

# Polarizing (Partisan) Messages as Precision Voter Registration Tools for Shifting the Power Balance in Swing Areas<sup>1</sup>



Bryan E. Burke, Ph.D.  
Bryanb@CenterForVoterResearch.org  
Center for Voter Research  
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The aim is to develop voter registration into a precision tool to expand the Democratic base in unregistered populations with close to an even partisan split. An intentionally polarizing, pro-Democratic message was used that included social pressure and a discussion of candidates and issues that allowed Republicans to opt out before voter registration was even mentioned. This was tested against a nonpolarizing message in a randomized experiment at four registration sites in Spokane, WA, in 2016. It was an approximate replication of a 2012 experiment by Backof and Coger (2013). In Spokane, the polarizing (partisan) message increased the net percentage of Democratic votes by 27.5 pp. ( $p$ -value = 0.010) and net Democratic votes per hour by 0.17 above the nonpolarizing message. Because only 186 people voted in the sample, this large effect could be an outlier. However, past research, external validity, theory, and large effects elsewhere in society suggest the effect was large. Voters are defined as registrants who cast ballots.

There are other known instances of large partisan effects. In a re-analysis of Backof and Coger, their partisan message generated 10 pp. more net Democratic registrations (+/- 10 at 95% CL) than a neutral message. Also, the party of a sitting President has had 37.2 pp. (+/- 8.5 at 99.9% CL) more net viewers of State of the Union speeches than the party out of power, as discussed below. If the party of a President can have such a large effect, could a polarizing (partisan) message increase net Democratic voters by a comparably large amount during voter registration?

This paper explains why these results differ from past research and offers theory to guide further development of voter registration. Polarizing messages during voter operate through processes different from GOTV and persuasion. GOTV and persuasion change the behaviors and attitudes of *small numbers of people* on the cusp of change— if they vote and for whom they vote (Gerber and Rogers 2009). In contrast, it is theorized that polarizing messages trigger existing behavior. Specifically, a well-communicated polarizing message will trigger the habitual behavior of *most people* to avoid conversations with those of different viewpoints and gravitate towards the like-minded. Thus, a large percentage of Republicans will opt out, and a smaller percentage of Democrats will opt in to polarizing conversations with Democratic canvassers. There are other reasons why polarizing messages will produce larger net Democratic effects during registration than GOTV or persuasion. One is that registration effects become part of the voterfile and, thus, resistant to fading.

This and other evidence suggest that if the right buttons are pushed, large partisan effects from site-based voter registration are possible in swing populations. Specifically, this study focuses on how to increase the “net percentage of Democratic votes” to increase net Democratic votes.

## Goals of the Study and Measuring Partisan Effects

The goal is to develop a precision tool to expand the Democratic base through voter registration in swing populations. Naturally, different tools/strategies will have different outcomes. Those that

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register large volumes of voters in these swing populations will do little good because they will likely register about as many Republicans as Democrats. The best way to create a Democratic advantage is to develop new strategies to register substantially more Democrats than Republicans and, thus, a large net number of Democratic voters. The breakdown of net Democratic voters is below.

Net number of Democratic voters = Total number of voters X net % of Democratic voters

Of course, the net percentage of Democratic votes breaks down further into the percentage of votes for Democrats and for Republicans. Percent is calculated as a percent of the total sample.

Net % of Democratic voters – % of Republican voters = % of Democratic voters

In contrast, most previous studies have measured effects as only net Democratic voters (or net Democratic voters per shift) (Woolfalk et al., 2017). However, more information lies in the data.

### **Asymmetric Effects**

When a message has different effects on Democratic and Republican subsamples, the effects are asymmetric. Mirrored effects are a special case of basic asymmetry where the net effect on one party is positive and, on the other, negative. Asymmetric, mirrored, skewed effects are those that skew toward the demobilization of Republicans and away from the mobilization of Democrats or vice versa.

A message with asymmetric, mirrored, skewed effects has practical importance. As discussed in the theory section, these messages should cause large increases in the net percentages of Democratic votes within populations with many Republicans to demobilize (e.g., in swing districts).

### **Using Percent Differences Instead of Percentage Point Differences**

Traditionally, an effect is measured as percentage points (i.e., the absolute effect as a percent of the total sample). Likewise, the percentage point difference is, for example, the effect of treatment A minus the effect of treatment B. However, this study uses percent difference to better assess asymmetry than the traditional percentage point difference for a few reasons. *First*, when calculating a percentage, the denominator has a non-stochastic relationship with the numerator, and, thus, a percentage point difference will overestimate asymmetric effects. *Second*, a polarizing message won't actually demobilize Republicans from the entire sample (the traditional denominator). Instead, it demobilizes just from those who would have otherwise registered (the alternative denominator used here). This is discussed in more detail further below.

## **Past Research and Challenges**

Research on site-based registration is challenging in part because the unregistered voters are foot traffic that cannot be randomly assigned to treatments. We can only randomly assign volunteers and sites to treatments to control for confounding variables. However, the number of sites and canvassers is usually small, and, thus, the random assignment of treatments to them will not always adequately control site and canvasser characteristics. When administering such experiments, some luck is helpful because these problems can never be fully anticipated, and sources of error can be difficult to identify, measure, and correct after the fact.

We don't have a solid understanding of how the characteristics of sites, unregistered voters, and canvassers can moderate the effects of messages on net partisan effects. Woolfalk et al. (2017) noted that messaging "needs to be more distinct." Olin et al. (2017) suggested that more detailed research might explain why partisan messages do not always work. Their advice was taken here.

All past research is not reviewed. Alternatively, three studies are discussed because their designs resemble the Spokane experiment to various degrees. These are Woolfalk et al. (2017), Olin et al. (2017), and Backof and Coger (2013). However, they produced divergent and sometimes unexpected results that, at first glance, are not consistent with the Spokane results.

### Community-Based vs. Issue-Based Message

Woolfalk et al. (2017) tested a nonpartisan, community-focused message (C3) against a nonpartisan, minimum wage message (C4) at Arizona and Florida sites. Both were delivered through signs, apparel, and verbal conversations using well-defined scripts of the same length. In Table 1, the C3 message had 0.06 more net Democratic registrations (at 90% CL). Based on the results of the C3 message, the sites seem to have highly Democratic unregistered populations.

**Table 1.** Woolfalk et al. (2017) Arizona and Florida experiment: Democratic and Republican registration forms per shift for the community-based (C3) and wage issue messages (C4) <sup>a, b</sup>

Treatment (n = # of Shifts)	Dem. Regs. / Shift	Rep. Regs. / Shift	Other Regs. / Shift	Net Dem Regs. / Shift	Total Ave. Regs. / Shift
Community-based (C3) (N≈ 1,936)	0.87 (54%)	0.17 (11%)	0.56 (35%)	0.70 (%44)	1.6
Wage issue (C4) (N≈1,747)	0.79 (53%)	0.15 (10%)	0.56 (37%)	0.64 (%43)	1.5
Difference	-0.08** (-1 pp.)	-0.02 (-1 pp.)	0.00 (2 pp.)	-0.06** (-1 pp.)	-0.1**

<sup>a</sup> Percentages were calculated as percents of the treatment group.

<sup>b</sup> Treatments were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature to estimate the standard error of the difference of the net Dem effect between the treatments.

\*\*90% CL    \*\*95% CL    \*\*99% CL

Intuitively, one would think that using the Democratic issue of raising the minimum wage would be associated with a larger net number of Democratic registrations than the politically neutral c3 message. However, it was not. There are several possible explanations. *First*, wage issues might not be polarizing enough to have a partisan effect. The minimum wage has often had significant bipartisan support in public opinion polls (e.g., Harris-Hill 2019), which will be discussed below. *Second*, even if the minimum wage message was more polarizing than the c3 message (and it skewed toward the demobilization of Republicans), it would have been difficult to detect a greater partisan effect on the population with so few Republicans. *Second*, cross-over effects between the treatments might have muddied the differences between them. If some of the foot traffic during one treatment crossed over to another treatment, it would make it difficult to measure the true effect.

### Minimum Wage vs. Anti-Trump Message

Arizona and Florida experiments used anti-Trump vs. issue messages from April to May 2016 (Olin et al., 2017; Rosmarin and Duran 2016). Although these experiments did not yield the expected increase in Democratic votes from the anti-Trump message, they provide valuable insight into the indirect effects that messages can have by influencing canvassers, bystanders, and venue owners.

Sites were in high-traffic areas (e.g., strip malls, grocery stores) in (likely) Democratic neighborhoods where eighty percent of registrants were Latinx (Rosmarin and Duran 2016). Both messages were delivered verbally as well as with signs and apparel. Clearly defined scripts were not used. In the *issue message*, many canvassers mentioned minimum wage. Some mentioned

immigration, election reform, and climate change. In the *anti-Trump message*, canvassers often asked if people would like to “register so they could vote against Trump” (Wornhoff 2016), who was described as anti-immigrant and anti-women (Rosmarin and Duran 2016).

“Canvassers were routinely kicked out of their sites” and “experienced verbal threats/abuse.” This seemed to happen “more often when wearing anti-Trump shirts.” The backlash was “Largely resolved with de-escalation and conflict mitigation training.” Also, partisan canvassers were “Occasionally confused for pro-Trump canvassers” (Rosmarin and Duran 2016).

In Table 2a on the Arizona experiment, Olin et al. (2017) found 0.27 more net Democratic registrations per shift (at 95% CL) from the Anti-Trump message than the (relatively neutral) wage message. However, this was mainly from a 0.49 increase in total registrations per shift (a 54% increase) at 99% CL above the anti-Trump message and not the net percent of Democratic votes. In fact, the number of both Democratic and Republican registrations increased by about the same percentage points. Moreover, relatively speaking, Democratic registrations increased by less than Republican (65% vs. 130%, although not shown in Table 2a).

**Table 2a.** Arizona experiment: Democratic and Republican voter registrations per volunteer shift for the wage and anti-Trump messages <sup>a,b,c</sup>

Treatment (n = # of Shifts)	Dem. Regs. / Shift	Rep. Regs. / Shift	Other Regs. / Shift	Net Dem Regs. / Shift	Total Ave. Regs. / Shift
Pro-wage Issue (n=289)	0.48 (53%)	0.03 (3%)	0.39 (43%)	0.44*** (50%)	0.9
Anti-Trump (n=289) <sup>b</sup>	0.79 (57%)	0.07 (5%)	0.53 (38%)	0.72*** (52%)	1.39
Difference	0.31** (4 pp.)	0.04 (2 pp.)	0.14 (-5 pp.)	0.27** (2 pp.)	0.49***

<sup>a</sup> Olin et al. (2017) and Rosmarin and Duran (2016) reported different results than each other. The latter publication was used.

<sup>b</sup> Percentages were calculated as percents of the treatment group.

<sup>c</sup> Both treatments were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature.

\*\*90% CL    \*\*95% CL    \*\*99% CL

Why was the large increase in net Democratic registrations from the anti-Trump treatment mainly from an increase in total registrations? But not from an increase in the net percent of Democratic registrations? A few explanations are plausible. *First*, perhaps the anti-Trump message *indirectly* increased total registrations by increasing canvassers’ enthusiasm to work. *Second*, perhaps something blurred the difference between the treatments, such as foot traffic that was common to both treatments. Another possibility is that messages were not clearly communicated. Some registrants did think that anti-Trump canvassers were pro-Trump (Rosmarin and Duran 2016). *Third*, it is possible that anti-Trump canvassers adopted strategies to prevent a backlash that decreased their message’s partisan effectiveness. This is speculative, but it explains Table 2a.

It is even more surprising that, in Florida (see Table 2b), the anti-Trump message generated fewer net Democratic registrations and fewer total registrations per shift than the wage issue. Even though those differences are not statistically significant, this is still a surprise. These effects may be accurate, and our theoretical understanding of how messages impact voters is wrong. However, that seems unlikely. Both treatments registered nearly the same partisan percentages.

Methodological challenges are a possible explanation. As mentioned, sample designs cannot always fully control for site and volunteer characteristics when sites and canvassers are relatively few. As mentioned above, perhaps canvassers used strategies to cope with the backlash that decreased the effectiveness of the polarizing message. Wornhoff (2016) implies that the backlash was worse in Florida, with the more Republican population. This explanation seems likely and makes an important contribution to our understanding of site-based registration. It appears that messages can have indirect effects by generating a backlash from some registrants, bystanders, and/or venue owners that interferes with the ability of canvassers to stay on task and on message.

**Table 2b.** Florida experiment: Democratic and Republican voter registrations per volunteer shift for wage and anti-Trump messages <sup>a,b</sup>

Treatment	Dem. Regs. / Shift	Rep. Regs. / Shift	Other Regs. / Shift	Net Dem Regs. / Shift	Total Ave. Regs. / Shift
Wage Issue (n=620)	0.41 (29%)	0.19 (13%)	0.81 (57%)	0.22 (16%)	1.41
Anti-Trump (n=620)	0.36 (28%)	0.17 (13%)	0.75 (59%)	0.19 (15%)	1.28
Difference	-0.05 (-1 pp.)	-0.02 (0 pp.)	-0.06 (2 pp.)	-0.03 (-1 pp.)	-0.14

<sup>a</sup> Olin et al. (2017) and Rosmarin and Duran (2016) reported different results than each other. Thus, the later publication was used.  
<sup>b</sup> Both treatments were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature.

### Backof's and Cogger's Nevada Experiment

Backof and Cogger (2013) measured a “pro-Obama” message against a “neutral” message in Las Vegas, NV, from Aug. 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> in 2012. As seen in Table 3, the pro-Obama message generated 0.3 more net Democratic registrations per shift. In the polarizing treatment, volunteers wore t-shirts and buttons with “Obama” on them and “emphasize(d)” Obama in conversations. In the control group, volunteers wore plain t-shirts and had conversations that “de-emphasize(d)” Obama. However, the authors did not mention a clearly defined script that was closely followed.

**Table 3.** Nevada “Obama for America” experiment: Democratic and Republican voter registration cards per volunteer shift for the neutral treatment and pro-Obama treatment <sup>a</sup>

Shifts in Treatment	Dem. Regs. / Shift	Rep. Regs. / Shift	Other Regs. / Shift	Net Dem Regs. / Shift	Total Ave. Cards / Shift
Neutral (N≈123 <sup>b</sup> )	1.7 (71%)	0.2 (8%)	0.5 (21%)	1.5 (62 pp.)	2.4
Pro-Obama (N≈124 <sup>b</sup> )	1.9 (76%)	0.1 (4%)	0.5 (20%)	1.8 (72 pp.)	2.5
Difference	0.2 (5 pp.)	-0.1 (-4 pp.)	-0.0 (-1 pp.)	0.3** (10 pp.**)	0.1

<sup>a</sup> Both treatments were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature.  
 \*\*90% CL    \*\*95% CL    \*\*99% CL

This study's author calculated that the net percentage of Democratic registrations per shift was 10 pp. (+/-10 at 95% CL) higher from the pro-Obama message than the neutral message (i.e., 5 pp.

increase in Democratic and 4 pp. decrease in Republican registrations). Original data from Backof and Coger was unavailable when Table 3 was made.<sup>2</sup> While rounding error could have impacted the data in Table 3, it is unlikely to have been large enough to alter the conclusions here.<sup>3</sup>

## Theory Building

It is hypothesized that, during site-based registration, a polarizing message will increase the net percentage of Democratic votes primarily by prompting Republicans to opt out and less so by prompting Democrats to opt in. There is likely more than one mechanism through which messages cause partisan effects during site-based voter registration. The *first* mechanism is where social norms prompt people to register (Panagopoulos 2010 and Gerber et al. 2008). All conversations about voter registration implicitly or explicitly invoke this norm. For example, the question “Are you registered?” implies that people should vote. The effects of this first mechanism are theorized to be symmetric. Also, once these effects become part of the voting rolls, they are resistant to fading.

In theory, the second and third mechanisms work as a set to polarize conversations with potential registrants. The *second* mechanism demobilizes Republicans from registering among a segment of unregistered voters who 1) would have registered through a canvasser with the social pressure mechanism/treatment and 2) were predisposed to choose Republican candidates. This does not create new habits among nonvoters at the cusp of change, as does a GOTV. Instead, within a boarder subpopulation, it activates people’s existing habits to avoid those with different politics.

The *third* is when a small percentage of additional Democratic voters are mobilized by being attracted to like-minded Democratic canvassers using the polarizing message and, thus, register to vote. Specifically, these additional Democratic voters are mobilized from a subpopulation that would not have registered because of the social pressure mechanism alone.

In non-electoral contexts, psychologists Brehm and Cohen (1962) and Kiesler (1971) found evidence of these two mechanisms. Most people have a habit to avoid people with different beliefs and seek those with similar (Hart et al. 2009). Eagly and Chaiken (2005) called this confirmation bias. Jensen-Campbell and Graziano (2001) call it conflict avoidance that is strengthened by strongly held beliefs (Hart et al., 2009). The Analyst Institute (2014) refers to people accepting “messages that are consistent with” existing attitudes.”

The second and third mechanisms should have the largest effects when the most polarizing messages are used on unregistered individuals with the strongest political beliefs. As before, its registration effects should be resistant to fading once registrants are on the voting rolls.

The fourth is a GOTV mechanism where the message causes someone to vote who would not have otherwise voted but who would have registered with the canvasser or on their own. The fifth is persuasion, where the message changes the registrants’ vote choices and/or party identities. These two should have the smallest effect, if any at all. Past research is clear that persuasion effects are usually small and seldom last more than a week or two (Kalla and Broockman 2018). GOTV effects are only slightly larger and slightly more resistant to fading.

The Spokane polarizing message blended partisan, candidate, issue, and social pressure messages with all five mechanisms. In theory, the characteristics of the message, site, canvassers, and the unregistered population should shape the partisan effects in some of the below ways.

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<sup>2</sup> A personal communication with Peter Backof and Chris Coger confirmed that the original data was not available.

<sup>3</sup> If there was rounding error, Table 3 would be unchanged if the original unrounded number of Republican registrations was 0.14 or below in the pro-Obama treatment and 0.19 or higher in the neutral treatment. This is because the smallest percentage point difference between the treatments would have been -2 pp. and smallest percent difference would still have been a substantial -26%.

## **Asymmetry and Partisan Skewing**

There is no reason to expect that any message will have the same effect on the registration of Democratic and Republican voters resulting in perfect symmetry.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, there are reasons to expect that a polarizing message can demobilize a larger percentage of Republicans than it will mobilize additional Democrats, which will produce asymmetry in the partisan effects.

Social pressure (i.e., the first mechanism) should alone push both Democratic and Republican registration rates to near the ceiling of what is possible. However, if a polarizing message is spoken before a social pressure message to register, it will prompt a large portion of Republicans to opt out that would have otherwise heard the social pressure and registered. This should mobilize only a few additional Democrats since most would have already registered.

## **Polarizing vs. Nonpolarizing Messages and Communicating Them**

What message will be the most effective at polarizing an unregistered population along partisan lines? A choice between a message based on party, candidates, issues, or social pressure is a false choice because all three can be combined into a single message. The degree to which a message is polarizing is likely more important to its effectiveness at increasing net Democratic effects than whether it is partisan or issue-based. Some issue messages might be just as effective as purely partisan messages, but, in general, issues are likely not polarizing enough.

Intuitively, issues should be less effective than partisan messages at polarizing people. Party affiliation is the strongest predictor of voter choices (Hillygus and Treul 2014). In contrast, polling shows considerable bipartisan public support for many policies, such as a higher minimum wage. A nationwide Harris-Hill (2019) poll in 2019 found that most Democrats supported higher minimum wages. Also, 36% of Republicans supported a \$15 minimum; 34% supported a small increase; 22% supported current levels; 8% thought it should be reduced or eliminated. Likewise, there is bipartisan support for some abortion and gun control policies (Polling Report 2019a, 2019b).

Arguably, the most polarizing messages will blend party identity, candidates, and issues to affect people's emotions. Saul Alinsky (1971) suggested that the most effective way to mobilize people is to draw a distinction between good and evil by clearly stating injustices and naming heroes and villains. For example, "You deserve to be paid a decent wage for your work. Unfortunately, Republicans don't care if you struggle to pay rent or die on the sidewalk. However, Democrats believe in paying a wage that people can live on. Please vote for Democratic Joe Biden in 2024."

However, if a polarizing message is to be as effective as theorized, it must be delivered with little or no message clutter, clearly heard, and mentally processed by potential registrants. This can be difficult. Canvassers will often struggle with the nuances of verbal communications. However, using signs and apparel to deliver messages can also be problematic since design features, lighting, visual barriers, angle of placement, and distance to foot traffic can hinder communication.

Delivering the parts of the polarizing treatment in the proper order is likely important. When canvassers use a partisan message, the worst thing that they can do is start a conversation by saying, "Do you want to register to vote?" because there is no prompt for Republicans to opt out. Once someone says they want to register, most canvassers feel compelled to register them. The polarizing message is designed to have the polarizing component delivered first and then allow people the chance to opt out before the canvasser delivers the message about voter registration.

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<sup>4</sup> This is similar to the concept of "Dog whistle" messages. The concept suggests that some messages will have little or no meaning for one group but will generate a strong response in another.

## Characteristics of Unregistered Populations and Sites

Since a polarizing message works primarily by prompting Republicans to opt out, it should have a larger effect on highly Republican populations. The volume of foot traffic should also be important. When the foot traffic of unregistered Democrats is high relative to the number of canvassers, opportunity costs are high for time spent on each potential registrant.

## Summarizing the Theoretical Reasons for Large Partisan Effects

There are reasons to expect large net Democratic effects from polarizing messages during registration. *First*, these messages do not work on a cusp of change like GOTV but likely on a larger population. *Second*, registration effects should have a resistance to fading once they are part of the voting rolls. *Third*, when Republican and Democratic effects are netted, the result will be larger than either the increase in Democrats or the decrease in Republicans who voted.

## Evidence of Large Partisan Effects

Large partisan effects do occur in society, as discussed below. This includes the audiences of State of the Union Speeches and also the partisan choices of voters. There is precedent for large increases in the net percentage of democratic votes.

### State of the Union Speeches

Table 4 shows that a sitting president's party consistently has twice the viewership of State of the Union (SOTU) speeches than does the opposing party from 2011 to 2019. Multiple regression and the below variable model were used to analyze the data in Table 4. *PrcntDemView* is the net percent of viewers who are Democratic, and *PartyPres* is a dummy variable representing the President's party. *NetJobApp* is the President's net percent job approval.

$$\text{PrcntDemView} = \text{PartyPres} (B_{pp}) + \text{NetJobApp} (B_{naj}) + \text{Constant}$$

That is remarkable that *PartyPres* predicts a 37.2 pp. (at a 99.9% CL) increase in net Democratic viewership. Model 2 had an  $R^2$  of 0.997 (in Table 5). *NetJobApp* is not statistically significant.

**Table 4.** The partisan composition of the viewership of State of the Union speeches 2011 to 2019

President	Date	Viewership of SOTU			Job Approval of President		
		Net Dem.	Dem.	Rep.	Net Approval	Approve	Disapprove
Trump	Feb. 5, 2019	-20%	22%	42% <sup>a</sup>	-8%	44%	52%
Trump	Jan. 30, 2018	-17%	25%	42% <sup>b</sup>	-17%	40%	57%
Trump	Feb. 28, 2017	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	-8%	43%	51%
Obama	Jan. 12, 2016	18%	42%	24% <sup>c</sup>	1%	48%	47%
Obama	Jan. 20, 2015	19%	39%	20% <sup>d</sup>	2%	49%	47%
Obama	Jan. 28, 2014	19%	41%	22% <sup>e</sup>	-8%	42%	50%
Obama	Feb. 12, 2013	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	8%	51%	43%
Obama	Jan. 24, 2012	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	-3%	45%	48%
Obama	Jan. 25, 2011	19%	44%	25% <sup>f</sup>	8%	50%	42%

<sup>a</sup><https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/06/politics/state-of-the-union-poll/index.html>

<sup>b</sup><https://www.cbsnews.com/news/viewers-approve-of-trumps-first-state-of-the-union-address-cbs-news-poll/>

<sup>c</sup><https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/12/politics/state-of-the-union-2016-poll/index.html>

<sup>d</sup><https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/21/politics/state-of-the-union-poll/index.html>

<sup>e</sup>[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/state-of-the-union-poll\\_n\\_4684252](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/state-of-the-union-poll_n_4684252)

<sup>f</sup><https://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-high-marks-for-obamas-state-of-the-union-speech/>

**Table 5.** Results of regression on the partisan composition of viewership of State of the Union speeches (N=6)<sup>a, b</sup>

Coefficient	Model 1	Model 2
PartyPres	38.30*** (1.57) <sup>a</sup>	37.2**** (1.32) <sup>a</sup>
NetJobApp	-8.03 (8.45) <sup>a</sup>	n.a.
Constant	-19.50*** (1.55) <sup>a</sup>	-18.5*** (1.30) <sup>a</sup>
R <sub>2</sub>	0.997	0.998

<sup>a</sup> Robust Standard Errors

<sup>b</sup> R<sup>2</sup> = 0.997

\*95% CL \*\*99%CL \*\*\*99% CL \*\*\*\*99.9% CL.

While a sample size of six is small, Austin and Steyerberg (2015) found that six observations per independent variable were usually sufficient for regression through Monte Carlo simulations. The risk is an inflated R<sup>2</sup>, but coefficients are relatively unaffected. Of course, when analyzing only the seven election years in Table 4, the model may not generalize well to other years.

One explanation for these large effects is that the party of a President triggers the well-condition, habitual behavior of most people to avoid those with different points of view and seek out those with similar. Other explanations seem unlikely. Obama likely did not persuade that many Independent and Republican viewers to identify with Democrats, and Trump likely did not do the analogous. Of course, SOTU speeches are not voter registration programs. Unregistered voters probably have weaker partisan identities than SOTU viewers and probably are less likely to be affected by polarizing messages. Conversely, perhaps some strong partisans will watch a SOTU by the opposing party but not allow an opposing party to register them.

### Party Identification of Candidates and the Polarization of Voter Choice

The largest known partisan effect is the effect that a candidate’s party has on voter choices. Party identification is the “single best predictor of vote choice” (Hillygus and Treul 2014). “Partisanship is the overwhelmingly dominant influence” on voter choices (Petrocik 2009, 564). Partisanship is “the most important concept” in political science (Dalton 2016).

In an average election, Democratic candidates will mobilize 80% of Democrats to vote for them and 20% of Republicans (Petrocik 2009). That is a net 60 percent of Democratic votes. Republican candidates produce similar but opposite effects. Thus, the difference in the net percentages is a very large 120 pp. Similar to before, partisanship seems to trigger the well condition behavior of voters to align with and vote for candidates of the party to which they identify.

Of course, registration is different than voting in a few ways. *First*, that huge 120 pp. net increase was mostly among habitual voters with strong political identities. However, individuals that register during field efforts tend to be irregular voters with weaker identities. *Second*, that huge effect occurred when voters had a choice between Democratic and Republican candidates. During field registration, there is only the choice to register or not register with a Democratic canvasser. Thus, a message during registration will never have an effect that large.

## Hypotheses

This study seeks to understand how to develop polarizing messages into precision tools to expand the Democratic base in swing districts using site-based registration. The polarizing message

treatment was an opt-out, pro-Democratic message along with messages about candidates, issues, and social pressure that allowed potential registrants who were Republican to opt out before voter registration was even mentioned. Seven hypotheses are examined.

*Hypothesis one:* The polarizing treatment is more effective than the nonpolarizing at increasing the net percentage of Democratic voters during site-based voter registration on a mobilizable unregistered population with an even partisan split.

*Hypothesis two:* The nonpolarizing treatment will generate a larger number of total registrations per shift and total ballots cast per shift than the polarizing. This is because the demobilization of Republicans will not be fully offset by the mobilization of additional Democrats, in theory.

*Hypothesis three:* Advocating for a particular Democratic candidate wins more votes for that candidate relative to just the polarizing message. Again, non-experimental data will be used.

*Hypothesis four:* The polarizing message treatment will generate asymmetric, mirrored effects that skew toward a large Republican demobilization and a small Democratic mobilization (relative to the nonpolarizing message treatment).

*Hypothesis five:* Canvassers will be unsuccessful in the field at IDing registrants who are Democrat voters and who are Republican voters. This also will use non-experimental data.

*Hypothesis six:* Polarizing messages are more cost-efficient than nonpolarizing at increasing the net percentages of Democratic votes on unregistered mobilizable populations that are evenly split.

*Hypothesis seven:* Polarizing messages will be more effective than nonpolarizing at increasing net Democratic effects in an evenly split unregistered population than in a highly Democratic unregistered population. This is because there are more Republicans to demobilize in the evenly split population. A non-experimental analysis was conducted.

## Methodology Overview

A randomized experiment on polarizing vs. nonpolarizing messages during a site-based registration effort was conducted in Spokane, WA, from early May to mid-October 2016. The polarizing message blended partisan, candidate, issue, and social pressure messages that implicitly offered potential registrants a chance to opt out of the conversation before voter registration was mentioned. The main goal was to measure which treatment resulted in a larger net percentage of votes for Democrats, but other metrics were evaluated. A post-election survey was used to measure voter choices and partisan identification.

This polarizing message has been used by Eastern Washington Voters (EWV) in its normal program work from 2011 to 2019 for five months per year at the same registration sites as in the experiment. Most registrations were collected by staff and volunteers with clipboards who approached people mostly at a bus plaza and some at two nearby colleges and a university.

During the *polarizing treatment*, canvassers gave people a chance to opt out of conversations before voter registration was mentioned. Canvassers were trained to break off conversations before arguments occurred, and the vast majority of encounters were civil. Most canvassers advocated for Democrat Joe Pakootas for Congress, who had an underfunded campaign but who had considerable support among the Democratic base. In the *nonpolarizing treatment*, canvassers advocated a levy to fund the local bus system before discussing voter registration.

The backlash was minimal, which was likely because freedom of speech was largely ensured at the Spokane sites and careful recruitment, training, and oversight kept canvassers on message. That situation contrasts with Arizona and Florida experiments (Olin et al. 2017), where backlash caused greater problems even though the unregistered population was more Democratic.

There was a 75% chance of assignment to the polarizing treatment and 25% to the nonpolarizing. Also, 267 canvasser shifts averaged 1.5 hours per shift (from data in Table 6), and fifteen canvassers collected 89.5% of the forms. Also, 1008 registrations were collected; 852 resulted in valid registrations with a final code of partisan or nonpartisan; 272 registrants voted and were in the starting sample; 186 voters returned a questionnaire to make the final sample.

**Table 6.** Number of shifts, canvasser hours, contacts, and registrations in the nonpolarizing and polarizing treatments: Data from shift sheets and the voterfile.

Treatment	Shifts <sup>a</sup>	Hours <sup>a</sup>	Contacts w/ unregistered <sup>a</sup>	Total Contacts <sup>a,b</sup>	Registrations forms from shift sheets <sup>a</sup>	Valid Registrations from voterfile
Nonpolarizing	70	117	1,001	2,567	267	263
Polarizing	197	300	2,461	5,786	565	589
Total	267	410	3,462	8,353	832	852

<sup>a</sup>Data is from shift forms.

<sup>b</sup>These are unregistered, registered, and ineligible individuals who received a partial or entire message from canvassers.

### Unit of Observation, Population, and Sample

The unit of observation is the registrant who voted (unless otherwise noted) and includes votes from all registrations (not just roll changing<sup>5</sup>). The theoretical population was the unregistered mobilizable population that was part of the foot traffic through the sites during the experiment, whether canvassed or not. This is assumed to be about five thousand individuals. By mobilizable, it is meant that individuals were willing and capable to register and vote on their own or with help. Unless otherwise stated, the sample is that portion of the theoretical population that received one (or occasionally both) of the two treatments, registered, and voted.

### Partisan Split of the Population

Going into the experiment, it was assumed that the support among the (mobilizable) unregistered population was evenly split between the two main parties (or perhaps leans slightly Democratic). This is a reasonable assumption for a few reasons. First, in Spokane County, Trump won 50.0% of the vote, and Clinton won 41.3% in 2016. Although the parts of Spokane where the registration sites were located do lean Democratic, the sites received a large amount of foot traffic from other more conservative parts of the county. Second, both an analysis of the candidate choices by voters in the nonpolarizing treatment and by the voters within the precincts where nonpolarizing treatment group members resided are suggestive of a split close to 50:50 (see Appendix A).

### Treatments

The first part of the script for the polarizing and nonpolarizing message treatment was different. The second part was the same for both. It was on voter registration using social pressure. Potential registrants were given a chance to opt out of conversations before registration was mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> However, about 79.2% of registrations were confirmed as roll changing since January 17, 2015.

*Polarizing treatment.* This first part of the script was used to polarize the conversation by using a carefully designed polarizing message (see Appendix B). According to the advice of Olin et al. (2017), attention was given to specific characteristics of the message. The polarizing message was an opt-out, pro-Democratic message that included messages about candidates, issues, and social pressure. Canvassers were allowed to use their own words if they hit all the main points and started with an explicitly partisan statement about who they supported and why as they handed out candidate literature. The vast majority advocated for Democrat Joe Pakootas for 5<sup>th</sup> CD and his support of food stamps, Medicaid, and Medicare. Volunteers were trained to then wait for a reaction from potential registrants and let them opt out before discussing voter registration.

The treatment was designed to be a pro-Democratic message and not anti-Republican. The opponent Cathy McMorris Rodgers would often come up, but an overall positive message still dominated the large majority of conversations. Volunteers occasionally went off script and said, “we’re trying to defeat Republican Cathy McMorris Rodgers,” but this was incidental.

*Nonpolarizing treatment.* The beginning of this script was a message to support the transit levy on the ballot (see Appendix C). Canvassers could use their own words if they hit the main points and did not mention a political party or candidate. These nonpolarizing conversations took one-half of the time of the polarizing.

In addition to the second part of the scripts, both treatments had things in common. *First*, canvassers were trained to target youth, People of Color (POC), and low-income people (although many who did not fit one of these criteria were registered). *Second*, canvassers were trained and monitored to verbally deliver a clearly communicated message. *Third*, potential registrants were allowed to opt out before the social pressure message to register. If individuals said “I’m not interested,” canvassers broke off the conversation. However, if the reaction to the first parts of the scripts was neutral or positive, canvassers continued with the second part that was on voter registration. *Fourth*, canvassers were trained not to push hard if people were not interested in registering because it was assumed that *most of those opting out were Republicans*. *Fifth*, canvassers were trained not to persuade people who disagreed with them and keep conversations cordial. *Sixth*, no one who asked to be registered was refused registration by canvassers.

## **Effect**

The main treatment effects are voter choices that are measured as choices for Congress, President, County Commissioner, and partisan identity. Choices for Congress are the most important because canvassers specifically advocated for the Democratic candidate during the polarizing treatment. Effects are examined as net votes for Democrats, the net percent of Democratic votes, percent of Republican votes, and percent of Democratic votes.

## **Sampling Design, Random Assignment, and Other Controls**

A sampling design was used where treatments were randomly assigned to the volunteers at each site and for each shift. To control for site characteristics, all four sites were where 1) freedom of speech could be reasonably assured, 2) foot traffic was mainly low-income to lower-middle-income individuals in all but one minor site (i.e., the local university), and 3) foot traffic was low to moderate in volume. These were the Spokane downtown bus plaza, Spokane Community College (SCC), Spokane Falls Community College (SFCC), and Eastern Washington University (EWU). Before each shift at a site, the principal investigator randomly assigned canvassers a treatment with a 75% chance of the polarizing treatment and a 25% chance of the nonpolarizing.

Clearly defined scripts were used to help ensure message control, and a significant investment was made into recruiting, training, and overseeing canvassers. Also, message treatments were only delivered verbally and by handing out literature. Signs and apparel were not used. **Data**

The data was from the Spokane County voterfile, information collected in the field, and a post-election survey. The voterfile contained data on age, gender, and who voted.

On each paper registration form, there was a *code box* for canvassers to code each completed or semi-completed form (see Appendix D). Canvassers recorded 1) their initials, 2) site, 3) tactic, 4) experimental treatment, 5) candidate that was advocated, and 6) race/ethnicity of the registrant. If a form was collected through the wrong treatment, it was also coded as such.

Canvassers signed into their *shift sheets* (see Appendix E) on the back of their clipboard with their 1) name, 2) start date and time, 3) site, and 4) treatment, and they recorded their 5) end time. They also recorded 6) how conversations ended (e.g., “already registered,” “yes, I will register,” “Republican and not interested”). This data source is judged to be of lower quality than the data from the coding on the registration forms. Canvassers frequently forgot to sign out, and conversations and registrations were undercounted by five to ten percent.

The very short, five-item, post-election survey measured voters’ candidate choices and party identification using phone, mail, and online modes from early December to early March 2016. Exactly 186 questionnaires were returned out of 273 for a 68.4% response rate (i.e., 66.5% response rate for the polarizing treatment and 72.4% for the nonpolarizing for a difference of 5.9 pp. with a p-value of 0.327). Respondents were told that the Eastern Washington Research Group was sponsoring the survey, but they were not told that Eastern Washington Voters was registering them. Thus, respondents would be unlikely to link the survey to being registered.

## Volunteer Management

Traditionally, organizers give volunteers a very short training and send them to the field mostly unsupervised, saving staff time. The problem with that approach is that often volunteers go off message, switch the order of the script elements, or even encourage Republicans to register.

Because these things can jeopardize the effectiveness of a voter registration effort in swing populations, the staff for the experiment instead carefully recruited, worked alongside of, and monitored volunteers. Only volunteers who were believed to be partisans were recruited. They were given 45-minutes of classroom-style training and two hours of initial hands-on training in the field.<sup>6</sup> If they were unable or unwilling to deliver the assigned treatment, they were not invited back.

Staff registered voters alongside of volunteers to monitor a few things. *First*, on a daily basis, staff handed volunteers the script for the assigned treatment and explicitly stated that it was polarizing or nonpolarizing. *Second*, staff worked in close proximity to volunteers to monitor how they were delivering the messages. *Third*, staff occasionally checked to see if volunteers were provoking a partisan response from potential registrants. If volunteers were on message during a partisan shift, one or two potential registrants should have explicitly said, “I am a Republican.” No such responses were a red flag that canvassers were off message but not proof of assignment error. *Fourth*, volunteers were asked to wear clothes without political messaging.

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<sup>6</sup> Others have noted the benefit of investments into training and oversight, such as Fuld (2017).

## Assignment Errors and Quality Control

There were 6 instances of assignment errors out of a final sample of 186 registrants. During the last 10 days of the experiment, a minor change in the random assignment was made. Also, there was likely a small amount of bleed-over between the treatments. The effect of these on the results was found to be inconsequential, and no correction was made (see Appendix F).

### Assignment Errors for Shifts and Individual Forms

Assignment error was coded on registration and shift sheets a total of 32 times, but only 8 of those cast a ballot, and only 6 completed the post-election survey (see Appendix F). An instrumental variable analysis suggests that the assignment errors did not impact the results. Therefore, voters were recoded to reflect the actual treatment that they received. No other adjustment was made.

### Change in Random Assignment

To increase the size of the nonpolarizing group, the chance of being assigned to the polarizing treatment at SCC was changed in the last two weeks of the experiment from a 25% to a 50% chance. There were 15 voters from the nonpolarizing treatment and 9 from the polarizing during this period at SCC and might have created a small bias because voters from SCC appeared to be slightly more Democratic than other locations. However, as seen in Appendix F, these changes did not have a statistically significant effect on the results, and no correction was made.

### Bleed Over between Treatments

Since both treatments used the same sites, a few individuals were exposed to two treatments, blurring their differences. However, the large majority of registrants seemed to be from new encounters. The two types of bleed-over effects are discussed below. They were likely small and somewhat offset by each other.

*First*, as Democrats were being disproportionately registered by the polarizing message, the remaining unregistered population became slightly more Republican, which may have lowered the net Democratic effects of the nonpolarizing treatment. *Second*, when using the nonpolarizing message, there were a few times when canvassers heard, “You’re those Democrats who were out here yesterday.” These potential registrants likely thought that the nonpartisan canvassers were Democrats. This could have slightly increased the nonpolarizing treatment’s net Democratic effect. However, if voters were first exposed to the nonpolarizing treatment before the polarizing, it seems less likely that they would have thought that the partisan canvassers were nonpartisan.

### Final Sample and Balance

The final sample size was 186 voters who were 1) registered through either treatment, 2) voted, and 3) completed the post-elect survey. Also, 45.5% of this sample was between 18 and 29 years old, and 18.4% were People of Color (POC). The final sample includes the six voters who had assignment errors and were coded to reflect the actual treatment they received. As shown in Appendix G, this sample is balanced on the names of canvassers and the registration sites.

### Other

The analyses in Appendix H provide evidence that the survey data did not contain response, social desirability, primacy, or recency bias. Appendix I discusses related topics.

## Results

With voter choices and party ID as the primary measures of treatment effect, the experimental and non-experimental data were analyzed. Choices for Congress were the primary interest since most canvassers specifically advocated for the Democrat for Congress when administering the polarizing treatment, but choices in other races were also examined. Weighted survey data was used. For the unweighted data and how the weighting was done, see Appendix J.

### Hypothesis One: Net Percentages of Democratic Votes and Identities

“The polarizing treatment is more effective than the nonpolarizing at increasing the net percentage of Democratic voters . . .” The hypothesis is strongly supported for Congress and somewhat for partisan identification. There was only weak support for President and Commissioner. The main mechanism appears to have been the demobilization of Republican votes except for the congressional race. For all categories of choice, the polarizing treatment had fewer Republican votes (statistically significant in three). Since the political goal was votes for Pakootas, the congressional race is of particular interest.

In Table 8a, the net percentage of Democratic votes for Congress from the polarizing treatment was 27.6 pp. (+/- 20.7 at 95% CL) higher than nonpolarizing. In the nonpolarizing treatment, the large margin of error for net percent of Democratic votes (3.6 pp. +/- 17.1%) does not rule out the possibility that more Republicans were registered than Democrats. It appears that the effects of the polarizing message were asymmetric, mirrored effects (relative to the nonpolarizing message), but they did not skew toward greater demobilization of Republicans. However, these metrics are not a good tool for assessing asymmetry, as discussed further below.

**Table 8a.** Voter choices for U.S. Congress in 2016 among the 273 registrants who voted from the polarizing and nonpolarizing treatments in the Spokane experiment, using weighted data <sup>a</sup>

Treatment	Votes for Dem.	Votes for Rep.	Neither, Refused, Not Sure, or Skipped <sup>b</sup>	Net Dem. Votes	Net Dem. Votes / Hr.	Total Votes	Total Votes / Vol. Hr.
Nonpolarizing (n=63)	36.4 (41.8%)	33.3 (38.3%)	17.3 (19.9%)	3.1 (3.6 pp.)	0.03	87.0	0.60
Polarizing (n=123)	103 (55.4%)	45.2 (24.3%)	37.8 (20.4%)	57.8 (31.1 pp.***)	0.19	186.0	0.49
Difference	(13.6 pp.*)	(-14.0 pp.**)	(0.5 pp.)	(27.6 pp.***)	0.17	99.0	-0.10

<sup>a</sup> All subgroups were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature.

<sup>b</sup> Only one refusal and six skipped answers for these questions in the unweighted data  
N=186    \*90% CL    \*\*95% CL    \*\*\*99% CL

In Table 8b on choices for president, the net percentage of Democratic votes was 10.8 pp. higher for the polarizing treatment but not statistically significant. However, votes for Trump were 12.0 pp. lower in the polarizing treatment (p-value of 0.0239), but Clinton’s percentage of the vote was the same. Interestingly, the polarizing treatment mobilized 13.1 pp. more voters that skipped the presidential race or voted third party than the nonpolarizing (p-value = 0.0583). Thus, for President, the polarizing treatment had the hypothesized partisan effects, but the effects were not as strong as other measures of voter choice. Partisan effects appear to skew toward a Republican demobilization. However, just as before, these metrics are imperfect.

The Democrat for Commissioner was also underfunded. In Table 8c, the net percentage of Democratic votes from the polarizing treatment was 13.4 pp. higher than the nonpolarizing but not statistically significant. However, votes for the Republican candidate were lower in the polarizing treatment by a statistically significant level (i.e., skewing toward Republican demobilization).

**Table 8b.** Voter choices for U.S. President in 2016 among 273<sup>a</sup> registrants who voted in the polarizing and nonpolarizing treatment groups in the Spokane experiment using weighted data. <sup>a</sup>

Treatment	Votes for Clinton	Votes for Trump	Votes for 3 <sup>rd</sup> Party or "Other"	Neither, Skipped, Refused	3 <sup>rd</sup> Party, "Other," Neither, Skipped, Refused	Net Dem. Votes	Total Voters	Total Votes / Vol Hr
Nonpolarizing (n=63)	45.1 (51.8%)	25.5 (29.3%)	13.9 (16.0%)	2.6 (3.0%)	16.5 (18.9%)	19.6 (22.5 pp.**)	87	0.72
Polarizing (n=123)	94.2 (50.7%)	32.2 (17.3%)	42.7 (22.9%)	16.9 (9.1%)	59.6 (32.0%)	62.0 (33.4 pp.***)	186	0.56
Difference	(-1.2 pp.)	(-12.0 pp.**)	(7.0 pp.)	(6.1 pp.)	(13.1 pp.**)	10.8 pp.	99	-0.16

<sup>a</sup> All subgroups were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature. N=186 \*90% CL \*\*95% CL \*\*\*99% CL

**Table 8c.** Estimated choices for County Commissioner in 2016 among the 273 registrants <sup>a</sup> who voted from polarizing and nonpolarizing treatments in Spokane experiment, using weighted data.

Treatment	Votes for Dem.	Votes for Rep.	Neither, Not Sure, Refused, Skipped <sup>b</sup>	Net Dem. Votes	Total Voters	Total Votes / Vol. Hr.
Nonpolarizing (n=63)	37.1 (43.3%)	30.2 (35.2%)	18.4 (21.5%)	7.0 (8.1 pp.)	87	0.58
Polarizing (n=123)	75.3 (42.2%)	36.9 (20.7%)	66.1 (37.1%)	38.4 (21.6 pp.***)	186	0.37
Difference	(-1.1 pp.)	(-14.5 pp.)**	(15.6 pp.***)	(13.4 pp.)	99	-0.20

<sup>a</sup> All subgroups were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature. N= 186 \*90% CL \*\*95% CL \*\*\*99% CL

**Table 9.** Partisan identification by treatment group among the 273 registrants who voted from polarizing and nonpolarizing treatments in the Spokane experiment, using weighted data

	Dem. and Ind. Dem	Rep. and Ind. Rep.	Ind., 3 <sup>rd</sup> Party, Other, and Unsure, Skipped	Net Democrat and Independent Democrat	Total Votes
Nonpolarizing (n=63)	43.7 (50.2%)	27.3 (31.3%)	16.1 (18.5%)	16.4 (18.9 pp.**)	87
Polarizing (n=123)	105.5 (56.7%)	39.2 (21.1%)	41.3 (22.2%)	66.3 (35.7 pp.***)	186
Difference	(6.5 pp.)	(-10.3 pp.)	(3.7 pp.)	(16.8 pp.*)	99

<sup>a</sup> All subgroups were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature. \*90% CL \*\*95% CL \*\*\*99% CL

Did the polarizing message increase the net percentage that identified as Democrats? Perhaps it did. In Table 9, the net percentage of voters who identified as a Democrat or Independent Democrat was 16.8 pp. higher in the polarizing treatment (p-value = 0.107). Again, the polarizing message skewed toward a greater demobilization of the Republicans than a mobilization of Democrats.

### Hypothesis Two: Total Registrations and Total Votes per Shift

“The nonpolarizing treatment will generate a larger number of total registrations per shift and total ballots cast per shift than the polarizing.” As shown in Table 10, the nonpolarizing treatment had 1.1 more registrations per shift (p-value of 0.048 from a chi-square test) and 0.36 more ballots cast per shift (p-value of 0.098 from a chi-square test). The hypothesis is supported.

Why did the polarizing message have fewer registrations and ballots per shift? It seems the large demobilization of Republicans was not offset by mobilization of additional Democrats, 3<sup>rd</sup> Party candidates, and undecideds (see tables 8a to 9). The evidence is weaker for other explanations, such as turnout differences and how long and hard canvassers worked. Both treatments had the same percentage of ballots cast. Likewise, in polarizing shifts, canvassers worked only 0.2 hours fewer (p-value = 0.174) and had 0.36 fewer contacts per hour (p-value = 0.442) as see in Table 10.

**Table 10.** Number of shifts<sup>a</sup>, canvasser hours<sup>a</sup>, registrations<sup>a</sup>, ballots cast<sup>b</sup> and contacts<sup>a,b</sup> with unregistered voters in the nonpolarizing and polarizing treatments using unweighted data

Treatment	Shifts <sup>a</sup>	Hrs <sup>a</sup>	Contacts <sup>a,c</sup>	Regs <sup>b</sup>	Ballots Cast <sup>b</sup>	Hrs <sup>a</sup> /Shift	Contacts <sup>a,c</sup> /Hr	Regs <sup>a,b</sup> /Contact	Regs <sup>b</sup> /Shift	Ballots <sup>b</sup> /Shift	Ballot <sup>s</sup> /Regs <sup>b</sup>
Nonpolarizing	70	120	1001	301	94	1.7	8.6	0.301	4.30	1.34	0.312
Polarizing	197	300	2461	623	194	1.5	8.2	0.258	3.16	0.98	0.311
Difference	127	180	1460	322	100	-0.2	-0.4	-0.043	-1.14	-0.36	-0.001
Total (Ave.)	267	420	3,411	924	288	(1.6)	(8.2)	(0.271)	(3.11)	(1.11)	(0.320)

<sup>a</sup> Number of hours and contacts with unregistered voters are from shift sheets and are rounded to two digits.

<sup>b</sup> Number of registrations and ballots cast were actual counts using data from Spok. Co. Elects.

<sup>c</sup> These are contacts with unregistered voters who are eligible to register.

### Hypothesis Three: Candidate Advocacy

“Advocating for a particular Democratic candidate wins more votes for that candidate relative to just the polarizing message.” In Table 11, there is very weak non-experimental evidence for the hypothesis from an unpaired t-test. There were 4.5 pp. more votes for Pakootas (p-value = 0.636) when canvassers advocated for him than when they did not within the polarizing treatment.

**Table 11.** Votes for Democratic Pakootas and Republican McMorris Rodgers in the polarizing treatment when exposed to advocacy and no advocacy for Pakootas using weighted data (N=123)<sup>a</sup>

	Votes for Dem.	Votes for Rep.	Neither, Refused, Not Sure, Missed	Net Democratic Vote	Total Vote
No Advocacy (n = 41)	34.5 (52.5%)	15.4 (23.4%)	15.8 (24.1%)	19.1 (29.1%)	49.9
Advocacy (n = 82)	68.5 (57.0%)	29.8 (24.8%)	22.1 (18.3%)	38.7 (32.2%)	98.3
Difference	(4.5 pp.)	(1.4 pp.)	(-5.8 pp.)	(3.1 pp.)	n.a.

<sup>a</sup> Both treatments were assumed to be independent random samples. Standard errors were added in quadrature.

There is additional weak evidence for hypothesis three. In the other two measures of voter choices for candidates (for President and Commissioner), the polarizing treatment mobilized 13.1 and 15.6 pp. more voters (95% and 99% CL, respectively) who were “3<sup>rd</sup> Party” or “Other, Neither, Skipped nor Refused” than did the nonpolarizing treatment (see tables 8b and 8c). It appears that advocacy for Pakootas converted the 3<sup>rd</sup> Party voters and undecideds to vote for him.

#### **Hypothesis Four: Asymmetric, Mirrored, Skewed Effects**

“The polarizing message treatment will generate asymmetric, mirrored effects that skew toward a large Republican demobilization and a small Democratic mobilization (relative to the nonpolarizing message treatment).” The evidence supports this hypothesis, which has important implications for how and where the polarizing message works. However, it was difficult to find an appropriate statistical design to assess the asymmetry of the (difference of) effects of the two partisan subgroups. Three approaches were used that defined effects and subsamples in different ways. All three approaches gave some evidence of asymmetry, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> approach is arguably the most valuable. All three are summarized in Table 12.

Also, the wordage is long and cumbersome to accurately describe the asymmetry of effects. Thus, when the words “asymmetry of the effects” are written, it is implied that the author is referring to the asymmetry between 1) the difference of effect between the polarizing and nonpolarizing message treatment for the Democratic subgroup and 2) the difference of effect between the polarizing and nonpolarizing message treatment for the Republican subgroup (see Appendix K).

*1st Approach: Partisan (difference of) effects as the percentage point increase in the polarizing message treatment group above the nonpolarizing among voters:* This was an evaluation of the asymmetry of the 1) difference in the percentage of Democrats between the treatment groups and the 2) difference in the percentage of Republicans between the treatment groups (tables 1, 2a, 2b, 3, 8a to 9). This approach defines the two subsamples as all the voters who registered in the nonpolarizing treatment group and all the voters who registered in the polarizing treatment group. However, the numerators have non-stochastic relationships with the denominators (in the calculation of percentages) that inflated the asymmetric effects.

*2nd Approach: Partisan (difference of) effects as the percentage point increase in the polarizing message treatment group above the nonpolarizing among the canvassed unregistered population:* This approach assesses asymmetry between 1) the numbers of Democratic votes as a percentage of the unregistered Democrats who were canvassed in the polarizing treatment minus those in the nonpolarizing and 2) analogous for Republicans. This approach defines the Democratic subsamples as all unregistered voters who were canvassed in one of the two treatments and who had a predisposition for Democrats and defines similar for Republicans. These subsample sizes cannot be directly measured. However, with the use of assumptions, these subsample sizes can be reasonably estimated for Spokane but not for other experiments (see Appendix K).

With this approach, voter choices for Congress were asymmetric mirrors at a 90% CL, but there was no theorized skew (see Table 12). None of the theorized asymmetric effects for other voter choices were statistically significant, but most were in the theorized direction (see Appendix K).

This second approach avoids the problem of a non-stochastic relationship between numerators and denominators. However, it has the problem (discussed directly above) of subsample sizes that cannot be directly measured (see Appendix K).

*3rd Approach: Partisan (difference of) effects as the percent increase in the polarizing message treatment group above the nonpolarizing:* Arguably, the best approach is to assess symmetry

between the 1) difference in the number of voters who choose Democratic candidates between the nonpolarizing and polarizing treatment and the 2) analogous difference in choices for Republican candidates. This difference is measured as the percent difference, not the traditional percentage point increases (see Appendix K).

With this 3<sup>rd</sup> approach, Spokane voter choices showed evidence of asymmetry, mirrored, skewed effects toward a relatively large demobilization of Republicans. There is evidence of basic asymmetric effects for all categories of choices (99% CL for Congress and 90% CL for the others). In addition, all the categories of choice had evidence of either mirrored effects or skewed effects at the 90% or 95% CL level but not both kinds of asymmetry (see Appendix K).

In the other experiments with polarizing treatments, only the Nevada experiment generated statistically significant evidence of the theorized asymmetric, mirrored, skewed effects. There was no evidence of the theorized asymmetric effects in the Arizona and Florida experiments. However, as discussed, the anti-Trump message might have indirectly impacted partisan outcomes by making it harder for canvassers to effectively deliver the polarizing messages (see Appendix K). The results of all three approaches are summarized in Table 12 for Spokane.

**Table 12.** All three approaches: Asymmetry of the difference between treatments reported as percentage point differences and percent differences <sup>a, b</sup> (see Appendix K)

		Spokane				Nevada	Arizona	Florida
	Party	Cong.	Pres.	Commis.	Party ID.	Party Aff.	Party Aff.	Party Aff.
Second approach	Dem.	2.4 +/-2.6	-0.2 +/-2.3	-0.2 +/-2.4	1.0 +/-2.5	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
	Rep.	-2.8 +/-2.5	-3.1 +/-2.8	-3.0 +/-2.5	-2.5 +/-2.9	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
	Effect	A*,M*	A,SRD	A,SRD	A,M,SRD	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Third approach	Dem.	(32.4 +/-20.9)	(-2.2 +/-17.0)	(-2.5 +/-17.1)	(13.1 +/- 14.4)	(10 +/-10)	(10 +/-10)	(0 +/-10)
	Rep.	(-36.6 +/-20.6)	(-40.9 +/-24.3)	(-41.2 +/-18.3)	(-32.6 +/- 19.9)	(-50 +/-40)	(50 +/-70)	(-0 +/-20)
	Effect	A,*** M,***	A*, SRD*	A,* SRD**	A,* M*, SRD	A,** M,* SR**	None	None

<sup>a</sup> “A” refers to asymmetric, “S” refers to symmetric, “M” refers to mirror, “SRD” refers to skewed toward greater Republican demobilization, and “SRM” means skewed toward greater Republican mobilization.

<sup>b</sup> At the end of the calculations, rounding errors were large for NV, AZ, and FL and resulted in only one significant digit.

\*90% CL

\*\*95% CL

\*\*\*99% CL

### Hypothesis Five: Projection of Democratic Party Identify upon Republicans

“Canvassers will be unsuccessful in the field at IDing registrants who are Democrat voters and who are Republican voters.” This hypothesis was partially supported. We have heard canvassers say, “I am sure that I register mostly Democrats because I can tell who they are.” However, canvassers likely project their own identity upon the people that they registered. To test that, in the last four weeks of the study, we asked canvassers to record their guesses as to whether a registrant was a Democrat, Independent, or Republican. The resulting data is in Table 13.

As shown in Table 13, canvassers thought almost everyone was a Democrat and failed to identify most of the Republicans. Specifically, they correctly IDed 95% (+/- 6%) of Democrats but only 18%

of Republicans (+/- 18% at 95% CL) (see Table 13). This hypothesis is supported for Republican IDs in the field (at over 99.9% CL in t-test) but not Democratic IDs.

**Table 13.** Field IDs vs. Exit Poll IDs: Registrants who voted and who were surveyed

		IDs by Post-Election Survey			
		Democratic	Republican	Independent	Sum
IDs in the field	Democratic	41 (95%)	12 (70%)	8 (89%)	61 (89%)
	Republican	0 (0%)	3 (18%)	0 (0%)	3 (4%)
	Independent	2 (5%)	2 (12%)	1 (11%)	5 (6%)
	Sum	43 (100%)	17 (100%)	9 (100%)	69 (100%)

<sup>a</sup> The last month of the registration season

<sup>b</sup> Unweighted data.

### Hypothesis Six: Efficiency

Polarizing messages are more cost-efficient than nonpolarizing at increasing the net percentages of Democratic votes on unregistered mobilizable populations that are evenly split. A DPK of 10.2 was estimated for the congressional vote from the polarizing treatment and 1.2 from the nonpolarizing. The hypothesis is supported. However, if DPKs of the polarizing treatment were calculated for voter choices in the other races, the cost-effectiveness would be slightly more for President and less for commissioner and party identification.

**Table 14.** Direct expenses of the polarizing treatment for 103 ballots cast and indirect expenses

	Direct Registration Expenses	Indirect Expenses	Total Expenses
Field organizers for voter reg. \$13.5/hr.	\$3,356		\$3,356
Photocopying		\$139	\$139
Data Entry		\$225	\$225
Staff for a phone bank to turn out the vote		\$225	\$225
Oversight and management \$25/hr.	\$1,694		\$1,694
Office expenses and rent	\$641		\$641
Post-Election Survey		\$825	\$825
	\$5,691	\$1,414	\$7,105

In Table 14, the direct costs for the voter registration component of the polarizing treatment were \$5,691. The polarizing treatment generated 57.8 net Democratic votes for Congress (see Table 8a). That is a DPK of 10.2 in an evenly split unregistered population. The DPK for the nonpolarizing treatment was 1.4. However, those calculations made the unrealistic assumption that every registrant who voted did so because of the treatments. In fact, many would have registered and voted anyway. Under the assumption that 50% would have registered and voted anyway, the DPK of the polarizing treatment would be 5.1. Also, other expenses might have contributed to program success, which are also in Table 14.

It is likely that costs will be lower at some venues in the future. Expenses for site-based registration vary with the volume of foot traffic, percentage of unregistered voters, etc. Perhaps the volume of

foot traffic at the Spokane sites was typical, but Spokane County has a much higher registration rate than many places (i.e., about eighty percent). As discussed, significant staff resources were used to ensure message control. It is uncertain how much message control is actually needed to generate high net Democratic effects and how much staff is needed to ensure that level of control.

### Hypothesis Seven: Spokane vs. Nevada Results: Partisan Composition of Unregistered

“Polarizing messages will be more effective than nonpolarizing at increasing net Democratic effects in an evenly split unregistered population than in a highly Democratic unregistered population.” The data in Table 15 is suggestive of the hypothesis. However, the interpretation of the data is not straightforward because each experiment had characteristics unique to the years, localities, and races. Thus, readers should be very cautious about inferring causality.

**Table 15.** Spokane and Nevada experiments: Net percent and the net number of Democratic votes/registrations per canvasser-hour from roll changing registrations <sup>c</sup>

Col. 1	Col. 2	Col. 3	Col. 4	Col. 5	Col. 6	Col. 7	Col. 8	Col. 9	Col. 10
Exp.	Treat.	Effect Measure	Tot. Canv. Hrs.	Tot. <sup>c</sup> Voters (Reg.)	Net % Dem. Voters (Regs.)	Net # Dem. Voters (Reg.)	Total Voters/Hr. (Reg./Hr.)	Net # Dem. Voters/Hr. (Reg./Hr.)	Partisan Comp. of Nonpolar. Treatment.
Spok.	Nonpolarizing	Cong.	117 <sup>a</sup>	66.2 <sup>a</sup>	3.6	2.4	0.60	0.02	47%/45%
Spok.	Polarizing	Cong.	300 <sup>a</sup>	140.8 <sup>a</sup>	31.1	43.8	0.49	0.15	n.a.
Spok.	Difference	Cong.	n.a.	n.a.	27.6	n.a.	-0.10	0.13	n.a.
Spok.	Nonpolarizing	Pres.	117 <sup>a</sup>	80.2 <sup>a</sup>	22.5	18.0	0.72	0.15	52%/29%
Spok.	Polarizing	Pres.	300 <sup>a</sup>	160.6 <sup>a</sup>	33.4	53.6	0.56	0.18	n.a.
Spok.	Difference	Pres.	n.a.	n.a.	10.9	n.a.	-0.16	0.02	n.a.
Spok.	Nonpolarizing	Commis.	117 <sup>a</sup>	63.9 <sup>a</sup>	8.1	5.2	0.57	0.04	50%/40%
Spok.	Polarizing	Commis.	300 <sup>a</sup>	106.6 <sup>a</sup>	21.6	23.0	0.37	0.08	n.a.
Spok.	Difference	Commis.	n.a.	n.a.	13.4	n.a.	-0.20	0.03	n.a.
Spok.	Nonpolarizing	PID	117 <sup>a</sup>	82.7 <sup>a</sup>	18.9	15.6	0.74	0.13	62%/38%
Spok.	Polarizing	PID	300 <sup>a</sup>	176.7 <sup>a</sup>	35.6	63.0	0.62	0.21	n.a.
Spok.	Difference	PID	n.a.	n.a.	16.8	n.a.	-0.12	0.08	n.a.
NV	Neutral	Party Aff.	369 <sup>b</sup>	(295)	(62)	(184)	(0.80)	(0.50)	63%/8%
NV	Pro-Obama	Party Aff.	372 <sup>b</sup>	(310)	(72)	(223)	(0.83)	(0.60)	n.a.
NV	Difference	Party Aff.	n.a.	n.a.	10	n.a.	(0.03)	0.10	n.a.

<sup>a</sup> Calculated from the total votes in tables 8a, 8b, 8c & 10 multiplied by the percent of roll changing registrations (95%) that was estimated by comparing registrants from the 2016 experiment with the 2015 Spokane Counter Voterfile.

<sup>b</sup> Two volunteers per shift (Backof and Coger 2013) and assumes a lower bound estimate of 1.5 hours per shift, which is the same number of hours that were measured and used in the Spokane experiment.

<sup>c</sup> Total number of voters that chose a candidate from any party in that race on their ballot.

For easier comparison in Table 15, voters in the Spokane experiment were adjusted to votes from roll-changing registrations. While votes and registrations are still not directly comparable, arguably their net Democratic percentages are more so. The following can be cautiously concluded. The polarizing treatment resulted in a 17.3 pp.<sup>7</sup> increase in the average net percent of Democratic votes

<sup>7</sup> This is an average of all types of voter choices (U.S. Congress, President, and Spokane County Commissioner).

in the slightly Democratic Spokane population (56%:44%) above the nonpolarizing. This is higher than the analogous increase of 10 pp. in the net percent of Democratic affiliations among registrants in mostly Democratic Las Vegas, Nevada, population (89%:11%).

Clearly, these comparisons between the Spokane and Nevada experiments are tenuous. However, even if the effects from the polarizing treatment in the evenly split Spokane population were *the same* as in the highly Democratic Nevada population, that would still be an impressive performance by the polarizing message treatment.

To summarize, Table 15 is suggestive that polarizing messages can have approximately the same net Democratic effects or larger on evenly split populations as either polarizing or nonpolarizing messages in heavily Democratic populations. However, more research is needed.

## External Validity Check

The large increase in the net percentage of Democratic votes from the polarizing treatment might be a statistical outlier, but evidence of external validity suggests it is not. One set of evidence of external validity is the consistency of the Spokane results with Nevada results, which was already discussed. Another piece of evidence is the examples of large partisan effects in other parts of society that were also discussed. But, of course, all that evidence is somewhat indirect.

However, here we consider other evidence. Specifically, the voter choices in the control and treatment groups in Spokane are shown to be very similar to the choices in constructed comparison groups. The *comparison group for the nonpolarizing treatment group* was all voters in the precincts in which members of the nonpolarizing treatment group resided. The difference between these groups was fairly small overall. For the nonpolarizing treatment group, the weighted average of voter choices for all three races was 56.8% for Democratic candidates and 43.2% for Republicans. For its comparison group, the weighted average of voter choices for all three combined races was 50.0% for Democrats and 50.0% for Republicans (see Appendix A).

The *comparison groups for the polarizing treatment group* were the voters registered by Eastern Washington Voters and an ally who did not meet all the criteria for the experiment. This was mostly those voters who were registered in previous years with the same sites, strategies, messages, and many of the same canvassers. The two-party voter choices of the polarizing treatment group had a pooled average of 69.5% +/- 8.8 for Democratic and 30.5% +/- 8.8 for Republican candidates. These were very similar to the average choices of these comparison groups, which were 71.8% +/- 4.5 and 28.2% +/- 4.5, respectively. The pooled sample size of this comparison group was 326 voters, which was three times the size of the polarizing treatment group (shown in Appendix L).

## Discussion

The evidence is strong that the polarizing, opt-out, pro-Democratic message with candidates, issues, and social pressure did, in fact, increase net Democratic effects above the nonpolarizing message. The strongest evidence came from choices for Congress, where the polarizing message resulted in an increase of 27.5 pp. more net Democratic voters (p-value is 0.010). The choices for other races had higher p-values and smaller net Democratic effects but were still in the theorized direction.

In Arizona and Florida, the backlash from the anti-Trump messages made it more difficult for canvassers to stay on task and on message. This is probably why polarizing messages did not increase net Democratic effects above the minimum wage messages in these experiments.

Evidence suggests that the large net Democratic effects were mostly from a large demobilization of Republican voters from registering. Specifically, from the third approach to assessing the partisan asymmetry of effects, there was statistically significant evidence of the theorized skew toward Republican demobilization in the County Commissioner and U.S. Presidential race (Table 12). However, a skew was not found for the U.S. Congressional race where the polarizing message mobilized almost as many additional Democratic votes as it demobilized Republican votes. This is perhaps because canvassers advocated explicitly for the Democratic candidate in this race.

The study was not well structured to evaluate the effectiveness of advocating for a candidate when using a polarizing message, but weak evidence from a regression analysis suggested that this advocacy might increase net Democratic effects. Additional (weak) evidence suggests that advocacy for Democrat Joe Pakootas converted 3<sup>rd</sup> Party and undecided voters to vote for him.

Typically, advocacy has only a small effect on voter choice that soon fades toward zero (Kalla and Broockman 2018). However, there are reasons why persuasion might have had a larger effect when canvassers explicitly advocated for Democrat Joe Pakootas and why that effect might have lasted to Election Day. *First*, the Spokane experiment was largely on first-time and infrequent voters who likely had little prior information about the candidates. *Second*, the Pakootas campaign conducted minimal paid advertising. *Third*, the polarizing message was well targeted at low-income individuals with details about how Pakootas supports food stamps and Medicaid. These were some of the factors that Kalla and Broockman (2018) found to increase the effectiveness of persuasion. Finally, the effects may have resisted fading for two reasons. *First*, registrants were told about Pakootas during a memorable event—when they registered (often for the first time) in 2016. *Second*, registration effects were resistance to fading once a person was on the registration rolls.

It might be that polarizing messages (that can generate asymmetric, mirrored, skewed effects) are more effective in evenly split populations (i.e., those with plenty Republicans to demobilize) than in highly Democratic populations. That is consistent with the comparison between Spokane and Nevada results in Table 15. However, the differences between the Spokane and Nevada are not statistically significant, and exact comparisons are not possible due to the mentioned reasons.

### **Implications for Social Pressure GOTV**

This begs a question: Can polarizing messages be combined with social pressure GOTV messages to increase the net Democratic effects? If these can, it would explain some of the past research results. Some research has found that advocacy for progressive issues/ candidates as part of a social pressure message either decreased or had no effect on turnout relative to pure social pressure messages (e.g., Harmon et al. 2014; Cunow 2015). Perhaps this negative or zero effect was because Republicans opted out of the polarizing message before reading/processing/internalizing the social pressure part, which would have decreased both Republican and overall turnout.

The Analyst Institute (2014) has suggested similar. It described a process similar to opt out that occurs when voters receive a part of a message “that is attitude-incongruent,” which “causes them to ignore the [overall] message or actively (mentally) counter-argue” with it.

### **Replication**

Spokane results fit well with the Nevada results and constitute a reasonably close replication of each other. Both resulted in large increases in net percentages of Democratic votes from the polarizing message through asymmetric effects. Both used a polarizing pro-Democratic candidate message in a presidential election year. However, there were differences. The Spokane population had a fairly even partisan split. Nevada was highly Democratic. In Spokane, the polarizing

message was about an underfunded Congressional candidate. In Nevada, it was about a Presidential incumbent. Spokane effects were measured primarily as voter choices, and Nevada effects were measured as party affiliations from roll-changing registrations. Also, there is the possibility of rounding error in the registration results from the re-analysis of the Nevada data.

However, Spokane results did not fit with Arizona and Florida results. In fact, the anti-Trump message in Arizona generated more Republican registrations per shift than the (relatively nonpolarizing) wage message (although not statistically significant). This was likely because there was backlash from the polarizing message making it difficult for canvassers to stay on message.

The Arizona and Florida experiments generated knowledge of equal value to that of the Spokane experiment. The Arizona and Florida results (Olin et al. 2017) are not so much evidence of the *direct* effects of a polarizing anti-Trump message. Instead, these experimental results are evidence that polarizing messages can have *indirect* effects on net Democratic outcomes by generating a backlash that affects the ability of canvassers to stay on task and on message.

### **Fit with Theory**

The Spokane results fit well with theory. All the hypotheses were supported either partially or fully. It was predicted that a polarizing pro-Democratic message along with candidates, issues, and social pressure would result in a large increase in the net percentage of Democratic votes. That is what was found for the congressional race. All other races resulted in some of the expected partisan effects. When the evidence was weak for a hypothesis, it was usually a situation when the data design or available methodologies were not ideal to answer the respective questions.

### **Validity, Generalizability, Scalability, and Adaptability**

Because the Spokane experiment was on a small sample, the large differences in net Democratic effects between treatments could be a statistical outlier. However, strong evidence of external and theoretical validity suggests it was not.

While the polarizing message should be usable elsewhere, scaling it up might present challenges. For the polarizing message to perform elsewhere as well as it did in Spokane, more careful recruitment, training, and oversight of canvassers will likely be needed than is traditionally done. However, it is not clear how much more. Perhaps more management resources were expended for message control in Spokane than was necessary. Likewise, a polarizing message might only be feasible to the extent that freedom of speech can be guaranteed.

If sites do not exist where free speech can be protected, perhaps polarizing messages can be toned down to generate less backlash but still be effective. Lastly, polarizing messages should be adaptable to door-to-door and mail registration programs. Since there are no bystanders or venue owners to generate the backlash found at some sites, they might work even better in these contexts.

### **Recommendations for Voter Registration in Swing Districts**

Although more research is needed, the evidence suggests that four widely used strategies might not always be successful at generating net Democratic effects and could register more Republicans than Democrats in evenly split populations. *First*, nonpolarizing messages should be avoided. *Second*, canvassers cannot be relied upon to identify Democrats and Republicans in the field because they seem to think that everyone is a Democrat. *Third*, the simple registration strategy of focusing on youth and minorities might be insufficient in many years and localities.

*Fourth*, it seems that some issue messages are not polarizing enough to increase net partisan effects. This is partly because unregistered voters tend not to have firm positions on many issues.

The Spokane results suggest that a polarizing, pro-Democratic, opt-out message is an effective and efficient way to generate net Democratic votes during site-based registration on a (mobilizable) unregistered population with a roughly even partisan split. It did much better than a nonpolarizing message on that population. Moreover, this polarizing message produced net Democratic effects that were larger or roughly commensurate with the effects of both polarizing and nonpolarizing messages on heavily Democratic populations in Nevada (Backof and Coger 2013).

It appears that demobilizing Republicans is the main mechanism through which polarizing opt-out messages generate net Democratic effects. When planning site-based registration efforts on populations with a roughly even partisan split, planners should design polarizing messages to demobilize Republicans since there will be many to demobilize. Therefore, it is crucial to choose the appropriate message and build a capacity to deliver and control that message. Issue messages alone might not be polarizing enough, as just mentioned.

A corollary of the results is that polarizing messages should be used in unregistered populations with a roughly even partisan split, and nonpolarizing messages should be used on highly Democratic populations. However, it is difficult to judge the partisan composition of a population at a site (based on the neighborhood) because foot traffic from outside the area can make sites much more Democratic or Republican. Therefore, in-cycling testing and year-end evaluations are essential to know the partisan composition of foot traffic at specific registration sites.

Another corollary is that field efforts using nonpolarizing messages should not conduct their registration work in the same evenly split unregistered populations where polarizing messages are being used. If nonpolarizing efforts register voters in that turf, they will largely be registering the Republicans that opted out of the polarizing message and will accomplish relatively little. This is especially the case if the registration work using the polarizing message will saturate the turf.

Backlash need not be a problem. The Spokane experiment suggests that polarizing, pro-Democratic, opt-out messages during site-based registration can be used in swing areas with little or no backlash. Crucial factors are likely a combination of 1) a pro-Democratic message that is polarizing but not negative, 2) sites where free speech can be ensured, 3) canvassers with the natural skill to stay on message and polarize a conversation without conflict, and/or 4) proper training, monitoring, and oversight to ensure message control. However, more research is needed.

It is generally reasonable to focus on youth and POC when registering voters, but the Spokane evidence suggests that it is not always enough to generate net Democratic effects when using a nonpolarizing message in swing districts. Despite popular opinion, youth is not a consistent voting bloc for Democrats. POC, especially Blacks, have more consistently voted for Democrats. However, many evenly split populations likely don't have enough POC to greatly impact net Democratic effects. Even when youth and POC are targeted and POC are numerous, one-half of those registered by a field campaign can be older and whiter in swing districts.

While youth, on average, voted for Democrats from 1972 to 2014, it is a logical fallacy to assume that what is true of the whole is true of the parts (Mellone 1902). There have been many years and places where youth have voted Republican. For instance, Nixon won the youth vote in 1972, Regan in 1984, and Bush in 1988. Both Carter and Reagan in 1980 and Gore and Bush in 2000 statistically tied for the youth vote. The only Democrats to win the youth vote by statistically significant margins were Carter in 1976, Clinton in 1992 and 1996, Kerry in 2004, and Obama in

2008 and 2012. Youth have been more favorable to Democrats in U.S. House races, but their votes still show considerable variation (Appendix M). While youth are currently trending Democratic, it might not be the case future years. If history alone is a guide, there is a roughly even chance that youth will be evenly split or vote Republican in the years to come race.

There is even more variation in the youth vote by geography. For example, John Kerry in 2004 garnished a high of 72% of the youth vote in the State of New York and a low of 25% in Wyoming (Appendix M). The Democratic vote share for Blacks and Hispanics is more stable, but there is still variation. There will always be subgroups that deviate from the overall average.

The organizers should also be careful about assuming the partisan composition of a local population in a particular election year based on national trends. There is considerable variation over time and place. Also, as discussed, even when a site is in a highly Democratic neighborhood, there can be considerable foot traffic from other Republican areas and vice versa. In-cycle evaluation of partisan effects and end-of-the-year surveys of voters should be considered.

Lastly, using signs and apparel to deliver polarizing messages might increase the risk of backlash while doing little to increase net Democratic effects (although that is somewhat speculative). Canvassers with a clipboard can discretely walk up and deliver a polarizing message to only those who will be asked to register (unless they opt out). In contrast, signs and apparel are less discerning as they deliver a message to all foot traffic through a site. The use of these may appear as a small invasion force to venue management or to those who can complain to management. However, only a small percentage of those who receive a message from signs and apparel will likely be approached by canvassers about registering to vote. Also, people can misunderstand the messages on signs and apparel (Rosmarin and Duran 2016). Without direct interaction with canvassers, those misunderstandings cannot be easily rectified. Signs and apparel likely have benefits, but we don't understand their overall effect. More research is needed, especially regarding negative messaging.

### **Ensuring Message Control**

One thing is clear from decades of research and thousands of experiments—the message matters. A change in the message that a voter/nonvoter hears can significantly change a program's effectiveness. The script is the organizer's primary means of controlling that outcome.

However, some organizers say that “Canvassers don't follow scripts, so don't worry about scripts.” This perspective lacks an understanding of how to keep canvassers on message. Of course, canvassers will neglect the script if it is poorly written, too long, or doesn't allow them to adapt it to their own style or if they are not taught why specific script elements are important and how to use them. Additionally, some lack the basic skills to follow a nuanced script even after training.

These problems are largely solvable. The Spokane study suggests canvassers can be recruited and taught to follow a moderately complex script with devastating effectiveness. This is a somewhat detail-orientated management-intensive process. However, once the management capacity is developed, it is not difficult or overly time-consuming to use.<sup>8</sup>

### **Voter Registration in Highly Democratic Populations**

In highly Democratic unregistered populations, a polarizing opt-out message should, in theory, result in a slightly larger net number of Democratic votes than a nonpolarizing message. However,

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<sup>8</sup> The methods section discusses this, but if readers want more information they should contact the author.

the small additional benefit might not always be worth 1) the extra effort to keep canvassers on message and 2) the risk of backlash if free speech cannot be guaranteed. Nonpolarizing messages are easier to use, and the case-study evidence suggests they will perform almost as well on these populations (e.g., those with a two-party vote share above 90% Democratic).

## Further Research

Additional replications of this experiment will be beneficial. Spokane is a reasonable replication of the Nevada experiment. However, both were of small local samples, and treatment effects were not measured in the same way. Also, the re-analysis of the Nevada data might have caused enough rounding error to have a small effect on the Nevada results presented here.

During site-based registration, the random assignment of treatments to volunteers and sites might not be sufficient to fully control for confounding variables. Experimentation on polarizing messages during door-to-door registration and register-by-mail programs should be considered, because they allow for a full set of statistical controls, including the 1) random assignment of households or sides of streets to treatments and 2) placebo treatments. Research on site-based registration is still important because of its unique variables. When confounding variables during site-based registration cannot be controlled through randomization, perhaps it should be planned from the start of the experiment to measure these variables in the field and include them in a regression model along with treatment variables.

The direct and indirect effects that signs and apparel have on the communication of polarizing messages need more research, especially when negative messaging is used. Polarizing messages on signs and apparel might have benefits, but case-study evidence suggests a risk of miscommunication and backlash, especially when using negative messaging.

One of the challenges of scaling up the use of polarizing messages for site-based voter registration is the amount of effort that was used in Spokane to recruit, train, and manage canvassers to ensure message control. The main burden was developing these capacities. Once built, these capacities were not that difficult or resource-intensive to use. Nevertheless, less effort might have sufficed in this regard. *Thus, the most important research might be on how polarizing a message must be to obtain large net Democratic effects and how much managerial effort is needed to achieve the message control to deliver a message with that degree of polarization.*

The concepts of asymmetric, mirrored, and skewed effects might be useful to increase the net number of Democratic votes from other strategies, such as social pressure GOTV. Specifically, does including a polarizing/partisan message with a social pressure GOTV message produce asymmetric, mirrored, and skewed effects? As discussed, it might depending on exactly how a polarizing message is included within a social pressure message. The general questions are: For a particular strategy, what variations in techniques will produce asymmetric partisan effects? What variations will produce mirrored effects? Finally, what variations will produce skewed effects? However, better data designs and statistical tools would be useful to assess asymmetry.

## Replication

The data set and research records are available for inspection. This includes copies of all available paperwork, forms, and records that are associated with the field voter registration effort and the post-election survey. Also, all the names and contact information for staff and volunteers who helped and all the registrants in the sample are available. Copies of the completed CallFire phone questionnaire, web questionnaire, and mail questionnaires are also available.

Some of the data in this paper are only known to one or two significant digits. During calculations, numbers were not rounded until the final numbers were obtained, and it was assumed that other researchers cited in this paper did so as well.

## Conclusion

When a nonpolarizing message was used on an unregistered population with a roughly even partisan split, the effort produced little or no net Democratic effect (3.6 pp. +/- 17.1), and it could have backfired by registering more Republicans than Democrats. Despite what many people believed they could do, canvassers in the field could not accurately identify which voters were Republicans. It seems likely that merely targeting youth and POC in these populations will not always yield net Democratic effects.

*In contrast, the Spokane experiment suggests that a polarizing, pro-Democratic, candidate, issue, opt-out message during site-based voter registration can be used as a precision tool to expand the Democratic base in swing populations.* The net percentage of Democratic votes for U.S. Congress was 27.5 pp. higher for the polarizing message than the nonpolarizing message (p-value = 0.010).

This large effect could be a statistical outlier since the experiment was on a small, local sample. However, evidence from other experiments, situations in other parts of society, and comparison groups suggest that the net Democratic effects are likely large.

The main mechanism through which the polarizing message created net Democratic effects seems to have been by prompting a large number of Republicans to opt out and perhaps a smaller number of Democrats to opt in before registration was mentioned. In other words, the polarizing message produced asymmetric, mirrored, skewed effects. The concept of asymmetric effects might help to increase the net Democratic effects for other tools such as social pressure GOTV.

Polarizing messages might not be feasible at some venues because of backlash. Evidence from Spokane suggests such challenges can be overcome, but we do not yet know how to consistently use polarizing messages to register large net numbers of Democratic voters on a large scale.

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