

Putting the Party Back into Politics: Results of A Pilot Experiment Designed to Increase Voter Turnout through Music, Food, and Entertainment¹

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Introduction

A century and a half ago, casting a vote was a celebratory experience, as voters at the polls engaged their friends, imbibed free booze, listened to lively entertainment, and generally had a good time. Americans have lost touch with the raucous and engaging elections of the past. As historian Richard Bensei points out, by comparison to the elections of the nineteenth century, contemporary polling places have a mausoleum-like atmosphere (Bensei, 2004).

Our polling places have been drained of their celebratory elements, and the 90%-plus rates of voter turnout that accompanied them have disappeared from our collective consciousness. But the disappearance of festive elections is felt in ways that go beyond diminished rates of voter turnout. Like other aspects of community life, poignantly described by Robert Putnam (Putnam, 2000), the community ties that elections once provided are gone. Certainly, working on a campaign brings people together, but rarely does campaigning bring together the community as a whole. Indeed, campaigns often split communities apart, sometimes in ways that have long-range implications. It is from this starting point that we began to ask about the feasibility of creating a more celebratory and community-focused atmosphere at the polls. Can the festive, social environment surrounding old-fashioned elections be recreated in ways that increase voter turnout? What would it mean to change the polling environment? Would it increase voter turnout? Might it change the orientation of people toward their community?

This report describes the results of a pilot study of the effects of a widely-publicized Election Day festival conducted in New Hampshire during its spring 2005 local elections. Due to budget constraints, we situated our pilot study in small towns that voted at a single polling location. This arrangement made it possible for us to direct our advertising toward an entire town and yet hold a festival at a single polling place. New

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Hampshire was chosen because it allows its citizens to register at the polls on Election Day, which means that every adult citizen attending the festival would be eligible to vote.

Using data supplied by state and local elections officials, we compiled voter turnout records for towns throughout New Hampshire. After stratifying towns by population and voter turnout rates, we identified two similar towns, Hooksett and Hanover, which hold local elections on the same day. According to the 2000 census, Hooksett's population was 8,872 compared to 9,211 in Hanover. In the local elections of 2004, 836 people voted in Hooksett as compared to 854 in Hanover; the year before, Hanover's local elections attracted 1,473 people to the polls, as compared to 912 in Hooksett. A coin flip assigned Hooksett to the treatment group and Hanover to the control group. A third town, Newmarket, was similar to the other two but had a slightly smaller population (6,250) and somewhat higher voting rates (1,016 voters in 2004); we decided to use it as a parallel case for statistical purposes.²

The experimental intervention consisted of a publicity campaign and a festival at the voting site. A week before the election, we met with the town administrator, election officials, and community leaders. We asked them to publicize our poll party and to hand out flyers advertising our event at town meetings. We also displayed posters announcing the event at local stores and meeting spots. On the Saturday before Election Day, the regional newspaper, the *Union Leader*, contained a flyer advertising an "Election Day Poll Party," giving the location and time. The local paper, the *Hooksett Neighborhood News*, also advertised the event. On the Sunday before Election Day, a story describing the party appeared in the *Union Leader*. At the same time, three dozen lawn signs advertising the event were planted on busy streets in town. Finally, two pre-recorded thirty second phone calls were directed to 3,000 Hooksett households. The first call was made on Saturday and the second on Election Day. Both extended an invitation to the party and gave details about its hours (3:00 to 7:00 PM) and location. More than 89% of the calls were successfully completed, with approximately two-thirds of the completed calls reaching answering machines.

On Election Day, the festival took place immediately outside the polling place, on the front lawn of the local middle school. The weather was sunny and 68 degrees. A large tent was set up surrounded by signs encouraging people to enjoy free snacks, drinks, and raffles. A cotton candy machine attracted a steady stream of children, and a professional DJ played upbeat, family-friendly music. People of all ages milled about the party tent. Young children danced and played catch. Elderly couples took advantage of the chairs around the tent to sit, listen to the music, and to eat the sandwiches we provided. Mothers and fathers juggled cookies and potato chips and mingled with their friends and neighbors. People at the party seemed aware of the event prior to coming to the polls to vote. They had read the flyer, received the calls, or heard about the various advertised activities from other residents. Several people expressed enthusiasm for the festival and said they would try to convince their town leaders to recreate the event next year.

² Newmarket will not be used to estimate the effect of the treatment but will help us estimate the year-to-year variability in turnout rates. As shown in Table 1, its inclusion has little effect on the results.

The Hooksett ballot presented voters with fairly low-salience issues. Hooksett voters elected town councilors, members of the budget committee, a member of the cemetery committee, a library trustee, a moderator, a sewer commissioner, and a trustee of trust funds. Each of the candidates for these offices ran unopposed. Hooksett voters also evaluated ballot measures concerning the town budget, planning and zoning, growth management, the purchase of new fire trucks, and the appropriation of funds for projects like converting a school into town offices. The low salience of the election was evident in the mobilization efforts surrounding it. Outside the polls in Hooksett, two or three people stood with handmade signs for or against one of the ballot measures. On Hooksett's main roads, there were only a handful of lawn signs concerning the election.

The elections in Hanover and Newmarket were similarly nondescript. In Hanover, voters selected two selectmen, a treasurer, a library trustee, and a trustee of funds. In Newmarket, voters evaluated the budget and requests for expenditure, and they elected new selectmen and a town clerk. The weather in both Hanover and Newmarket was similar to Hooksett, 68 degrees and sunny all day.

We estimated the effect of our experimental intervention using regression analysis. The sample consists of 18 data points: 3 towns observed annually across 6 local elections. The dependent variable was defined in two different ways. The first is the turnout percentage, defined as the ratio of voters to the population of adults.³ The second is the log-odds of the turnout percentage. The log-odds transformation is commonly used when predicting percentages, particularly when percentages in question are below 25%.⁴ The independent variables are as follows: a dummy variable scored 1 if the election is Hooksett in 2005 and zero otherwise; a dummy variable scored 1 if the election is 2005 and zero otherwise, a dummy variable scored 1 if the election took place in Newmarket in 2005 and zero otherwise, and a dummy variable scored one if the election took place in Newmarket in any year. The first independent variable represents the experimental treatment. The second distinguishes the 2005 experiment from the nonexperimental years that preceded it. The third independent variable accounts for the fact that Newmarket is not part of the 2005 experiment per se; its role is to help estimate the year-to-year variability in election outcomes. The final independent variable accounts for the fact that Newmarket's historical voting rates are higher than Hooksett's or Hanover's.

The results suggest that the intervention succeeded in stimulating turnout. Hooksett's turnout was 1,498 as compared to Hanover's 401. The regression results presented in the first two columns of Table 1 indicate that the intervention increased turnout by 10.4 percentage-points. When all 18 observations are used, this estimate is associated with a large standard error of 6.5 percentage-points. Despite the small sample size, the estimate borders statistical significance ($p=.06$). Excluding the Newmarket

³ We use a measure of the voting age population, not the voting eligible population, as the denominator due to the small number of noncitizens and disenfranchised felons living in these towns. The 2000 census figures were adjusted to account for population growth.

⁴ The log-odds transformation takes the observed voting percentage (P) and creates a dependent variable using the formula $Y = \log(P/(1-P))$.

cases has no effect on the estimate but slightly diminishes the p-value. The statistical results are slightly stronger when the dependent variable is scored as the log-odds of turnout.⁵ With Newmarket included the p-value is .03; excluding Newmarket raises the p-value slightly to .06. None of the regressions shows signs of heteroskedasticity problems, as gauged by Breusch-Pagan tests. The regression results, in sum, suggest a promising positive effect of borderline significance.

The magnitude of this effect is even more striking when one considers the cost-per-vote. The advertising and festival cost a total of \$3503 and generated approximately 1,065 votes, which implies a return of roughly \$3.25 per vote. This rate of return exceeds any of the leading get-out-the-vote tactics. Green and Gerber (2004, p.94), for example, report that the returns from door-to-door canvassing are roughly \$19 per vote. Direct mail and calls from commercial phone banks are even more expensive on a cost-per-vote basis. Festivals, therefore, appear to be a promising and cost-effective means of increasing voter turnout, particularly in low-salience elections.⁶

Conclusion

The initial results of this pilot project suggest that a well-advertised party at the polls on Election Day may substantially increase voter turnout in a local election. Future replications of the experiment will increase our confidence in the findings by extending the experiment in several different ways. First, we wish to replicate the Hooksett experiment in other local, low-salience elections, as well as explore the impact of a poll party in different electoral contexts, such as highly competitive elections and well-advertised state and federal elections. Second, we would like to conduct the experiment in different demographic settings to examine whether the socio-economic characteristics of a community influence the poll festival's impact on voter turnout. Third, we plan to solicit more community input and participation in orchestrating the event in order to see whether greater community involvement further increases the party's effects on voter turnout. For example, we hope to have a local school band or senior citizens choir perform at the polls in an effort to draw out additional families and supporters to the poll party. Fourth, we plan to vary the location of the poll party to see whether proximity of the party to community activity influences the party's effects on voter turnout. In Hooksett, the polling station is the local middle school, which is located by itself on a fairly remote road. Due to the absence of foot traffic, no passers-by could have seen the party, joined the festivities, and made the decision to vote. Election festivals may be even more effective if situated in a more central place. Finally, we would like to conduct

⁵ Substantively, the coefficient of 1.37 indicates the extent to which the treatment increased the voting rate, expressed in terms of log-odds. In this case, the log-odds of 14.6% minus the log-odds of 4.2% is 1.37. Note that this coefficient implies that a festival potentially turns a 50% turnout into a 79.7% turnout.

⁶ New Hampshire state law prohibits any form of payment for voting. In the past, the New Hampshire Attorney General's office has issued warnings where cookies were given away to those that voted. The office also takes the position that raffle tickets or discount coupons may not be handed out to voters as a reward for voting as they leave the polls. However, the Attorney General's office informed us that if properly advertised (i.e., no relation between voting and gaining a benefit), food and a free concert equally available to all (whether one votes or not) would not violate the New Hampshire statutes.

a series of festivals in the same towns in order to test whether their effectiveness increases over time as more of the community comes to anticipate these events.

In addition to increasing voter turnout in the election accompanying the party, the poll party appeared to have the potential for more long-ranging positive spillover effects, which warrant further study. The festivities at the Hooksett polls were enjoyed by scores of children. While these children were too young to vote, they learned that Election Day can be a fun, family-friendly, community activity. During our part, one Hooksett child said that he was having so much fun at the party that he wished every day could be Election Day. If a positive experience with voting at a young age encourages young people to start voting at eighteen, the poll party could play a positive role in increasing youth voter turnout. Future research in the area could track these children and find out if those who grow up in towns with Election Day festivals are more likely to vote once they reach voting age eligibility than children who grow up in towns in the control group.

Some aspects of nineteenth century elections – petty bribes and drunken brawls – are best left in the past. Nevertheless, contemporary America has something positive to learn from its distant past. The question for future discussion and research is whether it is feasible to recreate the festive atmosphere that surrounded these past elections and to do so in a way that only raises turnout in a particular election but also leaves good feelings about elections in general. The encouraging results of this pilot study suggest that the social aspects of voting warrant further investigation.

Table 1: Regression Estimates of the Effects of an Election Day Festival on Voter Turnout (standard errors in parentheses)

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable			
	Turnout Percentage		Log-odds of Turnout	
	Sample Excludes Newmarket	Sample Includes Newmarket	Sample Excludes Newmarket	Sample Includes Newmarket
Treatment (1=treated, 0=control)	.104 ^a (.075)	.104 ^b (.065)	1.369 ^c (.807)	1.369 ^d (.684)
2005 Election Dummy (1=2005, 0=other years)	-.076 (.056)	-.076 (.048)	-1.018 (.599)	-1.018 (.508)
Newmarket Dummy in 2005 (1=Newmarket 2005, 0=other cases)	N/A	.047 (.070)	N/A	.810 (.734)
Newmarket Dummy (1=Newmarket, 0=other towns)	N/A	.058 (.025)	N/A	.566 (.265)
Constant	.118 (.017)	.118 (.015)	-2.115 (.180)	-2.115 (.153)
Root MSE	.053	.046	.571	.484
<i>p</i> -value, Breusch-Pagan test	.67	.36	.66	.34
N	12	18	12	18

^a One-tailed *p*-value = .09.

^b One-tailed *p*-value = .06.

^c One-tailed *p*-value = .06.

^d One-tailed *p*-value = .03.

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