Vote.org 2018 SMS Voter Mobilization Program: Mobilization of Unregistered Movers in Election Day Registration States

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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 five states that allow Election Day voter registration. This memo evaluates an adaptation of SMS voter mobilization to encourage people identified as having moved from their prior registration address to register and vote on Election Day in states where Election Day Registration (EDR) is allowed. The test of encouraging EDR covered 332,199 people in five states: CA, IA, IL, MN, WI. Based on the EDR procedures in each state, the treatments in IA, MN and WI encouraged use of EDR available at each polling place while treatments in CA & IL encouraged use of EDR available at special voting service sites. The treatments used one message delivered on November 5, 2018. This message was adapted for EDR from the final message of Vote.org's Standard Practice voter mobilization messages for the 2018 election cycle.

The average effect appears to be a 0.18 percentage point increase in turnout ($48.17/net vote; 20.8 votes/$1000), although this effect does not reach statistical significance. However, the positive effect is due to a large effect in one state (Wisconsin) but null effects in the remaining four states.

In future "cold" SMS EDR mobilization programs, Vote.org should consider details of EDR procedures, public familiarity with EDR, and other factors that may condition successfully increasing turnout.

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 adaptation of SMS voter mobilization to encourage people identified as having moved from their prior registration address to register and vote on Election Day in states

where Election Day Registration (EDR) is allowed. The test of encouraging EDR covered 332,199 people in five states: CA, IA, IL, MN, WI. Based on the EDR procedures in each state, the treatments in IA, MN and WI encouraged use of EDR available at each polling place while treatments in CA & IL encouraged use of EDR available at special voting service sites. The treatments used one message delivered on November 5, 2018. This message was adapted for EDR from the final message of Vote.org's Standard Practice voter mobilization messages for the 2018 election cycle.

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 332,199 people 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) New residential address in the following states according to US Postal Service National Change of Address data, but not registered at this address.
    - California
    - Illinois
    - Iowa
    - Minnesota
    - Wisconsin
3) People of color or unmarried women:
    - People of color: individuals coded as non-white by TargetSmart.
    - Females under age 25 who were not included using the criteria above
4) Exclusions:
    - Requested a mail ballot for the 2018 election
    - Age under 18 years old or over 100 years old

Treatments:

The experiment compares an uncontacted control group to an adaptation of the 2018 Standard Practice message for voter mobilization. Examples of the treatment for states with polling place EDR or non-polling place EDR are in the Appendix. Each treatment consisted of a single SMS message. The Standard Practice treatment is based on prior tests and programs by Vote.org. The final message of the Standard Practice treatment focusing information about voting (and registration in this experiment) to increase turnout. This tactic is very common in voter mobilization and has been successful in randomized controlled tests of mail, phone calls and canvassing (see Green and Gerber 2019 for review).[i]

Anyone who cast a ballot according to public records acquired by TargetSmart LLC was removed from the contact list upon Vote.org's receipt of this information.

Intended Effects[ii]

- The treatment was intended to increase turnout in the November 2018 election.
- Different treatment effects were expected across the following groups:
  - States
    - States grouped by competitive vs. non-competitive statewide campaigns[iii]
  - Voters under and over age 30
  - Cell phone match confidence
  - Competitive vs. non-competitive Congressional Districts
  - Competitive state or CD vs. non-competitive state and CD
  - Gender
  - Age
  - Vote propensity score
  - Drop-off voters (voted in 2016 but not 2014)
  - 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. The 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).

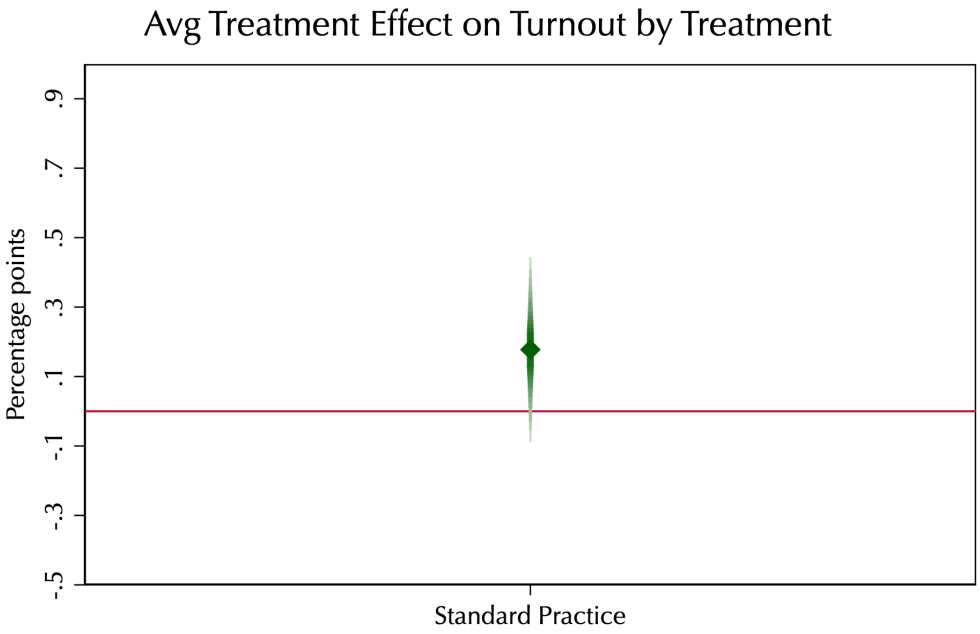
Random Assignment to Treatment & Control

	Individuals	%
Standard Practice	221,579	66.7%
Control	110,620	33.3%

Results

The average effect on turnout for appears to be a 0.18 percentage point increase in turnout, although this effect does not reach statistical significance.[iv]

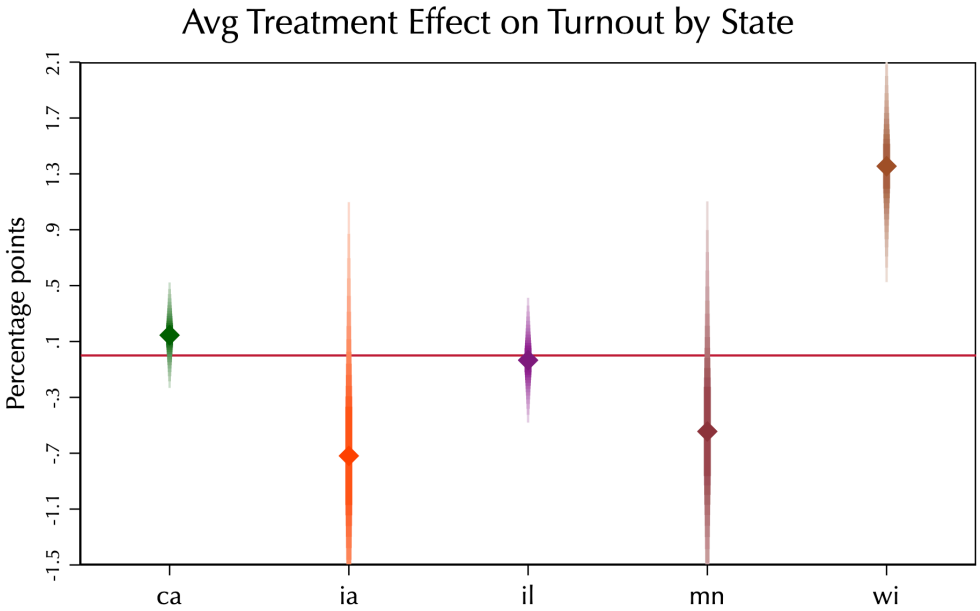
Note on reading the graphs in this memo: The estimated treatment effect is represented by the diamond shape in the middle of each bar. The gradient error bars display the statistical uncertainty of this estimate. Like traditional error bars, the ends of the gradient error bars indicate the 95% confidence 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.[v]



Notes: Turnout in control group = 34.43%. 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.

Subgroups

Noteworthy differences appear for across the states in the EDR mobilization program. The overall positive effect appears to be due to the large and statistically significant effect in Wisconsin (+1.35 percentage points[vi]). The effect was not statistically significant in other states, and even appears to be negative in two states (IA and MN).



Notes: Registration in control group: CA= 34.98%; IA= 27.04%; IL= 32.20%;MN= 46.83%; WI= 36.66%.
Difference in effects between states is *not* statistically significant (p=0.123).
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.

Note: Results are reported for impact on turnout. As of November 8, 2019, The Movement Cooperative instance of the Catalist voter file does not contain voter registration date. Therefore, this memo is unable to evaluate the rate of registration on Election Day. However, this outcome is of secondary interest as it is only an interim step to voting.

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
Treatment	0.18 pp	393	20.8	$48.17	[$0.0867/individual]

Notes: Treatment cost reflects average cost for the message in the 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

Although positive and fairly cost effective overall, Vote.org's strategy of using "cold" SMS messages to encourage use of Election Day Registration was successful in only one of five states. This pattern may be driven by competitiveness (WI had the most competitive statewide contests), but also suggests more careful attention is needed to details of EDR procedures, public familiarity with EDR, and other factors that may condition successfully increasing turnout.

Future Steps

Vote.org should conduct more research and planning than was possible when Vote.org's former Program Director added this program in late October. Mobilization for EDR may be a promising strategy in some locations (e.g. Wisconsin or competitive states) but more research and planning is needed to determine where, when and how to run this program effectively.

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
[Election Day Registration @ Polling Place]

Standard Practice
[Election Day Registration @ Off Site]

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 available on The Movement Cooperative's instance of the Catalist voter file. Unfortunately, this dataset does not have voter registration date available to assess the rate of registering on Election Day. The matching used name, date of birth, and residential address from the pre-election TargetSmart file. 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] The average treatment effect for any treatment is not statistically significant at p = 0.136, one-tailed. SE = 0.16
[v] 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.
[vi] WI The average treatment effect in Wisconsin is statistically significant at p = 0.004, one-tailed. SE = 0.05
[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).