Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Message Test of Social Pressure vs. Standard Practice in the Mississippi 2018 Run-Off Election

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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. Vote.org continued its mobilization efforts in 2018 run-off elections in Georgia and Mississippi.

This memo evaluates an element of Vote.org's SMS voter mobilization program intended to encourage participation by voters in the run-off election in Mississippi. Mississippi holds run-off elections for offices in which no candidate receives 50% of the votes cast in the general election. Several offices did not have majority winners in the November General election, most prominently a contest for US Senate. The run-off election was held on November 27, 2018.

This program delivered either the Social Pressure treatment or Standard Practice treatment to randomly assigned treatment groups. Due to a relatively small number of targeted voters, this test *only* compared messages and did *not* have an untreated control group. This test covered 299,978 people of color.

There was no statistically or substantively significant difference between these treatments in the Mississippi 2018 run-off. Note that this result is not consistent with the stronger effect of the Social Pressure treatment in the 2018 General election message tests by Vote.org.

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. Vote.org continued its mobilization efforts in 2018 run-off elections in Georgia and Mississippi. 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 element of Vote.org's SMS voter mobilization program intended to encourage participation by voters in the run-off election in Mississippi. Mississippi holds run-off elections for offices in which no candidate receives 50% of the votes cast in the general election.

Several offices did not have majority winners in the November General election, most prominently a contest for US Senate. The run-off election was held on November 27, 2018.

This test covered 299,978 registered voters in Mississippi who are people of color. Due to the relatively small number of targeted voters, this test *only* compared messages and did *not* have an untreated control group.

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 299,978 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 Mississippi
3) People of color: individuals coded as non-white by TargetSmart or individuals residing in areas with a Census population of at least 66% 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.
4) Exclusions:
    - Age under 18 years old or over 100 years old

Treatments

Half of the targeted voters were sent a Social Pressure treatment. The other half of the targeted voters were sent a Standard Practice treatment with candidate names added. Both treatments used a series of four SMS messages. Examples of the treatments 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). In the Mississippi run-off, the Candidate Names message – tested in the 2018 General election – was added to this treatment.

The Candidate Names condition was based on prior research conducted in mayoral elections demonstrating that radio ads including candidate names created more competitive elections (Panagopoulos & Green, 2008).[i] The ads likely worked by increasing name recognition of challenger candidates. Other research demonstrates that when voters are mobilized, they take the effort to become informed (Shineman, 2018); including candidate names in SMS mobilization may help spur that process.[ii]

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.[iii] 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).[iv]

Intended Effects[v]

- The treatment was intended to increase turnout in the November 2018 election.
- Each treatment was expected to have different effects.
- Different treatment effects were expected across the following groups:
    - Voters under and over age 30
    - Cell phone match confidence
    - 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 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

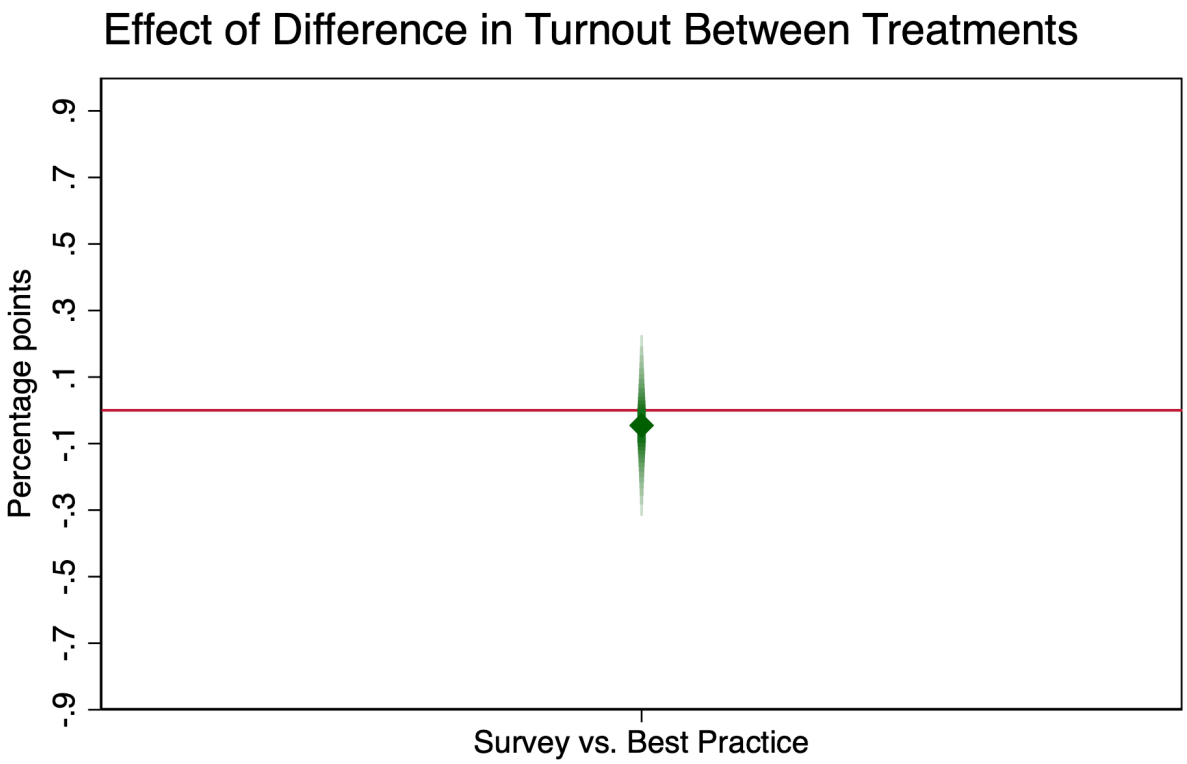
	Individuals	%
Standard Practice	149,442	50%
Social Pressure	150,536	50%

Results

The Social Pressure treatment did not generate increased turnout compared to the Standard Practice treatment.[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 = 47.29%. 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.

Other Subgroups

No statistically significant or substantively notable patterns were found in any subgroups listed in the "*Intended Effects*" section. Notably, this includes no difference across cell phone confidence scores, an interesting contrast to the higher effect among higher confidence scores in the 2018 General election program.

Lessons Learned

Although the much larger and broader message tests in the 2018 General election still strongly suggest using Social Pressure treatment, this treatment may not always significantly out-perform the 2018 Standard Practice treatment which was based on prior message testing.

Future Steps

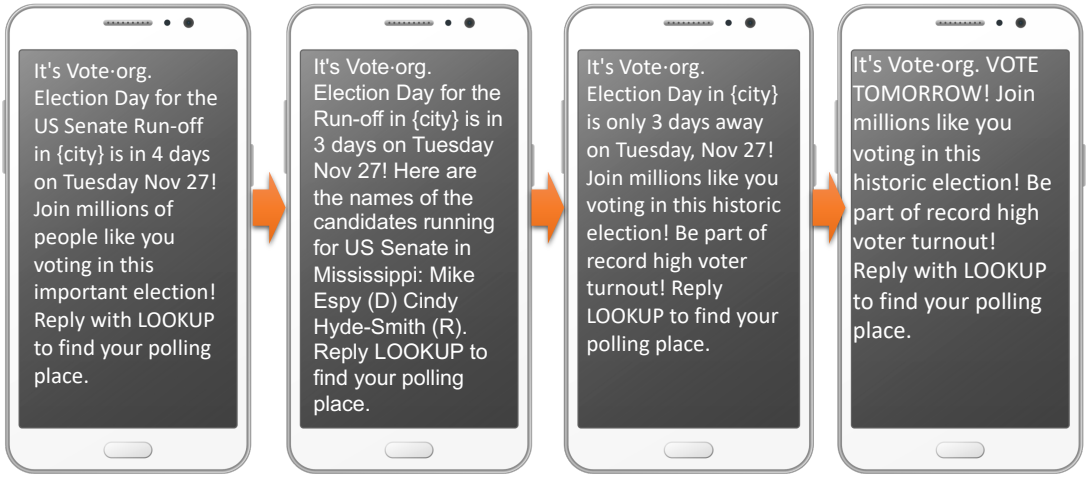
Vote.org should continue to tests messages. The absence of replicating the stronger performance of the Social Pressure message from the 2018 General election tests is a reminder that no test is definitive.

Cautions

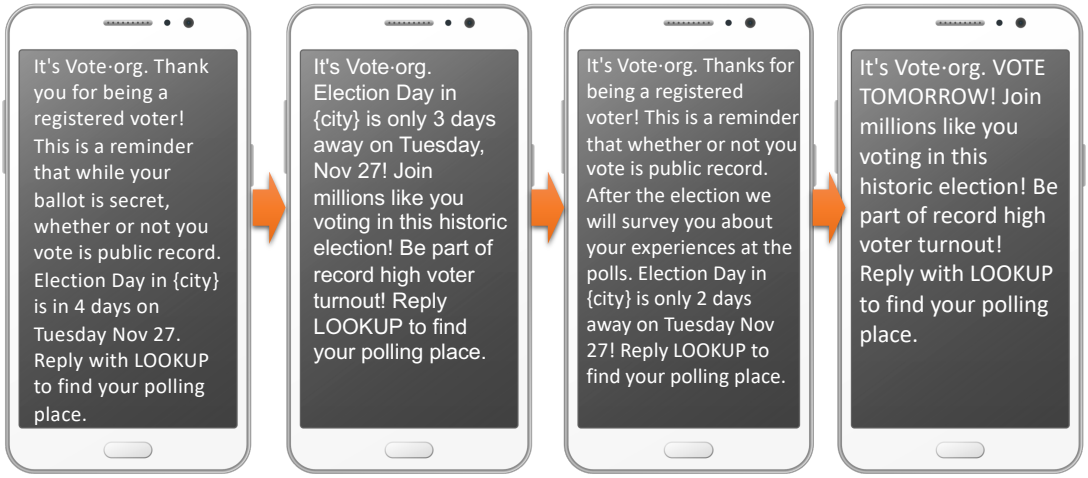
The effect of any voter mobilization communication is conditional on the execution of the program, the jurisdiction, the type of election, the level of interest in the election, and the activities of other organizations. Repeating these treatments in other election contexts or with variations of the treatments could produce different results.

Appendix: Examples of Treatments

MS Run-off: Standard Practice with Names



MS Run-off: Social Pressure with survey threat



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] Panagopoulos, Costas, and Donald P. Green. 2008. "Field Experiments Testing the Impact of Radio Advertisements on Electoral Competition." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(1): 156–68.
[ii] Shineman, V. A. (2018). If you mobilize them, they will become informed: Experimental evidence that information acquisition is endogenous to costs and incentives to participate. British Journal of Political Science, 48(1), 189-211.
[iii] Mann, Christopher B. 2010. "Is There Backlash to Social Pressure? A Large-Scale Field Experiment on Voter Mobilization." *Political Behavior* 32(3): 387–407.
[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 Standard 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] The -0.05 percentage point difference between the treatments is not statistically significant at p=0.783.

[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).