



The Power of the State: How Postcards from the State Increased Registration and Turnout in Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Unlike citizens in nearly all other democracies, most U.S. citizens bear the responsibility for registering to vote. We test whether states can help citizens overcome the barriers to registration and turnout using a simple postcard. To do this, we leverage a new program that brings states together to improve the quality of their voter registration rolls and generate lists of eligible but unregistered citizens. Using a unique list of eligible but unregistered citizens from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, we partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of State's Office to conduct a large-scale voter registration field experiment prior to the 2016 election. We provide new tests of traditional theories related to lowering the costs of registration as well as new theories related to promoting government responsiveness. We find that contact in the form of a single postcard from the Department of State led to a one percentage point increase in registration and a 0.9-point increase in turnout, regardless of the content of the postcard. Registration effects were strongest among young, first-time voters. Importantly, new registrants voted at a rate far exceeding rates found in previous registration drives.

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Introduction

The requirement that citizens first register before they vote is a barrier to participation (e.g., Piven and Cloward 2000, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), and the United States is one of few democratic nations to leave the responsibility of registering almost entirely to citizens (e.g., Powell 1986). This system discourages millions of eligible citizens from voting, one of the most fundamental political behaviors in a democracy. While several laws such as the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) sought to shift the burden from citizens to the government, these reforms have largely failed to deliver on their potential (e.g., Hanmer 2009). States could be more proactive in registering citizens to vote if they could easily identify those who are eligible, but unregistered (EBU).

In this study, we assess whether state election administrators can successfully register and turn out a greater percentage of their voting eligible population by making direct contact in the form of a single low-cost postcard. Working with state officials prior to the 2016 presidential election, we designed a field experiment whereby EBUs received direct contact from Pennsylvania election officials. This was made possible through Pennsylvania's membership in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), an organization created by the states and the Pew Charitable Trusts to improve the accuracy of voter registration rolls and increase registration rates.¹ To identify EBUs, ERIC matched state voter registration data to data from PA Department of Transportation, the state's motor vehicle department.² The contact consisted of a single postcard encouraging the recipients to register to vote, informing them of eligibility criteria, and providing instructions on ways to complete their registration.

We find that direct one-time contact from the state meaningfully increased voter registration and turnout, even in the saturated environment of the 2016 presidential election. These findings suggest that direct government action can boost participation rates in competitive elections. This is particularly significant as states have the resources and incentives to reach citizens that party and candidate GOTV campaigns often neglect and can scale their work in a way that non-profits cannot afford. While parties and candidates have raised massive amounts of money, states are in an excellent position to identify eligible but unregistered citizens by using data gathered from other transactions, such as issuing drivers licenses. Moreover, state efforts will be more inclusive as they seek to contact all eligible but unregistered citizens. While many non-profits seek to engage underrepresented portions of the population, they

¹ "Electronic Registration Information Center." <https://ericstates.org>

² ERIC seeks to improve the accuracy of voter rolls by tracking moves within states, moves across ERIC states, and checking records against death records. States share the costs of obtaining information on deaths and changes of address and communicate with one another regarding moves across the member states. States are also required to contact those identified as EBUs and encourage them to register.

do not have the wealth of data states have. Our findings further show the promise of partnerships between state election officials and researchers interested in assessing the utility of state-led voter registration efforts.

Of particular note in our findings are (1) that the rate of turnout among new registrants³ was very high in absolute terms and stands in contrast to lower rates found in other studies (Nickerson 2015; Mann and Bryant 2020), and (2) that registration rates were highest among young citizens participating in their first election. While campaigns spend a great deal finding ways to engage young voters on the internet and social media, we find that direct action from state governments in the more traditional form of a mailer has an important and outsized effect on younger citizens.

Get Out the Vote and Registration Efforts

Get out the vote (GOTV) campaigns are a staple of election activity in the United States. Often these campaigns are conducted by non-partisan organizations with the singular goal of increasing turnout regardless of party or issue. A large number of field experiments over the last two decades have shown that GOTV campaigns can be effective at increasing turnout among those who are already registered (see Green and Gerber 2015, Green et al. 2013; Michelson and Nickerson 2011; and Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009 for a review of several of these experiments).

However, far fewer studies have attempted to encourage registration (Bennion and Nickerson 2016, 2011; Nickerson 2015), a necessary first step to voting. Given the paucity of research and mixed results, researchers have not yet formed a consensus with regard to efforts to boost registration and turnout among those newly registered.

Studies of registered voters are aided by readily available voter files from which to sample and randomly assign individuals to conditions. Ideally, researchers seeking to study efforts to increase registration would want a list of those who are not registered. But until recently, lists of unregistered individuals have not been available, at least not for large portions of the population. In the absence of a list, Nickerson (2015) implements a clever design that samples city streets that contain a mix of registered and unregistered people. He finds that door-to-door efforts in six cities increased registration by 4.4%, with 24% of those who registered as a result of the treatment turning out to vote. In a pair of studies, Bennion and Nickerson (2011, 2016) utilize the availability of detailed information about college students. Their study found that emails designed to facilitate registration among college students actually had a negative effect on registration (Bennion and Nickerson 2011), while their study using classroom visits in 2006 found a large positive effect on registration, with about 33% of the newly registered voting (Bennion and Nickerson 2016).

Given the mixed results of existing studies there remains much for scholars and practitioners to learn both in terms of which types of appeals are most effective at generating new registrants and translating those new registrations into votes. In this

³ Here and throughout, we refer to those who registered in 2016 as “new registrants” to distinguish them from those who did not register and those who were already registered.

study, we take an important step toward these goals. That is, we leverage newly available lists of eligible but unregistered citizens from a large, diverse, and politically consequential state to test whether a low-cost intervention such as a postcard can increase participation and whether particular features of the mailers make them more or less effective at encouraging registration and turnout.

An important feature of our study is the partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of State. When delivering a message aimed at changing behavior, the messenger plays a role in its effectiveness (Malhotra et al. 2012). Malhotra et al. (2012) find that email messages from an official government source increase turnout while messages from non-profit organizations, that are fictional but presented as real, do not. In all the GOTV and registration field experiments to date, there are only a few where researchers have partnered with election officials (Herrnson et al. 2018; Menger and Stein 2018; Stein et al. 2012; Mann and Bryant 2020), but partnering with non-partisan state election officials rather than non-profits or other third parties should remove any suspicion of maliciousness or misinformation, which could affect registration and turnout. We also expect that by using state databases developed from interactions between citizens and the state, rather than consumer databases, problems such as delivering mail to deceased persons, pets, or ineligible residents will be minimized. This should improve overall accuracy and give recipients confidence that the message is legitimate. In addition, unlike most prior studies that did not possess lists of unregistered individuals, our partnership with the state and ERIC enabled us to work definitively with those who were unregistered, rather than sampling entire city streets or colleges containing a mix of registered and unregistered individuals.

Theoretical Expectations for Voter Registration Mailers

Although numerous mobilization experiments have evaluated the efficacy of different messages at increasing turnout or the method of voting, the findings among those already registered do not necessarily apply to encouraging registration. It is currently unknown whether message variation translates into differential treatment effects for registration.

As a starting point, all of the messages we design emphasize the ease of online registration and the urgency of meeting the registration deadline, as is common in state communications about registration (Mann and Bryant 2020). We also examine new features that highlight the government's responsiveness to citizen demands and an additional technology-based convenience option.

Drawing on the literature on policy responsiveness (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 1990) and political efficacy (e.g., Niemi et al. 1991), Herrnson et al. (2018) argue that outreach from elected officials can influence how individuals respond to new policies. They do so in the context of early voting and show that messages indicating the state instituted early voting as a response to citizen demand increased the rate of early voting among registrants. Menger and Stein (2018) replicate this finding in the context of returning mail ballots. Although there are numerous differences between registrants and non-registrants, as well as acts (method of voting and registering

to vote), it is reasonable to expect appeals about government responsiveness could increase the likelihood of registration. Indeed, much of the argumentation in favor of the NVRA was based on this premise (Piven and Cloward 2000). Furthermore, not knowing where or how to register is a common excuse for not voting (U.S. Census 2008) and citizens expect governmental responsiveness with regard to elections (Kropf and Kimball 2012). As a result, we expect a message that provides information to ease the burden of registration and suggests that the government is working for the people by responding to citizen needs and requests will have a positive effect on registration and turnout.

We hypothesize that the effect of contact by the state on voter registration will be higher for younger individuals. Younger voters are more mobile and may be harder to contact via traditional mail, but they are a key demographic for state-led registration campaigns. States are uniquely capable of identifying young, recently eligible citizens who have established a residence in the state but have not developed the habit of voting and are less likely to be targeted by campaign drives. Registration rates may therefore be low among this group, but have the greatest potential for growth when state election officials make contact.⁴

A long line of research focuses on ways to make registration and voting easier and more convenient. One way to do so is by using technology available through smart phones. For instance, studies have found that merely reminding people of an upcoming election via text message can boost turnout among those already registered (e.g. Dale and Strauss 2009). A 2014 study found that 34% of smartphone owners and 46% of those who also owned a tablet had scanned a quick-response code (QR code) or coupon with their device (Salesforce Marketing Cloud 2014). Studies also suggest that younger adults (Mendelson and Romano Bergstrom 2013; Radwanick 2011) are most likely to use QR codes. We expect that providing a QR code as an additional way to access online registration will increase registration.

Finally, election officials are particularly concerned about the best time to contact EBUs as it influences how they deploy resources. While registration drives happen throughout the year, the registration deadline is often a focal point for the organizations that typically conduct the drives. Knowing this, election officials seeking to increase registration would generally prefer more registration transactions take place well in advance of the deadline, thus making the time around the deadline, when activity usually spikes, less hectic. The literature on turnout mobilization is mixed on whether voter outreach is more effective closer to Election Day. Nickerson (2007) finds evidence of temporal decay in GOTV efforts, whereas Panagopoulos (2011) finds little evidence that the timing of a turnout treatment will substantially alter its effect. Given that the registration deadline does not hold as much weight as Election Day does in the minds of citizens, one might expect timing of contact not to matter. On the other hand, later contact might lead to more registrations as there is greater urgency and less time to forget. As we discuss below, our design is novel in

⁴ Although we did not pre-register the study our proposal to the funding organization included hypotheses related to this group.

the realm of registration drives in that we examine timing, though within a relatively short timeframe.

Research Design and Methodology

We employ a randomized field experiment in Pennsylvania, a large, diverse, and politically relevant state that is a member of ERIC. Our experiment uses communication to EBUs from the Department of State, the agency in charge of elections, in the form of a direct mail postcard. We evaluate the effects of direct communication from the state on whether different types of messages to encourage registration are more effective at turning EBUs into registered voters. A unique strength of studies such as ours is that they do not suffer from over-reports (e.g. Duff et al. 2007) because we use administrative voting records rather than self-reports from observational data to determine the effect of the treatments. Our partnership with ERIC and the state of Pennsylvania also allows us to examine the effect of the treatment by the age of the citizen and clearly assess the precise yield on turnout for each additional registrant.

The experiment began with 2,397,384 individuals who appeared in the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation database, but were not in the voter registration records. Per the agreement between the states, ERIC, and Pew, the state is required to contact 95% of EBUs and inform them about voter registration. Thus, 95% of our EBUs were treated, leaving 5% for our control group. In total, the state sent out 2,277,493 postcards. To account for the federal requirement that the state include both English and Spanish in three of the counties (Berks, Lehigh, and Philadelphia) and to enhance statistical precision (Nickerson 2005), we conducted the randomization process in four blocks: (1) Berks County (N=89,176); (2) Lehigh County (N=70,873); (3) Philadelphia County (277,110); and (4) all remaining counties (N=1,960,225).

The research team designed the postcards in consultation with the Department of State. The front of the postcards was identical across treatments. The postcards used the same color scheme as the Department of State website, listed the registration deadline, and encouraged recipients to register to vote online, emphasizing the ease of doing so with text that read, “3 min.”, “Click.”, and “Done”. The primary experiment examined four different messages on the back of the postcards. Text and images of all postcards are included in Online Appendix A.

The backs of all cards included the Department of State official seal and address, the official USPS election mail logo, and a phone number to call in case the recipient believed they received the card in error. All of the cards also featured text in bold font noting that state records indicated they may not currently be registered to vote and emphasized that the deadline to register online was approaching. The text then indicated that registering to vote online was “quick and easy,” provided the website to register to vote online, and listed eligibility criteria. Each card was personally addressed, including the recipients’ first and last name and their mailing address. The experiment involved four variations (treatments) on the back of the postcard:

1. Postcard 1 had no extra information other than what is described above.
2. Postcard 2 included a QR code as a registration option beyond the registration website's URL.
3. Postcard 3 noted that online registration was introduced in response to citizen demand.
4. Postcard 4 incorporated both the QR code and the additional text indicating that these forms of registration were included in response to citizen demand.

To perform randomization within each of the four blocks, we first grouped EBUs by household, then randomly assigned them to the control group, wave 1 treatment, or wave 2 treatment. Within each wave, we assigned households to one of four treatment groups. As is common in mobilization experiments, we performed randomization at the household level to ensure that the control group would not be treated and that two (or more) individuals within one household would not inadvertently receive two (or more) different messages (a phenomenon called cross-contamination). Pennsylvania elections officials sent the postcards to those selected into wave 1 starting on September 15, 2016 and to those in wave 2 starting on September 27, 2016.⁵ The following list summarizes the randomization procedures:

1. Identify each unique household from the EBU list using street address and zip code.
2. Randomly identify one individual from each household to use for assignment to treatment or control.
3. Generate a random value for each household, using the identified individual. These values determine who is in a treatment group and who belongs to the 5% assigned to the control group.
4. At the household level, among those assigned in Step 3 to receive a postcard, randomly assign individuals to either wave 1 or wave 2.
5. Within each wave, randomly assign those who were selected in Step 3 to receive a postcard to receive one of the four treatment postcards.
6. For remaining individuals in a given household who were not assigned a random value, assign them the same value as the selected person in their household so that all people within a given household receive the same postcard or none at all.⁶

After the election, state officials provided us with the voter file. We first removed those who were known to have registered prior to the date we obtained the EBU data from the voter file. We then matched the EBU data to the voter file using information

⁵ The research team and PA elections officials had hoped for a 2 to 3-week gap between the waves. The PA officials reported that issues with the agency used for printing and mailing caused a delay with sending out the wave 1 postcards.

⁶ Standard statistical tests showed that the randomization process was successful as treatment assignment could not be predicted by available indicators (zip code and household size): Berks $\chi^2 = 0.46$, $p = 0.79$; Lehigh $\chi^2 = 1.70$, $p = 0.43$; Philadelphia: $\chi^2 = 2.76$, $p = 0.25$; Rest of State $\chi^2 = 3.28$, $p = 0.19$.

Table 1 Experimental design, sample size, and effects

	Control	Basic		QR code		Citizen demand		QR code + citizen demand	
		Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2
N	119,891	284,666	284,642	284,570	284,678	283,993	285,370	284,351	285,223
Registered	8,741	23,697	23,950	23,779	23,928	23,664	23,464	23,753	23,550
Voted	6,420	17,722	17,932	17,935	17,848	17,664	17,470	17,876	17,703

on first and last name, date of birth, house number, and zip code.⁷ This experimental design yielded cell sizes presented in Table 1. Also shown in Table 1 are the number of individuals in each condition who registered and voted.

Analysis and Results

The outcomes of interest are differences in the rates of voter registration and turnout across the conditions. Our analyses follow Gerber and Green (2012) and we report results separately for each wave accounting for our randomization within the 4 blocks described above, as well as our randomization at the household level. Figures 1 and 2 show the effects of the four treatments across both waves on registration and turnout rates (full results in Online Appendix B).

Figure 1 shows the effect of the postcards on registration across both waves 1 and 2. First, we find that the treatments had their desired effect. Registration across treatment groups rises roughly 1 percentage point when compared to the control group, which is statistically significant for all conditions ($p < 0.01$).⁸ Given the 7% registration rate in the control condition, the more than one percentage-point boost in most conditions represents a relatively large and significant increase in participation among those who had previously declined to engage. Moreover, this boost in registration is impressive given that the experiment was conducted in the swing state of Pennsylvania during a presidential election year in which campaign and nonpartisan GOTV activity was widespread. If the message from the state was lost in the noise of the campaign activity, we would expect to see no difference between control and treatment groups. In the context of our experiment alone, this increase yielded

⁷ We follow Ansolabehere and Hersh (2017), who find combinations of information from a handful of fields including name, date of birth, and address, can uniquely identify individuals. A small number could not be uniquely identified ($N = 104$). In these cases, an observation was selected at random. Because of the procedure used, all individuals in the EBU data who match to the voter file are treated as having registered, while those who do not match are treated as having not registered. We recognize that this approach can lead to errors whereby true registrants fail to meet the exact matching criteria, though this is ultimately the more conservative approach, biasing our treatment effects downward. While we initially attempted to use a probabilistic “fuzzy” matching approach as an alternate, a review of the matches showed an unacceptably large number of errors.

⁸ The minimum detectable effect for a study with our sample was 0.28 percentage points.

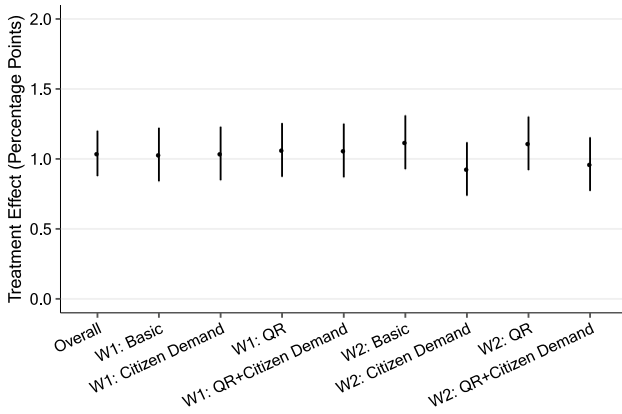


Fig. 1 Treatment effects by wave on voter registration. *Note* 95% confidence intervals presented, robust standard errors clustered by household

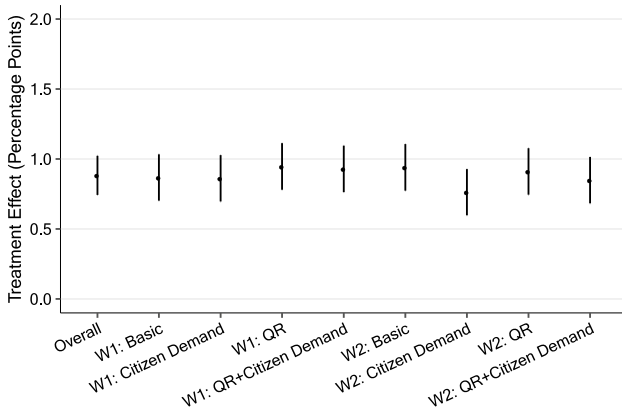


Fig. 2 Treatment effects by wave on turnout. *Note* 95% confidence intervals presented, robust standard errors clustered by household

approximately 23,000 new registrants in a state saturated in campaign activity and in which statewide elections are often decided by voting margins in the tens of thousands. This suggests that contact from state officials promotes registration among a subset of people that campaigns and nonpartisan private groups likely do not reach.

Second, we find few meaningful differences between individual treatment conditions.⁹ That is, the increase we see in registration rates is roughly 1 percentage point over the control group regardless of the card the subject received. These results suggest that, contrary to our expectations, the specific content of the postcard

⁹ To determine whether any meaningful differences existed, we employed an F-Test on the registration ($F = 1.44, p = 0.18$) and voting rates ($F = 1.62, p = 0.12$) across the treatment conditions.

did not matter. Neither the QR code nor the statement about Pennsylvania trying to respond to citizen demands were effective relative to the simpler version of the postcard. Instead, simply being asked to register by state election officials produces similar results regardless of message. We also find that the difference between Wave 1 and Wave 2 is negligible. Although one might have expected that sending cards closer to the registration deadline could create a sense of urgency and larger effects, our results suggest this was not the case. Of course, this 2-week period occurred entirely within the month of September, so our study cannot speak to any differences we might have seen if the timing spanned several months. Yet in the 2-week gap that we examine, we find no evidence of an effect for the timing of the mailer. For states looking to do GOTV pushes in the final month prior to the filing deadline, our results have an important practical implication—they need not be overly concerned about the exact timing or specifics of the message to succeed in promoting greater citizen engagement.

In Fig. 2, we report the results for voter turnout. Again, we find a positive, statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) effect for all cards across each wave. The turnout rate among EBUs was small—about 5% of EBUs in the control condition voted in 2016. But among those who received a postcard from the state, turnout jumped nearly one percentage point over those in the control group. This is a substantively noteworthy effect given the low rate of participation among EBUs, and in the context of previous attempts to use postcards to encourage participation. The high yield with respect to turnout among those who registered indicates that each new registrant created by the treatment yields 0.85 new votes.¹⁰ This yield is much higher than other experimental studies examining registration efforts. Comparatively, Bennion and Nickerson's (2016) study of registration on college campuses yielded roughly 0.43 votes for every new registrant, while Nickerson's (2015) canvassing field experiment yielded 0.24 new voters per registrant. Thus, while the registration effect may appear modest, the new registrants in our experiment are overwhelmingly likely to follow through and vote.¹¹

Finally, we examine the effect of these treatments by age.¹² Campaigns often fail to target young people, particularly newly eligible young people. The government can play an equalizing role, but one might well be concerned that traditional forms of communication (such as mail) may not reach younger citizens who are more mobile and less reliant on traditional mail. The left panel of Fig. 3 shows the differences between the control and pooled treatment groups' registration rates for

¹⁰ We calculate vote yield via two-stage least squares regression, using registration as the instrument for turnout. See Gerber and Green (2012) for a demonstration.

¹¹ Using an estimated cost per postcard between \$0.20 and \$0.50, including printing and postage, we estimate the cost per additional registrant is between \$19.19–\$47.97 while the cost per vote is between \$22.56–\$56.39.

¹² We performed additional tests for heterogeneity of treatment effects looking at the party affiliation individuals selected on their registration forms. We did not find that new registrations significantly benefited any particular party (results in Online Appendix B).

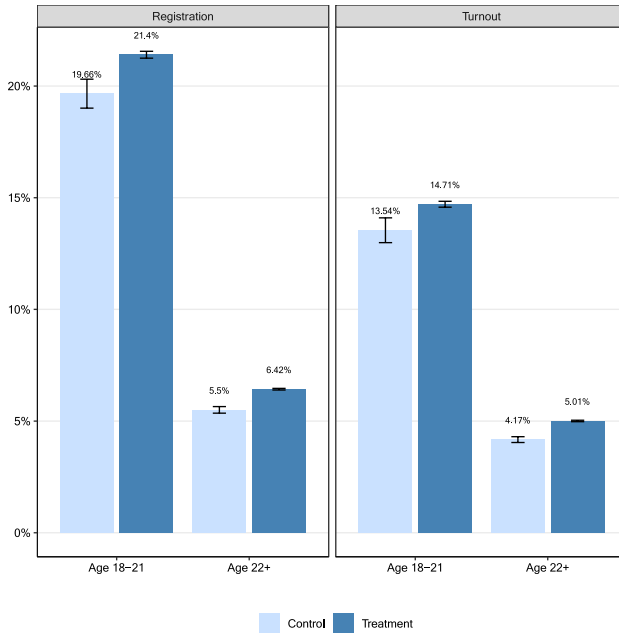


Fig. 3 Voter registration and turnout by condition and age. *Note* Results pool all treatments and all geographic regions. 95 percent confidence intervals presented using robust standard errors clustered by household. The differences between the control and treatment are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ for both age groups. The difference in the difference across age groups for registration is statistically significant at $p < 0.02$. The difference in the difference across age groups for turnout is not statistically significant ($p < 0.27$)

18–21-year-olds and for 22-year-olds and older separately.¹³ We found that the treatments were more effective at boosting the registration rate among individuals in their first election cycle than those who are older. The effect of the mailers on registration for people age 18–21 is approximately 1.8 percentage points, nearly double the effect found among those 22 and older. The difference in the differences across age groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.02$. Efforts by the state to engage young voters, even when done through the mail, can help reduce the registration gap prior to important elections.

The right panel of Fig. 3 shows the effect of the treatment on turnout by age group. Whereas the effects were significantly stronger for registration among younger individuals, we find that the effects on turnout are weaker and no longer statistically significant. While the impact of the mailer on registration is very strong for younger individuals, the differential effect diminishes when looking at turnout. The reason for this is that the voter yield of the treatment effect is lower for younger people. Figure 4 shows the estimates of registration-to-vote yield by age. For every

¹³ Given that the results do not differ across treatments or waves, we present the remaining findings pooling respondents regardless of the card they received or the wave to which they were assigned.

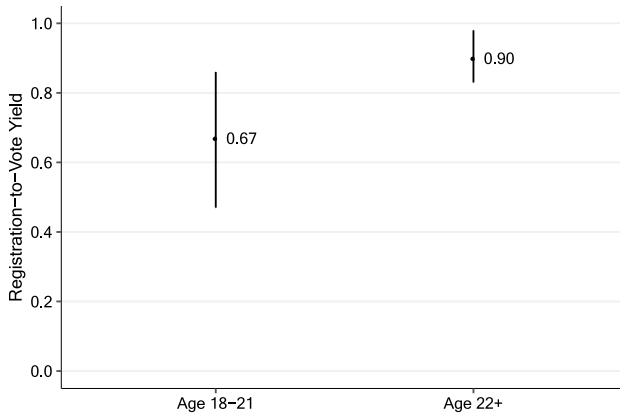


Fig. 4 Registration-to-vote yield by age. *Note* Estimates of two stage least squares regression using registration as an instrument for turnout with 95% confidence intervals calculated using standard errors clustered by household

new registration for people age 18–21, there is an additional two-thirds (0.67) of a vote. While this is higher than the yield found in other studies, it falls short of the full nine-tenths (0.90) of a vote yield for those over the age of 21. This means that treated individuals who are over the age of 21 are most likely to follow through and translate their registration to a new vote. We do not have data to speak to the reason and hope future research explores this issue. One explanation could be the relative resource advantages of older individuals that makes following through (finding the polling place etc.) easier for them.

In short, our results suggest a number of important findings for scholars and practitioners of registration and turnout:

1. While mailers are often seen as a relatively ineffective treatment, we find that mailers from a source with a high level of legitimacy (e.g. a state government) have a sizeable effect on registration. While we vary the content of the mailers to test existing theories, we find that the specific content does not appreciably alter their effect. We note that though easy to ignore, mail can reach people in places that are hard to reach (e.g. locked apartment buildings) or not particularly safe to canvass.
2. Effect sizes in the field experiment we examine are somewhat smaller with respect to registration than those found in other studies (e.g., Bennion and Nickerson 2016), yet those who register in our study are more likely to turn out. That is, whereas past studies found treatments created one new voter for every four new registrants, our treatments yield a nearly 1:1 ratio of new voters to new registrants. Thus, there are citizens who parties and non-profits are not reaching who will both register and vote if encouraged to do so.
3. While we examine a relatively short time-frame, we do not find evidence that sending the mailer closer to the election changes the effectiveness of the mailer. For states concerned with how to disburse resources in the final month prior to

a registration deadline, it appears there is some flexibility in timing. Given their preference to spread the work out and not exacerbate the already high volume of activity close to the deadline, we expect states will concentrate their efforts several weeks before the closing date for registration.

4. With regard to registration we find that young people are more responsive to the mailers than older citizens, a finding that runs counter to some of the literature on mobilization (see, e.g., Nickerson 2007). This effect, however, is partially mitigated by the lower yield in terms of turnout.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reported on a large-scale field experiment to encourage voter registration conducted via a collaboration between state elections officials and academics. While individuals ultimately had to decide whether to register or not, the state sought to actively encourage voter registration among those they identified as eligible, but not yet registered. Given the centrality of being asked to vote in the calculus of turning out (Verba et al. 1995), we suspected that this effort by the state would have an important effect. These types of collaborations represent an important step toward greater governmental action in the U.S. electoral system. And because states that join ERIC commit to reaching out to EBUs, these types of collaborations should become more commonplace and easier to study nationwide. We hope to see more research along these lines.

We find that a *single* postcard sent by state election officials several weeks before the election can produce meaningful increases in both registration and turnout. Even in the context of Pennsylvania, a hotly contested swing state which ranked third in terms of campaign visits by the 2016 presidential and vice presidential candidates,¹⁴ contact by state officials appeared to reach individuals who had not yet been contacted or persuaded to register by the campaigns or other mobilization groups. It appears as though simply being contacted by state officials matters more than the message itself or the timing of that message. We also find that the new registrants created through this contact by the state are overwhelmingly likely to follow through and vote, although the effects are not homogenous across age groups.

These results underscore the importance of government outreach to encourage participation, the need for organizations such as ERIC to assist states in reaching unregistered citizens, and the help of academics to study and improve these outreach efforts. Moreover, our findings raise interesting caveats with respect to the age of new registrants and suggests that future research is needed to determine what interventions will encourage newly-registered young people to vote. Collectively we have more to learn if we seek to bring about greater levels of engagement with the political system and this experiment suggests collaboration between state agencies and

¹⁴ FairVote, which tracked 2016 campaign visits, noted that Pennsylvania was behind only Florida and North Carolina with 54 total visits. This represents 13.5 percent of all candidate events.

academics may be an important path forward in advancing the participation research agenda.

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