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

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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 Vote.org's program to increase turnout in California among voters who are sent mail ballots. A majority of ballots in California are cast by mail, and this share has been increasing over time. In California, registered may be sent a mail ballot for three reasons: 1) voters may request permanent mail voter status to receive a mail by mail for every election, 2) may request a mail ballot for specific elections, and 3) election officials may designate jurisdictions in which all registered voters receive a mail ballot. The test of encouraging the return of mail ballots in California covered 1,074,450 low propensity and/or newly registered voters in California. This program was added late in the election cycle, so only two SMS messages were sent to the treatment group.

This "cold" SMS program to encouraging Californians to return their mail ballots had no discernible effect on turnout (0.02 percentage points, cost per net vote = $791.50, 1.3 votes/$1000). However, targeting only voters with higher cell phone match quality may produce a small (but non-significant) effect (0.14 percentage points, cost per net vote = $113.07, 8.8 votes/$1000).

In future "cold" SMS voter mobilization programs in states where all voters receive a ballot by mail, Vote.org should consider using the alternative messages identified as more effective in other tests of encouraging return of mail ballots (see memos on "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Ballot Request States" and "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Postal Voting States").

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 an adaptation of SMS voter mobilization to encourage the return of mail ballots in a state where a majority of voters use this method.

Since the California mail ballot chase effort was added to Vote.org's 2018 SMS voter mobilization program relatively late, it deployed only the Standard Practice treatment. For evaluation of different messages to encourage return of mail ballots in other states, see memos on "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Ballot Request States" and "Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Encouraging Ballot Return in Postal Voting States".

This memo evaluates Vote.org's program to increase turnout in California among voters who are sent mail ballots. A majority of ballots in California are cast by mail, and this share has been increasing over time. In California, registered may be sent a mail ballot for three reasons: 1) voters may request permanent mail voter status to receive a mail by mail for every election, 2) may request a mail ballot for specific elections, and 3) election officials may designate jurisdictions in which all registered voters receive a mail ballot.

In addition to growth in the number of Californians opting in to permanent or election specific mail ballots, a growing share of Californians live in areas designated for postal voting (wherein all registered voters are sent a mail ballot). In all counties, the election official may designate small precincts for postal voting. In addition, the state has allowed a growing number of counties to opt to use postal voting for the entire county.

The test of encouraging the return of mail ballots covered 1,074,450 low propensity and/or newly registered voters in California who were permanent mail voter status, requested a mail ballot for the 2018 general election, or were in jurisdictions where all voters receive mail ballots.

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 1,074,450 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:
    - California
3) Low propensity voter or new registrant:
    - 10-80 Vote propensity OR
    - Voted in Gen 2016 and registered between Dec 2014-Nov 2016 OR
    - Registered December 2016-present
4) Designated in California voter file as receiving a mail ballot, which includes:
    - Permanent mail voter status
    - Requested ballot for 2018 General election
    - Residing in jurisdiction where all voters are sent a mail ballot

5) 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.
6) Exclusions:
    - Age under 18 years old or over 100 years old

Treatments:

In this test, targeted voters were randomly assigned to Vote.org's Standard Practice treatment or an uncontacted control group. Since this data was added to Vote.org's program late, only the final two messages of the Standard Practice treatment were used. 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.[i] The Standard Practice treatment was modified to encourage return of mail ballots rather than in-person voting.

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

Intended Effects[ii]

- Each treatment was intended to increase turnout in the November 2018 election.
- Different treatment effects were expected across the following groups:
    - States
    - Voters under and over age 30
    - Cell phone match confidence
    - Competitive vs. non-competitive Congressional Districts[iii]
    - 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).

Random Assignment to Treatment & Control

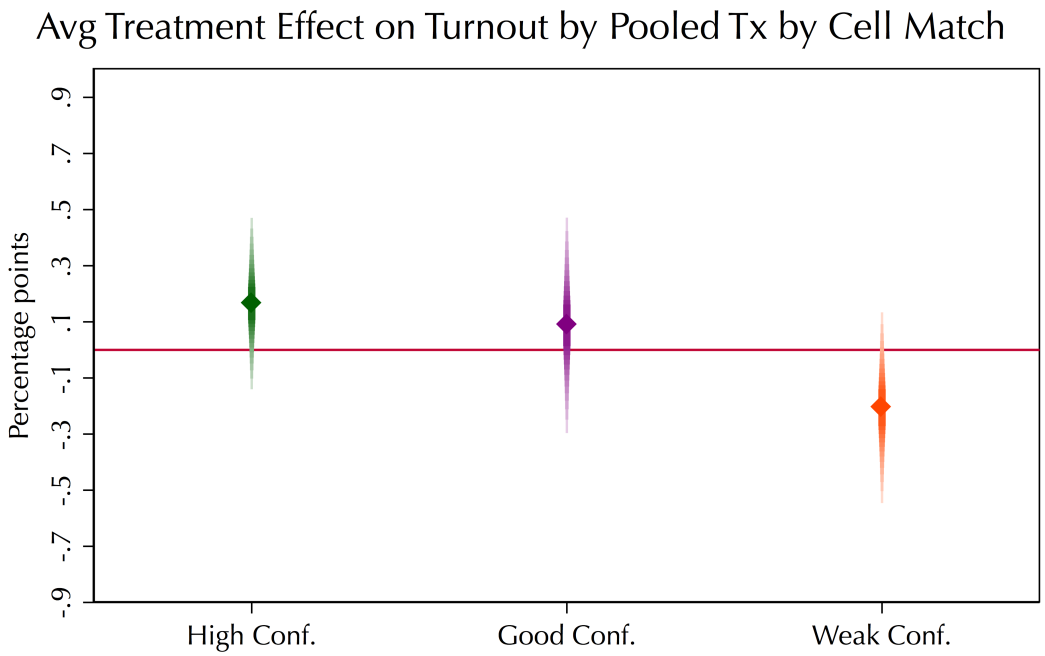
	Individuals	%
Standard Practice	859,587	80%
Control	214,863	20%

Results

Overall, the treatment had no discernible effect on turnout (0.02 percentage points, not statistically significant).[iv]

If records with weak cell phone match confidence are excluded, the effects are somewhat more promising (0.14 percentage points), although still not statistically significant (see 1st graph below).[v]

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.[vi]



Notes: Turnout in control group: best match = 58.23%; good match = 56.60%; weak match = 53.89%.
Difference in effects across cell match confidence is *not* statistically significant (p=0.380).
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.

No statistically significant or substantively notable patterns were found in other subgroups listed in the "*Intended Effects*" section.

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	0.02 pp	172	1.3	$791.50	$0.1583/individual
High & Good Cell Phone Confidence	0.14 pp	802	8.8	$113.07	$0.1583/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

Vote.org's strategy of using "cold" SMS messages for voter mobilization may be effective for encouraging return of mail ballots in California, but the impact appears limited to higher quality cell phone data.

Future Steps

Vote.org should consider continuing to invest in "cold" SMS voter mobilization programs to increase voter turnout in California, but should limit data to higher quality cell phone matches.

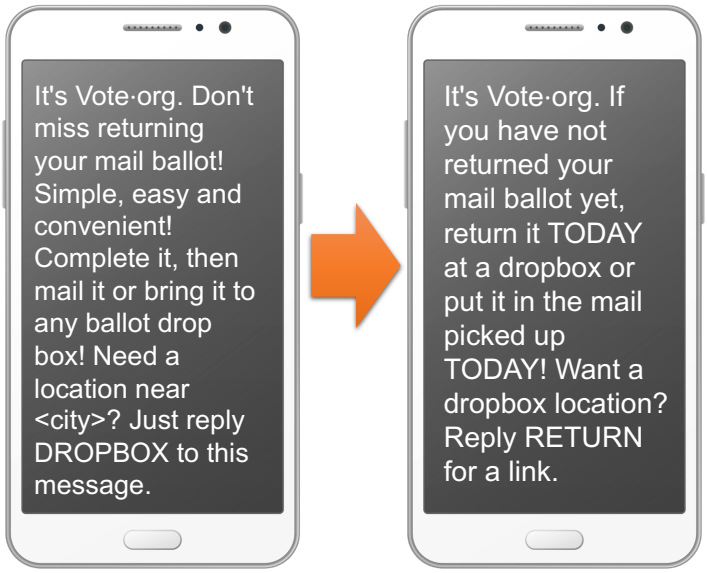
Due to the late addition to Vote.org's 2018 program, these SMS messages were delivered late relative to the other mail ballot chase programs which showed larger effects. Prior experiments on return of mail ballot (using mail and phone calls) indicate earlier contact is more effective, so future programs should begin earlier and possibly test the timing of SMS treatment to maximize return of mail ballots.

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
[California Mail Ballot Chase]



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.[vii]

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] 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).

[iii] Competitive districts defined by RealClearPolitics.com as Toss-up, Leans Dem or Leans GOP.

[iv] Avg. treatment effect compared to the control group is not statistically significant at p=0.431, one-tailed. SE = 0.12

[v] Avg. treatment effect compared to the control group is not statistically significant at p=0.179, one-tailed. SE = 0.15

[vi] 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.

[vii] 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).