



SOCIAL PRESSURE MAIL RESEARCH

Definition: Sending voters messages through the mail, usually via printed mailers and letters. Sometimes including social pressure, which is a form of influence based on the suggestion that others will know if you comply.

Bottom line: Social pressure is highly effective and social pressure mail has been shown to be more effective than regular direct mail.

CONSIDERATIONS

- **Pros** - Cost-effective; quick to print and distribute; uses real information about the voter; harnesses well-established principles of persuasion
- **Cons** - Can offend voters; can be seen as invasion of privacy; receivers may attach negative impressions to the source of mail

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Social pressure as a tactic is based on social psychological work on injunctive and descriptive norms.

- Injunctive norms describe what people should be doing (i.e., not littering) while descriptive norms describe what people are actually doing (i.e., sometimes the environment suggests many people are littering).
- The salience of the norm is important. If the environment makes an injunctive norm more salient, people tend to adhere to it, but if the descriptive norm is more salient, people tend to adhere to that.^{1,2}
- The most effective way to ensure adherence to make sure that injunctive and social norms match (i.e., you shouldn't litter and the environment suggests others are not littering).³

There are two main elements to social pressure messaging in political mail.

- It establishes a social norm that voting is the socially acceptable thing to do, often by references to "civic duty."⁴
- It establishes that the sender knows whether or not the target voted in the past and suggest they will also know in the future, either explicitly or implicitly.⁴

There are three main types of social pressure messaging in politics: positive, gentle, and hard.

- Positive social pressure generally thanks people for voting in a past election and reminds them of future opportunities to take part in this socially desirable behavior again.^{5,6,7}
- Gentle social pressure invokes a norm and makes clear that voting is public record, but the tone is not confrontational. Any comparisons of voters to others is general and not harsh.^{5,6,7}
- Hard social pressure tends to invoke a feeling of "shame" by mentioning a past failure to vote and/or providing a harsher comparison between the target and another relevant groups of voters (e.g., your neighbors, other people in your town, other people in your state). Some researchers have found this approach particularly effective, but this form of the tactic has the **highest potential for backlash**.^{5,6,7}



Social pressure is highly effective in both academia and industry.

- Many academics have found positive results for social pressure mail.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7}
- Social pressure mail is considered the gold standard of political mail within the industry and is one of the two most effective tactics along with relational organizing.⁸

It works on everyone, but need to ensure it is approached with cultural sensitivity.

- It is effective regardless of age, race, or gender according to industry sources.⁸
- Some industry sources suggest that social pressure messaging that reads too harsh to marginalized communities who have traditionally been targeted by voter suppression can be poorly received.⁸

Areas for Further Exploration:

- More research on effectiveness of social pressure in tactics other than mail.
- More research on other types of messaging that may boost efficacy (e.g., commit to vote pledge, plan-making).

References and notes:

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2. Reno, R. R., Cialdini, R. B., & Kallgren, C. A. (1993). The transsituational influence of social norms. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 64(1), 104.
3. Cialdini, R. B. (2003). Crafting normative messages to protect the environment. *Current directions in psychological science*, 12(4), 105-109.
4. Gerber, A. S., Green, D. P., & Larimer, C. W. (2008). Social pressure and voter turnout: Evidence from a large-scale field experiment. *American political Science review*, 102(1), 33-48.
5. Panagopoulos, C. (2013). Positive social pressure and prosocial motivation: Evidence from a large-scale field experiment on voter mobilization. *Political Psychology*, 34(2), 265-275.
6. Gerber, A. S., Green, D. P., & Larimer, C. W. (2010). An experiment testing the relative effectiveness of encouraging voter participation by inducing feelings of pride or shame. *Political Behavior*, 32(3), 409-422.
7. Panagopoulos, C. (2010). Affect, social pressure and prosocial motivation: Field experimental evidence of the mobilizing effects of pride, shame and publicizing voting behavior. *Political Behavior*, 32(3), 369-386.
8. Industry source (SDAN has access to various research reports by progressive organizations that we are not allowed to disseminate or cite but are sharing broad strokes of here).