

# Getting Environmentalists to the Polls

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Helping the millions of Americans concerned about environmental policies make their voices heard

**When large portions of the U.S. electorate sit out of elections, fringe voters wield outsized influence, elevating polarizing candidates and forestalling necessary action on pressing issues. Environmental challenges offer the starkest example of the hazards of disengagement: an effective response to threats like climate change requires a citizenry capable of demanding action from lawmakers and then holding them accountable at the ballot box. While millions of Americans identify the environment as one of the most important issues to them, Americans who actually vote are much less likely to share these priorities. In advance of the 2018 midterm elections, ideas42 partnered with the Environmental Voter Project (EVP) to test ways to build a consistent habit of voting among environmentalists using a series of behaviorally informed messaging strategies.**

## Summary

In a country built on the principle of a government “for the people, by the people,” chronically low voter turnout is a significant barrier to a functioning and representative democracy. Only 60% of eligible voters cast a ballot in presidential elections, while midterms and off-cycle elections typically see rates of only 40% and 20-30%, respectively. Although turnout in recent elections has ticked up in recent elections since 2016, this spike likely was likely driven more by the particularities of the current political moment than a change in underlying voting patterns.

Closing the gap between habitual voters and nonvoters is critically important to addressing the most pressing challenges facing our country today. Not only do habitual voters look different from the country as a whole across key demographics, there is evidence that the policy preferences of voters differ meaningfully from the overall population. When it comes to the environment, the consequences of this mismatch are increasingly dire—while millions of Americans say responding to threats like climate change is a top issue for them, this priority is not shared to the same extent by many voting Americans. With a disengaged electorate, the most polarized voters wield outsized influence in politics and stall progress on critical policy issues. Activating nonvoters, therefore, serves as a moderating force capable of strengthening the democratic processes that ensure our government’s ability to take action on issues that are critical to the majority of Americans.

ideas42’s Nonvoter Innovation Lab aims to tackle this problem head on by designing and evaluating behaviorally informed voter outreach interventions in partnership with a range of organizations committed to expanding participation in U.S. elections. With a strong evidence base supporting the idea that voting is a habit-forming behavior, finding ways to get underrepresented communities to vote for the first time,

## Highlights

- ▶ Policy preferences of habitual voters differ from the overall population, which means policies don’t always address the issues that most Americans believe are urgent priorities.
- ▶ Using behavioral science to design text messaging and direct mail can help increase overall voter participation.

or vote in new kinds of elections, can transform the electorate in an enduring way. Our collaboration with the Environmental Voter Project (EVP), a non-profit organization that aims to get more environmentalists to express their policy preferences at the ballot box, has helped us engineer new tactics to mobilize unlikely voters who are passionate about environmental issues across a range of channels.

## Solution

ideas42 partnered with EVP to develop and test a series of randomized experiments in three states throughout 2018, beginning with early primary elections and extending through the general midterm election in November. The goal of these experiments was to design and test different types of behaviorally informed messages across multiple channels that can increase turnout among voters who are estimated to have a high likelihood of prioritizing the environment but a low likelihood of voting based on survey data and information in state voter files. We randomly assigned potential voters to receive different kinds of outreach in each of these experiments. We assessed the relative performance of messaging and channels against one another and against a control group that received no contact.

In Nevada's primary election, we ran an A/B test of two-way text message scripts (messages that recipients could respond to) with a sample of roughly 65,000 voters. One script consisted of EVP's standard messaging, which delivered information about different options for casting a ballot on election day and concluded by asking if the recipient intended to vote. The second variant used **endowed progress** to encourage people to vote. The message suggested that the recipient had already made progress toward voting by being a registered voter with an active status on the voter rolls. These were framed as two completed steps on the path to the third step—casting the ballot on election day. Finally, to prompt feelings of **reciprocity** between the sender and recipient, the message concluded: "Can I count on you to vote?"

Following the Nevada experiment, we partnered with EVP on a second test in Florida's primary election. For this election, we tested six conditions across both direct mail and text message outreach with a sample of over 1 million voters. Most voters in the experiment received one of three text message scripts from EVP volunteers: EVP's standard informational message, a variant of the endowed progress message tested in Nevada, or a message that prompted voters to **anticipate regret** they might feel if they failed to vote. In addition, a subset of voters receiving the endowed progress message also received a **social pressure** paper mailer, which conveyed the recipient's public voting record in recent elections and suggested that average turnout in the upcoming election was expected to be high in their neighborhood. A subset of voters receiving the anticipated regret text script, meanwhile, also received a direct mail letter that included a personal testimonial from an EVP volunteer about their regret at failing to vote in a recent election, concluding in a personalized sign-off with the volunteer's signature and picture. The combination of different tactics and channels in this experiment thus permitted us to assess not only the effect of different messaging strategies, but the marginal effectiveness of layering one channel (direct mail) onto another (text messages).

Our final collaboration with EVP in 2018 was during Pennsylvania’s general election. We ran a two-way test of social pressure mail against a novel direct mail messaging tactic with a sample of roughly 550,000 voters. Seeking to address a common sentiment, “my vote doesn’t matter,” expressed by many nonvoters, we designed a **voter likelihood report** that informed voters of a unique estimate of their likelihood of turning out commonly used by campaigns and classified them as either “very unlikely” or “unlikely” voters. Framing the decision to vote around an outcome over a voter’s individual turnout in the election—as opposed to a national contest over which their single vote has relatively little direct impact—effectively reframed voting around an outcome firmly within the individual voter’s locus of control. At the same time, the letter prompted voter reactance against politics by encouraging voters to prove the predictions of political models wrong. While a single vote rarely determines the outcome of an election, an individual voter can prove a model wrong by voting in an election where they have been dismissed as “low propensity.” The goal of this design was to capture the personalization of the social pressure mailer, which conveys information customized to reflect to the recipient’s individual behavior, while also building voter motivation to change an outcome firmly under their control.

## Results

In the Nevada primary, where the overall turnout rate was 23%, voters in our treatment group who received text messages **voted at a rate 1.22 percentage points higher**<sup>1</sup> than voters in the control group, suggesting our intervention led to over 600 additional votes cast. At an average cost of roughly \$0.07 per message, this resulted in a net cost-per-vote generated of \$5.33. While we did not see any significant differences between the message variants, we found that the timing of messages was significantly related to the size of the turnout effect. Messages sent the day before the election led to 0.64 percentage points higher<sup>2</sup> turnout than the same messages sent the week before the election.

In the Florida primary, which experienced an overall turnout rate of 27%, we found that voters in the treatment group who received some form of engagement from EVP **voted at a rate 0.47 percentage points higher**<sup>3</sup> on average than voters in the control group. Given our total sample size for the experiment, this translates into over 2,400 additional votes generated. While in this experiment we again detected no significant differences between the turnout effect of different tactics or channels, the substantially higher cost of paper mail over text messages makes the latter the far more cost-effective means of outreach. For example, the most effective text script generated votes at a cost of roughly \$13 per vote.

Our experiment in the Pennsylvania general election, where midterm turnout rose to an historic high of 58%, demonstrated the enduring power of social pressure mail as a GOTV tactic. Compared to voters who received a voter likelihood report, **turnout among social pressure mailer recipients was 0.61 percentage points higher**.<sup>4</sup> Eligible voters in this election received multiple modes of outreach across

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<sup>1</sup> p<0.01

<sup>2</sup> p<0.05

<sup>3</sup> p<0.01

<sup>4</sup> p<0.05

several channels outside the scope of our experiment, preventing us from establishing a clear baseline over which to assess the effects of our mailers alone. Nevertheless, the significant rise in turnout from the social pressure mailer over the voter likelihood report suggests that holding voters accountable for their voting behavior by revealing their public voting record remains a powerful GOTV tactic.

These results are particularly notable given the record turnout in the 2018 midterm elections. There was heightened enthusiasm and a larger volume of voter outreach in the run-up to the November 2018 midterm election. But even with this level of enthusiasm, we observed a positive and significant increase in voter turnout among our target population at a cost-per-vote well below conventional GOTV tactics.

Across each of these experiments, we observed turnout effects substantially larger than effect sizes seen in previous GOTV interventions, and in the case of text messages those effects were generated at substantially lower cost-per-vote. One meta-analysis found the average weighted treatment effect of non-partisan GOTV direct mailings to be 0.19 percentage points, meaning our behaviorally informed interventions had more than twice the impact. The cost-per-vote of such campaigns, meanwhile, ranges from \$30 to \$91 per vote. Given the bigger price tag of paper mail over other channels—direct mail costs nearly ten times as much as sending a text message—one of our next priorities is to determine if effect sizes of costlier strategies like paper social pressure mailers can be achieved by deploying similar tactics through more cost-effective channels.

## Takeaway .....

The 2018 election saw the highest midterm voter turnout in a century. While this uptick in turnout was a welcome departure from past declines in voter turnout, maintaining this enthusiasm is a vitally important and daunting challenge. The roughly 0.5-1 percentage point increases generated through these interventions provide an exciting blueprint for continued innovation around cost-effective outreach that can build reliable voting coalitions in support of underrepresented policy preferences. These initial insights move us closer toward restoring the democratic mechanisms underlying a responsive and representative democracy in the United States.