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Vincent Pons, Vestal McIntyre

► To cite this version:

Vincent Pons, Vestal McIntyre. Ground work vs. social media: how to best reach voters in French municipal elections?. 2020. halshs-02515651

HAL Id: halshs-02515651

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02515651>

Submitted on 23 Mar 2020


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GROUND WORK VS. SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW TO BEST REACH VOTERS IN FRENCH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS?

IPP Policy Briefs 

n° 50 

February 2020 

Vincent Pons* 
Vestal McIntyre 

www.ipp.eu 

*Author of the reference study

Summary

Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are widely considered important, if controversial, channels for candidates and parties around the world to communicate with citizens and win votes. While political parties in France make less use of social media than in the U.S. and other Western democracies, there is disagreement of how it will affect French democracy. But discussions of the promise and peril of social media's role in elections may miss a higher-order issue: what limited evidence exists suggests that outreach via social media has little effect on voting behavior. By contrast, a series of studies show that face-to-face canvassing has a strong potential to mobilize and persuade voters. These findings give grounds for parties to increase their canvassing efforts, and for the government to enact policies that ease the way for citizens to participate in elections.

- While parties in France invest less money in social media political ads than in the U.S. or U.K. (even taking into account the difference in population), French local officials have as much reach as American local officials.
- One study in the U.S. showed a Facebook campaign had statistically significant but very small effect on getting people to go vote, while another found that Facebook ads had no effects on voters' opinions of candidates.
- By contrast, a series of studies based in France show that door-to-door canvassing has relatively large effects on the three margins where candidates can win votes: (1) by bringing in new voters through registration, (2) by mobilizing existing supporters to get out and vote, and (3) by persuading voters who are undecided to support their candidate.
- The turnout in municipal elections is smaller than in presidential ones. This may mean that candidates can most effectively win votes by focusing on the second channel, engaging volunteers to motivate supporters to go to the polls.
- One of the keys to the forthcoming elections may be whether En Marche is better or less able than the PS and other mainstream parties to mobilize its volunteers for the field campaign.
- Relying on parties to mobilize voters may exacerbate disparities in political participation. The state could counteract this effect by enacting policies encouraging and facilitating participation, such as automatic registration.



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Introduction

The use of social media in elections has been portrayed both as an important innovation and a threat to democracy. However, for all the controversy, there is little clear evidence on how outreach on social media affects voting behavior.

By contrast, a series of studies suggest that face-to-face canvassing has a strong potential to mobilize and persuade voters. This may be good news in a time of anxiety about technology-based election interference and uneven participation in democracy across social groups.

Political parties have limited resources, and must make hard decisions on which methods of outreach are worthy of investment. By engaging in field campaigns, they may strengthen democracy as well as their own prospects. We believe there is a relatively clear call for increased focus on old-fashioned, door-to-door canvassing, and that policy should ease the way to increased participation.

Social media in elections

Social media's potential as a means to win votes gained international attention after the U.S. presidential election of 2008, in which the Obama campaign was recognized for its effective online campaign. In an interview, Scott Thomas, the Chief Designer of Obama's campaign, said, "The campaign used platforms such as MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook to develop an interactive relationship between citizen consumers and their brand, so that the election of Barack Obama in 2008 really seemed to be the advent in political marketing, information and communication technologies, and in particular social media" (Baygert, 2015).

French politicians and parties are slower to use social media to reach voters than their counterparts in U.S. and some other Western democracies. There are sizable differences in the money invested on social media political ads, even taking the difference in population. Between November 2019 and January 2020, campaigns in France have spent €2.6m on political ads on Facebook, versus €14.2m in the UK and €163m in the U.S., according to Facebook's reporting tool.¹

¹See: <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/?source=archive-landing-page&country=EN>. Data files are available for export at the bottom of the webpage, after selecting the country in the top right menu.

Yet, while national-level politicians in France have smaller Twitter reach in terms of percentage of the population, local officials tend to have at least as many followers, as table 1 below shows.

Many candidates see social media as the next frontier, and consider a presence on social media as a test of modernity and a way to show relevance among young voters. Social media is the primary source of information for more than 21% of voters aged under 35 in France.²

On the other hand, there are well-founded concerns³ that if social media plays a larger role in French elections, that may lead to the creation of "echo chambers" where citizens are fed only the information and views that bolster their political position, easy circulation of disinformation, and the questionable use of data by tech giants and third parties. These worries are mainly based, again, on American elections.⁴

In the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the spread of "fake news" via social media famously reached unprecedented numbers. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) use web browser data and a survey to show that the penetration of fake news was indeed large, and heavily skewed in favor of Trump. They estimate 760 million instances of a user clicking through and reading a fake news story, or about three stories read per American adult, and that the average adult saw and remembered 1.14 fake stories.

Trump himself believes that social media played an important role in his victory, but as a means of communicating directly with voters, bypassing a hostile mainstream media. "I think that maybe I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Twitter," he said in a 2017 interview.⁵

Today, French law reflects caution about the use of social media in elections. While parties can buy social media ads advocating for the causes they defend, it is forbidden to buy ads directly promoting a candidate or a party six months or less before an election. This doesn't stop par-

²Source: Franceinfo, 18 Feb 2019. "Les réseaux sociaux première source d'info en ligne chez les personnes sensibles aux théories du complot". Accessed 2 Feb 2020: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/internet/reseaux-sociaux/info-franceinfo-les-reseaux-sociaux-premiere-source-d-info-en-ligne-chez-les-personnes-sensibles-aux-theories-du-complot_3191963.html

³Source: La Croix, 2 Feb 2017. "Baromètre des médias, les Français veulent une 'information vérifiée' ". Accessed 2 Feb 2020 : <https://www.la-croix.com/Economie/Medias/Barometre-medias-Francais-veulent-information-verifiee-2017-02-02-1200821914>

⁴Source: La Croix, 2 Feb 2017. "Baromètre des médias, les Français veulent une "information vérifiée".

⁵Source: RealClear Politics, 15 March 2017. "Trump: "I Wouldn't Be Here If It Wasn't For Twitter," "I Have My Own Form Of Media". Accessed 2 Feb. 2020: https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/03/15/trump_i_wouldnt_be_here_if_it_wasnt_for_twitter_i_have_my_own_form_of_media.html.

Table 1: Nombre d'abonnés Twitter des 10 personnalités politiques ayant le plus d'abonnés, en France et aux États-Unis

Etats-Unis			France		
Personnalités politiques	Abonnés (in thousands)	% population	Personnalités politiques	Abonnés (in thousands)	% population
Barack Obama	112 778	34,5%	Emmanuel Macron	4 462	6,7%
Donald Trump	71 917	22,0%	Marine Le Pen	2 338	3,5%
Hillary Clinton	26 610	8,1%	Nicolas Sarkozy	2 306	3,4%
Bill Clinton	11 538	3,5%	François Hollande	2 249	3,4%
Bernie Sanders	10 403	3,2%	Jean-Luc Mélenchon	2 085	3,1%
Mike Pence	8 446	2,6%	Alain Juppé	1 019	1,5%
Elizabeth Warren	5 584	1,7%	Ségolène Royale	743	1,1%
Joe Biden	4 129	1,3%	François Bayrou	696	1,0%
Marco Rubio	4 054	1,2%	François Fillon	619	0,9%
Nancy Pelosi	3 798	1,2%	Édouard Philippe	489	0,7%

Table 2: Nombre d'abonnés Twitter des maires des 10 plus grandes villes, en France et aux États-Unis

United States			France		
Mayor	Followers (in thousands)	% population of the city	Mayor	Followers (in thousands)	% population of the city
Bill de Blasio (New York City)	1 321	15,4%	Anne Hidalgo (Paris)	1 486	67,3%
Eric Garcetti (Los Angeles)	293	7,2%	Jean-Claude Gaudin (Marseille)	30	3,5%
Lori Lightfoot (Chicago)	52	1,9%	Gérard Collomb (Lyon)	161	31,4%
Sylvester Turner (Houston)	92	3,9%	Jean-Luc Moudenc (Toulouse)	23	4,9%
Kate Gallego (Phoenix)	13	0,7%	Christian Estrosi (Nice)	167	48,6%
Jim Kenney (Philadelphie)	63	4,0%	Johanna Rolland (Nantes)	54	17,7%
Ron Nirenberg (San Antonio)	21	1,4%	Philippe Saurel (Montpellier)	20	7,3%
Kevin Faulconer (San Diego)	29	2,0%	Roland Ries (Strasbourg)	11	3,8%
Eric Johnson (Dallas)	21	1,5%	Alain Juppé (Bordeaux)	1 019	408,1%
Sam Liccardo (San José)	29	2,8%	Martine Aubry (Lille)	166	71,4%

ties and candidates themselves from posting and tweeting, as is made clear in table 2 below, comparing the recent outputs of the different parties' official accounts.

Does social media succeed in changing voter behavior?

How effective can these efforts be to win votes? The most reliable information will come from randomized controlled trials – that is, experiments that apply a program to a randomly selected treatment group of individuals and then compare the effects to a control group. This method is originated in medical science as a means to test out new drugs, but has become widely used to measure the impact of policies.

Bond et al. (2012) conducted a randomized controlled trial among all voting-age people who logged onto Facebook on the day of the 2010 U.S. midterm elections – over 60 million people. The research team tested several different methods of using Facebook features to prompt users to vote, including simple reminders in their feed, information on polling sites, and “social messages” showing the faces of friends who identified themselves as having voted. The study found that users who received social

messages were slightly more likely to vote (0.39% more likely, to be exact) than users who received no message at all. A social message featuring the face of a close friend had a greater effect, and a simple informational message on voting had none.

Due to the size of its sample, this experiment could identify even tiny effects on behavior with statistical significance, yet it spoke only to the question of motivating people to vote for their preferred candidate. Another experiment by Broockman and Green (2014) was able to measure campaigns' effects on vote choice, not just on turnout. Two candidates for legislative office in the U.S. – a Republican candidate for state legislative office and a Democratic candidate for Congress – targeted randomly selected segments of their constituencies for weeklong, high-volume of Facebook advertising. The research team then used telephone surveys to measure recall of the ads, candidate name recognition, and candidate evaluations. The study found little effect: voters randomly assigned to view the ads were no more likely to recall the candidates' names, did not significantly update their opinions of the candidates, and sometimes did not recall viewing the ads at all.

This is in line with evidence that the effects of commercial online advertising are so small and variable that under-

standing whether they are cost effective will likely remain “nearly impossible” (Lewis and Rao, 2012).

Evidence on canvassing

And so, the focus on either the promise or peril of social media may overlook a first-order concern, that the scant evidence available points to weak effects on voting behavior. But we do have ample evidence of the impact of field campaigns, and it suggests that candidates still underinvest in reaching voters face-to-face.

To examine the effects of canvassing in detail, it is helpful to take a step back and think theoretically. There are three ways for a political party to get more votes:

- First, they can bring in new voters through registration.
- Second, they can mobilize their supporters to vote – meaning they can convince their supporters who are at the margin of voting and not voting to come out on election day.
- And third, they can persuade people who will vote, but are undecided on whom to vote for, to support their candidate.

Most prior research focused on the second margin of mobilizing voters, because this outcome is easiest to study. There is a clear definition of the sample within which to estimate effects – registered voters – and administrative turnout data is available at the individual level. Instead, a series of studies by one of us, Vincent, and coauthors looked at each of these channels.

Table 3: Number of Facebook posts and tweets published on the main French parties’ official accounts, from Jan 1 to Jan 31 2020

Party	Followers Facebook	Posts Facebook, january 2020	Followers Twitter	Tweets, january 2020
RN	456 345	91	243 300	281
LR	194 972	21	278 500	303
PS	132 667	29	214 500	265
LREM	236 690	69	273 700	178
LFI	150 437	21	87 000	141
EELV	53 992	3	157 100	33

Another unique aspect of the research is that, while most of the research on the effects of field campaigns is based on U.S. elections, Vincent’s experiments took place in France and other European countries. And the studies

represent some of the largest randomized studies of elections.

On the first channel, Vincent and coauthors Céline Braconnier and Jean-Yves Dormagen assigned 20,500 apartments to one control or six treatment groups that received canvassing visits providing either information about registration or help to register at home, in order to vote in the 2012 presidential elections (Braconnier, Dormagen, and Pons, 2017). Before the visits, they went building by building, writing down names found on mailboxes, comparing them to names in the voter rolls, and defining as sample the people who were present on the mailboxes but not on the voter rolls. While both information and home registration visits increased registration by an average of 29%, home registration visits had the greatest impact. Furthermore, 93% of citizens registered due to the visits voted at least once in 2012. Finally, by the time of the post-electoral survey, political interest and information were larger in the treatment groups than in the control group, suggesting that citizens registered due to the visits became more interested and attentive to the elections as a result of being able to participate in them. On the whole, these results suggest that easing registration requirements could substantially enhance political participation and interest while improving representation of all groups.

On the second channel – of mobilizing voters – Vincent and Guillaume Liegey randomly assigned 23,800 citizens in ethnically diverse neighborhoods to receive get-out-the-vote visits from PS activists during the lead-up to the 2010 French regional elections (Pons and Liegey, 2019). Again, using administrative voter rolls and turnout data at the individual level, they found that the canvassers’ visits increased the turnout of naturalized immigrants by 3.4 percentage points in the first round and 2.8 percentage points in the second round without having any statistically significant effect on other citizens. These findings suggest that voter outreach efforts can successfully increase immigrants’ political participation, even when they do not specifically target their communities and concerns.

Finally, on winning over undecided voters, Vincent embedded a countrywide experiment in François Hollande’s campaign in the 2012 French presidential election (Pons, 2018). An estimated 80,000 left-wing activists knocked on 5 million doors to encourage people to vote for the PS candidate. Previous studies randomized at the individual level use exit polls to measure effects on vote choices, as actual votes of individuals are, of course, secret. The is-

sue is that survey questions recording self-reported vote are particularly prone to misreporting. Instead, the scale of this study allowed randomization by precinct, the level at which vote shares are recorded administratively, allowing for a confident estimate of the effects of visits. The study found that canvassers did not affect turnout, but increased Hollande's vote share by 3.2 percentage points in the first and 2.8 in the second, accounting for one-fourth of his victory margin. Visits' impact persisted in later elections, suggesting a lasting persuasion effect. This constituted the first hard evidence that door-to-door campaigns actually affect electoral outcomes.

If we compare these estimates of the effects of canvassing to the effects of social media in the studies cited above, we see that they are orders of magnitude larger. This is likely due to the particular strengths of door-to-door canvassing: that it entails direct and personal contact, allowing the canvasser to personalize the message and fine-tune it based on the listener's reactions. Such personal contact may be the key to convincing disinterested voters.

What does this mean for contenders in the 2020 municipal election?

A savvy candidate would do well to consider the channels for gaining votes.

The first channel – of registering new voters – is now closed since the registration deadline was 7 February. And while there is potential for candidates to use canvassing to gain an edge via the third channel – persuading voters – this may prove more difficult in races in which voters have less preexisting knowledge on the candidates than in a presidential election on average.

So it may be through the second channel, of mobilizing supporters to vote, that municipal candidates have the greatest potential to gain an edge at this point in the campaign. The level of participation (and salience) of municipal elections is usually lower than presidential, but higher than parliamentary elections. In the last municipal elections in 2014, 64 and 62% of registered citizens voted in the first and second round, respectively. Compare that to 78/75% in the 2017 presidential elections and 49/43% in the 2017 parliamentary elections. Given this middling baseline turnout in municipal elections, candidates can target people who may not vote in municipal but do vote

in presidential elections. As they already have the habit of voting, they may be easy to convince to come out.

Which parties are best positioned to utilize door-to-door campaigns? It is an interesting question to consider, though we do not have evidence to draw firm conclusions.

Candidates can only knock on so many doors themselves. Hence, they need to rely on other people on the ground, and given the limits in campaign expenditures, this means unpaid volunteers. Even in small municipalities, where candidates could reasonably meet a substantial fraction of voters, evidence suggests that volunteers may be more effective as they are likely to be perceived by voters as more disinterested and bring legitimacy to the candidates. An experiment that Vincent conducted with coauthor Enrico Cantoni during the 2014 Italian municipal elections, showed that canvassers' visits increased turnout by 1.8 percentage points, while visits from the candidates themselves had no impact on participation (Cantoni and Pons, 2017).

So, which party will be able to motivate such volunteers? In embedding an experiment in the 2012 Hollande campaign, Vincent and his team were able to leverage an army of tens of thousands of PS volunteers – many of them longstanding party members. Four years later, well before the 2017 presidential elections, Emmanuel Macron successfully mobilized a set of less experienced and younger volunteers for the “grande marche,” a listening campaign in the entire country. It is unclear whether the PS and other established parties can mobilize their members once again to defend their strongholds and reelect incumbent mayors, and whether En Marche will be able to remobilize its volunteers – who may have become disillusioned after the realities of the bureaucratic realities of a ruling party – to canvas for lesser known local candidates. Whichever party most effectively overcomes these challenges will gain an edge that may very well prove decisive in the forthcoming elections.⁶

What does this mean for policy?

Increasing participation in elections is an enduring goal for policy in any healthy democracy, and the choice to reach voters via canvassing represents a particular instance where candidates have an incentive to do what's

⁶Le Monde, 6 April 2016. “La machine Macron se met en marche.” Accessed 2 Feb. 2020: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/04/21/emmanuel-macron-turbulent-locataire-de-bercy_4905760_823448.html

good for democracy. By mobilizing voters, they can both win votes and perhaps make participation more equal by increasing the turnout younger voters, immigrants, and other disenfranchised groups. Furthermore, discussions that take place at the doorsteps are a positive example of deliberative democracy in an age of impersonal interactions and polarization of views in online “echo chambers”. Policy can work to preserve these positive effects of canvassing by being particularly vigilant about the content of campaigns – in other words, monitoring the accuracy of facts mentioned in the material they distribute.

From the point of view of political equality, relying on parties to mobilize voters may not be a fully satisfactory proposition, because differential mobilization efforts are unlikely to lead to fully unbiased representation (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck, 2014).

The state could counteract this effect by explicitly adopting the goal of encouraging and facilitating participation. There is in fact some urgency in doing this, given how much participation has been dropping in the last decades. Establishing a later registration deadline was a step in the right direction, but more can be done to make voting easier. Citizens wishing to vote by proxy must register with the police and often face long queues, which may deter them. This process could be simplified and more resources could be allocated to it. Also, the state could automatically register people who acquire citizenship – since, in the process, they have already provided much more information than is required to register to vote – or all citizens, as is the case in Italy, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Australia, Indonesia, and many other democracies.

Finally, there is always the option to make voting compulsory, as is practiced in countries such as Argentina, Australia, and Brazil. Though many will see this as an extreme option, such a measure would go a long way in making elections better reflect the will of the people.

Authors

Vincent Pons is a Professor at the Harvard Business School and a member of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Vestal McIntyre is a staff writer for “Evidence for Policy Design” at the Harvard Kennedy School.

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