

Boosting Turnout in Minnesota's 2018 Midterm Election

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Encouraging occasional voters to cast their ballots

Minnesota has one of the highest voter turnout rates in the U.S., but still 40% of the state's eligible voters do not participate in midterm elections. We set out to tackle this problem by designing a series of behaviorally informed messages aimed at activating eligible voters who were otherwise unlikely to participate in the 2018 midterm election. Sending postcards through the secretary of state's office, we delivered these messages to hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans and saw a significant net improvement in voting behavior.

Summary

The United States was built on the principle of a government by the people and for the people, yet voter turnout—which hovers around 60% in presidential elections and 40-50% in midterms—lags behind many other democratic countries. Chronically low turnout undermines the responsiveness, representativeness, and accountability of our governmental institutions. And this problem is made worse by the fact that habitual voters look different than the broader population; they skew older, richer, and more educated than nonvoters and have different policy preferences than the overall country.¹ This means the needs and preferences of many Americans are not reflected in who is elected and which policies are put into place.

Minnesota's turnout significantly outpaces the national average, yet still 40% of eligible voters don't cast a ballot in midterm elections. In 2017, ideas42's Nonvoter Innovation Lab, a nonpartisan effort focused on broadening the electorate through behavioral science, began investigating what drives this participation gap. We identified barriers to voting that citizens face in our current electoral system and developed outreach solutions informed by behavioral science to help them make it to the polls. Our 2018 work focused on the context of midterm elections—which often see a high drop-off in participation from presidential elections.

This collaborative project with the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State highlights the impact of proactive outreach from state governments encouraging citizen to vote. It also sheds more light on which messaging and behavioral insights can help less engaged voters overcome barriers to being heard.

Behavioral barriers to voting

To identify behavioral barriers to voting, we conducted interviews and surveys with eligible voters and examined features of the voting context in Minnesota. We focused on a series of behavioral barriers voters face, especially around the midterm election. A sampling of these barriers include:

Highlights

- ▶ Habitual voters do not represent the broader population, which means that many Americans are not reflected in who is elected and what policies are put into place.
- ▶ Behaviorally informed postcards are one tool to increase voter participation by leveraging positive social pressure.

- ▶ **Mental models: Am I a good voter?** It's easy to have an incorrect mental model, or intuitive understanding, of what it means to be a "good voter" because it's not clearly defined. Most people think voting every four years is sufficient and don't consider participating in midterm elections as necessary to be a good voter.
- ▶ **Visibility: Is anyone paying attention?** Many voters reported social pressure, or encouragement to participate in the election from friends, family, and neighbors, as central to their decision to vote. Yet in midterm elections, where attention and excitement around voting is often lower than in presidential elections, voters may feel less pressure to participate.
- ▶ **Identity: Is voting a part of who I am?** Citizens who see voting as integral to who they are, are more likely to participate in elections to maintain consistency between their behavior and identity. But because elections are infrequent, "being a voter" isn't always top of mind for many people when they consider their central identities and values.

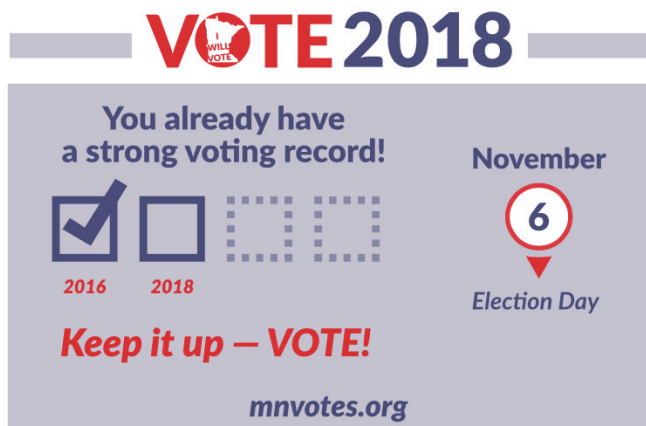
Designing postcards

With these barriers in mind, we designed two experiments to understand whether behaviorally informed messages could increase turnout among low-engagement voters. Working with the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, we randomized two subsets of voters into three groups and sent them one of the following: a simple reminder postcard, a "treatment" postcard incorporating our behavioral designs, or nothing. For each of the two experiments, we selected a different group of voters to focus on based on their history of participation.

The first experiment tested the impact of **positive social pressure** on new voters, which we defined as those who registered in Minnesota in 2016 for the first time (or updated their registration) and voted in that year's presidential election—almost 600,000 people total. We know many people participate in presidential but not midterm elections, so we expected a large number of these voters to "drop off" in 2018. To discourage this decline in turnout, the postcard acknowledges voters' participation in the 2016 election and frames the upcoming election as the next opportunity to keep their voting streak alive, establishing a mental model of a good voter being one who casts a ballot every two years. Additionally, the card suggests that whether or not a person votes in any given election is public information, leveraging social pressure and imposing a degree of accountability on the voter.

The second treatment intervention capitalized on residents' **Minnesota identity** to see if we could cultivate a stronger desire to vote among infrequent voters—in this case, those who only voted in presidential elections or fewer than half of the general elections for which they were eligible—over 400,000 people total. The card activates aspects of Minnesotan identity that align with a sense of civic duty (shared responsibility, community, and togetherness) and suggests that voting is an expression of that identity. It encourages recipients to vote in order to maintain consistency between their identity and behavior. The postcard also presents social norming language, indicating that Minnesotans turn out to vote at the highest rates in the country. We know from the literature that people want to do what their peers are doing, *which* in this case is voting.

Positive Social Pressure Control Reminder



Positive Social Pressure Treatment



Minnesota Identity Treatment



Minnesota Identity Control Reminder



Results

Across both tests we gathered valuable insights about how behaviorally informed postcards sent by the office of the secretary of state can increase turnout. The **positive social pressure** postcard increased turnout by 0.46 percentage pointsⁱ and generated 860 new votes, when compared to the no-contact control group. In the **Minnesota identity** test, the treatment postcard increased turnout by 0.17 percentage points, although the increase is not statistically significant.ⁱⁱ However, we found that assignment to the control postcard, which prominently featured Minnesotan imagery, increased turnout by 0.43 percentage pointsⁱⁱⁱ and generated 601 new votes, when compared to the no-contact control group. The fact that the simpler card resonated more with voters was a positive but surprising finding that we plan to explore further in a future election cycle.

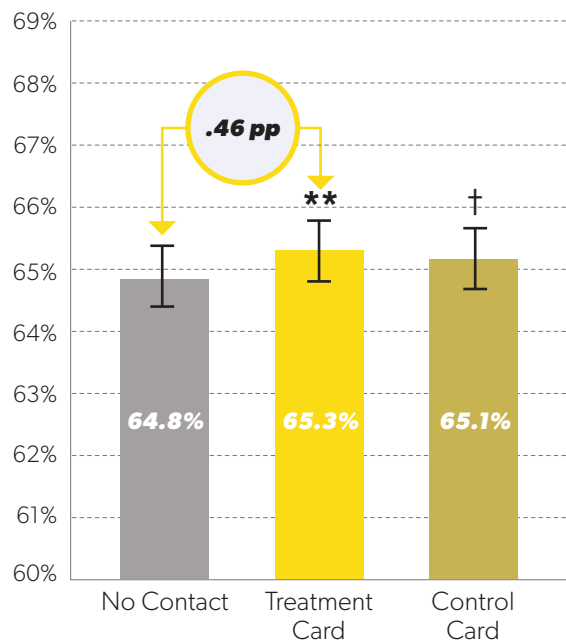
ⁱ P value=.01

ⁱⁱ P value=.38

ⁱⁱⁱ P value=.03

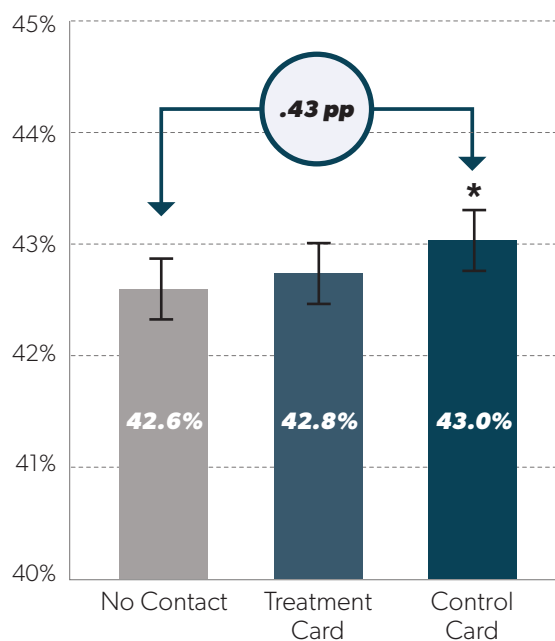
Positive Social Pressure

Turnout by Experimental Condition



Minnesota Identity

Turnout by Experimental Condition



In both cases, the turnout effect of 0.43-0.46 percentage points shows that behavioral science provides an additive benefit to typical mailers—on average, non-partisan direct mail campaigns increase turnout by 0.19 percentage points.²

These results are particularly notable given the record turnout in the 2018 midterm elections, with Minnesota once again leading the pack with 64.2% of eligible voters casting a ballot. The heightened enthusiasm and volume of voter outreach in the run-up to election day suggests that these types of messages could move the needle even more in lower-salience elections.

Takeaway

The creation of a truly representative democracy is an all-hands-on-deck project, and states have an important role to play as a trusted source for election-related information. Our 2018 partnership with the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State shows that behavioral science can bolster states’ efforts by providing simple tools for states to effectively expand the electorate through communications that resonate with people who may have otherwise sat out. Building evidence of what works to get out the vote and continuing to explore innovative solutions can spark civic action—and help more Americans be heard.

Endnotes

¹ Sean McElwee, “Why Non-Voters Matter,” *The Atlantic*. September 15, 2015, accessed July 14, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/why-non-voters-matter/405250/>

² Green, D. P., McGrath, M. C., & Aronow, P. M. (2013). Field experiments and the study of voter turnout. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 23(1), 27-48.