

**Invitation Phone Calls Increase Attendance at Civic Meetings:  
Evidence from a Field Experiment**

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## **Invitation Phone Calls Increase Attendance at Civic Meetings: Evidence from a Field Experiment**

Along with implementing sound policies, public managers are expected to manage public participation in the policy process. Civic meetings, in which citizens, elected officials and public managers discuss proposed policies, can be an effective venue for citizen input, but only if participation is sufficiently high. This paper shows that municipal government managers can improve attendance at civic meetings through invitation phone calls. Results from a field experiment in which stakeholders were randomly assigned to receive an invitation phone call for a civic meeting indicate that invitation phone calls can significantly increase meeting attendance. The attendance rate among the 108 stakeholders selected to receive the phone call was higher than among the 169 stakeholders in the control group (8.3 versus 4.7 percent). The \$20 cost of increasing meeting attendance by one stakeholder is about equal to the cost of increasing turnout in an election by one voter.

Public meetings and hearings would seem to be the ideal venue for allowing city stakeholders – managers, council members, and the general public – to discuss important, but perhaps narrow and technical, city matters. Public input can improve public administration and policy decisions (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). But all too often, public participation in such meetings and forums is disappointingly low, with only a few oft-heard voices present. The public wants its voice to *have been heard*, but does not always show up in the venues designed for that to happen. Yet when city councils charge managers with pursuing policy, they often require that the process not only offer opportunities for citizen input but also that these opportunities result in meaningful participation. City managers in the US have always had to respond to public input, but now it has become a challenge they must actively manage (Berman 1997).

From a practical perspective, public input can improve policies by providing feedback from those most directly affected and those who might have expertise on how different options would work. From a political perspective, elected politicians need to understand their constituents' opinions to remain in office. Managers who engage the public to build towards early consensus can avoid later backlash when citizens find out that their cities' policies are not what they want. More broadly, participation increases legitimacy as citizens are more likely to buy into government policy after fellow citizens' and their voices have been heard (Olken 2010).

What managers need is guidance for identifying low cost ways to increase citizens' participation in public meetings. In this paper, we examine how invitation phone calls to stakeholders can help municipal managers increase participation in civic meetings. Using a simple but powerful experimental research design, we show that supplemental invitation phone calls from a municipal government employee increase public attendance at a municipal civic meeting beyond participation achieved through the government's standard publicity procedures.

In addition, we show that supplemental postcards inserted into standard meeting invitations do not help to increase meeting attendance. The experiment was carried out for a meeting regarding policy options for renovating the downtown commercial district in Ames, Iowa, a fairly typical Midwestern city. The target population for the meeting was the districts' 277 in-state residents and small business owners with listed phone numbers, 108 of whom were randomly selected to receive brief invitation phone calls. Attendance at the meeting was 75% higher among stakeholders receiving the invitation phone call as for the control group who received only the city government's standard meeting publicity, 8.3 percent versus 4.7 percent. Depending on statistical modeling assumptions, the difference in attendance between those receiving phone calls and those not ranges from 3.6% to 6.3%, with confidence levels around 88 percent. The fact that these results come from an experiment conducted under realistic field conditions increases our confidence that invitation phone calls are an effective tool to increase meeting attendance.

The finding that short invitation phone calls increased participation at this meeting is instructive because the meeting was typical of civic participation challenges many municipal governments face: downtown renewal is a common issue in municipal politics, and small business owners are frequent stakeholders in municipal affairs. While a personalized invitation phone call may seem expensive, the calls were in fact quite brief, allowing a city employee to complete 100 of them in four hours over two evenings. The findings are also instructive because they allow us to calculate the cost-effectiveness of phone calls for increasing participation.

The first section of this paper reviews the background on civic participation and experiments to improve civic engagement. The second section describes the research settings and methods. The third section presents the results and the fourth offers guidance for municipal

managers considering whether to use phone calls to improve meeting attendance. The final section offers thoughts on the importance of public participation and future research.

## **Public Participation in Municipal Governance**

The United States has a rich history of citizen engagement in government (Cooper, Bryer and Meek 2006), but activities such as sending letters to elected politicians (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, Sylvester and McGlynn 2010) and attending public meetings about civic events and decisions have been in decline (Sinclair-Chapman, Walker, and Gillion 2009). Civic meetings remain a common practice in municipal governance, with around 97 percent of municipal governments using them (Berman 1997). For many commentators, civic participation in public meetings, in which citizens, elected officials and public managers engage in dialogue about public issues, has important normative (Fung 2007) and instrumental virtues (Moynihan 2003). Meetings can be a venue for citizen input in a setting where face-to-face deliberation encourages compromise, shared responsibility for solving problems, and sharing information and views that that might otherwise have gone unheard (Fung 2007, Morse 2006) leading to government policies that better reflect citizens' needs. Beyond improving the quality of discourse and government's decisions, civic meetings can also instill among participants a better sense of trust and civic identity (Bryan 2004, Barber 2003, Halvorsen 2003, Mansbridge 1983). Of course, not all civic meetings achieve such lofty promise, and they can even degenerate into conflict that widens political divides, exacerbates mistrust, and generates paralysis. With high potential and lowly pitfalls – and in practice most civic meetings fall somewhere in between – it's no wonder that so much of the scholarship on civic meetings focuses on making them work (e.g., Moynihan 2003, Yang and Callahan 2007). Much of this research focuses on what public

managers can do in civic meetings to ensure effective deliberation (e.g., Innes and Booher 2003) and “authentic participation” (e.g., King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). Others present useful frameworks for evaluating how and when public participation can work (e.g., Fung 2007), including how public managers can identify the conditions when civic meetings can work best (Irvin and Stansbury 2004).

City councils and mayors want municipal managers to offer not just pro forma opportunities for citizen input but meaningful opportunities that can improve policies by providing feedback from those most directly affected and those with expertise on how different options would work. Public participation can also increase legitimacy as citizens are more likely to buy into government policy after their voices have been heard (Olken 2010). Municipal managers who engage the public to build towards early consensus can often avoid later conflict. To help them respond to the new demands for civic engagement, municipal managers need low cost ways to increase citizens’ attendance at civic meetings.

There is little research on what steps can increase participation in civic meetings (but see Laurian 2004), an important omission because despite their widespread use in municipal governments around the United States, attendance at many meetings is problematically low. A first step in a successful civic meeting is getting people to show up. According to some estimates, the probability that a person attends a meeting on school or town events in a given year is less than five percent (Sinclair-Chapman, Walker, and Gillion 2009). In recent years, political science has generated a stream of strong research, much of it with rigorous field experiment research designs, on interventions that improve turnout in elections (Green and Gerber 2008). There are now established ways to improve electoral turnout, including through personal contact (Gerber and Green 2000), the influence of social networks (Gerber, Green and

Larimer 2008, Nickerson 2008, Middleton and Green 2008), “knock on door” canvassing (Arceneaux 2007), and invitation calls from professionals and volunteers (Gerber and Green 2001, Nickerson 2006). Since attendance at a civic meetings has some commonalities with voting, phone calls may increase attendance at civic meetings as well. This paper builds on voter turnout research by employing a field experiment in which a subset of the population targeted for participation in a civic meeting received an invitation phone call from an employee of the municipal government hosting the meeting.

## **Research Setting and Methods**

The setting for this research is the city of Ames, Iowa. Ames is a fairly typical Midwestern university town, with a population of about 50,000 and a median income of \$36,000. The population is 87.3 percent white. The city has a Mayor-Council form of government with a City Manager. The Council appoints the City Manager and sets policy for the city government. The City Manager is the city’s chief administrator and is responsible for carrying out the Council’s policy, appointing department heads to each of twelve departments, managing city business, and overseeing the annual budget of approximately 180 million dollars (City of Ames, 2011).

The civic meeting selected for study offered an agenda with two items of particular interest to downtown business owners and residents. The first item was discussion of the Downtown Façade Assistance Program. Managed by the Planning and Housing Department, the Downtown Façade Assistance Program offers two types of support for businesses wishing to improve non-residential buildings in a portion of the city’s Main Street Cultural District: matching grants of up to \$15,000 for store front improvements and property tax abatements for

tax increases resulting from improvements. The second item was discussion of a possible municipal code setting aesthetic criteria for storefronts. If adopted, a business owner would need to meet this code should she decide to remodel or upgrade her storefront. Main Street improvements and building codes are a common topic for municipal governments; cities all over the country, ranging from Philomath, Oregon to West Haven, Connecticut, have programs similar to Ame's Downtown Façade Assistance Program.

The key stakeholders the city targeted for the meeting were 277 Main Street residents and business owners, a clearly defined and relatively large stakeholder group. Ame's Main Street businesses are typical of cities of its size and include restaurants and coffee shops, a few small service firms such as accounting and law firms, along with jewelry, craft, and shoe stores. The aim of the meeting was to solicit input from downtown residents, business owners, and managers to gauge reaction to the proposed storefront uniformity requirement. The meeting's agenda items were only moderately pressing to Main Street business owners and to the community in general, so participation was expected to be modest. However, this is precisely the type of topic for which public participation could have high payoff. Should the city government choose to implement an aesthetic code, city officials believed that the downtown business owners and residents would have strong opinions when it came time for storefront upgrades. By airing their views in a public forum, the business owners would help the city to develop a policy that better fits their preferences and has more legitimacy once enacted.

The meeting for the Downtown Façade Assistance Program was open to the public, and the city followed its standard protocol for advertising civic meetings:

1. The meeting was announced through local newspapers and radio stations.

2. Invitation letters were sent to individuals and businesses in the geographic area affected by the meeting agenda.
3. Meeting notices were published in the city's newsletter, which is mailed to all residents with their monthly utility bill statements.
4. Meeting notices were posted on the city's web page.
5. Meeting notices were posted on a local public access television channel.

The meeting was held at 7:00 p.m. on March 15, 2010 at City Hall, consistent with standard Ames city government civic meeting practices. Twenty-three citizens attended the meeting, seventeen of whom represented businesses in the city's Main Street Cultural District. The meeting covered its agenda with broad and active participation and input from attendees.

The Downtown Façade Assistance Program meeting offers a chance to explore the effects of phone calls on meeting participation using an approach that can be scaled for larger or smaller jurisdictions. To identify whether the phone calls improved participation at the meeting, stakeholders were randomly assigned to either a treatment group to receive both the standard information and the phone call from the city employee inviting them to attend the meeting or a control group to receive only the standard information that the city uses to invite citizens to its civic meetings. Of course, a city might choose to telephone all stakeholders instead of just a sample. However, for our research purposes, random assignment to treatment and control groups isolates how much the invitation phone calls increased participation over the city's standard practices. In addition, 132 stakeholders were randomly assigned to receive an additional postcard in with the standard mailing to assess whether invitation by postcard might improve meeting attendance.

The target constituency for the meeting was identified by the city's Planning and Housing Department as individuals who owned and/or operated a business or building in the downtown business district and individuals with a residential address in the downtown area (mostly people residing in lofts above the businesses). Among this group of 370 stakeholders were 33 property owners with out-of-state addresses. These were not considered part of the target population for the meeting and were removed from the population to be assigned to the control and treatment groups. In addition, 60 stakeholders had unlisted numbers and were removed from the analysis since random assignment assures an unbiased estimate and no municipal employee could contact those with unlisted numbers.<sup>1</sup> The remaining 277 stakeholders were each assigned a random number for assignment to the treatment and control group.

A mid-level city government manager made the treatment group telephone calls over a total of four hours between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on two nights the week prior to the scheduled civic meeting. The government manager sorted the stakeholder list by the random number and moved through the list, starting with the lowest and, due to time constraints, ending when 100 calls had been completed. When possible, the city employee spoke with the person whose name appeared on the treatment group list. If that individual was not available, the city employee left a message with a staff member, a family member, or on the answering machine. Eight stakeholders could not be contacted either directly or via message. The phone calls opened with the following script:

Hello, my name is [...], and I am calling on behalf of the City of Ames to invite you to the upcoming meeting on Monday, March 15, 2010 at 7:00 p.m. at City Hall in the Council Chambers. The agenda is the possible modification of zoning requirements for

the downtown district. You should have received a letter detailing this meeting and how it pertains to you as a downtown business owner. Your input on this subject is important to us, and we hope you will attend. Additional information is also available on the City of Ames web site at [www.cityofames.org](http://www.cityofames.org) under the Planning and Housing Department link.

After the city employee finished reading the prepared script, respondents gave a variety of responses. Only one stated he was planning to attend the meeting. Six respondents indicated they would be unable to attend the meeting. Two respondents asked questions about the meeting either because they claimed to have not received prior information about the meeting or they could not remember details about the meeting. The others offered no noteworthy response. The city employee answered questions by referencing the letter and encouraging stakeholders to visit the city website or contact the Planning and Housing Department for further information. The phone calls lasted on average about two and a half minutes.

In addition to the contact phone calls, the city employee randomly inserted postcards into the standard city government meeting publicity mailing sent to stakeholder businesses and residents. The postcards contained a short message explaining how much the city government valued citizen input in its decisions.

All those attending the Downtown Façade Assistance Program civic meeting signed in at the start of the meeting with their name, business name, address, and email address. Attendance at the meeting was low, as is typical of such meetings. Table 1 reports the number of people who attended the meeting, as well as the numbers assigned to phone call and postcard treatments. Twenty-three people attended the meeting; seventeen attendees were representing Main Street

Business District businesses. Six attendees were city residents from outside the business district. No District residents who were not business owners attended. Table 1 also reports how many were not contacted and how many of those assigned to be contacted received only messages.

Table 1 about here

An advantage of employing an experimental design that is that random assignment ensures that stakeholders in the treatment phone call and control groups are alike in expectation. In other words, random assignment to treatment means that any difference in attendance between the groups is attributable to the treatment phone call. The research design has the appeal of experimental simplicity, allowing us to present a straightforward baseline calculation of the difference between treatment and control group meeting attendance (for another experimental example and a call for more such experimental research in public management, see Brewer and Brewer 2011).

Experimental designs have the advantage of more straightforward statistical analysis than observational studies. To assess the effect of phone calls, we first identified whether those attending the meeting had been assigned to the treatment or control group. Then we calculated the difference between the treatment and control group attendance rates, which we call the treatment effect. To determine whether this difference is statistically different from zero we calculate its standard error, from which we calculate a p-value identifying the probability that the results we observe were due to chance. We use one-tailed p-values throughout the manuscript because our hypothesis is directional; phone calls *increase* meeting attendance.

While experimental research designs generally have the virtue of lending themselves to simpler statistical analysis, a few issues complicate our data. For example, among the 108

assigned to a treatment phone call, eight had wrong or disconnected phone numbers and thus could not receive the treatment phone call, despite being in the treatment group. The analysis therefore uses several statistical adjustments for these complications, including adjustments for disconnected and wrong numbers and for the fact that the city employee sometimes left messages with a person and sometimes on voice mail or answering machines.

Stakeholders with wrong or disconnected numbers should not be included in the control group because the fact that they were unreachable for treatment may indicate that they are different from the rest of the sample, perhaps in ways that also make them less likely to attend the civic meeting. The eight disconnected and wrong numbers highlight the distinction in experimental research between intention to treat (ITT) and average treatment effect (ATE). The intention was to call and thus “treat” the eight unlisted numbers, but they ended up not receiving the treatment and consequently should not be evaluated as part of the treatment group. To account for this, we use standard adjustments for disconnected and wrong numbers in field experiments. The adjustment is a simple instrumental variable estimator proposed by Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin (1996) and used by Gerber and Green (2005) in their field experiment research. This estimator uses assignment to the treatment group as an instrument to produce a consistent estimate of the treatment effect by dividing the difference between attendance rate in the treatment group ( $P_T$ ) and control group ( $P_C$ ) by the contact rate ( $\alpha$ ),

$$\hat{t} = \frac{P_T - P_C}{\alpha}.$$

A similar issue concerns the 38 subjects assigned to the phone call treatment group who received only a message left on their voice mail or answering machine. The remaining 62 completed phone calls in the treatment group resulted in either a direct contact with the target person (e.g., the business owner) or with a live person who agreed to pass the message to the

target person. Since answering machine or voice mail messages may be a less potent treatment (and may not even have been received by the target), we also calculated the efficacy of phone calls on meeting attendance treating answering machine and voice mail messages as non-contacts. Since this is another instance of the distinction between intention to treat and actual treatment, we again use the Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin (1996) adjustment with a 57.4 percent contact rate that assumes voice and answering machine messages are noncontacts.

To preview the results, the analyses taken together indicate that phone calls increase attendance between 3.6 and 6.3 percent, with p-values between 0.11 and 0.12. The range of the treatment effect results is comparable to voting turnout studies that find a treatment effect of phone calls of between 0.2 and 5.2 percent (Nickerson 2007).

## **Field Experiment Results**

Table 2 reports the difference in attendance rates between the treatment phone call and control groups along with the statistical significance of the differences between the two for each statistical approach. Of the 108 businesses and individuals assigned to receive an invitation phone call, nine attended the meeting, for an 8.3 percent attendance rate. Of the remaining 169 businesses and individuals not receiving a phone call, eight attended the meeting for an attendance rate of 4.7 percent. This difference of 3.6 percent, what we call the Intention to Treat effect, means the treatment group (which was assigned to receive the phone call) was almost twice as likely to attend as the control group (which did not receive the phone call). The baseline analysis uses the simplest method for determining statistical significance by treating disconnected and wrong numbers as though they belong to the treatment group, since they were assigned to be contacted. The treatment effect in this analysis is 3.6 percent, with a standard error

3.3, indicating that the treatment effect is significantly different from zero at a p-value of 0.12. If the 169 control group members had received the phone call, an expected six more of them would have attended the meeting, increasing attendance by more than a third and in all likelihood changing the tenor of the group discussion.

Table 2 about here

Our second analysis uses Angrist, Imbens and Rubin's (1996) instrumental variable adjustment to account for the fact that the disconnected and wrong numbers may be different than the others in the treatment group. Recall that eight of the 108 telephone numbers the city employee attempted to call were disconnected or wrong numbers, producing a contact rate of 92.5 percent, which is quite high for these studies. For example, Gerber and Green (2005) report a 32 percent contact rate in an election turnout experiment. For this analysis, we use the Angrist, Imbens and Rubin (1996) instrumental variable adjustment and the 92.5 percent contact rate. The treatment effect in this analysis is 3.9 percent with a standard error of 3.2, indicating that the treatment effect is significantly different from zero at a p-value of 0.11.

The third analysis in Table 2 investigates whether treating an answering machine or voice mail message as a non-contact changes the results. In the treatment group, thirty-eight stakeholders were left messages for a contact rate of 57.4 percent. Again, for this analysis, we use the Angrist, Imbens and Rubin (1996) instrumental variable adjustment, this time with the 57.4 percent contact rate. The treatment effect in this analysis is 6.3 percent with a standard error of 5.2, indicating that the treatment effect is significantly different from zero at a p-value of 0.11. This analysis assumes that answering machine messages did not reach the intended

recipient and therefore couldn't be effective. The analyses in rows 1 and 2 assumed that answering machine messages did reach the intended recipient and were equally effective as direct contact, producing a treatment effect that is the average of the direct contact and message effects. In reality, the effect of answering machine messages is likely somewhere between no effect and as effective as a direct contact. Thus, these two calculations demonstrate the extremes of the possible effectiveness of leaving messages. Future research should more explicitly address the effects of different forms of phone contact.

Table 3 shows the results of the experiment involving postcards inserted into the standard mailer. Those receiving postcards were no more likely to attend the meeting (ATE=-3.0%, s.e.=2.85%, p= 0.85) compared to those not receiving postcard. Also, among those who received the additional postcard, there was no significant difference in attendance rates between those who received phone calls and those who didn't (ATE=1.8%, s.e.=3.9, p=0.32). Among those who did not receive the additional postcard, the average treatment effect of phone calls was 6.2 percent with a standard error of 5.0% and a p-value of 0.11. These results suggest, not surprisingly, that phone calls are particularly effective when the citizens were not otherwise specifically invited to the meeting. This is especially likely given that the postcards were simply inserted into a standard mailed notice announcing the meeting. Their effect was thus unlikely to be large.

Table 3 about here

Although the p-values in this study are not below the 0.05 level often used in social science, we believe the results are still compelling because they were generated in a field experiment setting. P-values in observational studies are only relevant if certain unverifiable

assumptions, such as that the model is correctly specified and that it includes all the relevant control variables, about the estimation procedure are correct. For example, we might use regression analysis on data generated from an observational study to understand why people attend civic meetings. Regression analysis may suggest that better informed citizens are more likely to attend meetings, but this conclusion is valid only to the extent the analysis controls for factors that are correlated both with citizen's information and their propensity to attend the meetings. Better educated, older, and wealthier citizens may be both better informed and more likely to attend meetings. More difficult to address in a regression context are effects like the fact that citizens' neighbors can influence both their information and their propensity to attend civic meetings. Regression analyses assume that all such factors have been measured and controlled for.

In this study, the experimental research design suggests that we can rely on more plausible assumptions. Random assignment allows us to estimate the likelihood that the treatment and control groups differ by chance, allowing us to calculate the odds our results were due to the treatment or chance. Model misspecification is much less likely, allowing greater confidence in estimates of the results' significance. Also, the fact that the experiment was conducted in the field as part of regular municipal government business boosts confidence in our study's external validity. That is, realistic experimental conditions increase confidence that we would observe similar results when other municipalities adopt phone calls to improve attendance at similar meetings, even while it results in a study that is relatively underpowered with only 277 stakeholders.

## **Management Implications for Using Phone Calls to Increase Meeting**

### **Participation**

The results from our field experiment offer insights for managers deciding when to use invitation phone calls to improve public meeting participation. Managers can use these insights along with their knowledge of local conditions and the costs and benefits of additional citizen participation to determine when invitation phone calls are justified. The decision to use invitation phone calls should reflect several factors: the monetary cost of phone calls; whether there is a discrete population that should be invited to attend; local conditions; whether improving attendance is part of a long term strategy; and the benefits of input from meetings.

Our research sheds light on the cost-effectiveness of invitation phone calls for increasing attendance. One of the virtues of this field experiment is that along with the efficacy of the contact phone calls, we know the amount of time the city employee spent making them. From this information, we can estimate the cost of phone calls across different sizes of stakeholder groups and their cost-effectiveness. Such a cost analysis is informative because it allows the results of this study to be translated to larger and smaller jurisdictions, though the usual out of sample prediction caveats certainly apply. The city employee's phone calls were relatively brief; the average time per phone call was two minutes and 25 seconds, short because of the large number of messages. Assuming a \$20 per hour labor cost since the caller need not be a high level city employee, each phone call cost approximately 80 cents.<sup>2</sup> For a stakeholder group of 300 members, a government would invest approximately \$240 in making calls to produce an expected increase in attendance from 14 to 26. Each additional attendee would cost \$20.00. The cost-effectiveness of phone calls for civic meetings from this study is comparable to cost-effectiveness findings for phone calls in the voter turnout literature, where the cost for each

additional voter showing up at the polls ranges from \$19 - \$150 (Nickerson 2007). Because the city government in our research sent out its standard meeting invitations via mail, our analysis likely underestimates the effectiveness of phone calls given that the businesses were already informed via the mailers. The contact phone calls made here might be even more cost-effective if they had replaced mailed invitations. Further research should consider whether a city can forgo mailed invitations when phone calls are made.

Knowing invitation phone calls' cost-effectiveness, city managers can use other information to compare these costs to the benefits of increased attendance. First, making phone calls only makes sense where the issue up for discussion concerns a discrete population that can be invited to attend. When this is the case, a manager can directly calculate the costs of calling all of them. Second, knowledge of local conditions should be used to better estimate the costs of phone calls. For example, if the issue concerns a hard-to-reach population such as the homeless, phone calls are not likely to be cost-effective. Additionally, we assume here that the cost-effectiveness of phone calls is constant, even though the results follow a logistic function, implying variable costs. A manager is likely to be well-informed regarding where on the cost curve a particular meeting might fall. For example, where attendance is already expected to be very high, the cost of an additional attendee may be very high. On the other hand, there may be meetings ripe for increased attendance where the cost-effectiveness of phone calls is higher than our estimate here. Finally, the manager should consider two possible longer term benefits from improving attendance: spillover to other meetings and shared costs. Increasing attendance at one meeting may have a positive spillover to other meetings, increasing attendance at them as well. Just as voting is habit-forming (Gerber, Green, and Schacher 2003), an individual's attendance at one meeting may increase other forms of civic engagement. Thus, a single investment in phone

calls may increase participation at more than just the target meeting. The cost of collecting the information necessary for phone calls may also be shared among multiple meetings. Once a reliable database of phone numbers and a calling protocol has been established, using the database for other meetings will be less costly.

After adjusting the baseline cost-effectiveness by the localized considerations, a manager should compare the costs of phone calls to the expected benefits, particularly the value of extra information and political legitimacy from higher attendance. Criteria for when phone calls should be used include the importance of stakeholder input to the governing body, the resources available, and the political climate and salience of the meeting's agenda. In particular, municipal managers ought to consider targeted phone calls on issues with a low public profile that nonetheless have the potential to raise major public concerns. The Downtown Façade Assistance Program and building codes considered here are an example of such issues. These are issues where policy change could impose intense concentrated costs that may not be obvious to the general public. Phone calls could also be more cost-effective where the value of additional information from stakeholders is particularly high. For example, regulations that require detailed, technical information that only stakeholders can provide would benefit from the increased participation associated with phone calls.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, the results of this study suggest that phone calls are effective at increasing attendance at civic meetings. Increasing meeting attendance by one person through a phone call has approximately the same cost as increasing turnout by one voter. Without debating the relative importance of voting versus meeting attendance, this paper's findings are encouraging

because meeting attendance is much more time-consuming than voting yet may offer stronger ancillary social capital benefits.

Following the literature on voter turnout, future research in this area should consider whether the form or content of the contact affects the propensity to attend meetings (de Rooij, Green, and Gerber 2009). Particularly helpful to managers would be research indicating whether the identity of the caller affects attendance. For example, is a phone call from a fellow citizen as effective as one from someone in city government? Likewise, can email or text messages improve attendance? Additionally, future research should directly investigate the factors that make issues more appropriate for the use of phone calls. For example, this study showed that only business owners (not residents of the affected area) attended the meeting. Useful future research could also consider whether there are heterogeneous treatment effects, where phone calls increase attendance for some groups more than others. Research in this vein would assist managers in determining which policies are appropriate for using phone calls to increase meeting attendance.

Finding ways to improve public participation in public meeting is an important goal for public management research. To our knowledge, this paper is the first to provide evidence of how to increase attendance at municipal civic meetings. The paper shows that invitation phone calls are not only effective, but can be executed at a relatively low cost, provided the meeting's target population is clearly identifiable. Invitation phone calls should be an option among municipal managers' publicity and communication strategies for civic meetings. While no city could afford to use phone calls for every meeting, their judicious use for some topics based on the decision factors offered here could significantly improve both citizen input in the policy process and community social capital.

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## **Footnotes**

1. These numbers were not listed in phone numbers provided by the Planning and Housing Staff, in the local phone book, or on the Internet.
2. Not included in this assessment is the amount of time spent gathering phone numbers for the project. Although researching phone numbers can be time consuming, this time investment could be shared among many meetings if the data already collected were entered into an electronic database and made accessible for future projects. This long term strategy is discussed below.

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3.

**Table 1: Summary Experimental Treatments and Attendance**

	<i>Phone Call Only</i>	<i>Postcard Only</i>	<i>Phone Call and Postcard</i>	<i>Control</i>
# Assigned	54	78	54	91
# Contacted (Phone or Message)	49		51	0
# of Messages	21		17	
# Attending	6	3	3	5
Attendance Rate	11.1%	3.8%	5.6%	5.5%

**Table 2: The Effects of Invitation Phone Calls on Civic Meeting Attendance**

	<i>Estimate of Attendance Difference</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Baseline Estimate: Intention to Treat	3.6%	3.3%	0.12
IV Estimate: Average Treatment Effect	3.9%	3.2%	0.11
IV Estimate: Treating messages as non-contact	6.3%	5.2%	0.11

Note: p-values are one-tailed.

**Table 3: Effect of Postcards on Meeting Attendance**

	<i>Estimate of Attendance Difference</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Effect of Postcards on Meeting Attendance	-3.0%	2.9%	0.43
IV Estimate: Effect of Phone Calls Given Postcard	1.8%	3.9%	0.32
IV Estimate: Effect of Phone Calls Given No Postcard	6.2%	5.0%	0.11

Note: p-values are one-tailed. The IV estimate corrects for the unlisted numbers, treating messages as contacts.

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