THE MOVEMENT COOPERATIVE

People-Powered Postcards:
Evidence from 3 Field Experiments in 2020

Indivisible Chicago Alliance, Postcards to Swing States, and Progressive Turnout Project

BACKGROUND

- Postcards to Swing States (PTSS) organizes volunteers to **send handwritten GOTV postcards** to voters

- PTSS mails blank postcards, voter target lists, and GOTV message scripts to volunteers. **Volunteers provide their own stamps, and write and send the postcards**

- To date, PTSS has worked with volunteers to send up to **21 million postcards** to voters across the country during the 2020 primary and general election cycles

BACKGROUND

- **During the 2018 and 2020 primary elections**, PTSS and The Movement Cooperative (TMC) conducted 2 field experiments to identify best practices for handwritten postcards (Coalition for a Better Illinois 6th collaborated on the first test and Indivisible Chicago Alliance (ICA) collaborated on the second)

- These tests found a **1.2 percentage point (pp) and 0.6pp increase in primary turnout**, respectively

- Faster-to-write, short messages were overall more effective than longer messages, and short social pressure messages outperformed short plan-making

THIS STUDY

- PTSS, ICA, the Progressive Turnout Project (PTP,) and TMC build upon that research with a series of 3 field experiments involving up to **15.7 million postcards sent to 7.8 million voters in 14 highly competitive states**

- The test measures the efficacy of **different postcard messages** and **postcard volume** on turnout in the **2020 general election**

- The test also **compares** the efficacy of **handwritten postcards to standard, printed voter report cards**

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MAIN TAKEAWAYS

- In the extremely salient 2020 general election, **volunteer-written social pressure postcards were remarkably cost-effective in mobilizing voters**, nearly three times as cost-effective as paid voter report cards sent in the same context (14 votes per $1,000 spent, versus 5)

- Moreover, this program proved it could **scale extremely well**: in the 2020 general, over 100 thousand volunteers sent up to 15.7 million postcards to 7.8 million voters in 14 states

STUDY DESIGN

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Did contacting voters with **handwritten postcards** increase **turnout** in the 2020 general election?

- What was the effect of a **social pressure message** ("SP"), compared to a **race-class narrative message** ("RCN"), on turnout?

- What was the effect of **1 vs. 2. vs. 3 handwritten postcards**?

- What was the effect of handwritten postcards compared to **standard printed voter report cards** ("Printed")?

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RESEARCH STRATEGY

- We conducted **3 field experimental studies** as part of this project

- In each, voters were assigned to receive 1-3 handwritten postcards or a comparable number of printed voter report cards

- **Conditions and universes differed slightly** between studies, in order to balance research and programmatic goals

- Prior to conducting the experiment, we **ran an in-cycle message pre-test** to confirm that neither message produced a backlash effect

  - *Methodology:* Conducted on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online platform, with 843 respondents

  - *Result:* Neither message produced a backlash effect on vote enthusiasm or vote intent

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Universe: Nearly all voters in the selected states or congressional districts with turnout scores between 5 and 95[*], partisanship scores of 70 or higher, and mail deliverability scores of "somewhat likely deliverable" or higher

	Study 1 *Variable flights of handwritten postcards (delivered 10/23 - 10/27; 10/27 - 10/30; and 10/28 ~ 10/31)*	Study 2 *2 flights of handwritten postcards or 2 flights of printed voter report cards (delivered 10/23 - 10/27 and 10/28 - 10/31)*	Study 3 *2 flights of handwritten postcards (delivered 10/23 - 10/27 and 10/28 - 10/31)*
States	MI, WI	AZ, FL, IA, KS, ME, MT, NC, PA	GA, KY, SC, specific TX CDs
Conditions	• SP 1 postcard (11%) • SP 2 postcards (14%) • SP 3 postcards (19%) • RCN 1 postcard (11%) • RCN 2 postcards (14%) • RCN 3 postcards (19%) • Control (11%)	• SP (38%) • RCN (38%) • Printed voter report card (1%) • Control (24%)	• SP (42%) • RCN (42%) • Control (15%)
N	1,547,806 voters	4,782,592 voters	3,245,195 voters
Outcome	Turnout in the 2020 general election		

*Studies 1 and 2 had slightly more restricted universes, only targeting voters with turnout scores between 5 and 90, and 20 and 80, respectively

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Each target state had competitive races at the Presidential, Senate, House, and/or Governor level

State	Pres.	Senate	House	Gov.	No. Target Voters	No. Postcards Assigned
Arizona	✓	✓	✓		512,075	780,444
Florida	✓		✓		1,884,235	2,872,094
Georgia	✓	✓	✓		1,327,528	2,256,454
Iowa		✓	✓		237,679	362,220
Kansas		✓			188,162	286,752
Kentucky		✓			509,269	865,562
Maine	✓	✓	✓		101,568	154,876
Michigan	✓	✓			1,110,596	2,152,663
Montana		✓		✓	41,365	63,036
North Carolina	✓	✓		✓	724,739	1,104,644
Pennsylvania	✓		✓		1,044,794	1,592,338
South Carolina		✓	✓		593,413	1,008,358
Texas	✓	✓	✓		814,985	1,384,984
Wisconsin	✓				437,210	847,573

THE POSTCARD PROGRAM

- PTSS recruited **over 100 thousand volunteers from all 50 states** through social media, grassroots groups, and word-of-mouth. Volunteers were assigned to send **15.7 million postcards** in 14 states

- By relying heavily on the generosity of volunteers, the cost of the 15.7 million postcard program was kept extremely low: **$748,584** for shipping, printing, software, supplies, and staff time (a paid direct mail program at this scale might have cost almost $7 million)

  - The postcards were **volunteer-designed**

  - Volunteers provided their own stamps, which may have added up to over **5.5 million dollars in in-kind donations**

THE POSTCARD PROGRAM

- Volunteers chose to write **social pressure or race-class narrative messages** (to voters in the appropriate conditions)

- Volunteers were **instructed to mail the postcards on specific dates**

- The first flight of mail was scheduled to land between 10/23 - 10/27, the second between 10/27 - 10/30, and the third between 10/28 - 10/31. According to this plan, voters received 1-3 postcards in the **last week and a half before the 2020 election**

VOLUNTEER COMPLIANCE

- Postcards to Swing States conducted a **survey of their volunteers** post-program to find out how many had complied with the program

  - *Methodology:* Randomly sampled 725 volunteers, achieved 61% response rate by following up across multiple modes (3 phone calls with voicemails, text, email)

- **94% of volunteers self-reported completing all of their postcards.** 91% said they stuck to the exact message, without modification. 99% said they followed the mailing dates or sent them earlier

- For a variety of reasons, **these numbers are likely biased upward, so we consider these estimates an upper bound**

Example Postcard: Wisconsin
FRONT

The volunteer-designed postcards featured vintage-style, state-relevant designs and a link to the state's voter information website
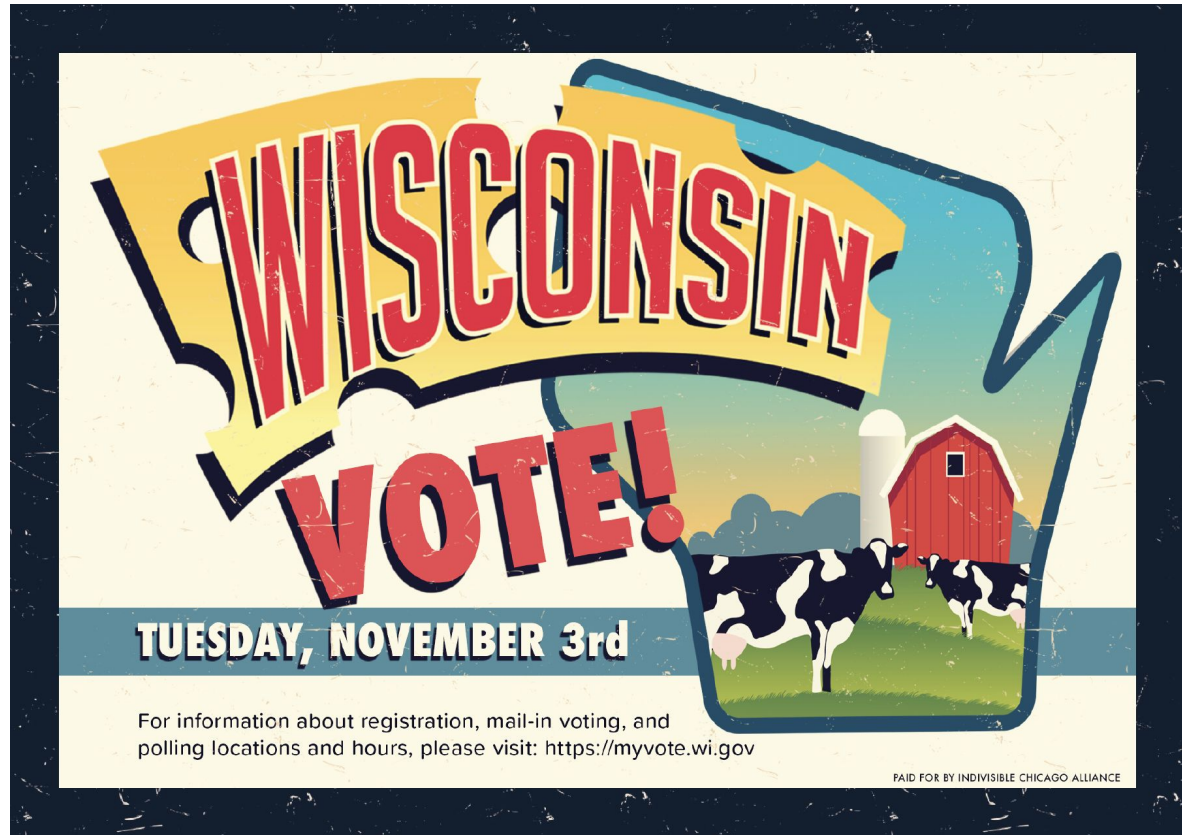
Example Postcard: Florida
FRONT

Each postcard included an image in the shape of the state and asked the recipient to vote on November 3rd

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Social Pressure Message

BACK

Following common social pressure recommendations, this message told voters that their vote is public information, and that organizations may follow up with them after the election

Joe, Thank you for being a previous/first time voter! Who you vote for is secret, but whether you vote is public information. After the election on Tues, Nov 3, local organizations may follow up with you on your voting record.

- David

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Race-Class Narrative Message
BACK

Adapted from the Race-Class Narrative, this message encouraged voters to come together across their differences and vote to get their needs met

Sam, we do our best for our families no matter our color, age, or gender. But some politicians divide us so they can block access to affordable healthcare, good schools & clean water. Let's join together & be voters on Tues, Nov 3!

- Betsy

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ANALYSIS STRATEGY

	Volume Test	**Format Test**	**Message Test**
Research Question	What is the effect of 1 vs. 2. vs. 3 handwritten postcards?	What is the effect of handwritten postcards compared to standard printed voter report cards?	What is the effect of a social pressure message compared to a race-class narrative message?
Data Included	All Study 1 data	All Study 2 data	All data from Studies 1, 2, and 3, minus printed voter report card data

MAIN RESULTS

Voters in the experimental universe were...

...almost 50% people of color, including 29% Black and 14% Latinx. 58% were women. On average, voters had high partisanship scores and weren't necessarily consistent voters - only 43% voted in 2016

Modeled Black	29%
Modeled Latinx	14%
Modeled White	51%
Modeled Other POC	4%
Women	58%
Men	39%
Turnout Score (mean)	55
Partisanship Score (mean)	91
Age (mean)	42
Voted 2018	32%
Voted 2016	43%
N	9,527,618

Combining all 3 studies, the program increased turnout by 0.07pp (±0.06)

At this scale, this translated to thousands voting in an extremely salient election who wouldn't have voted otherwise

Turnout rate by pooled treatment
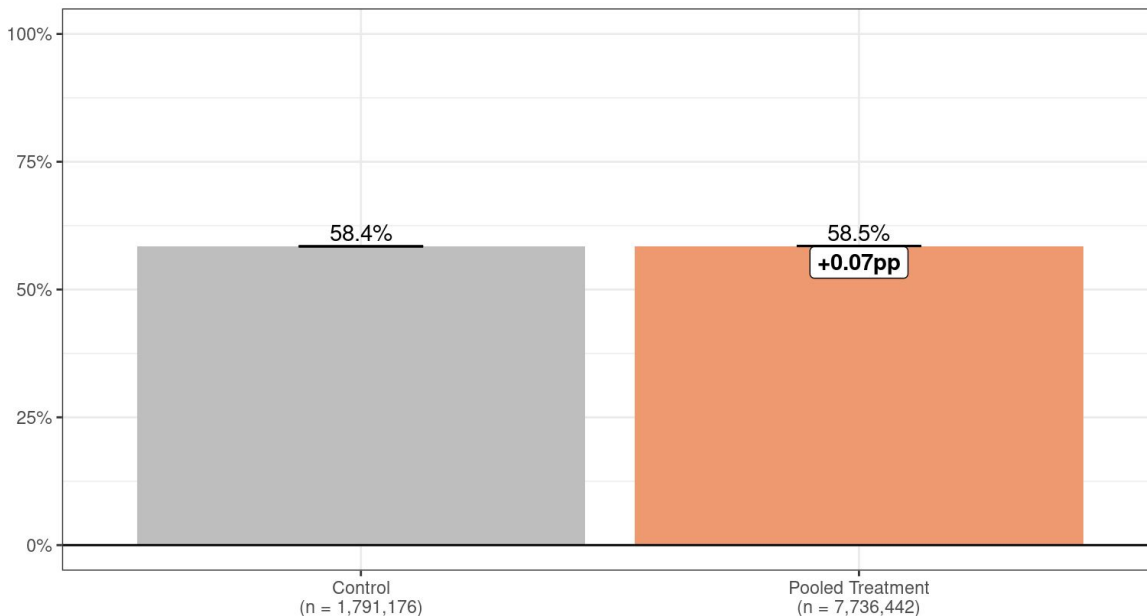
58.4%

58.5%

+0.07pp

Control
(n = 1,791,176)

Pooled Treatment
(n = 7,736,442)

The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States,
Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

The effect was entirely driven by the social pressure condition

SP increased turnout by 0.14pp (±0.07), while RCN had no effect on average (0 ±0.07)

At this level of statistical power, we have a lot of confidence in this finding

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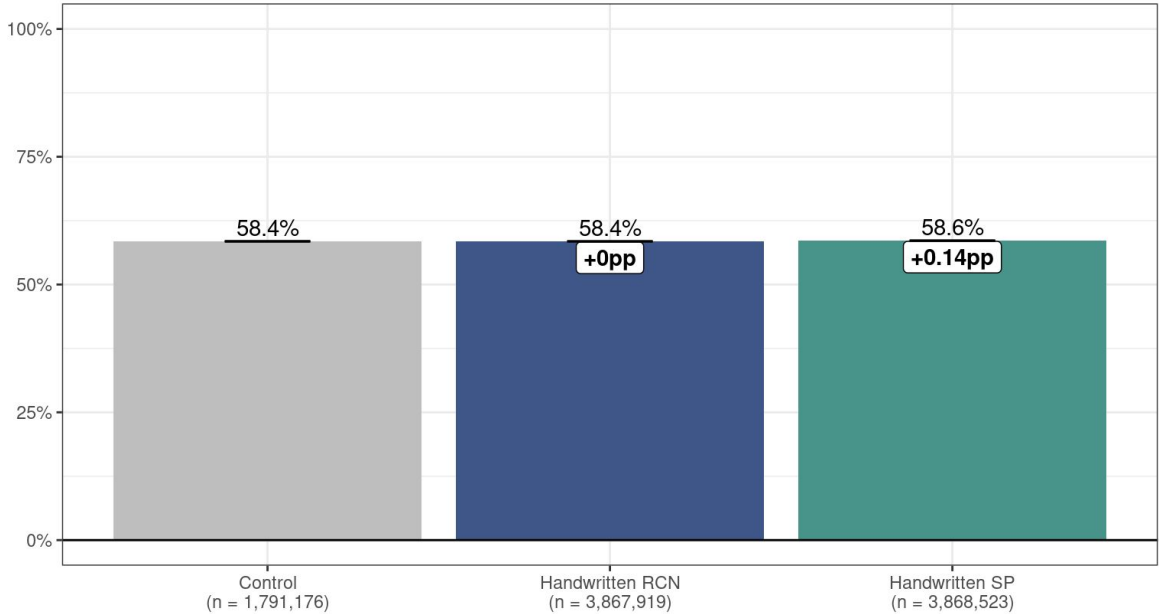
Turnout rate by message type
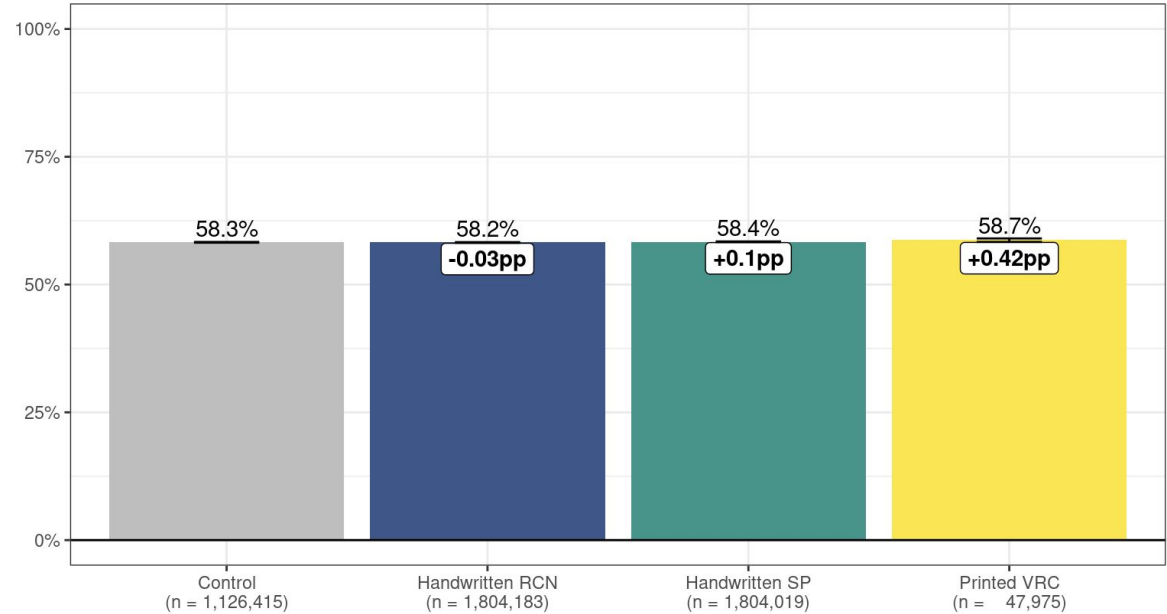

The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

Interestingly, 1 postcard was just as effective as 2 or 3

Typically, more is better, with diminishing returns. In this context, additional volume didn't appear to help

This may be because the postcards landed very close together in time

Turnout rate by mail volume
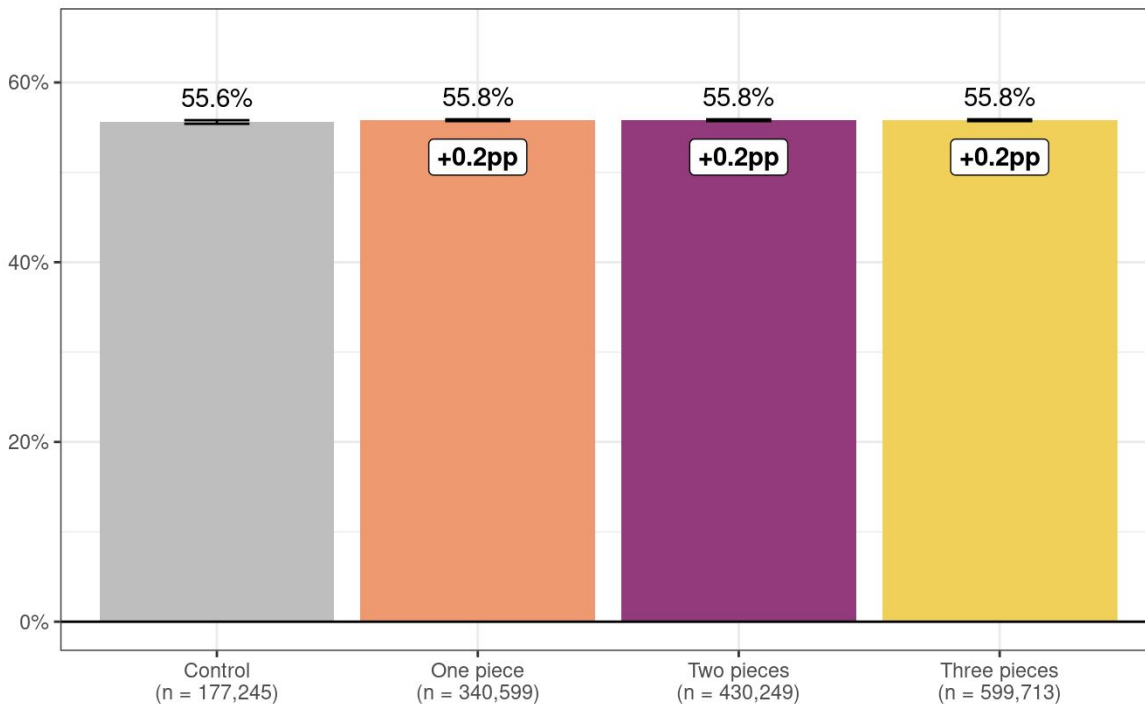
The Movement Cooperative, Indivisible Chicago Alliance, and Postcards to Swing States, 2020

Looking across both dimensions, it didn't matter the volume: social pressure was as or more effective than RCN

SP increased turnout by 0.2-0.5pp, compared to 0-0.2pp for RCN

Turnout rate by message and mail volume
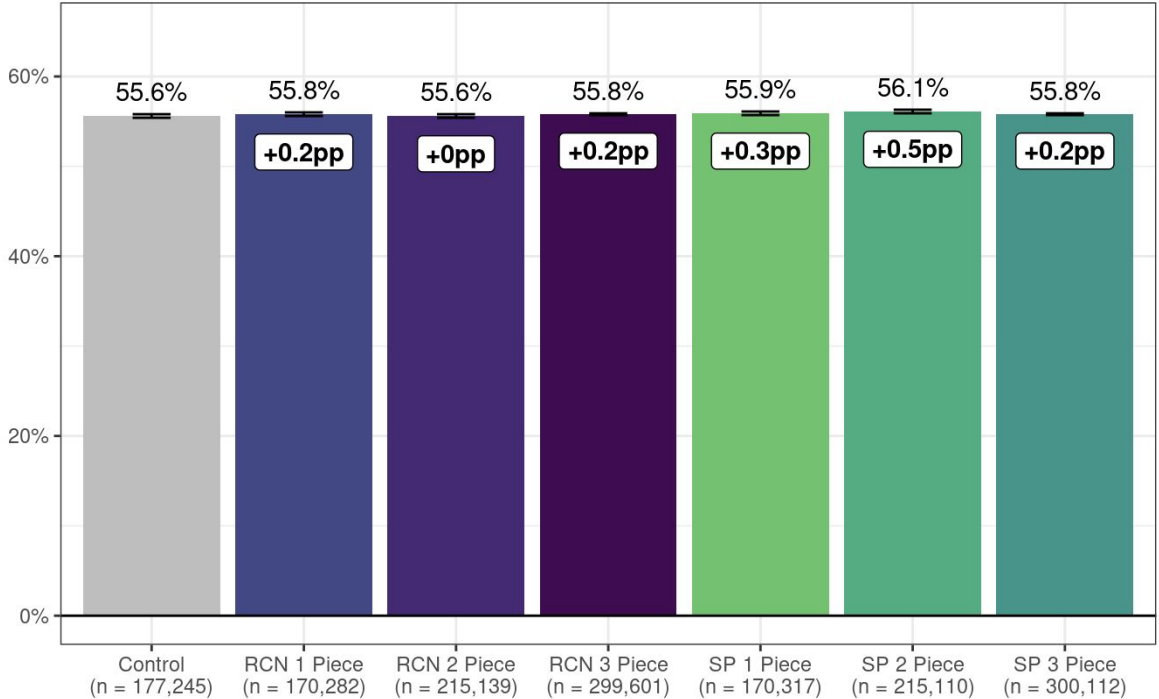
The Movement Cooperative, Indivisible Chicago Alliance, and Postcards to Swing States, 2020

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Study 2 showed that, all else equal, voter report cards (0.42pp ±0.35) were more effective than volunteer postcards (0.04pp ±0.08)

But as we demonstrate later, postcards were more cost-effective

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Turnout rate by mail format
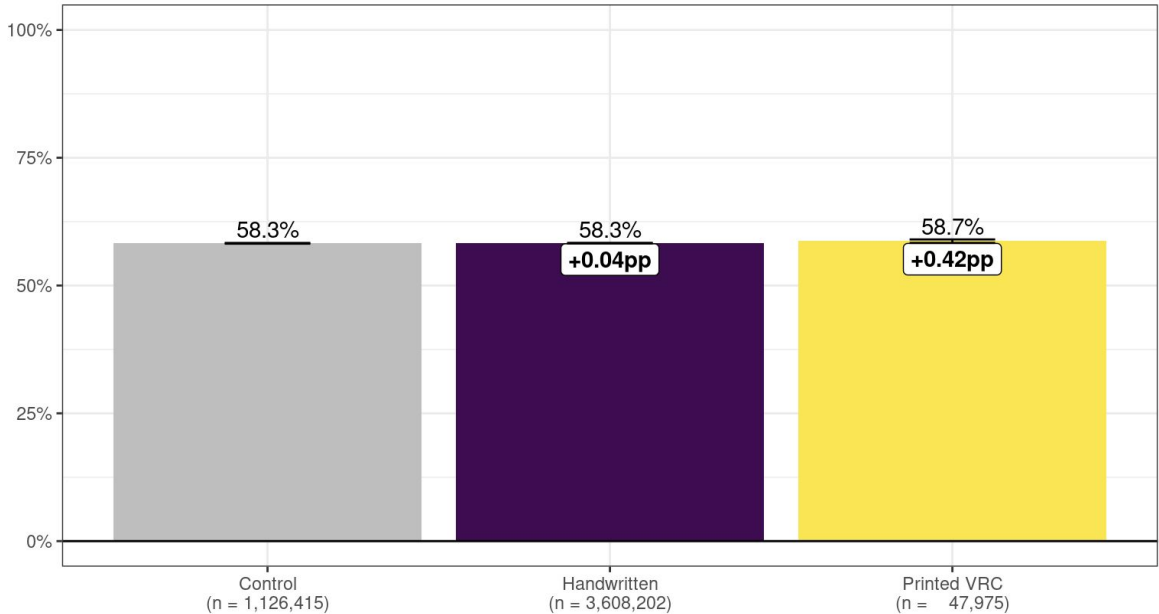
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States,
Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

Whether handwritten or printed, social pressure was more effective than handwritten RCN

This reinforces how uniquely effective social pressure messaging is in driving turnout in high-salience contexts

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Turnout rate by message and format

The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

The program mobilized between 2,800 and 8,000 net voters, driven entirely by social pressure postcards

Our best estimate is that it mobilized approximately 5,400 voters who wouldn't have voted otherwise

Size of SP treatment group	**3,868,523**
Effect on turnout	**+0.14pp**
Estimated voters added	**5,416**
Margin of error	**±2,617**

SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS

- In sum, **the program likely mobilized between 2,800 and 8,000 people to vote who otherwise wouldn't have**. Our best estimate is that it added approximately 5,400 voters

- **Overall, the program increased turnout by 0.07pp** (±0.06)

- **The effect was entirely driven by the social pressure message, which increased turnout by 0.14pp** (±0.07) and decisively outperformed the race-class message in this case

- Interestingly, **sending more mail didn't help** in this case

CONTEXTUALIZING THE EFFECT SIZE

- We have to understand the 0.14pp effect size in the context of *the scalability and cost of the program*

- By engaging over 100 thousand volunteers from all 50 states to write up to 15.7 million postcards to 7.7 million people in 14 states, this program has clearly demonstrated that it is very scalable

- Later, we also show that the program was more cost-effective than printed voter report cards sent in the same context

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CONTEXTUALIZING THE EFFECT SIZE

- We also have to understand the 0.14pp effect size in the context of the *electoral environment*

- According to Analyst Institute's meta-analysis, social pressure mail programs have historically produced a ~0.6pp effect on average (~0.2pp for non-social pressure mail). Our 0.42pp printed mail effect suggests 2020 was a harder-than-average context within which to mobilize additional voters

- Given the pandemic, if postcards had been sent earlier (in time to impact VBM sign-ups or early voting), the effect might have been bigger. By the time some voters received the first postcard, they could only vote in-person, which voters may not have felt comfortable doing

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SUBGROUP ANALYSIS RESULTS

The estimated effect was positive in 11 out of 14 states

Generally speaking, the program worked everywhere. Where the estimated effect was negative, we couldn't confidently distinguish the effect from zero

In general, the error is much larger state-by-state than in analysis pooling all data together

State	SP Effect (pp)	90% MoE	Est. Voters Added
Michigan	**0.32**	**±0.22**	1,574
Wisconsin	**0.3**	**±0.38**	581
Iowa	**0.29**	**±0.4**	263
Maine	**0.28**	**±0.6**	109
South Carolina	**0.28**	**±0.26**	706
Kentucky	**0.27**	**±0.3**	584
Pennsylvania	**0.2**	**±0.19**	796
North Carolina	**0.17**	**±0.24**	470
Florida	**0.11**	**±0.14**	790
Georgia	**0.06**	**±0.18**	338
Montana	**0.02**	**±0.92**	3
Texas	-0.07	±0.23	-242
Arizona	-0.15	±0.27	-293
Kansas	-0.44	±0.44	-316

The program effect was concentrated within voters 30 or older

Similarly, in the Wisconsin primary study, the effect was driven primarily by voters 40 or older
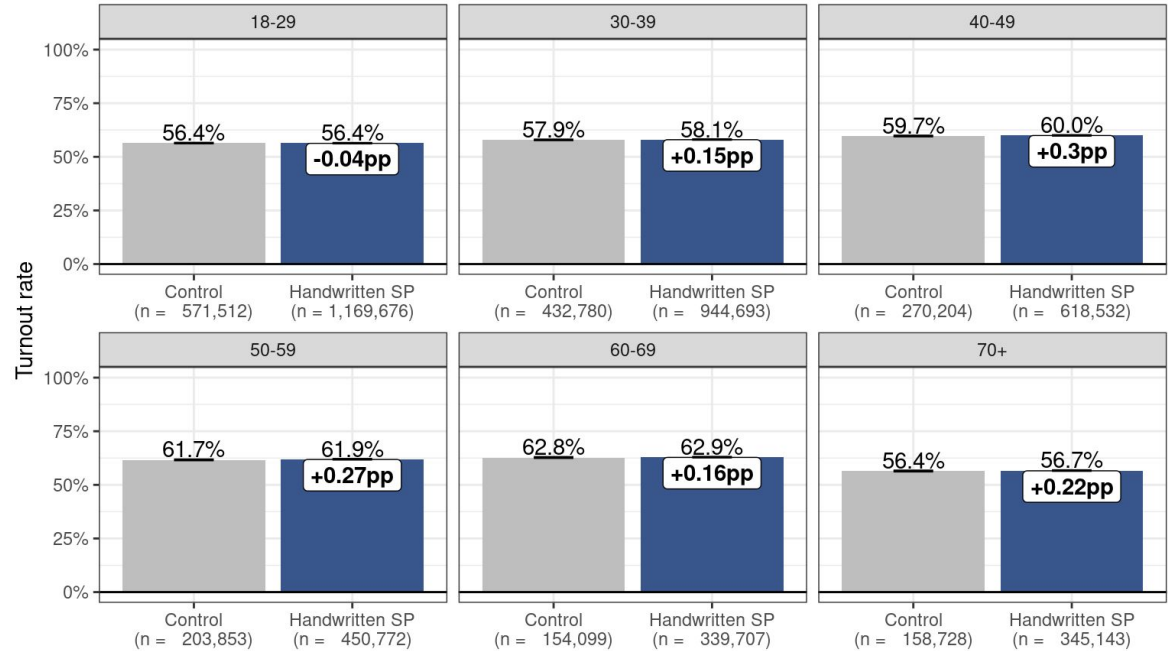
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

The effect was concentrated within voters whose turnout scores were below 60
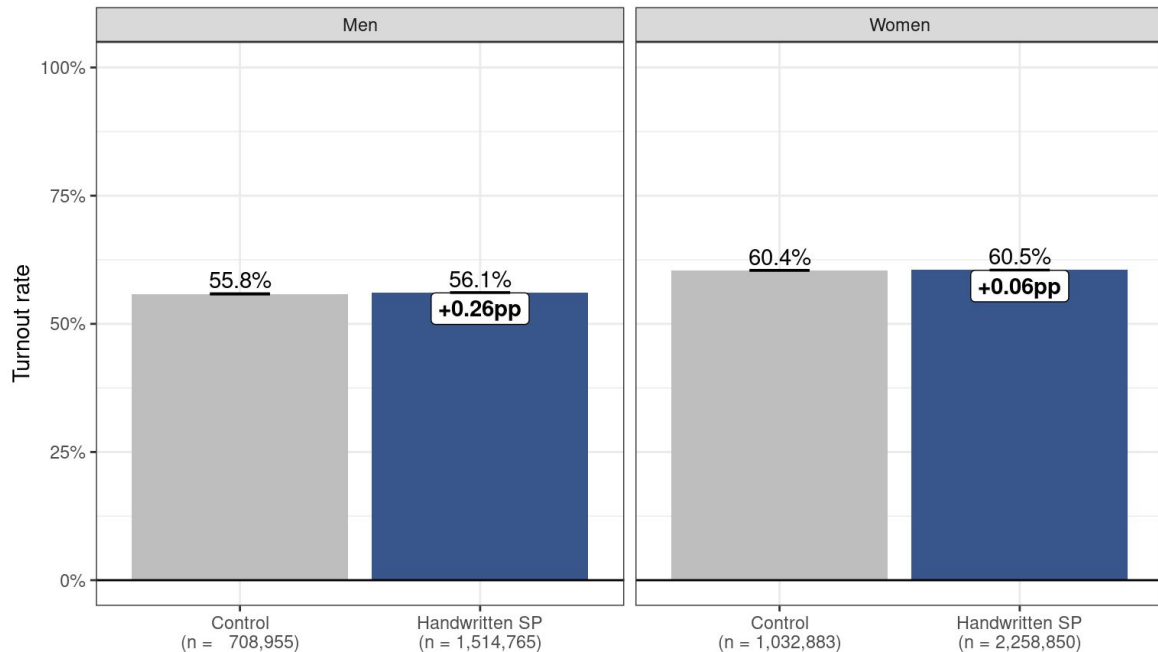
In the Wisconsin primary study, the program was effective across the entire turnout score — probably partly because it was a lower salience election
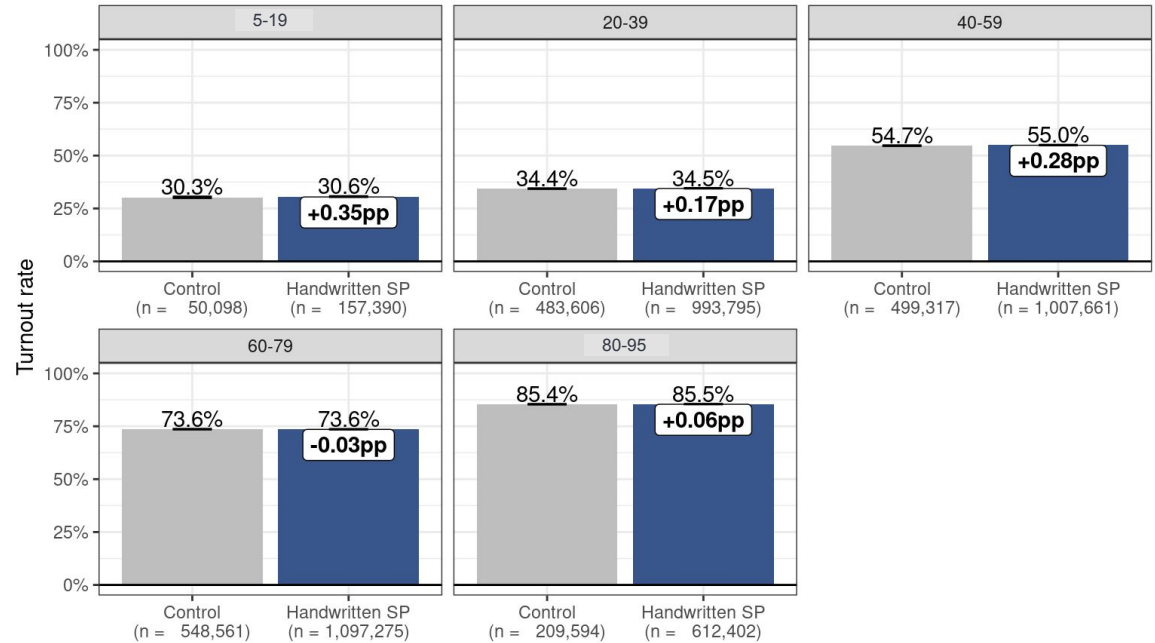
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

In this case, the program was more effective among men than women

We saw a different result in the Wisconsin primary test, where the effect was twice as large among women as men

	Men		Women	
Control (n = 708,955)	55.8%	Handwritten SP (n = 1,514,765) 56.1% +0.26pp	Control (n = 1,032,883) 60.4%	Handwritten SP (n = 2,258,850) 60.5% +0.06pp

The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

The program was equally effective across the relevant range of partisanship scores, between 70 and 100
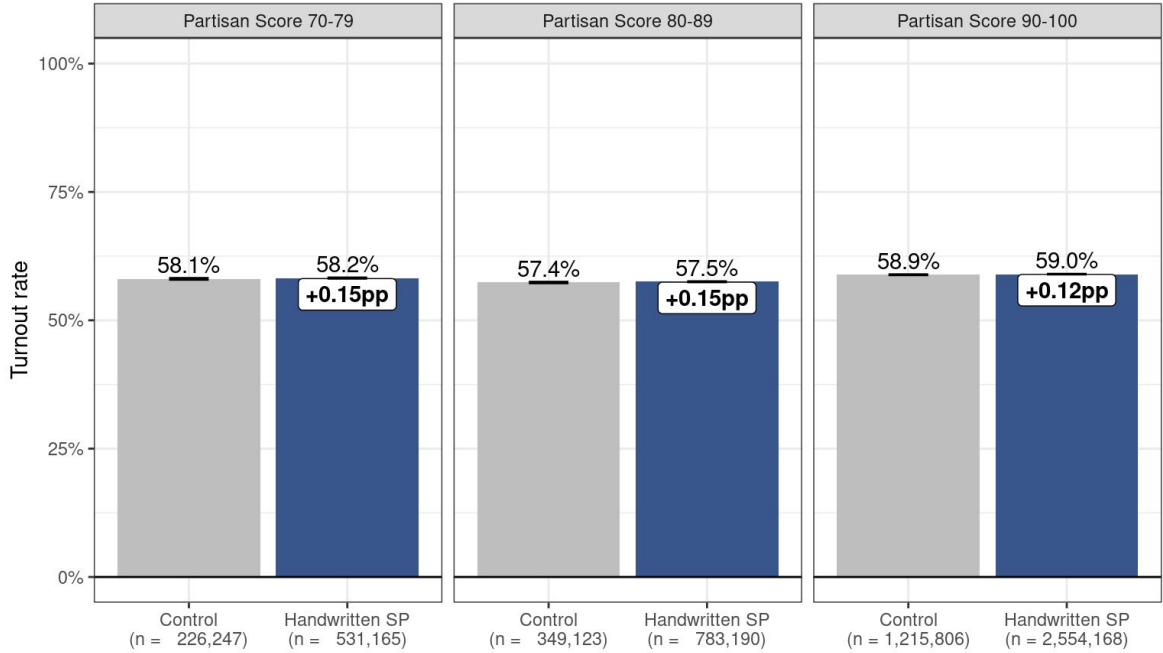
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

SUMMARY OF SUBGROUP ANALYSIS RESULTS

- The program was generally effective across the various states

- The effect was concentrated among voters older than 30, in line with our finding in the Wisconsin primary that younger voters were not as responsive to the program as older voters and in line with other research that finds that mail programs are more effective among older voters

- The effect was driven by voters with a turnout score under 60

- This program was more effective among men than women, but in the Wisconsin primary, the reverse was true

- The effect was similar across the partisanship score range 70-100

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DEEPER DIVE: MESSAGE RECEPTIVITY BY RACE

MOTIVATING QUESTION

- ***In terms of turnout**, how did different racial groups respond to each message: social pressure and race-class narrative?*

- Both messages are used by organizations with the intention of mobilizing a broad multi-racial coalition. Combined, these studies offer a tremendous amount of statistical evidence to answer this question in the context of a volunteer postcard program

- Usually we don't have enough sample size to get a read on the effectiveness of these messages on smaller racial groups, including Asian and Native American voters. Here, we do

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Social pressure probably increased turnout among Black voters, while RCN probably didn't

Social pressure increased turnout among modeled Black voters by 0.11pp (±0.1), while RCN did not increase turnout (-0.01pp ±0.1)
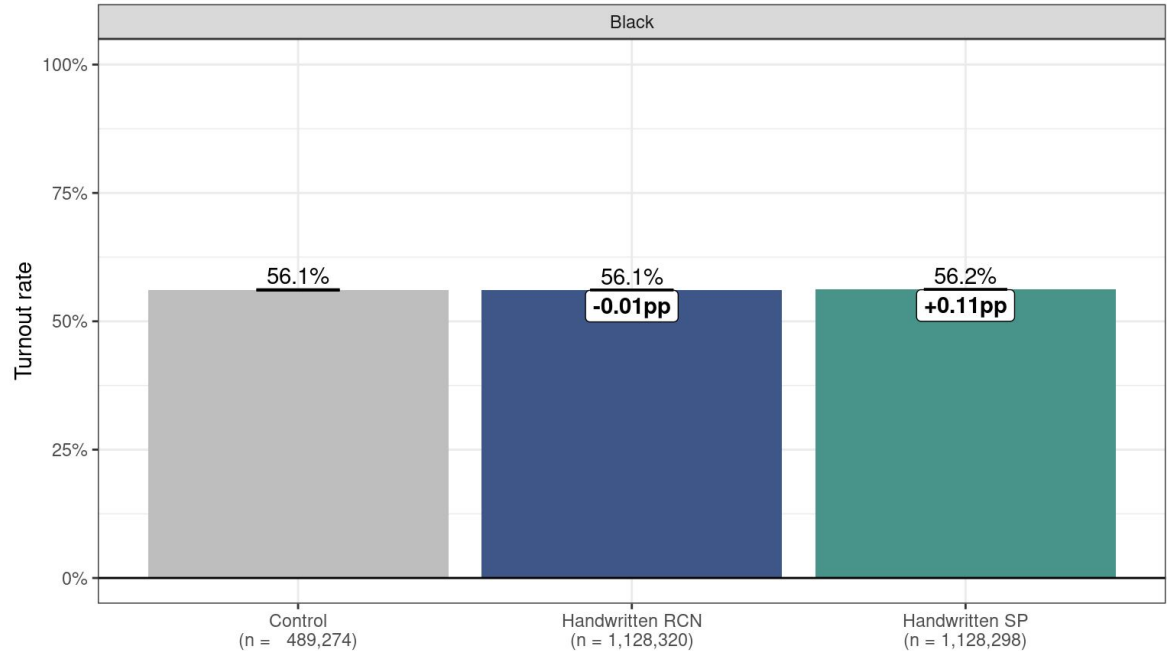
Black

56.1%	56.1% -0.01pp	56.2% +0.11pp

Control (n = 489,274) Handwritten RCN (n = 1,128,320) Handwritten SP (n = 1,128,298)

The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

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Among Native American voters, social pressure appeared to be very effective, while RCN didn't increase turnout

Social pressure increased turnout by 0.6pp (±1.1) among modeled Native voters, while RCN did not appear to increase turnout (-0.1pp ±1.1)
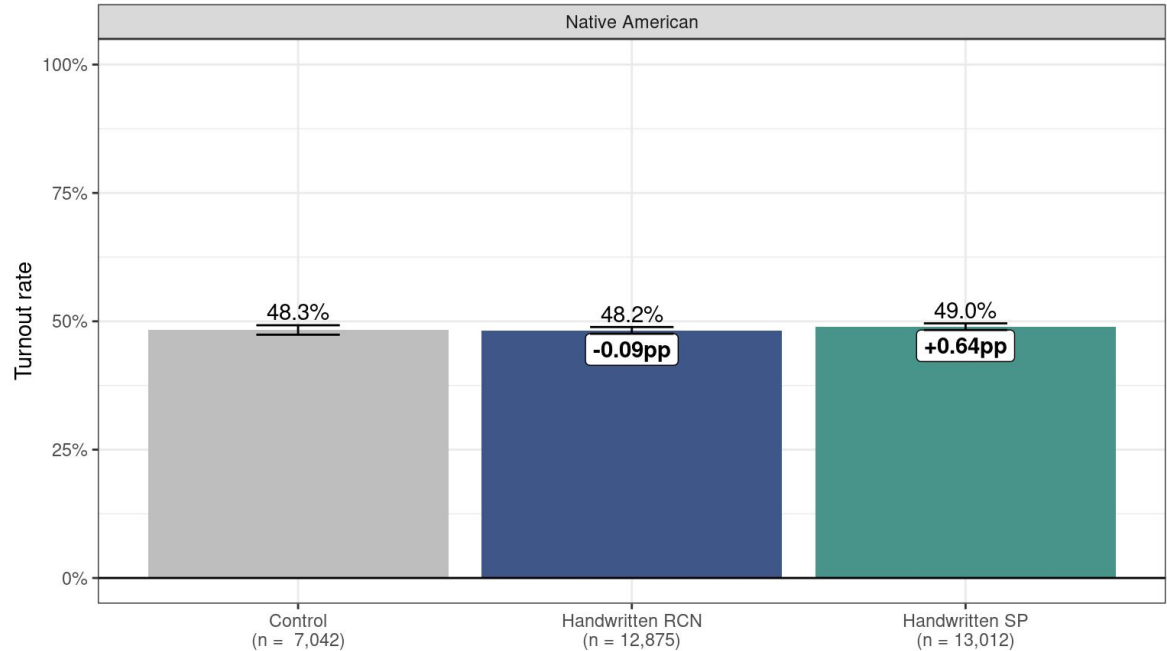
Native American

Turnout rate

| Control (n = 7,042) | Handwriten RCN (n = 12,875) | Handwriten SP (n = 13,012) |

48.3% — 48.2% (-0.09pp) — 49.0% (+0.64pp)

The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

Among Latinx voters, each message may have had a very small positive effective on turnout

Social pressure increased turnout among modeled Latinx voters by 0.07pp (±0.2), while RCN increased turnout by 0.04pp (±0.2)
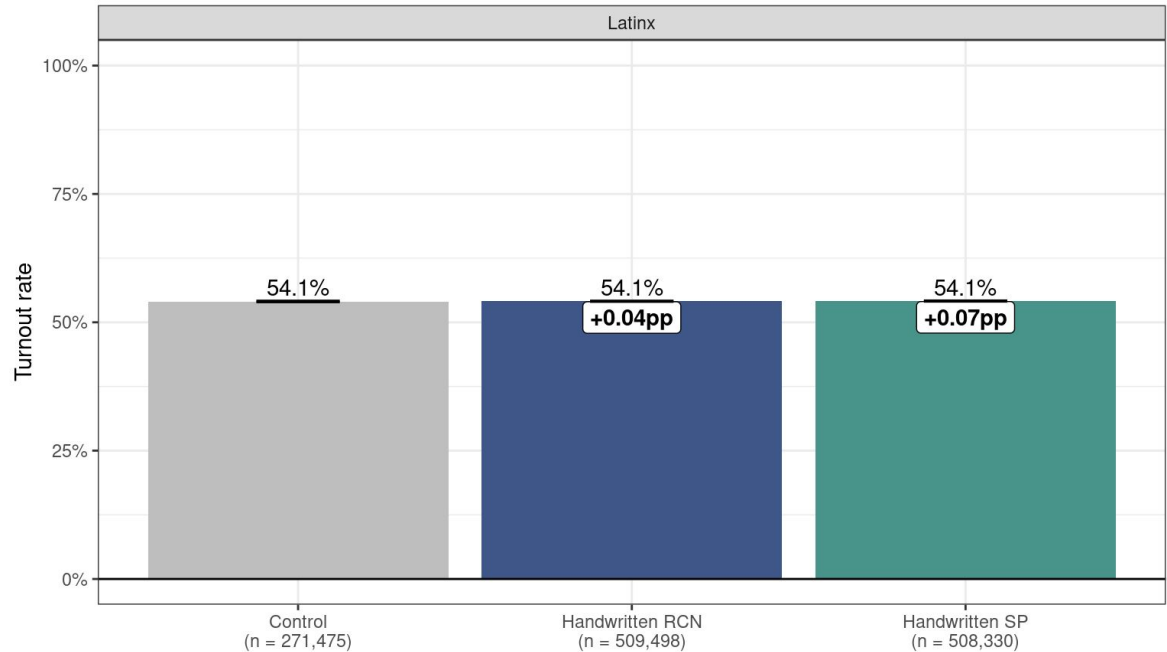
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

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Both social pressure and RCN worked well among Asian voters; RCN may have been a little bit more effective

Social pressure increased turnout among modeled Asian voters by 0.2pp (±0.5), while RCN increased turnout by 0.3pp (±0.5)
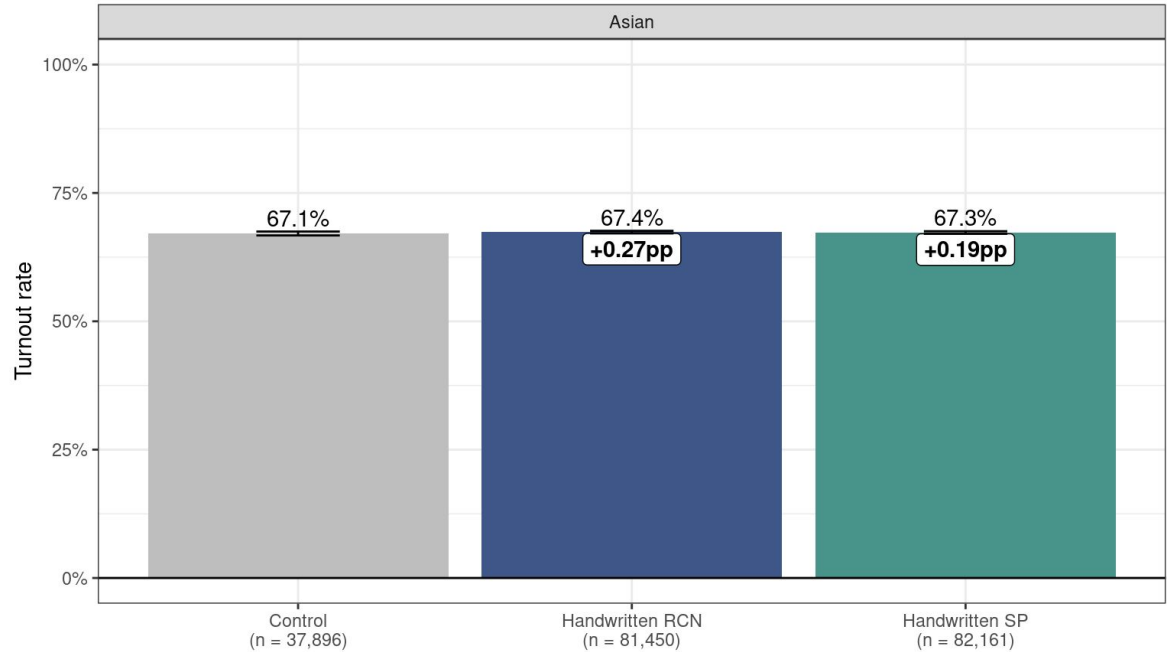
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

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Social pressure worked among white voters, while RCN didn't increase turnout

Social pressure increased turnout by 0.16pp (±0.1) among white voters, while RCN did not increase turnout (-0.02pp ±0.1)
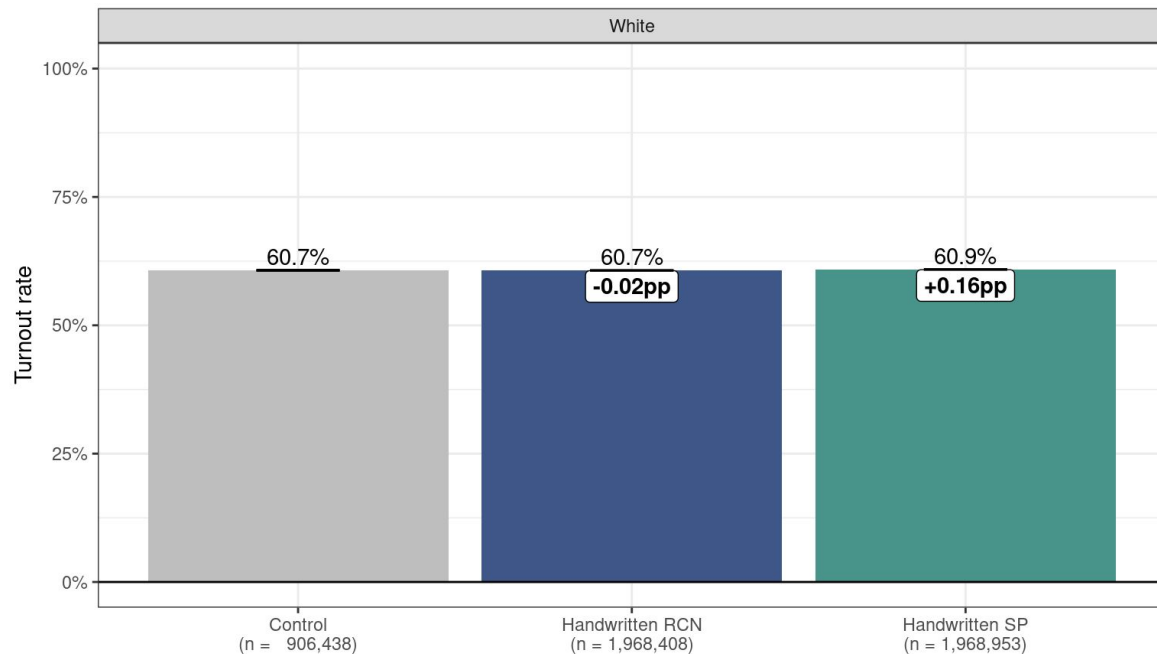
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

Both messages seemed to be very effective among voters categorized as "other race" on TargetSmart

Social pressure and RCN each increased turnout among voters modeled as "other race" by 0.3pp (±0.6)
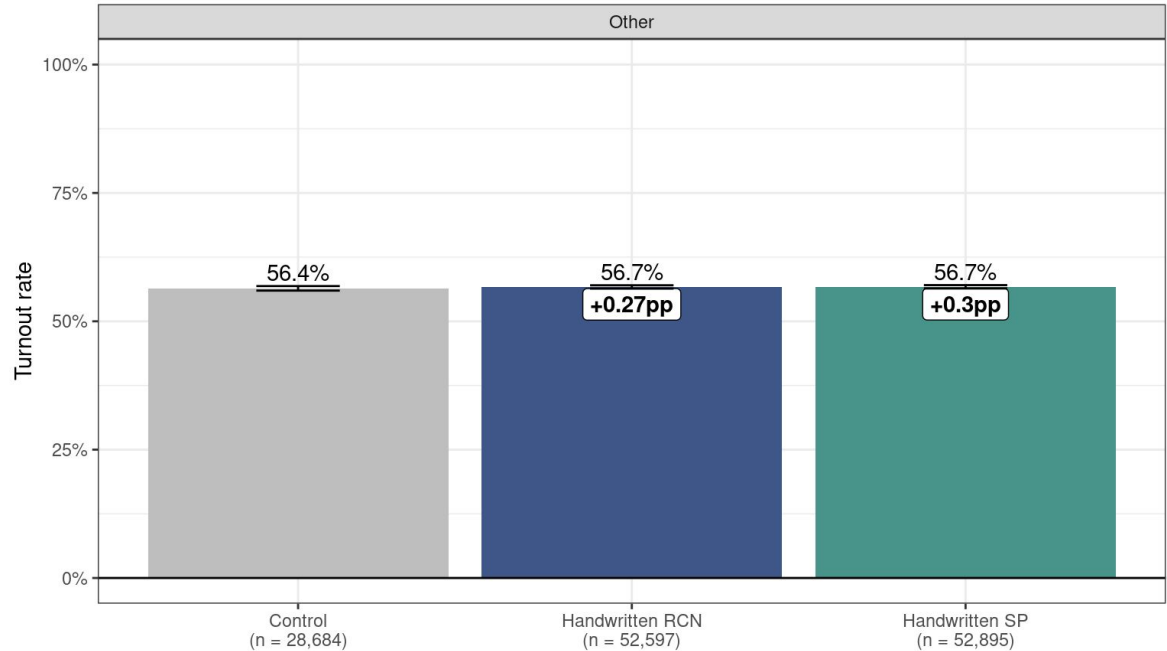
The Movement Cooperative, Postcards to Swing States, Indivisible Chicago, & the Progressive Turnout Project, 2021

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SUMMARY OF MESSAGE RESULTS BY RACE

- Social pressure appeared effective among Black, Native American, Asian, white, and "other race" (according to TargetSmart) voters — and appeared to be especially effective among Native American, Asian, and "other race" voters

- Race-class narrative appeared effective among Asian and "other race" voters, but probably didn't increase turnout among Black, Native American, or white voters

- Both messages may have had a very small positive effect on Latinx voters

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COST- AND TIME-EFFICIENCY

By engaging volunteer power, the handwritten social pressure program was nearly three times as cost-effective as a printed voter report card program run in the same context

We projected the cost of an at-scale voter report card program using estimates from a mail consultant, taking into consideration bulk discounts

	Program cost	Estimated number of voters added	Voters added per $1,000 spent (VPK)
Handwritten Social Pressure	**$374,321**	**5,416**	**14**
Printed Voter Report Card - As Conducted	**$62,416**	**201**	**3**
Printed Voter Report Card - At Scale (same N as handwritten SP program)	**$3,404,034**	**16,248**	**5**

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The social pressure postcard program likely generated between 1-3 voters per 100 volunteer hours

These scenarios consider that we can't know exactly how many postcards were ultimately written and sent

% of Postcards Written & Sent On Time	Effect Size	Estimated Minutes Per Postcard	Voters Added Per 100 Estimated Volunteer Hours
50%	+0.14pp	3	2.8
60%	+0.14pp	3	2.3
70%	+0.14pp	3	2.0
80%	+0.14pp	3	1.7
90%	+0.14pp	3	1.5
100%	+0.14pp	3	1.4

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SUMMARY OF COST- AND TIME-EFFICIENCY ANALYSIS

- **Handwritten social pressure postcards were nearly three times as cost-efficient as printed voter report cards (14 VPK versus 5)**

    - This is despite the fact that report cards are one of the most reliable GOTV tools available, and increased turnout by 0.4pp, compared to 0.1pp for handwritten

    - Why? Asking volunteers to pay for postage translated to millions of dollars in cost savings

- In terms of volunteer time, **social pressure postcards generated 1-3 additional voters per 100 volunteer hours spent**

CONTEXTUALIZING COST-EFFECTIVENESS

- According to Analyst Institute's meta-analysis, social pressure mail programs have historically added ~11 voters per $1,000 spent on average, while "other" mail programs have added ~5

- That a two-piece voter report card program here produced a VPK of 5 suggested a harder-than-typical GOTV environment or a harder-than-typical universe to mobilize. When understanding the 14 VPK figure, it is important to keep this in mind. The VPK likely would have been higher under more typical circumstances

- Meanwhile, in the Wisconsin primary test — a much easier environment within which to mobilize voters — the VPK was way higher: 55

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MAIN TAKEAWAYS

MAIN TAKEAWAYS: EFFICACY

- In the highly-salient 2020 election, handwritten social pressure postcards worked again, **mobilizing between 2,800 and 8,000 voters** who wouldn't have voted otherwise. Our best estimate: approximately 5,400 voters

- This program proved it could **scale extremely well**: in the 2020 general, over 100 thousand volunteers sent up to 15.7 million postcards to 7.8 million voters in 14 states. PTSS had volunteer capacity to write ~30 million postcards

- It was **very cost-effective, with a VPK of 14,** nearly three times that of a voter report card program run in the same context (5 VPK). The same program in the Wisconsin primary had a VPK of 55

  - While more expensive, the voter report card program had a larger effect size (0.4pp versus 0.1pp). With funding, it still had the potential to mobilize more voters

- In terms of volunteer time, between **1-3 voters** were **mobilized per 100 volunteer hours**

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MAIN TAKEAWAYS: MESSAGING & VOLUME

- An extraordinary amount of statistical evidence shows that the turnout effect was entirely explained by the social pressure message. Overall, the race-class narrative message didn't increase turnout

    - Importantly, this doesn't mean the race-class narrative doesn't work. Race-class narrative was designed with many outcomes in mind, not just turnout. A RCN message with a stronger voting frame, one that includes best practices like social pressure, may be more effective

    - In the Wisconsin primary test, social pressure outperformed plan-making

- In this context, sending more postcards wasn't needed; just one produced the same effect as three

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MAIN TAKEAWAYS: SUBGROUP ANALYSIS

- The **social pressure postcard program** was generally **effective across contexts and populations,** with notable nuances:
  - The effect was concentrated among voters **older than 30,** in line with previous research
  - It was concentrated among voters with turnout score under 60; however, in the Wisconsin primary test, it worked across the turnout score
  - It may have been **especially effective among Asian, Native American, and "other race" voters**; meanwhile, it may have had a very small effect among Latinx voters
  - In this case, the effect was larger among men than women; however, in the Wisconsin primary, the reverse was true

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Keep doing this!

- Use a short social pressure message, which has consistently shown itself to be most effective*:

    - *"[VOTER NAME], Thank you for being a previous/first time voter! Who you vote for is secret, but whether you vote is public information. Vote Tuesday, November 3rd! - [VOLUNTEER NAME]"*

- Send just 1-2 pieces to a broad universe

- When volunteer capacity is limited, focus this program on voters age 30 or older

*In the WI primary election test, the short social pressure message increased turnout by 0.9pp, while the long social pressure message increased turnout by 0.3pp. The message used in this test was more similar to the long social pressure message

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FUTURE RESEARCH

- Are volunteer postcard programs effective for other political purposes — e.g., persuasion, action mobilization, membership recruitment?

- Qualitative research: What are volunteers' experiences and preferences with the program? How can we keep them engaged and coming back?

- What are the most effective uses of volunteer hours, while taking into account volunteers' personal preferences and skill sets?

- How can this program be run in such a way that it builds long-term political power over time?

- Is a RCN message with a stronger voting frame more effective?

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THANK YOU

Elizabeth Zack, Chanita Intawan, and Leo Liu

APPENDIX

CREATIVES

Printed Voter Report Card

The printed voter report cards used social pressure, reminding voters that their vote history is public and letting them know how their record compares to their neighbors

Printed Voter Report Card

Voters who turned 18 after the 2018 election were delivered voter report cards that thanked them for registering; they were not compared to their neighbors

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DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Volume test descriptive statistics

Voters in this experimental universe were largely white. 60% were women. Voters had high partisanship scores and somewhat low turnout and vote history scores.

Modeled Black	**23%**
Modeled Non-Black POC	**5%**
Modeled White	**68%**
Women	**60%**
Men	**37%**
Turnout Score (mean)	55
Partisanship Score (mean)	88
Age (mean)	43
Voted 2018	**38%**
Voted 2016	**46%**
N	1,547,806

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Handwritten vs. printed descriptive statistics

In this experimental universe, almost 50% of voters were modeled people of color, including 22% Black voters and 19% Latinx voters. 56% of the universe were women. Voters had high partisanship scores and somewhat low turnout scores and vote history - only 40% voted in 2016.

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Modeled Black	**22%**
Modeled Latinx	**19%**
Modeled White	**52%**
Modeled Other POC	**5%**
Women	**56%**
Men	**40%**
Turnout Score (mean)	**52**
Partisanship Score (mean)	**91**
Age (mean)	**40**
Voted 2018	**24%**
Voted 2016	**40%**
N	4,782,592