SISTER DISTRICT ACTION NETWORK

New voters of color:
Do welcome messages emphasizing voter identity increase turnout?

Gabrielle Goldstein, Senior Vice President of Strategic Initiatives
Mallory Roman, Director of Research

Abstract: This study tested the efficacy of handwritten postcards that welcomed newly registered 18- and 19-year-old voters of color and gave them information about the upcoming election for increasing voter turnout. The postcards were sent to this group of Virginia voters ahead of the 2021 gubernatorial and state legislative general elections. In order to be included in the sample, targets had to be registered Virginia voters who were 18-19 years old at the time the list was amassed and were identified in the TargetSmart voter file as a race other than white. In the analysis, it does not appear that postcards influenced voting, and in fact, the direction trended away from the expected effect with controls voting more than postcard receivers ($p = 0.724$). There was no moderation effect of predicted turnout, suggesting that predicted turnout likelihood did not influence postcard efficacy ($p = 0.604$). Interestingly, there was a marginally significant moderation effect of modeled partisanship score on condition, such that people who were predicted to be more right-leaning responded better to the postcards than people who were modeled to be more left-leaning ($p = 0.055$). These initial results suggest that there was no main effect of postcarding, but the postcards may have been effective for specific groups of people, like more right-leaning people. As a small group of voters in this demographic living in Virginia, this is not a widely generalizable test. However, it does indicate that more research is needed to determine the best practices for reaching out to this specific group of young, newly registered voters of color. Based on the initial results seen here, more moderation tests related to modeled partisanship may be warranted.

Takeaways:

- People in the postcard condition voted at almost exactly the same rate as those in the control condition.
    - The turnout for voters who received a postcard was 20.59%, while voters who did not receive a postcard turned out at a slightly higher rate of 20.77%. This difference of 0.18% was not statistically significant in the main model ($p = 0.724$).
        - This indicates that this small difference is not statistically meaningful (i.e., not different from zero) and suggests that postcards did not have an effect on the voter turnout of the overall sample.
- Postcards did not work differently for targets based on their modeled turnout scores.
    - This interaction between condition and predicted turnout scores was not significant ($p = 0.604$) and indicated that the effect of postcards did not differ based on the predicted turnout score.
- Postcards appeared to work better on people in the sample who had lower modeled partisanship scores.
    - This interaction between condition and modeled partisanship scores was marginally significant ($p = 0.055$).

    - The results indicated that people with lower modeled partisanship scores were more likely to turn out in response to the postcards compared to people with higher modeled partisanship scores.
- This data suggests that people who received postcards were largely no more likely to vote than people who did not receive postcards, but that there may have been some efficacy for people with lower modeled partisanship scores. While these partisanship scores may not be fully accurate, given the sample targets were newly registered and very young voters, lower partisanship scores generally indicate that a voter is modeled to lean more politically to the right. This study should be replicated in an older group of newly registered voters to determine if this effect generalizes. It would also be useful to replicate in a state that has explicit party registration, which Virginia does not.
- Turnout in the actual election was higher than the average predicted turnout estimates in both conditions by 166%+, indicating that, as expected, modeled turnout scores aren't as good of an indicator of these young, newly registered voters' behavior as they have been in other studies we have conducted with a more established voter population.
- Voters included in this study adhered to very narrow inclusion criteria, including being 18 to 19 years old the summer before the election, being registered to vote in Virginia, and being identified as belonging to a racial/ethnic group other than white in the TargetSmart file (identifiers may be unreliable). As a result, this is not a highly generalizable sample.
- This study is statistically underpowered, and therefore this study does not provide a conclusive finding on the efficacy (or lack of efficacy) of this tactic. This tactic would need to be replicated in a larger sample to determine if the pattern seen here would be observed in an adequately powered sample.

I. Background and Research Question

This work was conducted to address the efficacy of welcome, informational GOTV messages to new, young voters of color on voter turnout among this segment in the 2021 Virginia general election (i.e., do these postcards increase turnout?). This study is unique in that it specifically targets new voters of color with the intention of elevating the political participation in an important group of voters that is often missed by traditional targeting: young voters of color with little to no history of voter participation.

II. Methods:

A. Study Design

This study was a randomized controlled trial (RCT) designed by SDAN. The study targeted all voters who met the inclusion criteria detailed below. Once voters met inclusion criteria, they were randomized to receive a handwritten postcard or to not receive any communication (controls). This resulted in 8,495 voters in the control condition and 8,494 voters in the treatment condition for a total n of 16,989. Volunteers completed the postcards and sent them in bulk to an in-state partner in Virginia for in-state mailing around October 19-20, 2021. We estimate that they were delivered to homes from October 22-October 27. After the election, data was matched back to

TargetSmart's voter file to determine if voters targeted in this study voted in the 2021 Virginia general election.

Inclusion criteria - The target universe for this study was voters registered to vote in Virginia who were 18 or 19 years old at the time the list was pulled on July 15, 2021, and who were identified in the TargetSmart voter file as a race other than white.

B. Statistical Analysis

Main Model.

The main model focuses on whether or not the target voted. Logistic regression was used to assess differences between conditions with respect to voting (yes, no), after controlling for age, partisanship, turnout, the dummy variables for race (Asian, Hispanic, Uncoded; reference category: Black), and the dummy variables for gender (male, unknown/gender-expansive; reference category: female).

More formally, the central question posed in this analysis is whether there is an association between receiving a postcard and voting in the general election.

To test the main model, a multiple logistic regression model was used. Response to voted (voted) was regressed onto age, partisanship, turnout, the dummy variables for race (Asian, Hispanic, Uncoded), and the dummy variables for gender (male, unknown/gender-expansive).

It should be noted that the Native American group was sparse and was therefore omitted from all analyses.

The reported odds ratio for the condition variable in the logistic regression is an estimate of the relative increase or decrease in the odds of having a positive response to the intervention for targets who are sent a postcard, compared to targets who did not receive a communication, after controlling for all of the covariates. Statistical results are measured at the $p \leq .05$ level.

Moderation models.

The first moderation model focused on whether the effect of condition was moderated by predicted turnout score. Again, logistic regression was used, but this regression also included an interaction term to represent the interaction effect of condition x predicted turnout. The model assessed differences between conditions with respect to voting, after controlling for age, partisanship, turnout, race, and gender, as well as the interaction between turnout and condition.

More formally, the central question posed in this analysis is whether there is an association between receiving a postcard and voting in the general election that depends on how likely the voter was to turnout in the first place.

To test the first moderation model, response to voted (voted) was regressed onto condition, age, partisanship, turnout, and the dummy variables for race (Asian, Hispanic, Uncoded), the dummy variables for gender (male, unknown/gender-expansive), as well as the dummy variables for the interaction between condition and turnout.

The second moderation model focused on whether the effect of condition was moderated by partisanship score. Again, logistic regression was used, but this regression also included an interaction term to represent the interaction effect of condition x partisanship score. The model assessed differences between conditions with respect to voting, after controlling for age,

partisanship, turnout, race, and gender, as well as the interaction between partisanship scores and condition.

More formally, the central question posed in this analysis is whether there is an association between receiving a postcard and voting in the general election that depends on how likely the target was to vote for Democratic candidates.

To test the second moderation model, response to voted (voted) was regressed onto condition, age, partisanship, turnout, and the dummy variables for race (Asian, Hispanic, Uncoded), the dummy variables for gender (male, unknown/gender-expansive), as well as the dummy variables for the interaction between condition and partisanship scores.

III. Results:

Main Model. The regression results indicate that people in the postcard condition did not vote more than the people in the control condition, controlling for the covariates, but this effect was not statistically significant as a main effect ($p = 0.724$). Results trend in the opposite direction than expected, with the control condition voting at a higher rate than the postcard condition. Variables included as covariates behaved as expected to be significant predictors of voting, with race, gender, turnout, and partisanship being significant predictors of voting. This was the case even for turnout, which we suspected was not a good metric of the likelihood of voting in a sample this young. However, the effect size is smaller than the effect size generally observed for predicted turnout. Ultimately, targets who received a postcard, while less likely to vote compared to controls as indicated by their turnout rate and the odds ratio for postcards (0.99), were not statistically significantly more or less likely to vote ($p = 0.724$). These findings suggest that postcards did not have an effect on the sample and targets in both conditions behaved similarly.

Table 1: Main Model voting outcome- Estimated odds ratios (robust standard errors), 95% confidence intervals, and p-values for the relationship between positive response, randomized condition, and other predictor variables.

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Postcard	0.986676 (0.0375162)	-0.35	0.9158187-1.063016	0.724
Age				
	1.039798 (0.0539257)	0.75	0.9392999-1.151049	0.452
Gender (Ref=Female)				
Male Unknown/gender-expansive	0.8919407 (0.0352076) 1.506795 (0.3947051)	-2.90 1.57	0.8255368-0.9636859 0.9017415-2.517831	0.004* 0.118

Race (Ref=Black/African-American)				
Asian Hispanic Uncoded	1.466225 (0.0743406) 1.060768 (0.0643778) 1.240423 (0.0689809)	7.55 0.97 3.87	1.327525-1.619415 0.941805-1.194757 1.11233-1.383266	<0.001* 0.331 <0.001*
Partisanship				
	1.003846 (0.0012081)	3.19	1.001481-1.006216	0.001*
Turnout				
	1.01242 (0.0022852)	5.47	1.007951-1.016909	<0.001*

N = 16,985, χ^2 (9) = 109.94, p <0.001, pseudo R^2 = 0.0063

Moderation Model 1. The moderation model with the turnout by condition interaction indicated that postcard efficacy does not vary based on predicted turnout score. Postcards were not more or less effective for people at different turnout scores. So, in this case, they were equally ineffective in motivating all targets to vote, regardless of how likely they were to turnout to vote at baseline.

Table 2: Moderation Model with voting outcome and condition x turnout interaction- Estimated odds ratios (robust standard errors), 95% confidence intervals, and p-values for the relationship between positive response, randomized condition, and other predictor variables.

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=controls)				
Postcard	0.9700954 (0.0486316)	-0.61	0.8793122-1.070251	0.545
Condition x Turnout (Ref = controls)				
Postcard	1.002065 (0.0039851)	0.52	0.9942847-1.009906	0.604
Age				
	1.039393 (0.0539103)	0.74	0.9389241-1.150613	0.456
Gender (Ref=Female)				

Male Unknown/gender-expansive	0.8922341 (0.0352237) 1.507667 (0.3949579)	-2.89 1.57	0.8258002-0.9640124 0.9022345-2.519368	0.004* 0.117
Race (Ref=white)				
Asian Hispanic Uncoded	1.465716 (0.0743222) 1.060485 (0.0643628) 1.239403 (0.0689549)	7.54 0.97 3.86	1.327052-1.618869 0.9415498-1.194443 1.111362-1.382196	<0.001* 0.333 <0.001*
Partisanship				
	1.003845 (0.0012081)	3.19	1.00148-1.006215	<0.001*
Turnout				
	1.011367 (0.0030609)	3.73	1.005386-1.017385	<0.001*

N = 16,985, χ^2 (10) = 110.21, p <0.001, pseudo R^2 = 0.0064

Moderation Model 2. The regression results revealed a marginally significant interaction for postcards and partisanship, such that their efficacy varies based on the projected partisanship score of the target voters. The graph below illustrates the interaction found in the data. It appears that the postcards were more effective for people with lower partisanship scores, which are associated with being more likely to vote for Republicans. This indicates that these postcards worked better on Republican-leaning voters in this sample compared to more Democratic voters.

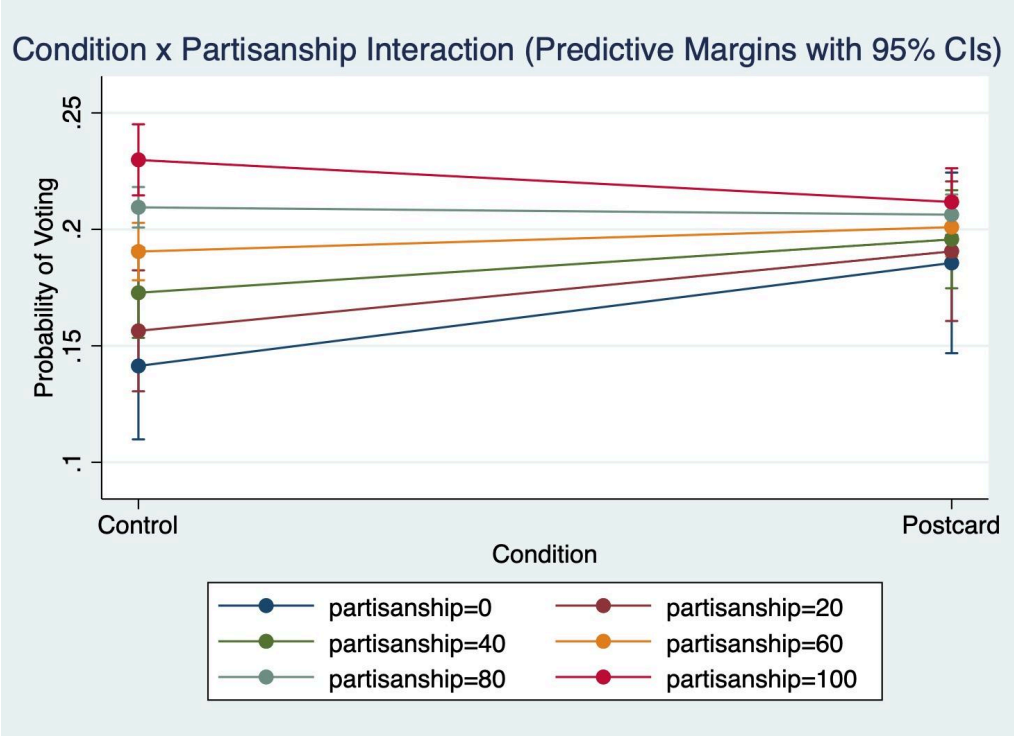
Table 3: Moderation Model with voting outcome and condition x partisanship interaction- Estimated odds ratios (robust standard errors), 95% confidence intervals, and p-values for the relationship between positive response, randomized condition, and other predictor variables.

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=controls)				
Postcard	1.38674 (0.2518036)	1.80	0.9714813-1.979502	0.072 †
Condition x partisanship (Ref = controls)				
Postcard	0.9956798 (0.0022487)	-1.92	0.9912822-1.000097	0.055*
Age				
	1.038114 (0.0538449)	0.72	0.9377666-1.149198	0.471

Gender (Ref=Female)				
Male Unknown/gender-expansive	0.892367 (0.0352246) 1.506027 (0.3945009)	-2.88 1.56	0.8259312-0.9641467 0.9012852-2.516537	0.004* 0.118
Race (Ref=Black/African-American)				
Asian Hispanic Uncoded	1.466327 (0.0743552) 1.059849 (0.0643332) 1.239637 (0.0689468)	7.55 0.96 3.86	1.327601-1.619549 0.9409697-1.193747 1.111608-1.382411	<0.001* 0.338 <0.001*
Partisanship				
	1.006003 (0.0016672)	3.61	1.00274-1.009276	<0.001*
Turnout				
	1.012379 (0.0022852)	5.45	1.00791-1.016868	<0.001*

N = 16,985, χ^2 (10) = 113.62, p <0.001, pseudo R^2 = 0.0066

Figure 1. Modeled interaction effect between the conditions and partisanship scores predicting voter turnout



Costs.

Cost per vote and votes per $1,000 spent cannot be calculated as there was higher voter turnout in the control group compared to the treatment group.

IV. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

The hypothesis that the people who received postcards would vote at higher rates than people who did not does not appear to have evidence, except possibly for people with lower partisanship scores. This suggests that postcards were more effective for some people than for others in this sample. For people who were more likely to lean to the right politically (partisanship below 50%), the postcards appeared to be more effective than for people who were more likely to lean left. The initial results suggest that the voters that would be most affected by this targeting are young, new voters of color who are more likely to vote for Republican candidates. Further, the average partisanship score in this sample was 78.22, the median partisanship score was 83.2, and that the explicitly predicted right-leaning portion of the sample was small (only 8.28% of the sample had partisanship scores below 50), indicating that this technique activated a small number of voters at best. Based on this response, it appears that this technique would need extensive modifications before testing again. It may also be useful to conduct some confirmatory research to determine how accurate partisanship scores are for voters this young, perhaps in a state with explicit party registration.

There are also some limitations to this study. As mentioned, it was a quieter election context as an off-year election than a midterm or presidential election, and even quieter considering the low expected turnout scores of the voters. It also targeted voters with very specific inclusion criteria, including a very narrow age range, which means that this group of voters is not widely generalizable.

Future research should explore whether there is a better way to communicate with this group of voters via postcard that is not as moderated by partisanship scores. It is important that young, newly registered voters in groups that have been traditionally marginalized in the voting process are included in voter outreach efforts. However, this particular effort appears to have been unsuccessful.

Appendix

Postcard message

“Hi <<first name>>,

Welcome new voter! VA’s House of Delegates is up for election this year. Voting is a great way to impact the policies that affect everyday life, like expanding health care access and curbing climate change.

Be a voter Nov. 2!
Elections.virginia.gov

<Vol name>