Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program:
Extending Mobilization to High Propensity Voters in States with In-Person Voting

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 evaluates an extension of Vote.org's original SMS voter mobilization program for in-person voting to include higher propensity voters: 70-80 on TargetSmart's 2018 vote propensity score. These higher propensity targets were added to the SMS voter mobilization program in late October when Vote.org determined there was additional capacity for sending SMS voter mobilization messages. This experiment explores whether even among likely voters with turnout scores of 70 to 80 text messages are still capable of increasing participation. 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".

This experiment was conducted among 622,180 registered voters with a 2018 vote propensity score of 70-80 in 26 states: AZ, FL, GA, IA, IL, IN, KS, MD, MI, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, ND, NM, NV, OH, PA, TN, TX, VA, VT, WI, WV.

Among voters with high turnout propensity scores (70 to 80), text messages did not increase turnout in the 2018 Midterm elections.

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.

This memo evaluates an extension of in Vote.org's original SMS voter mobilization program for in-person voting to include higher propensity voters: 70-80 on TargetSmart's 2018 vote propensity score. These higher propensity targets were added to the SMS voter mobilization program in late October when Vote.org determined there was additional capacity for sending SMS voter

mobilization messages. This experiment explores whether even among likely voters with turnout scores of 70 to 80 text messages are still capable of increasing participation. 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".

Prior work shows an inverse relationship between electoral salience--how exciting or attention-grabbing an election is--and the propensity voters who can be mobilized.[i] Other scholars have pointed out that GOTV efforts may actually widen disparities in who votes, since higher-probability voters are more receptive to mobilization.[ii] The 2018 Midterm election was extremely high salience, with the highest turnout in a Midterm election in a century.[iii]

This experiment determines whether voters with turnout scores of 70 to 80 are receptive to mobilization via SMS message in an election that was very high-salience. This experiment was conducted among 622,180 registered voters with a 2018 vote propensity score of 70-80 in 26 states: AZ, FL, GA, IA, IL, IN, KS, MD, MI, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, ND, NM, NV, OH, PA, TN, TX, VA, VT, WI, WV.

Due to the late addition to vote.org's SMS voter mobilization programs, this experiment used Vote.org's Standard Practice treatment (i.e. no message testing).

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 622,180 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: AZ, FL, GA, IA, IL, IN, KS, MD, MI, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, ND, NM, NV, OH, PA, TN, TX, VA, VT, WI, WV
3) Low propensity voter or new registrant:
    - 70-80 Vote propensity
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

Since this data was added to Vote.org's in-person SMS mobilization program late, the treatment consisted of two text messages. Due to capacity and the late start, about 40% of the records assigned to treatment were sent only one text message.

The final two messages of Vote.org's Standard Practice treatment were used (example in the Appendix). 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).[iv]

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[v]

- Text messages will increase voter turnout among registered voters.

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).

Subjects were randomly assigned to either the Treatment or Control group, with 80% in Treatment and 20% in Control.

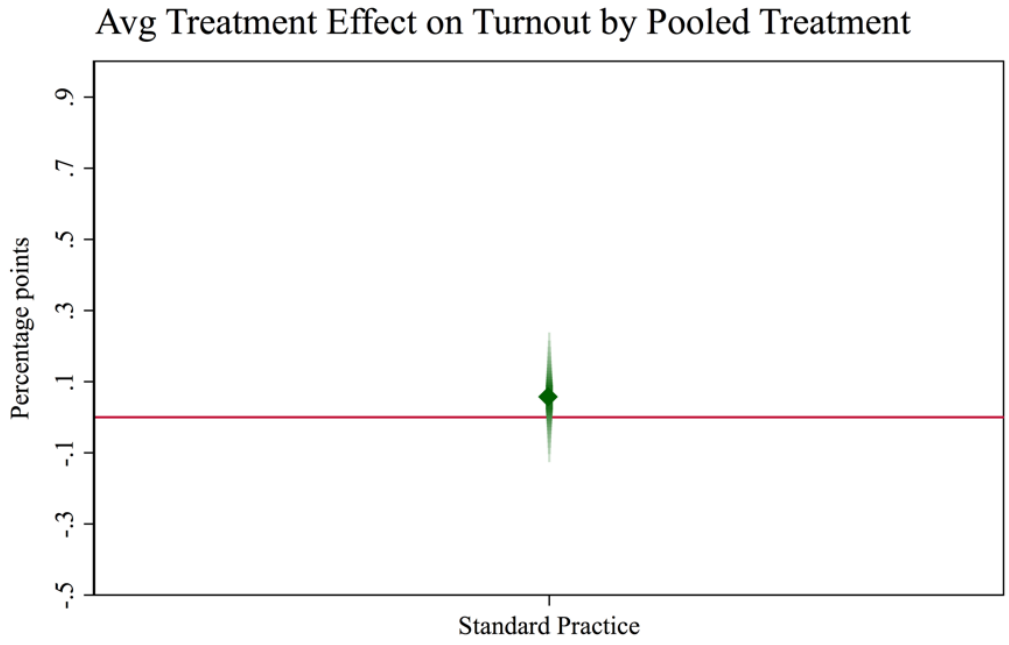
Random Assignment to Experimental Condition

	Individuals
Control	124,437
Standard Practice	497,743
Total	622,180

Results

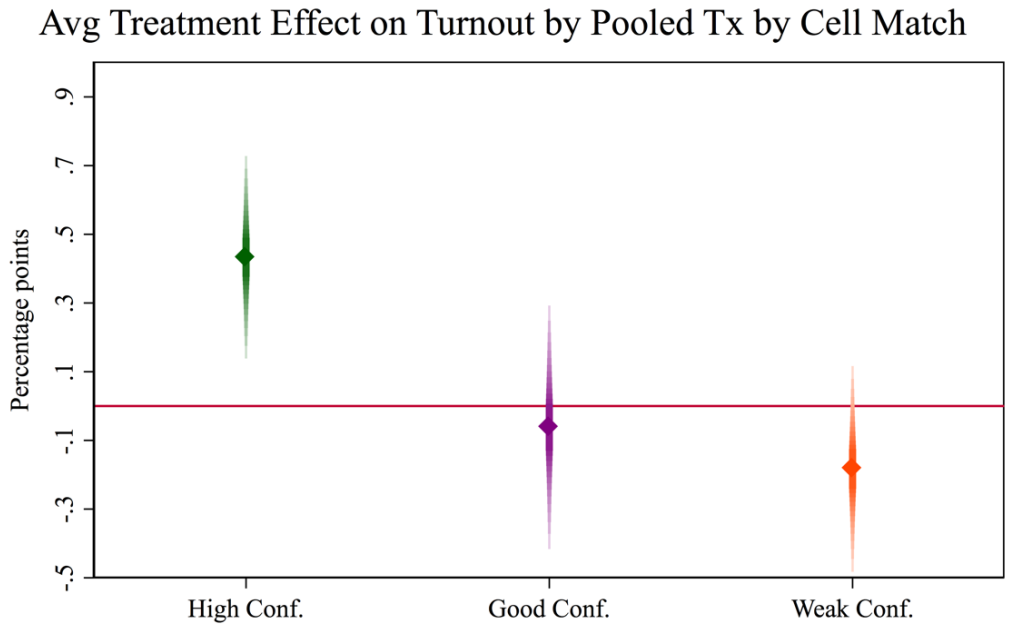
Overall, sending text messages to high-probability voters did not increase turnout in the 2018 Midterm elections. The increase in turnout was 0.06 percentage points, which was not statistically significant.[vi]

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.[vii]



Notes: Turnout in control group = 85.49%. 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.

It is worth noting that among records with a high confidence match between voter registration records and cell phone records, there was a statistically significant increase in turnout while the effect was null among good confidence and weak confidence (null but slightly negative).



Notes: Turnout in control group: best match = 87.35%; good match = 85.86%; weak match = 83.72%.
Difference in effects across cell match confidence is *statistically significant* (p=0.040).
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, 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	0.06 pp	299	5	$200	[$0.1200/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 suggests that there is minimal benefit from mobilizing high-propensity voters to vote in person in a mid-term election. Overall the treatments increased turnout by 0.06%, which was not statistically significant.

Future Steps

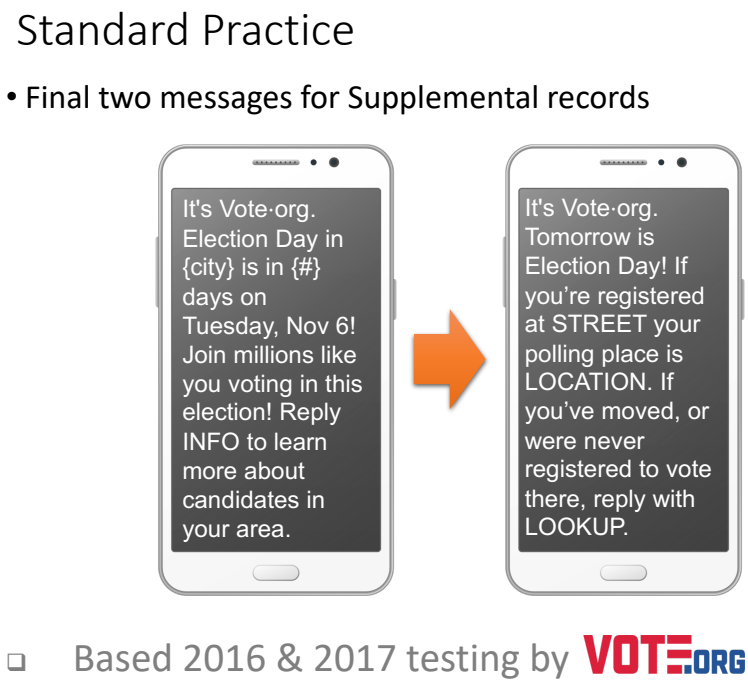
Future mobilization programs in high-salience Midterm elections should exclude voters with high propensity scores (> 70) from their programs, since there appear to be negligible returns.

If high propensity voters are targeted, the data suggests only high confidence matches should be targeted. Additionally, the program should be started earlier to ensure delivery of multiple messages.

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



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.[viii]

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] Arceneaux, Kevin, and David W. Nickerson. 2009. "Who Is Mobilized to Vote? A Re-Analysis of 11 Field Experiments." American Journal of Political Science 53(1): 1–16. Malhotra, N., M. R. Michelson, T. Rogers, and A. A. Valenzuela. 2011. "Text Messages as Mobilization Tools: The Conditional Effect of Habitual Voting and Election Salience." American Politics Research 39(4): 664–81.

[ii] Enos, R. D., Fowler, A., & Vavreck, L. (2013). Increasing inequality: The effect of GOTV mobilization on the composition of the electorate. *The Journal of Politics*, *76*(1), 273-288.

[iii] McDonald, M. United States Election Project. Retrieved from http://www.electproject.org/home

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

[v] 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).

[vi] Treatment vs. Control, p = .614

[vii] 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.

[viii] 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).