

Increasing Voter Turnout: The Academic Perspective

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A bit of a divide in political science research

- ▶ Legal rules and institutions matter - changing the rules has the potential to increase or decrease turnout. Usually studied non-experimentally.
- ▶ Social influence and encouragement “nudges” can increase turnout. Often studied using randomized experiments.
- ▶ We need more research on nudges that change - or explain - legal rules and institutions.

What increases and decreases voter turnout?

Randomized studies of voter encouragement

- ▶ Lowering legal and institutional barriers is a necessary condition for increasing turnout, but not always sufficient.
- ▶ Encouraging citizens to vote can sometimes lead to increased turnout.
- ▶ Simple reminders to vote, especially by mail or phone, do not increase turnout as much as in-person or unusual reminders.

Research I'll summarize today

- ▶ Source of voter turnout encouragement
- ▶ Social pressure effect on turnout
- ▶ Perceptions of lack of ballot secrecy & concerns about ballot security

Source of communication matters

Local election administrators sent reminders to voters, leading to a slight increase in turnout.

Similar emails from other, non-official sources do not increase turnout.

Emails from Official Sources Can Increase Turnout

Author(s): Neil Malhotra, Melissa R. Michelson, Ali Adam Valenzuela

How does randomization work?

Imagine a voter list.

- ▶ Voter A
- ▶ Voter B
- ▶ Voter C
- ▶ Voter D
- ▶ Voter E
- ▶ Voter F
- ▶ Voter G
- ▶ Voter H
- ▶ Voter I
- ▶ Voter J

Randomization assigns some voters to receive message; control group gets none

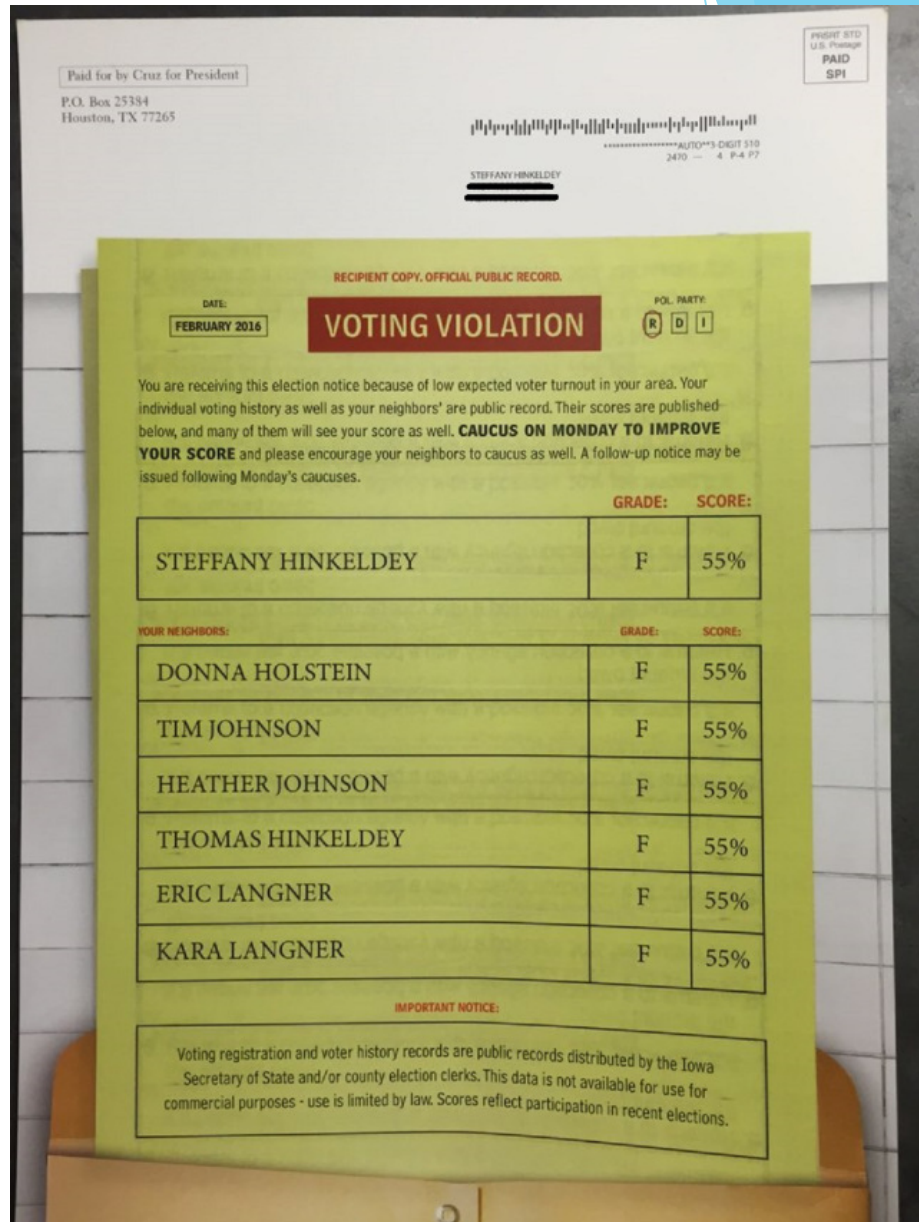
- ▶ Voter A → Treatment: receive election administrator message
- ▶ Voter B → Control: no message
- ▶ Voter C → Treatment: receive election administrator message
- ▶ Voter D → Treatment: receive election administrator message
- ▶ Voter E → Control: no message
- ▶ Voter F → Treatment: receive election administrator message
- ▶ Voter G → Control: no message
- ▶ Voter H → Control: no message
- ▶ Voter I → Treatment: receive election administrator message
- ▶ Voter J → Control: no message

Finally, after experiment - measure voter turnout & compare turnout across groups

- ▶ Voter A → Treatment: receive election administrator message → Voted
- ▶ Voter B → Control: no message → Did not vote
- ▶ Voter C → Treatment: receive election administrator message → Voted
- ▶ Voter D → Treatment: receive election administrator message → Did not vote
- ▶ Voter E → Control: no message → Did not vote
- ▶ Voter F → Treatment: receive election administrator message → Voted
- ▶ Voter G → Control: no message → Did not vote
- ▶ Voter H → Control: no message → Voted
- ▶ Voter I → Treatment: receive election administrator message → Voted
- ▶ Voter J → Control: no message → Did not vote

Other research: Social pressure increases turnout

- ▶ Conventional wisdom says social pressure *INCREASES* turnout (e.g., Green, Gerber, and Larimer 2008).
- ▶ People are embarrassed if their neighbors know about their lack of voting when *turnout* is revealed to be public.



Social Pressure and Turnout

- ▶ This social pressure mailer consistently leads to the highest increases in turnout when compared to other experimental studies.
- ▶ But, there is an “ick” factor and officials may want not want to do this, or may want to frame in a different way. Thank voter for past participation.
- ▶ Takeaway: social psychology and social pressure more important than simple reminders to vote for increasing turnout.

Voter perceptions of ballot security and secrecy

- ▶ Some research on this topic, but more research needs to be done, especially with recent cybersecurity issues

Many voters questions secrecy and security of their ballots

“Approximately 25% of all...people...and approximately half of non-white and less educated respondents do not believe their ballot choices are kept secret.” - Alan Gerber et al.

Those who have concerns about ballot secrecy - possibly due to ballot security - are less likely to turn out to vote.

Do Perceptions of Ballot Secrecy Influence Turnout? Results from a Field Experiment

Author(s):

Alan S., Gerber, Gregory A. Huber, David Doherty, Conor M. Dowling, and Seth J. Hill

My research - Turnout declines when voters are told their ballot is not secret

- ▶ Tested in 15 states during 2016 presidential election
- ▶ Voters unaware that Dem. caucuses are not secret ballots. When told ballot would not be secret, there was a significant drop-off in turnout.
- ▶ This has implications for regular elections. If 25% of the public thinks their ballot is not secret, and lack of secrecy leads to reduced turnout, then election administrators need to assure voters of secrecy and security of the ballot.

Ballot security and turnout: implications

- ▶ Ballot security and election administration cybersecurity issues that have arisen could yield lower turnout if voters perceive the security issues as making their vote less secret or secure.
- ▶ Election administrators need to think about how to best balance transparency regarding security issues to voters and also making clear ballot is secret and secure.
- ▶ This needs to be tested more to see if voters are less likely to turn out when told about data breaches and other security issues.
- ▶ Trust from official source is key.

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