

Summary Report

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Raising turnout at council elections with social pressure: evidence from a field experiment

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This Summary Report is an executive summary of the Electoral Commission of South Australia Research Report with the same title. The Report presents the results of a research project identifying strategies to raise voter turnout at South Australian council elections using social pressure. A field experiment testing different messaging strategies was conducted at four council supplementary elections in 2021. The results of the experiment provide a number of valuable lessons about the effectiveness of different election messaging and, in particular, how messaging using social pressure can lead to increased voter participation.

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BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Turnout rates at South Australian council elections over the past two decades have been very low. Average turnout reported at periodic council elections since 2000 has been 33.7%. The low turnout at these elections has long been a matter of concern. The councils themselves, the Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA), and the Electoral Commission of South Australia (ECSA) all invest significant effort and resources into attempting to mobilise electors at each election and thereby raise turnout. Yet despite this effort and expense, the participation rate barely moves.

In the past 25 years a great deal of scientific research has been looking at the question of what are the most effective - as well as cost-effective - ways to increase voter turnout at elections. This research has looked at the effectiveness both of different modes of reaching electors and of alternative messages used in communications with electors. In a large and growing number of field experiments it has been demonstrated that some voter turnout messages and methods of conveying those messages are very effective, while others simply do not work at all, or worse, can even reduce turnout.

One of the most important findings to emerge from this burgeoning research is that messages that exert social pressure on electors, appealing to people's innate desire to comply with social norms (widely shared ideas about how people ought to behave), can have a very significant impact on turnout. Messages exerting social pressure to vote have been shown to raise turnout by several percentage points (and as much as 8 percentage points in some large-scale experiments). Social pressure refers to the forceful assertion of social norms. It can be asserted by praising those who comply with a norm or reproaching those who violate it, with the stronger the praise or the reproaches, the greater the social pressure. But there are at least two other important ways of augmenting social pressure: monitoring people's compliance with social norms, and disclosing whether someone has complied with a norm or not.

The aim of this project is to test in a field experiment whether using messages exerting social pressure on electors can also generate increased turnout at South Australian council elections.

THE EXPERIMENT

The setting for this experiment was four supplementary elections held in 2021: one in March to fill a vacancy on the Clare & Gilbert Valleys Council; one in June to fill two vacancies on the Copper Coast Council; one in July to fill a vacancy on the City of Adelaide Council; and one in October to elect a councillor for the City of Port Adelaide Enfield Council Outer Harbor ward.

The sample was 21,248 electors enrolled in the four selected council areas. Before each election, the electors selected for the experiment at that election were randomly assigned to either the control group or to one

of three treatment groups described next. Groups were all of similar sizes and were balanced in terms of background characteristics (age, gender and household size).

Electors assigned to the treatment groups were sent one of three letters encouraging them to vote. Electors assigned to the control group received no letter.

Treatment 1: Electors assigned to the first treatment group received a letter reminding them about the upcoming election and encouraging them to vote. Most of the language was lifted directly from actual communications to electors from the 2018 periodic election campaigns published by the LGA ('Make a Difference' campaign) and ECSA ('Be Counted' campaign). I did not anticipate finding much impact on turnout from this treatment (1 to 2 percentage points at the very most).

Treatment 2: Electors assigned to the second treatment group received a letter politely and repeatedly thanking and praising them for having voted at past elections and expressing hope that they will vote again this time. It ends by hinting at the possibility that the elector might be contacted by phone after the election and thanked if they participate. The letter repeats language developed in a series of successful American experiments. Because this treatment combines multiple elements to build positive social pressure, I expected it to raise turnout around 3 to 4 percentage points, in line with other experiments reported in the literature.

Treatment 3: Electors in the third treatment group received a letter admonishing them to think about low turnout and do their civic duty by voting. This treatment employed similar tactics to Treatment 2, but did so amplifying negative social pressure: disclosing to individuals their prior voting history, informing them that an official record of voter turnout is kept, and hinting that failure to vote may put them in the awkward position of having to explain themselves to others over the phone. A mildly chastising tone is used to engender shame, playing upon the basic human drive to avoid such feelings. As noted previously, experiments playing on shame have raised turnout significantly at American elections, and I anticipated this treatment would be the most successful in increasing turnout, probably in the range of 4 to 6 percentage points.

Copies of each of the letters are provided in the Appendices to the larger Research Report.

RESULTS

After each election I obtained records about each individual's participation from the ECSA database. The effect of the treatments was measured comparing the turnout of each treatment group to the control group.

Table 1: Number and Percent Voting with Effects of Treatments on Turnout, overall

Experimental group	Turnout (N)	Turnout (%)	Turnout effect (%)	Percentage increase in turnout (%)
Treatment 1	1709	33.20	0.67	2.06
Treatment 2	1853	36.09	3.56	10.93
Treatment 3	1902	37.11	4.58	14.09
Control	1682	32.53		

Table 1 reports the basic turnout rates among participants in each of the three treatments and the control group across the four elections combined. As can be seen, turnout in each of the three treatments was increased compared to the control group which participated at a rate of 32.5%. By comparison, in the first treatment group the turnout was 33.2%, which represents a slight turnout boost of 0.7 percentage points above the control group. The second treatment group had a turnout of 36.1%, which implies a more substantial 3.6 percentage point gain in turnout over the control group. Lastly, the third treatment group had a turnout of 37.1%, a notable 4.6 percentage-point increase over the control group.

For more rigorous analysis of the experimental results, a series of log binomial regression models were fitted to estimate the effect of each of the treatments versus the control. Table 2 reports the estimated overall effect of each treatment vs control, for all four council elections combined.

Table 2: Estimated Treatment Effect (vs Control) Overall

Comparison	Estimated RR (95% CI)	p-value
Treatment 1 - Control	1.02 (0.95, 1.10)	0.887
Treatment 2 - Control	1.11 (1.03, 1.19)	<0.001
Treatment 3 - Control	1.14 (1.06, 1.22)	<0.001

RR = Relative Risk; CI = Confidence Interval

Participants exposed to Treatment 2 were on average 1.11 times more likely to vote (or 11 percent more likely) compared to participants in the control group, while participants exposed to Treatment 3 were on average

1.14 times more likely to vote (or 14 percent more likely) than the control group. These effects are statistically significant ($p < .001$). Meanwhile, I found no significant difference in likelihood to vote between participants exposed to Treatment 1 compared to participants in the control. The slight turnout boost of 0.7 percentage points noted above could be caused by chance as much as by the effects of the treatment ($p = 0.887$).

LESSONS

The results of this experiment provide a number of valuable lessons – particularly about what works and what does not work to raise turnout at council elections.

Lesson 1: Conventional messaging reminding and encouraging electors to vote is not effective

The first major lesson from this experiment, and possibly the most important, is that the conventional messaging used to encourage voter participation at South Australian council elections has no effect on electors, or a very negligible one at best.

It is commonly assumed that a lack of awareness and a lack of information are among the key barriers to voter participation at elections. But my experiment corroborated what multiple other experiments have shown before. Communications that merely remind electors of an upcoming election and urge them to vote have nil or negligible effects on voter turnout. There is undoubtedly a need to provide South Australian electors with more information about what their councils and councillors do. However, local government bodies would be advised to do this *outside of election time* as it is unlikely to do anything to increase voter turnout at *election time* – and could even get in the way of more effective messaging.

Lesson 2: Messages that exert social pressure on electors are effective at raising turnout

The second lesson from this experiment is that messaging that exerts social pressure on electors can lead to significant increases in participation at South Australian council elections. Both Treatment 2 and Treatment 3 raised turnout significantly – both in statistical and electoral terms. These findings suggest that South Australians are susceptible to social pressure regarding their voting behaviour, and this despite some of the notable differences in the electoral context between here and the U.S. (as described at the end of Part 1 of the Research Report). Advertising and voter mobilisation communications that play on this susceptibility may succeed in increasing turnout at SA council elections, if done properly.

Lesson 3: The most effective messaging strategy was the one that employed shame

Although this experiment attempted to activate both positive and negative emotions to induce electors to vote, the results provided stronger evidence that a messaging strategy activating negative feelings was more effective. The most effective impact on turnout came from the third treatment, which attempted to stimulate voting by activating the psychological mechanism of shame. Although the language and tone of the letter used in this experiment were somewhat confrontational and would probably not be suitable to incorporate directly in promotional advertising for an election, social pressure appeals based around shame could certainly be harnessed in an official campaign to stimulate turnout, provided they are couched in carefully crafted language.

Lesson 4: Social pressure based on positive emotions is almost as effective at raising turnout – and is almost certainly more palatable for electoral communication strategies

The results also show a significant and only moderately smaller effect on turnout from messaging that exerts social pressure on electors using positive feelings of praise and gratitude. From a communications strategy perspective this is an important finding. While it may not generate quite as many votes as negative social pressure messaging, thanking and praising electors for voting is a more palatable and less confrontational alternative. Those seeking an effective messaging strategy to raise turnout at council elections with fewer negative side effects would be advised to consider the lessons of Treatment 2.

Lesson 5: Electors are more likely to vote when told that participation is being monitored

The experiment corroborated previous findings that electors are significantly more likely to vote when alerted to the fact that others are watching them. Participants assigned to Treatments 2 and 3 in the experiment were told that their past and present participation was being monitored. The letters also suggested that they might be contacted to discuss their voting experience after the election. Raising the prospect of contacting electors after the election is an effective strategy because it plays on people's subconscious desire to be seen by others to be behaving properly. This non-confrontational technique to harness surveillance could easily be adapted for official electoral communications.

Lesson 6: Personally-addressed mail works - but it is the messaging that really matters

The results from the experiment indicate, like a host of other experiments reported in the literature, that personally addressed mail in itself raises turnout slightly. What really matters however, in terms of stimulating electors to vote, is the contents of the mail, i.e. the messaging. This experiment has shown that personally addressed mail containing the right messaging has the ability to significantly raise turnout - without any use of bold colours, stylish fonts, eye-grabbing graphics, or glossy photographs.

Lesson 7: Social pressure messages are far more cost-effective

One of the big lessons from the literature is that voter mobilisation campaigns rarely work miracles. Generating extra votes costs money, but some strategies are much more cost-effective than others. In this experiment, the social pressure letters far outperformed the reminder letter in terms of cost-efficiency. Each letter in this experiment cost \$1.39 to print and post. Treatment 1 generated 27 votes, or one vote for every 197 people contacted: which equates to a cost of \$274 per vote generated. Treatment 2 generated 171 votes which is one vote for every 31 people contacted: a cost of \$43 per vote generated. Treatment 3 generated 220 votes which was one vote for every 24 people contacted: a cost of \$33 per vote gained.

Lesson 8: Electors from different areas and demographics react somewhat differently to messaging

Different treatments worked differently on different subgroups of the study population. Because of this, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be successful or cost-effective at raising turnout at council elections.

- » Young electors aged 18-35 were particularly responsive to the Gratitude Treatment.
- » Electors aged 35-50 were the most responsive to all three of the treatments. Given their general responsiveness, electors in this age band may be good targets for any future messaging strategies aimed at raising turnout.
- » Treatment 3 was the most effective for older electors, particularly those aged 65+. Given that this is the cohort of electors with the highest propensity to vote at council elections, targeting older electors with elements of the Shame Treatment could be a cost-effective way of driving up the overall turnout rate by a few percentage points.
- » While Treatment 1 was associated with a 2% increase in voting in the country electorates, in the metropolitan councils turnout actually dropped by half a percent.

Lesson 9: The experiment worked, but it should be just the start of many more studies aimed at improving turnout at South Australian council elections

The final key take-away from this project is that this experiment, which to my knowledge is the first of its kind to be undertaken in Australia, was a success. The hypotheses I set out to test were all largely confirmed. The treatment effects generated by the two social pressure interventions were significant. The four councils that agreed to allow the experiment at their supplementary elections were all very supportive of the project. And lastly there was absolutely minimal negative response to the treatments from participants.

There is clearly a need and a place for experiments like this one to identify ways of increasing turnout at South Australian council elections. And this experiment should be just the start. Much more research is needed in order to reliably assess how electors respond to an array of other persuasive communication strategies and psychological stimuli. There is ample scope for more randomised field experiments to be done in South Australia and councils should be encouraged to undertake or commission their own.