

Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Message Test of Candidate Name vs. Standard Practice

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Executive Summary

For the 2018 general election, Vote.org conducted SMS voter mobilization programs covering 12,681,951 people of color and unmarried women in 33 states. These programs used “cold” text messaging to registered voters who have no prior relationship to Vote.org.

This memo on the Candidate Name vs. Standard Practice message evaluates one in a series of tests embedded in Vote.org’s SMS voter mobilization program for in-person voting. The overall impact of Vote.org’s SMS voter mobilization program for in-person voting can be found in the memo “Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Mobilization for In-person Voting from Any Treatment”.

Building in prior research by Panagopoulos and Green (2008),ⁱ this experiment tested the effect of assignment to receive a text message including the names of gubernatorial candidates in Texas and Florida against the Standard Practice message developed by Vote.org. This test was conducted on 1 million low propensity and/or newly registered voters in Florida and Texas.

The effects of the Standard Practice and Candidate Names treatments were statistically indistinguishable. The Standard Practice treatment generated an increase in turnout of 0.50 percentage points at a cost per net vote of \$44.56 (22.4 net votes/\$1000). The Candidate Names treatment generated an increase in turnout of 0.43 percentage points at a cost per net vote of \$51.81 (19.3 net votes/\$1000).

In future “cold” SMS voter mobilization programs during mid-term and Presidential elections, Vote.org should not use the Candidate Name treatment as it adds considerable complexity to implementing treatments without any gain in effectiveness over the Standard Practice treatment. Other message tests produced alternative treatments that should be considered in future programs.

Objectives and Context

For the 2018 general election, Vote.org conducted SMS voter mobilization programs covering 12,681,951 people of color and unmarried women in 33 states. Despite widespread use, SMS messages have received little attention from researchers as a medium for campaign communication. In 2016, Vote.org established that “cold” SMS messages could increase turnout with a randomized experiment design covering 1.2 million young people of color and unmarried women in 7 states. [Vote.org’s 2016 “cold” SMS voter mobilization program](#) increased turnout by 0.2 percentage points. In 2017, Vote.org replicated and expanded testing of “cold” SMS voter mobilization with a randomized experiment covering 714k young people of color and unmarried women for the Virginia gubernatorial and legislative elections. [Vote.org’s 2017 test of “cold” SMS voter mobilization](#)

increased turnout by 0.6 percentage points and identified Standard Practices regarding timing and message framing.

The 2018 programs build on Vote.org's successful SMS voter mobilization programs in 2016 and 2017. This memo evaluates testing additional message frames to determine the most effective methods of increasing voter turnout via SMS messages. Practical constraints of implementing delivery of the SMS messages required executing each message test in a subset of states. Each message test includes the Standard Practice treatment derived from the 2016 program as a shared benchmark. This memo is one of a series examining each message test. This memo evaluates a comparison of Candidate Name vs. Standard Practice messages.

In particular, we studied whether telling voters the names of candidates increased turnout. This is a valuable study because it builds on prior work showing that broadcasting candidate names in a nonpartisan manner increased competitiveness in mayoral elections (Panagopoulos & Green, 2008).ⁱⁱ The ads likely worked by increasing name recognition of challenger candidates. In this instance, one election (Texas) consisted of an incumbent vs. challenger, whereas the other (Florida) featured an open race.

This test was conducted across 1 million low propensity and/or newly registered voters in Florida and Texas. The treatments in these states where there is extensive early in-person voting (EIPV) were targeted at both EIPV and Election Day voting.

This test also addresses a secondary research question about mobilization for these two types of in-person voting: is it more effective to mobilize voters to vote early, to vote on Election Day, or to mobilize for early voting and then for Election Day voting? To the best of our knowledge, this question has received almost no attention despite the widespread availability of early in person voting. Therefore, treatment records in these states are assigned to mobilization for EIPV only, Election Day only, or both. This research question is evaluated in a separate memo, "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Timing of Encouraging In Person Voting for Early Voting or Election Day".

The overall impact of Vote.org's SMS mobilization program for in-person voting can be found in the memo "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Mobilization for In-person Voting from Any Treatment".

Selected Universe

The data for the experiment was selected by Vote.org from the voter file maintained by TargetSmart, a firm providing voter data.

The 1,033,200 registered voters included in the experiment met the following criteria:

- 1) A cell number available in the TargetSmart database
 - TargetSmart provided the best single record for each available cell phone number (i.e. no duplicate numbers)

- 2) Registered to vote in the following states:
 - Texasⁱⁱⁱ
 - Florida^{iv}
- 3) Low propensity voter or new registrant:
 - 10-70 Vote propensity OR
 - Voted in Gen 2016 and registered between Dec 2014-Nov 2016 OR
 - Registered December 2016-present)
- 4) People of color: individuals coded as non-white by TargetSmart or individuals residing in areas with a Census population of at least 67% non-white.
 - The latter criterion is intended to capture false negatives for non-white in the individual coding data. The race coding is based on state voter file information about race (where available) and proprietary models of race maintained by TargetSmart.
- 5) Exclusions:
 - Request mail ballot for Gen 2018 -OR- permanent mail ballot status
 - Age under 18 years old or over 100 years old

Treatments

The experiment compares an uncontacted control group to two treatments: 1) Standard Practice or 2) Candidate Names. Examples of each treatment are in the Appendix.

The message condition (Control, Standard Practice, or Candidate Names) tested whether the inclusion of candidate names in an SMS message increased turnout relative to a Control group that received no messages from Vote.org, and to a treatment group that received Vote.Org's Standard Practice message. Subjects in Florida in this condition received a text telling them that the candidates for governor were Andrew Gillum (D) and Ron DeSantis (R). In Texas, subjects were informed that their candidates were Lupe Valdez (D) and Greg Abbott (R).

Treatment consisted of a series of three to five SMS messages. The three-message series were for records assigned to EIPV only or EDay only. In the five-message series, the first two messages were repeated (1st & 3rd; 2nd & 4th) for EIPV and then EDay voting. In this memo, the three and five message treatments are pooled. As noted above, the differences between assignment to three messages for EIPV, three messages for EDay, and five messages for both EIPV and EDay is evaluated in a separate memo "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Timing of Encouraging In Person Voting for Early Voting or Election Day".

The Standard Practice treatment is based on prior tests and programs by Vote.org. The Standard Practice treatment relies on positive descriptive norms, civic duty and information about voting to increase turnout. These tactics are very common in voter mobilization and have been successful in randomized controlled tests of mail, phone calls and canvassing (see Green and Gerber 2015 for review).^v

The Candidate Names condition was based on prior research conducted in mayoral elections demonstrating that radio ads including candidate names created more competitive elections (Panagopoulos & Green, 2008).^{vi} The ads likely worked by increasing name recognition of

challenger candidates. Other research demonstrates that when voters are mobilized, they take the effort to become informed (Shineman, 2018); including candidate names in SMS mobilization may help spur that process.^{vii}

Prior to each round of text messages, anyone who "opted out" of receiving text messages was removed from the contact list. Also, anyone who who cast a ballot (EIPV or mail ballots) according to public records acquired by TargetSmart LLC were removed from the contact list upon Vote.org's receipt of this information.

Intended Effects^{viii}

- Each message condition was intended to increase overall turnout in the November 2018 election relative to the Control group.
- The two treatments were expected to cause effects on voting behavior, but we had no clear expectation about which treatment effect would be larger.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation is based on a randomized trial design (or field experiment) that is considered best practice by academic researchers and the Analyst Institute. Each treatment group received SMS messages from Vote.org; the control group was sent none of the SMS messages.

The randomization is conducted at the household level to reduce the risk of contaminating behavior of co-habitants. For this experiment, households were defined as people with the same mailing address. The randomization uses an automated re-randomization procedure to ensure good balance in characteristics available from the voter file prior to delivery of treatment (see Technical Appendix).

Random Assignment to Message Condition

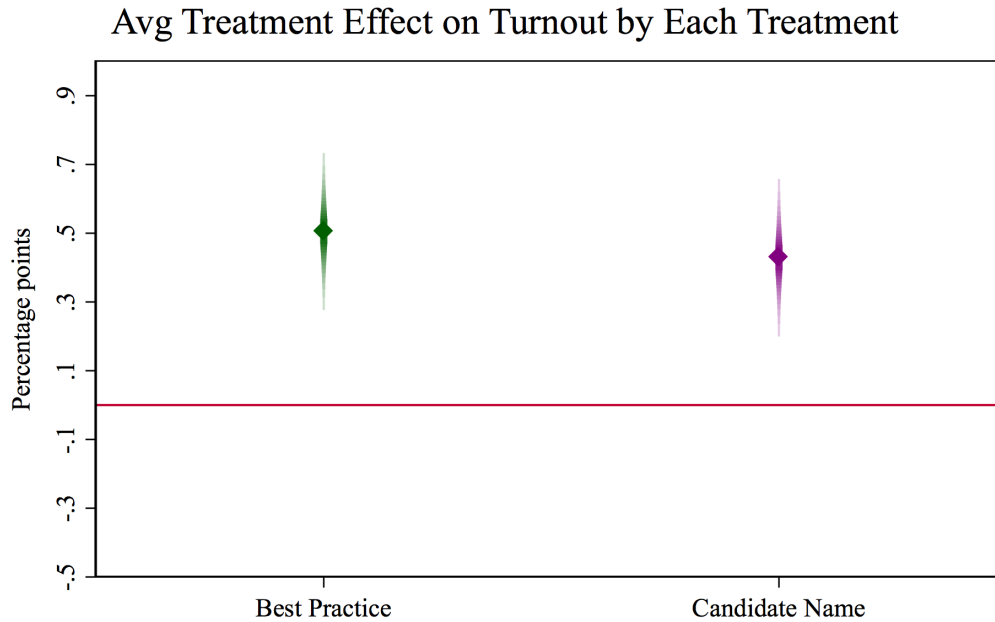
Individuals	
Control	344,733
Standard Practice	344,211
Candidate Names	344,256
Total	1,033,200

Results

Both the Best Practice (0.50 percentage points) and Candidate Names (0.43 percentage points) messages increased turnout by a statistically significant margin over the control group.^{ix} However, the small difference in message effectiveness means the treatments are statistically indistinguishable.

Note on reading the graphs in this memo: The estimated treatment effect is represented by the diamond shape in the middle of each bar. The gradient error bars display the statistical uncertainty of this estimate. Like traditional error bars, the ends of the gradient error bars indicate the 95% confidence range. If these bars cross the red horizontal line at zero, the difference from the control group is not statistically significant. The width and intensity (darkness) of the bar indicate the statistical likelihood that the treatment effect falls in this range, so the bars are wider and darker close

to the diamonds, thinning and fading farther away. When comparing to treatment effects, the likelihood of being different can be seen by the width and intensity of the overlapping gradient bars.^x



Notes: Turnout in control group = 60.88%. Difference in treatment effects is *not* statistically significant (p=0.513). Treatment effects estimated from regression with covariates for precision. Gradient confidence intervals by line width and intensity (max=95% c.i.). If confidence intervals cross line at zero, then effect is not statistically significant.

Net Votes

The cost per net vote (and net votes/\$1000) calculation includes all costs of design, delivering, and managing the treatment delivery process.

Treatment	Effect	Net Votes	Votes/\$1000	CPV	Treatment Cost
Standard Practice	0.50 pp	1,721	22.4	\$44.56	[\$0.2228/individual]
Candidate Names	0.43 pp	1,480	19.3	\$51.81	[\$0.2228/individual]

Notes: Treatment cost reflects average cost for the series of SMS messages in each treatment. Net votes is the number of people who voted in response to the treatment(s), and would not have otherwise voted in the November 2018 election.

Lessons Learned

This experiment provides guidance for future SMS mobilization campaigns.

- SMS messages remain an effective way to increase voter turnout.
- Overall, the effectiveness of Standard Practice and Candidate Names messages were statistically indistinguishable.

Future Steps

Future mobilization programs should continue to use SMS. This experiment determined that the Candidate Name treatment was not a better alternative, but not worse. Vote.org may want to consider trying the Candidate Name treatment again with measurement of information and/or ballot choice confidence (following Shineman, 2018) to see if there are reasons beyond turnout to use Candidate Names. Given that it had no negative or additional positive impact on turnout, it is worth exploring other reasons to use Candidate Names.

Future programs may also want to consider trying names in lower-salience races. The races used here were pretty well known, whereas Panagopoulos and Green (2008) conducted their radio advertisement experiment with candidate names in low-salience races. Candidate Names may be more effective with Congressional candidates or those farther down on the ballot, such as state legislature. This may be an effective way to reduce ballot drop-off in presidential elections.

Cautions

The effect of any voter mobilization communication is conditional on the execution of the program, the jurisdiction, the type of election, the level of interest in the election, and the activities of other organizations. Repeating these treatments in other election contexts or with variations of the treatments could produce different results.

Appendix: Examples of Treatments

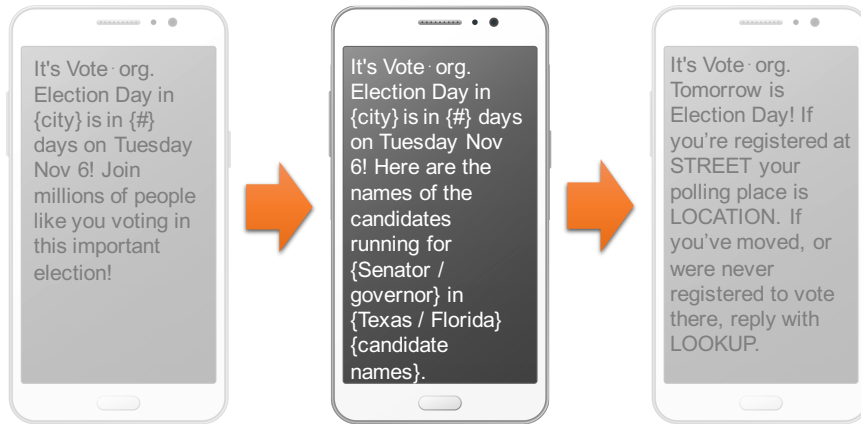
Standard Practice

- Series of 3 text messages for Election Day



□ Based 2016 & 2017 testing by **VOTE.ORG**

Providing Candidate Names



- Based on Panagopoulos & Green 2008

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Technical Appendix

Randomization Procedure:

Randomization was conducted at the household level. The random assignment was conducted in Stata using the “re-randomize” procedure developed by Kennedy and Mann (2015) to ensure balance across observable covariates.^{xi}

This procedure rejects any instance of randomization outside of pre-determined parameters: minimum of 10 iterations and maximum of 25 iterations. Iterations stopped between 10 and 25 when iteration had $p > 0.8$ based on Mahalanobis distance test. This procedure produced equal sized groups, and each group was designated as an experimental condition. Blocked randomization used equal probabilities of assignment in all blocks.

Blocked randomization using the following variables: State, Young (under 30 years old), Quality of cell phone match to individual (three strata based on TargetSmart cell phone match confidence code)

Balance checked using age, female, individual-level race codes (Hispanic, African American, white), past voting history (dummies for voting in the 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 general elections), and three-digit zip-code (geography).

Statistical Methods for Analysis:

The analysis is based on matching the pre-election experimental population to post-election vote history from TargetSmart. The matching used the unique TargetSmart record identification number. Analysis was conducted using standard regression techniques for evaluating experimental results.

Hypothesis testing uses robust standard errors clustered by unique address to account for potential correlation between the behaviors of co-habitants.

All reported estimates are calculated using models that include the covariates used to check balance in the random assignment procedure. As expected from a well-balanced experiment, the estimates are essentially identical when estimated without these covariates.

Technical Endnotes

ⁱ Panagopoulos, C., & Green, D. P. (2008). Field experiments testing the impact of radio advertisements on electoral competition. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), 156-168.

ⁱⁱ Panagopoulos, C., & Green, D. P. (2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Individuals in Texas were randomly assigned to this experiment (50%) or the Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice message test (50%).

^{iv} Individuals in Florida were randomly assigned to this experiment (50%) or the Adopt-a-voter vs. Calendar vs. Standard Practice message test (50%).

^v Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerber. 2019. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*. 4th ed. Brookings Institution Press.

^{vi} Panagopoulos, C., & Green, D. P. (2008).

^{vii} Shineman, V. A. (2018). If you mobilize them, they will become informed: Experimental evidence that information acquisition is endogenous to costs and incentives to participate. *British Journal of Political Science*, 48(1), 189-211.

^{viii} Following best practice in academic research, the intended treatment effects and plans for analysis were pre-registered with the Evidence in Governance and Politics program at the University of California at Berkeley (egap.org).

^{ix} Best Practice vs. control was statistically significant, $p < .001$; Candidate Names vs. control was statistically significant, $p < .001$. Best Practice vs. Candidate Names was not significant, $p = .513$.

^x Research by Isabelle Fischer (2018) finds that people are much more likely to correctly interpret data displayed with gradient error bars than other more commonly used data visualizations.

^{xi} Kennedy, Chris, and Christopher B. Mann. 2015. *RANDOMIZE: Stata Module to Create Random Assignments for Experimental Trials, Including Blocking, Balance Checking, and Automated Rerandomization*. Boston College Department of Economics.

<https://ideas.repec.org/c/boc/bocode/s458028.html> (May 16, 2017).