

SECOND DRAFT: Pilot Study: Addressing the Midterm Curse: Invoking Biden's Approval within Social Pressure Messages



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April 9, 2022

The *goal* of this pilot study is to find better ways to increase Democratic turnout during mid-term elections when the Democratic Party controls the Whitehouse. Turnout will likely be lower in 2022 for Democrats because Joe Biden will not be on the ballot. However, when the issue of voter turnout was made to be about Biden, it might have increased the ballots cast in an odd-year local election. Specifically, when Joe Biden was used as the source of approval in a positive social pressure postcard, turnout was 5.0 pp. (+/- 3.5 at 95% CI) higher than no postcards were mailed in the Spokane, WA, 2021 general election as a proxy for mid-terms. This was only 0.7 pp. (+/3.6 pp.) higher than non-Biden postcards.

In all the treatments, a very short, simple positive social pressure message was used on very casual looking postcards. The turnout associated with the postcards was 4.7 pp (+/-3.1 pp.) higher than no postcards. Each additional voter was turned out for \$10.20 with these messages and postcards. Also, in the first true experimental matchup between printed and handwritten postcards, printed was associated with a turnout that was 2.3 pp. (+/-3.6) higher than handwritten. This was unexpected but in hind sight made sense from the postcards with a casual design.

Strauss (2020), Cunow et al. (2015), Duch and Cohea (2019), and Harmon et al. (2014) might have been correct that the inclusion of partisan, candidate and/or issue messages into GOTV messages can increase turnout and/or net Democratic votes. The key is likely to avoid message clutter while integrating political messages into social pressure messages according to social psychology theories. The experimental results of this and three other studies are suggestive that this is achievable. However, more research is needed, because effects have often been measured imprecisely.

Of course, Biden was not on the ballot in 2021. There was no advocacy on the postcard for him or any other candidate. This means that the Biden treatment message was C3 friendly.

Overview

One theory for why the party in the White House has a lower voter turnout in midterm elections is that that party's president is not on the ballot (Bafumi et al. 2010). That president was a reason why many of his/her supporters voted in the presidential year. Thus, later, when that president is not on the ballot, voters from his/her party cast their ballots at a lower rate relative to the other party. If that is in fact part of the problem, a potential solution is to make odd-year and midterm turnout about the President. Therefore, positive social pressure postcards were used that invoked Joe Biden's approval of the receipt's voting record to strengthen the effect of positive social pressure (SP) messages on Democrats in an off-year election as a proxy for midterms. On the backside of the postcard, Biden's picture was used to prompt Republicans to opt-out of the message.

Most research has found that incorporating partisanship, candidates, and/or or issues into SP messages has not increased the effectiveness of SP messages, possibly because they distract from the SP messages

(Strauss 2020; Analyst Institute 2014). However, a careful review of past research suggests that there might be ways to avoid message clutter and use political messages to strengthen SP messages. More specifically, it is theorized in this paper that political messages can be used in ways to increase the effectiveness of SP messages for Democratic voters while prompting Republicans to opt out of reading the SP message. For these outcomes to happen, the political messages must be integrated into the mechanisms of the SP message according to the social psychological theories of social norms, authority, and opt-in vs. opt-out dynamics. Also, message clutter must be minimized or avoided.

An experiment using a 2 x 2 x 1 factorial design was run in the 2021 general election for city council races in Spokane, WA. Odd-year elections were used as a proxy for mid-term elections. The 2 x 2 factorial treatments were Biden vs. non-Biden SP messages and handwritten vs. printed SP messages. A control group was also used. The total sample was 3,785 registrants.

The somewhat higher turnout from the printed postcards was surprising, but the superiority of handwritten messages in this context is mostly theoretical. Malchow (2008) theorized that handwritten notes increase turnout by cutting through the clutter in mail boxes and getting recipients to notice and read them. It is further theorized in this study that the casual postcard design that was used in this experiment were effective at also getting people to notice and read the cards. Perhaps the handwritten cards were not going to increase turnout any further than the casual design already was.

The Biden treatment group across other conditions had only a slightly higher turnout than the non-Biden group. This might have been because many of the 5% to 20% of Republicans (unintentionally) in the sample were prompted by the partisan message to opt out of the social pressure message, which lowered Republican and overall turnout.

The larger surprise was the overall effect of the social pressure postcards among all treatments. The social pressure postcards were associated with a turnout that was 4.7 pp. (+/- 3.1 pp.) higher than those who did not receive a postcard. This could be an outlier, but it is also possible that the casual postcard design (with a short, simple SP message) was extremely effective at applying pressure to people to vote.

Past Research

There are theoretical reasons to suspect that partisan, candidate, and issue advocacy during the election cycle contribute to higher voter turnout, but there is no direct evidence that it does. Likewise, when studying GOTV, seldom do researchers offer well-developed theory for exactly 1) how turnout can be increased through the specific inclusion of partisan, candidate, and/or issue messages into GOTV messages or 2) how those political messages should be integrated within GOTV messages.

As the literature was reviewed, the goal was to identify which messages probably have not increased turnout and why and, also, which might have worked and why. Patterns were found that help to explain experimental results. Given the wide spread use of handwritten GOTV messages, it was surprising to find no true experimental matchups between handwritten and printed messages. Also, studies on authority and on opt-out behavior offer clues as to how to integrate political messages into GOTV.

Midterm Elections

For both parties, voter turnout is always lower in odd-year and midterm elections than in presidential elections. However, the drop in turnout does not seem to affect both parties equally. In almost every election since 1938, the party in the Whitehouse has lost seats in midterms, apparently to a large degree because it does not do as well at turning out its base of voters.

Bafumi et al. (2010) and Erikson (n.d.) discuss several theories as to why the party not in the Whitehouse usually loses midterms. One is the coattail theory. The party that wins the Whitehouse does

so in part because their presidential candidate does a better job (than the opposing party) of mobilizing the part their base. Then, during odd-year and midterm elections, when that presidential candidate is not on the ballot, the party of that candidate cannot fully employ that advantage at turning out its base.

If this is truly part of the problem, a possible solution is to make turnout in local and midterm elections about the President when possible. The challenge is to integrate political messages with SP messages to strengthen those SP messages for Democratic voters while not mobilizing Republican voters or causing message clutter. A few researchers (Duch and Cohea 2019; Backof and Coger 2013; Burke n.d.) have taken similar approaches with promising results, which will be discussed below.

Social Pressure

Apart from research on the inclusion of political messages with SP messages, some of the research has been on how to activate the social norm to vote as a means to increase voter turnout. This includes describing to voters the compliance of other people with the norm, letting voters know that they are being watched for compliance with the norm, telling people that they should obey the norm, and enforcing the norm with positive sanctions (e.g., pride) or negative sanctions (e.g., shame).¹

Most research points to the effectiveness of using pride or shame to increase turnout. In contrast, it seems less effective to merely describe to voters the level to which others are complying with norms to vote (prescribing norms) or to merely tell them that they should to vote (enjoining norms) (Analyst Institute 2014). However, it is difficult to generalize those results, because researchers have went about prescribing and enjoining social norms in very different ways with wide ranging results. Likewise, there have been too few studies that are true replications of those experiments. In contrast, the research on the use of pride and shame is more conclusive that it is very likely effective.

Adherence to social norms is fundamentally a social phenomenon. We feel pride and shame because of our emotional attachment to others. In theory, people should feel more pride or shame when they know others are watching (to see if they comply with social norms). For example, Gerber et al. (2010) sent mailers to people who had voted in one election but not in another and reported to them their past turnout in one of two ways. In one treatment, they reported their past abstention to them. In another, they reported their past participation. They found that the shame of past abstention—negative social pressure—was better at increasing voter turnout than the pride of past participation. Using Facebook posts as treatments, Haenschen (2015) provides additional evidence for the greater effectiveness of shame of (rather than pride) in one’s voting record. However, negative social pressure messages often generate backlash that is uncomfortable to the sponsoring organization. If a way was found to use pride of past participation that is almost or just as effective as shame, it would be very helpful.

As mentioned, efforts to increase voter turnout by describing normative behavior has been less effective overall. One experiment that measured a positive effect was by Gerber and Rogers (2009). Telling voters over the phone a detailed story about high voter turnout in the last election appears to have increased intentions to vote above that of a story about low turnout. However, researchers described normative behavior and measured effects in different ways. For example, Panagopoulo et al. (2014) describe low, medium, or high turnout as a numerical percentage on a score card and found no increase in turnout. Nickerson and White (2013) used a set of treatments fairly similar to Panagopoulo et al. (2014) and also found no meaningful effect. However, of course, the detailed, one-to-one phone conversation in Gerber

¹ Social norms are shared standards of acceptable behavior, which are acceptable because many people are engaging in that behavior. Many researchers take the view that there are two kinds of norms—descriptive and injunctive. In their schema, injunctive norms indicate what people should do, and descriptive social norms describe what people are actually doing. However, this study takes the view that these researchers are actually referencing the same standards behavior that the majority of people vote. However, when trying to activate this norm, it seems to matter a great deal how we talk about it and whether we describe the compliance of others enjoin people to follow the norm.

and Rogers (2009) is very different than a percentage on a postcard. Intuitively, stories told during live phone calls might be more effective at invoking descriptive norms than would bulk-mailed postcards.

Another way to activate social norms is by describing the high turnout of comparison groups. For example, for each voter in their sample, Gerber et al. (2017) used the population of voters in their state as a comparison group. Of course, some groups might be more effective than others. For example, the voting records of a peer group, such as members of the voter's Democratic Party, might be a more effective comparison group. Duch and Cohea (2019) tried something more innovative. They used voters from the opposing Republican Party as the comparison group, which perhaps does not apply to social pressure to Democrats but instead political pressure to vote because their party could lose the election if Republicans turn out to vote but they do not. This will be discussed in more detail further below.

Instead of describing the high voter turnout of others to increase a voter's own turnout, some researchers have experimented with merely telling people they should engage in the normative behavior to vote. This approach was not very successful in at least two experiments. Gerber and Green (2000) found that a civic duty message was not appreciably more effective than other messages. Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) found a civic duty message to be the least effective.

Two-Part, Opt-Out Communications

Ideally, a social pressure message would mobilize Democrats but not the 5 to 20 percent of Republicans that are often (unintentionally) in a target universe. Burke (n.d.) showed how a two-part, opt-out verbal communication can do this during site-based voter registration in Spokane, WA, in 2016. The canvasser script that contained a partisan, candidate and issue message generated a net percentage of Democratic votes that was 27.5 pp. (p-val. = 0.010) higher but 0.36 fewer total ballots cast per shift (p-val. = 0.098) than a non-partisan message. Backof and Cogler (2013) had similar results with a similar message.

In Burke (n.d.), the first part of the conversation between canvassers and potential registrants was a polarizing message to prompt as many unregistered Republicans as possible to opt out of the conversation as possible. The second part was a social pressure message to register the remaining unregistered voters (who were disproportionately Democrats) to vote.

In the first part, Democratic canvassers verbally delivered a 30 to 90 second polarizing partisan/candidate/issue message to potential registrants, and, then before continuing, they gave potential registrants a chance to opt-out of the conversation. If potential registrants did not opt-out, then and only then, canvassers encouraged them to register. Burke provides fairly strong evidence that one-third of Republicans choose to opt-out and weaker evidence that a few percent of additional Democrats stayed in the conversation for the second part on voter registration and, thus, were mobilized to vote. By keeping the overtly partisan part of the communication separate from the part on voter registration, this allowed potential registrants the chance to first hear and cognize the partisan, candidate, and issue message part before starting the second part on voter registration. This separation likely eliminated or reduced the message clutter.

In non-electoral contexts, psychologists' Brehm and Cohen (1962) and Kiesler (1971) found evidence of people opting-out of interactions with people of whom they disagreed. Most people have a well engrained habit of avoiding people with different beliefs and seeking those with similar (Hart et al. 2009). The Analyst Institute (2014) theorizes a similar phenomenon where people accept "messages that are consistent with existing attitudes." Cunow et al. (2015) theorized similar and see Burke (n.d.).

The first part of the conversation was also used to increase the effectiveness of the second part on voter registration by addressing the reasons why people don't vote. Two of the reasons that were identified

by Burke (2015) were that nonvoters 1) felt like they did not know enough about the candidates and 2) did not see how elections affected their lives. Thus, the partisan/candidate/issue message was used to educate the unregistered voters about a Democratic candidate and his support of food stamps, Medicaid, and Medicare of which most the target population had been a benefactor.

Obviously, people will perceive and mentally process verbal and written messages differently. Thus, the exact same techniques that were used in Burke (n.d.) cannot be used in written postcard messages of this experiment. However, in the theory section, analogous approaches are discussed.

In Backof and Coger (2013) a message treatment similar to Burke (n.d.) was used. Backof and Coger did not describe the use of a specific script, but we do know that their canvassers wore Obama t-shirts in their partisan treatment that most potential registrants would have seen before being asked to register. Their results suggest that these t-shirts prompted Republicans to opt out of the conversations.

Handwritten vs. Printed

There is evidence that fully or partial handwritten and/or hand addressed postcards and letters with GOTV messages can increase voter turnout. However, it is unclear whether the effect comes from the handwriting or the message. Malchow (2008) gives solid theoretical reasons to believe that a handwritten message will increase turnout above that of a printed message. "Personal contacts" are generally more effective, and handwriting is more personal than printed. Therefore, handwritten messages are more likely to get noticed, and break "through the clutter" in mailboxes. While that is intuitive, there has been no true experimental matchup between printed and handwritten messages using the exact same message, media (e.g., postcard) and postage (e.g., first class stamp or bulk rate).

However, four studies measured the turnout from receiving handwritten notes on GOTV mailers relative to receiving no mailers. *First*, in a 2018 Illinois primary, postcards with handwritten positive SP and vote planning messages increased turnout by 1.2 pp. (p-val. < 0.01) above no postcards (Coalition for a Better Illinois 2018). *Second*, in the 2017 Virginia gubernatorial race, recipients of partially handwritten postcards voted at a rate 0.4 pp higher than no cards (not significant, p-val. > 0.4). GOTV was merely "vote on Election Day," and the handwritten note advocated for the Democratic candidate (Women Effect Action Fund 2018). *Third*, in the 2017 Alabama U.S. Senate runoff, handwritten addresses on envelopes containing a GOTV "Please Vote Letter" increased turnout by 3.4 pp. (at 95% CL) above no letter (Vote Forward 2018). *Fourth*, in Ohio 2018, a fully handwritten letter with positive SP and a story about voting and issues had a turnout that was 0.6 higher (p-val. = 0.46) than no letter (Wang 2018a).

The Movement Cooperative (2021) experiment on the optimum number of handwritten postcards and found that one was just as effective as two or three. The Movement Cooperative (2020) found that short handwritten messages were just as if not more effective than long.

Also, Wang (2018b) conducted a meta-analysis of five experiments on partially and fully handwritten letters/postcards that she defined as GOTV communications. These were the four studies mentioned above and a fifth by Wang (2018a). She measured a 1.0 pp (SE = 0.3) increase in turnout from handwritten GOTV letters above that of no letters. However, she includes one treatment that does not contain GOTV messaging by contemporary standards of social pressure and plan making.

There is no clear standard for what GOTV is and many have been loose with definitions of it. Wang (2018b) is one example. Another is Bankston's and Burden's (2021) study on the effects of handwritten messages on turnout. Bankston and Burden calls these GOTV letters, but there was not anything in their example letters that resembled SP or plan making, but there was advocacy for candidates. Thus, these letters are perhaps better described as persuasion letters and not considered as GOTV in this study.

There has been no true experimental matchup between printed and handwritten messages. However, Malchow (2008) comes closer than others. He conducted an experiment in the 2007 Kentucky Gubernatorial race. He found that handwritten notes on GOTV postcards with 1st class stamps had a 1.4 pp. higher turnout than similar (but not identical) GOTV postcards without handwritten notes (at 94% CL).² It might have been the message³ within the handwritten note that increased turnout, not handwriting per se. There were other differences between treatments. First, even though the printed text in each treatment contained the same words, layouts were different. Second, the handwritten postcard appears to have used first class stamps⁴ whereas the printed cards used bulk mailing postage.

Partisan Communications and Voter Turnout

General advocacy for one party or candidate over another has not been associated with measurable impact on voter turnout (McNulty 2005). Cardy (2005) reached a similar conclusion while using phone calls. (Gerber, Green, and Green 2003) found the same using phones and mail. Also, Green's et al. (2013) meta-analysis of experimental research found that advocacy mailings do not affect turnout in measurable amounts. However, one experiment found otherwise (Nickerson et al. 2006). They found that youth who were targeted with partisan advocacy through phone calls, door hangers, and face-to-face visits had a higher turnout than those targeted with non-partisan communications. If the message within Bankston's and Burden's (2021) study on handwritten letters is consider persuasion, then perhaps his results are additional evidence of the positive effect of persuasion on turnout.

Of course, it is possible that the effect on turnout from partisan communications is too small to be easily detected at conventional levels of statistical significance even when using large samples of tens of thousands of voters. After all, the volume of campaign spending has been consistently associated with higher voter turnout (e.g., Cancela and Geys 2016; Hogan 2013), and most campaign spending is for candidate advocacy. Of course, from those associations, we should be careful about claiming causality.

Partisanship, Candidates, and Issues within Social Pressure Messages

Thus, there are reasons to believe that general advocacy in the form of partisan/candidates/issues messages could have a small positive effect on voter turnout. However, there is a more specific question: Can GOTV communications be made more effective at increasing voter turnout by including partisan/candidate/issue messages within them?

There are only four studies and eleven experimental matchups that 1) directly compare partisan/candidate/issue and GOTV messages with just GOTV messages and 2) use contemporary social pressure or plan making as GOTV.⁵ Table 1 summarizes the results of these four studies and their eight experimental matchups. In only two out of eight matchups, the partisan/candidate/issue and SP messages had a statistically larger effect than the pure SP messages (at only 90% CL), which were the two by Duch and Cohea (2019) at the bottom of the table. There were also nine experimental matchups without statistically significant higher turnout for the partisan/candidate/issue and SP treatments.

There are possible explanations as to why Duch's and Cohea's (2019) two experimental matchups were more successful than the other nine. In the other nine, partisan/candidate/issue messages might have distracted from and interfered with the SP messages. In contrast, in the Duch's and Cohea's two experimental matchups, the overall message/postcard design likely prevented message clutter and the candidate and partisan messages likely strengthen the SP message, as discussed below.

² The postcard used a very simple "Vote November 6th" as its GOTV message without social pressure or plan making.

³ It is unclear what the handwritten note said.

⁴ Dillman et al. (2014) reviews evidence that first class postage on return envelopes increases return rates in mail surveys.

⁵ Studies such as Condon et al (2015) and Michelson (2005) were left out because it did not meet these criteria.

Table 1. Ways political and partisan messaging are incorporated in social pressure messages and election effects

Location in SP Message	Political/Issue Part of Treatment (plus Social Pressure)	Positive / Negative	Social Pressure	Election Type	Sample	Mailed / Received	Effect	Reference
1) Within social pressure message	1) Advocacy: vote to improve envmt. & women's choice 2) Opt-Out/ in**	Positive Issue	Issue & gentle, social pressure message in a letter	2014 Midterm	184,310 MI voters: 63% female and 53% black	Three pieces: card sent on 10/24, 10/27, 10/29	0.3 pp. increase in turnout relative to social pressure only.	Cunow et al. 2015
Pictures on the bottom of social pressure message	Knowledge of a Black candidate will mobilize black voters	Positive / Neutral candidate	Black candidate & gentle, social pressure message on a postcard	2019 General Election xxx???	39,988 PA Blacks < 90 yrs. in voted in 2016, 2018, but not 2017 (ave. vote propen. 22; Dem Scr. 95)	?	0.5 pp. increase in turnout relative to social pressure only.	Strauss 2020
Separate set of graphics alongside plan making message	Advocacy: vote for Dems. because it supports their values	Positive	Rational & plan making on a postcard	2013 General Election	31,680 OH females; Dem Scr. 65+; 1/6 - 5/6 voters	Sent 10/26	0.6 pp. decrease in turnout relative to only plan making	Harmon et al. 2014
Separate set of graphics alongside plan making message	Advocacy: women should vote for women's interests	Positive	Rational & plan making on a postcard	2013 General Election	31,680 OH females; Dem Scr. 65+; 1/6 - 5/6 voters	Sent 10/26	0.5 pp. decrease in turnout relative to only plan making	Harmon et al. 2014
Separate set of graphics alongside plan making message	Advocacy: vote for people who support education	Positive	Rational & plan making on a postcard	2013 General Election	31,680 OH females; Dem Scr. 65+; 1/6 - 5/6 voters	Sent 10/26	0.9 pp. decrease in turnout relative to only plan making	Harmon et al. 2014
1) Within message 2) Graphic on score card	Comparison Group is Trump Voters (in contrast to regular voters)	Negative candidate	Candidate & Gentle, social pressure message on a postcard	2018 Midterm General Election	26,600 in CA-10, MI-11, UT-04; voted in '16 but not in '14 (Vote Propen. Scr. 15-60; VCI Scr. 70+)	Sent 11/1 & received 11/3	0.7 pp.* increase in turnout relative to social pressure only.	Duch and Cohea 2019
1) Within message 2) Graphic on score card	Comparison Group is Republican Voters (in contrast to regular voters)	Negative Partisan	Republican Party & gentle, social pressure message on a postcard	2018 Midterm General Election	26,600 in CA-10, MI-11, UT-04; voted in '16 but not in '14 (Vote Propen. Scr. 15-60; VCI Scr. 70+)	Sent 11/1 & received 11/3	+0.8 pp.* increase in turnout relative to social pressure only.	Duch and Cohea 2019

1) Within social pressure message Brand: Letter head/Signature Line	1) Advocacy: vote to advance pro-choice policy 2) Opt-Out/ in**	Positive Issue	Issue & gentle, social pressure message in a letter	2014 Midterm	99,990 CO & WI females; vote propen. 30 to 65	Sent 10/26	0.4 pp. decrease in turnout relative to social pressure only.	Cunow et al. 2015
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* 90% CL

**According to the author of current paper "Soft Political Messages within Positive Social Pressure Messaging on Postcards"

No statistically significant positive difference: In nine experimental matchups, there are explanations for why there was not a significant positive effect from treatments with partisan/candidate/issue messages and SP messages relative to just SP messages. One explanation is the lack of integration between the partisan/candidate/issue and social pressure messages. In other words, the partisan/candidate/issue messages do not appear to be part of the mechanisms through which social pressure increases turnout. Thus, it is uncertain how these partisan/candidate/issue messages could have increased turnout.

A second explanation is that the partisan/candidate/issue messages seem to be competing with the social pressure messages for the attention of the reader and, thus, could weaken the effect of the SP message. Strauss (2020)—who authored one of these studies—made a similar comment.

A third explanation is that issue and candidate messages might have created doubt among the large numbers of low propensity voters in the sample that interfered with them casting ballots. For example, one version of the postcards told recipients to vote for candidates that support our “reproductive freedom” and “environment” (Cunow et al. 2015). However, the messages did not say which candidates supported those issues. This could have created confusion in the minds of these low propensity (and low information) voters about for whom to vote that lowered their voter turnout. Harmon’s et al. (2014) candidate/partisan/issue messaging was similar and was associated with a lower turnout (but not by a statistically significant amount). Also, the candidate and SP treatment in Strauss (2020) listed four candidates for Superior Court Judge. The large number of candidates on the postcard but gave to no explicit info about those candidates might have created indecision in the mind of votes about for whom to vote.

Bankston’s and Burden’s (2021) analyzed quasi-experimental data, and advocacy for down the ticket candidates was associated with decrease in turnout among low propensity voters. Survey evidence suggests that some people do not vote because they lack confidence in their ability to make good choices (Burke 2015).⁶ Likewise, there is evidence in non-electoral situations that decision paralysis occurring from too many decisions (Schwartz 2004; Gourville and Soman 2005).

A fourth explanation is that the Democratic leanings of the partisan/candidate/issue messages might have caused some of the Republicans in the sample to opt-out of reading the social pressure message. This would have lowered the turnout in those treatment groups, but it would have increased the net number of Democrats from these treatments—a good thing.

Positive differences that were statistically significant: In table 1, the only two experimental matchups with statistically significant higher turnouts for partisan/candidate/issue and SP messages relative to pure SP messages were from the same population using similar mailings in Duch and Cohea (2019). Several possible reasons exist for this higher turnout. *First*, candidates and partisan messages were fully integrated into the social pressure messages. This was done by using Trump voters or Republican voters as the comparison group in the social pressure message. Table 1 lists these partisan/candidate messages as negative messages because the message implies something negative could happen to the interests of Democratic voters. The rationale was apparently to motivate the Democrats to vote because the Democratic candidate could lose if Trump/Republican voters cast ballots but they did not (Duch and Cohea 2019). However, this is not social pressure per se. It is political pressure. However, perhaps political pressure is close enough to social pressure that it could reinforce it without distracting from it.

There is a second possible reason for the larger positive differences in turnout in Duch and Cohea (2019). Some of the higher turnout in the partisan/candidate/issue and SP group could have been from Republican voters. To Republican voters, the Trump voter and the Republican voter comparison groups would be peer groups. In theory, this would exert social pressure on them to vote. That would also have

⁶ This is consistent with other research in non-electoral contexts. People with low-confidence are adverse to some forms information (Muriel and Paul 201; Barber et al. 2007).

contributed to an increase in Republican turnout. Because targeting is never perfect, it is nearly certain that there were Republicans in the sample (perhaps five to twenty-five percent).

It is conceivable that some (but probably not many) Democratic voters would have seen the comparison to Trump voters or Republican voters and opted out of the messages because they thought the postcard was sent to them by mistake. There is nothing in those treatments that casts Trump voters or Republican voters in either a positive or negative light. Thus, it seems more likely that most of both Democratic and Republican voters would have assumed that the postcard was for them and interpreted the message accordingly. In which cases, it would have increased turnout of both sets of voters.

Partisan Effects: Apparently, Harmon et al. (2014) have been the only researchers to measure the partisan effects of their partisan/candidate/ issue treatments. They did not find a statistically significant association between partisan scores and turnout. However, their political message might not have been well integrated with the SP message. Also, there probably were not enough Republicans in their sample to easily detect a difference in turnout between Democrats and Republicans. Also, partisan scores, which are modeled data, are not always accurate measures of partisanship.

Theoretical Underpinnings

As just discussed, most research on partisan/candidate/issues messages within GOTV communications has found no statistically significant increase in turnout from that inclusion. These political messages might have distracted from the GOTV messages because they were long and generated message clutter.

Instead, it is theorized that, there are ways to avoid or minimize message clutter by keeping these political messages very short and simple and either 1) keeping these messages very separate from GOTV messages or 2) fully integrating them to the mechanism through which social pressure works. The worst scenario is to have partisan/candidate/issues messages directly next to social pressure messages and directly competing with each other for the attention of the reader.

It is theorized that the effectiveness of a positive social pressure message can be improved by invoking the approval of the recipients voting record to generating even more pride by voters. In theory, this effectiveness could be further improved if the approval was from an authority figure/leader in the area of voting/politics. Milgram (1963; 1965) demonstrated that authority figures can convince people to break norms. Therefore, it makes sense that authority figures might be successful at getting people to follow norms. Specifically, authority figures who are political leaders should be effective at activating people's social norms to vote. If the political leader is well liked, they might be even more effective but it is perhaps not necessary. In Milgram's (1963; 1965) experiments, Milgram did not vary the likability of the experimenter. He set up the experimenter to be rather bland, professional, and de-attached, and the subjects obeyed him regardless of that. Likability does not seem to be essentially. It might be more important that the voters have a prior relationship of complying with the norms that are being reinforced by the authority figure/leader.

Specifically, it is theorized that postcards with a positive social pressure message that explicitly invokes Joe Biden's approval of the recipients' voting records will result in an increase in turnout above that of postcards with a social pressure message that does not invokes Biden's approval. In theory, it should be more effective on Democratic voters in 2022 because they 1) are more likely to accept his legitimacy as an authority, 2) share a political identity with him, and 3) have already conformed to Biden's wishes to vote in 2020. Biden's current approval rating among Democratic and other voters might not matter very much. As mentioned above, the likability seemed irrelevant in Milgram's experiments (1963; 1965).

It is also theorized that a two-part, opt-out communication can prompt Republicans to opt out of reading a social pressure message on the postcard. Specifically, Biden’s picture on one full side of the postcard conveys a partisan message that should in theory cause Republicans to opt-out of reading the social pressure message. This is based on the results from Burke (n.d.) discussed above. It is further theorized that message clutter from political message can be reduced if that message is kept short⁷ and simple and is either kept very separate from the social pressure message or is very well integrated into mechanisms of the social pressure message so that the two messages work together seamlessly as part of the overall communication. Specifically, in the Biden treatment discussed above and below, the persona of Joe Biden is integrated into the social pressure message as the source of approval of the recipients voting record. In theory, this should strengthen the social pressure message for Democrats.

Also, Biden’s picture on the back of the card should cause Republicans to opt out of reading the SP message (for reasons suggested by opt-out theory). Because the picture conveys a simple partisan message on the opposite side of the postcard from the SP message, it should cause little or no message clutter for Democrats. They should be able to perceive and cognize both sides of the postcard separately.

Methods

An experiment on soft partisan messaging integrated with a positive social pressure message on postcards was conducted on the 2021 general election. A 2 x 2 factorial design with a control group (no postcards) was used on a total sample of 3,944 registrants (see Table 2). The factorial treatments were messages that invoking Biden’s approval vs. those that did not and handwritten vs. printed messages.

Casual postcard design

A fairly standard positive social pressure message was use on the postcards for each treatment (see Appendices A and B). The postcard was designed to look like a card that someone would receive from a friend or relative, which has been referred to as a causal postcard design (see Appendices A and B). This was intended to get recipients to notice the postcard and read it. The small postcard was 4.25 by 5.5 inches with a photo of Joe Biden on one side and the social pressure message on the other with a first class stamp as postage. The postcard was printed in-house on a color laser printer for about 5 cents per card. The print quality was good by contemporary standards, but not exceptional. All postcards were mailed and postmarked locally. Goldstein and Roman (2020) theorize and provide weak evidence that a postmark that is in-state to the receipt will increase turnout by more than an out of state postmark.

Table 2. A 2 x 2 factorial design and control group with sample and sub-sample sizes*

	Control	Biden	Non-Biden	Total
Control	1,306	n.a.	n.a.	1,306
Handwritten	n.a.	653	660	1,313
Printed	n.a.	664	661	1,325
Total	1,306	1,317	1,321	3,944

*6% of postcards were returned as undeliverable.

Control

Voters in this group received no postcard.

Biden and non-Biden treatments

⁷ The Movement Cooperative (2020) found short SP messages were as effective if not more than effective than long.

The Bidden treatment message said that “Joe Biden would be happy to know that you voted in 2020” and had a picture of Joe Biden on the other side. The non-Bidden treatment message said “I am happy to know you voted in 2020” and had a picture of a landscape on the other side. The rest of the text of the social pressure message was identical for both treatments. Of course, Biden was not on the ballot in 2021. There was no advocacy on the postcard for him or any other candidate. This means that the Bidden treatment message was C3 friendly.

Handwritten vs. Printed

For the handwritten treatment, each volunteer was assigned to handwrite messages for approximately the same number of Biden and non-Biden treatments. Staff checked the postcards before mailing them to make sure that volunteers had followed the script. Penmanship was good to excellent on all of the handwritten messages. For the printed treatment, the messages were printed using a font that mimicked cursive handwriting (see Appendix A and B).

Sample

The sample was 3,944 voters with partisan scores of 80 and above. They voted in the 2020 general election and in either two or three of the last four odd-year general elections, and Spokane County Elections had not received their 2021 general election ballot as of Thurs., October 21, 2022 (based on match backs 11 days before the Election Day deadline). The average age of the sample was 49.6 years.

Electoral context

The experiment was on the 2021 general election in Spokane, WA, with a non-partisan city council race (1st District) that had two well-funded candidates Naghmana Sherazi (endorsed by the Democratic Party) and Jonathan Bingle (endorsed by the Republican Party). Bingle won the election by 13 pp. No other social pressure mail was used in the election cycle.

Mailing and Receiving Postcard

Approximately 65% of the postcards were mailed on Wednesday, Oct. 27th, 25% on Thursday, Oct. 28th, and 10% on the Friday, Oct. 29th, and most voters likely received the postcard on the next day. Election Day was Tuesday, November 2nd. Approximately the same number of Biden and non-Biden postcards and handwritten and printed cards were mailed on each of these three days.

Results

As shown in Table 3, the Biden message group had a voter turnout that was 5.0 pp. (+/- 3.5) higher than the control group, but that difference was just slightly larger than the 4.3 pp. (+/- 3.5) difference between the non-Biden and the control group. That 0.7 pp. difference was of course statistically insignificant. As readers will recall, all confidence levels and intervals in the paper are at 95%.

Table 3. Ballots cast in the Biden, non-Biden, and controlled groups and differences between groups*

Row Labels	Did Not Vote	Voted	Grand Total
Control [C]	72.7% [949]	27.3% [357]	100.0% [1,306]
Biden [B]	67.7% [891]	32.3% [426]	100.0% [1,317]
Non- Biden [NB]	68.4% [903]	31.6% [418]	100.0% [1,321]
Total	69.5% [2,743]	30.5% [1,201]	100.0% [3,944]
Diff. btw. B & NB	n.a.	0.7 pp. (+/- 3.6)*	n.a.
Diff. btw. NB & C	n.a.	4.3 pp. (+/- 3.5)*	n.a.

Diff. btw. B & C	n.a.	5.0 pp. (+/- 3.5)*	n.a.
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*A 95% CI was used here and throughout the paper.

Printed postcards had a turnout that was 5.8 pp. (+/- 3.5) higher than the control group compared to the handwritten postcard group that were 3.5 pp. (+/- 3.5) higher, as shown in Table 4. Of course, the 2.3 pp. (+/- 3.6) difference between them was not statistically significant.

Table 4. Ballots cast in the handwritten, printed, and controlled groups and differences between groups*

Row Labels	Did not vote	Voted	Grand Total
Control [C]	72.7% [949]	27.3% [357]	100.00% [1,306]
Handwritten [H]	69.2% [886]	30.8% [405]	100.00% [1,313]
Printed [P]	66.9% [908]	33.1% [439]	100.00% [1,325]
Grand Total	n.a. [2,743]	n.a. [1,201]	n.a. [3,944]
Diff. btw. H & P	n.a.	2.3 pp. (+/- 3.6)**	n.a.
Diff. btw. H & C	n.a.	3.5 pp. (+/- 3.5)**	n.a.
Diff. btw. P & C	n.a.	5.8 pp. (+/- 3.6)**	n.a.

*A 95% CL was used here and throughout the paper.

Table 5 shows that the combined effect of all social pressure postcards had a turnout that was 4.7 pp. (+/- 3.1) higher than the no postcards (p-val. = 0.0028). Although the postcards were mailed over a three-day period, there was no statistically significant difference between the percentages of ballots cast from each of those three days.

Table 5. Ballots cast in the overall social pressure and controlled groups and differences between groups*

Row Labels	Did not vote	Voted	Grand Total
Control [C]	72.7% [949]	27.3% [357]	100.0% [1,306]
Social Pressure [SP] [P & NP]	68.0% [1,794]	32.0% [844]	100.0% [2,638]
Total	n.a. [2,743]	n.a. [1,201]	100.0% [3,944]
Diff. btw. SP & C	n.a.	4.7 pp. (+/- 3.1)** [p-val. = 0.0028]	n.a.

* To calculate the treatment effect, the undeliverable postcards were removed from the treatment and control groups

**A 95% CL was used here and throughout the paper.

Expenses for the postcards were kept to a minimum at although more expensive than a large bulk mailing. The postcards were produced in-house. The total expenses for each of them including postage with a first class postage stamp 48 cents apiece. Volunteers were used for all aspects of handwriting and stamping the mailing. For 2,638 postcards, this came to a total of \$1,266, as shown in Table 6. Since the social pressure postcards increase turnout by 4.7 pp., that comes to a total of 124.0 additional votes from the use of all these postcards (see Table 5). That is \$10.20 per additional voter turned out or 98.9 additional voters turned out per thousand dollars spent. Of course, applying postage stamps by hand is not as scalable as bulk rate postage. However, it is not as difficult as it may sound, and there are mechanized options for scaling up to hundreds of thousands.⁸

⁸ A hardworking, well-organized volunteer should be able to stamp about between 750 and 1,000 postcards per hour (when postcards are four to a 8.5 by 11 inch sheet). This makes is feasible for a small group of people to scale the casual postcard

Table 6. Costs per Postcard and Total Costs for all social pressure treatments for 2,638 postcards

Item	Per Unit Cost	Number of Units	Total Cost
Printing and Cutting to Size	\$0.10	2,638	\$263.80
Postage	\$0.38	2,638	\$1,002.44
Final Postcard	\$0.48	2,638	\$1,266.24

Discussion

When viewing the above results, the slightly higher effects from the Biden social pressure treatment above that of the non-Biden are roughly consistent with the treatments in the four other above experimental matches that used analogous strategies to reduce message clutter and integrate the political and the social pressure messages. Also, the lack of a statistically significant difference between the handwritten and printed messages was unexpected, but explainable.

Biden vs. Non-Biden

The higher turnout for the Biden social pressure treatment relative to the non-Biden was not statically significant. However, if turnout was in fact higher from the Biden treatment, it was likely too small of a difference to be found statistically significant with the small sample sizes. Of course, it is possible that the higher turnout was statistical noise. It is also possible that there were more Republicans in the sample than expected and more of them opted out of the communication than expected, which would have lowered turnout.

The higher turnout effect from the Biden treatment is consistent with the effects that were measured from the four treatments in three other studies that had strategies similar to the one in the Biden treatment in the Spokane 2021 study. These three studies—Duch and Cohea (2019), Burke (n.d.), and Backof and Coger (2013)—as well as this Spokane 2021 pilot study used one or more strategies to minimize message clutter and integrate partisan, candidate, and/or issue messages into the social pressure/voter registration messages. Specifically, as discussed above, Duch and Cohea (2019) kept the partisan and candidate messages very simple and fully integrated with their social pressure message, which likely reduced message clutter. Also, by using Republican voters and Trump voters as comparison groups, they might have strengthened the effects of the social/political pressure message (see Goldstein et al. 2008 evidence of the importance of comparison groups. Burke (n.d.) kept his partisan, candidate, and/or issue message verbally separate from his voter registration message using a two-part, opt-out approach and also used the partisan, candidate, and/or issue message in a way that might have prompted Republicans to opt-out, increased the effect of the voter registration message, and avoided message clutter, also as discussed above. Backof and Coger (2013) used a similar message. These researchers did not describe the use of a specific script, but we do know that their canvassers wore an Obama t-shirt that most potential registrants would have seen before being asked to register. There results suggest that these t-shirts prompted Republicans to opt out of conversations with canvassers. Likewise, in this Spokane 2021 experiment, the partisan message was kept very simple and used in two instances. In the first instance, the strategy to minimize message clutter was to place the picture of Biden on the opposite side of the postcard from the social pressure message. In the second instance,

design with a printed message to at least twenty thousand postcards. For a volume of one hundred thousand postcards or more, purchasing a machine to affix stamps is a feasible option.

Biden's name was integrated into the social pressure message to strengthen its effects. Just as in Duch and Cohea, the political message was seamlessly integrated into the SP, and, thus, message clutter was likely reduced or eliminated.

No other studies (of which the author is aware) have used these design strategies to the same degree as in these three past studies and the pilot study. However, all the details about the messages and layout of postcards in the other experimental treatments could not always be determined by the author. Also, classifying messages designs as using or not using these messaging designs does involve some subjectivity.⁹

Measuring Partisan Effects

It is unfortunate that net Democratic effects could not be measured in the pilot study. There were too few Republicans in the sample and the partisan variables that were available were too imprecise. Only the effect on voter turnout was measured. However, voter turnout, alone, is problematic as an indicator of electoral effects for the Democratic Party. For example, as discussed above, in Burke's (n.d.) experiment on partisan voter registration, he measured a statistically significant decrease in voter turnout (i.e., 0.36 ballots per shift) from the partisan/candidate/issue treatment below that of the non-partisan treatment. However, he also measured a 27.5 pp. increase in net Democratic effects from the same partisan/candidate/issue treatment. Also, see Burke's (n.d.) discussion of Backof and Coger 2013 who had a similar result. This was apparently because many Republicans were demobilized by the partisan/candidate/issue message.

The same might have happened in the Spokane 2021 experiment. The Biden treatment (relative to the non-Biden treatment) could have had a politically meaningful effect on net Democratic votes without effecting overall voter turnout. If meaningful increases in the net Democratic effects are possible from adding partisan/candidate/issues messages to positive social pressure mail, it could have important electoral impacts. Not only could it increase the net Democratic votes from existing target universes, but it could expand the feasible target universes by justifying the inclusion of voters who have partisan scores that were previously considered to not be cost effective.

Printed vs. Handwritten

It was surprising that the printed message group had a turnout that was higher than the handwritten by 2.3 pp. (+/- 3.6). However, no other study has before tested a head-to-head experimental matchup between handwritten and printed social pressure messages, so perhaps surprises were in order.

It seems likely that the higher turnout for the printed treatment group was a statistical aberration. It is also possible that the handwritten and printed messages on these casual postcards have very similar effects on turnout. Perhaps turnout can be increased only so much through strategies that operate through similar mechanisms. Handwritten messages and the causal postcard design likely both increase the effectiveness of SP mailings by getting recipients to pay attention and read the cards. *If so*, the handwritten message was not going to increase turnout any further than the casual postcard already did.

We should not jump to conclusions about the meaning of this result. Even if handwritten was no better than printed in this context, it might be in another context. Therefore, it is particularly important for these results to be replicated with a larger sample size and in other electoral contexts before firm

⁹ For example, it could be argued that Harmon et al. used these design features to integrate partisanship into his social pressure message. A partisan message was integrated into the message "It is important for all Democrats to vote" on the side of the postcard with the logo of the Democratic Party. However, arguable that message was not kept separate enough from the logo to avoid message clutter. Also, on the other side of the postcard, the partisan appeal to vote for Democrats values competes with the reader's attention on the social pressure message.

conclusions can be drawn. Also, even if printed messages provide the same boost to turnout with this casual postcard design, they might not for other mail formats. Moreover, it might be that handwritten messages make a unique contribution to the turnout effects from the cocktail of GOTV mailers that are sent each election cycle that cannot be measured by a simple one-to-one matchup.

Social Pressure and Other Possible Reasons for the High Treatment Effects

It was unexpected that the overall effect for the social pressure postcards would be as high as 4.7 pp. relative to no postcards. As discussed, most positive social pressure mailers have an ITT effect of between one and two percentage points. It is possible that the high turnout effect was a statistical outlier, but given that it had a p-value of 0.0028 it is unlikely that it out lied by much.

The large effect was likely to due to the casual postcard design (described in the methods section). Because the design did not look like a political mailer, it probably “cut through the clutter” and gained the attention of the voter.

Of course, other explanations of the large treatment effects are possible. It might be that the sample or electoral context was different in some way that made it more responsive to social pressure than other past experiments. However, this seems unlikely. There are (at least) four characteristics of a sample and electoral context that perhaps could have done this, but these were not found in Spokane 2021. These were that 1) the sample contained a larger number of voters who were ages 65 years or older and few that were between 31 and 45 years of age, 2) the sample contained more low-propensity voters, 3) and the election had a lower salience than the elections of the other studies, and/or 4) there were important differences in the electoral system. As discussed below, the samples and electoral context in Spokane 2021 seem comparable with the elections in the studies in Table 1 (although the studies often did not thoroughly describe all of these characteristics). Where differences exists, it seems unlikely that these would account for much (or any) of the large treatment effect in Spokane 2021.

In Table 6, the Spokane 2021 results are specifically compared with the Pennsylvania 2019 results (Straus 2020), because Strauss thoroughly describes some of his sample characteristics and electoral context. In his Pennsylvania 2019 experiment, Strauss (2020) found that voters of age 65 years and older were particularly responsive to social pressure. Thus, could the large treatment effects in Spokane because there were more voters who were 65 plus in the sample? No, it could not have. As seen in Table 6, there was not a meaningfully larger percentage of voters who were 65 years and over in Spokane 2021. Also, there was a lower percentage of 31 to 45 years olds in Spokane 2021, which also does not explain the high turnout effects in Spokane 2021 relative to Pennsylvania 2019 (Strauss 2020).

Table 6. Turnout based on age in Spokane, WA, 2021 and Pennsylvania 2019

		18 to 30 yrs.	31 to 45 yrs.	46 to 64 yrs.	65+ yrs.
Spokane 2021	Difference	5.2%	-1.5%	7.0%	7.3%
	95% CI	+/-6.4%	+/-6.2%	+/-5.4%	+/-6.6%
	% of Total Sample	20.8%	23.7%	33.0%	22.6%
	Subsample (Sample) Size	819	933	1,302	890
Pennsylvania 2019 (Strauss 2020)	Difference	1.5%	1.0%	4.0%	6.0%
	95% CI	+/-3.0%	+/-2.0%	+/-1.8%	+/-2.5%
	% of Total Sample	11.8%	29.0%	39.6%	19.6%

	Subsample (Sample) Size	2,367	5,800	7,917	3,931
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The Spokane 2021 and the Pennsylvania 2019 samples used different criteria for the inclusion of voters based on voting histories. For inclusion in the Pennsylvania 2019 sample, those who voted in 2016 and 2018, but not 2017 were included, which resulted in an average 2019 voter propensity score of 22 (on a scale of 0 to 100). For inclusion in the Spokane 2021 sample, see the voting history criteria described in the methods section. While voter propensity scores were not available for Spokane 2021, the average voter propensity was likely the same size or larger. If so, this probably would not have accounted for the larger treatment effects in the Spokane 2021. The effects from social pressure seem to be smaller with high-propensity voters and larger with low-propensity voter (Strauss 2020).

Both the Spokane and Pennsylvania experiments were in odd-year, low-salience elections. The turnout of the control groups was 27.3% and 37.1%, respectively, suggesting that the Spokane election had a lower salience than the Pennsylvania. This might have contributed to a slightly larger effect in Spokane.

However, Spokane is in Washington, an all vote-by-mail state. Some observers believe that social pressure performs less well in this context.¹⁰ If it does, it might have lowered the effects in the Spokane 2021 experiment relative to the one in Pennsylvania, because Pennsylvania votes only 38% by mail.

Other studies in Table 1 are also on odd-year and mid-term elections with voters who had comparable propensities to vote. Detailed age data was not available for these other studies. Also, these others were in states that do not vote all by mail. *There were no doubt small differences between Spokane 2021 and these other experiments that had some (probably small) influence on their results. However, there is no clear reason to conclude that these differences account for the substantially higher effects from the Spokane 2021 social pressure treatments.*

Further Research

Obviously, a replication of this experiment with a larger sample size and in other states is crucial because strong conclusions cannot be drawn about the Biden treatment, the casual postcard design, and handwritten messages in this context and from the moderately small sample alone. The 3,944 sample is large enough so that the large treatment effects cannot be brushed aside, but it was too small to provide precise estimates of the treatment effects on turnout.

It will likely require extra effort and different research designs to successfully measure the net Democratic effects for social pressure mailings. Some have tried to detect partisan effects such as Harmon et al. (2014) and they did not measure a statistically significant association between partisan scores and turnout. If small partisan effects did occur, there probably were not enough Republicans in their sample to easily detect a difference in turnout between Democrats and Republicans. Also, partisan scores (which are modeled data) are not a particularly accurate measure of voter choice or party preference for individual voters. *To measure net Democratic effects, future research must include more Republicans in the sample and use more precise measures of partisanship. Even small improvements in net Democratic effects can be politically meaningful.*

It is interesting that the effect size by age group follows the same pattern in both Spokane 2021 and Pennsylvania 2019. The 31 to 45 year old group had the lowest effect and the 65 and older group had the largest. There appears to be a bifurcation in the treatment effect that varies with age. If this

¹⁰ In a personal communication with Lionel Dripps from the Voter Participation Center, Lionel Dripps referred to in-house data that suggested that social pressure mailers are less effective in all vote-by-mail elections. Moreover, an experiment on door-to-door GOTV found that GOTV did not increase turnout among medium propensity voters who vote-by-mail but it was effective on poll place voters (Arceneaux et al. 2012).

bifurcation is real, the reason why it exists could help explain the mechanisms through which social pressure works. Also, if social pressure does not work well with some age groups, this can help us better choose a target population.

The benefits from additional research could be large. These potential benefits include increased net Democratic effects from positive social pressure mail, expanded feasible target populations for social pressure mail, and increased turnout because of the casual postcard design. For the reasons discussed, this could be particularly effective in mid-term and odd-year elections.

Conclusion

Odd-year and mid-term elections are a challenge to the party in the White House. They are also an opportunity to change the dynamics of the electoral cycle if a more effective way is found to turn out that party's base of voters in these years. A general theory was offered that suggests that the inclusion of partisan, candidate and/or issue messages into GOTV messages (including social pressure and voter registration) can increase overall turnout and/or net Democratic votes. Specifically, President Joe Biden was invoked as 1) an authority figure that approved of recipients' voting records and 2) a prompt to Republicans to opt out of reading the SP message during an odd-year election as a proxy for midterms.

Although more research is needed, the results from this and other experiments are suggestive that the inclusion of partisan, candidate and/or issue messages could have the theorized effect of higher turnout for Democratic voters. Likewise, this might also prompt Republicans to opt-out of reading the social pressure message. The solution seems to be avoiding message clutter and integrating these political messages with social pressure messages in ways that are consistent with the theories of social pressure, norms, opt-out behavior. Simply "tacking on" a political message to a social pressure message does not seem to improve its effectiveness and may instead distract from it and lower its effects. However, for social pressure mailers, the difference in treatment effects is likely to be moderately small but still meaningful (perhaps around one percentage point) and hard to detect without large samples and improved methods.

It is unclear whether handwritten or printed social pressure messages are more effective. The Spokane 2021 experiment found that printed message had a higher turnout by 2.3 pp. (+/- 3.6 pp. at 95% CI). If printed messages can be made as effective as handwritten, it is a more scalable tool than handwritten messages. However, for the reasons discussed, we should not jump to conclusions based on this first experimental match up.

Likewise, the large 4.7 pp. (+/- 3.1 pp.) effect from the social pressure message among all the treatments using the casual postcard design was suggestive of a low-cost and effective alternative to negative social pressure mail. The benefits from additional research could be large. It could have a very meaningful political impact if the net Democratic votes from positive social pressure mail could be doubled. While that is an ambitious goal, the experimental results presented and reviewed in this study suggest that is reasonable to pursue.

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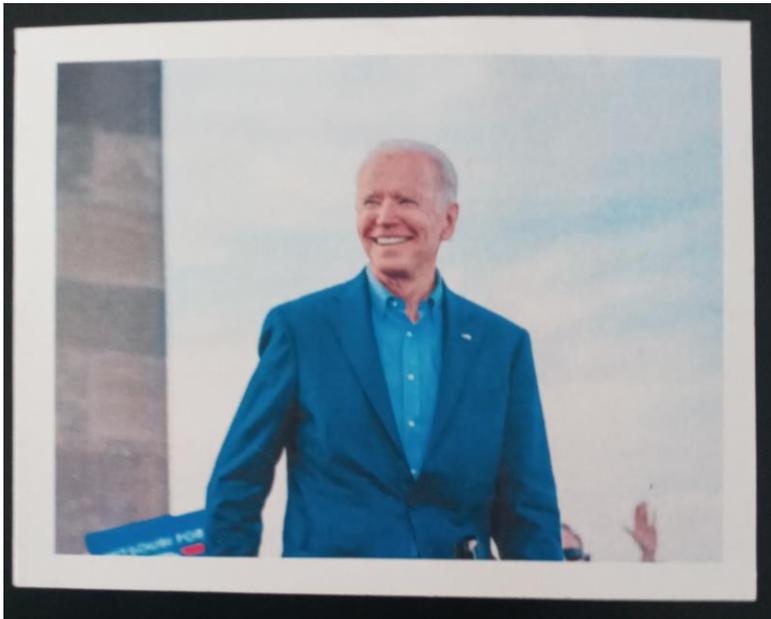
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Appendix A. Biden Social Pressure Treatment and Handwritten/Printed Treatment: Casual Postcard Design



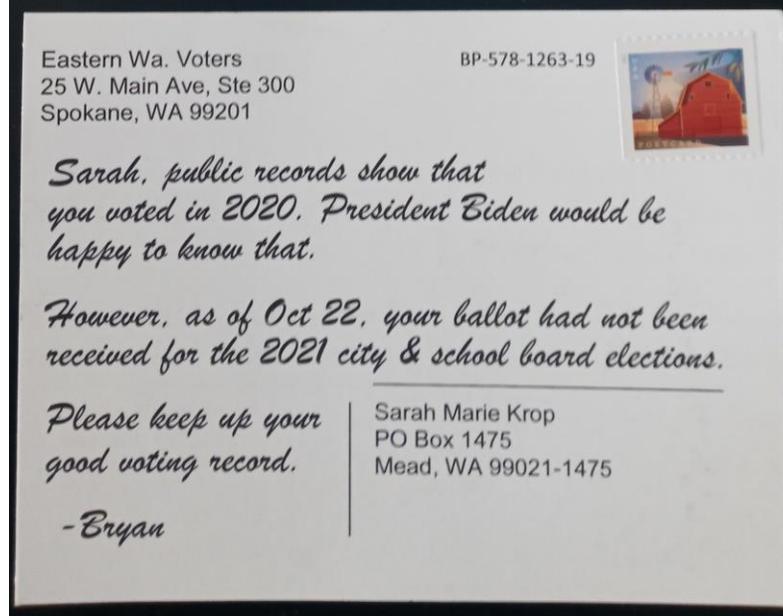
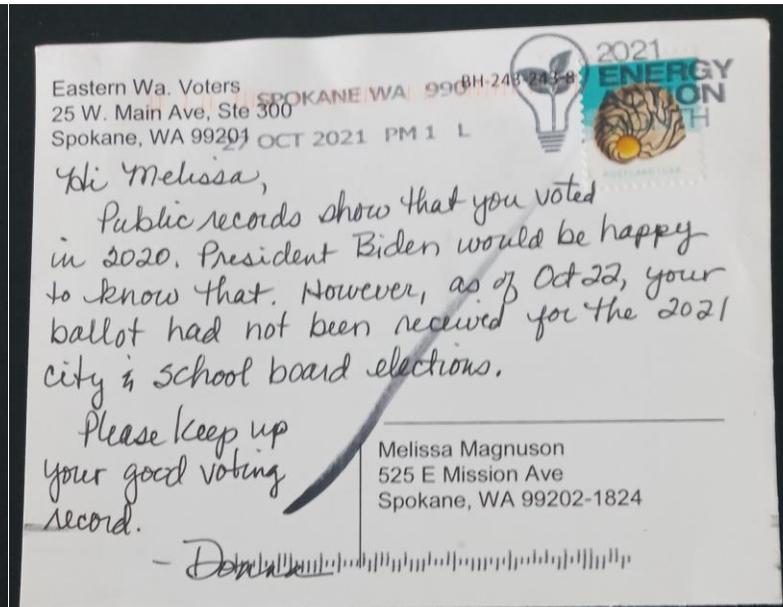
Text

Jaime, public records show that you voted in 2020. President Biden would be happy to know that.

However, as of Oct 22, your ballot had not been received for the 2021 city & school board elections.

Please keep up your good voting record.

--Donna



Appendix B. Non-Biden Social Pressure and Handwritten/Printed Treatment: Casual Postcard Design



Text

Jaime, public records show that you voted in 2020. I am happy to know that.

However, as of Oct 22, your ballot had not been received for the 2021 city & school board elections.

Please keep up your good voting record.

--Donna

