built engagement with the campaign, it also provided increasingly rich data on individuals’ interests and the issues that motivated them. This data could then be used to target people with the tailor-made content most likely to engage them further.
Harvest digital signals
The UK Electoral Commission’s public engagement strategy for the 2015 UK general election will utilize digital signals that people need to register to vote. This could include signals that a voter has moved house or is looking to register but has not completed the process yet. This approach will enable the Electoral Commission to target a specific group of incidental voters (home-movers, private renters, young people and students, unconfirmed postal voters).

Community Groups
Community groups are often used to mobilize voters. But they can also be a source of additional insights about the attitudes and behaviours of particular groups. The challenge is for electoral authorities to tap into their vast pools of knowledge.

Elections Canada has launched “Inspire Democracy” (#inspiredem), a campaign and digital platform to share and discuss both local expertise and research findings. This reflects a unique philosophy—electoral participation is a shared challenge, so campaigns are decentralized and run at grassroots level.

Data drives targeting and tailoring
The campaign used the newest technology to understand people on an individual level (e.g. what they care about, what actions they take). Having more layers of understanding of individual voters allowed the campaign to meet them where they are and to give them more targeted messages.

“You dive into behavioural analytics and gain a better understanding of who the voter is on an individual level. Then, engage them on the issues that matter to them and the actions they’re most likely to take.”

Gillea Allison, Blue State Digital
Context Matters

No campaign operates in a vacuum. Successful campaigns thoroughly analyse the actual political context of elections to turn them into an asset for voter mobilization.

For example, the 2014 EU elections campaign utilised the fact that voters could for the first time impact the selection of the next European Commission chief. The message “this time it’s different” was highly visible in media coverage. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, more than four in ten Europeans now believe that their voice counts in the EU, a 13 percent point increase since 2013 and the largest ever recorded. Campaign leaders say this message helped to increase the salience of the election.

Test and Test Again

Finally, practitioners behind successful campaigns test messages iteratively before execution.

Testing techniques such as copy testing are widely used in mainstream advertising and are applicable to voter turnout campaigns. These tests predict the likelihood of messages or pieces of content being successful.

For digital content, multivariate testing can be used. A number of different versions of content are tested on a random sample of the target audience to see which versions are most effective. The content can then be tweaked and re-tested to find the optimal version.

Focus groups are also very useful to test messages and creative routes to get qualitative feedback on how audiences respond. They are often used for creative development to hone concepts and content.

Sharing research and local expertise

In the run-up to the 2015 federal election, Elections Canada is set to launch a webinar series with organizations keen to boost youth civic engagement. These monthly, hour-long online conversations will address the latest Canadian research in order to inform the local work of respective organizations. As some voters can be easily overlooked, one likely topic is youth diversity across Canada.

“Elections Canada’s vision is to see their stakeholder community gain from and use research and best practices in civic engagement from across the country. Social media and digital engagement tools like webinars are about making that research more accessible.”

Ellis Westwood, Ascentum

Source: Ascentum
2. Define your target audience

Since all adults citizens are eligible to vote in most democracies, it may be tempting to try to communicate with as broad an audience as possible. But successful turnout campaigns have tightly defined target audiences. In this section, we consider which audiences to prioritize and what barriers to voting electoral commissions are likely to encounter.

Prioritizing Audiences
Based on deep data and insight (see Section 1), electoral commissions should consider:

• Which groups of potential non-voters are closest to mobilization?
• Do we want to prioritize certain types of potential non-voters (e.g. young voters)?
• Which barriers to voting do we want to address?
• Which barriers can be effectively addressed through communication?
• Which barriers do we have the time and resources to address effectively?

Picking the right target
The 2014 EU elections turnout campaign chose to target only citizens who had positive or neutral attitudes towards the European Parliament. Research had shown that the largest opportunity to increase turnout was to convert ‘neutrals’ to become more positive towards the European Parliament and therefore more likely to vote. The campaign did not target voters who were negative about the European Parliament or unconditional abstainers who never vote.

It’s about matching the right information to the right person.

Laure Van Hauwaert, Ogilvy

Target audience is a strategic choice
The choice of target audience is critical because it impacts the rest of the campaign. The choice of target audience will impact:

• Additional research to uncover themes voters will respond to
• The role of communication
• The campaign’s philosophy, time-frame, design of prospective phases
• Creative work, including messages and communication channels
• Testing those communication methods and messages
• Possible partnerships
• Resources channelled to different aspects of the campaign
• Evaluation of success.
Barriers to Voting

The table below summarizes common barriers to voting which have been successfully tackled through communications. Sometimes there are political reasons for voters to abstain (e.g. ‘there is no candidate I am willing to support’). These political barriers need political solutions, so we set them aside for the purposes of this article.

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<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Communication responses</th>
<th>Facilitating mechanisms</th>
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<td>Lack of knowledge</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Cutting the cost of obtaining information</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Better not to vote than to make an uninformed choice.”</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Awareness &amp; education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rational decision</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Communicating the tangible impact of legislation</td>
<td>Touching voters’ key interests: the economy, health, jobs</td>
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<td>“My voice doesn’t really matter. It makes no difference to the outcome.”</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Awareness &amp; education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Voter Identity</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Reminding people of their identity as a voter</td>
<td>Social norming</td>
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<td>“Voting isn’t for people like me. I don’t want to be the only one voting.”</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Creating a group mentality</td>
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<td>Bringing voters closer to the conversation</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
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<td>Priming or making an identity more salient</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Cognitive dissonance or encouraging congruence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Apathy &amp; Disengagement</strong></td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Looking at people’s behavioural journey to casting a vote &amp; Making a plan to vote</td>
<td>Chunking the task</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I don’t care.”</td>
<td>Procrastination, time inconsistency. Optimism bias (making us lazy or forgetful)</td>
<td>Emphasising risk: the real danger of abstention</td>
<td>Commitment bias</td>
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<td>Memory triggers</td>
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<td>Emotions (fear, passion)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>UK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No interest in politics; Voting seen as irrelevant</td>
<td>Inspire &amp; engage: powerful messengers, partnerships with celebrities, brands, media</td>
<td>Social contagion</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Peer-pressure</td>
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<td><strong>Australia</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>General apathy; Voting seen as a drag</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Mnemonics</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Creating a ‘handle’: a set of words or visuals encapsulating the core idea and easier to remember (e.g. a speech bubble)</td>
<td>Loss aversion: ‘If we do nothing we will miss out our chance to be heard.’</td>
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<td><strong>India</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mainly among 1st time voters and in urban areas</td>
<td>Engage &amp; inspire: No preaching; No logic; Using personal experience</td>
<td>Emotions (guilt, personal pride)</td>
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<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Apathy into action by pointing out the real danger of abstention (the possible return of dictatorship)</td>
<td>Emotions (shock to awaken people’s political engagement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Interest</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Raising the elections’ profile: Brand the EP; Education (‘this time it’s different’)</td>
<td>The feeling that it is more consequential, more important; Social pressure; Emotions (guilt)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Second-class’ elections</td>
<td>No social pressure; less guilt for not voting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Effort</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Driving awareness; Educating; Providing guidance and making it easier</td>
<td>Sense of urgency</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It’s too complicated.” Or “I didn’t realize. I have not got round to it.”</td>
<td>Home-movers; Some young people</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3. Execution: Campaign Strategies & Tactics that Work

Having uncovered the key insights and selected target audiences, we now turn to successful voter turnout campaigning.

Penn Schoen & Berland’s Alex Braun notes two main approaches:

• **A central theme** that, communicated repeatedly and effectively, can whip up interest. In other words, the most dominant theme that speaks to a wide range of voters but can be adjusted to various segments.

• **Issues-based communication**, i.e. multiple themes that appeal to various audiences. For example, the 2014 EU elections campaign built awareness and educated using five themes – economy, money, jobs, EU in the world, quality of life.

**Having a central idea**

During the 2012 Queensland State election, the campaign presented a speech bubble that all voters – both younger and older – carried around with them. Each person’s bubble represented their unique opinion. Various media portrayed how people go about their lives with their speech bubbles. They also showed them taking these to vote. The aim was to have something catchy, easy to memorize and visualize that everyone can relate to.
Based on interviews with expert practitioners around the world, we have identified some common approaches that electoral commissions may find useful to design campaign strategies and tactics.

**Cultivate a sense of community**

People do not want to feel isolated, so it is useful to remove barriers such as ‘I am going to be the only one doing this’. Language and imagery should convey the sentiment that ‘I am a voter and this is what everyone does on Election Day.’ It creates a social norm with an aspirational component; they want to do what other people do.

The 2012 Obama campaign engaged surrogates - famous or influential individuals in a particular community, especially among Latinos and young African Americans. Communities were encouraged with relevant messaging - ‘this is what you do as an American citizen, this is part of an American experience’ - tapping into their pride and sense of community, combined with basic educational messages about voting, reinforcing the message that voting is easy and everyone is doing it.

Social networks such as Facebook can also help to nurture the group mentality. But the trick is to ensure that discussions are authentic and organic.

Based on the idea that people trust their friends’ opinions, the Obama campaign engaged online communicators, i.e. fans most likely to share its content. Benenson Strategy Group’s Daniel Franklin explains that:

"The power of digital is not following people around with ads, unless you are selling shoes. The power of digital is to know who people are connected to and letting them do your work for you.

**Using national pride**

The run up to the 2011 Federal National Elections in the United Arab Emirates was marked by the Arab Spring and calls for greater political participation. Based on this socio-political insight, BPG Group suggested building a narrative of collective growth and development, obligations rather than rights and national pride with a sense of purpose."
Strengthen voter identity
People are more likely to vote if reminded of their identity as a voter (see ‘Reviewing the evidence’) so the key is to make this identity salient. Reminders of their past identity as a voter - e.g. during in-person canvassing - can be a subtle nudge.

The ‘I am a voter’ identity can be strengthened through of commitment mechanisms. People want to be consistent in their own beliefs and with what they have committed to in the past, especially in public.

Commitment mechanisms
Commitment mechanisms encourage people to make a public pledge to vote. This commitment can then be reinforced through follow-up communications to hold people accountable.
Commit to Vote
Obama’s campaign asked people to sign a simple ‘Commit to vote’ form. In doing so, people also shared personal details such as their email, phone number and location. This enabled regular targeted communications to ensure people followed through on their commitment.

Email can be incredibly effective when done right. Things like getting people to commit, to take their own action around issues they care about or to connect with us on Facebook were important. The more the people engage with the campaign, the better we are able to target them in a specific way and serve them with specific messages that are meaningful to their lives.

Gillea Allison, Blue State Digital
Design channel mix carefully
Channel selection is critical to successfully reaching target audiences in any campaign. The choice of channel is a combination of reach (where are the audience?), context (where will they be most open to this message?) and efficiency (what is the relative cost or ROI of reaching this audience on each channel?).

Make the most of the channels you have
The Obama campaign did not have phone numbers for the majority of 18–29 year old voters. So Facebook became one of the critical ways to reach them, especially made possible by TargetShare technology.

“Digital cannot replace face-to-face conversation but it can supplement it and even help organizers on the ground to build a relationship. But you need to have an understanding who you are talking to be authentic and intentional in your communications and asks.”

Gillea Allison, Blue State Digital

Digital channels have the advantage of interaction. The campaign for the 2015 Queensland (Australia) state elections will engage young, slightly apathetic potential voters using interactive website banners. The idea is to remind voters that they have a point of view which they should express. Opinions on apolitical, fun and topical issues are asked, with people voting a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ with a mouse click. Are dogs better than cats? Is mowing your neighbour’s grass rude? Is orange the new black? After that, voters receive a thank you note and a link to enrol to vote.
Digital channels can be very effective, but Penn Schoen & Berland’s Matt Carter warns against choosing a channel for novelty value. For example, in the US, **door-to-door canvassing** remains a very powerful means of communication. Similarly, traditional mass media, particularly **television**, continue to be among the most effective channels. Successful campaigns therefore tend to balance the breadth of television with the personalization of digital.

But practitioners expect the impact of traditional media on voter turnout to gradually decrease, reflecting broader trends in media consumption in most countries. **Direct mail** – as personal and targeted as possible – is valuable because voters can explore content in the quiet of their own homes.

The 2008 New Zealand general election voter turnout campaign summed up its channel strategy as:

> Be in their place, not in their face.

**Powerful Partnerships**

Partnerships can be a powerful way to reach potential voters, taking the message out directly into their lives and delivering it through a trusted messenger. Youth groups, schools, university, sports clubs and religious groups can all be potential partners for mobilisation.

**Brand partnerships** can also take the mobilisation message to mass audiences and, if chosen carefully, can be powerful and trusted messengers. For the Indian general election in 2014, brands including Google, CNBC and Fevicol (a glue company) ran campaigns to promote voting.

**Inspire, don’t preach**

Two recent campaigns targeting younger, disinterested potential voters took an ‘engagement’ approach, based on research that found that a preaching or lecturing tone would not be effective with this group.
In the run-up to the 2014 general election, Google teamed up with Ogilvy & Mather India to encourage young, digitally savvy voters through the inspirational true story of 97-year old Shyam Saran Negi. He is the first voter of independent India and has never missed an opportunity to exercise his right to vote. The video was viewed nearly 3 million times on YouTube.

“People don’t want to be told. They want to be engaged.”

Piyush Pandey, Ogilvy & Mather India

This video targets first-time voters. Social media usage data shows that young people (18 years and under) are most likely to share videos that are fun, exciting, awesome or plain stupid. So Ogilvy created a movie that appeals to their sense of humour, visual style and tone. The video takes the idea of ‘first time’ and magnifies it in surreal and unexpected ways - highlighting the message that the ‘first time’ is a big deal.

Only five days after its release (6 May 2014), the movie had been seen more than 2.3 million times.
EU elections 2014: 3-phase campaign

Communications had a distinct role in each of the phases of the European Parliament 2014 turnout campaign, as it moved the branding to awareness and education and finally to action.

Campaign dynamics

Communication tends to be more intense closer to election day. However, it can be harder for messages to cut through political campaign noise to reach voters at this stage. And turnout campaigns always have to compete with normal brand messages as well as the distractions of citizens’ everyday lives.

Campaign dynamics should be guided by strategic decisions on audiences prioritization. For example, the UK Electoral Commission’s strategy for the 2015 UK General Election recognizes that disengaged voters need interaction over a longer period of time, whereas incidental voters should be approached nearer the registration deadline.

Campaigns often have distinct phases. For example, pledge-based campaigns may start with the ‘pledge’ phase and then move into ‘reminder’ phase to get people to act on their commitments closer to election day.

Shock Tactics?

In some situations, a shocking message may effectively mobilise voters. However, this is a high-risk approach. Shocking messages cannot be used repeatedly because the impact wears off (for example, shocking anti-smoking messages lose effectiveness where smokers have been over-exposed to them). A shocking message could also have political ramifications or unintended consequences.

One campaign which successfully used a ‘shock’ combined with social media was ‘The Return of Ben Ali’ for the Tunisian elections of 2012. The context was the aftermath of the Arab Spring, so may not be directly applicable to other elections, but the concept is inspirational.
The Return of Ben Ali

Turnout was expected to be just 55% for Tunisia’s first democratic elections. Ogilvy worked with Engagement Citoyen, a non-profit pro-democracy NGO, to drive turnout.

They put posted a huge image of Ben Ali, the ousted Tunisian dictator, in the centre of the capital. It was a vivid reminder of the danger of apathy: a return to dictatorship. The poster provoked protests and crowds tore it down. Underneath was a second poster encouraging them to vote. The event was widely shared on social and news media. Within hours, the act of voting had become the ultimate act of the revolutionary process.

Turnout was 88%.

4. Constant Feedback

The experts we interviewed agreed that feedback is essential throughout the campaign to allow for necessary adjustments. Penn Schoen & Berland’s Alex Braun explains that both quantitative surveys and regular listening activity (e.g. focus groups and social media monitoring) are conducted regularly. It is important to specify measurable metrics reflecting the campaign goals, for instance:

- Is a selected target group more aware of elections?
- What proportion of voters saw the piece of communication?
- Did voters like it and act on it or not?
- What is driving their responses?

The campaign’s effectiveness should then be evaluated after it ends so to understand its impact and learn lessons for future campaigns.

To gain deep insights into turnout ‘game-changers’, it would be useful to track attitudes strongly correlating to people’s actual voting behaviour. Benenson Strategy Group’s Daniel Franklin explains that we need to talk to people who were unsure about voting but did vote after all: Why? What did they think about particular aspects of the campaign? What did they think about the elections in general? It is important to pinpoint the reason for their last-minute decision to vote.
In conclusion: Marketing an idea

Penn Schoen & Berland’s Matt Carter compares voter turnout campaigns with commercial product marketing. To sell a car, we communicate the car’s unique proposition and the values of the brand. To raise voter turnout, we need to engage in more than just a sales conversation - we need to spark ideas.

This report has presented international best practice in voter turnout campaigns, which we hope is a valuable contribution to the efforts of electoral commissions and civil society organisations worldwide to support a truly healthy and participatory political system.
Penn Schoen Berland (PSB)

A member of Young & Rubicam brands and of the WPP Group, is a global research-based consultancy that specialises in messaging and communications strategy for blue-chip political, corporate and entertainment clients. Since being founded over 35 years ago by Mark Penn and Doug Schoen, PSB brings together lessons from the campaign trail and the boardroom to create innovative strategies to handle complex situations.

About the Author
Renata Goldirova produced this report as part of her Summer Project for her Master of Public Policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. The Blavatnik School of Government exists to inspire and support better government and public policy around the world.

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