

Brief 21: Support for Gay Equality

Category: [Human Rights](#)

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Language English

Background:

Political canvassing, the direct contact between campaign volunteers and voters, occurs before nearly every election and voting opportunity in the United States. Campaigns believe that canvassing can change voter attitudes about candidates and issues. Importantly from the budget-conscious campaign's perspective, it rarely takes more than a few minutes. However, whether or not these efforts actually result in attitude change is an open question.

Using an experiment, the authors provide one answer by examining the effects of canvassing in Southern California in 2013, five years after a ballot measure banned same-sex marriage. The canvassers aimed to reduce prejudice towards gays and in doing so reduce support for the ban on same-sex marriage. Prejudice, according to the contact hypothesis from social psychology, decreases when members of different groups are able to interact. To induce meaningful contact in a brief span of time, LaCour and Green organized "active" canvassing with discussions between a canvasser and the voter about the issue of gay equality, rather than "passive" canvassing which involves contact without dialogue. The authors study whether active canvassing changed the attitudes of voters, and whether discussions within the household after the canvassing lead to effects on housemate attitudes as well.

Research Design:

Voters selected for the study initially participate in an Internet survey gauging their views on a variety of issues, including same-sex marriage. Then, the voters are **randomly assigned** to receive a gay canvasser (one group) or a straight canvasser (a second group). The canvasser—either gay or straight—is randomly assigned to discuss recycling (a “placebo” topic) or same-sex marriage. When the canvasser discusses same-sex marriage, he or she truthfully identifies him or herself as either gay or straight. The straight canvasser mentions that he or she knows a gay person who would like to get married, but cannot because of the law. The gay canvasser mentions that he or she would like to get married, but cannot because of the law. A final set of voters who took the Internet survey was randomly assigned into a group that was never to be visited by a canvasser (control). Afterwards, all voters participate in Internet surveys administered days, weeks, and months after the canvassing (for more on treatment assignment, see Table 1). Attitudes of voters are measured before and after canvassing, and are compared between the four possible types of canvassing (gay or straight canvasser, same sex marriage or recycling script). In order to measure both the effect on the targeted voter as well as the effect on housemates of the voter, the experiment targeted registered voters who shared a home with at least one other registered voter.

Table 1 (Supplementary materials, Page 11)

Treatment Assigned	Form of Contact		
	Direct	Secondhand	None
Same Sex Marriage Script by Gay Canvasser	11%	21%	68%
Same Sex Marriage Script by Straight Canvasser	13%	23%	65%
Recycling Script by Gay Canvasser	13%	22%	65%
Recycling Script by Straight Canvasser	12%	19%	70%

Findings

Three days after the canvassing, individuals who were randomly assigned to receive canvassing about same-sex marriage, whether assigned to receive a gay or straight canvasser, had similarly high acceptance levels of same-sex marriage that were much higher than those who had heard about recycling (see Figure 1 below). However, ten days later, those who discussed gay marriage with a straight canvasser returned to their previous levels of acceptance, while those who had met with a gay canvasser maintained their increased acceptance level. Even 9 months later, attitudes of people visited by a gay canvasser remained elevated. Over the long-term, it was the combination of canvassing about same-sex marriage and a gay canvasser that led to sustained attitude change.

In addition to these positive effects for the voters who talked to canvassers, housemates living with voters who received a gay canvasser discussing same-sex marriage also grew more accepting of same marriage. This effect was also long lasting. Attitudes of housemates who spoke with a straight canvasser did not increase.

Figure 1 (Page 1367)

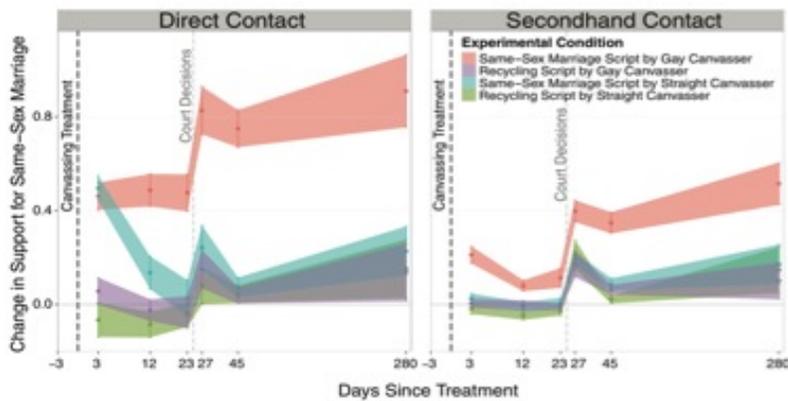


Fig. 1. Direct and secondhand effects on support for same-sex marriage, by assigned message and messenger, and time since treatment. The first vertical dashed line represents the canvassing intervention, which was administered between Internet survey waves 1 and 2. The second vertical dashed line represents the U.S. Supreme Court decisions striking down California’s ban on same-sex marriage. The y axis is opinion change between the baseline survey and subsequent survey waves, with higher scores indicating more support for same-sex marriage. Points represent mean values, and bars display 95% bootstrap confidence intervals.

Policy Implications:

This study suggests that **active** contact can change behaviors and attitudes over the long-term about minority groups. LaCour and Green’s study noted further surges in support at the time of the Supreme Court decisions on gay marriage, when the topic was frequently in the news. The media coverage might have surfaced the issue in the minds of participants, which combined with the canvassing produced larger observed effects than might be expected without the media coverage. To address this concern, the researchers conducted a second study in August 2013, when media coverage had died down, in which they found results of similar magnitude.

Political canvassing is a ubiquitous tool of activists and political campaigns, so improvements to its efficiency could substantially diminish the costs of campaigns. This study suggests that active canvassing may be one such efficiency improvement that can lead to long-term support for a campaign’s candidate or issue.

References

LaCour, Michael J., and Donald Green. 2014. “When Contact Changes Minds: An Experiment on Transmission of Support for Gay Equality.” *Science* 346(6215): 1366-1369. Available at: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/346/6215/1366.full>[Accessed: 12 February 2015].