

THE EFFECT ON TURNOUT OF MOBILIZATION CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATIONS
ADDRESSING BALLOT SECRECY CONCERNS: A REPLICATION EXPERIMENT

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Abstract

Given the persistence of public doubts about the integrity of ballot secrecy, which depress turnout, two prior experiments have shown precise evidence that both official governmental and unofficial mobilization campaigns providing assurances about ballot secrecy increases turnout among recently registered nonvoters. To assess whether these findings replicate in other political settings, we describe a replication experiment where a non-governmental, non-partisan mobilization campaign sent similar treatment mailings to recently registered nonvoters during the 2014 general election in Mississippi. We find that sending mobilization mailings containing assurances about ballot secrecy protections has no effect on turnout rates in this setting, which is characterized by an unusually low baseline turnout rate. These results are consistent with past research concluding that nonpartisan GOTV mail has very weak effects among very low turnout propensity registrants, and suggest that there are heterogeneous effects of ballot secrecy treatments associated with subjects' characteristics and the electoral context.

Keywords: field experiment; ballot secrecy; voter turnout; replication

Doubts about the integrity of ballot secrecy protections are prevalent among nonvoters (Gerber et al. 2012; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling and Hill 2013, p. 541, Figure 1) and has been linked to depressed levels of political participation (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling and Hill 2013; Gerber, Huber, Doherty and Dowling 2013). Accordingly, there has been considerable interest among practitioners and scholars alike in whether Get Out the Vote (GOTV) appeals that provide assurances about ballot secrecy protections are effective at increasing turnout levels among registered nonvoters.

To date, there are two field experiments that provide precise evidence that such treatments, which encourage individuals to vote and communicate assurances about ballot secrecy protections, are effective at increasing turnout among recently registered nonvoters regardless of whether the appeal is sent by an official governmental source (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling and Hill 2013) or from a non-governmental and non-partisan source (Gerber et al. 2016).¹ Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling and Hill (2013) report findings from a field experiment conducted in Connecticut in 2010, in which sending a letter from the Secretary of State providing information about ballot secrecy protections increases participation levels among registered nonvoters by about 3.8 percentage points ($p < .01$, two-tailed; $n = 69,488$) when compared to registered nonvoters in a placebo condition that is sent, from the same source, election-related mail that does not address ballot secrecy concerns. Gerber et al. (2016) examine whether nearly identical ballot secrecy treatments are effective at increasing turnout levels when sent from a non-governmental source. Analyzing data from a large field experiment targeting recently registered nonvoters in six states² in the 2014 general election, Gerber et al. (2016) report that sending the ballot secrecy treatment mailing increases turnout levels by about 1 percentage point among registered nonvoters ($p < .01$, two-tailed; $n = 281,929$) when compared to a control group that was sent no mailing.

To assess whether the results from these studies replicate in other political settings, this article reports findings from a replication field experiment in which a non-governmental and non-partisan

¹An earlier study by Gerber et al. (2014) also offers suggestive evidence of positive effects when the appeal is sent from a non-governmental source, but this study was statistically underpowered to detect small but true effects.

²These states are Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan, North Carolina, and Texas.

mobilization campaign randomly sent GOTV appeals addressing ballot secrecy concerns to recently registered nonvoters in Mississippi during the 2014 general election. We find no effect of sending the ballot secrecy treatment mailing on turnout levels when compared to a control group that was sent no mailing. The remainder of this essay describes the experimental design, presents results, and discusses the implications of the findings and directions for future research.

Design

We designed and analyze data from a replication field experiment conducted in Mississippi during the 2014 general election. This was a low salience election, as there were no competitive statewide or congressional races and no controversial initiatives on the ballot in the 2014 general election in Mississippi. In the experiment, a consulting firm specializing in direct voter contact programs randomly sent GOTV appeals addressing ballot secrecy concerns to recently registered nonvoters.

The experiment proceeded as follows. First, the firm obtained a list of eligible Mississippi registrants from an outside private vendor that regularly collects and standardizes voter file records from the state and merges that data with vote history and consumer file records. The private vendor processed that file and verified registrants' addresses using a National Change of Address filter.

Second, the firm selected the study population of recently registered nonvoters from this list of registrants. Consistent with existing experiments in the literature (Gerber et al. 2014; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling and Hill 2013), recently registered nonvoters are defined as individuals who have never voted in any prior election, who had registered to vote since the general election 6 years prior, had not ever voted, including not voting in at least one high-salience presidential election. Applying this definition to this study, we operationalize subjects as individuals who reside in and are registered to vote in Mississippi, who registered to vote between November 5, 2008 (the day after the 2008 general election) and before October 1, 2012, and who never voted in any prior elections. Subjects are randomly selected from households such that no two subjects are from the same household. This yields 12,738 subjects in the experiment, who are predominantly black

(77.6%), female (43%), and have a high predicted likelihood of being Democratic (mean=84.6%, s.d.=10.5%).³

Subjects were randomly assigned to a treatment group (n=8,704) that was sent a GOTV appeal addressing ballot secrecy concerns, which we describe in greater detail below, or to a control group (n=4,034) that was sent no mailing. The randomization procedure occurred at the subject-level. A randomization check regressing treatment assignment on observed covariates confirms that the covariates are not jointly prognostic of treatment ($F=.8$, $p=.62$) and we infer that the randomization procedure is valid.⁴

The ballot secrecy treatment mailer was sent five days before the election by the Mississippi Center for Voter Information, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization. The treatment mailing is a letter that begins by reminding subjects about when Election Day is and when the polls are open. The letter continues by providing assurances about ballot secrecy protections that are phrased identically to those tested in prior experiments. Specifically, these assurances are designed to mitigate three types of fears citizens might have about ballot secrecy. First, the treatment letter assures subjects that their vote choices cannot be traced back to their name. Second, the treatment letter assures subjects that voting booths are private places to vote. Third, the letter assures subjects that voting is free of intimidation from polling workers or campaigns. The treatment mailing concludes by directing subjects to the Mississippi Secretary of State for more information about the voting process and urging the subject to vote and participate in the democratic process. A sample mailing containing the full treatment text is provided in the online Supplemental Appendix.

Following the election, we obtained participation records for all subjects from the same vendor. The outcome variable of interest is turnout in the 2014 general election, which is coded 1 if the subject voted and 0 otherwise.

³The Democratic likelihood score is a proprietary measure provided by the private vendor and is modeled as a function of pre-treatment subject characteristics including primary vote history and demographic characteristics.

⁴Details about the randomization check and a balance table are presented in the online Supplemental Appendix.

Results

We use ordinary least squares to estimate a weighted regression of turnout in 2014 on treatment assignment and a battery of observed demographic covariates, which include age, gender indicators, race and ethnicity indicators, the number of days between Election Day and their voter registration date, and indicators to denote if the value of age or days since registering to vote are missing.⁵ Weights are defined as the inverse of the probability of assignment to the observed treatment assignment.

Table 1: Sending the Ballot Secrecy Treatment Mailing Has No Effect on Turnout in the 2014 Election

Variable	(1) Weighted and With Covariates	(2) Weighted and Without Covariates	(3) Unweighted and With Covariates	(4) Unweighted and Without Covariates
Ballot Secrecy Treatment (1=Yes)	-0.00049 (0.00224)	-0.00036 (0.00224)	-0.00050 (0.00224)	-0.00036 (0.00224)
Constant	0.03261 (0.00764)	0.01425 (0.00127)	0.03237 (0.00770)	0.01425 (0.00127)
Observations	12,738	12,738	12,738	12,738
Weighted?	Yes	Yes	No	No
With Covariates?	Yes	No	Yes	No
Control Group Mean Turnout	0.0142	0.0142	0.0142	0.0142

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses. The omitted comparison group is the control group. Estimates on covariates are not shown in this table. We refer the reader to the online Supplemental Appendix for a table showing the full set of regression estimates.

Results are shown in Table 1. We focus in particular on the first column, which presents the estimates from our primary and preferred specification. The baseline mean turnout rate in the control group is unusually low at 1.4 percent. When compared to the control group, sending the ballot secrecy treatment has a negative but virtually null effect on turnout that is statistically indistinguishable from zero (estimate=-0.0005; s.e.=0.002; $p = 0.828$, two-tailed). The remaining columns show that this main finding is not materially affected by the use of covariate adjustment or inverse probability weights.

⁵We impute missing values for all variables using the sample mean of that variable.

Discussion

This null result contrasts against the positive effects of ballot secrecy treatments reported in previous large-scale experiments. We speculate *ex post* that this null result may be due to heterogeneous treatment effects associated with characteristics of the sample and/or electoral context, and we analyze ancillary data to assess the plausibility of this claim.

First, we assess the similarity of the control group in this study to comparable control groups in experimental studies fielded at the same time. Specifically, we compare the baseline turnout rate in the control group in this study (in Mississippi) to state-specific control group turnout rates in Gerber et al. (2016), which also tests the effect of non-governmental ballot secrecy GOTV appeals on recently registered nonvoters (which are defined similarly) in states other than Mississippi in the same general election in 2014. Whereas the state-specific baseline turnout rates in the experiment by Gerber et al. (2016) range from 10% to 23%, the control group turnout rate in this study is unusually low at 1.4%.⁶ This suggests that even among the pool of recently registered nonvoters, the Mississippi sample had unusually low turnout. In light of prior experimental findings by Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling and Hill (2013) that GOTV appeals addressing ballot secrecy concerns are more effective than standard GOTV appeals, the findings from this study also suggest that for the sample of recently registered nonvoters in Mississippi examined in this study, standard GOTV appeals would also be ineffective at increasing turnout. More generally, the null result is consistent with findings in the field experimental literature on voter mobilization that nonpartisan GOTV mail has weak or no effects among voters with extremely low propensities to vote (Green and Gerber 2015, 59).

Second, we assess differences in state-specific political contexts during the 2014 general election to explore possible contextual factors that may explain why subjects' untreated and treated mean potential outcomes appear virtually identical during the 2014 general election in Mississippi

⁶This is unusually low even when compared to Mississippi's low statewide turnout rate of 20.8% in 2014. The statewide turnout rate in 2014 is calculated by dividing the total number of ballots cast for the highest office with an election (630,858 for the U.S. Senate election) by the total number of registered voters in the state (3,040,740 registrants). Data are from the Mississippi Secretary of State.

and appear to be different across the six states in Gerber et al. (2016). One possible explanation is that subjects may be more difficult to mobilize if treated during elections with no competitive or controversial contests. This would be true if subjects can be mobilized only if they believe they have an instrumental reason to vote (e.g., they perceive that there is a social choice that they should be weighing in on). In 2014, there were no competitive statewide or congressional races and no controversial initiatives on the ballot in Mississippi, whereas in each of the six studies examined in the experiment by Gerber et al. (2016) there was either a contested Senate or gubernatorial election or at least one ballot initiative that was potentially controversial.

Taken together, the results suggest two important avenues for future research. First, additional experimental replication is needed to amass a sampling distribution of the effects of mobilization campaigns addressing ballot secrecy concerns on turnout and to understand the generalizability of existing findings. Second, additional research is needed to assess whether the effects of such mobilization appeals depend on specific features of subjects' electoral context that might affect the likelihood a recently registered nonvoter becomes a marginal voter if they are treated.

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Supplemental Appendix for:
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FOR ONLINE PUBLICATION ONLY

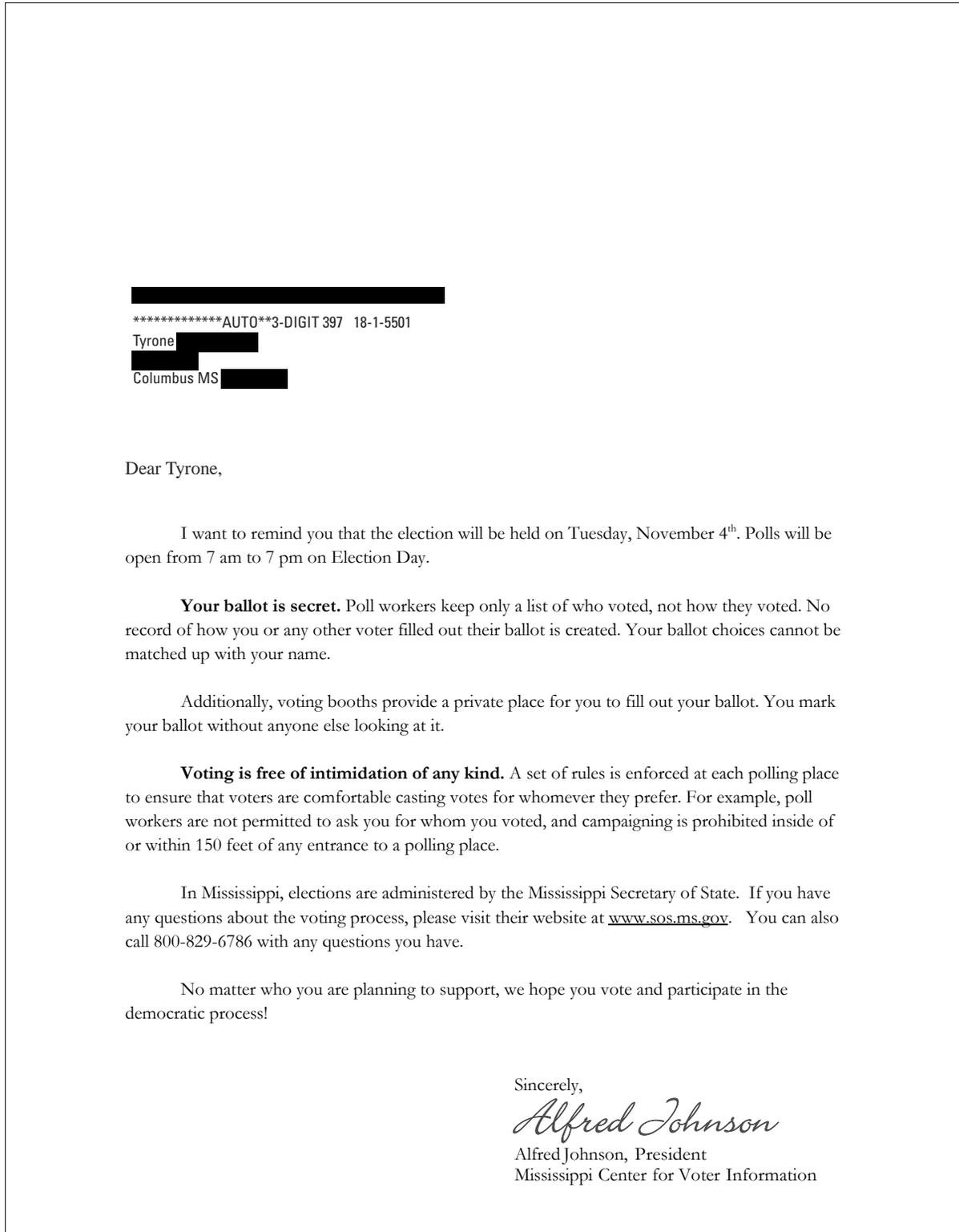
This appendix contains the following material:

A: Sample Treatment Mailing

B: Additional Tables

A Sample Treatment Mailing

Figure A1: Sample Ballot Secrecy Treatment Mailing



B Additional Tables

Table A1: Randomization Check. This table presents OLS estimates from a regression of treatment assignment on observed covariates, with and without inverse probability weights. At the bottom of the table reports the F-statistic and p-value from a test of the null hypothesis that all the coefficients are equal to zero. We fail to reject the null hypothesis that the observed covariates are jointly prognostic of treatment assignment and infer that the randomization procedure did not fail ($F = .8, p = .62$ for the weighted model).

Variables	(1) Weighted	(2) Unweighted
Age	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Gender: Female (1=Yes)	-0.004 (0.010)	-0.003 (0.009)
Gender: Unknown (1=Yes)	-0.022 (0.014)	-0.019 (0.013)
Race/Ethnicity: Black (1=Yes)	0.006 (0.011)	0.005 (0.010)
Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic (1=Yes)	-0.006 (0.047)	-0.005 (0.044)
Race/Ethnicity: Other (1=Yes)	0.007 (0.048)	0.006 (0.045)
Days Since Registering to Vote	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Missing Age (1=Yes)	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.005 (0.009)
Missing Days Since Registering to Vote (1=Yes)	-0.501 (0.414)	-0.317 (0.329)
Constant	0.543*** (0.030)	0.354*** (0.027)
Observations	12,738	12,738
R-squared	0.001	0.000
F-statistic	0.800	0.650
F-stat p-value	0.620	0.760

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A2: Balance Table.

Variable	Control	Treatment
Age	40.2793 [10.2628]	40.1359 [10.2495]
Gender: Female (1=Yes)	0.429 [.495]	0.4308 [.4953]
Gender: Unknown (1=Yes)	0.1484 [.3556]	0.1393 [.3463]
Race/Ethnicity: Black (1=Yes)	0.7748 [.4177]	0.7786 [.4152]
Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic (1=Yes)	0.0093 [.096]	0.0089 [.0941]
Race/Ethnicity: Other (1=Yes)	0.0088 [.0936]	0.0089 [.0941]
Days Since Registering to Vote	1448.498 [326.6446]	1440.843 [317.7326]
Missing Age (1=Yes)	0.6374 [.4808]	0.6301 [.4828]
Missing Days Since Registering to Vote (1=Yes)	0.0002 [.0152]	0 [0]
Observations	8704	4034

Cells present weighted means and weighted standard deviations in brackets.

Table A3: Sending the Ballot Secrecy Treatment Mailing Has No Effect on Turnout in the 2014 Election. This table presents the full set of regression estimates.

Variable	(1) Weighted and With Covariates	(2) Weighted and Without Covariates	(3) Unweighted and With Covariates	(4) Unweighted and Without Covariates
Ballot Secrecy Treatment (1=Yes)	-0.00049 (0.00224)	-0.00036 (0.00224)	-0.00050 (0.00224)	-0.00036 (0.00224)
Age	-0.00010 (0.00012)		-0.00008 (0.00012)	
Gender: Female (1=Yes)	0.00249 (0.00243)		0.00077 (0.00230)	
Gender: Unknown (1=Yes)	0.00043 (0.00344)		-0.00148 (0.00306)	
Race/Ethnicity: Black (1=Yes)	-0.00094 (0.00281)		-0.00132 (0.00270)	
Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic (1=Yes)	-0.01401*** (0.00257)		-0.01425*** (0.00247)	
Race/Ethnicity: Other (1=Yes)	-0.00827 (0.00690)		-0.00619 (0.00908)	
Days Since Registering to Vote	-0.00001** (0.00000)		-0.00001** (0.00000)	
Missing Age (1=Yes)	-0.00648*** (0.00249)		-0.00758*** (0.00237)	
Missing Days Since Registering to Vote (1=Yes)	-0.01420*** (0.00447)		-0.01629*** (0.00449)	
Constant	0.03261*** (0.00764)	0.01425*** (0.00127)	0.03237*** (0.00770)	0.01425*** (0.00127)
Observations	12,738	12,738	12,738	12,738
Weighted?	Yes	Yes	No	No
With Covariates?	Yes	No	Yes	No
Control Group Mean Turnout	0.0142	0.0142	0.0142	0.0142

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1