



A culture of voting:

Does early, repeated voter contact help boost odd year voter turnout?

Gaby Goldstein, PhD, Director of Research

Mallory Roman, PhD, Associate Director of Research

Objective: This study sought to determine if sending 3 waves of handwritten postcards to high support, mid-low turnout propensity voters (i.e., people who support the Democratic party but need motivation to turn out to vote) could increase voter turnout for the 2019 Virginia, Louisiana, and Mississippi primary and general elections.

Background: Industry research suggests that sporadic voters are often ignored by political campaigns, which may see them as bad investments based on their likelihood of voting. This means that sporadic voters often do not receive as much attention, or as many asks, as more reliable voters.

However, we know that effects from persuasion and GOTV communications with voters generally “decay” and become weaker and/or disappear after a period of days or weeks. More research is required to see if this is true with low propensity/high support voters as well. This study was designed to test the utility of sending voter education postcards during the 2019 elections in Virginia, Mississippi and Louisiana by sending 3 waves of handwritten postcards encouraging voting to low-mid turnout propensity Democratic-leaning voters in competitive districts in the first half of the year.

There are several unique circumstances related to these elections and this sample that may have contributed to an electoral context that is not generalizable. All of these elections were conducted in odd years, which means that the ballot does not include federal candidates (i.e., congressional, Senate, and Presidential candidates). Such elections tend to draw less interest, less media, and less money to the state, and voter turnout is generally much lower than it is in Congressional midterm or Presidential years. Further, these states are not representative of the larger American electorate and represent only one region of the US.

Additionally, due to the early timing of the first postcard delivery, the districts and targets were chosen before the filing deadline in each state. This meant that some districts chosen, and unfortunately almost all of the districts chosen in Virginia, did not have a state legislative primary. Since Virginia did not have a Gubernatorial race like Mississippi and Louisiana, this meant that most of the Virginia sample did not vote in the primary. These considerations limit our ability to draw reliable conclusions about this voter education tactic from this particular study.

Specifics: SDAN pulled a list of all registered voters in 4 Virginia House of Delegates Districts (94, 28, 84, 40), 6 Louisiana state House of Representatives districts (105, 70, 94, 12, 85, 62), and 13 Mississippi state House of Representatives districts (102, 53, 79, 86, 43, 3, 12, 4, 90, 10, 96, 11, 46) who met inclusion criteria (registered voters living in one of the above districts with partisanship scores between 80-100, indicating general support for Democrats, and turnout propensity scores for off-year general elections between 30-50, indicating sporadic/low voting behavior). The sampling frames for these states were: LA - 20,255 voters, MS - 17,010 voters, and VA - 18,610. Each list was randomized and up to 18,000 voters were selected from each list. For Louisiana and Virginia this resulted in samples of 18,000 from each state, and for Mississippi this resulted in a sample of 17,010. This resulted in a final sample of 53,010.

All participants were randomized into either the postcard condition, where they received 3 waves of postcards in the first half of 2019, or the control condition, where they received no postcards. Volunteers wrote to voters in one or more states. All recipients received the same first postcard, but for the second and third postcards, postcard recipients were randomly assigned to receive postcards with either a general or a specific message. The general message for postcard 2 outlined a few general issues that Republicans were failing to deliver on in the state, while the specific message cited specific examples. The general message for postcard 3 outlined a few general issues that Democrats plan to deliver on if given the majority in the state legislature, while the specific message cited specific examples (see Appendix for postcard scripts).

Volunteers mailed postcards to an in-state partner, who then mailed them locally. Volunteers mailed their postcards to partners on January 31, April 24, and July 1, 2019 who mailed them locally as soon as all postcards were received (generally within 3 days of the volunteer mail date). After the 2019 elections, SDAN matched all individuals in both conditions to the voter file to determine if they voted in the primary and general elections in 2019.

Key Findings:

- **Postcards largely did not affect primary or general election voting.** While postcards had a marginally significant negative effect on voter turnout in the primary election ($p = 0.065$), they did not approach significance for predicting voter turnout in the general election ($p = 0.196$).
 - For the primary election, postcards had a marginally significant backlash effect ($p = 0.065$), associated with an approximately 5.7% decrease in odds of turning out to vote compared to folks who did not receive postcards.
 - For the general election, postcards had no effect on voting ($p = 0.196$), indicating that any backlash during the primary from the postcards was short lived.

Primary election vote outcome

Variable	Odds Ratios. (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Postcards	0.9429277 (0.0300242)	-1.85	-0.8858801-1.003649	0.065 †
State (Ref=LA)				
MS	1.037591 (0.0343929)	1.11	0.972325-1.107237	0.266
VA	0.067481 (0.0047277)	-38.5	0.0588229-0.0774136	<0.001*
Age (continuous)				
	1.00103 (0.0007884)	1.31	0.9994864-1.002577	0.191
Gender (Ref=Women)				



Men Unknown	1.10288 (0.0356513) 0.5097483 (0.0345494)	3.03 -9.94	1.035172-1.175016 0.4463377-0.5821677	0.002* <0.001*
Race (Ref=White)				
African-American/Black	0.989101 (0.0336017)	-0.32	0.9253877-1.057201	0.747
Asian	1.207706 (0.1734441)	1.31	0.9114156-1.600318	0.189
Hispanic	0.6067501 (0.0827836)	-3.66	0.4643804-0.7927676	<0.001*
Native American	0.9748172 (0.3493262)	-0.07	0.4829417-1.967667	0.943
Other	1.612306 (0.1794074)	4.29	1.296376-2.005228	<0.001*
Unknown	0.3430509 (0.0655334)	-5.60	0.2359134-0.4988439	<0.001*
Dem score (continuous)				
	1.050017 (0.0034332)	14.9	1.043309-1.056767	<0.001*
Turnout score (continuous)				
	1.004521 (0.0008768)	5.17	1.002804-1.006241	<0.001*

$\chi^2(14) = 4450.91, p < 0.001, \text{pseudo R squared} = 0.1362, (n=41,855)$

General Election outcome

Variable	Odds Ratios (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Postcards	0.9698123 (0.0230004)	-1.29	0.9257641-1.015956	0.196
State (Ref=LA)				
MS	1.222691 (0.0365121)	6.73	1.153183-1.296389	<0.001*
VA	1.217408 (0.0336799)	7.11	1.153155-1.285242	<0.001*
Age (continuous)				
	1.002639 (0.0005959)	4.43	1.001472-1.003808	<0.001*
Gender (Ref=Women)				
Men	1.186845 (0.0285772)	7.11	1.035172-1.175016	<0.001*
Unknown	0.4166862 (0.0240426)	-15.2	0.3721304-0.4665766	<0.001*
Race (Ref=White)				

African-American/Black	0.8094884 (0.0202057)	-8.47	0.7708391-0.8500755	<0.001*
Asian	1.332937 (0.098198)	3.90	1.153723-1.539991	<0.001*
Hispanic	0.6067501 (0.0827836)	-7.03	0.499245-0.6757704	<0.001*
Native American	0.5314142 (0.1899239)	-1.77	0.2637663-1.070649	
Other	1.603248 (0.1673485)	4.52	1.306627-1.967207	0.077 †
Unknown	0.669177 (0.0485694)	-5.53	0.5804437-0.771475	<0.001*
Dem score (continuous)				
	1.094043 (0.0025699)	38.3	1.089018-1.099092	<0.001*
Turnout score (continuous)				
	0.9847061 (0.0019115)	-7.94	0.9809667-0.9884597	<0.001*

$\chi^2(14) = 2374.16, p < 0.001$, pseudo R squared = 0.0480, (n=41,855)

- The general message performed worse than the specific message in both elections.** In both the primary and general elections, it appears that the generally worded postcards were associated with a decrease in voter turnout, while the postcards that cited specific examples were not associated with a significant decrease in turnout.
 - For the primary election, people who received a generally worded postcard were marginally significantly less likely to turnout to vote in the primary election than people who did not receive any postcards (controls; $p = 0.054$). People who received postcards with specific examples were not distinguishable from controls ($p = 0.179$), indicating that while they did not have a positive effect on turnout, they were not associated with the backlash that the general message was.
 - There were similar trends for the general election, with marginally statistically significant backlash for voter turnout among generally worded postcard receivers ($p = 0.062$) and non-significant results for the postcards with specific examples ($p = 0.698$). This indicates that the general postcard may have actually had some longer term effects that were obscured when both postcard messages were combined in the previous model.

Primary Election outcome

Variable	Odds rat (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Message condition (Ref=control)				
General	0.9301728 (0.0348808)	-1.93	0.9257641-1.015956	
Specific	0.9522604 (0.0346819)	-1.34	0.8866545-1.022721	0.054 † 0.179

State (Ref=LA)				
MS	1.036079 (0.0343515)	1.07	0.9708927-1.105643	0.285
VA	0.0665064 (0.0047211)	-38.2	0.057868-0.0764342	<0.001*
Age (continuous)				
	1.000974 (0.000789)	1.23	0.9994287-1.002521	0.217
Gender (Ref=Women)				
Men	1.101594 (0.0356383)	2.99	1.033913-1.173706	0.003*
Unknown	0.5099255 (0.0345648)	-9.94	0.446487-0.5823776	<0.001*
Race (Ref=White)				
African-American/Black	0.9905916 (0.0336768)	-0.28	0.9267373-1.058846	0.781
Asian	1.147252 (0.1681481)	0.94	0.8607985-1.52903	0.349
Hispanic	0.6082372 (0.0830169)	-3.64	0.465473-0.7947883	<0.001*
Native American	0.9734419 (0.3488424)	-0.08	0.4822516-1.964927	0.940
Other	1.612551 (0.1794387)	4.29	1.296566-2.005543	<0.001*
Unknown	0.3446245 (0.0658514)	-5.58	0.2369721-0.5011816	<0.001*
Dem score (continuous)				
	1.049774 (0.0034353)	14.8	1.043062-1.056528	<0.001*
Turnout score (continuous)				
	1.004539 (0.0008774)	5.19	1.002821-1.00626	<0.001*

$\chi^2(15) = 4426.53, p < 0.001, \text{pseudo R squared} = 0.1358, (n=41,645)$

General Election outcome

Variable	Odds Ratios (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Specific	0.9498511 (0.0261676)	-1.87	0.9257641-1.015956	0.062 † 0.698
General	0.9894199 (0.027158)	-0.39	0.9375978-1.044106	
State (Ref=LA)				
MS	1.221079 (0.036475)	6.69	1.151641-1.294703	<0.001*

VA	1.219133 (0.033858)	7.13	1.154546-1.287333	<0.001*
Age (continuous)				
	1.002601 (0.0005971)	4.36	1.001432-1.003772	<0.001*
Gender (Ref=Women)				
Men	1.189711 (0.0287118)	7.20	1.134747-1.247337	<0.001*
Unknown	0.4177612 (0.0241121)	-15.2	0.3730774-0.4677967	<0.001*
Race (Ref=White)				
African-American/Black	0.8105024 (0.0202798)	-8.40	0.7717137-0.8512408	<0.001*
Asian	1.319855 (0.0981486)	3.73	1.140849-1.526948	<0.001*
Hispanic	0.6067501 (0.0827836)	-7.03	0.5007095-0.678258	<0.001*
Native American	0.5314142 (0.1899239)	-1.77	0.2632377-1.068609	
Other	1.603248 (0.1673485)	4.52	1.3082-1.969651	0.077 †
Unknown	0.669177 (0.0485694)	-5.53	0.5829848-0.7753738	<0.001*
Dem score (continuous)				
	1.094066 (0.0025801)	38.1	1.089021-1.099134	<0.001*
Turnout score (continuous)				
	0.9848484 (0.0019168)	-7.94	0.9810987-0.9886124	<0.001*

$\chi^2(15) = 2356.6, p < 0.001, \text{pseudo R squared} = 0.0479, (n=41,645)$

Additional findings:

- Independent of the postcard intervention, people in both Mississippi and Virginia voted significantly more in the general election than voters from Louisiana (this may be because of [Louisiana's unique "jungle" primary and runoff election system](#) where the primary is essentially the general election if candidates receive more than 50% of the vote).
- Demographic characteristics that are generally predictive of voting were significant predictors of voting in the *general* election as well. Older people voted more than younger voters, men again voted more than women, Asian people and people who identified as a race other than those listed voted significantly more than white people, while all other races voted significantly, or, in the case of Native Americans, marginally, less than white people.
- Interestingly, in the primary election, race was not a significant predictor for many of the specific races tested (Black/African-American, Asian, and Native American). This indicates that most non-white voters in the sample voted at similar rates to white voters in the sample. Age was also not a significant predictor of voting in the primary election. It is



unclear why some demographics were more significant predictors of general election voting behavior than of primary voting behavior.

- Partisanship predicted turnout (i.e., the more partisan someone is the more likely they are to vote) but people with higher turnout scores for the general election were actually less likely to vote than people with lower turnout scores. It is unclear why this would be the case, but it could be because some people with especially low turnout scores are simply newer voters whose scores are not particularly accurate due to lack of data.
- We ran several exploratory regression models looking at whether or not partisanship and turnout scores moderate the effect of condition and message condition, after controlling for state, age, gender, race, partisanship, and turnout.
 - There were no interactions between partisanship and condition ($p = 0.597$ for primary vote, $p = 0.763$ for general vote), or partisanship and message condition ($ps = 0.179-0.748$) for either primary or general elections.
 - Similarly, there were no interactions between turnout and condition ($p = 0.815$ for primary vote, $p = 0.766$ for general vote), or turnout and message conditions ($ps = 0.658-0.992$). This indicates that neither partisanship nor turnout scores moderated people's voting behavior based on their condition.

Takeaways:

- Handwritten postcards were not effective for improving voter turnout in this sample. Neither postcard message helped to boost voter turnout compared to not getting a postcard ($ps = 0.054$ and higher).
- The general message appears to be responsible for the bulk of the backlash. The generally worded postcard was a marginally significant predictor of being less likely to vote in the primary and election elections ($ps = 0.054$ and 0.062 respectively). The postcard that provided more specific examples performed largely the same as not getting a postcard, causing people to be no less likely to vote in the primary or general elections.

Caveats and limitations:

There are a few limitations in this study. Study participants came from selected competitive districts in 3 specific states (LA, MS, VA) holding elections in a relatively quieter odd-year election cycle. This means these elections get less publicity and tend to attract fewer voters than midterm or presidential elections. Further, these voters were high support, low to mid turnout propensity voters, indicating they are a very specific population of people and the findings from this sample cannot be widely generalized. This study was also underpowered to detect effects and would need to be replicated in a larger sample size to determine if the backlash to the general postcard message is reliably marginally statistically significant.

Future directions for this research should include finding other ways to effectively deliver voter education messages and testing these methods outside of the same states. Garnering more information on this technique will allow folks to make more informed choices about postcarding and messaging for these sporadic Democratic voters.

This is far from the definitive word on this research but suggests that we should tread carefully in voter education efforts, as they do appear to have minimal electoral consequences even months later. More research is needed to fully clarify and be more confident about the reliability of these results. Overall, this evidence should be taken with caution as an initial suggestion that this type of messaging needs more work.



Appendix

Postcard Scripts:

Scripts - Participants received message 1, message 2, and message 3 based on their state and message condition.

Message 1 all states - Hi _____, There are elections for your state senator and representative in 2019. These elections are especially important because state legislators spend your tax dollars, fund schools, and create all state laws. A single vote could decide the races on your ballot - please vote this year! Thanks for reading, _____

Message 2 - LA General

Dear _____, Governor & state legislature elections are Oct 12. Under GOP control of the legislature, LA is:

- High in incarceration
- High in unemployment
- Low in economic opportunity

It used to be worse before Dem Gov. Edwards. Let's give Edwards a legislature he can work with - please vote this year! _____

LA Specific

Dear _____, Governor & state legislature elections are Oct 12. Under GOP control of the legislature, LA is:

- 2nd highest in incarceration
- 4th highest in unemployment
- 49th in economic opportunity

It was worse before Dem Gov. Edwards. Let's give Edwards a legislature he can work with - please vote this year! _____

MS General

Dear _____, Governor and state legislature elections are Nov 5. Under GOP control of the legislature, MS is:

- High in incarceration
- Low in healthcare access
- Low in economic opportunity

The GOP forgets they work for us - but we can vote them out - please vote for every race on your ballot this year! _____

MS Specific

Dear _____, Governor and state legislature elections are Nov 5! Under GOP control of the state legislature, MS is:



- 3rd in incarceration
- 49th in healthcare access
- 50th in economic opportunity

The GOP forgets they work for us - but we can vote them out - please vote for every race on your ballot this year! _____

VA General

Dear _____, State legislature elections are Nov 5. Under GOP control of the legislature, VA is:

- Low in per student spending
- Low in quality of life

GOP state legislators block bills that would help Virginians. Dems are just a few seats from flipping the legislature blue - please vote this year! _____

VA Specific

Dear _____, State legislature elections are Nov 5. Under GOP control of the legislature, VA is:

- 42nd in per student spending
- 41st in quality of life

GOP state legislators block bills that would help Virginians. Dems are just 4 seats from flipping the legislature blue - please vote this year! _____

Message 3 -

LA General

Dear _____, Governor & state legislature elections are OCT 12! Democrats want to:

- Draw fair congressional districts that give voters the power
- Decrease tax breaks for out-of-state corporations

Dem Gov Edwards already expanded Medicaid. With competitive elections & corporations paying their share, we can fund schools & fix roads. Please vote!

LA Specific

Dear _____, Governor & state legislature elections are OCT 12! Democrats want to:

- Draw fair congressional districts that give voters the power
- Decrease property tax breaks for out-of-state corporations

Dem Gov Edwards already expanded Medicaid to 481,000+ people. With competitive elections & corporations paying their share, we can fund schools & fix roads. Please vote! _____

MS General

Dear _____, Governor & state legislature elections are NOV 5! Democrats want



to:

- Raise teacher pay to the Southeast average
- Expand Medicaid to more people

Dems want to pass laws that help us thrive, but Dems are only 37.4% of the state legislature. Only voters like you can balance the scales. Please vote! _____

MS Specific

Dear ____, Governor & state legislature elections are NOV 5! Democrats want to:

- Raise teacher pay from \$42,925 to the Southeast average (\$52,830)
- Expand Medicaid to 100,000+ people

Dems want to pass laws that help us thrive, but Dems are only 37.4% of the state legislature. Only voters like you can balance the scales. Please vote! _____

VA General

Dear ____, State legislature elections are NOV 5! Democrats want:

- To raise minimum wage
- Legislators that reflect the diversity of our community (ex. Dems have more female VA legislators than the GOP)

VA Democrats already expanded Medicaid to 300,000+ people. When Dems win, they pass laws that help us thrive. Please vote! _____

VA Specific

Dear ____, State legislature elections are NOV 5! Democrats want:

- A \$15 minimum wage
- Legislators that reflect the diversity of our community (ex. Dems have 284% more female VA legislators than the GOP)

VA Democrats already expanded Medicaid to 300,000+ people. When Dems win, they pass laws that help us thrive. Please vote! _____