

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN THE 2008 ELECTION

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black youth project

{ Political Mobilization in the 2008 Election

The Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (MCPCE) Project was created to investigate the relationship between the political environment during the 2008 election and political behavior.¹ The study was a three-wave panel survey covering the period between October 2008 and January 2010;² over 3,000 respondents were interviewed, 85 percent of whom participated in both wave 1 and wave 3. Respondents were a representative sample of the U.S. population.³ In lieu of millions of people being asked by organizations to participate in the 2008 election, researchers and activists alike are interested in the effectiveness of voter-mobilization campaigns. From veteran's organizations to organizations promoting the interests of women, an avalanche of e-mails, phone calls, and door-stoop conversations blanketed cities and towns across the United States in the lead up to election day. Parsing the data from the MCPCE Project reveals interesting patterns about popular mobilization before and after the 2008 presidential election.

I. TYPES OF MOBILIZATION

What is mobilization?

Mobilization refers to any activity designed to increase the political involvement of citizens in a specific campaign.⁴ In the following analysis, mobilization is measured positively if a respondent was asked to become involved in a specific form of political participation (letter-writing, voting, etc.). From voter registration drives to Internet-based social networking, people were asked to participate in 2008 election campaigns by the millions. Seventy percent of respondents indicated that they were contacted by one or more organizations in the lead-up to the 2008 election. An important but often overlooked dimension of mobilization is what—beyond just voting—individuals are being asked to do. For instance, 9 percent of respondents said that they tried

to involve other people in the election, including going door to door. Of those who involved others (this group will be referred to in the following analysis as those involved⁵), 47 percent said that it was an organization that asked them to do the work. With these initial figures in mind, it's revealing to break down mobilization by organization type, method of contact, and where people (once involved) did their work.

ORGANIZATION TYPE

A general overview of the different types of organizations involved in mobilizing the public during the lead up to the presidential election is presented in table 1. Note that the respondents were asked to select all of the types of organizations that tried to get them to participate. As a result, the percentages do not sum to 100 and the frequencies do not sum to the total number of respondents (3,181).

¹For more information, visit the project Web site at <http://www.2008andbeyond.com>.

²Wave 1 was conducted from October 17 to November 3, 2008; wave 2 from May 30 to July 24, 2009; and wave 3 from November 24, 2009, to January 19, 2010.

³Cases were weighted to census (CPS) data. The study used a stratified sampling design; youth and ethnic minorities were oversampled in the survey.

⁴See Cathy Cohen and Michael Dawson, "Neighborhood Poverty and African Politics," *American Political Science Review* 87 no. 2 (1993): 286–302.

⁵For the purposes of this brief, participation is defined as a general term that incorporates actions such as voting and involving others in the campaign. The term involved only refers to those individuals that tried to get others to participate in the election (e.g., going door-to-door, phone conversations, etc.).

Table 1. Contact, by Organization Type (Wave 1)

Organization Type	Frequency	Percent
Social or recreational Group	158	5
Labor union	251	8
Political party	943	30
Political campaign	949	30
Veteran's organization	124	4
Women's organization	160	5
Racial/ethnic organization	100	3
Youth group	53	2
Professional organization	155	5
Place of worship	455	14
Neighborhood groups	210	7
People in your neighborhood	480	15
People at your job	545	17
People at children's school	105	3
People at your school	108	3
Other	333	10
Refused	943	30
Total contacted	2237	67

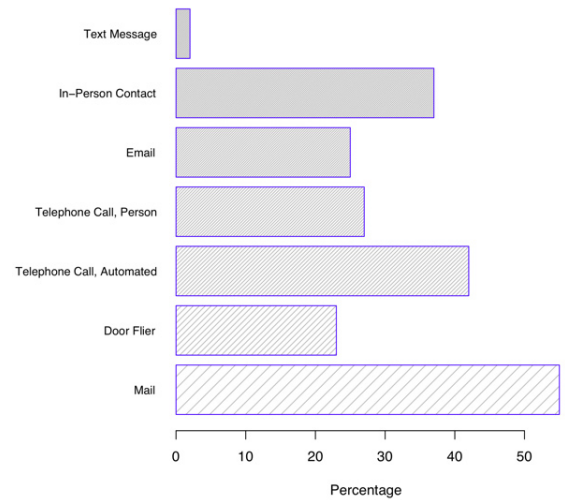
While the above list of organization types is not exhaustive, it testifies to the tremendous variety of organizations involved in trying to mobilize the electorate. Unsurprisingly, political parties and political campaigns are the most active in asking individuals to participate in the election. In addition, note that “everyday life” spaces like the workplace, school, and neighborhood are central locations where individuals were asked to participate in the election.

TYPE OF ACTION

Just as diverse as the types of organizations trying to mobilize the public are the means by which organizations deliver their message. Figure 1 shows how people were contacted in the lead up to the 2008 election.

While mailings were the most common form of contact, a large number of requests to go out and vote came from interpersonal communication—whether face-to-face or via telephone.

Figure 1. How people were contacted



LOCATION OF ELECTION WORK

As mentioned above, about 9 percent of respondents tried to involve other individuals in the election. Within this group, people were more likely to involve others closer (geographically) to themselves. Seventy-five percent of those involved did work in their neighborhood, in contrast to 32 percent in their city, 9 percent in their state, and 7 percent outside their state.⁶ Now that we’ve explored the key dimensions of mobilization, we’ll turn to an analysis of how different populations were differentially contacted and involved in the election.

2. AGE

Individuals between the ages of 18 and 34 were the least likely of any other age cohort to report being contacted by a political party or political campaign. Those under the age of 35 were 5 percent less likely to be asked to vote by an organization than people between 35 and 74. Similarly, individuals older than 35 accounted for 63 percent of

⁶These are not discrete categories—respondents may have tried to involve others in multiple places (state and neighborhood, for instance). Thus, the percentages don’t sum to 100.

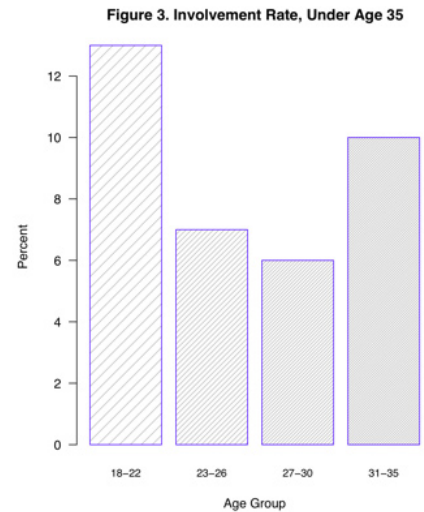
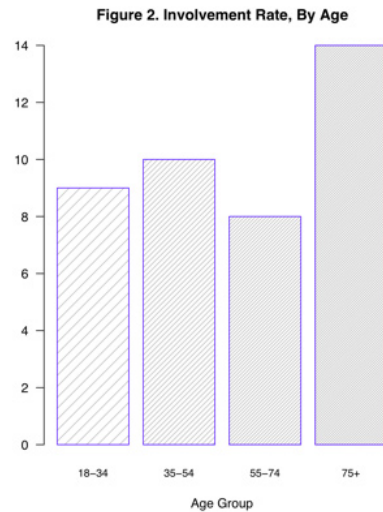


Table 2. Involvement Rate, by Reported Level of Education (Wave 1)

Level of Education	Refused	Yes	No	Total, %
Less than high school	1	6	93	100
High school	2	6	92	100
Some college	2	12	86	100
BA or higher	3	12	85	100
Total	2	9	88	100

all people who tried to involve others in the election; however, the rates of involvement for those both under and over 35 years old are approximately equal (9 percent and 10 percent, respectively).

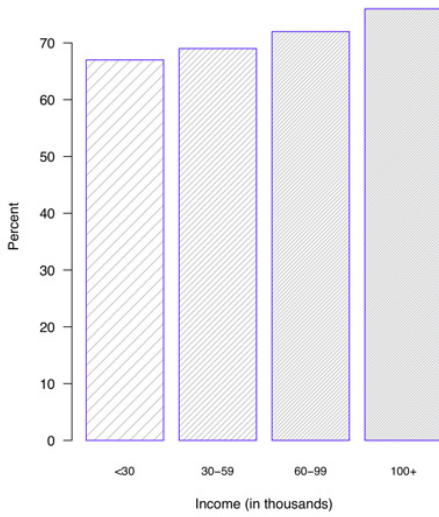
Figures 2 and 3 illustrate differences in who tried to involve others in the election by age cohort. The relatively high rate of involvement by 18–22-year-olds (and the dip in the mid- to late-twenties) suggests that, for many people, college years—or at the very least, periods of less stable work (when individuals have yet to settle into a particular career)—are when individuals have the time to get involved in the election. The mid-twenties are when people are busy trying to establish themselves in their life (getting married, starting a career, etc.) and are

thus probably less invested in political activity. When individuals are in their early thirties, they are more likely to be settled and have a closer attachment to the communities in which they live.⁷

While education didn't have a large role in who was asked to participate, it did play an important role in who became involved. As you can see above in table 2, those with at least some college were about twice as likely to report that they involved others in the election: This relationship holds across age cohorts. There is also an interesting pattern between age and where those involved did their work. Involved individuals under age 35 were more likely to work in their neighborhood (85%) than those over 35 years of age (67%). In all age cohorts, individuals were less likely to do work the farther out they were from their neighborhood.

⁷ See Steven J. Rosenstone and John M. Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

Figure 4. Contact Rate, By Income



*Note: Change (+/-) from wave 1 (before Nov. 2008) included in parenthesis.

Figure 5. Contact Rate, By Race

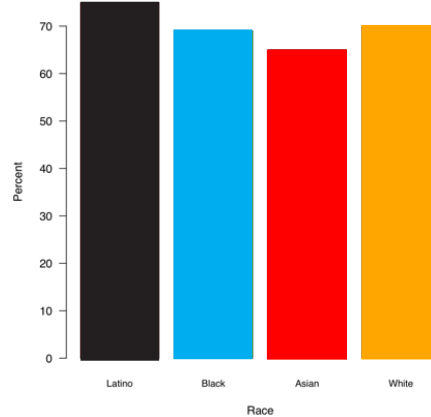
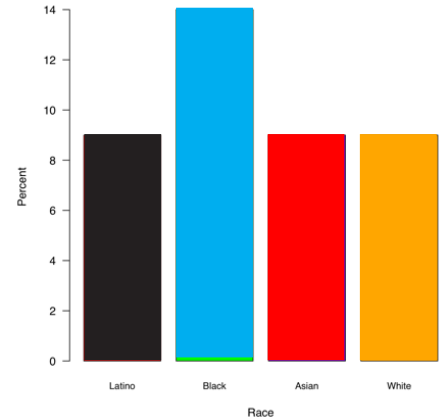


Figure 6. Involvement Rate, By Race



3. INCOME

The relationship between income and mobilization is a bit ambiguous. In general, as household income increases, so does the percentage of individuals that report being contacted by an organization (see figure 4); however, it's important to remember that within each of these income groups there is a tremendous amount of variation. If there is an effect, it's small.

Additionally, household income does not appear to correspond with how likely an individual is to report trying to get others to participate in the election.

4. RACE

Racial and ethnic groups were mobilized differently in the lead-up to the 2008 election. In this section, data from the MCPCE Project is broken down by different ethnic groups. Initially, white

respondents were almost twice as likely to report being contacted by a political party or political campaign than other groups (43 percent and 27 percent, respectively).⁸ Figures 5 and 6 compare rates of contact and involvement within different ethnic groups. Blacks appear to have higher rate of involvement when compared to other ethnic groups. After controlling for education, income, and age, blacks were still more likely to be involved.⁹

When looking at individuals under the age of 35, the pattern begins to shift a bit. Figure 7 suggests that Asian youth are significantly more likely to be involved relative to the entire involved Asian population. However, when you control for other variables like education and income, the effect disappears.¹⁰ Among those involved, with the exception of blacks, men were more likely to be involved than women. Among blacks,

⁸This relationship holds even when controlling for education, income, and age.

⁹Estimated by logistic regression.

¹⁰Estimated by logistic regression.

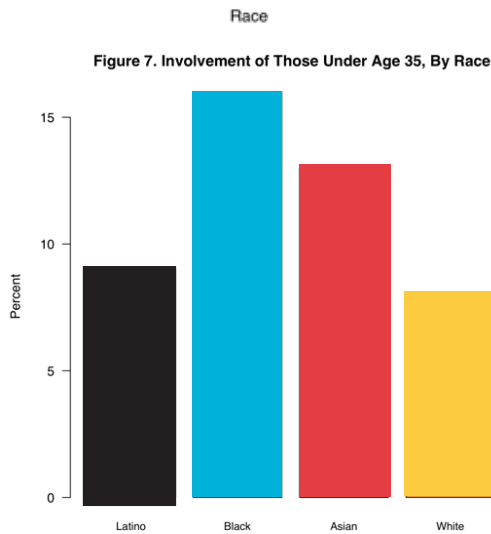
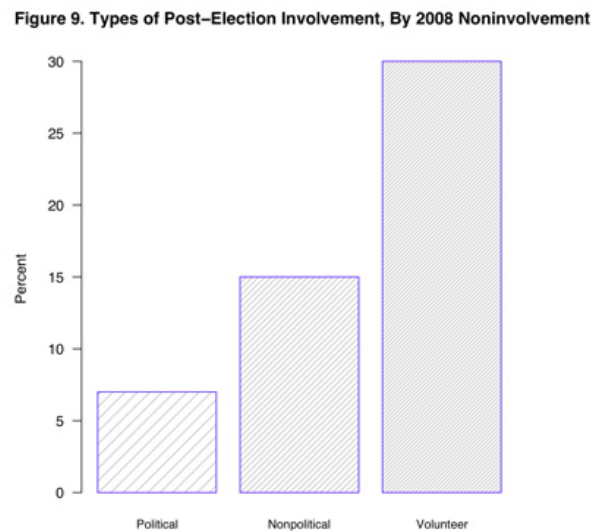
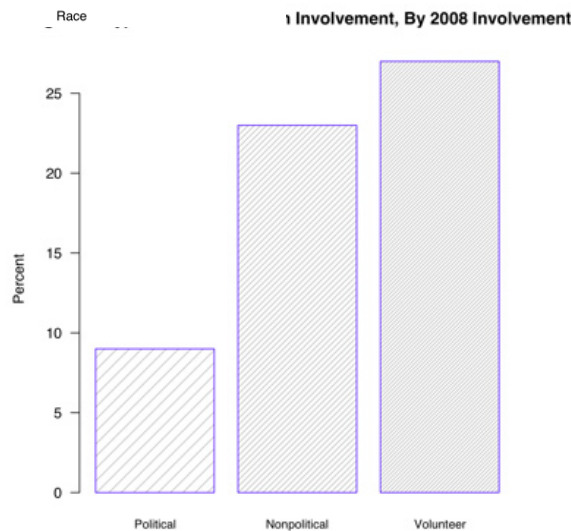


Table 3. Contact Rates, by Organization Type (Wave 3)

Organization Type	All (+/-)*	Youth	Black	Latino	Asian	Women
Social or Recreational group	5(0)	5(-3)	4(-3)	7(+3)	3(-4)	6(+2)
Labor union	6(+1)	6(-2)	6(-1)	5(+1)	7(0)	7(+1)
Political party	15(-15)	18(-2)	15(-6)	14(-5)	10(-11)	14(-16)
Political campaign	11(-19)	15(-6)	10(-13)	19(3)	16(-1)	10(-18)
Veteran's group	3(-1)	2(+1)	4(+2)	3(+1)	2(0)	3(0)
Women's group	5(0)	6(+3)	5(+3)	5(+2)	7(+4)	5(-2)
Racial/ethnic group	7(+4)	7(+4)	9(-1)	6(0)	6(+2)	7(+3)
Youth group	5(+3)	5(+2)	5(+2)	3(0)	7(+5)	4(+2)
Refused	36(+6)	40(+4)	39(+8)	35(+10)	39(+4)	35(+4)
Total contacted	36(-34)	40(-26)	39(-30)	35(-30)	40(-25)	35(-34)



however, women were 4 percent more likely to be involved than their male counterparts. Controlling for income, education, race, and gender, being a black woman is still a statistically significant predictor of involvement during the lead up to the 2008 election.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE ELECTION

Now that the election has come and gone, of particular interest to community activists and scholars alike

is whether individuals have continued to be contacted by organizations and continued to do work for political causes.¹¹ In this final section, the data from before (wave 1) and after (wave 3) the 2008 election are compared.

Of the respondents who were interviewed in the first wave of the study, 2,844 (85%) were re-interviewed after the 2008 election. Of those who were contacted in the lead-up to the

¹¹ For the purposes of this brief, political causes refer to issues with an explicitly governmental focus—issues centered on legislative policy changes or particular political candidates (e.g., ballot initiative, mayoral election). Nonpolitical causes are issues of importance to a particular community that are not directed at transforming legislative policy but still aimed at improving community well-being (e.g., volunteer tutoring, participating in the neighborhood watch, etc.).

Figure 10. Involvement Rate After 2008 (Political), By Race

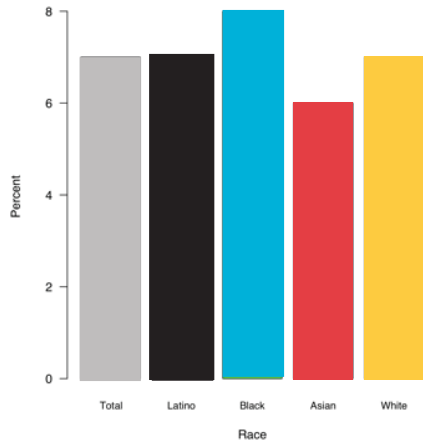


Figure 11. Under Age 35 Involvement Rate After 2008 (Political), By Race

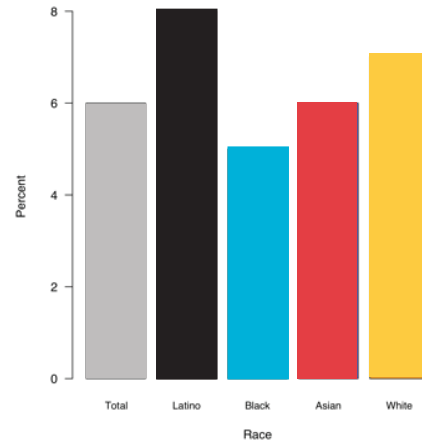


Figure 12. Involvement Rate After 2008 (Nonpolitical), By Race

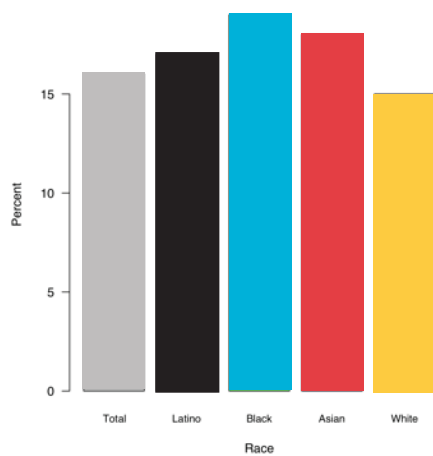
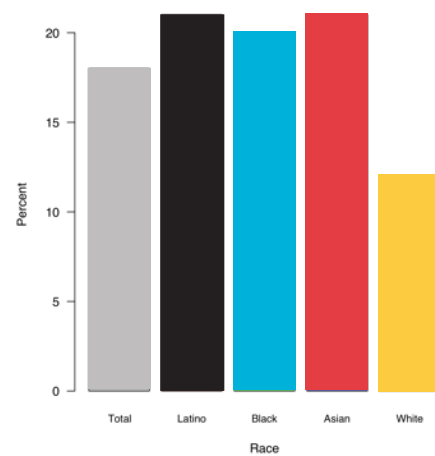


Figure 13. Under Age 35 Involvement Rate After 2008 (Nonpolitical), By Race



2008 election, after the election 36 percent were asked by an organization to get involved in some political activity and 19 percent were asked to be involved in a community or neighborhood activity. Table 3 breaks down rates of contact among different demographic groups by organization

As you can see from figures 8 and 9, those that were involved in the lead up to the 2008 election, unsurprisingly, were more likely to involve themselves in both political and nonpolitical

causes after the election. What is interesting is that those involved before November 2008 were almost twice as likely to report participating in nonpolitical community causes a year after the election than those who weren't involved in 2008. It may be that specific political mobilization increases the likelihood that an individual will participate in other, more general forms of community mobilization. Figures 10 and 11 present a snapshot of who was involved in political causes a year after the election. As you can

see, blacks continue to have the highest involvement rate of any ethnic group; however, black youth appear to be less involved in political causes than youth in other ethnic groups.

Figures 12 and 13 look at the same relationships among youth (under age 35). White youth, while politically active, appear to be substantially less involved in nonpolitical causes, compared with youth in other ethnic groups.

2010 AND BEYOND

Voter-mobilization campaigns were extremely active in the lead-up to the 2008 election. Millions of people were contacted by organizations to participate,

and hundreds of thousands answered the call to involve themselves in the election in ways beyond just voting. From data collected by the MCPCE Project, we've seen important patterns in popular mobilization—different communities (defined in terms of demographic characteristics) were mobilized in different ways. Looking forward, one of the most important results from the above analysis is that the effects of political mobilization don't end once the election season concludes; rather, political mobilization contributes to continued general mobilization. A concern for politics appears to translate into a concern for general community well-being.