

THE COMPARATIVE EFFECTIVENESS ON TURNOUT OF POSITIVELY VERSUS  
NEGATIVELY FRAMED VOTER MOBILIZATION APPEALS

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## **Abstract**

An ongoing debate in political science is whether mobilization appeals encouraging voting are more effective when framed positively, by highlighting the desirable behavior of a referent and encouraging consistent behavior, or when framed negatively, by highlighting the referent's lack of desirable behavior as problematic. Few published studies have experimentally assessed this question and results are mixed across existing studies. We address the need for additional replication by designing and analyzing data from two field experiments conducted across four states in the 2014 primary and general elections. We find no difference between the effects on turnout of voter mobilization campaigns that frame such appeals positively rather than negatively. The results are not sensitive to election context, the mode of treatment delivery, or whether the appeals involve a social or self referent. Additional research is needed to understand the conditions under which framing appeals positively versus negatively have distinguishable effects on turnout.

Abstract: 150 words

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An ongoing debate in political science is whether voter mobilization appeals that encourage an individual to vote are more effective when framed positively, by highlighting the desirable behavior of a referent and encouraging behavior that is consistent with the referent's, or when framed negatively, by highlighting the lack of desirable behavior by a referent and suggesting that the absence of that behavior is problematic. The conventional wisdom in political science is that positively framed appeals to vote are more effective than negatively framed appeals to vote (e.g., Gerber and Rogers 2009). However, insights from other research on the determinants of voter turnout offer reasons to question this prediction. In particular, citizens may vote for a variety of instrumental and normative reasons<sup>1</sup> that call into question the expected relationship between the direction in which an appeal is framed and one's decision to vote. For example, an individual who perceives that turnout is uncommon may be more likely to vote (rather than not vote) because she believes her vote has a higher likelihood of being pivotal or because she believes she has a civic duty to step in and vote when others do not.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Existing experimental research offers mixed support for the argument that mobilization appeals are more effective when framed positively than negatively. Table 1 summarizes the existing literature. Only four published studies have experimentally assessed the comparative effectiveness of communicating positive and negative appeals about voting on turnout, and results are mixed across these studies (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2010; Murray and Matland 2014; Panagopoulos, Larimer and Condon 2014; Keane and Nickerson 2015). Thus additional experimental replication is needed to generate a body of credible evidence to understand whether framing descriptive norms about voting positively or negatively alters their effectiveness in increasing turnout.

In this research note, we contribute new field experimental evidence on the comparative effectiveness in increasing turnout of Get Out the Vote (GOTV) mobilization campaigns that employ positive or negative appeals. We analyze data from two experiments, one conducted during the

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<sup>1</sup>For a review of this literature, see Feddersen (2004) and Fiorina (1976).

2014 primary election and another conducted during the 2014 general election, in which nonpartisan, non-profit organizations sent campaign communications urging registrants to vote. In both experiments, the organizations randomly varied whether the mobilization appeals were framed positively or negatively. Three features of the experimental designs notably improve on past designs. First, we are able to assess whether the effects of positively versus negatively framed mobilization appeals are robust to different referents used in the appeals. In one study the treatments communicate descriptive norms about the past voting behavior of others (i.e., a social referent) and randomly vary whether this information is framed positively or negatively. In the other study the treatments communicate information about the past voting behavior of the subject (i.e., a self referent) and randomly vary whether this information is framed positively or negatively. Second, we compare the effects positive and negative mobilization appeals to a pure control condition in one study and to a placebo condition in the other study, which allows us to assess robustness to different comparison group definitions. Third, the experiments were conducted using large sample sizes across multiple electoral contexts (including primary elections in three states and a general election in a fourth state), which reduces the possibility that our results are driven by sample selection and provides adequate statistical power to detect potentially small effects while minimizing the likelihood of false positives.

To preview our results, in both experiments we find no difference between the effectiveness in increasing turnout of GOTV campaigns employing positively versus negatively framed appeals. This result does not seem to be sensitive to primary versus general election context, to the mode of treatment delivery, or to whether the GOTV appeal involved a social referent or a self referent. Our findings therefore suggest the need for further theory building about, and testing of, the conditions under which positive versus negative framing have distinguishable effects on turnout.

## **DESIGN**

We designed and analyze data from two field experiments that assess the comparative effectiveness on turnout of GOTV campaigns that make appeals to vote by providing either positively or

negatively framed information about the past voting behavior of either a self or social referent. We briefly describe the design of each experiment before presenting results.<sup>2</sup>

### **Study 1: Testing Appeals Communicating Positively or Negatively Framed Descriptive Norms in the 2014 Primary Election**

The first experiment was designed to test the effect of GOTV appeals communicating positive or negative descriptive norms about voting on turnout in the 2014 primary elections in Michigan, Missouri, and Tennessee. Subjects were randomly assigned to receive either a GOTV appeal communicating a positive descriptive norm, a GOTV appeal communicating a negative descriptive norm, or an apolitical placebo message. The scripts, detailed below, were delivered during the four days before each state's primary election day using live telephone calls conducted by a consulting firm specializing in direct voter contact programs.

The experiment originally included 2,122,738 subjects<sup>3</sup> who were block randomized<sup>4</sup> to receive the positive norm treatment call (n=25,274), the negative norm treatment call (n=25,276), or the apolitical placebo call (n=50,557). We focus our analysis among the subset of subjects who are Ever Voters, defined as individuals who had ever voted in any prior election, and who were successfully contacted.<sup>5</sup> This yields an analysis sample of 8,263 subjects, of whom 2,105 were assigned to the positive norm treatment, 2,112 were assigned to the negative norm treatment, and 4,046 were assigned to the placebo condition.

We briefly describe the treatment and placebo scripts.<sup>6</sup> Both norm treatment scripts begin with information about the upcoming primary election. Only subjects assigned to the positive

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<sup>2</sup>For both studies, the Supplemental Appendix presents balance tables and randomization checks. We infer that the randomization procedure is valid for both studies.

<sup>3</sup>See the Supplemental Appendix for details on the construction of the subject pool.

<sup>4</sup>We blocked on subjects' state of residence, past vote history, and the competitiveness of their congressional district. Block-specific assignment probabilities are presented in the Supplemental Appendix.

<sup>5</sup>Conditioning on successful contact is customary in experimental analyses of mobilization campaigns. Subjects are successfully contacted if the targeted subject is contacted and confirms their state of residence, a determination made before any specific treatment condition was delivered (i.e., if a subject subsequently terminated contact after treatment is delivered, they are still coded as being in the treatment group, so as to not introduce post-treatment bias). We show in the Supplemental Appendix that contact rates are balanced across treatment arms by block and that treatment assignment does not predict contact and admission into the analysis sample.

<sup>6</sup>The full text of the treatment and placebo scripts are presented in the Supplemental Appendix.

norm condition are then read the following script: *“In the 2012 primary election, [NUMBER] of [STATE]’s eligible voters actually voted. Many hope this high level of engagement will continue in the upcoming primary election on [DATE OF ELECTION]. We encourage you to continue this high level of participation and vote!”* This script communicates to subjects that past voter turnout has been relatively high and that there is a collective expectation for citizens to vote. The last line explicitly encourages subjects to conform their behavior to the group’s behavior by voting. In contrast, subjects assigned to the negative norm condition are read the following script after being provided with information about the upcoming election: *“In the 2012 primary election, [NUMBER] of [STATE]’s eligible voters did not actually vote. Many fear this low level of engagement will continue in the upcoming primary election on [DATE OF ELECTION]. We encourage you to break from this low level of participation and vote!”* This script emphasizes that past turnout has been relatively low and that this is expected to continue. The last line encourages subjects to vote by not conforming their behavior to the group’s behavior of non-voting. The placebo script included an apolitical message asking subjects how often they had been to the grocery store in the last two weeks and contained neither information about the upcoming election nor appeals to vote.

## **Study 2: Testing Appeals Communicating Positively or Negatively Framed Information about Subjects’ Past Voting Behavior in the 2014 General Election**

The second experiment was designed to test the effect of GOTV appeals communicating positively or negatively framed information about subjects’ own past voting behavior on turnout in the 2014 general election. The same consulting firm also implemented this experiment. The study includes 244,940 subjects comprised of intermittent voters in Mississippi who voted at least once in the 2008, 2010, 2011, or 2012 general election and who never voted in a Republican primary election.<sup>7</sup> Subjects were randomly assigned to receive either a GOTV mailer communicating a positively framed appeal highlighting a prior election in which the subject voted (n=7,000), a GOTV mailer

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<sup>7</sup>The composition of the subject pool was determined by the consulting firm based on population subgroups they wished to target in the election. See the Supplemental Appendix for complete details on the procedure used to construct the experimental sample for this study.

communicating a negatively framed appeal highlighting a prior election in which the subject did not vote (n=7,000), or no mailer (n=210,940).

Treatment mailings were sent by the Mississippi Center for Voter Information, a nonprofit organization, 5 days prior to Election Day.<sup>8</sup> Both treatment conditions presented subjects with their past vote history in the 2008, 2010, 2011, and 2012 general elections. The positively (negatively) framed treatment mailer then highlights the last election which the subject voted (did not vote) by stating “*We noticed you [voted/didn’t vote] in November XX.*” Then both treatment mailers encouraged the subject to vote in the upcoming election. Both treatment mailers also contained standard appeals applying social pressure to vote. A sample mailing is shown in the Supplemental Appendix. Note that by construction, all voter histories (which included at least one case of voting and one case of not voting) could be framed positively or negatively.

## RESULTS

We estimate the effect on turnout of the positively and negatively framed treatments relative to placebo (in Study 1) or control (in Study 2).<sup>9</sup> The outcome measure of turnout is obtained from state voter files and is coded 1 if the subject voted and 0 otherwise. To assess the comparative effectiveness of the positively and negatively framed appeals for each study, we then test the null hypothesis that the difference in estimated mean effects is equal to zero.<sup>10</sup>

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1 summarizes the results for Study 1 (left panel) and Study 2 (right panel).<sup>11</sup> In each panel, we first plot the effect of the positively framed appeal (left-most line) and the negatively

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<sup>8</sup>Election Day was November 4, 2014. Mailings were sent on October 30, 2014.

<sup>9</sup>Specifically we use OLS to regress turnout on treatment assignment indicators, with covariate adjustment and weighting to account for assignment probabilities. As shown in the Supplemental Appendix, results are not sensitive to weighting or covariate adjustment. For Study 1 controls include age; gender; race; years since the date of voter registration; the total number of past general, primary, and special elections in which the subject voted; flags for missing covariates that are imputed with the sample mean; state fixed effects; and state-by-covariate interactions. For Study 2 controls include age; gender; race; prior vote history in 2008, 2010, 2011, and 2012; and flags for missing covariates that are imputed with the sample mean.

<sup>10</sup>Formally, we test the null hypothesis that  $\beta_{positive} - \beta_{negative} = 0$ .

<sup>11</sup>Regression tables are presented in the Supplemental Appendix.

framed appeal (second line) with 95% confidence intervals, and then plot the difference in estimated effects with 95% confidence intervals on the far right. In Study 1, which is the placebo-controlled experiment testing the effects on turnout of GOTV appeals communicating either positive or negative descriptive norms, we find that the positive norm treatment increases turnout by 2.4 points relative to the placebo group (s.e.=.01,  $p<.05$ ) and the negative norm treatment increases turnout by 2.2 points (s.e.=.01,  $p<.05$ ). (The average placebo group turnout rate is 32.2%.) We find no substantively or statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of the positive and negative norm treatments (difference=.0016, s.e.=.012,  $p=.889$ ). In Study 2, which tests the effects on turnout of GOTV appeals communicating positively or negatively framed information about subjects' past voting behavior, we find that the positively framed appeal increases turnout by 3.1 points relative to the control group (s.e.=.005,  $p<.01$ ) and the negatively framed appeal increases turnout by 3.7 points (s.e.=.005,  $p<.01$ ). (The average control group turnout rate is 26.9%.) We similarly find no substantively or statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of the positively and negatively framed appeals (difference=-.006, s.e.=.007,  $p=.437$ ).

Thus while both the positively and negatively framed treatments are effective at increasing turnout relative to the placebo group in Study 1 and relative to the control group in Study 2, in both studies neither framing is more effective than the other.

## DISCUSSION

Do GOTV campaigns that make appeals to vote by communicating information about the voting behavior of a given referent have differential effects on turnout when the referent's behavior is framed positively or negatively? In the burgeoning experimental literature assessing the comparative effectiveness of GOTV campaigns that employ positive versus negative framing, results are mixed and therefore prompt a need for further replication. Addressing this need, we report results from two field experiments and find no substantively or statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of GOTV campaigns that are positively framed and otherwise identical campaigns that are negatively framed. This finding does not seem to be sensitive to primary ver-



sus general election context, whether treatments are delivered by mail or phone, or to whether the GOTV appeal involved a social referent or a self referent.

The results cast doubt on the importance of how a referent's behavior is framed when that information is bundled with a GOTV voter mobilization campaign. This does not, however, mean that how this information is framed and perceived does not matter in other settings where efforts to convert nonvoters into marginal voters include information about behavioral voting norms. Instead, we argue that the results suggest two fruitful avenues for future research. First, future field experiments should employ factorial designs that manipulate the communication of information about the voting behavior of a given referent, how this information is framed, and the context in which this information is communicated. This would provide leverage to empirically assess the possibility that other features of a message alter the importance of how normative appeals to the behavior of the referent are framed. Second, to assess the plausibility of hypothesized psychological mechanisms explaining observed effects and to generate new testable hypotheses about the existence of heterogeneous responses to information about such appeals, future designs should measure how subjects construe information about the behavioral patterns of referents, the degree to which subjects vary in their construal of this information, and the extent to which the construal of normative information and behavioral responses to that information are correlated.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>See Paluck and Shafir (2016) for an extended discussion on design-based approaches to address concerns about the construal of treatments in experiments and implications for the interpretation of experimental data.

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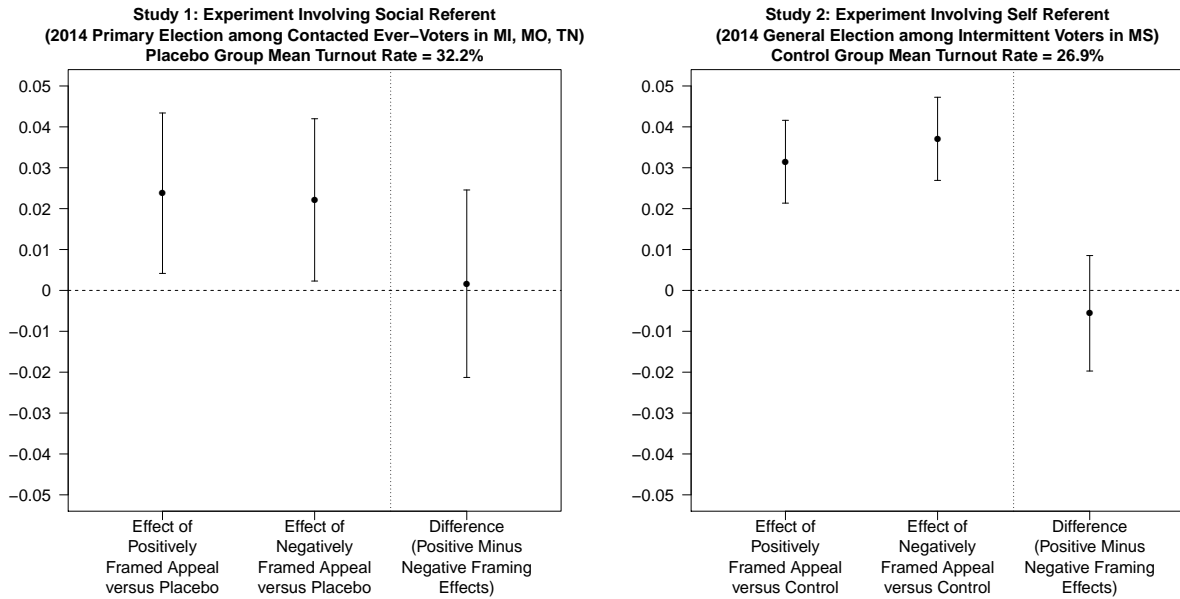
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## TABLES

**Table 1: Summary of Published Field Experiments Assessing the Effectiveness of Communicating Positively versus Negatively Framed Mobilization Appeals on Turnout.** Only four published studies have experimentally assessed the comparative effectiveness of communicating positively versus negatively framed appeals to vote on turnout, and these studies have found mixed results across studies (Panel A, first row). Two other studies in the literature have experimentally manipulated whether subjects receive information about positively or negatively framed appeals, but examine stated vote intention as the outcome instead of voter turnout (Panel A, second row). Other relevant experimental studies only randomly manipulate whether the behavior of the referent is framed either positively or negatively, not both (Panels B and C).

<i>Outcome Variable</i>	<i>Type of Appeal Communicated in Mobilization Campaign</i>	
	<b>Appeal Involves Self Referent</b> (i.e., the subject's past voting behavior)	<b>Appeal Involves Social Referent</b> (i.e., the past voting behavior of others in the subject's state/community/etc.)
<b>A. Experimental Comparisons of the Effects of Positively vs. Negatively Framed Appeals to Vote</b>		
Voter Turnout	<u>Negative Frame More Effective</u> • Gerber, Green and Larimer (2010)	<u>Mixed Results</u> • Murray and Matland (2014) <u>Negative Frame More Effective</u> • Panagopoulos, Larimer and Condon (2014) <u>Positive Frame More Effective</u> • Keane and Nickerson (2015)
Vote Intention	No studies	<u>Positive Frame More Effective</u> • Gerber and Rogers (2009) • Glynn, Huge and Lunney (2009)
<b>B. Experiments Testing the Effect of Positively Framed Appeals to Vote Relative to Placebo/Control</b>		
Voter Turnout	No studies	No studies
<b>C. Experiments Testing the Effect of Negatively Framed Appeals to Vote Relative to Placebo/Control</b>		
Voter Turnout	<u>Negative Frame Is Effective</u> • Mann (2010)	<u>Negative Frame Is Effective</u> • Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008) • Mann (2010)

## FIGURES



**Figure 1:** Estimated effects in percentage points of positively and negatively framed GOTV appeals on turnout levels and the estimated difference in positively and negatively framed effects, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are from weighted regressions of voting in the election on treatment assignment and covariates, where weights are the inverse of the probability of assignment to the observed treatment assignment. In both studies, we find no statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of positively and negatively framed appeals on turnout levels. (See the Supplemental Appendix for full regression tables and sensitivity analyses).