

Young Voters in the 2018 Midterm Elections

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Increasing the youth vote with behaviorally informed text messages

Low voter turnout among young people has become a prominent challenge of U.S. elections, but we believe smart behavioral design can change that paradigm. By understanding and addressing the distinct set of challenges young people face around voting, we can disrupt this trend and help young people establish lifelong voting habits. We designed and tested a series of behaviorally informed messages during the 2018 midterms to help more young people make it to the polls, generating a significant positive change in voting behavior in the primary and general elections.

Summary

The United States was built on the principle of a government by the people and for the people, yet voter turnout—which hovers around 60% in presidential elections and 40-50% in midterms—lags behind many other democratic countries. Chronically low turnout undermines the responsiveness, representativeness, and accountability of our governmental institutions. And this problem is made worse by the fact that habitual voters look different than the broader population; they skew older, richer, and more educated than nonvoters and have different policy preferences than the overall country.¹ In 2018 specifically, Millennials and Generation Z voters turned out at 42% and 30% respectively—compared to 64% turnout among Baby Boomers and members of the Silent Generation. This means the needs and preferences of many Americans—especially young people—are not reflected in who is elected and which policies are put into place.

The Nonvoter Innovation Lab at ideas42, a nonpartisan effort focused on broadening the electorate through behavioral science, aims to tackle low turnout head-on by partnering with large-scale organizations. In 2018, we partnered with Democracy Works, a civic technology organization and maker of TurboVote, an online platform that guides users through the voter registration process and updates them about elections in their area.

TurboVote's userbase is a diverse subset of the electorate, including a high concentration of voters under thirty. These young voters face a set of distinct barriers when it comes to voting, which can lead to lower rates of participation. Working with Democracy Works, we set out to understand what types of messaging strategies can help young people overcome barriers to voting.

Highlights

- ▶ Young voters face a set of distinct barriers when it comes to voting, which can lead to lower rates of participation.
- ▶ Text messages are an effective tool to increase voter engagement and participation.
- ▶ Some messages increase turnout more than others: finding the most impactful framing expands the voter turnout toolkit.

What stops young people from voting?

Many of the barriers young voters face are tied to their inexperience with the process of voting. Some of these barriers include:

- ▶ **Uncertainty about how to engage with the process:** Young voters are new to the process, so may be unaware of the steps necessary to register, obtain a ballot, and vote. This uncertainty leads a number of young voters to sit out completely rather than risk making an error.
- ▶ **Overestimating the challenges to voting:** Unfamiliarity with the process leads young voters to overestimate the difficulty of completing each step, which can halt their progress. Even when young voters have an accurate perception of the difficulty, behavioral science teaches us that seemingly small hassles, like finding a stamp for an absentee ballot, can derail us from our goals.
- ▶ **Lack of stable voting context:** Young people are nearly four times more likely to move homes in a given year compared to Americans over 40. High mobility means young people often have to start from scratch in each election cycle by re-registering at their current address, finding their new polling place, and navigating a potentially whole new set of requirements if they move across state lines.

Solution

To tackle these barriers, we designed a series of text messages that TurboVote sent to nearly 900,000 users leading up to the 2018 primary and general elections. To identify the most effective framing for getting more young people to the polls, we designed four different messages leveraging behavioral insights, testing two messages (plan-making and social influence) in the primary elections and all four (including social accountability and social exclusion) in the general.

All of the users in our sample received the standard notifications TurboVote sends before an election. In addition, users randomly assigned to the treatment groups received one of the four message types below. This allowed us to measure the change in voting behavior as a result of receiving a behaviorally informed message in comparison to receiving a standard reminder.

The four message types included:

- ▶ **Plan-making:** Plan-making activities help people concretize their intention to take action and think through potential obstacles and how to overcome them in advance, therefore making it more likely that they follow through. Text messages prompted people to plan when they would vote, consider where they would be coming from, and determine how they would get to their polling site.

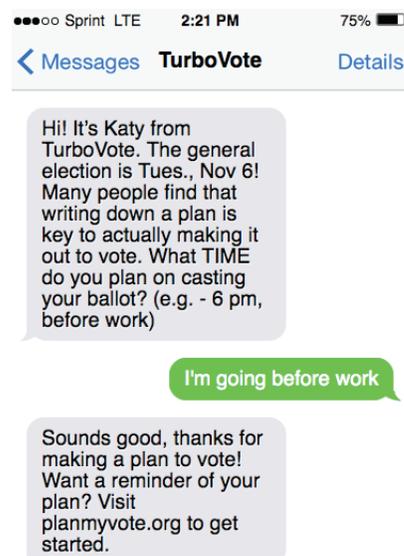


Figure 1: Plan-making text message

- ▶ **Social Influence:** Theory suggests that if people encourage others to vote in the election, they are more likely to follow through themselves to maintain consistency between their words and actions. Messages asked users to encourage two of their friends to vote.
- ▶ **Social Accountability:** The literature on social accountability suggests that when our actions are public and/or we may be called upon to justify them, we are more likely to act in socially desirable ways, in this case by voting.ⁱ Messages highlighted that users' voting history is public record and indicated that TurboVote would follow up after the election to inquire about their voting experience.
- ▶ **Social Exclusion:** The behavioral science literature suggests that people may be eager to take pro-social action when they are confronted with the potential of social exclusion and then given an opportunity to prevent that exclusion.ⁱⁱ Messages highlighted that politicians tend to pay attention (and cater) only to voters who participate in every election.

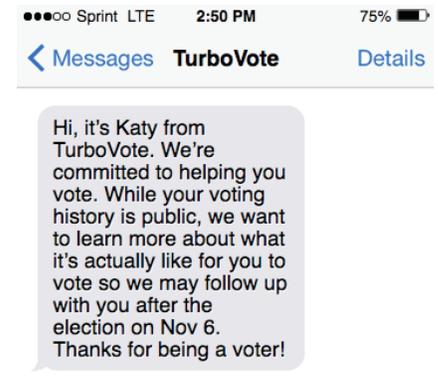


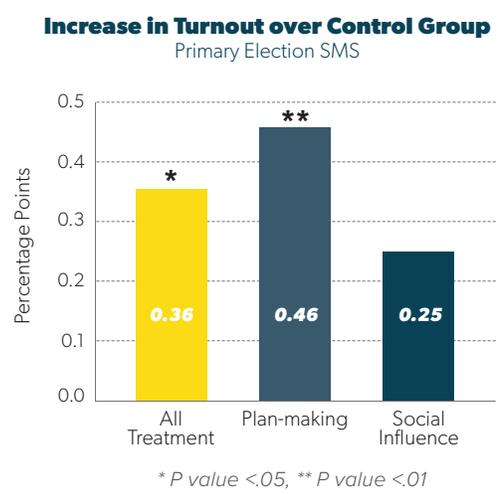
Figure 2: Social Accountability text message

Results

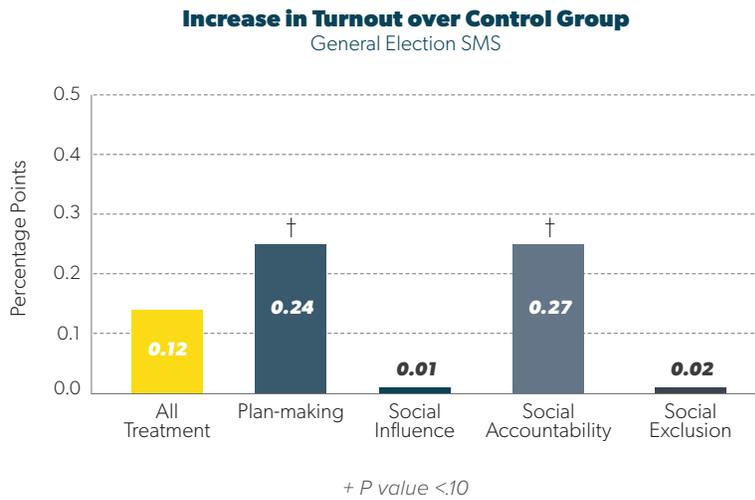
We used randomized controlled trials to pinpoint the causal impact of these messages, and matched TurboVote users to the voter file in order to measure actual voting behavior.

In the primary election, there was a 0.36 percentage point increase in turnout in response to receiving either of our text message treatments.ⁱⁱⁱ This increase was driven by a particularly positive response to the plan-making text messages, which increased turnout by almost half a percentage point.^{iv}

In the general election we deployed two additional messages. As a result, we generated valuable insights about the message frames that impact voter behavior, even in a very high salience election. We saw a significant increase in turnout of between .24-.27 percentage points^v in response to the plan-making and social accountability text messages.



ⁱ Lerner, J. S., & Tetlock, P. E. (1999). Accounting for the effects of accountability. *Psychological bulletin*, 125(2), 255.
ⁱⁱ Hutchison, P., Abrams, D., & Christian, J. (2007). The social psychology of exclusion. *Multidisciplinary handbook of social exclusion research*, 29.
ⁱⁱⁱ P value <.05, as a reminder in the primary election we only sent plan-making or social influence messages
^{iv} P value <.01
^v P value <.10



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 were able to generate additional new votes through our experiments, suggesting that these types of messages can be effective in changing voter behavior in both low- and high-salience elections.

Takeaway

In both the primary and general elections in 2018 we were able to help more people vote through simple, low-cost behaviorally informed text messages (roughly \$4-5 per vote generated). This increase in turnout is particularly striking considering the control group already receives a robust set of reminders as part of TurboVote’s standard message flow. Our results confirmed that employing strategic behavioral levers can create significant positive behavior change, even when layered on top of effective reminders that already change behavior.

Strong youth participation in elections is core to the mission of the Nonvoter Innovation Lab to build a representative electorate and facilitate a habit of voting for all Americans. Our partnership with Democracy Works in 2018 generated additional votes and valuable insights for future exploration about the types of message frames that move young voters.

Endnotes

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