

## *New Electorate Study*

# For Whom Does the Message Matter? Examining the Effect of Targeted Get Out the Vote Appeals on the Political Participation of Underrepresented Groups

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### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Can racial and ethnic minorities be mobilized to participate in politics at greater rates? In particular, are mobilization messages that activate minorities' identities or provide information about their group's underrepresentation in government effective at increasing political participation?

### **PRACTICAL RELEVANCE**

For decades, scholars and practitioners have expressed concern about the unrepresentativeness of the electorate (relative to the general population) and the consequences it might have for democratic accountability. These concerns are particularly acute in states like California, where growing racial/ethnic diversity in the population is not reflected in rates of political participation. For example, a recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) shows that 60% of likely voters in California are white, even though California's population is only 42% white. Conversely, California's population is 36% Latino, yet only 18% of the state's likely voters are Latino (PPIC 2016). These "participation gaps" among different racial/ethnic groups are consequential, given differences in these groups' policy priorities and political preferences (e.g., Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1997; Matsuoka and Junn 2013). As such, politically interested groups, get out the vote (GOTV) organizations, and states themselves have invested considerable resources in boosting the political participation of underrepresented groups.

Yet, we still know little about how different types of mobilization messages affect racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, existing studies offer conflicting conclusions about whether targeted group-based messages are more effective than standard get out the vote messages among racial and ethnic minorities (for a review see Green and Gerber 2015). These studies tend to treat racial/ethnic groups as monolithic and, therefore, do not consider that the effects of group-based mobilization messages may vary depending on the strength of an individual's group identity or awareness of their group's underrepresentation in government. This may explain why previous studies have not consistently found that group-based mobilization messages increase political participation among racial and ethnic minorities.

### **METHODS**

To examine how different types of group-based mobilization messages affect racial and ethnic minorities, we conducted a two-wave online panel survey with an embedded experiment during the 2018 general election using panelists from Research Now/Survey Sampling International. Our sample consists of Latinos, Blacks, and Asians in California, supplemented with a national sample of Asians and Blacks (total sample size is 2,216). In the first wave, we measured respondents' racial/ethnic identities, the strength of those identities, and respondents' beliefs about the extent to which their racial/ethnic group is underrepresented in government. In the second wave (administered approximately one week later), we re-contacted these respondents and randomly assigned them to receive different types of get out the vote (GOTV) messages that either: 1) appeal to their identities as racial/ethnic minorities, 2) appeal to their identities as a member of their state, or 3) provide factual information about the underrepresentation of their racial/ethnic group in government. We compare the effects of these different group-based messages to the effects of a standard GOTV message (that does not activate identities) and to a control message that encourages a civic duty other than voting (recycling).

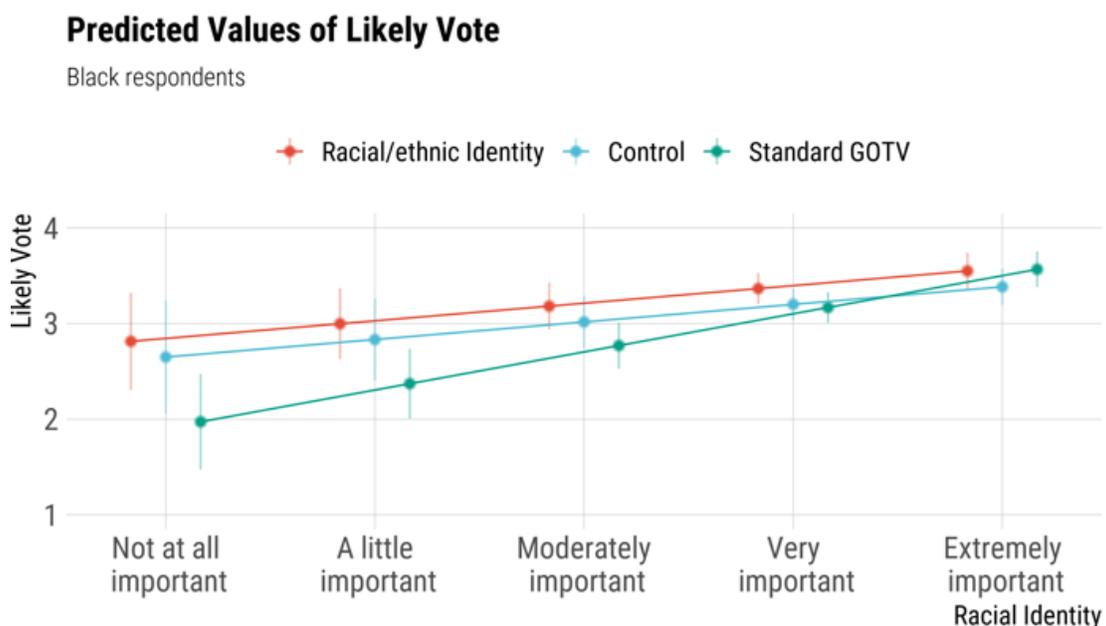
After respondents were randomly exposed to one of these five messages, we asked them to report the likelihood that they would vote in the 2018 general election on a four-point scale, as well as engage in other types of political activities (e.g., participating in a rally, attending a government meeting). We also gave them the opportunity to fill out a postcard to send to their U.S. senators. We examine whether group-based mobilization messages increase these types of political participation among racial and ethnic minorities, relative to the standard GOTV message and the recycling message. We also assess whether the effects of these group-based messages vary depending on the strength of one’s attachment to their racial/ethnic group and one’s awareness of their group’s underrepresentation in government.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Our results show that, in the aggregate, none of the group-based mobilization messages increase respondents’ likelihood of voting, relative to either the standard GOTV message or the recycling message. In contrast, our results show that the effects of the group identity message depend on the strength of one’s attachment to their racial/ethnic group. In particular, the group identity message increases participation among those with weaker attachments to their racial/ethnic group, who are less likely to participate in the first place. In this way, our results indicate that messages that appeal to respondents’ identities as racial/ethnic minorities can close the “participation gap” between those with strong versus weak group identities.

To illustrate our findings, Figure 1 shows the predicted likelihood of voting among Blacks who receive either the message that appeals to their group identity, the standard GOTV message, or the recycling message by levels of group attachment. The group identity treatment significantly increases the likelihood of voting among Blacks who state that being Black is “not at all important” to their identity, relative to their counterparts in the standard GOTV group ( $p = 0.05$ ). We also observe significant increases in the likelihood of voting in response to the group identity treatment among Blacks who state that being Black is “a little important” or “moderately important” to their identity, relative to their counterparts in the standard GOTV group ( $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, this treatment does not significantly increase the likelihood of voting among Blacks who state that being Black is “very important” or “extremely important” to their identity. These respondents have higher baseline likelihoods of voting, and the group identity treatment does not significantly increase them. In this way, the group identity message closes the gap in the likelihood of voting among Blacks with strong versus weak group identities. We find a similar pattern among Asians relative to their counterparts who read the recycling message. We find no effects of the group identity message on the likelihood of voting among Latinos, though Latinos with weaker group attachments become more likely to report future engagement in other types of participation activities in response to the group identity message.

Figure 1



With respect to the mobilization message that highlighted the underrepresentation of respondents' racial/ethnic group in government, we find no effects on the likelihood of voting in the 2018 election, regardless of one's awareness of their group's underrepresentation. However, if we look at the other measures of political participation, we find that Blacks become more likely to report future engagement when they read about their group's underrepresentation in government, and this effect is more pronounced for those previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation. However, Asians and Latinos become less likely to engage in some types of political activities like contacting their Senators in response to the message emphasizing their group's underrepresentation in government.

Together, these findings have important implications for the types of mobilization messages that may be more or less effective at increasing political participation among underrepresented groups. In particular, our findings suggest that appeals to racial and ethnic minorities' group identities can effectively boost participation among those whose attachments to their group are weak. On the other hand, our results also show that messages that highlight the underrepresentation of one's group can, under certain conditions, demobilize segments of the electorate.

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## REFERENCES

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