

**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**

*Prepared by Katherine Haenschen, Ph.D. and
Christopher 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.

All states allow voters to request to vote by mail, either through permanent absentee voting or a request for a specific election, and many states do not require a reason for the request. This experiment tested whether SMS messages could increase mail ballot returns among individuals who requested to vote absentee. This request data was available from TargetSmart, Vote.org’s voter file firm in 2018. The memo also assesses a message test comparing Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice messages. The same messages were tested in a program encouraging in person voting (see memo on “Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice”).

The test of encouraging the return of requested mail ballots covered 753,499 registered voters in 19 states: AZ, FL, GA, IA, IL, KS, MI, MT, NC, NJ, NM, NV, OH, WI.

Vote.org’s SMS messages increased voter turnout among people who had requested a ballot, and the Social Pressure treatment was the most effective treatment. On average, the treatments generated a 0.21 percentage point increase in turnout at a cost per net vote of \$75.14 (13.3 net votes/\$1000). The Social Pressure treatment was the most effective message for increasing turnout in this experiment, generating a statistically significant increase in turnout of 0.28 percentage points at a cost per net vote of \$56.36 (17.7 net votes/\$1000). The Political Efficacy treatment generated a marginally statistically significant increase in turnout of 0.24 percentage points at a cost per net vote of \$65.75 (15.2 net votes/\$1000). The Standard Practice treatment appeared to generate an increase in turnout of 0.09 percentage points at a cost per net vote of \$175.33 (5.7 net votes/\$1000), but this effect was not statistically significant. Testing the same messages for increasing in-person voting produced a similar pattern (see memo on “Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice”).

In future “cold” SMS voter mobilization programs in states where voters request a ballot by mail, Vote.org should consider the Social Pressure message to be a best practice.

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.

Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Ballot Request States

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.

Encouraging the return of ballots requested by and mailed to registered voters is a different challenge than moving registered voters from the couch to the polling place. The voters in this experiment have already taken concrete steps towards participating by requesting a ballot. They also face potentially less opportunity cost to complete a ballot (at home, anytime) and return it (any mail box or ballot drop box, anytime over a period of weeks). This experiment explores whether SMS messages can successfully increase the return of valid ballots.

This memo evaluates an adaptation of SMS voter mobilization to encourage the return of mail ballots in states where registered voters request a ballot in the mail. The test of encouraging the return of requested mail ballots covered 753,499 registered voters in 19 states: AZ, FL, GA, IA, IL, KS, MI, MT, NC, NJ, NM, NV, OH, WI.

The memo also builds on prior work by testing Social pressure and Political Efficacy messages against Vote.org's Standard Practice message, in the context of encouraging voters to return their absentee ballots. Social pressure messages emphasize the public nature of voting records, and may attempt to induce feelings of pride in past participation or shame for past abstentions.ⁱ Combining the threat of a post-election survey with positive social pressure is as effective as negative social pressure.ⁱⁱ Political efficacy refers to a voter's perceived ability to understand and participate in politics, and is positively associated with political participation.ⁱⁱⁱ Here, we use language emphasizing that the voter will make a difference and has the power to impact the outcome of the election. The same messages were tested in a program encouraging in person voting (see memo on “Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Political Efficacy vs. Standard Practice”).

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 753,499 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, MI, MT, NC, ND, NJ, NM, NV, OH, PA, TX, VA, WI
- 3) Request mail ballot for Gen 2018 -OR- permanent mail ballot status

- 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:
 - 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. Each treatment consisted of a series of three SMS messages sent in the 10 days prior to the election. Examples of each treatment are 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}

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.^v 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).^{vi}

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.^{vii} It stands to reason that if we can induce efficacy by telling people that their votes will matter, it will increase their turnout.

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 treatment was intended to increase turnout in the November 2018 election.
- Each treatment was expected to have different effects on turnout.
- Different treatment effects were expected across the following groups:
 - States
 - Voters under and over age 30
 - Cell phone match confidence
 - Competitive vs. non-competitive areas^{ix}
 - Gender
 - Age
 - Vote propensity score
 - Drop-off voters (voted in 2016 but not 2014)
 - New registrants (since 2016)
 - Race / ethnicity
 - Households with single vs. multiple targets

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 evenly into the three treatment and one control groups.

Random Assignment to Experimental Condition

	Individuals
Control	188,469
Standard Practice	188,486
Social Pressure	187,945
Political Efficacy	188,599
Total	753,499

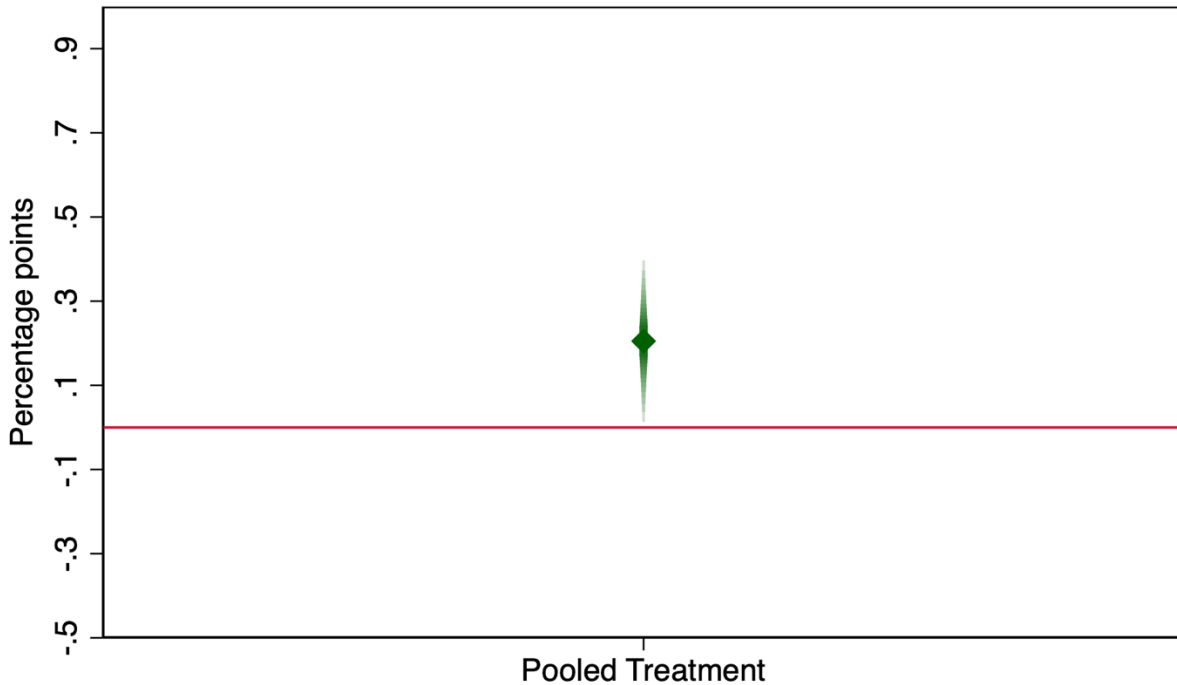
Results

Overall, assignment to receive any of the texts generated a marginally significant 0.21 percentage point increase in turnout.^x

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.^{xi}

Avg Treatment Effect on Turnout by Pooled Treatment

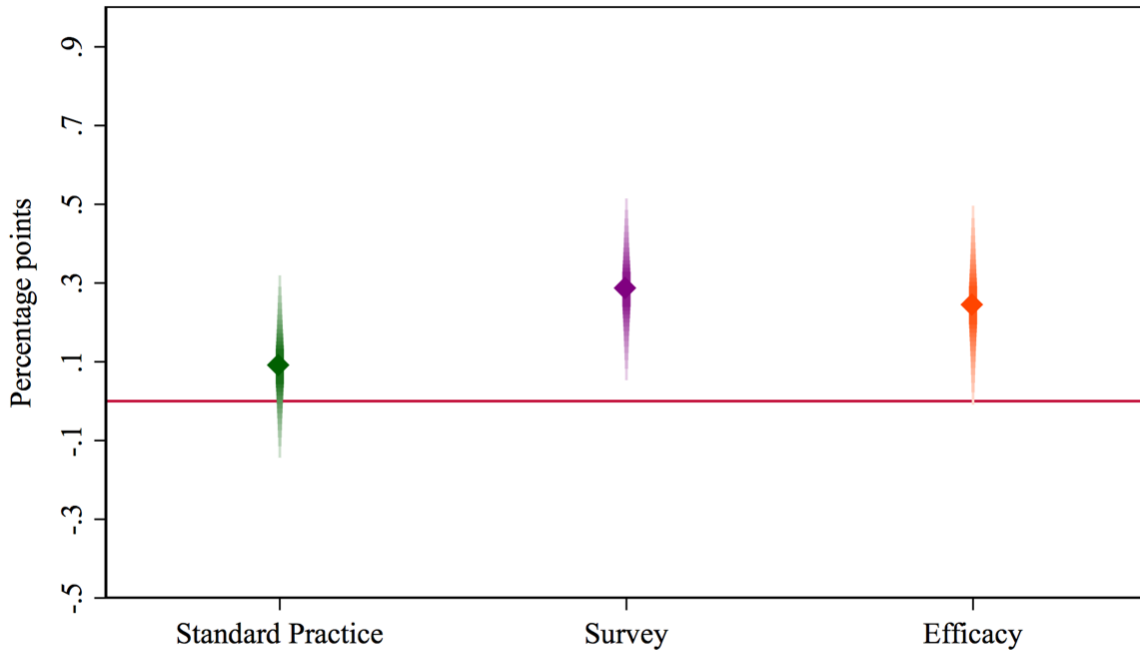


Notes: Turnout in control group = 71.42%. Treatment effects estimated from regression with covariates for precision. Gradient confidence intervals by line width and intensity (max=95% c.i.). If confidence intervals cross line at zero, then effect is not statistically significant.

By Message Condition

Next, we consider whether the messages themselves impacted ballot return. Only the Social Pressure message generated a statistically significant increase in turnout relative to the Control group, equivalent to 0.28 percentage points. The Political Efficacy message approached marginal significance with a 0.24 percentage point increase in turnout relative to the Control group. The Standard Practice message generated a non-significant 0.09 percentage point increase in turnout.^{xii} However, the differences between the three treatments are not statistically significant.^{xiii}

Avg Treatment Effect on Turnout by Each Treatment



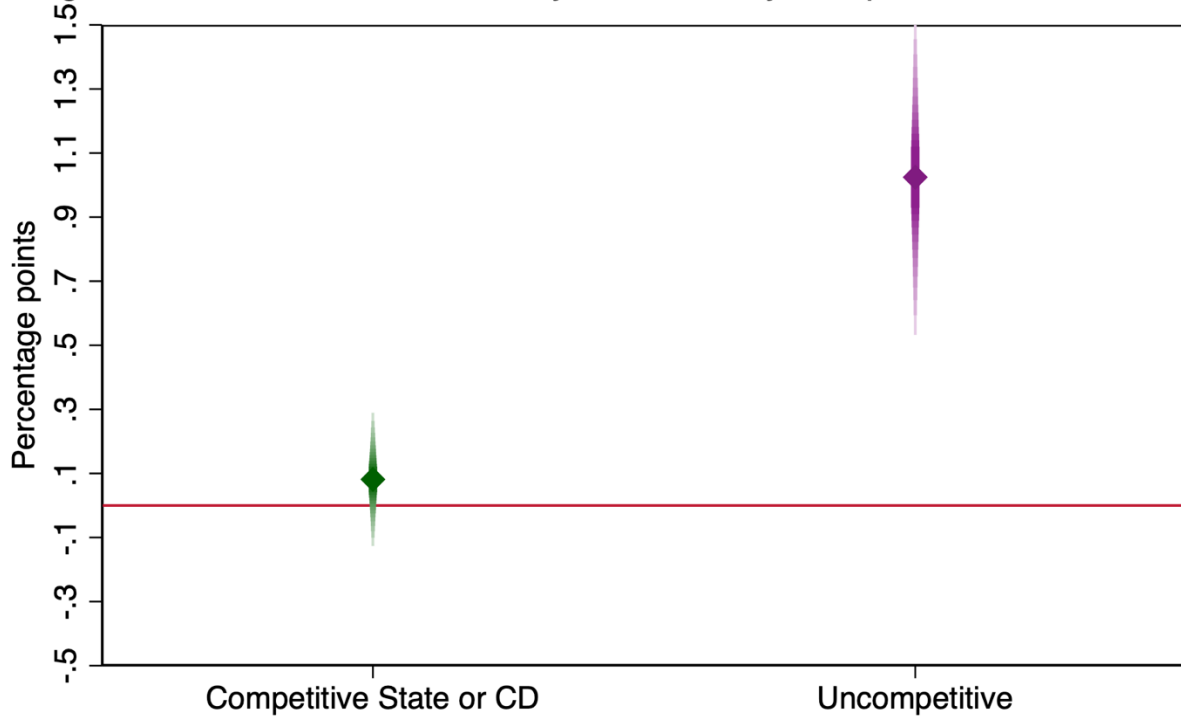
Notes: Turnout in control group = 71.42%. Difference in treatment effects is *not* statistically significant ($p=0.345$). Treatment effects estimated from regression with covariates for precision. Gradient confidence intervals by line width and intensity (max=95% c.i.). If confidence intervals cross line at zero, then effect is not statistically significant.

By Electoral Competitiveness

The competitiveness of top-of-the-ticket elections influences the effectiveness of treatment.^{xiv} SMS messages encouraging return of mail ballots increased turnout by 1.02 percentage points in areas without competitive US House, US Senate or gubernatorial contests.^{xv} However, the treatment effect was much smaller (0.08 percentage points) and not statistically significant in areas with competitive top-of-the-ticket elections.^{xvi} The difference in the effects across electoral competitiveness was statistically significant.^{xvii}

The smaller treatment effect in competitive areas is most likely due to one or both of the following: First, competitiveness at the top of the ticket means greater advertising, media attention, and other mobilization efforts so it becomes more difficult to produce a net additional effect on turnout. Second, people requesting a mail ballot are more likely to be aware of and interested in a competitive election so it becomes more difficult to produce a net additional effect on turnout.

Avg Treatment Effect on Turnout by Pooled Tx by Competitive State or CD



Notes: 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. Difference in effects by state competitiveness is statistically significant (p=0.004).

Heterogeneous Effects across Subgroups

We found no evidence of significant differences in treatment effects across the other subgroups listed in the Intended Effects section above.

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
Any Treatment	0.21 pp	1,187	13.3	\$ 75.14	[\$0.1578/individual]
Standard Practice	0.09 pp	170	5.7	\$ 175.33	[\$0.1578/individual]
Social Pressure	0.28 pp	526	17.7	\$ 56.36	[\$0.1578/individual]
Political Efficacy	0.24 pp	453	15.2	\$ 65.75	[\$0.1578/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 several guidelines for organizations looking to use SMS messages to chase requested mail ballots.

- SMS messages are an effective way of reminding voters to return the mail ballots they requested.
- Social Pressure and Political Efficacy messages are more effective than the Standard Practice message

Future Steps

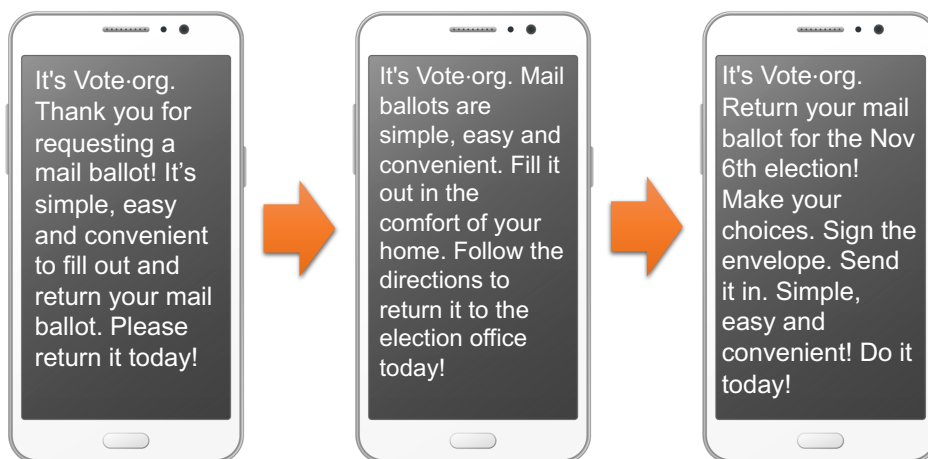
Future programs should consider using SMS messages to chase mail ballot requests, particularly as the use of mail ballots increases.

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 [Ballot Request States]



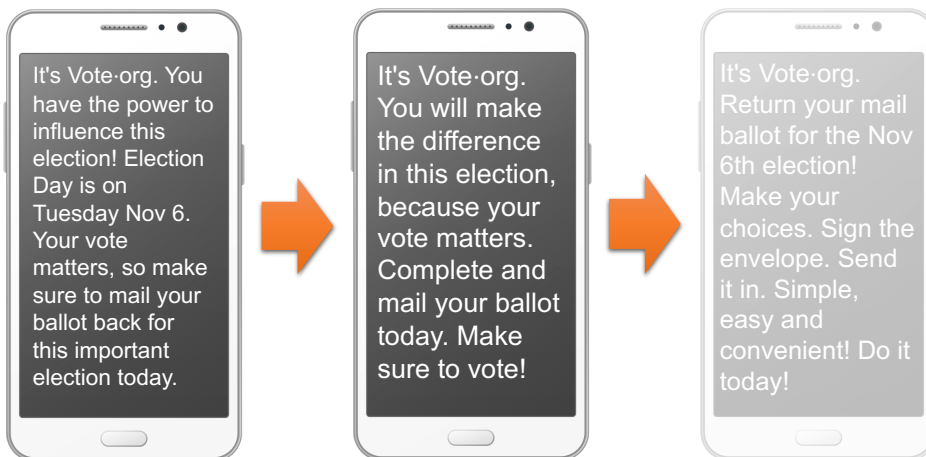
Social Pressure with survey threat [Ballot Request States]



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

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Efficacy [Ballot Request States]



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

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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.^{xviii}

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

^v Mann, Christopher B. 2010. “Is There Backlash to Social Pressure? A Large-Scale Field Experiment on Voter Mobilization.” *Political Behavior* 32(3): 387–407.

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

^{vii} 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.

^{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} Competitive areas defined by RealClearPolitics.com as Toss-up, Leans Dem or Leans GOP.

^x Any treatment vs. control, $p = .053$

^{xi} 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.

^{xii} Standard practice vs. control, $p = 0.532$; Social Pressure vs. control, $p = 0.043$; Political Efficacy vs. control, $p = 0.113$.

^{xiii} Differences between the treatments are not statistically significant. $p = 0.345$.

^{xiv} Competitiveness defined by the final pre-election RealClearPolitics ratings of contests for US Congress, US Senate, and Governor.

^{xv} The treatment effect in non-competitive states is statistically significant at $p=0.001$.

^{xvi} The treatment effect in competitive states is not statistically significant at $p=0.515$.

^{xvii} The difference between states with competitive vs. non-competitive elections is statistically significant at $p=0.004$.

^{xviii} 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).