

Experimental Design Proposal: Mobilizing activism through the formation of social ties

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Abstract

Social ties and personal interactions with like-minded others should be beneficial for organisational involvement, and political activism. While existing field experiments focus on the effects of interventions on social belonging, and appreciation, most theories assume that it is actual social interactions with other activists, which induce feelings of belonging and connectedness. The aim of this randomized field experiment is to identify the effects of forming new social relationships on political activism in a grassroots political movement. Partnering with one of the biggest grassroots political movements in the United Kingdom, we will encourage members and supporters to form new ties with each other, during one-to-one meetings in a local coffee shop, or pub. We then identify the effects of these newly formed ties on individuals' engagement in the organisation, and on their subsequent political activism.

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Aim and overview

Social ties and personal interactions with like-minded others should be beneficial for organisational involvement (Han, 2016; Rogers, Fox and Gerber, 2014; Rogers, Goldstein and Fox, 2018; Rolfe, 2012). Personal interactions and personal relationships are also assumed to play a key part in activating citizens to engage in election campaigns, for instance through canvassing (Neuenschwander and Foos, 2015; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). However, few experiments on political activism actually manipulate the formation of social ties. Existing field experiments focus on the mechanisms through which social connectedness occurs, for instance perceptions of belonging and appreciation (Han, 2016), or social norms and social identities (Rogers, Goldstein and Fox, 2018). While perceptions of connectedness and social identities may be the internalised, psychological mechanisms through which social ties mobilize activists, most theories assume that it is actual social interactions, which constitute relational contexts, and induce feelings of belonging and connectedness. The aim of this randomized field experiment is to identify the effects of forming social relationships on political activism in a grassroots political movement. Partnering with one of the biggest grassroots political movement in the United Kingdom, we will encourage members and supporters to form new ties with each other to identify the effects of these newly formed ties on individuals' engagement in the organisation, and on their subsequent political activism.

Encouraging the formation of social ties

Most randomized network experiments, when trying to identify the effects of social interactions on political participation, administer an exogenous shock to nodes in an already existing network, such as the household (Nickerson, 2008), or online social networks (Bond, Fariss, Jones, Kramer, Marlow, Settle and Fowler, 2012), and observe how these shocks diffuse within the network (Bowers, Fredrickson and Panagopoulos, 2012). While these experiments have led the way in identifying spillover effects within networks, some research questions necessitate that researchers exogenously manipulate the structure of the network, or cause new ties to form between previously unconnected individuals (Fowler, Heaney, Nickerson, Padgett and Sinclair, 2011; Nickerson, 2011). Encouraging the formation of

new ties between members of an organisation is relatively rare (but see Marx, Pons and Suri (2016)). We will take the latter approach in this experiment, by arranging actual one-to-one meetings between supporters and members of an organisation, and comparing the organisational involvement and attitudes of individuals who were invited to participate in those meetings to the organisational involvement and attitudes of individuals who were not invited.

Homogeneous or heterogeneous ties?

Different types of demographic heterogeneity in randomly assigned teams have been shown to negatively affect the performance of political canvassers (Marx, Pons and Suri, 2016). However, one could also expect that different political preferences lead to more debate, greater exposure to new information, and therefore extended engagement (Foos and de Rooij, 2017; Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008). As a secondary research question, we are therefore interested in whether meetings between members who share the same policy priorities will be more or less likely to lead to sustained engagement than meetings between members with heterogeneous policy priorities. We define homogeneous and heterogeneous preferences in relation to the policy priorities of supporters and members that we record pre-treatment.

Research Design

We are planning to conduct a field experiment in collaboration with a London chapter of a political grassroots organisation. The chapter is one of the largest local chapters in the UK and counts 700 registered members, and around 4000 supporters, individuals who have interacted with the organisation before and expressed support for its political principles.

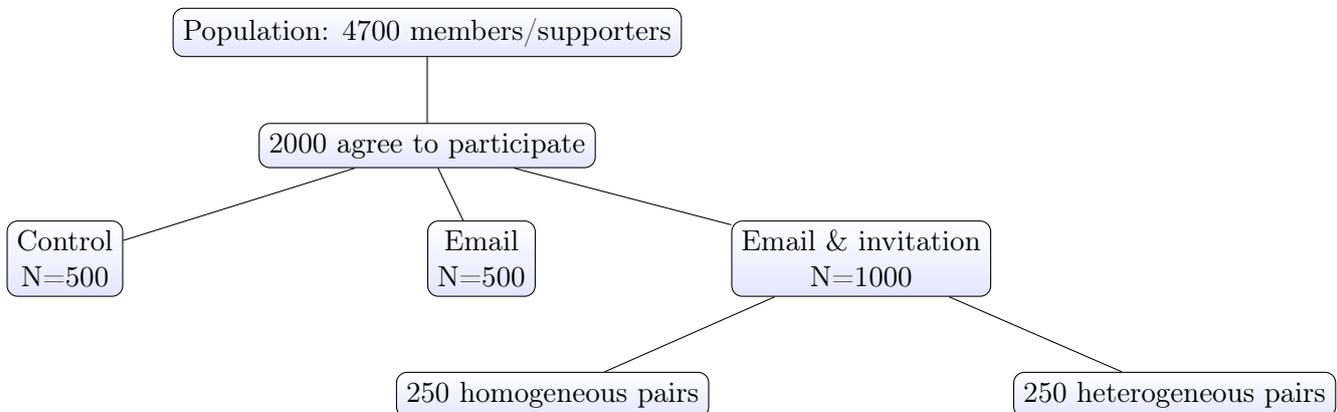
Potential participants will be identified through the organisation's database, and will be approached by the organisation via email. They will then be asked to participate in a study on political activism conducted in collaboration with the researchers, and complete the first wave of an online survey. The questionnaire is displayed in the Appendix. Monetary and social incentives in the form of donations to charity will be provided to encourage

members and supporters to participate in the study. With each survey they fill in, subjects will be eligible to enter a lottery and win GBP 250, and GBP 500 for a charity of their choice.

Treatments

The treatment is an email sent by the organisation which invites the subject to meet another local member/supporter for breakfast or for a casual meal in a pub to discuss about political issues that are important to them (based on their answers to the pre-treatment questionnaire). In order to disentangle the effect of the meeting from the effect of the email, which Han (2016) has shown can encourage citizens to participate, we follow Gerber and Green (2012), and Green, Ha and Bullock (2010) and use an implicit mediation strategy. We either assign the subject to an email that mentions the issue they care about and encourages the subject to get involved in the organisation, but without arranging a meeting for them, or we assign the subject to an email which mentions the issue they care about, and invites them to discuss this issue with a fellow supporter who lives locally. The treatment script are displayed in Appendix documents A.1 and A.2. We also randomly assign whether the subject meets a homogeneous match or a heterogeneous match, based on policy-preferences expressed in the pre-treatment questionnaire. The different treatment conditions are outlined in Figure 1. In order to encourage attendance at the meeting, we pay for subjects' breakfast or pub meals, up to a combined value of GBP 25.

Figure 1: Complete random assignment



Ranking of treatments

We expect that the two meeting conditions and the email condition will have a larger effect than the control condition (no contact) in relation to all outcome variables. moreover, we hypothesize that non-hierarchical personal meetings will be more effective than hierarchical impersonal communication between the subject and the organisation.

We expect that the ranking of the personal meeting conditions is reversed between activism and attitudinal outcomes. Meeting with someone who shares a subject's issue priority should mobilize the subject more than meeting with someone who does not share the subject's issue priority. Hence, we assume that for activism-related outcomes, meeting a homogeneous match should be more effective than meeting a heterogeneous match.

Ranking activism (from most effective to least effective):

1. Meeting homogeneous match
2. Meeting heterogeneous match
3. Email
4. Control

For attitudinal outcomes, however, we assume that subjects influence each other more if they are further apart on how they rank their issue priorities. Heterogeneous matches should therefore influence each others' issue priorities more than homogeneous matches.

Ranking issue priority similarity (from most effective to least effective):

1. Meeting heterogeneous match
2. Meeting homogeneous match
3. Email
4. Control

Stage 1: Baseline survey on activism and political preferences

We outline the different steps of the experiment below. First, we intend to collect the following variables in the baseline survey:

1. Demographics
2. Areas of policy interest
3. Self-reported activism

Stage 2: Random assignment into two treatment groups and one control group

Subjects assigned to treatment 1 are contacted by email. Subjects assigned to treatment groups 2 and 3 are contacted by email, and invited to a meeting with another member/supporter. Treatment group 2 is introduced to a homogeneous match, and treatment group 3 is introduced to a heterogeneous match (based on policy interests). Subjects are invited by the organisation to have breakfast at a local coffee shop or a casual meal in a local pub. By photographing the receipt and sending it via whatsapp to the researcher, subjects will be re-imbursed for their expenses. The reimbursement request also serves as our measure of compliance with treatments 2 and 3.

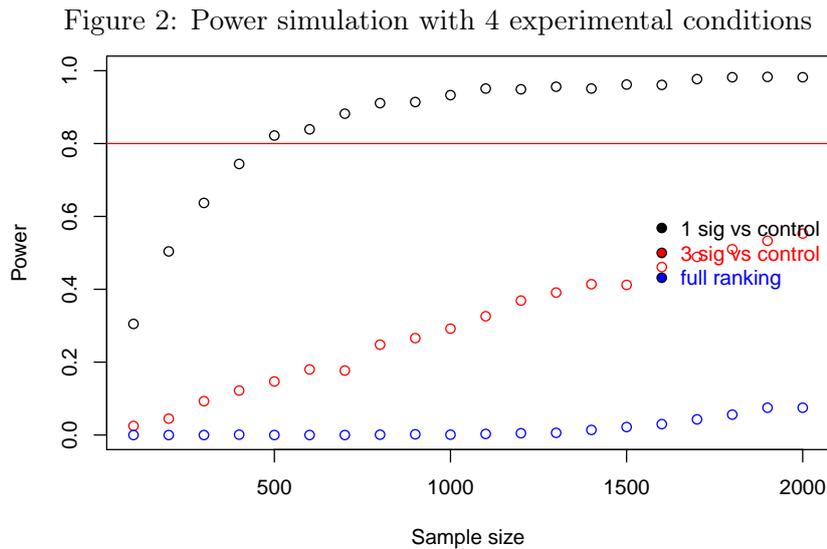
Stage 3: Collection of behavioural and attitudinal outcomes

Two months after the treatment emails were sent, everyone in treatment and control is invited by the organisation to fill in a post-treatment survey, recording self-reported activism, political preferences, issue interests, and social interactions with other members and supporters (see questionnaire in the Appendix). The post-treatment survey will record the following outcomes:

1. Attendance at canvassing sessions
2. Attendance at chapter meetings
3. Social media activism (tweets)
4. Areas of policy interest

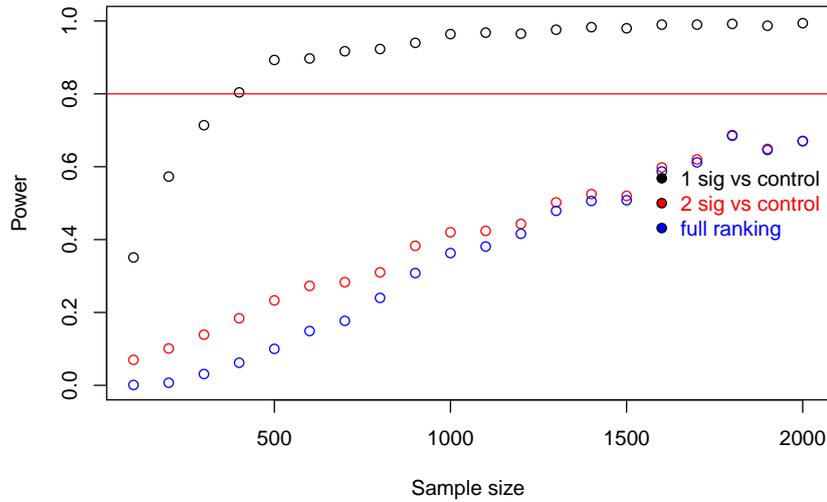
Power simulations

Below we display power simulations for the experiment with the specified four conditions (control, email, meeting homogeneous match, and meeting heterogeneous match), and reduced to three experimental conditions. To run the simulations, we modify the code for power simulations published on the EGAP website. We specify a count outcome variable for the number of activities subjects engaged in since the treatment (our most common outcome variable). Moreover, we use the ranking of experimental conditions specified below with the following inputs ($p=.05$, one-tailed, outcome mean=1, $sd=1.5$, $\tau_{email}=0.2$, $\tau_{heterogeneous}=0.4$, and $\tau_{homogeneous}=0.6$). The simulations displayed in Figure 2 below show that a 4-groups design is unlikely to reach conventional power levels using the full ranking of conditions.



We therefore consider reducing the experimental design to three groups as displayed in Figures 3 and 4. A three-groups design is much more likely to reach conventional power standards. If we settle on a three-group design, we need to decide whether to either scrap the second meeting condition (Figure 3), the control condition or the email condition (Figures 4). Scrapping either one of these conditions implies different trade-offs. Scrapping the second (heterogeneous) meeting condition is the least likely to affect our ability to speak to the excludability assumption. This means we would be able to employ implicit mediation analysis (Gerber and Green, 2012) to disentangle the effect of the personal interaction from the effect of the encouragement, the email itself. However, by scrapping

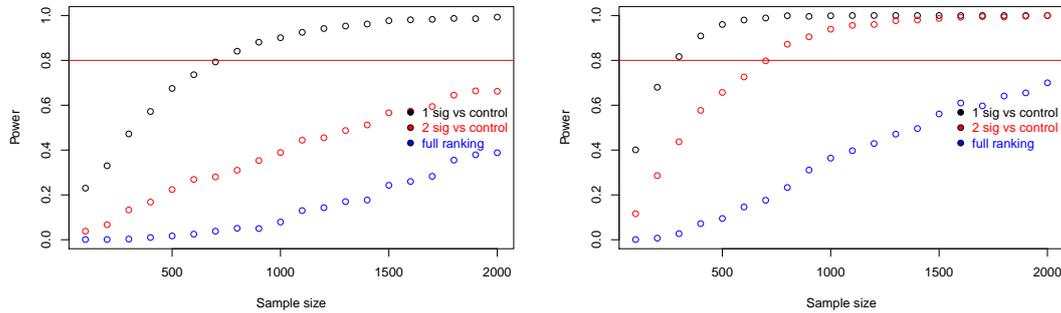
Figure 3: Power simulation with 3 experimental conditions - no heterogeneous match



the 2nd meeting condition, we invalidate the comparison with the most statistical power, the comparison between the two meeting conditions, which would allow us to condition the analysis on compliance, measured by the coffee/pub meal receipt that subjects provide for reimbursement of their expenses.¹ Scrapping the email condition instead would impair our ability to separate the effect of the encouragement from the effect of the meeting, via instrumental variable regression. Finally, deleting the control (“no contact”) condition makes it impossible to detect an effect of the email alone, and might make us vulnerable to claims that emails and meetings, both taken together, had a *negative* effect on political activism, which we cannot detect. Hence, there are non-trivial trade-offs involved between statistical power, our ability to speak to the excludability assumption, and discriminate between competing hypotheses. One alternative idea would be to try and replicate the experiment with a second chapter of the organisation (and accept that the first experiment will be under-powered). We would be particularly interested in soliciting EGAP members’ views on the trade-offs described above.

¹Using the Broockman/Kalla/Sekhon method (<http://experiments.berkeley.edu>) we estimate that we would only need around 124 compliers in each group to reach 80% power on the meeting vs meeting comparison.

Figure 4: Power simulation with 3 experimental conditions - no control/no email



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Appendix

Scripts

Figure A.1: Email only

Dear [subject name],
Thank you so much for filling in the questionnaire that we distributed earlier this month, and helping us to better understand the views and opinions of our members. Your views are extremely important to us, and we will use them to decide upon [organisation name's] strategy going forward.
In the questionnaire you mentioned that [issue priority 1] and [issue priority 2] are of particular interest to you, and we would encourage you to get more involved in [organisation name], contribute your expertise, and help us build our profile around [issue priority 1] and [issue priority 2]. You can find all information about our upcoming meetings here: [link to section on website]
Team [organisation name]

Figure A.2: Email and invitation

Dear [subject name],
Thank you so much for filling in the questionnaire that we distributed earlier this month, and helping us to better understand the views and opinions of our members. Your views are extremely important to us, and we will use them to decide upon [organisation name's] strategy going forward.
In the questionnaire you mentioned that [issue priority 1] and [issue priority 2] are of particular interest to you, and we would encourage you to get more involved in [organisation name], contribute your expertise, and help us build our profile around [issue priority 1] and [issue priority 2]. You can find all information about our upcoming meetings here: [link to section on website]
We would also take this chance to ask you if you'd be willing to meet another [organisation name] supporter in a local coffeshop or pub for a meal to discuss about [issue priority 1] and [issue priority 2], and how you can get further engaged on these issues. Your meal will be on us!
Click here to indicate your availability for a meeting, and your preferred spot. We will then match you with a local member!
Team [organisation name]

Survey Questions Wave 1

1. Demographics
2. Areas of policy interest
3. Positions on specific issues
4. Self-reported activism

1. Personal characteristics

- 1.1. Gender (male/female/non-binary/other/prefer not to say)
- 1.2. Age in years
- 1.3. Education in categories
- 1.4. Job
- 1.5. Birthplace
- 1.6. Household characteristics (#people, rented/owned, ...)

2. In a scale from 1 (not that important) to 5 (very important) rate the following issues

- 2.1. Homelessness
- 2.2. Council Housing
- 2.3. Work conditions
- 2.4. The NHS
- 2.5. Brexit
- 2.6. Foreign aid
- 2.7. Foreign affairs
- 2.8. National defence
- 2.9. Tax avoidance
- 2.10. Immigration
- 2.11. Gender
- 2.12. Equal opportunities for black, Asian and ethnic minorities

3. Thinking more broadly, what are in your opinion the THREE most important political problems today?

- 3.1. ...
- 3.2. ...
- 3.3. ...

4. Often, people think about left and right when they talk about politics. On a scale from 1 (very leftwing) to 10 (very rightwing), where would you place yourself?

5. Activism

- 5.1 Length of Labour party membership (last time you joined, total number of years you are part of Labour)
- 5.2 Union membership
- 5.3 Have you attended any [organisation name] general meeting in the past six months?
- 5.4 Have you attended any [organisation name] meeting focused on specific political issues in the past six months? If yes, which issue?
- 5.5 How many [organisation name] general meetings have you attended in the past six months?
- 5.6 How many Constituency Labour party general meeting have you attended in the past six months?
- 5.7 How many Ward Labour party meeting have you attended in the past six months?
- 5.8 Have you been out on the door-step talking to voters in the past two months? If yes, how many times?
- 5.9 Have you shared posts by [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months on facebook?
- 5.10 Have you written facebook posts in support of [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months? If yes, approximately how many?
- 5.11 Have you retweeted messages by [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months on Twitter? If yes, approximately how many?
- 5.12 Have you written tweets in support of [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months on Twitter? If yes, approximately how many?
- 5.13 How many people from [organisation name] or the Labour Party did you talk to (either in person or over the phone) in the past month?
- 5.14 How many people from [organisation name] or the Labour Party have you interacted with on whatsapp in the past month?
- 5.15 How many people from the Labour Party do you talk to on a monthly basis?
- 5.16 How many people from [organisation name] do you talk to on a monthly basis?

Survey Questions Wave 2

- 1. In a scale from 1 (not that important) to 5 (very important) rate the following issues**
 - 1.1. Homelessness
 - 1.2. Council Housing
 - 1.3. Work conditions
 - 1.4. The NHS
 - 1.5. Brexit
 - 1.6. Foreign aid
 - 1.7. Foreign affairs (Russia, Israel-Palestine etc)
 - 1.8. National defence
 - 1.9. Tax avoidance
 - 1.10. Immigration
 - 1.11. Gender
 - 1.12. BAME

- 2. Thinking more broadly, what are in your opinion the THREE most important political problems today?**
 - 2.1. ...
 - 2.2. ...
 - 2.3. ...

- 3. Often, people think about left and right when they talk about politics. On a scale from 1 (very leftwing) to 10 (very rightwing), where would you place yourself?**

- 4. Activism**
 - 4.1. Have you attended any [organisation name] general meeting in the past two months?
 - 4.2. Have you attended any [organisation name] meeting focused on specific political issues in the past two months? If yes, which issue?
 - 4.3. How many [organisation name] general meetings have you attended in the past two months?
 - 4.4. Have you met other [organisation name] supporters to discuss about current political issues that are important to you?
 - 4.5. How many Constituency Labour party general meeting have you attended in the past two months?
 - 4.6. How many Ward Labour party meeting have you attended in the past two months?
 - 4.7. Have you been out on the door-step talking to voters in the past two months? If yes, how many times?

- 4.8. Have you shared posts by [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months on facebook?
- 4.9. Have you written facebook posts in support of [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months? If yes, approximately how many?
- 4.10. Have you retweeted messages by [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months on Twitter? If yes, approximately how many?
- 4.11. Have you written tweets in support of [organisation name] or the Labour Party in the past two months on Twitter? If yes, approximately how many?
- 4.12. How many people from [organisation name] or the Labour Party did you talk to (either in person or over the phone) in the past month?
- 4.13. How many people from [organisation name] or the Labour Party have you interacted with on whatsapp in the past month?
- 4.14. How many people from the Labour Party do you talk to on a monthly basis?
- 4.15. How many people from [organisation name] do you talk to on a monthly basis?