

Postal Voter Recruitment and Turnout Experiment: Pre-Analysis Plan

3rd April, 2018

Introduction

We use a randomised control trial (RCT) to test the effect of partisan letters on the uptake of postal voting in the United Kingdom. Households in Southwark, London were randomly assigned to receive a letter from the local Liberal Democrats encouraging them to apply for postal voting either online or by returning to the local council an enclosed postal voter application form. Our aim is to test (1) whether a party's efforts to recruit known supporters to postal votes is effective, and (2) whether these efforts have an effect on the turnout of these supporters.

Evidence from the US suggests that it is possible to change voters' registration from the traditional, in-person status, to postal voter status (or 'Vote-By-Mail')¹. However, existing studies have been conducted in the US, with limited research conducted in the UK. The first (and to our knowledge, only) experiment to test partisan efforts to mobilise voters through vote-by-mail was also conducted in the US, during the 2016 elections. Hassell's (2017) experiment² tested the effect of encouragements to vote-by-mail sent on behalf of the Republican Party to Republican supporters in Minnesota. The results suggest that party supporters sent a letter urging them to vote-by-mail were indeed more likely to do so. Our study broadly replicates Hassell's study. We hope to build on existing research by adding another partisan experiment that tests the effect of treatments urging voters to vote-by-mail – this time, in Britain. Given the imbalance of existing experiments towards non-partisan, US-based studies, we hope to examine whether these findings generalise to postal voting recruitment in a UK context. The experiment represents (to our knowledge) the first partisan postal vote recruitment study to be conducted outside the US.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that individuals living in households that receive encouragements to register for a postal vote will see higher postal vote registration. The second hypothesis is that those in the treatment group will also see a higher turnout rate at the local election.

¹ Mann, C. B., 2011. "Get the Vote in the Mail: Experiments in Getting Out the Vote using no Excuse Absentee Voting." Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, LA.

Mann, C. B., and G. Mayhew. 2011. "Whether, When, & How to Vote: Four Field Experiments on Mobilization to Vote by Mail, Early in Person, and on Election Day." Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, WA.

Monroe NW and Sylvester DE (2011) Who converts to vote-by-mail? Evidence from a field experiment. *Election Law Journal* 10(1): 15–35.

² Hassell, H. 2017. "Teaching voters new tricks: The effect of partisan absentee vote-by-mail get-out-the-vote efforts". *Research and Politics* 1-6.

Sample

The units of analysis are households in Southwark, London that contain Liberal Democrat party supporters (as identified by previous local party canvassing records), who do not regularly turnout to vote at local elections.

Random Assignment of Treatment

Registered non-postal voters in Southwark, London who had been previously identified as sympathetic towards the party but who do not regularly participate in previous local elections, were first clustered into their households. Households are randomly assigned to the treatment group or to the control group.

Treatment

Households assigned to the treatment group will receive a letter from their local Liberal Democrat candidate encouraging them to register for a postal vote. The letter is not overtly partisan in tone but mentions local political issues at stake in the election such as “housing, crime and the environment”. The letter stresses the convenience of voting by post (“make it easier for you to vote”) and an assurance that postal voting reduces the likelihood of being unable to vote on election day. Recipients were also asked to complete and return a postal voter application form that was enclosed with the letter.

Data and Outcome Measures

Our first outcome measure will be postal voter registration, measured by the number of postal voters in the treatment and controls groups after the letters are sent. We expect the proportion of postal voters in the treatment group to be higher than in the control group after the treatments are administered. The data will be gathered from the regular updates to the electoral register provided by the local council.

The second outcome is individual-level voter turnout at the 2018 local elections in Southwark. We expect the treatment group to turnout at a slightly higher rate if the postal voter registration is successful. The data will be gathered from the marked registers that are released after the election on 3rd May, 2018.

Method for Estimating Average Treatment Effects

We will measure the intent-to-treat (ITT) of treatments on both of our outcome measures (postal voter registration and turnout). As the experiment is cluster randomised at household level, our regression models will include clusters for households. We will regress postal voter registration on assignment, using covariates to generate more precise estimates.

Additional Analyses

Subject to data availability from the local party and the electoral roll, we plan to explore heterogeneous treatment effects at the individual and ward level. These additional explorations include:

- Registration and turnout effects for different socio-demographic and political variables.
- The effect of treatments in wards with incumbent Liberal Democrat councillors versus those with no incumbents.