Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program:
Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice

Prepared by Katherine Haenschen Ph.D. and
Christopher B. Mann Ph.D.

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 Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy 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." The same messages were tested in a program encouraging the return of mail ballots in states where voters requested to receive their ballot in the mail (see memo on "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Ballot Request States Including Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice").

This experiment tested the effect of assignment to receive a text message including either positive social pressure or a political efficacy message against the "standard practice" message developed by Vote.org through previous testing.

This test was conducted across 2.4 million low propensity and/or newly registered voters in 9 states: Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, North Dakota, New Jersey, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.

The Social Pressure treatment was the most effective message for increasing turnout in this experiment, generating an increase in turnout of 0.50 percentage points at a cost per net vote of $44.56 (22.4 net votes/$1000). The Political Efficacy treatment generated an increase in turnout of 0.26 percentage points at a cost per net vote of $85.69 (11.7 net votes/$1000). The Standard Practice treatment appeared generated an increase in turnout of 0.11 percentage points at a cost per net vote of $202.55 (4.9 net votes/$1000), but this effect was not statistically significant. Testing the same messages for encouraging the return of mail ballots in ballot request states produced a similar pattern (see "Vote.Org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Ballot Request States Including Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice."

In future "cold" SMS voter mobilization programs, Vote.org should consider the Social Pressure message to be a best practice. Other tests indicate the Adopt-a-voter treatment also outperforms the 2018 Standard Practice treatment (see "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Message Test of Adopt-a-Voter vs. Calendar Reminder vs. Standard Practice"). Future research should compare these two treatment alternatives directly.

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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 Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice messages. The same set of messages were tested in a program encouraging the return of ballots in states where all voters receive their ballot in the mail (see "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Ballot Request States Including Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice.")

In this experiment, we explored whether positive social pressure with a survey threat or a positive political efficacy message could increase turnout. Social pressure messages emphasize that voting records are public; while positive messages praise voters for prior participation are effective, negative social pressure that shames voters for abstentions tend to produce the largest percentage point increases in turnout.[i] However, negative social pressure can generate backlash, which can negatively impact attitudes towards the organization doing the pressuring. Prior work demonstrates that including a threat of a post-election survey with positive social pressure can produce turnout on par with negative social pressure.[ii]

Internal political efficacy refers to an individual's perception that they are capable of participating in politics.[iii] Higher internal political efficacy is associated with increased participation, thus it stands to reason that if we tell people they have efficacy, their participation will increase. Here, we explore whether a message telling voters that they have efficacy will increase turnout. We also explored whether the timing of the message stream would impact turnout.

This test was conducted across 2.4 million low propensity and/or newly registered voters in 9 states: Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, North Dakota, New Jersey, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. These states cover a range of electoral contexts (defined by competitiveness, voting procedures, and

other characteristics). In states with extensive EIPV use, the treatments were targeted at both EIPV and EDay voting: Illinois, Texas, Wisconsin, West Virginia. In states, the treatments targeted only EDay voting: Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, New Jersey, Virginia.

In the states with EIPV and EDay voting, the 2018 SMS voter mobilization program 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 voter mobilization program 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 2,372,939 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:
   - Iowa
   - Illinois
   - Minnesota
   - North Dakota
   - New Jersey
   - Texas[iv]
   - Virginia
   - Wisconsin
   - West Virginia
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 or unmarried women:
   - 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 criteria 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.
- Females under age 30 who were not included using the criteria above
  - Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin only
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 three treatments: 1) Standard Practice, 2) Social Pressure, and 3) Political Efficacy. Examples of each treatment are in the Appendix.

In states without EIPV, each treatment consisted of a series of three SMS messages. In states with EIPV, treatment consisted of a series of three to five SMS messages. The three message series were identical to the non-EIPV states. 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 in EIPV states 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 Social Pressure message was based on prior research demonstrating that positive social pressure praising voters for participating and including a threat of a post-election survey was effective at increasing turnout while minimizing backlash.[vi] Social pressure has increased turnout in many voter mobilization experiments because it reminds people that voting records are public and emphasizes the social norm of voting; people vote because they do not want people to find out that they failed to comply with the norm (see Green and Gerber 2015 for review).[vii]

The Political Efficacy message was based on research demonstrating a positive relationship between individuals' internal political efficacy, which measures their perceived ability to participate in politics, and their participation itself.[viii] It stands to reason that if we can induce efficacy by telling people that their votes will matter, it will increase their turnout.

Intended Effects[ix]

- Assignment to receive any texts was intended to increase voter turnout relative to the Control group.

- Each message version was intended to increase turnout relative to the Control group

- The three treatments were expected to cause effects on voting behavior, but we had no clear expectation about which treatment effects 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	591,685
Standard Practice	594,037
Social Pressure	594,245
Political Efficacy	592,972
Total	2,372,939

Results

The Social Pressure condition increased turnout by a statistically significant 0.50 percentage points (pp) relative to the Control group; the Political Efficacy condition increased turnout by a statistically significant 0.26pp relative to the Control group. However, the Standard Practice message did not increase turnout by a statistically significant margin, 0.11pp relative to the Control group.[x] The difference between these treatments is statistically significant.[xi]

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.[xii]

Avg Treatment Effect on Turnout by Each Treatment
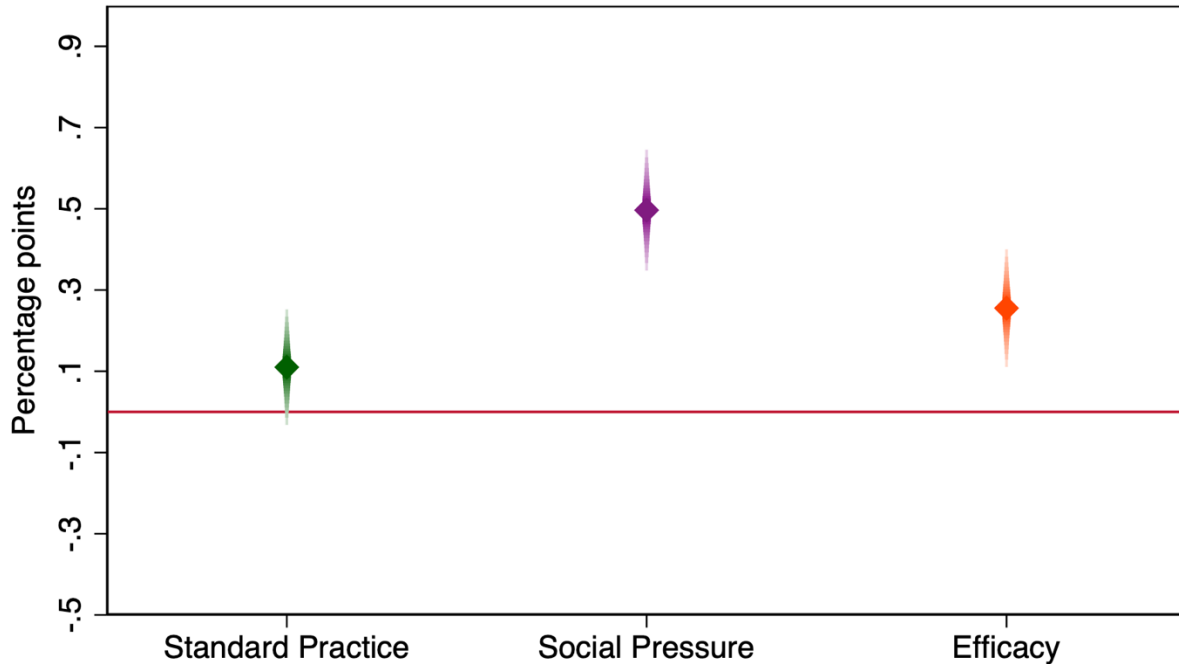
Notes: Turnout in control group = 56.34%. Difference in treatment effects is statistically significant (p=0.000). Treatment effects estimated from regression with covariates for precision. Gradient confidence intervals by line width and intensity (max=95% c.i.). If confidence intervals cross line at 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	0.11 pp	653	4.9	$ 202.55	[$0.2228/individual]
Social Pressure	0.50 pp	2,971	22.4	$ 44.56	[$0.2228/individual]
Efficacy	0.26 pp	1,542	11.7	$ 85.69	[$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 <u>voted</u> in response to the treatment(s), and would not have otherwise voted in the November 2018 election.

Lessons Learned

o Vote.org's strategy of using "cold" SMS messages for voter mobilization continues to generate significant and cost-effective increases in voter turnout in mid-term elections.

o The Social Pressure message frame appears more effective than prior Standard Practice, and therefore should be considered for use in future programs.

Future Steps

o Vote.org should continue to invest in "cold" SMS voter mobilization programs to increase voter turnout.

o Vote.org should consider the Social Pressure message in future "cold" SMS mobilization programs and test against other message frames that outperformed the prior Standard Practice treatment in other 2018 tests.
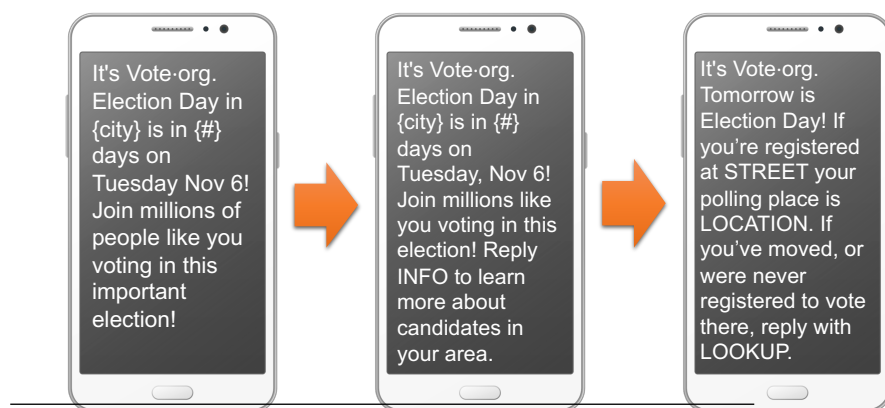
Cautions

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

It's Vote·org. Election Day in {city} is in {#} days on Tuesday Nov 6! Join millions of people like you voting in this important election!

It's Vote·org. Election Day in {city} is in {#} days on Tuesday, Nov 6! Join millions like you voting in this election! Reply INFO to learn more about candidates in your area.

It's Vote·org. Tomorrow is Election Day! If you're registered at STREET your polling place is LOCATION. If you've moved, or were never registered to vote there, reply with LOOKUP.

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

Social Pressure with survey threat

It's Vote·org. Thank you for being a registered voter! This is a reminder that while your ballot is secret, whether or not you vote is public record. Election Day in {city} is in {#} days on Tuesday Nov 6.

It's Vote·org. Thanks for being a registered voter in the {City} area! Remember, whether or not you vote is public record. After the election we will survey you about your experiences at the polls. Election Day is only {x} days away!

It's Vote·org. Tomorrow is Election Day! If you're registered at STREET your polling place is LOCATION. If you've moved, or were never registered to vote there, reply with LOOKUP.

- Based on many successful social pressure GOTV tests with direct mail (see Green & Gerber 2015), esp. (Mann 2010) using survey

Political Efficacy Efficacy

It's Vote·org. You have the power to influence this election! Election Day in {city} is in {#} days on Tuesday Nov 6. Your vote matters, so make sure to cast your ballot in this important election.

It's Vote·org. You will make the difference in this election, because your vote matters. Election Day in {city} is only {x} days away. Make sure to vote!

It's Vote·org. Tomorrow is Election Day! If you're registered at STREET your polling place is LOCATION. If you've moved, or were never registered to vote there, reply with LOOKUP.

- Based on positive relationship between voters' perceived efficacy and political participation (Niemi, Craig & Mattei 1991)

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.[xiii]

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 Malahanobis 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] Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerber. 2019. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*. 4th ed. Brookings Institution Press.
[ii] Mann, Christopher B. 2010. "Is There Backlash to Social Pressure? A Large-Scale Field Experiment on Voter Mobilization." *Political Behavior* 32(3): 387–407.
[iii] Niemi, Richard G., Stephen C. Craig, & Franco Mattei. 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85(4): 1407-1413.
[iv] Individuals in Texas were randomly assigned to this experiment (50%) or the Candidate Name 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] Mann, Christopher B. 2010. "Is There Backlash to Social Pressure? A Large-Scale Field Experiment on Voter Mobilization." *Political Behavior* 32(3): 387–407.
[vii] Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerber. 2019. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*. 4th ed. Brookings Institution Press.
[viii] Niemi, Richard G., Stephen C. Craig, & Franco Mattei. 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85(4): 1407-1413.
[ix] 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).

[x] Social pressure vs. Control, p < .001; Political Efficacy vs. Control, p = .004; Standard Practice vs. Control, p = .203.

[xi] Difference across all three treatments is statistically significant at p < 0.001.

[xii] 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.

[xiii] 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).