

Pre-analysis plan: The effects of online social interactions on Asian American partisan attitudes

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This is a pre-analysis plan for an experimental study of the effects of political social media posts on the partisan preferences of Asian Americans. I will conduct a randomized experiment that varies the nature and content of hypothetical partisan social media posts, testing for the effects on the partisan attitudes of Asian American and white college students. This plan was written prior to the primary data collection for this study.

1 Background

Asian Americans are increasingly voting for Democrats in national elections. For example 73% voted for Obama in 2012, and up to 79% voted for Clinton in 2016 (New York Times Exit Polls 2012; AALDEF 2016). This strong Democratic preference is surprising in view of the fact that many are of high socioeconomic status, immigrated from countries with a communist history, or identify as Evangelical Christians – traits that typically correlate with Republican vote choice (Murray 2012; Wong 2015). Why do Asian Americans, voters with some conservative predispositions, support Democrats? More generally, how do Asian Americans develop partisan attitudes?

This research explores these questions by providing a causal test of a theory of “social transmission,” a novel explanation for Asian American partisan socialization. This theory predicts that immigrants develop political orientations through the diffusion of the views of their peers, rather than through the family. This theoretical perspective is motivated by the fact that familial theories do not explain the political socialization of immigrants, whose parents do not have partisan preferences in the American context. The poor fit of such explanations extends to the children of immigrants, who grow up with limited political discussion at home. In the absence of strong parental socialization, this theory predicts that Asian Americans are particularly open to the political preferences of their peers.

I find evidence in support of this theory in previous observational research. First, an analysis of data from the National Asian American Survey conveys that local partisan context

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is strongly associated with Democratic vote choice. This result holds across multiple analyses that test for the possibility of selection effects. Second, in interviews with Asian Americans in Houston, I find qualitative evidence that social interactions with peers lead to Democratic partisan preferences (Raychaudhuri 2018). Finally, in an analysis of a large panel survey of college students, I find that Asian American students become more politically liberal over the course of college through peer interactions. The liberalizing political effects of interactions with non-Asian peers, in comparison to Asian peers, are particularly large. This is because non-Asian peers experience stronger parental political socialization and enter college with more deeply-held political views. While this existing work provides evidence in support of the theory of social transmission, it is associational in nature. It is possible that these results are driven by Asian Americans selecting into social contexts based on pre-existing partisan preferences. This experiment addresses this possibility and provides a direct causal test of this theory.

In this study, I will test the effects of exposure to partisan social media messages on support for the Democratic Party. I predict that exposure to partisan social media messages from friends will lead Asian Americans to favor the Democratic Party. I compare the effects for Asian American students to white students, a comparison group used to test whether Asian Americans are more likely to develop political preferences through peer influence than their non-immigrant counterparts.

To test different aspects of the theory of social transmission, I will manipulate three elements of social media posts in this design. First, I will manipulate whether respondents view a partisan social media post with or without comments from their friends. This provides a test of whether partisan messages are more persuasive when they come from peers or an article headline. Second, I will manipulate the content of the posts between those that are largely affective and those that include messages about the parties stances on racial inclusivity. This provides a test of whether substantive messages about the parties' racial positions are more persuasive than generic partisan cues. Third, I will manipulate the racial composition of the group of friends commenting on the social media post, between mostly same-race and mostly different-race peers. This provides a test of whether messages are more persuasive when they come from non-Asian peers, who may experience stronger parental socialization than Asian peers.

2 Research Design

Overview of Experimental Procedure

This experiment employs a panel design with two survey waves. The study procedure was pre-tested for feasibility with a small pilot. In the wave 1 survey, respondents will answer questions about demographics, Facebook usage habits, and pre-treatment measures of some dependent variables for a \$10 gift card incentive.¹ Respondents will also refer six friends

¹This study employs both a within-subjects and between-subjects design. I state which dependent variables are measured in each survey wave in the “outcomes” section.

under the premise that they will be invited to participate in the study. The information collected about referred friends will include their first name and last initial, email address, race (Asian, Black, Latino, White, other) and partisan leaning (Democratic, Republican, not sure).

Next, I will use the information respondents provide about their referred friends to create the treatments. Each treatment will consist of two hypothetical social media posts that favor the Democratic Party. I will manipulate whether the posts contain an article headline alone (control), or the same headline with user comments from a subset of their referred friends (treatment). These conditions will be crossed with the content of the partisan message (affective vs. racial inclusion). I will also vary the racial composition of the commenters (mostly same-race vs. different-race). The treatment design is discussed in further detail in the next section.

To avoid selection bias, I will screen out wave 1 survey respondents who did not refer a sufficiently diverse range of friends such that they could be assigned to any of the treatment conditions. These omitted respondents will be compensated for their participation in the wave 1 survey but will not be invited to participate in the wave 2 survey.

I will use the following criteria to screen out respondents from the wave 2 survey:

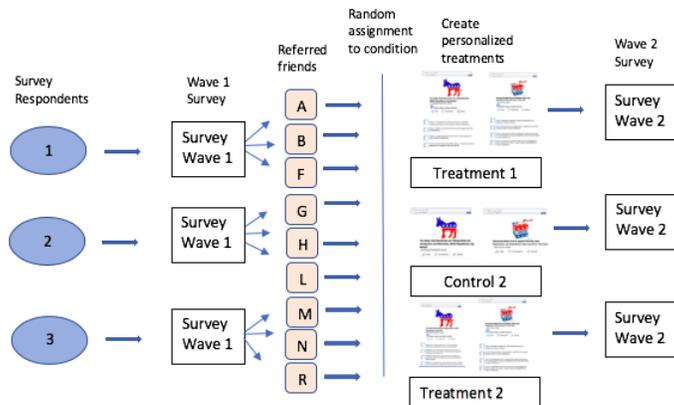
- Respondents must refer at least 4 friends who are identified as *Democratic leaning* or whose partisan leaning is unknown to the respondent.
- Within the partisan subset describe above, respondents must refer at least 1 same-race and 1 different-race friend.

Next, I will randomly assign each respondent who qualifies for the wave 2 survey to an experimental condition, using complete random assignment in the R package 'randomizr.' Each respondent will have an equal probability of being assigned to any of the six experimental conditions. The control conditions contain two article headlines within a social media environment, with no user comments. The treatments contain the same article headlines and four comments, attributed to a subset of the respondents referred friends. Each comment is attributed to the first name and last initial of a referred friend. For treated respondents, I will randomly select names to include in the treatment from the subset of referred friends who fit the racial and partisan composition criteria for their assigned condition. For example, suppose an Asian American respondent is assigned to a "mostly same-race" treatment condition. I will randomly select the names of three Asian and one non-Asian friends to include in the treatment, drawing from the set of Democratic friends that they referred. If they did not refer three different Asian friends, I will re-use the names of the Asian friend(s) they referred for multiple comments.

The original respondents will be invited to participate in wave 2 of the study several weeks after the wave 1 survey. Wave 2 respondents will be offered an additional \$10 gift card incentive. Respondents will view the social media posts and answer several post-treatment questions about the political outcomes of interest. Respondents will be required to view each treatment post for at least one minute. At the end of the survey, respondents will be

appropriately debriefed.² Figure 1 provides an overview of the experimental procedure.

Figure 1: Summary of experimental procedure



Experimental Conditions

The design varies the nature and content of two partisan social media posts that favor the Democratic Party. I will manipulate whether the posts contain an article headline only (control), or the same headline with comments attributed to a subset of each respondent’s referred friends (treatment). This tests whether partisan cues are more effective when they come from peers than from a news headline. These conditions will be crossed with the content of the partisan message. This is to test whether substantive messages about the racial inclusivity of the political parties are more effective than generic affective messages. I will also vary the racial composition of the friends who comment on the post, to test whether partisan messages are more effective when they come from same-race or different-race friends. The content of the partisan messages will vary between: (1) an “inclusion message,” stating that the Democratic Party is racially inclusive and the Republican Party is not and (2) an “affective message,” stating that the Democratic Party is good and the Republican Party is not. These messages are reflected in the article headlines and the user comments. For Asian American respondents, the network composition categories are: (1) mostly Asian (2) mostly non-Asian and (3) no comments (control). For white respondents, the network composition categories are: (1) mostly white, (2) mostly non-white, and (2) no comments (control). Table 1 provides an overview of the six experimental conditions.

The experimental conditions each consist of two partisan posts in a social media interface, displayed on a single page. Each post contains one of the following article headlines: (1) “Ten ways Democrats are taking action *for immigrants and minorities*, while Republicans lag behind,” (inclusion message, post 1) (2) “Democrats make push to *expand minority voter registration*, but Republicans stay focused on their base,” (inclusion message, post 2) (3) “Ten ways Democrats are taking action, while Republicans lag behind,” (affective

²The introductory text for each experimental condition also indicates that the posts are hypothetical.

message, post 1) and (4) “Democrats make push to mobilize voters, but Republicans stay focused on their base” (affective message, post 2). The treatment conditions include four standardized user comments below each headline. The treatment and control post templates are presented on pages 13 to 16. The treatments will be personalized by attributing each user comment to one of the respondent’s referred friends. These posts are described as hypothetical, and respondents are asked to imagine that they saw them on a social media website. After viewing the treatment, respondents will be asked to reflect on it with an open-ended question, to strengthen the effects (Hopkins 2018).

Table 1: Experimental Conditions

| | Network comp: No comments | Network comp: Mostly same-race | Network comp: Mostly different-race |
|-----------------------|---|---|--|
| Message: Inclusion | Control 1: Inclusion post, headline only | Treatment 1: Inclusion post, headline and comments from same-race friends | Treatment 3: Inclusion post, headline and comments from different-race friends |
| Message: Affective | Control 2: Affective post, headline only | Treatment 2: Affective post, headline and comments from same-race friends | Treatment 4: Affective post, headline and comments from same-race friends |

3 Sample

I will conduct this study on a random sample of 650 undergraduate students at Princeton University, recruited over email by the Survey Research Center. Half of the respondents will be Asian American and half will be white. Respondents must be members of Facebook to participate in the study.

I conducted a power analysis to determine the minimum sample size for sufficiently powered tests. The total sample size accounts for potential attrition between survey waves due to ineligibility, estimated from the feasibility pilot. For an outcome scaled from 0 to 1, I estimated an effect size of 0.10 with a baseline mean of 0.70 and a standard deviation of 0.16, an alpha of 0.05, and power of 0.80. I need at least 40 respondents per racial group per cell.³ With a conservative estimated drop off rate of 20% between waves, the estimated sample size for the wave 2 survey is 520 total respondents, or 43 respondents of each racial group per cell.

4 Exclusions

Survey wave 1 respondents will be re-invited to participate in survey wave 2, with the following exception:

³I would like to analyze the results for each racial group separately.

- Wave 1 respondents will be excluded from the wave 2 survey if they do not provide sufficiently varied referrals to be assigned to any of the six treatment conditions.

Observations will be excluded from the analysis in the following circumstances:

- Observations will be excluded from the analysis if respondents do not complete both the wave 1 and wave 2 surveys.
- Observational will be excluded from the text analysis if the open-ended responses are not coherent.

5 Hypotheses

Main hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 1 – Social network effects*: Relative to social media posts with an article headline alone (control), posts with a headline and comments from friends (treatment) will increase support for the Democratic Party and intentions to vote in future elections. Exposure to the treatment will also increase support for Democrats and intentions to vote within subjects.
 - *Hypothesis 1a – Message content effects*: The treatment effects will be limited to or stronger for respondents who view an inclusion treatment, compared to those who view an affective treatment.
 - *Hypothesis 1b – Racial composition effects*:
 - * Among Asian American respondents, the treatment effects on partisan preferences will be stronger for or limited to those who view a post from mostly non-Asian friends, compared to those who view a post from mostly Asian friends.
 - * In contrast, the treatment effects on voting will be stronger for those who view a post from mostly Asian friends, compared to those who view a post from mostly non-Asian friends.
 - * The racial composition of the commenters will not moderate the treatment effects for white respondents.

Moderation hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 2 – Immigrant constituency effects*: The effects will be stronger for or limited to Asian American respondents, compared to white respondents.
- *Hypothesis 3 – Political predisposition effects*:
 - The effects will be stronger for or limited to Independents or Democrats, compared to Republicans.

- The effects will also be stronger for those with low or medium levels of political interest, compared to those with high political interest.⁴
- *Hypothesis 4 – Generational effects:*
 - The effects will be stronger for or limited to immigrants and their children, compared to more acculturated respondents.
 - Likewise, the results will be stronger for or limited to foreign-born respondents who have lived in the US for ten years or fewer, compared to those who have lived in the US for more than 10 years.
 - The results will also be stronger for or limited to Asian American respondents who rarely discussed politics at home with their parents.
- *Hypothesis 5 – Racial composition of actual network:*
 - In line with the hypothesis that network racial composition matters, I expect that the effects will be stronger for or limited to Asian American respondents with mostly non-Asian networks.
 - The racial composition of social networks will not moderate the treatment effects for white respondents.

6 Outcomes

I will analyze the effects of the treatments on the following outcomes. I will code closed-ended partisan measures such that higher values represent favoring the Democratic Party and lower values represent favoring the Republican Party. For feeling thermometer ratings, higher values represent favorable attitudes towards the subject of the rating. Items that correlate well will be scaled into indices.

This study employs both a within-subjects and between-subjects approach, comparing outcomes both within individual respondents and across respondents exposed to different experimental conditions. The wave(s) in which each outcome will be measured are listed below.

- Feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic and Republican parties respectively (ANES). Hundred-point ratings, measured from 0 to 100.
 - If the ratings correlate well, they may be combined into a single index. If not, they will be analyzed as separate outcomes.
 - The ratings will be recoded on the 0 (least favorable) to 1 (most favorable) interval.

⁴Respondents with low or medium levels of political interest include those who did not vote in the 2018 midterms (vs. those who voted), and who view political material on Facebook weekly or less often (vs. those who view political material more often).

- Measured: Pre-treatment (in wave 1) and post-treatment (in wave 2).
- Partisan identification (ANES). A closed-ended seven-point measure, rescaled from 0 to 1. (Coded as: 0 = Strong Republican, 0.17 = Republican, 0.33 = Republican leaner, 0.5 = Independent, 0.67 = Democratic leaner, 0.83 = Democrat, 1 = Strong Democrat)
 - Measured: Pre-treatment (in wave 1) and post-treatment (in wave 2).
- Expressive partisanship ratings, measured for Democrats and Republicans only (Huddy et al. 2015). Hundred-point ratings, measured from 0 to 100.
 - Items: (1) “How important is being a Democrat/Republican to you?” (2) “How well does the term Democrat/Republican describe you?” and (3) “To what extent do you think of yourself as being a Democrat/Republican?”
 - If the ratings correlate well, they may be combined into a single index. If not, they will be analyzed as separate outcomes.
 - The ratings will be recoded on the 0 (least important) to 1 (most important) interval.
 - Measured: Pre-treatment (in wave 1) and post-treatment (in wave 2).
- Perceptions of the inclusivity of each party (Kuo et al. 2017). Closed-ended four-point measures, rescaled from 0 to 1. (Coded as: 0 = Not very well at all, 0.33 = Slightly well, 0.67 = Somewhat well, 1 = Very well)
 - Items: “How well does the term ‘inclusive’ describe Democrats/Republicans?”
 - Measured: Pre-treatment (in wave 1) and post-treatment (in wave 2)
- Perceptions of the likelihood that each party will represent the interests of “people like yourself” (Kuo et al. 2017). Closed-ended four-point measures, rescaled from 0 to 1. (Coded as: 0 = Not very likely, 0.33 = Slightly likely, 0.67 = Somewhat likely, 1 = Very likely)
 - Items: “How likely is the Democratic/Republican Party to represent the interests of people like yourself”
 - Measured: Pre-treatment (in wave 1) and post-treatment (in wave 2)
- A closed-ended binary measure of allocating a college scholarship to a young Democrat or Republican (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). (Coded as 1 = award to Democrat, 0 = award to Republican)
 - Measured: Post-treatment only (in wave 2).
- Likelihood of voting in 2020 presidential election: A closed-ended four-point measure. (Coded as: 0 = Not likely, 0.33 = Somewhat likely, 0.67 = Likely, 1.0 = Very likely)
 - Measured: Post-treatment only (in wave 2).

- Open-ended likes and dislikes of the Democratic and Republican parties (ANES). I will also count these numerically, to compare the number of likes and dislikes of each party across conditions (Kuo et al. 2017).
 - Measured: Post-treatment only (in wave 2).

7 Moderators

I will test whether the treatment effects are moderated by political predispositions, generational variables, and the racial composition of respondent’s actual social networks. All moderators will be measured in the wave 1 survey and will be coded as described below.

Political predispositions:

- Pre-treatment partisan identification: A closed-ended seven-point measure, rescaled from 0 to 1, and binned into the following categories: Republicans and leaners (1 = Strong Republican, Republican, or Republican leaner, 0 = Otherwise), pure Independents (1 = Independent, 0 = Otherwise), and Democrats and leaners (1 = Strong Democrat, Democrat, or Democratic leaner, 0 = Otherwise).⁵
- Voted in 2018 midterms: A closed-end binary measure of voting in the 2018 midterms (1 = voted, or 0 = did not vote).
- Frequency of viewing political material on Facebook: A closed-ended five-point measure, rescaled from 0 to 1, and binned into the following categories: Rarely (1 = Never, Every few weeks, 0 = Otherwise), Weekly (1 = Several times a week, 0 = Otherwise), Daily (1 = About once a day, several times a day, 0 = Otherwise).

Generational variables:

- Parents born outside the United States: A closed-ended binary measure of whether at least one of the respondent’s parents was born in the U.S. = 0, or abroad = 1.
- Respondent born outside the United States: A closed-ended binary measure of whether the respondent was born in the U.S. = 0, or abroad = 1.
- Length of residence in U.S. (for foreign-born respondents): A closed ended seven-point measure. (Coded as: 0 = Less than 1 year, 0.17 = 1-3 years, 0.33 = 4-6 years, 0.5 = 7-10 years, 0.67 = 10-15 years, 0.83 = 16 to 20 years, 1 = more than 30 year and binned into two or three categories based on the distribution).
- Frequency of political discussion at home with parents: A closed ended five-point measure. (Coded as: 0 = Never, 0.25 = Rarely, 0.5 = Occasionally, 0.75 = Frequently, 1 = Very frequently, and binned into two or three categories based on the distribution)

⁵I will omit partisan identification as an outcome for this moderation analysis.

Racial composition of actual social network:

- Racial composition of Facebook social network: A closed-ended categorical measure. (Will be coded as mostly same-race and mostly different-race.)

8 Pre-treatment covariates

These variables will be used in a version of the regression models to increase the precision of the treatment effects.

- Age (numeric)
- Gender (male = 0, female = 1)
- Sexuality (heterosexual = 1, lgbt = 0)
- Region (a set of dummy variables: Northeast (omitted category), Midwest, South, West)
- Generational status (a set of dummy variables: first-generation (omitted category) second-generation, third-generation plus)
- Asian national origin (a set of dummy variables: East Asian (omitted category), South Asian, Southeast Asian, Other)
- Family income (a set of dummy variables: Less than \$65,000 (omitted category), \$65,000 to \$150,000, Greater than \$150,000)
- College major (a set of dummy variables: National Sciences (omitted category), Social Sciences, Humanities, Engineering, Math)
- Racial composition of Facebook social network (a set of dummy variables: mostly same-race, otherwise (omitted category))
- Number of Facebook friends (a set of dummy variables: Less than 100 (omitted category), 101-600, more than 600)
- Frequency of Facebook use (a set of dummy variables: Never (omitted category), Every few weeks, Several times a week, Several times a day, Every day)
- Frequency of viewing political content on Facebook (a set of dummy variables: Never (omitted category), Every few weeks, Several times a week, Several times a day, Every day)

9 Analysis

I will conduct between-subjects and within-subjects analyses to test my hypotheses. The between-subjects analyses will use regression models and the within-subjects analyses will use difference-of-means tests. For the regression analyses, I will use OLS for continuous measures and logistic regression for binary measures. All analyses will be conducted for the full sample and separately, for Asian American and white respondents. To improve the precision of the estimates, I will include the the pre-treatment covariates described above in some versions of the regressions.

First, I will test the main hypotheses (1, 1a, and 1b) using between-subjects analyses. To test hypothesis 1 (social network effects), I will regress each outcome onto exposure to any treatment condition, relative to any control condition (omitted category). Next, to test hypothesis 1a (message content effects), I will regress each outcome onto exposure to the inclusion treatment, relative to the inclusion control (omitted category). I will repeat this analysis for the affective treatment, relative to the affective control (omitted category). To test hypothesis 1b (racial composition effects), I will regress each outcome onto each mostly same-race and mostly different-race treatments relative to the appropriate control, pooling across message types. I will also repeat this analysis separately for each message type.

Second, I will conduct text analysis to compare the stated likes and dislikes of the political parties across the treatment conditions. I will use various text analysis techniques including word clouds, sentiment analysis, and structural topic models.

Third, I will test the main hypotheses using within-subjects tests. I will begin by calculating the mean within-subjects difference in ratings of each outcome that was measured in both survey waves. Next, I will conduct difference-of-means tests across the following conditions. I will conduct these tests for all respondents, and separately for Asian American and white respondents.

- Any control vs. any treatment
- Inclusion control vs. inclusion treatment
- Affective control vs. affective treatment
- Any control vs. Any mostly same-race treatment
- Any control vs. Any mostly different-race treatment
- Inclusion control vs. mostly same-race inclusion treatment
- Inclusion control vs. mostly different-race inclusion treatment
- Affective control vs. mostly same-race affective treatment
- Affective control vs. mostly different-race affective treatment

Finally, I will repeat these analysis on subsets of respondents to test the moderation hypotheses (2-5). To test hypothesis 2 (immigrant constituency effects), I will compare the results for Asian American and white respondents. To test hypothesis 3 (political predisposition effects), I will compare the results for: (1) Democrats or Independents and Republicans, (2) those who voted and did not vote in the 2018 midterms, and (3) those who view political material on Facebook rarely and frequently. To test hypothesis 4 (generational effects), I will compare the results for: (1) those with and without foreign-born parents, (2) those who are US-born and foreign-born, (3) foreign-born respondents who lived in the U.S. for longer and shorter periods of time, and (4) those who discussed politics at home with their parents frequently and infrequently. To test hypothesis 5 (racial composition of actual network), I will compare the results for respondents who have mostly same-race and mostly different-race Facebook social networks.

To confirm that differences which appear across these subsets are significant, I will conduct regressions that interact the treatments with these moderators. Where possible, I will re-estimate the moderation models for the full sample and separately for Asian American and white respondents.

10 Additional Information

I conducted a small exploratory pilot prior to pre-registering the study. The purpose of the pilot was to determine whether the research design is feasible and to estimate attrition rates between waves of the survey. The pilot was necessary due to the novel research methods employed in this design. The pilot was conducted on a sample of less than 50 respondents, an insufficient sample size for conducting sufficiently-powered tests of the hypotheses. I also conducted a small manipulation check on an independent sample of MTurk respondents to validate that the treatments are interpreted as expected.

In addition to the pre-registered analyses described above, I may conduct some exploratory analyses. These analyses may use variables that I do not have strong expectations about prior to data collection. If I conduct such analyses, I will explain that they are exploratory in nature rather than theoretically driven in future written work.

11 Treatment templates

The following are two hypothetical examples of articles about politics that you might see on a social media platform like Facebook. Please read the text of each carefully.

Figure 2: Affective control, post 1 of 2



Figure 3: Affective control, post 2 of 2



Imagine that the following two hypothetical discussions about politics occurred between your friends on a social media platform like Facebook. Please read each exchange carefully.

Figure 4: Affective treatment, post 1 of 2



What's on your mind?

Attach: 📎 📷 📹 📄 📌 📎



Ten Ways that Democrats are Taking Action, While Republicans Lag Behind
HUFFINGTONPOST.COM

Person 1, Person 2, and Person 3 like this

Like Comment Share

Person 1: I'm excited that the Democratic Party is working to represent the interests of the people, unlike the Republicans.

Person 2: I think it's clear that the Democrats have bigger ideas than the Republicans.

Person 3: I'm glad that the Democratic Party is implementing new ideas, unlike the Republicans.

Person 4: The Democrats are the better party, so it's good to see them getting their act together before the election.

Figure 5: Affective treatment, post 2 of 2



What's on your mind?

Attach: 📎 📷 📹 📄 📌 📎



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Democrats Make Push to Mobilize Voters, but Republicans Stay Focused on Their Base
POLITICO.COM

Person 1, Person 2, and Person 3 like this

Like Comment Share

Person 1: This doesn't surprise me, since the Democrats try to represent everyone's interests.

Person 2: The Democrats are a better party, I'm glad they are taking a proactive stance on voter mobilization.

Person 3: The Democratic Party is making these efforts because they can actually appeal to voters. But Republicans know they aren't likely to attract anyone new.

Person 4: It's exciting to see that the Democrats are expanding their base to include more voters. I wouldn't expect anything different from the Republicans.

The following are two hypothetical examples of articles about politics that you might see on a social media platform like Facebook. Please read the text of each carefully.

Figure 6: Inclusion control, post 1 of 2



Figure 7: Inclusion control, post 2 of 2



Imagine that the following two hypothetical discussions about politics occurred between your friends on a social media platform like Facebook. Please read each exchange carefully.

Figure 8: Inclusion treatment, post 1 of 2



Figure 9: Inclusion treatment, post 2 of 2



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