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

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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 evaluates an extension of Vote.org's original SMS voter mobilization program for postal 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 impact of Vote.org's SMS voter mobilization program for postal voting among low propensity and/or newly registered voters can be found in the memo "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Postal Voting States Including Message Test of Adopt-a-Voter vs. Calendar Reminder vs. Standard Practice".

This experiment was conducted among 32,153 registered voters with a 2018 vote propensity score of 70-80 in three states: Colorado, Oregon, and Washington.

Among voters with high turnout propensity scores (70 to 80) in postal voting states, 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 postal 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 postal voting among low propensity and/or newly registered voters can be found in the memo "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Postal Voting States Including Message Test of Adopt-a-Voter vs. Calendar Reminder vs. Standard Practice".

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 32,153 registered voters with a 2018 vote propensity score of 70-80 in three states: Colorado, Oregon, and Washington.

Due to the late addition to Vote.org's SMS voter mobilization programs, this experiment used Vote.org's Standard Practice 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 32,153 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: Colorado, Oregon, Washington
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:
    - Age under 18 years old or over 100 years old

Treatments

Treatment consisted of a single text message on November 1, 2018 reminding voters to return their ballot and provided voters information on where and how they could return their ballot.

> It's Vote.org. Don't miss returning your mail ballot! Simple, easy and convenient! Complete it, then mail it or bring it to any ballot drop box! Need a location near <city>? Just reply DROPBOX to this message.

Intended Effects[i]

- A text message 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.

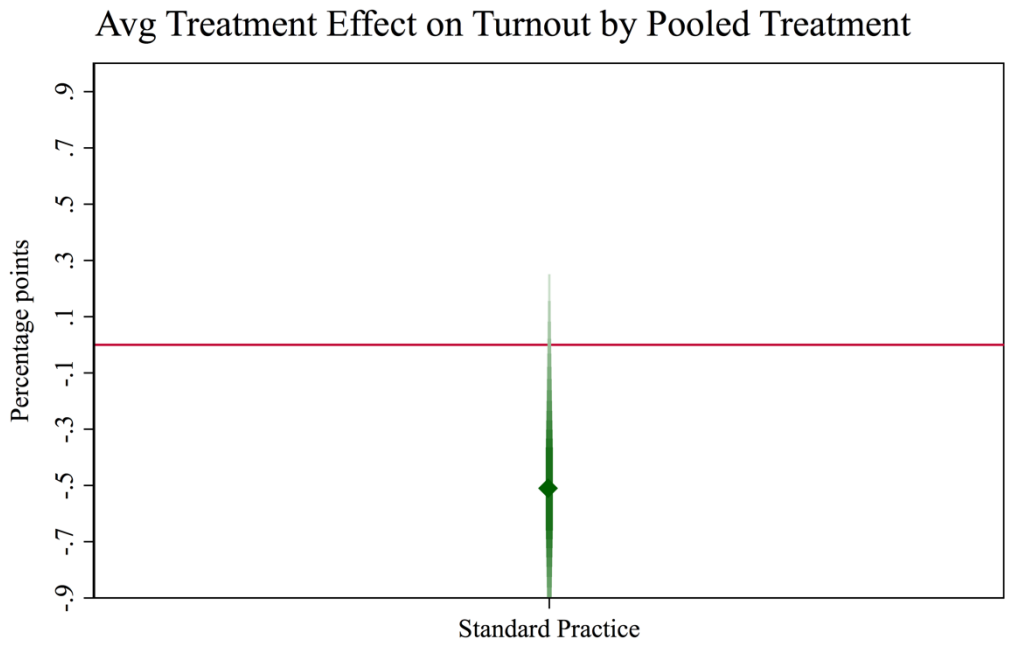
Random Assignment to Experimental Condition

	Individuals
Control	6,444
Standard Practice	25,709
Total	32,153

Results

Sending text messages to high-probability voters in postal voting states did not increase turnout in the 2018 Midterm elections. The difference in turnout between the treatment (87.14%) and control (87.65%) groups was negative although not statistically significant.[ii]

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.[iii]



Notes: Turnout in control group = 87.65%. 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.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

There was little evidence of significant variation in the treatment effects across demographic characteristics, although with a small experimental population such differences are hard to detect with statistical certainty.

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
Postal Voting – High Propensity	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

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 no benefit from seeking mobilizing high-propensity voters in postal voting states.

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 no positive returns.

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.

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.[iv]

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] 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).

[ii] Treatment vs. Control = -0.51 pctpts, p = .270

[iii] 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.

[iv] 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).