May 2021 Experiment Testing the Impact of SMS Messages

Key findings from a randomized controlled trial testing three different

SMS messages to voters in the May 18, 2021 Pennsylvania state primary

Environmental Voter Project

1. Key Findings

- The Environmental Voter Project's texting campaign in the May 18, 2021 Pennsylvania state primary **increased turnout by +0.8 percentage points (pp)** over our control group.
- A "Friends and Family" message — where targeted low propensity voters were prompted to ask their friends and family to vote — **increased turnout by +1.0pp** over the control group, outperforming the other two messages tested, which were a "Fight for your Rights" message (+0.7pp) and an "Assumed Good Behavior" message (+0.7pp).
- **African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American & Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters** may be more responsive to "Assumed Good Behavior" messaging than other messages, but more testing is needed to confirm this possible finding.

2. Introduction

The Environmental Voter Project (EVP) works year-round in hundreds of elections to improve the voting habits of low propensity environmental voters. As part of that work, we run randomized controlled trials to measure our impact on turnout while learning which messages work best with certain subgroups of voters.

For the May 18, 2021 Pennsylvania state primary, EVP volunteers texted a "treatment group" of 404,675 Pennsylvanians whom EVP had identified as (a) registered to vote, (b) having a high likelihood of listing climate/environment as their top issue priority, and (c) being unlikely to cast a ballot in the state primary (based on their previous voting histories). 119,845 similarly identified voters were randomly set aside in a "control group" that received no text messages from EVP. We further divided our treatment group into three subgroups of approximately 135,000 voters, with each group receiving a different voter-turnout message.

We found that EVP's combined texting campaign led to +0.8pp higher turnout in EVP's treatment group than in the control group. Among the messages delivered to EVP's treatment group, the so-called "Friends and Family" message performed best overall — especially among women — but the data implies that this message might not be the best way to increase turnout among people of color.

3. Messages Tested

EVP tested the impact of three different messages on voter turnout, each relying on a different behavioral science technique.

Message A. The "Fight for your Rights" message.

"Hi [voter], this is [volunteer] with the Environmental Voter Project. Don't let anything keep you from exercising your power as a voter this year. You have your PA state primary on May 18. Will you be voting by mail, early in person, or on Election Day?"

Although not explicitly, this message establishes the act of voting as a way to fight back against an unnamed oppressor or larger establishment that makes it harder for targeted voters to exercise their rights.

Message B. The "Friends and Family" message.

"Hi [voter], this is [volunteer] with the Environmental Voter Project. Please make sure your friends and family vote in the PA state primary on May 18. Would you like information on voting by mail, early in person, or on Election Day?"

Rather than focusing on our targeted voters' behavior, this message recruits low propensity voters to enforce voting norms on *other people* — their friends and family. By doing so, our hope is that these deputized norm enforcers will actually become more likely to vote themselves.

**Message C. The "Assumed Good Behavior" message.**

"Hi [voter], this is [volunteer] with the Environmental Voter Project. You have your PA state primary on May 18. Will you be voting by mail, early in person, or on Election Day?"

Framed in a way that assumes the low propensity voter will be voting, this message nudges voters into either stating how they will cast their ballot or explicitly admitting that they will not vote.

4. Overall Impact on Turnout

All three messages led to statistically significant increases[1] in voter turnout over the control group. The "Friends & Family" message performed better (+1.0pp) than the "Fight For Your Rights" (+0.7pp) and "Assumed Good Behavior" messages (+0.7pp), although the differences *between* these messages are not — on their own — statistically significant.

Turnout: Treatments vs. Control
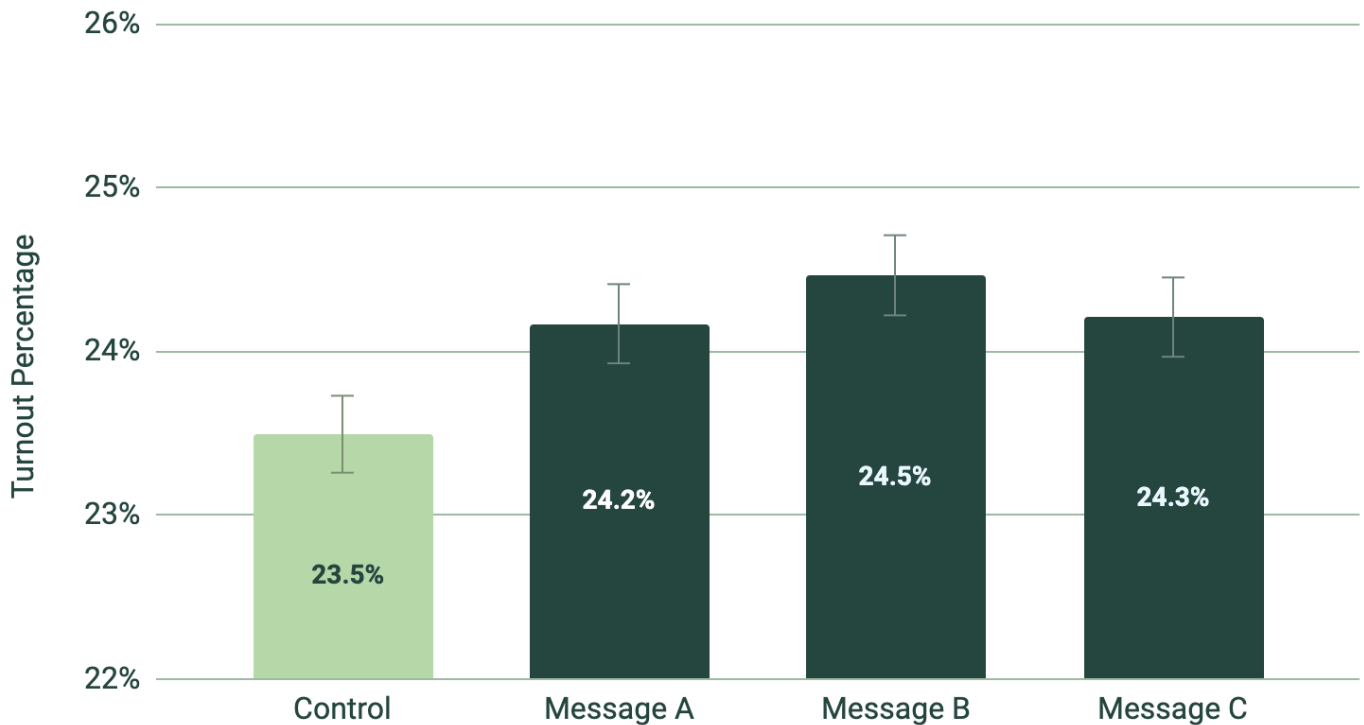

5. Differential Treatment Effects

Although the "Friends & Family" message performed best with the overall treatment population, subgroup level data (broken out by both race and sex) reveal that alternate messages might be more impactful with different demographic subgroups.

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[1] Statistically significant at the p = 0.05 level.

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A.   Impact on Turnout by Race[2]

Small sample sizes made it difficult to measure any statistically significant differences that our three messages may have had *within* racial subgroups. Even so, we see in the chart below that (a) the "Assumed Good Behavior" message was the only message to cause a statistically significant increase in turnout among African-American voters, and (b) although none of the messages had a statistically significant impact on turnout among the small AAPI and Hispanic samples, the "Assumed Good Behavior" message did *seem* to outperform the other two messages, albeit without statistical certainty. This suggests that "Assumed Good Behavior" messaging could be the optimal approach with African-American, Hispanic, and AAPI voters, but we recommend further experimentation along these lines with larger samples of the relevant subgroups.


Impact on Turnout by Race

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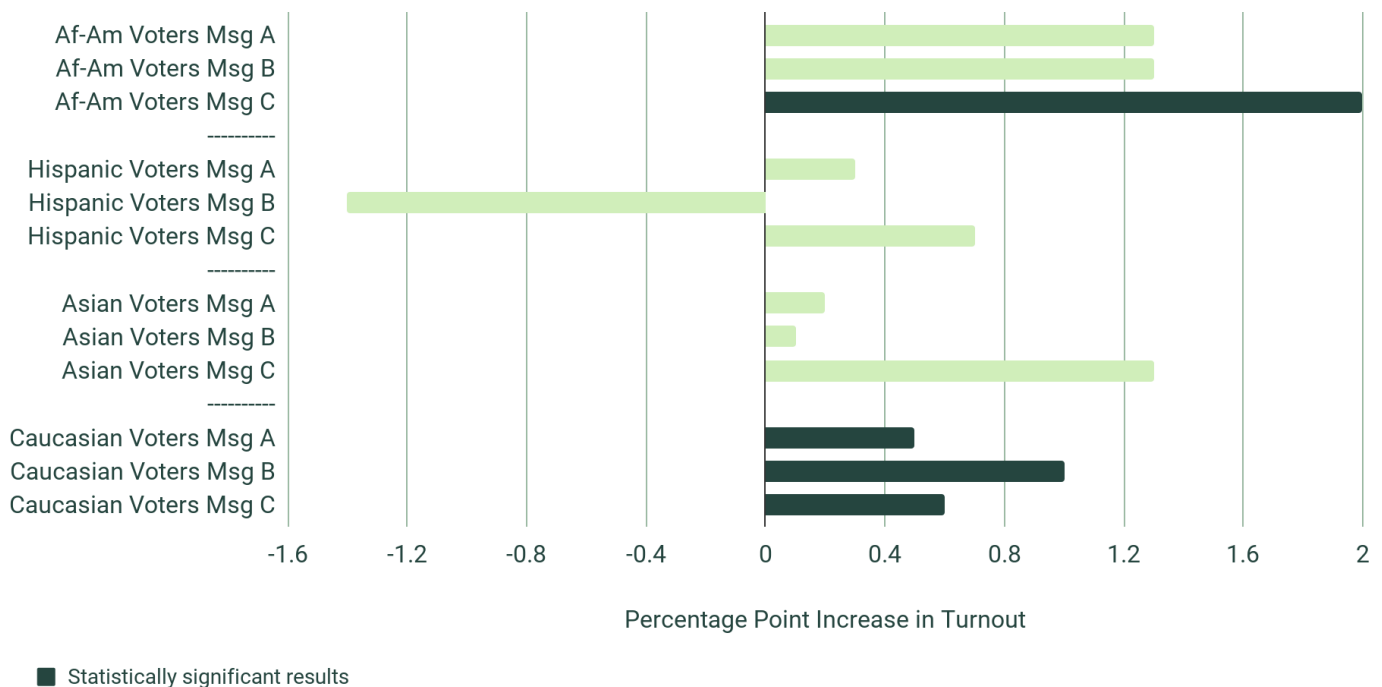
[2] When presenting charts of racial subgroup data in this report, we have chosen to retain the subgroup-identifying nomenclature found in NGP/VAN voter files: African-American (Af-Am), Hispanic, Caucasian, and Asian. In this report's narrative discussion, we use the more commonly-accepted terminology of AAPI and white. We do not replace African-American with Black or replace Hispanic with Latinx because Black is not completely analogous to African-American, nor is Hispanic completely analogous to Latinx, and we want to avoid misrepresenting any voter file data.

B. Impact on Turnout: Voter File Identified Male vs. Female[3]

When comparing each message's impact on turnout among men and women, the "Friends and Family" message was almost twice as impactful among women as the other two messages, whereas men responded equally to all three of the messages presented. Indeed, the overall success of the "Friends & Family" message in this experiment was solely due to its resonance with female voters.

Impact on Turnout: Male vs. Female

Percentage Point Increase in Turnout

■ Statistically significant results

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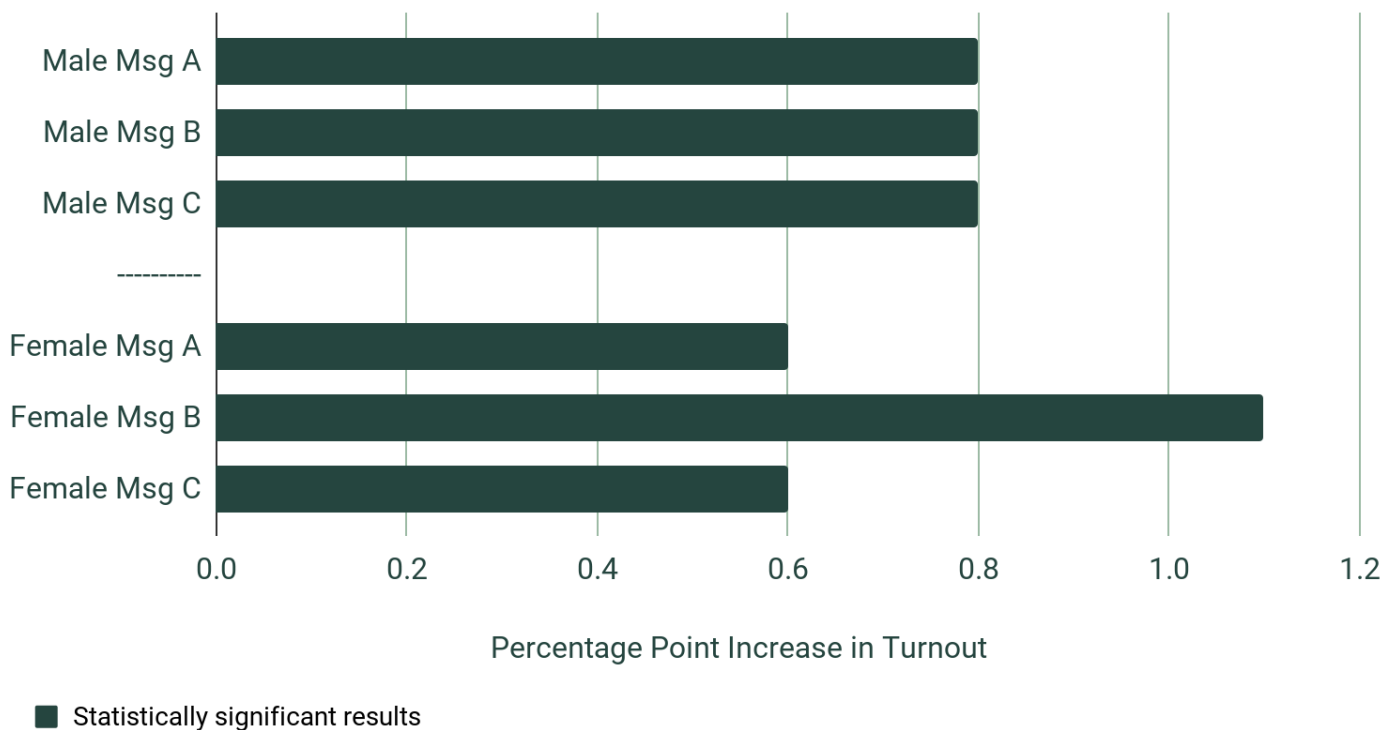
[3] Voter file data includes "sex" — rather than gender — as a demographic category. In some instances this identifier is self-selected by the voter and in others it is state-identified or modeled. Since sex is not analagous to gender, this report presents only the "male" and "female" identifiers categorized as "sex" in NGP/VAN voter files. In our narrative discussion, we use the term men to encompass the group identified as male and the term women for the group identified as female.

6. Conclusion

The Environmental Voter Project is pleased to have had an appreciable impact on turnout among low propensity environmental voters in the 2021 Pennsylvania primary. This further adds to the long-term impact we've had in Pennsylvania, where from 2017–2020, we helped 99,931 non-voting and seldom-voting environmentalists become consistent super-voters who now vote in every election. We are also pleased to have learned that "Friends and Family" text messages increase turnout among women much more than two other common types of messaging. Finally, it is interesting to note that African-American, Hispanic, and AAPI voters may not respond to "Friends and Family" messaging (at least via SMS) as much as "Assumed Good Behavior" messaging, and we look forward to more experimentation along these lines.