

Two Field Experiments Mobilizing US Citizens Who Have Felony Convictions

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Abstract: This paper presents the results from a pilot study designed to mobilize convicted felons to vote in the November 2014 General Election, as well as the design for a follow-up study to be conducted during the November 2017 Virginia Gubernatorial Election. The study has two primary aims: (1) to identify the most effective methods of mobilizing convicted felons to vote; and (2) to identify the downstream effects which occur after felons are politically mobilized. Intensive mobilization treatments are embedded within a panel survey completed by a population of convicted felons who are eligible to vote before and after an election. Treatment effects are assessed using data from official voter history records, as well as data from pre-treatment and post-election surveys. The pilot study found that mobilization generated substantial (but imprecise) increases in voter registration and voter turnout, as well as significant increases in trust in government and trust in the criminal justice system. The results from the pilot study were promising overall, but largely under-powered. Given the promising results from the pilot study, I propose the design for a larger-scale follow-up field experiment, planned for Fall 2017.

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The United States is among the most punitive countries in the entire world. Beyond record-high rates of incarceration, the US is also unique in the civil consequences it applies to its criminal population. Felon disenfranchisement laws vary widely by state (See Figure 1). Current estimates suggest 6.1 million US citizens are denied the right to vote due to felony disenfranchisement laws. More than 75% of these disenfranchised citizens are not in prison, and more than half have completed all terms of parole and probation. The most extreme case is the state of Florida, which currently disenfranchises more than 10% of its citizens (1.6 million people).

These laws disproportionately affect minority populations. While about 1 in 40 citizens is disenfranchised nationwide, about 1 out of every 13 Black citizens is disenfranchised. In three states (FL, KY, and TN), more than 20% of Black citizens do not have the right to vote.

Among felons who are eligible to vote, their turnout is substantially lower than their non-felon counterparts. Why eligible felons vote less often is a question I will discuss at greater length below. Even considering the lower expected turnout from eligible felons, felon disenfranchisement laws tend to favor Republican outcomes. Manza and Uggen (2008) estimate that felon disenfranchisement laws changed the outcome of the 2000 Presidential Election, along with 7 different US Senate races between 1978 – 2004 (enough seats to the Senate from a Republican to a Democratic majority). Effects on lower-level elections are also widespread.

Given the clear partisan consequences of felon disenfranchisement, it is no surprise that felon voting rights are often decided on a party line. However, members from both sides have begun to find common ground on criminal justice reform. Both Democrats and Republicans share a common concern regarding successful offender re-entry and reduced recidivism. Most incarcerated citizens will eventually be set free, and lawmakers have paid increasing attention to improving the successful re-entry of formerly incarcerated citizens into society.

The re-entry and recidivism literature suggest that successful re-entry is best supported by targeting criminogenic characteristics – traits that are dynamic, and directly linked to recidivism – including anti-social attitudes and beliefs. Models of successful re-entry stress the importance of community ties, feeling vested, and prosocial attitudes. Although a proposed link between voting and recidivism has been suggested, empirical evidence is currently based entirely on observational evidence. For example, felons who vote go back to prison less often than felons who don't vote (Manza and Uggen 2008). However – these studies (as they note themselves) are based on observational data, and cannot account for the endogeneity between voting and crime (the types of felons who vote are different from the types of felons who don't vote), nor the endogeneity between disenfranchisement laws and other types of criminal justice policies.

Beyond effects on turnout and electoral outcomes, it has long been theorized that felon disenfranchisement laws also generate negative consequences at the individual-level. Early models of participation argued that voting and participation elicited transformative effects, generating more socially-minded, informed, and active citizens.

In my previous work, I have explored a number of proposed downstream effects of participation. Through a previous randomized controlled trial among a non-felon population, I found evidence that reducing costs of participation generates an increase in political information (Shineman 2016), and that being mobilized to cast a ballot generates increases in political efficacy and trust in government. I believe that a direct link between voting and recidivism – though plausible – would require a sample size larger than the one allowed by the presently proposed study. However, this study intends to generate enough power to estimate downstream effects on trust and efficacy – both of which are linked to patterns of recidivism.

This paper presents the results from a pilot study designed to mobilize convicted felons during the November 2014 General Election, as well as the design for a follow-up study to be conducted during the November 2017 Virginia Gubernatorial Election. Section 1 reviews the theory and hypotheses. Section 2 presents the design and results from the pilot study, and Section 3 presents the design for the follow-up study.

1. Theory and Hypotheses

Why Do Felons Vote Less Often? The causes of lower participation among eligible felons are debated. Some argue that felons are not interested in participating; hence disenfranchisement policies are not barring citizens who would actually vote. However, I identify three other categories of explanations which can account for the lower turnout among eligible felons as a result of disenfranchisement policies.

(1) Costs of Registration and Turnout: Initial voter registration is among the largest barriers to voter turnout. Most felons are required to re-register after their eligibility is restored.

(2) Misinformation about Eligibility: There is a high degree of misinformation about the eligibility of convicted felons, both among the felons themselves (Drucker and Barreras 2005; Manza and Uggen 2006), and among elites – including election officials (Ewald 2005; Allen 2011). Given the variation (and frequent changes) in laws across states, some of the non-participation among convicted felons is likely driven by misinformation about eligibility.

(3) Social Identity: Typically, voting is perceived to be a pro-social behavior, as something people are proud to be observed doing. The mobilization literature has exploded in the last 20 years, with hundreds of studies intended to estimate the most effective methods of increasing turnout. The strongest effects have been generated by treatments that promised (or threatened) to advertise whether subjects participated to members of their in-group (Gerber,

Green, and Larimer 2008; McClendon 2014). However, the effects of social pressure are at least partially dependent on the degree to which one expects to receive esteem for voting (or to receive shame for not voting). Gerber and Rogers (2009) find that turnout increases more when a script emphasizes that turnout will be high – suggesting people are more likely to want to vote if they think other people like them are also voting. Typical felons, however, are less likely to be surrounded by social networks that are politically active. Furthermore, because low propensity voters are less likely to be targeted by political campaigns, felons are unlikely to be recruited and invited into the political system.

In *Mobilizing Inclusion*, Garcia Bedolla and Michelson (2012) argue that individuals have a “schema” based on their group identities, and this schema can include an identity as a “voter” or as a “non-voter”. For members of many socially and politically isolated groups, these identities are less likely to include expectations to participate in politics. Therefore, delivering a “get out the vote” (GOTV) message to such groups can be ineffective, as GOTV messages are not grounded in social expectations regarding high participation. On the contrary, Garcia Bedolla and Michelson argue that GOTV messages can be highly effective if they are accompanied by elements that alter one’s perception of what is expected from members of their group; the message should aim to shift the subject’s schema from that of a “non-voter” to that of a “voter”.

Hypotheses: I predict that the voter turnout of convicted felons will increase in response to the provision of: (H1 Cost Reduction) Assistance with voter registration and voting; (H2 Correction of Misinformation) Factual information about voter eligibility; and (H3 Social Identity) Appeals which transform and increase perceived expectations about felon participation.

What are the Downstream Effects of Disenfranchisement / Mobilization?

Political Information: The decision to become politically informed and engaged is partially dependent on one's expectations regarding participation. If the costs of participation are high, one has little incentive to invest in information. However, as barriers to participation are reduced, incentives to become politically informed increase. In a previous experiment conducted among a non-felon population (forthcoming at *British Journal of Political Science*), I find that subjects who are mobilized to vote also become more informed about the election. In my book manuscript, I document comparable effects in additional empirical settings.

Trust in Government: The act of engaging with a political system can make that system feel less foreign, more legitimate, and more inclusive – thereby increasing political trust.

Political Efficacy: The act of engaging with a political system generates will increase both internal efficacy (one's confidence in their own ability to engage a system and effect change) and external efficacy (one's confidence that a system is accessible to them).

Recidivism: Some have also suggested that the act of voting might cause felons to be less likely to commit further crimes. As voting is one element of social and political re-integration, it can make felons feel more included and invested in their communities, thereby reducing the chance that they will resort to activities in contrast to these communities. On the contrary, being disenfranchised or discouraged from voting can increase the sense of otherness, making felons more likely to develop norms and behaviors oppositional to their communities.

I predict that enabling and encouraging citizens with felony convictions to vote will cause those citizens to develop: (H4) Increased political information; (H5) Increased trust in government; (H6) Increased political efficacy; and (H7) Decreased recidivism.

Methodological Challenges Estimating Downstream Effects of Participation

There are strong reasons to believe that mobilizing individuals to participate in politics might cause those individuals to change in meaningful ways. However, given that participation is typically both costly and voluntary – and that many proposed effects of participation are also likely motivators for participation – previous empirical studies have been greatly hindered by endogeneity concerns. For example, I argue that motivating people to participate will cause them to increase their political information. However, we also know that information increases one’s propensity to participate. How then can a researcher isolate the independent effects of participation?

The basic template for my studies in this area embeds intensive mobilization treatments into panel surveys conducted before and after an election. Because the mobilization is randomly assigned, I am able to use voting behavior and survey responses among the mobilized and non-mobilized samples to estimate the effects of being mobilized.¹

In order to estimate the effects of exogenous participation, I need to generate a strong increase in voter turnout. A strong primary effect is essential for estimating a secondary effect with enough precision. One method of maximizing potential increases in voter turnout is to focus on elections where the baseline level of turnout will be low across the full population – such as local elections. Another method is to target populations who are likely to have lower levels of baseline participation in high salience elections, such as youth, people with low income and/or low education, or convicted felons.

¹ Note: I use the average treatment effect generated by receiving the mobilization treatment to estimate the effect of reducing costs (or increasing incentives to vote). I use an instrumental variables approach (with the mobilization treatment as the instrument, and actual turnout as the treatment) to estimate the effects of voting.

In previous project, I generated a large increase in turnout (among a non-felon sample) in the 2011 San Francisco Municipal Election by offering subjects a \$25 reward for voting.

My current project aims to generate substantial increases in voter turnout among a population of convicted felons who are eligible to vote. Several previous studies have tried to increase voter turnout among felon populations, with varied success. Meredith and Morse (2013; 2014) find mixed effects resulting from efforts to notify felons of their right to vote. Gerber et al. (2014) find that an official letter from the Secretary of State informing felons of their right to vote increased voter turnout among a subset of eligible felons by 1.8 percentage points. These results suggest that at least some felons can be mobilized through an informational treatment sent via postal mail. However, even the most effective of these treatments still left more than 90% of the sample population unregistered.

Where previous studies have focused primarily on documents inserted into release papers or sent through postal mail, my study aims to engage convicted felons in a voluntary face-to-face interaction. Given the unreliability of addresses and phone numbers, and given the overall difficulties in convincing strangers to engage in an unexpected conversation, generating direct voluntary contact with a felon sample through a door-to-door or phone campaign would be especially difficult. In light of these challenges, this study recruited felons for a paid research study, and then delivered a mobilization treatment once the felons arrived for the study. Although it is illegal to pay anyone to vote outside CA and AK, it is not illegal to pay people for their time. Once someone agrees to exchange their time for payment, they provide a captive audience. Recruiting felons for a paid research study creates an excellent opportunity for communicating with a convicted felon in an environment that provides a voluntary and attentive

in-person audience. I predict that this direct one-on-one contact will maximize the ability to successfully deliver information.²

2. Pilot Study, November 2014 General Election in Akron, Ohio

Experimental Design: A pilot study recruited 52 convicted felons living in Akron, Ohio during the 2014 General Election. In the state of Ohio, a convicted felon loses the right to vote when they are imprisoned, and any existing voter registration is purged. The right to vote is restored after release, but citizens who were incarcerated must re-register.

All subjects completed a survey one month before the November, 2014 election. After completing the pre-election survey, subjects were randomly assigned to one of three different treatment groups: a control group, a generic “get out the vote” (GOTV) group, or a felon specific GOTV group. Both mobilization treatments offered assistance with registration. After the election, subjects completed a post-election survey. Validated voter turnout rates were verified using the official voter history file, and other effects of the mobilization treatment are assessed using data from the pre and post-election surveys.

Subject Pool and Recruitment: All subjects were required to be US Citizens, at least 18 years old, and to have at least one felony conviction. Among this population, I recruited a convenience sample by advertising in places where citizens with felony convictions would be likely to see the announcement. An invitation to participate offered \$25 in exchange for

² Regarding Cost Effectiveness: Garnering a subjects’ attention through a paid research study introduces a higher cost per subject contacted, compared to more traditional methods of mobilization – such as calling people on the phone, or going door-to-door. However, I predict that a personally delivered mobilization script will generate a significantly stronger effect on voter turnout, compared to less personal or more intrusive methods of contact. I also suspect that acquiring a captive audience through paid survey and research opportunities might be more cost effective in terms of votes per dollar.

completing two surveys, about 5-6 weeks apart. The invitation to participate was circulated through the mailing lists of organizations that provided assistance with job training, employment, housing, clothing, food, and other social services. Flyers were also posted at food banks, public transportation centers, job centers, and other areas where citizens with felony convictions would be likely to frequent. In total, 52 subjects were recruited.

Analysis of the official voter history file suggests that the randomization successfully produced three groups who had balanced levels of prior registration and voter turnout.³ Table 1 displays the rate of voter registration before the treatments were administered, as well as the rate of voter turnout in each treatment group for the previous 6 elections.

TABLE 1 HERE

Location: Subjects were required to take the first survey in person, at the Akron Urban League, which was easily accessible by car or public transportation. The Urban League is well known for providing assistance with job training and community development. The location was chosen in order to provide a safe space to deliver the treatments, as well as to direct interested subjects to a familiar location with a credible reputation. As subjects would not receive any payment until they completed the second survey one month later, it was essential that all subjects trusted the researcher. Subjects could complete the first survey any time between 9:00 AM and 7:00 PM during a 5-day window (Thursday, October 2nd – Monday, October 6th). Upon arrival, each subject was “checked in” by the experimenter, and then escorted to a computer lab, where

³ Appendix A provides more thorough documentation of sample characteristics and balance across treatment groups.

they completed the first survey. Assistance was provided in completing the survey when needed.⁴ All treatments were delivered in-person in private after the survey was completed.

Experimental Treatments: The study provided two different mobilization treatments, as well as a control “placebo” treatment.

Treatment #1 – Generic “Get Out The Vote” Treatment: The first mobilization treatment provided a generic appeal to register and vote, along with assistance with voter registration, and a reminder of the upcoming election. After completing the pre-election survey, subjects were (conversationally) read a short script informing and reminding them that the November 2014 election was a few weeks away. Subjects were informed that the voter registration deadline was the next week, and were offered a voter registration form.⁵ If the subject chose, he or she could fill out a form to generate a new registration, update the address on their existing voter registration, or request an absentee ballot. The experimenter delivered all forms to the Department of Elections before the deadline. Subjects were also given a packet of information including details on how to register, how to find one’s polling place, how to vote early or vote by mail, and how to cast a provisional ballot (See Appendix B: Generic GOTV Treatment Materials). In the generic treatment, the identity of the subject as a felon was never mentioned, other than in the recruitment materials.⁶

⁴ In retrospect, using a computer to record the first survey was a poor choice. All questions were multiple choice and only required the subject to move the mouse and click. However, several subjects had never used a computer before, and had to be given instructions on how to maneuver the mouse.

⁵ The script was memorized and recited in a conversational tone. The content of the mobilization script was delivered as uniformly as possible, but was adapted slightly to suit each conversation, as the personalized natural method of delivery was more important than an exact word-for-word match across subjects.

⁶ Given that the study announced a felony conviction as an eligibility criterion, subjects likely knew the study had something to do with convicted felons. If a subject in the generic GOTV treatment explicitly asked if felons were allowed to vote, the experimenter responded “yes”, and

Treatment #2 – Felon Specific Get out the Vote Treatment: A second mobilization treatment included all of the content from the generic treatment, along with additional felon specific appeals. In the felon specific mobilization treatment, the experimenter engaged the felon identity, and addressed felon voting rights directly. In addition to the voter materials distributed in the generic treatment, subjects in the felon specific treatment also received a handout displaying the variation in felon voting rights by state (See Appendix C: Felon Specific GOTV Treatment Materials). The experimenter walked through the map, explaining that the rights of convicted felons vary across states, and emphasized that all felons who are not currently imprisoned are allowed to vote in Ohio. Additionally, the experimenter read a memorized script urging subjects to vote, in order to take advantage of their right to vote, to demonstrate that felons should have the right to vote, and to influence government and have their voice be heard.

Control Group – Placebo Treatment: All subjects in the control group received a placebo treatment, which was intended to capture all the elements of the GOTV treatments, except for voter mobilization. Because the subject population is known for being socially isolated and largely neglected by political actors, there was concern that the experience of being engaged directly by a researcher might produce effects (like increased trust or efficacy), independent of the mobilization message. In light of these concerns, the placebo treatment was designed to provide subjects with an equivalent level of personalized attention, without mentioning politics or the upcoming election. I borrowed the idea of a recycling placebo, which is fairly standard in the mobilization literature. Subjects in the placebo group received a packet of information about how to reduce, reuse, and recycle, as well as a guide to composting (See Appendix D: Placebo Treatment Materials). The researcher had an extended one-on-one

truthfully answered any questions about voting rights introduced by the subject. Felon specific information was not offered proactively, but no information was deliberately withheld.

conversation with each subject, walked each subject through the packet, reviewed the instructions on how to compost, and ended with an appeal to reduce, reuse, and recycle as much as possible, so we can take care of our planet.⁷

All subjects were contacted by e-mail or by phone on the day before the election. For all subjects, this communication served as a reminder that the second survey would begin in two days, and an opportunity to schedule a phone appointment to complete the second survey. For subjects in either mobilization treatment group, this communication also included a reminder of the upcoming election, and an appeal to vote. For subjects in the felon-specific treatment group, this communication also included a reminder that it was important for felons to exercise their right to vote (see Appendix E: Pre-Election Contact Script).

Predictions: Both mobilization treatments were intended to increase voter turnout. Engaging the felon identity could have mixed effects. On the positive side, directly addressing felon voting rights enables the felon specific treatment to clarify misinformation about eligibility. The treatment aims to engage felon identity in a positive frame. However, there is also concern that activating the felon identity might backfire, by making the subject feel isolated from society. Note: The 2017 design (see below) attempts to differentiate these two elements by integrating a positive social identity treatment.

Post-Election Survey: The post-election survey began on November 5th, 2014 – one day after the November 2014 General Election. In order to maximize the study completion rate, the

⁷ Some subjects responded quite strongly to the placebo treatment, and initiated conversations about their experience trying to compost, or how they had a friend who used to compost. These responses suggest that the placebo treatment successfully generated personalized face-to-face interactions between the subject and the researcher, without engaging the topic of electoral participation.

second survey could be completed online, by phone, or by postal mail.⁸ Subjects were informed that they would only receive payment after completing both surveys, and were contacted multiple times to maximize the completion rate. Of the 52 subjects who took the first survey, 41 also completed the second survey (78.9%). Attrition was comparable across treatment groups.⁹

Results: I estimate the effects of the mobilization treatments through three different sets of estimates: (1) Immediate responses to the treatment; (2) Voter registration and voter turnout; and (3) Post-election attitudes and level of information.

Immediate Responses to the Treatment: After receiving either mobilization treatment, subjects were offered a series of forms which could be used to register to vote, update one's address, or request an absentee ballot. I noted which forms each subject completed. Subjects in the control group were not offered these forms.¹⁰ Figure 2 presents the percent of subjects who tried to initiate or update their voter registration status in response to the mobilization treatments. The results from both treatments are pooled, and differences are noted in footnotes below.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Overall, 38.9% of subjects receiving either mobilization treatment responded by filling out some type of voter registration form¹¹, 13.9% tried to update the address on their voter

⁸ Subjects were asked to indicate their preferred method of contact, as well as to offer the contact information of three people who would be able to locate them, in case their contact information changed. In cases when a subject was not reachable, the experimenter contacted the individuals suggested by the subject, in an attempt to restore contact.

⁹ Specifically, the completion rate was 75% in the control group, 80% in the generic GOTV group, and 81% in the felon specific GOTV group.

¹⁰ Although I can observe each subjects' voter registration status before and after the treatment, the voter history file does not enable me to observe whether subjects in the control group submitted forms intended to *update* their registration. Therefore, I cannot formally analyze whether the treatments lead to an increase in registration forms *submitted*.

¹¹ The generic GOTV treatment motivated 33% of treated subjects to fill out a registration form (5/15) and the felon specific GOTV treatment motivated 43% of subjects to fill out a registration form (9/21).

registration¹², and 11.1% requested an absentee ballot for the upcoming election¹³, and 22.2% tried to register to vote for the first time¹⁴. Some subjects who filled out what they believed were new registration forms were actually already registered.¹⁵

Treatment Effects on Voter Registration and Voter Turnout: Figure 3 displays the average treatment effects on the rate of voter registration and voter turnout – both of which are observable for subjects in all three treatment groups. Actual voter registration and voter turnout were validated using the Summit Country Voter History File. Subjects were matched based on their name, year of birth, and home and mailing addresses. All treatment effects are estimated by comparing raw averages across each treatment group, with 2-tailed significance tests.

FIGURE 3 HERE

Compared to the control group, voter registration was higher in the generic GOTV group (+6.7) and the felon specific GOTV group (+5.1) – with a pooled average increase of 8.3 percentage points (from 75.0 – 83.3%). Turnout was also higher in each treatment group (+23.4 pp in the generic GOTV group, and +6.0 in the felon GOTV group), with a pooled increase of 13.1 percentage points overall. None of these estimates are significant within a 95% confidence

¹² Among subjects who received the generic GOTV treatment, 26.7% filled out a form to update their address; whereas 4.8% of subjects in the felon-specific treatment initiated address updates.

¹³ Absentee ballot requests were initiated by 6.7% of subjects in the generic GOTV treatment, and by 14.3% of subjects in the felon specific GOVT treatment.

¹⁴ The generic GOVT treatment motivated 6.7% of subjects to try to register to vote, whereas the felon specific GOTV treatment motivated 33.3% of subjects to initiate what they believed were new registrations

¹⁵ Some subjects had registered many years before, but had not voted in over a decade. Although a felon's voter registration is supposed to be purged if he or she serves time in prison, it is possible the local election offices neglected to cancel some registrations. Alternatively, subjects might not remember registering, and might have stopped receiving election-related mail when they failed to update their address. Among those who requested new registrations, the registration forms were used to update the subject's address (if it had changed), or were otherwise disregarded by the election office. In either case, filling out a registration form makes the subject aware that he or she is registered to vote, and ensures that election-related materials were being sent to the correct mailing address.

interval. Although the effects on voter registration and turnout are not statistically significant within traditional boundaries, the data suggest substantial increases in new voter registrations, and more than a 200% increase in voter turnout. The precision of these estimates is greatly limited by the small sample size. But given the magnitude of the average effects, the results suggest a larger-scale implementation is worthwhile.

Treatment Effects on Post-Election Attitudes and Information: The post-election survey asked multiple questions intended to estimate political engagement, political preferences, and political information. In the interest of both transparency and space, all models (including null effects) are referenced in the text, and full results are presented in cases where the data suggest promising trends. Full results from all models are available upon request.

Political Trust: Both the pre-treatment and the post-election survey asked subjects to indicate their level of trust regarding various institutions and groups of people. The surveys intentionally asked about trust regarding different levels of government and society in order to differentiate between different types of trust. The original hypothesis predicts that being mobilized to vote should increase trust in all electoral institutions which were elected on that ballot, with possible diffuse trust effects spreading out to other political institutions and actors. In order to differentiate between increases in trust toward particular actors, and overall increases in trust, the surveys ask subjects to indicate their level of trust regarding several non-political actors, including their neighbors, coworkers, and the media. The surveys also asked about the level of trust toward the police, the criminal courts, the Supreme Court, and the fire department – all of which are institutions run by the government, but not elected. Appendix F displays the full summary statistics regarding pre-treatment levels of trust for all categories across each treatment group.

For each category of trust, I estimate the effects of each treatment in two different models. The first model compares the raw average level of trust in each treatment group, compared to the level of trust in the control group. In order to account for some minor differences in pre-treatment levels of trust, a second model estimates the effect of each treatment on trust, controlling for the level of trust indicated in the pre-treatment survey. Trust was originally measured on a 1-5 point scale, which has been re-scaled to range from 0 – 100, with higher numbers indicating higher trust. Table 2 presents the average effect of each treatment on each level of trust.

TABLE 2 HERE

Focusing on the Column 2B (raw differences, controlling for pre-treatment levels), the results suggest that the felon specific mobilization treatment generated substantial increases in trust for the local government (+27.5, $p \leq 0.01$), state government (+18.5 $p \leq 0.05$), the federal government (+22.0, $p \leq 0.10$), the Supreme Court (+25.0, $p \leq 0.05$), the criminal courts (+30.0, $p \leq 0.05$), and the biggest effect – trust in the police (+42.5, $p \leq 0.01$). The generic mobilization treatment (Column 1B) also lead to an increase in trust in the police (+35.0, $p \leq 0.05$), but the generic treatment did not affect levels of trust in other government institutions. Neither treatment affected trust in non-governmental actors, such as the media, neighbors, coworkers, or the Fire Department. Figure 4 displays the average effects of the felon specific mobilization treatment on trust, broken down by category.

FIGURE 4 HERE

A clear pattern emerges, where trust in government increases – but trust in specific political actors (like Congress and the President) does not. Trust in the criminal justice system also increases substantially, but subjects do not become more trusting of all actors; there are no

significant effects on trust in the media, neighbors, coworkers, or the Fire Department.

Although the effects on trust in elected government were predicted, analyses regarding treatment effects on trust in the criminal justice system (both through criminal courts and through the police) were exploratory, and were not predicted before the analysis. In retrospect, it seems possible that the felon specific treatment increased trust in these institutions because it clarified misinformation about the voting rights of convicted felons, or served to offset some of the negative associations felons might have with the criminal justice system. With such a small sample, one should be hesitant to make big generalizations. Nonetheless, the magnitude and persistence of the effects is worth notice, and should be investigated further in future studies.

Satisfaction with Electoral Outcome: The post-election survey asked subjects to identify their level of satisfaction with the outcome of the election, at different levels of government. As satisfaction is associated with legitimacy and trust, one might expect that being mobilized to vote in an electoral system – or even being invited to participate – might make an individual more likely to approve of the outcome of that election. Table 3 presents the results.

TABLE 3 HERE

Although the low sample size provides imprecise estimates, it is worth noting that satisfaction with the outcome of the election was higher in both treatment groups, across every level of electoral outcome. The data suggest that the felon-specific mobilization treatment significantly increased satisfaction with the outcome of the local electoral contests (+22.5 on a 100-point scale, $p=0.04$), and marginally increased satisfaction with the state-level results (+15.0, $p=0.14$).

Cycle of Participation: At the end of the post-election survey, subjects were informed the survey was complete, and they verified the address where their payment was to be sent. After indicating their address, the survey asked subjects if they would be willing to answer a few more

questions, without payment. Subjects were told they would receive the same \$25 payment regardless as to whether they agreed to answer these extra questions. The extra questions were included in order to estimate whether the mobilization treatments made subjects more likely to engage in participation in a more general sense. Figure 5 presents the results. The data suggest that the mobilization treatments increased willingness to answer the optional questions. Only 18.2% of subjects in the control group were willing to answer the extra questions; whereas 41.7% of subjects answered these questions in the generic GOTV group, and 70.6% of subjects answered these questions in the felon specific GOTV group, more than a 380% increase ($p \leq 0.01$). Given that the control group received a placebo treatment that matched the same level of personal attention and engagement, the data suggest that treatments which targeted mobilization increased willingness to engage in some other forms of participation.¹⁶

FIGURE 5 HERE

Null Effects

Political Efficacy: Subjects were asked a series of questions in both surveys which were intended to estimate political efficacy. For example, questions asked subjects to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “I feel politically empowered”, “My vote makes a difference”, and “I like to participate”. Responses were comparable in the pre-treatment survey, and there were no significant differences in the post-treatment survey.

¹⁶ Note: A similar outcome was estimated during the San Francisco 2011 experiment. Subjects who received the mobilization treatment were significantly more likely to agree to answer extra questions for free. However, because subjects who received the mobilization treatment also had the (surprise) chance to earn an extra \$25 through the study, I was unsure whether this outcome was driven by the act of participation, or whether it might have been generated because the extra payment shifted views toward expected payoffs. As the felon study did not provide any additional monetary incentives to subjects, the outcome in the felon study can be more clearly attributed as a result of mobilization.

Residual Mobilization: The post-election survey asked subjects to indicate their likelihood of voting in the upcoming 2015, 2016, and 2018 elections, as well as how likely they believed they were to “participate” in the future. There were no significant differences in self-predicted future participation across treatment groups. Additionally, I continued to track the turnout of all subjects in the 2015 and 2016 elections, and found no significant differences in long-term turnout across treatment groups.

Political Information: I estimate political information in two different ways: self-identified levels of political engagement, and knowledge of electoral outcomes. Overall, there were few significant differences.¹⁷

Summary of 2014 Pilot Study: The pilot study intended to mobilize convicted felons during the November 2014 General Election. Subjects were invited to participate in a research study, including the completion of two surveys about 5-6 weeks apart. Two intensive mobilization treatments were embedded into the panel survey, along with a placebo control treatment intended to generate all the effects of personalized contact, without mentioning the upcoming election or offering registration assistance.

The study recruited a convenience sample, by advertising in places where felons would be likely to see the announcement. A preferable design would integrate the recruitment strategy with official criminal records and release files, in a method similar to the one utilized by Gerber

¹⁷ The exceptions were that the felon specific GOVT treatment increased self-identified interest and information relating to local politics by 1.8 ($p < 0.01$) and 1.9 ($p < 0.01$) points on a 5-point scale, respectively. Interest in state-level politics was also higher in the felon specific GOVT treatment group (+1.8, $p < 0.01$), as well as marginally in the generic GOTV group (+0.9, $p = 0.16$). The results suggest that the felon specific treatment might have activated increased interest and engagement in local and state-wide politics, but with the small sample size, we should be wary to place too much value on these results. None of the models suggest differences in engagement in national politics. Given that the November 2014 election contained electoral contests at local, state, and national levels, these results are difficult to interpret. Neither treatment generated a significant increase in knowledge of the electoral outcomes.

et al. (2014). An integration of the methods could use official records to locate felons by address, and then recruit felons to participate in a paid research study – either through mailings, phone calls, or through door-to-door visits. A more representative sample would be ideal, as would a much larger sample size. The 2014 Akron study only recruited 52 subjects. The limited sample size was due in part to timing restrictions, as well as bad luck with regard to weather and attendance on the limited number of days during which the surveys could be conducted. Given the small sample, the number of inferences which can be made from this study are limited. However, the data suggest several promising trends – including substantial increases in voter registration and turnout, as well as promising data regarding downstream effects on trust and future participation – which warrant a follow-up study on a larger scale.

3. Experimental Design – 2017 Virginia Gubernatorial Election

Given the success of my previous research involving a non-felon population in San Francisco, and the promising results of the exploratory study conducted among felons in Akron Ohio, I now propose a larger-scale field experiment estimating: (1) the most effective methods of mobilizing convicted felons; and (2) the downstream effects of mobilization among a felon population.

Overview of Experimental Design: Subjects will be recruited to participate in a research study which will integrate a series of mobilization treatments into a panel survey conducted before and after the 2017 Virginia Gubernatorial Election. Again, voter turnout effects will be estimated through the official voter history file, and attitudinal effects will be estimated using the results from the post-election surveys. All subjects will be convicted felons who are either eligible to vote, or eligible to request a restoration of their voting rights.

Setting: I choose the November 2017 Virginia Gubernatorial Election for a number of reasons. The incumbent Governor (Terry McAuliffe) is not allowed to run for re-election (due to VA restrictions on the same candidate occupying the office for two terms in a row). The Governor's office has alternated between Democratic and Republican candidates in recent decades, with fairly competitive elections.

The lack of an incumbent candidate combined with a competitive election for a high-level office suggest the campaign will be active and exciting, generating an environment where subjects can be mobilized to vote based on the content of the campaign (whereas a non-competitive contest would be less appealing). Having the Gubernatorial election in an odd-number year also means there will be lower turnout on average (typically between 40 – 50%), allowing for larger increases in voter turnout.

Finally, Virginia is a prime setting for a follow-up study because of the recent changes in felon disenfranchisement policy in the state. In order to restore one's voting rights in VA, a convicted felon must not only complete their parole and probation, and must also receive a special exemption from the Governor. On April 22nd 2016, current Governor Terry McAuliffe signed an executive order restoring voting rights to *all* citizens who had completed their probation and parole – over 206,000 citizens. He promised to sign a new order every month restoring the rights of all felons who had completed their terms of supervision within the last month. The Republican Party challenged the executive order, and it was overturned by the VA Supreme Court on July 22nd 2016. The Court ruled that McAuliffe had the right to restore voting rights to all 206,000 citizens – but he was not allowed to do so in a single executive order; instead, he would have to sign a separate document for each individual. On August 22nd 2016, McAuliffe announced he intends to sign the individual orders as quickly as possible, beginning

with the 13,000 newly-enfranchised citizens who had tried to register to vote before the executive order was released. McAuliffe restored the voting rights of 70,000 citizens before the voter registration deadline for the November 2016 election, and he restored voting rights for 140,000 citizens by January 2017. His office continues to evaluate and restore voting rights to additional citizens every month.

A citizen with a felony conviction in Virginia can look up their status on a government website – including details about whether their voting rights have been restored. There is also a link provided where citizens can request to be placed at the front of the list of those whose voting rights will be restored, with an approximate turnout time of about 2-3 weeks between the request and the restoration of rights.

Virginia therefore presents a state where over 150,000 citizens have had their voting rights restored within the last year, more than half of them since the deadline to register and vote in the 2016 election. I am currently working on matching the names from the restoration list to the voter file, to estimate how many eligible felons have registered thus far, and how many voted. Given the recent restoration of rights, the public confusion in the changes in eligibility, and the lack of active mobilization efforts since the registration deadline for the November 2016 election, I expect the rate of voter registration and voter turnout among eligible felons in the 2017 Gubernatorial election will be quite low. As such, the case offers a population with a low baseline and high potential for mobilization. Virginia offers a prime setting to estimate the most effective methods of mobilizing convicted felons, as well as a prime opportunity for generating the large increases in turnout necessary to estimate downstream effects with enough precision.

Research Design: The experiment will mimic the Akron study in many ways. My target sample is US Citizens residing in Virginia who have at least one felony conviction, and have

completed their term of supervision (including parole and probation). Subjects will be recruited to complete a panel survey, with the first survey taking place in September or October (before the voter registration deadline), and the second survey taking place just after the November Election.

The first survey will be completed in person at a neutral location, in order to facilitate both trust and safety, and to make sure all subjects can receive their treatments in person. Likely cities are Fairfax, Richmond, and/or Virginia Beach – all of which have fairly concentrated felon populations.¹⁸ The post-election survey will be conducted either by phone, internet, or postal mail (as preferred by the subject), beginning immediately after the November Election.¹⁹ Subjects will similarly be paid \$25 (by mail) after completing both surveys. Voter history files will be available in December 2017, and full analyses should be complete by February 2018.

The study will differ primarily in terms of scope (larger sample size) and treatment specification. The current vision for the experimental treatments is summarized below.

Experimental Treatments

(T1) *Placebo*: the control group will receive a placebo treatment, which will provide an encouragement to recycle along with instructions on how to compost. The placebo treatment intentionally provides personal attention and interaction between the experimenter and subject, in order to isolate the effect of the mobilization messages in the other treatments. I intend to

¹⁸ I am still working on identifying the physical place to conduct the surveys. Leading options including renting space at an Urban League office in Virginia, or working in the space of another well-known non-profit organization (such as the ACLU, or the New Virginia Majority).

¹⁹ Although face-to-face would be ideal, I opt to increase the ease of completing the second survey, in consideration of both the costs of facilitating another live survey, and concerns about attrition within the sample.

replicate the compost/recycle placebo, perhaps with an added hands-on demonstration of composting;

(T2) The *GOTV Treatment* (Get Out the Vote) will provide a generic “get out the vote” appeal, and will offer subjects a voter registration form, assistance completing the form (if requested), and reminders about the upcoming election;

(T3) The *Eligibility Treatment* will provide all of the content from the GOTV Treatment, and will also provide subjects with factual information about the voting rights of convicted felons, clarifying any misinformation or concerns about eligibility. The researcher will offer to help the subject look up their own eligibility status online. If the subject is registered, the experimenter will encourage the subject to register to vote, or update their registration to their current address if needed. If the subject is not eligible to vote, the experimenter will encourage the subject to request to have their voting rights restored.

Because VA is part-way through the restoration cycle, the case allows study of both citizens whose voting rights were recently restored, as well as currently ineligible citizens who could request to have their voting rights restored. The deadline to register to vote for the November 2017 Election is October 16th. Any subject treated before September 25th (3 weeks before the registration deadline) should have enough time to request restoration of their voting rights in time to register to vote in the election. I can therefore estimate effects of both voter turnout and the process of requesting (and maybe receiving) a restoration of one’s voting rights.

(T4) The *Social Identity Treatment* will provide subjects with all of the content from the Eligibility Treatment, and will also provide subjects with truthful information intended to shift their expectations regarding the political participation of convicted felons, by characterizing voting as “something felons do” or “something felons are expected to do”. The goal is to shift

subjects' perception about how members of their peer group – and hence, also themselves – are expected to interact in a democratic system. Currently this treatment consists of two types of information: positive estimates of felon turnout, and endorsements from key political actors.

(T4A) *Estimates of Felon Turnout*: One strategy is to provide subjects with estimates regarding the number of felons who vote in Virginia. Although the percent of (eligible) felons who vote overall is quite low, there are ways to convey these numbers in a positive light. For example, I could report the *number* of felons in the state who voted in the most recent presidential election (rather than the *percent*). Although the percent of felons who vote is lower than turnout among the average population, when that percent is multiplied by the number of felons, the product is a raw number that feels much bigger, and is more likely to trigger a positive identification with voting.²⁰

(T4B) *Endorsements from Key Political Figures*: I have been gathering statements in favor of felon voting rights from people like Barack Obama, Former Attorney General Eric Holder, Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe, and others. The idea would be to make a handout with quotations (or possibly a video if I can find enough quality clips) to share with subjects, to help demonstrate that people they respect and admire believe they should be voting. The aim of this content is to reduce the stigma associated with having a felony convictions. Although felons tend to be overwhelmingly Democratic, I intend to include quotations from actors on both sides of the political aisle, to portray the issue as one gaining more widespread consensus.

²⁰ For example, given PA's non-incarcerated felon population of 275,700 and Manza and Uggen's (2006) estimate that 35% of eligible felons vote in presidential elections, one can estimate that 96,495 felons voted in the last PA presidential election. A treatment script might truthfully read: "A recent study suggests that nearly 100,000 felons voted in the last presidential election in PA". I could also report the *percent* of newly eligible felons who voted in the 2016 election.

(T5) Finally, *The Peer Appeal Treatment* will provide subjects with the content from the Social Identity Treatment, but this information will be delivered by another felon who is trained by the experimenter. Evidence suggests that people are more receptive to messages from in-group members, and hearing a pro-mobilization message from a fellow felon might be more persuasive than hearing the same message from a researcher. I will likely train several people to help deliver the treatments. Such assistants could be individuals with felony convictions, and treatments could randomize whether they reveal their personal status while delivering the treatments.

I welcome advice on which treatments seem most promising, as the number will depend on the final sample size I am able to recruit and afford. Based on the results from the pilot study, I estimate that I need approximately 120 subjects per treatment group. My current budget is sufficient to recruit about 600 subjects, with an estimated 480 completing the study – meaning about four treatments in total.

Recruitment: I am still struggling to identify my method of recruitment. Although I have a list of names (First, Middle, Last) of all citizens whose voting rights have been restored, I have not yet been able to attain any contact information for these people. I can use similar methods to those used in Akron (recruiting a convenience sample by advertising widely in public places). I've also been in touch with local non-profit organizations (like the New Virginia Majority) who work with felon populations about contacting potential subjects on my behalf. My experience has generally been that subjects are eager to participate once they become aware of the study (as the compensation is more than 2x the minimum wage), so the primary challenge with recruitment is sufficiently advertising the study to recruit enough subjects within a limited window of time.

Conclusion

Felon disenfranchisement laws restrict the voting rights of over 6 million US Citizens, altering electoral outcomes, and generating unknown effects at the individual level. Scholars and policymakers have long suspected that disenfranchisement causes a sense of otherness, ripples into disengagement beyond the electoral arena, and can affect overall political efficacy and trust in government, as well as recidivism. Though these theories are long-standing, the best evidence in support of these effects is observational and highly subject to endogeneity. Because the factors which participation is thought to predict are also factors which affect the decision to participate (e.g. higher efficacy makes one more likely to vote), observational studies have been unable to isolate the causal direction of such relationships.

This study presents a template for an experimental design that hopes to answer two primary questions: (1) What are the most effective methods of mobilizing eligible felons to vote?; and (2) What are the downstream effects of disenfranchisement (and mobilization) on citizens with felony convictions? By randomly assigning a population of eligible felons to receive a placebo treatment or one of several mobilization treatments, the experiment aims to generate substantial increases in voter turnout (and identify which mobilization messages are most successful). Furthermore, the study will use responses to pre and post-election surveys to estimate how mobilization affects a number of political attitudes and behaviors. Because the mobilization treatments are randomly assigned, differences in political attitudes across treatment groups can be used to estimate the effects of mobilization.

Typical mobilization studies (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009) target marginal voters – those near their indifference point between voting and non-voting. Such moderate-propensity voters are considered to be the best “bang for the buck”, as low propensity voters are costly to

mobilize, and high-propensity voters are considered to be an unnecessary investment. In contrast, my current research aims to develop successful strategies for generating large increases in voter turnout among low-propensity voters (such as convicted felons). I focus on low propensity voters both because they present the best opportunity for generating large increases in voter turnout, and because of the normative implications associated with the lower participation of disadvantaged groups. Because disadvantaged groups participate at lower rates, identifying strategies for increasing the political engagement of under-represented citizens is especially important. Increasing participation can improve both the quality of democratic outcomes, and the stability of democracy as a whole.

This study builds on my other research regarding downstream effects of participation. The theories are intended for a general population – including felons and non-felons.

Applying this research agenda to convicted felons offers an additional advantage. Not only are felons notoriously disengaged from politics, but they are also known for having low levels of political trust. Some argue that disenfranchisement policies serve to further isolate convicted felons from the rest of society, thereby perpetuating criminal networks and behavior. If this project can demonstrate whether mobilizing convicted felons to vote also causes those citizens to become more politically informed, more engaged in their communities, and more trusting of government and government-run institutions – the results have the potential to affect the wider policy debate regarding disenfranchisement policy as a whole.

The potential policy implications of this study are widespread. In a separate paper (Shineman and Hurwitz 2016), I find that attitudes toward felon disenfranchisement are largely racially motivated. However, I also find that public opposition to felon voting rights can be reduced if evidence suggests that allowing felons to participate has positive effects – such as

increases in political information, trust, and community involvement. Preliminary evidence (from the Akron study) suggests that felons are mobilize-able, and that electoral disenfranchisement generates isolation beyond the political realm. Several states are currently debating reforms in felon disenfranchisement policies. Although felon voting rights has traditionally been a partisan issue, bipartisan alliances have recently found common ground on concerns regarding successful re-entry programs. Given felons' historically low trust in government and police – and the links between pro-social attitudes and recidivism – demonstrating that encouraging felons to participate can increase political trust could have a wide impact on disenfranchisement policies nationwide.

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Appendices Can Be Viewed Here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8ncWLLzADEac1h1SUs3R1FnVTQ/view?usp=sharing>

**Figure 1: Voting Rights of Convicted Felons, by State
When Do Felons Get Their Voting Rights Back?**

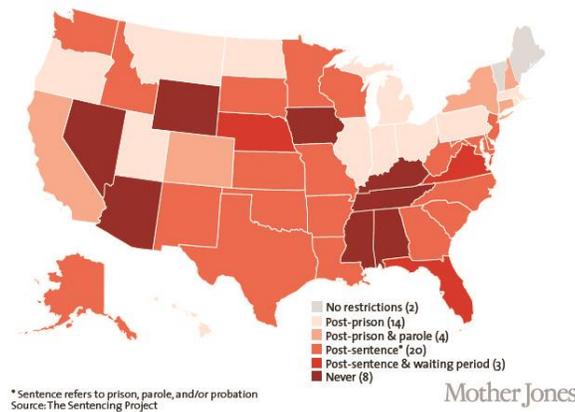
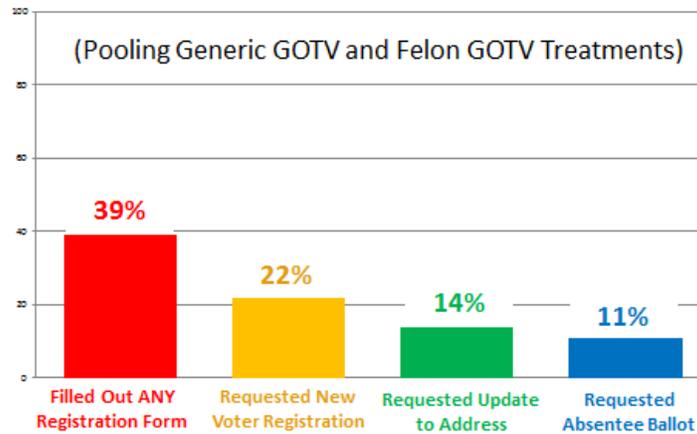
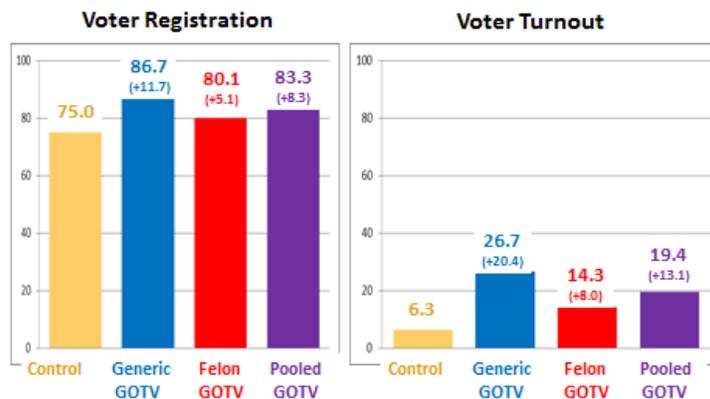


Figure 2: Intent to Register or Update Registration



**Figure 3: Effect of Mobilization Treatments on
Voter Registration and Turnout**



+ $p \leq 0.10$

* $p \leq 0.05$

** $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed tests)

Figure 4: Effects of Felon GOTV Treatment on Trust, by Category

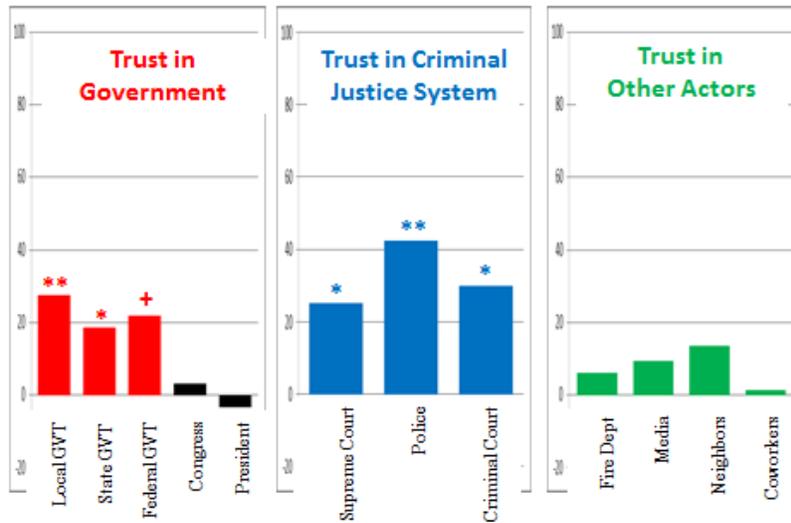


Figure 5: Treatment Effects on Willingness to Answer Extra Survey Questions for Free

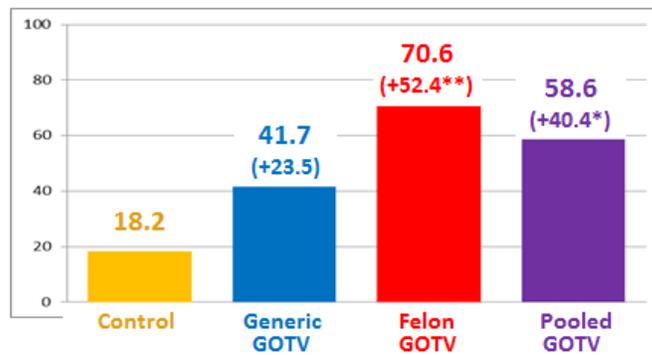


Table 1: Pre-Treatment Voter Registration and Voter Turnout, by Treatment Group

	Sample Average	Control	Generic GOTV	Felon GOVT	Pooled GOTV
Registered Before Treatment	73.1	75.0	73.3	71.4	72.2
Validated Turnout 2008	32.7	25.0	40.0	33.3	36.1
Validated Turnout 2009	7.7	0	13.3	9.5	11.1
Validated Turnout 2010	13.5	12.5	13.3	14.3	13.9
Validated Turnout 2011	9.6	0.0	26.7	4.8	13.9
Validated Turnout 2012	34.6	31.3	33.3	38.1	36.1
Validated Turnout 2013	7.7	12.5	13.3	0.0	

++ p ≤ 0.15

+ p ≤ 0.10

* p ≤ 0.05

** p ≤ 0.01

(2-tailed tests)

Table 2: Effect of Each Treatment on Trust Regarding Varying Institutions and Groups

	1A	1B	2A	2B	3A	3B
Trust in...	Generic GOTV	Generic GOTV	Felon GOTV	Felon GOTV	Pooled GOTV	Pooled GOTV
Local Gvt	18.75	14.75	30.0**	27.5**	25**	19.75*
Ohio Gvt	14.5	10.75	27.5**	18.5*	21.75**	13.75+
Federal Gvt	20.75	12.25	35**	22.0+	30.0**	14.25
Congress	12.5	0.75	21.5+	3.25	18.0+	-0.5
President	6.25	0.75	21.5+	-3.5	15.5	-0.25
Supreme Court	16.75	7.75	37.5**	25.0*	30.0**	14.25
Police	45.0**	35.0**	47.5**	42.5**	47.5	37.5**
Criminal Court	12.5	9.25	35.0**	30.0*	25.0*	20.0+
Fire Department	8.25	9.25	12.5	6.0	10.75	7.75
Media	18.75	13.75	14.0	9.5	15.75+	11.5
Neighbors	2.0	-1.0	16.0	13.5	10.5	7.25
Coworkers	8.25	7.75	8.25	1.25	8.25	4.75
Control for Trust in Pre-Treatment Survey?	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
n	24	24	30	30	42	42

Table 3: Treatment Effects on Satisfaction with Electoral Outcomes

Satisfaction with Electoral Outcomes...	Generic GOTV	Felon GOVT	Pooled GOTV
Local / Akron Contests	12.5	22.5*	17.5*
State / Ohio Contests	7.5	15.0⁺⁺	12.5
Federal Outcomes	5.0	12.5	10.0
Overall Electoral Outcomes	0.0	15.0	17.5

++ $p \leq 0.15$

+ $p \leq 0.10$

* $p \leq 0.05$

** $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed tests)