SISTER DISTRICT ACTION NETWORK

Location, Location, Location: Does Postcard Postmark Location Matter for Voter Turnout?

Sister District Journal, 2020

www.sisterdistrict.com/research

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Abstract

The Postcard Postcard Study was a randomized controlled trial that sought to determine if the location a postcard is sent from, as indicated by the postmark on the card, affects the efficacy of the postcard in boosting voter turnout to the March 3, 2020 primary election in North Carolina and Texas. This study targeted high support (partisanship scores of 80+) but low-mid turnout propensity voters (primary turnout scores of 25-60) with GOTV messaging encouraging them to vote in the upcoming primary in their state and providing information about the process of voting. This study sought to determine if receiving a handwritten postcard significantly boosted primary turnout compared to not receiving a postcard at all, and if this effect was significantly higher for postcards sent from inside the target state or from postcards sent outside of the target state. The results indicated that handwritten postcards did boost primary turnout compared to controls, with in-state postcards significantly increasing primary turnout and out of state postcards marginally increasing primary turnout compared to controls. The difference in turnout between in- and out of state postcards was not statistically significant, but the relative effect sizes and levels of significance of the two treatment conditions indicate that the results should be replicated for more clarity.

Keywords

GOTV, low turnout propensity voters, postcards, handwritten communications, turnout rate, location

Handwritten postcarding has become an increasingly popular voter outreach tactic in recent years, with millions of postcards being sent to voters across the country on the behalf of thousands of political candidates and advocacy organizations. Many of those campaigns and organizations ask that volunteers ship the postcards to local partners (or to a local office of that campaign or organization) for them to be mailed locally as opposed to from other areas. As far as SDAN is aware, the efficacy of sending handwritten GOTV postcards from a local as opposed to a non-local area as indicated by the postmark has not been tested. In February/March of 2020, SDAN ran an internal study to investigate whether sending handwritten GOTV postcards to targets increased the rate of voting among low turnout propensity but high-support voters, and further, if there was a difference in efficacy between postcards sent from inside the target state (referred to as in-state postcards) as opposed to from outside the target state (referred to as out of state postcards).

This targeted registered voters in North Carolina and Texas who were identified as low to mid voter turnout propensity (25-60 TargetSmart scores for presidential primary turnout) for the March 3, 2020 primary election and as likely Democrats (80-100 TargetSmart scores for partisanship) living in a number of competitive state legislative districts. For the purposes of the study, targeted voters received a postcard in the mail on approximately February 24-26, 2020 encouraging them to vote in the upcoming March 3, 2020 primary election.

Half of the postcards were sent on February 20, 2020 from outside of the state and half of the postcards were sent on February 22, 2020 from inside of the state.

It was hypothesized that the people who received GOTV postcards would be significantly more likely to vote than people who did not receive postcards. Additionally, it was hypothesized that this effect would not be significantly different for people who received postcards from in as opposed to out of state.

1. Voter Propensity

In the current hyper-partisan culture of the United States, there are two potential ways to expand any one party or candidate's vote share. One is to persuade people who don't agree with you to vote for a specific candidate or party for whom they normally wouldn't vote. This is an uphill battle for a variety of reasons, including the fact that party identification is known to largely trump policy concerns (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). The other is to persuade folks who already agree with the specific candidate or party to vote when they normally wouldn't turnout to vote in that election. This is also an uphill battle to some degree, as past voting behavior tends to be a strong predictor of future behavior (Green & Shachar, 2000). But it seems increasingly more appealing in a more partisan era, as there is a relatively small pool of truly persuadable voters in the political middle (Kaltenthaler & Miller, 2012). As noted in this investigation by the New York Times, only about 9% of US voters are truly persuadable. This means that one of the best paths for winning may be to appeal to folks who are already ideologically on board and just need to be persuaded to mobilize. For this reason, the current research focused on high support but low-mid turnout propensity voters. These voters are individuals who are unlikely or sporadic voters who are likely to vote for Democrats if they decide to vote.

Interestingly, recent industry research has suggested that lower turnout voters may be more mobilizable than previously thought. Several industry efforts have shown exciting increases in turnout from things like direct mail, digital advertising, canvassing, and more among lower turnout likelihood voters than are usually targeted. Some industry actors say that we should be targeting voters down to 0 turnout propensity scores, which is akin to a likelihood of voting of 0%. Some arguments in this camp include the fact that turnout propensity is usually calculated at least partially based on past voting history, but this may not provide a clear picture for many groups, including newly registered voters and voters aging out of adolescence and young adulthood. For this reason, we may be missing some targets that are ripe for mobilization, and they may be hearing fewer voices than higher turnout propensity voters, making it easier for any one persuasion or GOTV effort to break through.

2. GOTV Postcarding

GOTV, or Get Out the Vote, postcarding refers to postcards that are sent to voters shortly before (generally the few weeks or days before) an election encouraging them to vote. These types of communications are meant to mobilize voters to the polls and are often nonpartisan (Gerber & Green, 2000). Industry recommendations suggest that GOTV messaging should focus on the process of voting, and also potentially include plan-making, rationalization, and social pressure (Green & Gerber, 2019). But interestly, Dale and Strauss found that even just noticeable reminders to vote, like a text message reminding someone to vote the following day, can provide meaningful boosts to voting (Dale and Strauss, 2009). Postcards, while not as attention grabbing as text messages, may still be fairly noticeable, as most people must at least retrieve their mail, and in the process, may be exposed to the postcard's message before disposing of it. There is relatively little research about handwritten GOTV postcard research that is publicly available (as opposed to industry findings) due to its relative youth as a political tactic. A 2018 GOTV postcard study conducted by SDAN revealed no effect from postcards on voter turnout, though the study did have a variety of issues, including the fact that baseline turnout was much higher for the study targets compared to the general electorate (Goldstein & Roman, "In press").

3. Hypotheses

There were two main hypotheses in this study that were tested using the method outlined below. Overall, this work suggests that GOTV postcards for the primary election may be an effective way of targeting low-mid propensity high support voters.

> **Hypothesis 1.** Handwritten GOTV postcards will increase voter turnout rate among targets who receive GOTV postcards compared to targets who do not receive postcards (controls).
>
> Further, it was assumed that the postcards sent from in- and out of state would be statistically indistinguishable in terms of voter turnout.

Hypothesis 2. Movers will vote at similar rates in both the in- and out of state postcard conditions.

4. Research Design

This study was designed internally by SDAN as a randomized controlled trial across 2 states (North Carolina and Texas) who met inclusion criteria (voter turnout propensity scores of 25-60 and partisanship scores of 80-100) and who lived in competitive state legislative districts. To test the hypotheses, SDAN randomly chose 30,000 targets and randomly assigned targets to three conditions: control, in-state postcard, and out of state postcard. Trained Sister District volunteers recruited to help in this project wrote postcards to targets in the treatment conditions and sent those postcards to in-state partners for local mailing or sent them from their local out of state post office.

This study did not include a procedure for informed consent or debriefing, as its design met SDAN's internal criteria for ethical review: 1) there was no risk to subjects, 2) there was no active deception, and 3) there were no recordings of the subject's private behavior made without their consent. Studies are submitted to a professional IRB for an external review if they do not meet the ethical guidelines detailed above.

The details of the experiment can be found below.

4.1 Treatments

Targets were randomly assigned to three conditions: control, in-state, and out of state. Targets in the control condition received no mail in this study. Targets in the in-state condition received a GOTV postcard in the mail about a week before the primary election date that was sent from inside the target's state. Targets in the out of state condition received a GOTV postcard in the mail about a week before the primary election date that was sent from outside the target's state. The script for both in- and out of state postcards was the same for each state with the only difference being the postmark location. Volunteers were asked to follow the scripts as closely as possible.

The script for North Carolina was, "*Hi [Voter Name], Reminder: North Carolina's primary is coming up! • The primary is March 3 (polls open 6:30am-7:30pm). • Visit vote.org/polling-place-locator to find your polling location. Thank you for voting for every office on your ballot in the primary! [Volunteer Name].*"

The script for Texas was, "*Hi [Voter Name], Reminder: Texas's primary is coming up! • The primary is March 3 (polls open 7:00am-7:00pm). • Visit vote.org/polling-place-locator to find your polling location. Thank you for voting for every office on your ballot in the primary! [Volunteer Name].*"

On or before February 18, 2020, volunteer teams assigned to the in-state condition sent their postcards to in-state partners living in Durham, NC and Austin, TX. On February 20, 2020 exactly, volunteer teams assigned to the out of state condition put their postcards in the mail from their local post office in a state other than North Carolina or Texas. On February 22, 2020, both in-state partners mailed all of the in-state postcards from their city located in the target states. It is assumed, based on a 3-5 day delivery window, postcards arrived to voter mailboxes from February 24-26, 2020, approximately 1 week before the March 3, 2020 primary.

4.2 Subjects

SDAN targeted voters that met the inclusion criteria who lived in a number of districts in North Carolina and Texas that were considered competitive (i.e., were not "safe" seats for either political party). These were North Carolina state senate districts 18 and 39 and state house districts 9, 12, 20, 45, 46, 51,59, 63, 74, 82, and 83, and Texas state house districts 26, 66, 67, 92, 96, 108, 112, and 138. The people included registered voters in these districts who had TargetSmart presidential primary turnout propensity scores of 25-60 and partisanship scores of 80-100. To increase generalizability, the study was conducted in two different target states that voted on Super Tuesday (March 3, 2020), likely indicating noisier primary election environments than may have occurred in less competitive states or in states voting earlier or later in the election cycle. A sample of 15,000 subjects was randomly chosen from each state's list of voters who met inclusion criteria in the target districts. This resulted in a final n of 30,000 (treatment n = 20,000).

4.3 Random assignment procedure

SDAN randomized the sample by assigning random numbers to each voter in the sample frame for each state (95,914 in North Carolina and 63,332 in Texas) and sorting the list by the randomly assigned numbers. The first 15,000 voters were chosen from both lists. The voters were again sorted by randomly generated numbers and the first person on the list was assigned to

the control condition, the next to the in-state condition, and the next to the out of state condition repeatedly until all participants had been assigned.

4.4 Measurements

The main dependent variable in this study was Voted, which indicated that the target voted in the March 3, 2020 primary election in their state. The variable was binary and coded 0 for no (did not vote) and 1 for yes (voted). The main independent variable was Condition, which indicated which condition the target was assigned to. The variable was a three-level categorical variable that indicated the participants condition control (no communication), in-state (sent postcard from within the target state), and out of state (sent postcard from outside of the target state).

The state the target lived in was included as a covariate to control for individual differences between registration rates in different states and was indicated by a two level categorical variable (North Carolina, Texas). Age, gender, and race were also included as covariates due to the fact that these factors are often related to voter turnout. Age was a continuous variable indicating the voter's age and ranged from 18-111. Gender was a 3 level categorical variable coded as female, male, and unknown. Race was a 7 level categorical variable coded as Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, White, Other, Unknown. Also included were the variables used in the inclusion criteria, voter turnout propensity and partisanship. Voter turnout propensity is closely related to voting because it is an estimate of how likely people are to vote. The range of scores included was 25-60. Partisanship is sometimes related to voting as people who are more partisan may be more invested in the party platform. The range of scores included was 80-100 (though only scores up to 99.9 were observed). This information came from the TargetSmart voter file.

4.5 Procedure

SDAN identified voters that met the inclusion criteria in the target districts and randomly selected 15,000 from each state. Those voters were randomized into 3 conditions, with 10,000 voters in each condition (5,000 from each state). SDAN recruited volunteers to write postcards to targets in both the in- and out of state conditions. Each volunteer team requested a different amount of postcards depending on their team's capacity and SDAN federated out target addresses to teams based on condition. SDAN held a training session via Zoom that was also recorded and circulated and provided a three page package of guidelines and information about the project to train teams. Teams assigned to send in-state postcards sent them to in-state partners on February 18, 2020. The in-state partners mailed postcards from Durham, NC and Austin, TX on February 22, 2020. Teams assigned to send out of state postcards sent from directly from their state on February 20, 2020. SDAN worked with teams to confirm that all postcards had been mailed to targets. In May 2020, SDAN matched the targets enrolled in the study back to the TargetSmart voter file after primary voting data was available.

5. Descriptives

Looking at the descriptive results, voter turnout rates were slightly higher in both of the treatment conditions compared to the control condition. In the combined treatment condition, targets who received in-state postcards voted at a 1.71% higher rate than people who didn't receive postcards. Unexpectedly, voter turnout in the two treatment conditions did appear to differ in practical effect size, with in-state postcards increasing voter turnout 2.17% compared to the control group turnout rate and out of state postcards increasing voter turnout 1.25% compared to controls. This indicates that there is a difference in practical effect size of the two treatment conditions, which is evidence suggesting that in-state postcards may be behaving differently from out of state postcards.

Table 1. Voting x combined condition

Voted?	No Postcard	Postcard
No	5,926	11,510
Yes	4,074	8,490
Total	10,000	20,000
Voter Turnout Rate	40.74%	42.45%

Table 2. Voting x condition (broken out)

Voted?	No Postcard	In-state	Out of State
No	5,926	5,709	5,801
Yes	4,074	4,291	4,199
Total	10,000	10,000	10,000
Registration Rate	40.74%	42.91%	41.99%

Interestingly, North Carolinians in the sample voted at much higher rates than Texans, with 45.13% (6,770/10,000) of North Carolinians voting and 38.63% (5,794/10,000) of Texans voting ($p < 0.001$ in all tests) regardless of the fact that inclusion criteria was identical for both states. Further, the mean primary turnout score for Texas was 43.87 and the median score was 45.7, both higher than North Carolina's mean turnout score of 42.85 and median score of 43.7.

6. Results

Multiple logistic regression was used to assess differences between conditions with respect to the primary voting outcome among people included in the sample, after controlling for state, age, gender, race, voter turnout propensity for the presidential primary, and partisanship. Two regression models were run, one looking at whether or not postcard receivers voted at higher rates than control subjects, and another looking at the same question but breaking the target conditions out to test the efficacy of the in- and out of state postcards. Both models were run with the March 3, 2020 primary voting outcome.

More formally, the central question posed in the main model is whether there is an association between receiving a handwritten GOTV postcard and voting in the 2020 presidential primary among these low-mid propensity high support voters.

Voting was regressed on the dummy variable for Condition (postcard), and the dummy variables for state (North Carolina, Texas), the continuous variable of age, the dummy variables for gender (male, unknown), the dummy variables for race (Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Unknown/Other), the continuous variable of voter turnout propensity, and the continuous variable of partisanship.

The combined postcard condition was significant compared to the control condition that did not receive a postcard ($p = 0.008$), indicating that significantly more people voted in the primary when they received a GOTV postcard from Sister District. Again, targets in North Carolina were more likely to register than targets in Texas ($p < 0.001$). Interestingly, the age variable is significant ($p < 0.001$), but the odds ratio below 1 and negative z score indicate that people in the sample were less likely to vote as they got older, perhaps indicating more movability with younger sporadic voters than older ones. Men were significantly more likely to vote than women in the sample ($p < 0.001$; though it's important to note that the sample includes 62.97% women and 36.52% men). They also indicate that several racial and ethnic minority voters in the sample (African-American/Black, Hispanic, Native American) voted at significantly lower rates ($p < 0.001$, $p < 0.001$, and $p = 0.001$ respectively) than white voters in the sample. Finally, both turnout propensity and partisanship were significantly related to voting ($p < 0.001$ for both).

Table 4. Main Model 1

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=controls)				
Received Postcard	1.070325 (0.274379)	2.65	1.017877-1.125476	0.008*
State (Ref=North Carolina)				
Texas	0.7063208 (0.019054)	-12.89	0.6699458-0.7446708	<0.001*
Age (continuous)				
	0.9919591 (0.0007544)	-10.62	0.9904817-0.9934388	<0.001*
Gender (Ref=Female)				
Male	1.12784 (0.0282361)	4.81	1.073834-1.184562	<0.001*
Unknown	1.196156 (0.2033302)	1.05	0.8572256-1.669093	0.292
Race (Ref=white)				
African-American/Black	0.9012435 (0.0268408)	-3.49	0.8501425-0.9554162	<0.001*
Asian	1.08185 (0.0627235)	1.36	0.9656415-1.212043	0.175
Hispanic	0.722395 (0.0337567)	-6.96	0.6591724-0.7916814	<0.001*
Native American	0.5459394 (0.0999299)	-3.31	0.3813632-0.7815381	0.001*
Other	0.9864866 (0.1200988)	-0.11	0.7770743-1.252333	0.911
Unknown	0.8311816 (0.0588621)	-2.61	0.7234626-0.9549394	0.009*
Primary turnout (continuous)				
	1.02578 (0.0012796)	33.97	1.040073-1.045089	<0.001*
Partisanship (continuous)				
	1.024455 (0.0028458)	8.70	1.018893-1.030048	<0.001*

($x^2(13) = 1797.18$, p = 0.0001, pseudo $R^2 = 0.0441$); n = 29,999

* *Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

A second model was specified, breaking out the separate treatment conditions. In this model, voting was regressed on the dummy variable for Condition (in-state postcard, out of state postcard), and the dummy variables for state (North Carolina, Texas), the continuous variable of age, the dummy variables for gender (male, unknown), the dummy variables for race (Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Unknown/Other), the continuous variable of voter turnout propensity, and the continuous variable of partisanship.

The in-state postcard condition was significant compared to the control condition that did not receive a postcard, indicating that significantly more people voted in the primary when they received a GOTV postcard from Sister District (p = 0.005). The out of state postcard condition was marginally significant compared to the control condition that did not receive a postcard, which is consistent with its lower practical effect size. The odds ratio above 1 and positive z score indicate that the out of state GOTV postcards did result in more votes than the control condition, but the p value does not meet the threshold for statistical significance (p = 0.071).

The covariate findings in this model largely do not differ from Main Model 1 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Main Model 2 - Treatment condition follow up tests

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=controls)				
In-state postcard	1.085867 (0.0320973)	2.79	1.024745-1.150634	0.005*
Out of state postcard	1.05497 (0.0312168)	1.81	0.9955269-1.117963	0.071†
State (Ref=North Carolina)				
Texas	0.7065057 (0.0190601)	-12.88	0.6701192-0.744868	<0.001*
Age (continuous)				
		-10.61	0.9904895-0.9934468	<0.001*
Gender (Ref=Female)				
Male	1.127844 (0.0282366)	4.81	1.073837-1.184567	<0.001*
Unknown	1.197738 (0.2036052)	1.06	0.8583505-1.671317	0.288
Race (Ref=white)				
African-American/Black	0.9016105 (0.0268546)	-3.48	0.8504832-0.9558113	<0.001*
Asian	1.081576 (0.0627084)	1.35	0.9653955-1.211737	0.176
Hispanic	0.7224603 (0.0337593)	-6.96	0.6592329-0.7917519	<0.001*
Native American	0.5465532 (0.1000387)	-3.30	0.3817968-0.7824068	0.001*
Other	0.9873083 (0.1201963)	-0.10	0.7777255-1.25337	0.916
Unknown	0.8305833 (0.0588232)	-2.62	0.722936-0.9542597	0.009*
Primary turnout (continuous)				
	1.042565 (0.0012796)	33.96	1.04006-1.045076	<0.001*
Partisanship (continuous)				
	1.024455 (0.0028462)	8.71	1.018922-1.030078	<0.001*

($x^2(14) = 1797.14$, p = 0.0001, pseudo $R^2 = 0.0441$); n = 29,999

* *Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

In order to test whether the difference between the two treatment conditions was significant, the same regression was run with the in-state condition recoded as the reference group instead of the control condition. The difference in voter turnout in the two treatment conditions was not statistically significant (Odds Ratio = 0.9715467 [Robust std. Error = 0.0286565), z score = -0.98, 95% CI = 0.9169737-1.029368, p = 0.328). This means that, though the size of the effect in the in-state condition was larger, the difference in size between the effects of the in- and out of state conditions was not large enough to be statistically meaningful.

6. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that handwritten GOTV postcards do help to increase voter turnout among the voters targeted, and that this may be the case more for in-state postcards than for out of state postcards. People who received postcards were more likely to vote in the primary; however, it was statistically significant for people who received in-state postcards and only marginally significant for out of state postcard receivers. When directly compared, the difference in voter turnout between in- and out of state postcards was not statistically significant and did not approach marginal significance. However, the practical effect size of the in-state postcards was larger than the practical effect size of out of state postcards.

This indicates that, though not statistically significant in this sample, there may be advantages to sending postcards from within the state. This is contrary to hypothesis 2 and suggests that further investigation is needed to clarify the utility of in- vs out of state postcard postmarks in voter turnout. Since postmarks include the closest major city, a study that includes a completely local condition (sent from the same city) compared to the in- and out of state conditions may be particularly clarifying.

A post-hoc two proportions power analysis in Stata reveals that the sample was adequately powered to detect the in-state postcard effect (87.5% power), but underpowered to detect the out of state postcard effect (43.5%), likely due to its smaller effect size. It is worth noting that an increase in turnout above 1% and up to 2.17% is quite large in the realm of turnout effects and handwritten postcards.

This study was run during the primary election in order to investigate postcarding in the relatively quieter environment of a primary as opposed to a general election. However, as two Super Tuesday primary elections held in majorly contested states during a presidential year, we might expect the effect size to be larger in, for instance, a midterm or municipal election but smaller in a general election. Further, this study targeted low-mid turnout propensity voters, which means that voters with higher or lower turnout propensity for presidential primaries than included in the range used in the present research (25-60) may behave differently.

Overall, handwritten GOTV postcards do appear to be helpful in boosting voter turnout rates during the presidential primaries for sporadic voters, and this effect appears to be larger for in-state postcards than out of state postcards.

The cost per vote in this study is determined based on a per postcard cost of $0.50 ($0.35 for postcard stamp + $0.15 for a postcard = $0.50). The out of state condition generated 125 more votes than the control condition (10,000 * 0.0125=125) indicating that the votes generated by the out of state postcards cost $40 each (10,000*$0.50=$5,000 / 125 = $40). That means the VPK (votes per thousand dollars spent) for the out of state postcards was 25. The in-state condition generated 217 more votes than the control condition (10,000 * 0.0217 = 217), indicating that the votes generated by the in-state postcards cost $23 each (10,000*$0.50=$5,000 / 217 = $23). That means the VPK for in-state postcards was 43.5. It is worth noting that the cost per vote for this intervention is relatively low compared to cost per vote cited in programs discussed by Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009).

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