SISTER DISTRICT ACTION NETWORK

Call (or Text) Your Girlfriend: Personal Contact Increases Volunteer RSVP and Attendance Rates

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Abstract

This experiment tested whether personal contact (calls with voicemails, calls with text messages in lieu of voicemails, and text messages only) for volunteer event recruitment affected RSVP rate and rate of event attendance. It was found that volunteers in the call + voicemail and text message only conditions RSVP'd at higher rates than people in the control condition and the call + text condition. However, only participants in the text only condition attended the events at significantly higher rates than participants in the control condition. It should be noted that both of the other treatment conditions trended toward marginal significance and produced more attendees than the control condition, in which volunteers only received an email confirmation. Overall, the results indicate that personal recruitment contacts generally elicit more volunteer RSVP's and event attendance, and that the text condition was particularly effective in this regard (when compared to the control condition). Implications and limitations of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

Volunteer engagement, activist engagement, volunteer recruitment, volunteer outreach, flake rate

Sister District is a national grassroots organization with a large volunteer capacity in the form of volunteer teams that host local events. Prior research indicates that personal contact is an especially powerful tool for engaging voters, increasing voter turnout by a large percentage over impersonal methods like cold SMS. Less is known about modes of contact that may increase volunteer turnout (event attendance), and whether those modes of contact may operate differently in the context of volunteer recruitment as opposed to volunteer turnout.

Prior research suggests that the mode in which that contact is delivered has an impact on agreement to participate in volunteer activities and reduces volunteer flake rates. Although we know that both personal contact and modes of communication impact volunteer and voter behavior, it is less clear which modes of communication are ideal for recruiting volunteers for events in the first place.

This study builds on the SDAN volunteer recruitment pilot conducted in August-September 2018 by asking which method of personal recruitment contact, if any, increases response rates and attendance rates in volunteer recruitment efforts. It used 3 different modes of communication: calls with voicemails, calls with text messages, and text messages only.

It was hypothesized that: 1) personal recruitment contact would increase RSVP rates and attendance to events; and 2) that this response would vary based on the method used (although no specific hypotheses were made about which method would be most effective).

1. Volunteers and Political Participation

The time since the 2016 general election has been filled with a new energy for political activism. The "Resistance" against Trump has manifested itself in myriad ways, from record breaking protests like the 2017 Women's March to increased turnout in the 2018 midterm election. Another way progressives have gotten involved is by volunteering for organizations like Sister District Project and Indivisible, which allow volunteers to access a variety of volunteer opportunities to support progressive candidates. While research about volunteerism in general is common, research about this new wave of volunteer activism in the past 3 or so years is less common. The current research aims to help fill that gap by exploring methods of volunteer event recruitment within the context of the "Resistance."

Existing research suggests that social ties are an important factor in mobilizing people to engage in civic participation (Beyerlein & Bergstrand, 2015). While close social ties appear to be best, research from psychology on ingroup behavior suggests belonging to the same group (like being members of the same Sister District team) can be incredibly impactful for interpersonal influence (Balliet, Wu, & De Dreu, 2014). Further, one survey by SDAN found that volunteers were especially motivated by social aspects of volunteerism, like feeling interpersonally close to their fellow team members (Goldstein & Roman, White Paper in press). Additionally, many industry tests find that "warm" contacts, or people who have given their number to an organization with the knowledge that they may be contacted, are potentially more likely to be receptive to persuasion or information than "cold" contacts, or people who have not opted into contact with the organization (though not always, see Malhotra, Michelson, Rogers, & Valenzuela, 2011). In the case of this study, contacts came from people identified as fellow Sister District team members and were received by "warm" contacts who had provided their number to the volunteer organization.

Though little public research exists on modes of communication for recruiting political volunteers, progressive organizers have long told volunteers that personally contacting volunteers to invite them to an event is more effective than email invitations, indicating a consensus around this knowledge in industry practice. This study directly tests this organizer knowledge and helps to quantify the potential impact of personally contacting volunteers to encourage them to participate in a volunteering event.

2. Communication modes

In addition to determining how effective personal contact is for event recruitment, it was necessary to consider the various modes by which volunteers may receive that recruitment contact. A wide array of communication modes are used to target voters in the current political environment, ranging from direct mail to canvassing voters at their homes to placing ads on YouTube. While many of those modes prompt interesting questions about their political utility, most are not personal and do not allow for a two way conversation. Based on the information available about volunteers, we selected email, phone calls, and text messages as the appropriate contact methods for the current study.

Email is widely used to publicize political information and solicit donations (Mejova, Garimella, Weber, & Dougal, 2014). However, both anecdotal and industry studies report mixed results from email tests. While email has proven to be an important part of the fundraising programs of political campaigns, it is unclear if it has the same effect for volunteer recruitment. However, emails provide convenience, including the ability to include links for volunteers to click to sign up and the ability to reach a large amount of people with a single click of the send button.

Personal contact is a bit more involved. Obviously, it is more time consuming to have individual conversations with potential volunteers, but both organizer knowledge and knowledge from voter mobilization research suggests that personal contacts can have a meaningful effect on people's behavior. Calling voters on the phone has a long history of success, demonstrating a small but significant bump in turnout among voters who receive phone calls compared to those who don't (Gerber & Green, 2019; Nickerson, 2006; Nickerson, 2007). To a lesser extent (and based on less evidence due to the relative recency of text messaging), text messages also appear to provide a small boost to voter turnout (Malhotra et al., 2011; Dale, & Strauss, 2009). Since these modes of communication are widely used by campaigns to persuade voters, it follows that they may be useful in persuading volunteers to attend an event.

3. Hypotheses

There were 2 main hypotheses relevant to this project that follow from traditional organizer knowledge. These hypotheses were tested using the research design outlined in the next section. The main premise of this work is that conversations between organizers

and volunteers are especially important in recruiting volunteers to attend events.

Hypothesis 1. Personal recruitment contacts (calls with voicemails, calls with text messages in lieu of voicemails, and text messages) are more effective in producing RSVPs and attendees than passive recruitment contact (email only).

Further, it was expected that some modes may prove to be more effective than others, when compared to the email-only control group. However, it was unknown which modes of communication would be more or less effective compared to the control group.

Hypothesis 2. When compared to the control condition, the 3 different recruitment methods vary in efficacy and significance.

4. Research Design

This study was designed in conjunction with Dr. Katherine Haenschen, Assistant Professor of Communication at Virginia Tech, and utilized a randomized controlled trial approach across 3 different samples and 7 different events. In order to test the hypotheses, volunteers that belonged to 3 different participating Sister District Project teams were randomly assigned to one of the four volunteer contact conditions (control - email only, call + voicemail, call + text message, text message) and were contacted by SDAN staff or fellow volunteers to encourage them to attend an event.

While this study did not involve an informed consent procedure, this study met SDAN's internal criteria for ethical review: 1) it involved minimal to no risk to subjects, 2) it did not involve active deception, and 3) it did not involve the recording of private behavior without the subject's consent. SDAN refers studies that do not meet these criteria to an external IRB for review.

The following subsections detail the specifics of the experiment.

4.1 Treatments

Political organizers have long counseled volunteer leaders to personally contact volunteers to invite them to attend volunteer events. However, there is little available information on the efficacy of this practice or the best mode of communication to utilize. Since most volunteer teams announce events via email, every target in the study received an email announcing and allowing them to sign up for the event. Targets who were randomized into the control group received no additional contact. Targets randomized into the three treatment conditions received an additional treatment contact starting the day after the email was sent and continuing for 3-4 days depending on team size. Targets randomized into the call and voicemail group received a phone call and a voicemail was left if they did not answer the call. Targets randomized into the call and text group received a phone call and a text message in lieu of a voicemail if they did not answer the call. Targets randomized into the text message group received a text message. All of the messages had a similar script, with the messages personalized for each location.

The call script that was read if targets answered the phone was, "*Hi, is [person name] there? Hi, this is [volunteer name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm calling to invite you to a phonebank event on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. We will be phonebanking at [LOCATION]. Can you join us?*"

The voicemail script that was used in the call + voicemail condition when participants did not answer the phone was, "*Hi, this is [volunteer name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm calling to invite you to a phonebank event on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. We will be phonebanking at [LOCATION]. Can you join us? If so, sign up at [Google form bitly link].*"

The text message script that was used in the call + text condition when participants did not answer the phone was, "*Hi, this is [volunteer name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm calling to invite you to a phonebank event on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. We will be phonebanking at [LOCATION]. Can you join us? If so, sign up at [Google form bitly link].*"

People who answered the phone were given verbal instructions about signing up at the form or were manually signed up over the phone.

The text message script that was used in the text message condition was, "*Hi, this is [volunteer name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm calling to invite you to a phonebank event on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. We will be phonebanking at [LOCATION]. Can you join us? If so, sign up at [Google form bitly link].*"

4.2 Subjects

SDAN recruited Sister District teams holding suitable events (i.e., large teams with a history of well-attended events that could provide several subjects and a large

enough space/organized enough leadership team to host a sizable event). In order to increase the external validity of the results, all three teams came from different geographic/demographic areas with teams on both coasts represented.

SDAN pulled a list of the active members of participating teams from Sister District records and narrowed that list to only members with a listed email and phone number to allow random assignment to the conditions. People in the treatment conditions who RSVP'd for the event before being contacted, event hosts and volunteers, Sister District Project staff, and people who knew about the experiment were all eliminated from the experiment. Since elimination of people who were aware of the experiment happened before randomization, those individuals were not tracked. Only five treatment subjects were removed from the sample for RSVPing before the contact was made. People who RSVP'd for the event before the contact period began who were originally sorted into the control condition were left in the control condition as they were never going to receive personal contact. This resulted in a final n of 1,220.

4.3 Random assignment procedure

All active members of the participating Sister District teams with listed emails and phone numbers were enrolled in the study (unless they met the elimination criteria outlined above). Team members were randomized at the team level due to different timelines in the study caused by event timing (i.e., team 1's members were randomized independently of team 2's members). Each eligible team member was assigned a random number using the RAND function in Excel and the team members were sorted by the random numbers to create a random order. Then each team member was assigned to a condition by assigning the first individual on the randomly sorted list to condition 1 (control), the second individual on the list to condition 2 (call and voicemail), the third individual on the list to condition 3 (call and text), the fourth individual on the list to condition 4 (text), and repeating that pattern down the list until each team member was assigned to a condition.

4.4 Measurements

The main outcome measures in this study were: 1) Formal RSVP, which indicated that the volunteer RSVP'd to attend the event on the official sign-up form, and 2) Attended, which indicated that the person actually attended the event they were recruited to attend. Both variables were binary. The RSVP variable was coded 0 if the person didn't RSVP; the attended variable was coded 0 if the person didn't attend. The RSVP variable was coded 1 if the person RSVP'd; the attended variable was coded 1 if the person attended the event. An additional variable was recorded in the treatment conditions that reflected an informal RSVP given during the personal contact, but this value is largely redundant with formal RSVP and has far more missing values due to nonresponse (people who never responded to the personal contact) and a large portion of control participants (who have no values because they did not receive a personal contact). For these reasons, the informal RSVP variable was not used in the analyses.

The team the volunteer belonged to was included as a covariate in order to control for individual differences between teams and was indicated by a three level categorical variable. While collecting data, callers and texters recorded whether the target responded to the personal recruitment contact in the binary categorical variable Responded, but this variable was not used in the analyses as 1) it eliminated the control group and 2) several values were missing with only 203 responses recorded. Finally, if possible, teams provided SDAN with information about if the person had previously volunteered (Past Volunteerism) and the person's output at the event (e.g., how many calls they made). Due to differences in team records and procedures, both variables proved hard to collect and were missing for the vast majority of targets. Because of these reasons, these variables were not explored in the analyses.

4.5 Procedure

In the Fall of 2018, SDAN identified and approached a handful of active teams with large member bases via email to gauge interest in the study. Three teams agreed to participate. SDAN identified the active membership lists of participating teams and narrowed those lists down to members who met inclusion criteria (had a listed email and phone number). After identifying and removing individuals who met elimination criteria, SDAN randomized each team's sample into the four conditions and created a contact tracker spreadsheet that separated contacts by condition, provided scripts, names and phone numbers, and allowed callers and texters to record aspects of the interaction.

Participating teams were asked to identify a

suitable event and send a recruitment email about the event to all of the volunteers enrolled in the study approximately 10 days before the event. The recruitment email contained a description of the event and a link to a sign-up form on either Google Forms or EventBrite that allowed members to RSVP for the event.

Starting the day after the email was sent and continuing for 3-4 days, personal recruitment contacts were made according to the condition volunteers were assigned to and information was recorded in the contact tracker provided by SDAN. Contacts were made by members of the SDAN staff, event hosts, and team volunteers recruited by leadership members. Contacts were made using either personal cell phone numbers or Google Voice numbers depending on volunteer preference. The volunteer events all took place over the period of October 12, 2018 - November 6, 2018. Teams tracked who attended the events. They then provided this information to SDAN for analysis in the larger dataset.

5. Intent to treat analysis

First, a linear regression model was fit to determine the intent to treat effect of each condition in keeping with the method outlined by Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2003). An intent to treat approach allows us to analyze the data with all individuals in the sample in the condition they were originally randomized into, regardless of whether or not those individuals were actually treated. Instead of inflating the efficacy of the treatments by removing all people who weren't fully treated, we can use a regression adjustment to determine the intent to treat effect and adjust it using the successful contact rate in each treatment condition. This analysis did not control for team membership or any of the other potential covariates.

An intent to treat approach was used because of the nature of the conditions and of phone capabilities. For conditions involving calling, several people answered the phone and did not receive a voicemail or a text message, essentially leaving them half-treated. For conditions involving texting, not all phones are able to receive text messages (largely landlines). Finally, not all of the phone information Sister District had was accurate and there were disconnected and incorrect numbers in all 3 treatment conditions.

The intent to treat analysis (see Table 1) reveals that texting has the highest intent to treat effect at 3.07%, which improves to 3.45% when you account for the fact that SDAN was only able to contact 88.93% of people in this condition. This indicates that texting effectively led to an increase in attendance by 3.45 percentage points over emails only (controls). Overall, each of the treatment conditions had higher attendance (and RSVP) rates (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Intent to treat analysis (attendance outcome)

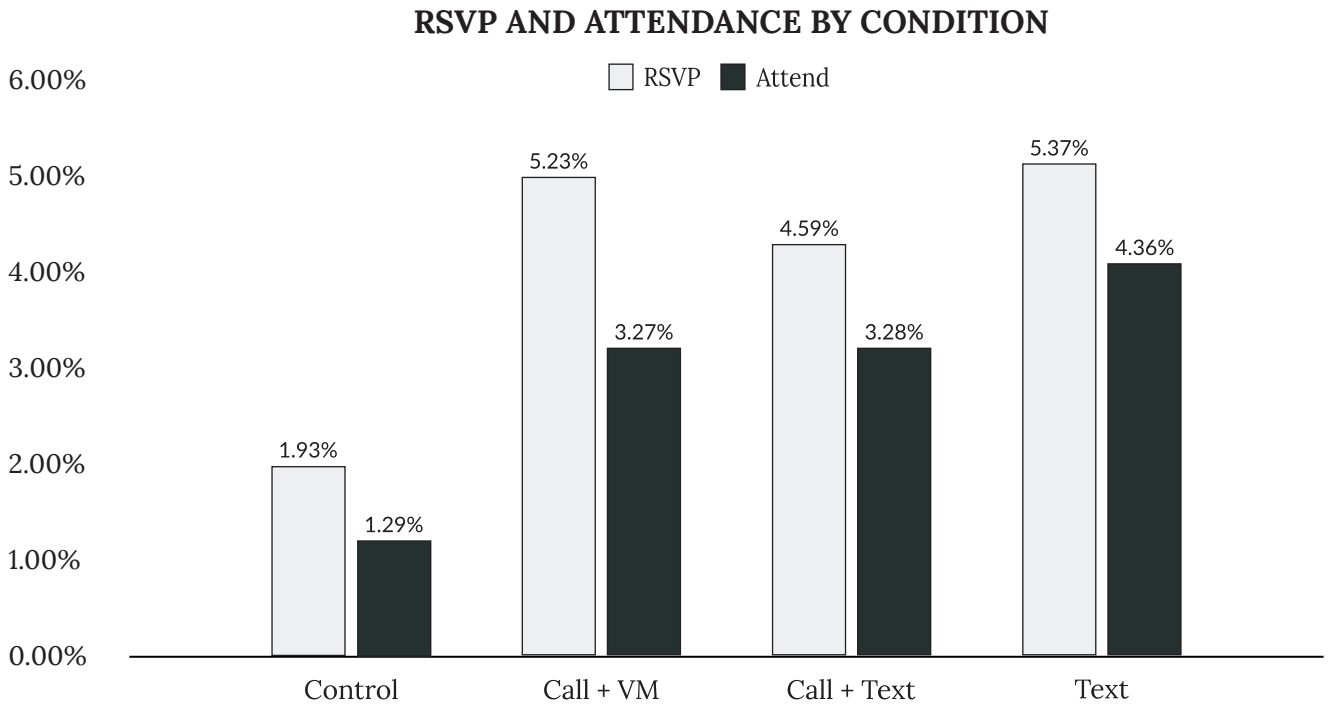
Comparison with controls	Coeff.	Robust Std. Err.	Z Score	P Value	95% CI
Call + VM	0.019818	0.0120054	1.65	0.099	-0.0037122-0.0433482
Call + Text	0.0199251	0.0120332	1.66	0.098	-0.0036595-0.0435098
Text	0.0307624	0.0134472	2.29	0.022	0.0044064-0.0571185

Table 2. Descriptives and adjustment (attendance outcome)

Attended?	Control	Call + VM	Call + Text	Text
No	307	296	295	285
Yes	4	10	10	13
Total	311	306	305	298
Attendance Rate	1.29%	3.27%	3.28%	4.36%
Intent to treat effect	--	1.98%	1.99%	3.07%
Contact rate	--	88.24%	93.11%	88.93%
Actual treatment effect	--	2.24%	2.14%	3.45%

*Contact rate represents the percentage of people for whom treatment could be completed, or in other words, the individuals whose phones had the ability to be contacted as the study dictated (either through calls or text messages).

Figure 1. RSVP and Attendance rates by individual treatment condition



6. Results

Multiple logistic regression was used to assess differences between condition with respect to RSVP rate event attendance among people included in the sample, after controlling for team. Two regression models were run, one with a combined treatment condition that compared all of the kinds of personal contact to the control condition, and another that compared the treatment conditions to the control condition separately. Models were run with both RSVP and attendance outcomes.

More formally, the central questions posed in the main model is whether there is an association between receiving different forms of personal recruitment communication (calls with voicemails, calls with text messages, or just text messages), and event RSVP (defined as formally signing up to attend the event through the form provided), or an association between the same forms of personal recruitment communication and attendance (defined as attending the event the volunteer was invited to). To test these questions, multivariate logistic regression models were used.

To test the RSVP outcome, Formal RSVP was regressed on the dummy variable for condition (treatment), and the dummy variables for team (Team 1, Team 2). The treatment condition was statistically significant compared to the control condition, indicating that significantly more people RSVP'd after receiving personal contacts than after receiving the email only. The results indicate that members of Team 3 were statistically more likely to RSVP to the event than the members of the other two teams (Team 1 and Team 2).

To test the attendance outcome, Attendance was regressed on the dummy variable for condition (treatment), and the dummy variables for team (Team 1, Team 2). The model confirmed that people who received personal contacts were statistically more likely to attend the event than people who did not (control subjects). Members of Team 3 were again statistically significantly more likely to attend the event than members of Team 2 and almost marginally significantly more likely to attend the event than members of Team 1.

Table 3: Main Model 1 - Outcome Formal RSVP

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Treatment	2.704881 (1.19)	2.26	1.140855-6.413065	0.024*
Team (Ref=Team 3)				
Team 1	0.2031796 (0.15)	-2.18	0.0485878-0.8496365	0.029*
Team 2	0.3326684 (0.13)	-2.81	0.1543491-0.7169997	0.005*

($x^2(3) = 21.20$, p = 0.0001, pseudo $R^2 = 0.0493$); n = 1,220

** Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

Table 4: Main Model 1 - Outcome Attended

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Treatment	2.704881 (1.19)	1.98	1.009992-8.2059	0.048*
Team (Ref=Team 3)				
Team 1	0.3007641 (0.22)	-1.63	0.0709019-1.275834	0.103
Team 2	0.3672227 (0.17)	-2.21	0.1509174-0.8935519	0.027*

($x^2(3) = 13.22$, p = 0.0042, pseudo $R^2 = 0.0399$); n = 1,220

*†Marginally significant ($p \leq 0.1$); * Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

To address the second hypothesis about the difference in efficacy between modes, another set of regression models were run that broke the treatment condition out by mode. To test the RSVP outcome, Formal RSVP was regressed on the dummy variables for randomized condition (call and voicemail, call and text, text), and the dummy variables for team (Team 1, Team 2). Both the call + voicemail and the text condition were statistically significant, and the call + text condition were marginally significant predictors of RSVPing. All 3 treatment conditions produced higher rates of event RSVPs than the control condition, regardless of statistical significance (see Table 2). The text condition appears to have a similar effect size to the call and voicemail condition compared to the control condition. The results again indicate that Team 3 was statistically more likely to RSVP to the event than the other two teams (Team 1 and Team 2).

To test the attendance outcome, Attendance was regressed on the dummy variables for randomized condition (call + voicemail, call + text, text), and the dummy variables for team (Team 1, Team 2). Here, only the text condition was statistically significant, and the call and voicemail and call and text conditions approached marginal significance. All 3 treatment conditions produced higher rates of event attendance than the control condition, regardless of statistical significance (see Table 2). The results indicate that the members of Team 3 were statistically more likely to attend the event than the members of Team 2 and almost marginally more likely to attend the event than the Team 1 team members.

Table 5: Main Model 2 - Outcome Formal RSVP

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Call + VM (2)	2.805541 (1.37)	2.12	1.0791095-7.294031	0.034*
Call + text (3)	2.452150 (1.22)	1.81	0.9265768-6.489522	0.071^
Text (4)	2.860262 (1.39)	2.16	1.099936-7.437797	0.031*
Team (Ref=Team 3)				
Team 1	0.203191 (0.15)	-2.18	0.048587-8497347	0.029*
Team 2	0.333085 (0.13)	-2.81	0.1545321-0.7179447	0.005*

($x^2(5) = 21.40$, p = 0.007, pseudo R2 = 0.0498); n = 1,220

*†Marginally significant ($p \leq 0.1$); * Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

Table 6: Main Model 2 - Outcome Attended

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Call + VM (2)	2.583118 (1.55)	1.59	0.7995486-8.345331	0.113
Call + text (3)	2.602169 (1.56)	1.60	0.8054229-8.407118	0.110
Text (4)	3.468120 (2.01)	2.15	1.115267-10.78473	0.032*
Team (Ref=Team 3)				
Team 1	0.301189 (1.01)	-1.63	0.0709856-1.277928	0.104
Team 2	0.368056 (2.45)	-2.20	0.1512282-0.8957662	0.028*

($x^2(5) = 13.84$, p = 0.0166, pseudo R2 = 0.0417); n = 1,220

*†Marginally significant ($p \leq 0.1$); * Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

6. Discussion

Overall, the results are extremely promising, if underpowered at the current sample size (a series of two proportions power analyses show observed power estimates ranging from 0.28-0.53). The initial results indicate that more RSVPs are elicited in both the call and voicemail and text conditions than in the control condition, while the call and text condition is marginally significant. They also indicate that only volunteers in the text condition actually attended the event at statistically significantly higher rates than volunteers in the control condition, while the call and voicemail and call and text conditions approached marginal significance over the control condition. Since results are underpowered and highly suggestive for both the call and voicemail and call and text conditions, these results should be substantiated in a larger sample size to see if these methods achieve significance.

Despite some significant results, the study is underpowered, which suggests a replication of this study is necessary to substantiate the initial findings. Looking at the gross attendance numbers suggests that it is likely true that all of the treatment conditions increased event attendance over the control condition, which had more far fewer RSVPs and attendees than all 3 of the treatment conditions, which each had more than double the attendees of the control condition. Between this fact and the statistical significance of the text condition, these results are highly suggestive and deserve further exploration. Contact rates also affected the results, with contact rates affected by wrong numbers, disconnects, full voicemail boxes, and untextable numbers. Asking volunteers for cell phone numbers or screening for cell phone numbers may help to improve contact rates, at least for texting. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are also limited because this study was specifically done on Sister District volunteers, a very specific group of people (e.g., mostly women, mostly over 40, highly educated) and cannot necessarily be widely generalized beyond that context without caution.

Overall, organizer knowledge was legitimized. Practically-speaking, more than doubling the volunteer force at an event, which was observed across treatment conditions when compared to the control condition, is quite meaningful, indicating that personal contact is well worth it for recruitment, and that texting may be the lowest stakes and highest return of the 3 methods tested (as compared to controls who did not receive personal contact). Calling through a long list is a relatively high lift activity, but texting, especially with a tool like Hustle, is relatively quick and can also easily be accomplished with a few volunteers. Future directions for this work will involve replicating this study in a larger sample and/or altering the messaging to try to test elements of persuasion or an emphasis on social identity. Since SDAN's volunteer survey found that volunteers were especially motivated by things like interpersonal closeness and social investment in teams, emphasizing the social nature or team relevance of the event may be a viable way to improve recruitment rates.

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