Is door-to-door canvassing effective in Europe? Evidence from a meta-study across five European countries

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Abstract

A vast amount of experimental evidence suggests that Get-Out-The-Vote encouragements delivered through door-to-door canvassing delivers large effects on turnout. Most of the existing studies have been conducted in an American context, and are inspiring European campaigns in their work. Whether the American findings transfer to Europe is an empirical question, which we tackle in this article. Specifically, we compile the existing European studies and present two new Danish studies. We show that the effects are substantially smaller in Europe compared to the findings from the US, and find no effects in the two Danish experiments. We discuss why the effects seem to be different in Europe compared to the US and stress the need for further experiments in Europe as there is still considerable uncertainty regarding the European effects.

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To what extent do campaigns aimed at increasing voter turnout actually affect the likelihood of participation? This question has received considerable attention in the academic literature, especially since Gerber and Green's seminal field experiments in New Heaven (Gerber and Green 2000). Perhaps one of the most studied mobilization tools is door-to-door canvassing which is widely used in US campaigns (e.g. Bedolla and Michelson; Gerber and Green 2000; Green, Gerber and Nickerson; Matland and Murray 2012; Nickerson 2008; Enos 2014). In a recent review of the literature Green, McGrath and Aronow (2013)[1] identified 71 canvassing experiments with a precision-weighted average complier average causal effect (CACE) of 2.536 percentage points and a 95% credible interval of (1.817, 3.255). The effect of door-to-door canvassing is one of the largest and most robust in the get-out-the-vote literature and almost rivals the effect from social pressure mailings (ibid.).

A few published studies have focused on the effectiveness of door-to-door canvassing outside the US. Guan and Green (2006) mobilized students in a 2003 Beijing election, John and Brannan's (2008) canvassed British voters in the 2005 election, and Gine and Mansouri (2011) targeted female voters in rural Pakistan. The three studies saw something between modest and impressive effects. The relative efficiency of door-to-door canvassing and to some extent inspiration from the 2008 Obama campaign (Pons, 2014: 6) has led to its increased popularity outside of the US. An example of this is the Danish Social Democrats who relied heavily on the strategy in the 2011 general election after campaigns strategists had volunteered on the Obama campaign (Jason & Kollerup 2014). However, almost all of the studies concerning the effect of door-to-door canvassing remain from a US context and some skepticism has been offered with respect to the generalizability of the results to a European context. Studies following John and Brannan (2010) find less effect (e.g. Ramiro, Morales and Jiménez-Buedo 2012). As campaigns in

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[1] We do not consider American studies conducted after Green, McGrath and Aronow (2013).

Europe adopt strategies from the US, one question begs to be answered: to what extent are the lessons from the US transferable to the rest of the world including European countries? The contribution of this research note is to compile the evidence for door-to-door canvassing in Europe and present findings from two new studies conducted in relation to a Danish election.

To study the effects of door-to-door canvassing in a European context is interesting for at least three reasons. First, door-to-door canvassing finds frequent use in a US context compared to most European countries, maybe apart from the UK (Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2007). This means that voters in Europe are not as used to exposure to political messages at their doorstep. This may influence the effects of the canvassing (Ramiro, Morales and Jiménez-Buedo 2012). Second, and related, there may be cultural differences in how invasive political campaigning in peoples' home is considered. Third, in several European countries turnout is much higher than in the US, especially considering that many of the existing American studies target voters in low-salience elections. Even though it is likely that door-to-door campaigns are also effective in Europe we cannot simply assume that the US results are directly transferable. It is an empirical question.

Table 1: Overview of previous European door-to-door studies

Study	Context	CACE[a] (st. error)	Control group turnout (%)	Total N	Contact rate (%)
John & Brennan (2008)	Households in one constituency in British 2005 general election.	6.7 (3.7)	46.3	2,510	53.7
Ramiro, Morales & Jiménez-Buedo (2012)	One city in 2011 Spanish local elections.	Not reported. ITT = -1.6[d]	67.5	26 census sections	48.9
Pons & Liegey (2013)	Citizen clustered by building in eight cities in French 2010 regional election.	1.0 (2.2)[b]	34.2	23,836 voters clustered in 1,350 buildings	48.9
Pons (2014)	Nationwide with treatment by precinct in French 2012 presidential election.	-0.8 (1.2)[c]	79.5	22,500 precincts	37.4
Nyman (2015)	One county in 2015 Swedish European Parliament election	3.6 (1.9)	45.3	10,897	62.5

[a] Percentage points.

[b] This is a rough estimate that fails to take in to account that contact success varied by household size (see text).

[c] Canvassers did not strictly adhere to the experimental protocol and Pons (2014) therefore suggest that the CACE is scaled to this size.

[d] Standard errors not reported.

Existing literature

Few studies have examined the effectiveness of door-to-door campaigns in a European context. The only published study to our knowledge is John and Brannan's (2008) study of the 2005 British General Election. The experiment included 2,510 individuals and found an intention-to-treat (ITT) effect of 3.6 percentage points of the non-partisan canvassing and a complier average causal effect (CACE) of 6.7, with standard error 3.7.

In recent years, a couple of additional high quality (currently unpublished) studies have been conducted. Pons and Liegey (2013) study 23,836 citizens sampled at the building level in the 2010 French Regional elections and report an intend to treat effect of 0.5 percentage points (standard error 1.1) on voting in the first round of the elections of living in a building treated by the partisan campaign. Pons and Liegey (2013) does not include precise point estimates and standard errors that take into account that about 49% of the households assigned to treatment opened the door. However, a rough estimate would be to use a scaling factor of two (1/0.49=2.05), giving us a CACE of 1.0 percentage points and a standard error of 2.2 percentage points.[2] Pons (2014) conducted a door-to-door canvassing experiment in cooperation with Hollande's 2012 presidential campaign. The study encompassed 6,615 precincts. The effect of living in a treated precinct is estimated to -0.2 percentage points with a standard error of 0.3.[3] Due to imperfect compliance among the volunteers, Pons (2014) suggests using a scaling factor of the raw estimates of at least 3.9, giving us rough CACE estimates of -0.8 percentage points with a standard error of 1.2 percentage points.

A recent study from the 2014 European Parliament Election in Sweden analyzes partisan canvassing among 10,897 individuals (Nyman, 2014). It demonstrates an ITT effect of 2.3

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[2] Pons and Liegey imply that this probably overestimates the CACE somewhat as larger households were less likely to open the door compared to smaller households.

[3] Results are similar for the second round of the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections

percentage points and a CACE of 3.6 percentage points, with standard error 1.9. Finally, Ramiro, Morales and Jiménez-Buedo (2012) conduct a partisan campaign in the Spanish city of Murcia during the 2011 local elections. They find negative treatment effects though the exact size of the CACE is unclear due to uncertainty about the compliance rate.

On top of the scarcity of European experiences, we notice that all the studies are from Western Europe. This limitation is worth to keep in mind as we evaluate the compiled evidence. If we assume that there exist an underlying distribution of effects from door-to-door canvassing in Western Europe and that all the results are drawn from this distribution we can combine the studies for which we have an estimate of the CACE in a fixed effects meta-analysis (Gerber and Green 2012: 361). This provides a precision-weighted average CACE of 0.91 percentage points with a 95% CI of (-0.84, 2.66). The point estimate is well below the general point estimate from the American literature. If we exclude John and Brannen's (2008) (UK) study from the meta-analysis reported by Green, McGrath and Aronow (2013) the precision weighted estimate for the American studies is 2.50 percentage points with a 95% CI of (1.77, 3.22). This difference between the European and American studies is even without Ramiro, Morales and Jiménez-Buedo (2012) who found a negative effect estimate but did not calculate an approximate CACE. However, the standard errors are almost 2.5 times larger than the standard error from the American literature, reflecting the few European studies to date. There is therefore a need for further studies in a European context.

Context and data

We examine two experiments conducted in the 2013 Danish municipal elections, November 19, 2013. Danish municipal elections are held simultaneously every fourth year on the third Tuesday of November in 98 municipalities where each municipality constitutes a single district and seats are distributed proportionally by D'Hondt's rule. The national political parties dominate the municipal

councils though local lists have some influence in a minority of the municipalities. Even though municipal elections do not receive the attention of national elections, and the elections may be considered as second order, it is fair to say that the municipalities are an important part of the public sector in Denmark. The public sector is very decentralized and municipalities have the authority to levy taxes (under restrictions from the central government) and administer about 30 percent of the entire GDP. Turnout usually fluctuates around 70 percent. In 2013, the national average was 71.9 percent with considerable variation between the municipalities.

Data on voter turnout stems from the voter lists. When citizens vote in Denmark, they are marked on the voter lists to prevent multiple votes from the same individual. In some municipalities electronic voter lists are used, in which case the voter is marked via a scan of the barcode on the polling card. After the election, we collected the voter files from all 98 municipalities. In case of manual lists, the municipalities digitalized the lists before submitting them for research. A few lists were lost due to administrative errors at the polling places, but we gained access to individual level turnout information for about 99 percent of all eligible citizens (4.36 million individuals). The voter lists were then matched with information on treatment status from the experiments and finally in anonymous manner merged with detail socio-demographical information from Statistics Denmark, the government statistics bureau.

Study 1: Non-partisan mobilization in Denmark

Study design

"We vote together" (in Danish "Vi stemmer sammen") was a non-partisan door-to-door canvassing campaign run by researchers from University of Copenhagen (the authors). The campaign was carried out on the weekend before Election Day on Tuesday the 19th November. In the experiment, a randomly selected treatment group of households received visits from two

canvassers recruited mainly among current and former students at the University of Copenhagen. The canvassers were volunteers, primarily students, and received a brief introduction to the project and the randomized design as well as a short script. The canvassers went over the script but did not rehearse it. They were told that they were free to do the canvassing as they pleased and that the script was for inspiration. They were required to encourage people to vote and hand out a flyer at the door. They were also instructed not to leave flyers with voters who did not open the door.

Before the election, we received accurate voter lists from the responsible agency including addresses. The selected population of interest was 3,402 households in the Østerbro neighborhood in the capital, Copenhagen. All voters in a household were assigned the same treatment status as the household. The area had an average turnout for Copenhagen but a lower than average turnout compared to the entire country.[4] The target population was divided into 18 routes. Each route consisted of 189 households, 90 were randomly selected to the treatment group and 99 to the control group. In total, 1,620 households with 2,167 eligible citizens were selected to the treatment group whereas 1,782 households with 2,345 citizens were in the control group. Thirty-six percent of the citizens in the treatment group, that is 535 households with 785 citizens , lived in a household where someone opened the door for the canvassers.

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[4] 61.8 percent turned out in the control group compared to 71.9 in the country at large.

Results

Table 2: Turnout for eligible citizens targeted by "We vote together".

	Turnout %	ITT effect (SE in brackets)	CACE (SE in brackets)	N
Control group	61.8			2,345
Attempted contact (Contact rate = 36 %)	61.0	-0.8 (1.7)	-2.1 (4.6)	2,167

Note: We use randomization inference with cluster random assignment on the household level, and blocked by routes with 100,000 iterations and ITT imputed for each iteration to obtain standard errors and confidence intervals.

Table 2 displays results from the first experiment. The design assigned treatment to clusters of household in blocks of routes. The results are obtained using randomization inference respecting this design (Gerber & Green 2012: 64). Our point estimate of the ITT effect is -0.8 percentage points. However, the 95%-confidence interval is (-4.1, 2.5). We also calculated the CACE by multiplying the estimate with the inverse of the contact rate (Gerber & Green 2012, p. 149). The CACE was -2.1 percentage points with a standard error of 4.6, giving us a 95% CI of (-11.2, 7.0). Thus, the effect estimates are negative, but not statistically different from zero. Perhaps not the norm, negative effect estimates are relatively common in the existing literature. About 20 percent of the 71 experiments reported in the recent meta-analysis by Green, McGrath and Aronow (2013) find negative CACEs. If we believe that the true effect is small but positive we will see negative effects from time to time in small to moderate sized studies such as those reported here.

Study 2: Mobilization by labor market union

Study design

A local youth branch of one of the largest labor market union in Denmark (3F Ungdom, Randers) launched a door-to-door mobilization campaign up to the election. The target group was the youth organization's own members who were all between 18 and 30 years of age.

Canvassers were trained to introduce themselves at the door, to listen, and establish a pleasant conversation. They were instructed to deliver an appeal in two parts: First, to encourage voting and tell the voter, why it was important to the canvasser that some of the candidates elected would work to promote issues of interest to the youth labor market union and its member. Second, the voters were offered a list with names of 47 recommended candidates, from a broad spectrum of the running parties, out of 194 candidates who ran in the municipality.

Randomization was carried out at the household level. The randomization was based on the organization's member list, which contained the same personal identifier that was in the general public records. This made it straightforward to merge the file to the above described turnout data. As the treatment directly targeted individual citizens, only members of the organization are considered in the experiment. Other voters that resided on the same address are not considered as part of either the treatment or control group. A few households contained more than one member from the organization. To overcome issues of within household spillover we randomized on the household level. We randomly selected 440 households (454 eligible citizens) to the treatment group whereas the control group consisted of 439 households (451 eligible citizens). It was possible to reach 24% of those intended for treatment.

Results

Table 3: Turnout for eligible citizens targeted by 3F's youth campaign in Randers.

	Turnout %	ITT effect (SE in brackets)	CACE (SE in brackets)	N
Control group	53.6			453
Attempted contact (Contact rate = 24 %)	49.9	-3.8 (3.4)	-15.4 (13.8)	451

Note: We use randomization inference with cluster random assignment on the household level with 100,000 iterations and ITT imputed for each iteration to obtain standard errors and confidence intervals.

Results are presented in table 3. Again, we use randomization inference because of the cluster assigned treatment. As in study 1 our best estimate is a negative effect, the point estimate for the ITT effect being -3.8 percentage points with a 95% CI of (-10.4, 2.8). The confidence interval is wide because of the small sample size and low contact rate. Since the contact rate was only 24% the CACE is about four times as large at the ITT effect. The estimate is -15.4 percentage points with a standard error of 13.8, giving an extremely wide 95% CI of (-42.4, 11.6).

Discussion

In the two studies reported, we find no evidence of a positive effect of door-to-door canvassing in Denmark. If we weigh the estimates by their precision we find the pooled IIT estimate to be -1.2 percentage points with a 95% CI of (-4.2. 1.7). The precision weighted pooled CACE is -3.4 percentage points with a 95% CI of (-12.0, 5.3). It is worth discussing why the interventions failed to increase turnout. Just as Danish voters are unaccustomed to door-to-door canvassing, so were our volunteers in doing door-to-door canvassing. Perhaps, better trained, more motivated or more experienced canvassers had produced better results. It is also entirely possible that it is not an artifact of poor canvassing quality but the low power of the two studies combined. The samples were a little undersized to begin with and the contact rates disappointingly low. However, it is worth noting, that the pooled precision is close to that of John and Brannan (2008) though the estimate is entirely different. In continuation of this point, it is possible that the true underlying effects in both our experiments were small and that sampling error yielded a negative effect. We can compare the effect to the compiled estimate of previous studies in Western Europe where the CACE was 0.91 with a 95 % CI of (-0.84, 2.66). The entire CI from the previous studies is contained in the combined CI of our studies. In that respect, the findings is not contradictive of findings from the rest of Western Europe.

Our study also adds to the scarce European literature on door-to-door canvassing. Including our two studies, we obtain a precision weighted average CACE of 0.75 percentage point with a 95% CI from -0.98 to 2.46 percentage points. In other words, the current best estimate based on experiences from Western Europe is below the general estimate, but it is positive as in the US. In figure 1, we have compiled all the studies included in the European meta-analysis along with the pooled European and American estimates. The horizontal bars are the CIs. The box is centered at the best estimate and its area is scaled by its precision.

It is evident from the figure that we cannot infer with certainty that the effect in Europe is greater than zero or that the effect is statistically smaller in the US. However, the estimate is centered below the American. Although fragile, we find it important to summarize both the existing published and non-published evidence (Franco et al. 2014) at the current stage and aid practitioners and scholars doing GOTV-research to plan campaigns based all evidence available. A large amount of money and volunteers' time are spent based on the existing research, and this important addition might make some European campaigns reconsider their campaign tactics or at least think about how to measure impact of their efforts.

However, while our results here might suggest that the canvassing is less effective in Europe than the US, the findings here cannot be taken as a final proof of canvassing being useless in European elections. Instead, we need more experiments and more precision to verify whether the US results can be generalized to a European context. While the collective literature on European GOTV canvassing effects has progressed in recent years, there are still substantial uncertainties regarding the effects. Thus, more experiments should be of interest to both scholars and practitioners interested in understanding and promoting turnout in Europe.

Common wisdom in the American context is that door-to-door canvassing, though resource demanding, has a sizable effect on turnout. The compiled evidence we presented here

demonstrates that we need to see more research before we blindly accept this to be the case in Europe. Finally, the compiled evidence here comes from Western European countries. What the effects are in the rest of Europe remains a question for further investigation.

Figure 1: Estimates from European studies and pooled European and American estimates
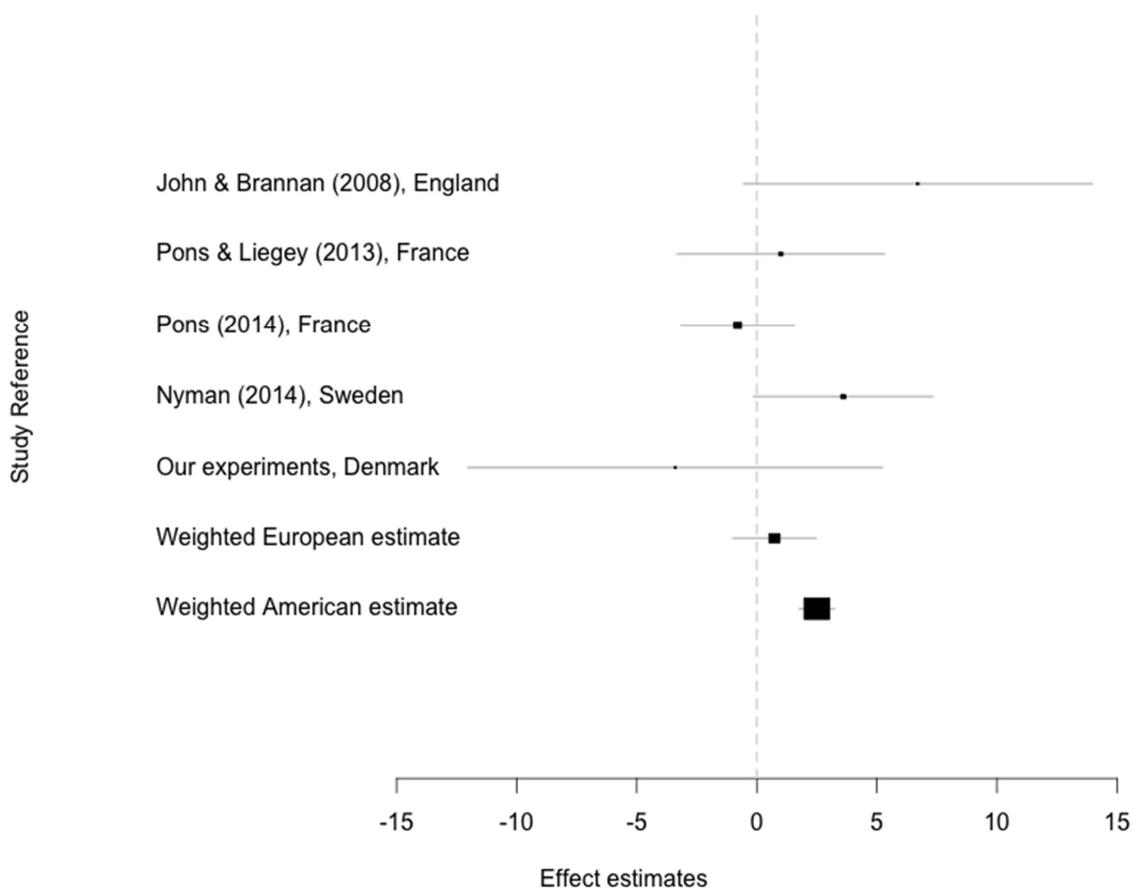
NOTE: The bars are the 95% CIs. The box is centered at the best estimate and its area is scaled by its precision.

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