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Increasing Political Behaviors in Local Communities

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Increasing Political Behavior Within a Local Community
Bionca Stewart
Western Michigan University

Abstract

The present project aimed to apply principles of behavioral science, specifically prompting, to increase voter turnout in a low voter community. The study used a mixed-model group experimental design in which voting in an experimental and control group was measured across two occasions. The sample population consisted of one off-campus community, which was District 4 of the City of Kalamazoo. This district was chosen because it was the district within the city with the lowest voter turnout in the 2016 election. The participants were randomly selected from within the district and randomly assigned to an experimental (N=68) and control (N=67) group. The intervention consisted of mailing a postcard then a flyer to voters, with both mailers containing information regarding the upcoming 2018 midterm election. The experimental group received the mailing intervention and the control group did not. The main dependent variable was voting in the 2018 midterm election, which was compared to voting to the previous 2014 midterm election. After the 2018 election voter turnout data were analyzed. The results show that, there was an 62% percent increase in voting in both groups in the 2018 midterm election compared to the 2014 midterm election, but that voting was higher in the mailing group. Specifically, voter turnout was 34.6% higher in the experimental group compared to the control group. The results show there is a percent difference of 54 %, which support prior research in showing that mailers may be an effective strategy for promoting voter turnout.

Increasing Political Behavior Within a Local Community

Voter turnout in America is very low. For example, of the 60% of Americans who were eligible to vote in the 2014 midterm elections, only 40% voted (FairVoter, 2018). For the 2016 presidential election, only 28.5% of the voting population voted in the primaries. In the 2016 general election, only 58% of the voting population voted (Thom, 2017). With such low turnout rates, the views of most citizens of America may not be represented. When the views of American people are not represented, this affects how the country's democracy functions and the stability in the government. For example, in the previous general presidential election only 58.1% of the eligible voting population voted and now many Americans are unsatisfied with the current administration agenda (Penn State, 2018). Some of the current administrations budget proposals have been widely rejected by the America public, such as cutting \$818 billion dollars from Medicare and \$1.5 trillion from Medicaid (Tankersley & Tackett, 2019). This budget change would devastate the healthcare system and lead to a health care crisis (Van De Water, Friedman, & Parrott, 2019). These bills may not have been proposed if more Americans had voted and elected leaders whose policies they support.

One reason why people may not vote is lack of trust in the process. Election polling showed that only 19% of the American population say they trust the government always or most of the time, and 74% say that most elected officials put their own interest ahead of the country's (Pew Research Center, 2015). Other reasons include different types of voter suppression such as purging of voter rolls, felon disenfranchisement, disenfranchisement of justice-involved individuals, and disinformation about voting procedures (Root, 2018).

Another reason why people do not vote is that they lack the necessary information about where and when to vote, as well as information about the candidates and the issues they support. Several studies have investigated whether mailers might increase voter turnout, and there are other studies that show that an antecedent prompt can increase behavior. One early study investigated the effectiveness of mailers to increase voter turnout in the 1920s. As described in the text by Green, Harold Gosnell was the first political scientist to publish a study on voting behavior, tested the effectiveness of mailing information to Chicago residents in 1924 and 1925. The mailers stated the importance of registering before the upcoming election in 1926. The results were that in the 1924 presidential election voter turnout increased by 1%, and in 1925 during the municipal election voter turnout increased by 9%. A meta-analysis of 42 studies of nonpartisan mailers showed that when persons are encouraged to participate in their civic duty by the mailers this will increase voter turnout by one to two percentage points (Green, 2015). Another study which used antecedent based interventions further helps the argument that antecedents can increase desired behaviors. In this study the goal was to increase good behavior in the classroom. The experimenters aided teachers in providing instructions and reminders of desired behaviors prior to the four students, whom were the subjects of this study, actually exhibiting those behaviors. The results show there was significant improvement in among the four students behavior. The results show that during baseline the students were not engaging at high rates, but when the prompting intervention was implemented the student were engaging in proper classroom behavior by about 90% of the time (Moore et al., 2018). One other study conducted using antecedents to promote recycling show that antecedent interventions can increase targeted behavior. This experiment was conducted on a college campus and during this experiment trash receptacles' were removed from the classrooms, and placed in the hallway

along side recycling receptacles that had signs prompting people to properly recycle. The results show that during the intervention phase correct recycling increased to 68 to 69 percent. (Fritz et al., 2017) This experiment will build on to this previous research by implementing an antecedent intervention using mailers in a time-sensitive way. Specifically, this experiment focuses on sending the informational mailers in two phases, both before the voting registration deadline and the actual election day. Most prior studies simply send mailers before the election day and the mailers simply inform people about the importance of voting and when the election is occurring (Green, 2015). The present study also send information about candidates.

In summary, the purpose of this experiment was to investigate the effects of a mailer intervention on voter turnout in the 2018 midterm election in a voting district with traditionally low turnout. Using a group design, participants were randomly assigned to receive no mailers (control group) or two mailers prior to the election containing information regarding the deadline to register to vote, and information on where and when to vote, as well as candidate information (experimental group). The hypothesis was that those in the mailing intervention group would show higher voter turnout than those in the control group. In addition to comparing voting across groups, voting was compared within group by comparing turnout in the 2018 mid-term election to voter turnout in the 2014 mid-term election. The intervention was originally designed to target people who did not vote in the 2014 midterms. As a result of a procedural error, however, all participants in the study were actually people who had voted in the 2014 mid-term election. Thus, the study investigated instead whether the mailers had any effect on voter-turnout in people who had voted in a prior election.

Method

Subject

The subjects consisted of people at 135 mailing addresses which had been reported by the City Council of Kalamazoo as being addresses of people in the lowest voter turnout district. The group of 135 mailing addresses were separated into two groups randomly. They were separated randomly using an excel spreadsheet and formula that randomly separated the addresses. One group consisted of 68 and the other consisted of 67 mailing addresses. One group was given the mailing intervention, and the other group was the control group.

Setting

The setting was District 4 of the City of Kalamazoo. The timing of the experiment occurred three weeks before the 2018 mid-term election, which was held on November 6th 2018.

Materials

Materials included a postcard and a flyer that contained information regarding the midterm election (see Appendix). The postcard included the voter registration deadline, the person's correct voting precinct, and the correct polling location, with a message stating the importance of voting. The flyer described the voting location and date, and provided information about the candidates on the ballot. Voting information was obtained from the City Council of Kalamazoo.

Procedure

This experiment utilized a mixed model group design with one between-group variable (mailing intervention) and one within group intervention (time). The intervention consisted of the two mailings: the first was with the postcard and the second was with the flyer (described in Materials above). This postcard was sent a week before the October 9, 2018 deadline for voting registration. The second mailer was a flyer containing information regarding the candidates and their policies. On the front side of the flyer each position that was up for the election was stated.

There were eight different positions up for election: The Governor and the Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, United States Senator, Representative in Congress, State Senator, Representative in State Legislature, and Justice of Supreme Court. Listed under these eight categories were the candidates' names who were running for these positions. At the top of the flyer was the title, "YOUR VOTING BALLOT*," the asterisk in the title was to notify the reader of a message at the bottom of the page. The message at the bottom of the page said, "*NOTE THIS IS NOT A FULL SAMPLE BALLOT THIS ONLY LIST THE FEDERAL AND STATE NOMINEES AND THEIR ISSUES. THIS DOES NOT INCLUDE THE COMMUNITY OF KALAMAZOO'S CANDIDATES AND THEIR ISSUES." On the back of the flyer the title was the same as the front of the flyer, although the note as the bottom was different. The note at the bottom stated, "NOTE: THE VOTING POLL FOR YOU ADDRESS IS AT WMU BERNHARD CENTER. PLEASE VOTE NOVEMBER 6TH." The eight categories of positions were listed again, but under them only the Democrat and Republican candidates were listed under each category. Under the candidates name was a list of the issues that they said they would address if elected. Each candidate was allotted the same number of bullet points of issues. For Governor and Lieutenant Governor, each candidate had nine bullet points. For the remaining categories for positions each candidate had three bullet points. Candidate information was first obtained from ... and platforms information was obtained from each candidates website. The ordering of issues on the flyer matched the rank ordering of issues on the candidates website, This flyer was mailed a week and a half before the November 6, 2018 election.

Postcard



Front of Flyer

YOUR VOTING BALLOT!*

GOVERNOR AND LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

- Gretchen Whitmer and Garlin D. Gilchrist II are the Democratic Party nominees
- Bill Schuette and Lisa Posthumus Lyons are the Republican Party nominees
- Bill Gelineau and Angelique Chaiser Thomas are the Libertarian nominees
- Todd Schleiger and Earl P. Lackie are the U.S. Taxpayers nominees
- Jennifer V. Kurland and Charin H. Davenport are the Green Party nominees
- Keith Butkovich and Raymond Warner are the Natural Law Party nominees

SECRETARY OF STATE

- Jocelyn Benson for the Democratic Party
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- Robert Gale for the U.S. Taxpayer Party

ATTORNEY GENERAL

- Dana Nessel for the Democratic Party
- Tom Leonard for the Republican Party
- Lisa Lane Gioia for the Libertarian Party
- Gerald T. Van Sickle for the U.S. Taxpayers Party
- Chris Graveline has no party affiliation

UNITED STATES SENATOR

- Debbie Stabenow for the Democratic Party
- John James for the Republican Party
- George E. Huffman III for the U.S. Taxpayers Party
- Marcia Squier for the Green Party

- John Howard Wilhelm for the Natural Law Party

REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS

- Matt Longjohn for the Democratic Party
- Fred Upton for the Republican Party
- Stephen J. Young for the U.S. Taxpayers Party

STATE SENATOR

- Sean McCann for the Democratic Party
- Margaret E. O'Brien for the Republican Party
- Lorence Wenke for the Libertarian Party

REPRESENTATIVE IN STATE LEGISLATURE

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- William Baker for the Republican Party

JUSTICE OF SUPREME COURT

(there are no party affiliations for the supreme court justice nominees)

- Samuel Bagenstos
- Megan Kathleen Cavanagh
- Elizabeth T. Clement (already sitting justice)
- Doug Dern
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*NOTE: THIS IS NOT A FULL SAMPLE BALLOT. THIS ONLY LIST THE FEDERAL AND STATE NOMINEES AND THEIR ISSUES. THIS DOES NOT INCLUDE THE COMMUNITY OF KALAMAZOO'S CANDIDATES AND THEIR ISSUES.

YOUR VOTING BALLOT!*

(This page will only show the issues of the two major parties and it does NOT show all their issues. Please refer to their websites for more information. The issues of the minor parties are not listed below)

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>GOVERNOR AND LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gretchen Whitmer and Garlin D. Gilchrist II (D) issues they promise to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Making Health Care More Affordable ○ Cleaning Up Our Drinking Water ○ Michigan’s Economy ○ Holding Government Accountable ○ Fighting Urban Poverty ○ Women’s Rights ○ Serving Veterans ○ Repeal Retirement Tax ○ Improving Education https://www.gretchenwhitmer.com/issues/ ● Bill Schuette and Lisa Posthumus Lyons (R) issues they promise to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Defending the Right to Life ○ Holding Lansing Accountable ○ Protecting Michigan Families ○ Accessible Healthcare for All ○ Tackling the Opioid Crisis ○ Cut Auto Rates ○ Better Schools ○ Guarding the Environment ○ Rebuilding Roads https://billschuette.com/bills-plan/ ● Jocelyn Benson (D) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ban Fee Increases on College Tuition ○ Provide Election Security ○ Ensure Ethics and Transparency in State Government https://votebenson.com/issues/ ● Mary Treder Lang (R) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Security of Elections ○ Optimization of Election Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bring Stability to the Branch Offices https://marytrederlangforsos.com/issues/ <p>ATTORNEY GENERAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dana Nessel (D) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Protecting the Environment ○ Legalizing and Regulating Cannabis ○ Protecting Consumers and Students https://www.dana2018.com/issues/ ● Tom Leonard (R) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Elder Abuse ○ Civil Asset Forfeiture ○ Mental Health https://leonardforag.com/issues/ ● Debbie Stabenow (D) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Michigan’s Economy ○ Veterans ○ Equality and Justice for All https://debbiestabenow.com/issues/ ● John James (R) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pro-2nd Amendment ○ Social Security ○ Entitlement Reform https://johnjamesforsenate.com/issues/ <p style="text-align: center;">REPRESENTATIVES IN CONGRESS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Matt Longjohn (D) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Healthcare ○ Equality and Equity ○ Gun Legislation https://www.matlongjohnforcongress.com/matts-values-2/ ● Fred Upton (R) issues he promises to address are | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 21st Century Cures ○ Agriculture ○ Fiscal Responsibility <p style="text-align: center;">STATE SENATOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sean McCann (D) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improving Small Business ○ Ensuring Competitive Jobs ○ Keeping Our Area Prosperous http://seanamccann.com/the-mccann-plan/ ● Margaret E. O’Brien (R) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fighting for Jobs ○ Transparency in Government ○ Leadership https://www.margaretobrien.com/about/ <p style="text-align: center;">REPRESENTATIVE IN STATE LEGISLATURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jon Hoadley (D) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improving the Economy ○ Education ○ Environment ○ Healthcare https://www.jonhoadley.com/on-the-issues ● William Baker (R) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Taxes (there’s no official website for this candidate) https://ballotpedia.org/William_Baker |
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***NOTE: THE VOTING POLL FOR YOUR ADDRESS IS AT WMU BERNHARD CENTER. PLEASE VOTE NOVEMBER 6TH**

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. A bar graph was constructed to show the difference in voting between the 2014 midterm election and the 2018 midterm election. A repeated measures ANOVA assessed differences in the group across time.

Results

Figure 1 shows the voting difference in the 2018 midterm election between the control group and the experimental group. The results show that in the control group of 67 persons only 30 people voted (45%) and in the experimental group of 68 persons 54 people voted (79%). The percentage difference of voting behavior between the control and experimental group was 34%. Thus, there was a greater percent of people voting among the voters who received the intervention compared to the control group. Figure 2 shows the voter turnout within the two groups, the control group and the experimental group. Note that because both groups consisted of people who voted in the 2014 midterms, the second number could not be higher than the 2014 elections. This figure shows that in the experimental group 14 persons who voted in the 2014 midterm election did not vote in the 2018 election. Also, this figure shows that in the control group 37 people who did vote in the 2014 midterm election did not vote in the 2018 midterm election. Figure 3 shows the number of registered voters and the number of people who voted in the 2014 and 2018 midterms in the District 4. This figure shows there was an increase in registered voters and voting from the 2014 midterm election to the 2018 midterm election. In the 2014 midterm election there were 1,767 registered voters in Precinct 4 and only 185 of those registered voted in the election. Thus, only 10% of the precinct voted in the 2014 midterm election. In the 2018 midterm election there was a total of 2,030 people who were registered to vote and 630 registered voters voted in the 2018 midterm election. Thus, 31% of registered voters voted in the 2018 midterm election. Concluding that there was an 87% increase in voting

registration and a 29% increase in voting. These data show that there was an overall increase in voting within the district.

Discussion

This experiment investigated whether a mailing intervention could increase voting in a low-voter turnout district. The data from Figure 1 shows there was an increase in voting behavior in the experimental group compared to the control group. Although there was an overall increase in voting in the district, there was a larger increase in voting in the experimenter than control group. Thus, the mailer intervention appeared to increase voting.

There are several reasons why the mailers may have increased voting. Those reasons range from the reminders about the voting dates in a timely manner (at least a week before the election), the reminders about the correct voting location in District 4, and the information that was provided. How the information on the ballot could have increased voting is the information on the ballot may have motivated the reader. The reader of the ballot would read the information on the ballot regarding the candidates, and the words on the ballot could have elicited an emotional response from the reader to either want to vote or a candidate or not vote for a candidate.

There are several reasons why overall voting increased. During the experiment there were many other voter registration drives and voting information awareness campaigns ongoing, from various sources such as Western Michigan University's campus, social media apps, and political party groups.

One variable that may have influenced the comparison from 2014 to 2018 is that between 2014 and 2018 around 50 people had moved out of District 4. This affected the data because some of the residents that were listed in the 2014 mailing list had changed in 2018, therefore

affecting if the person would open or receive the mail. Also, the data received from the City Council office were only of registered voters who were exhibiting voting behavior. This affected the model of the experiment changing the model from increasing voting among registered non-voters to increasing voting behavior on individuals who have prior history of voting. Meaning that the experimental group receiving the postcard were already registered voters, which means the postcard did not increase voting by increasing registration. Although, the postcard may have functioned as an additional reminder of the voting date and the importance of voting.

A main limitation of the study was that mailers were sent to those who had voted in the 2014 midterms, not those who were registered and had not voted. Thus, the intervention did not increase voting by increasing voter registration. Future research is needed to investigate whether mailers increase registration.

Although the present study used mailers, there are many other forms of communicating with voters, including person to person phone calls and or automated robotic calls. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of information being sent via text, social media, and/or information being given to in person. Also, for future research it would be beneficial to replicate this study in another group in a different district to better assess the experiments effectiveness.

In conclusion, this experiment showed that there was an increase in voting behavior among the experimental group when compared to the control group. There are barriers to implanting a mailer intervention, including effort to obtain voting materials and the cost of materials. However, overall sending mailers is a relatively low-cost method to increase voting. .

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<https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/2020-trump-budget-a-disturbing-vision>

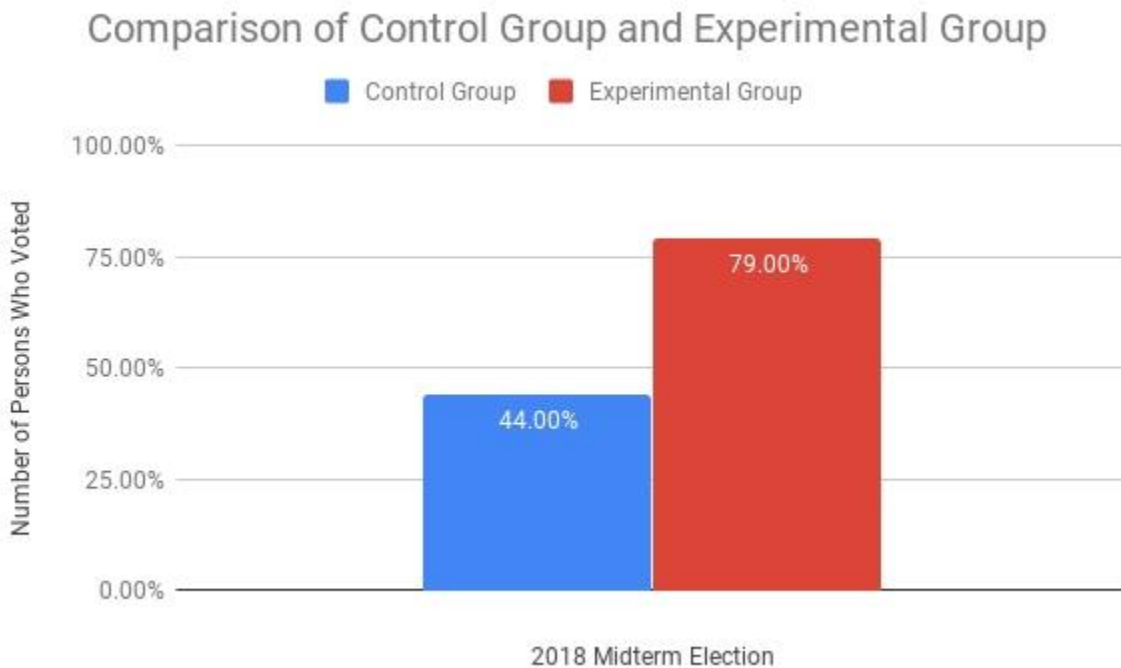


Figure 1. Number of voters in the control group and the experimental group during the 2018 mid-term election. This figure shows in the control group 44 percent of persons voted (n= 30) and 79 percent of people voted in the experimental group (n= 54).

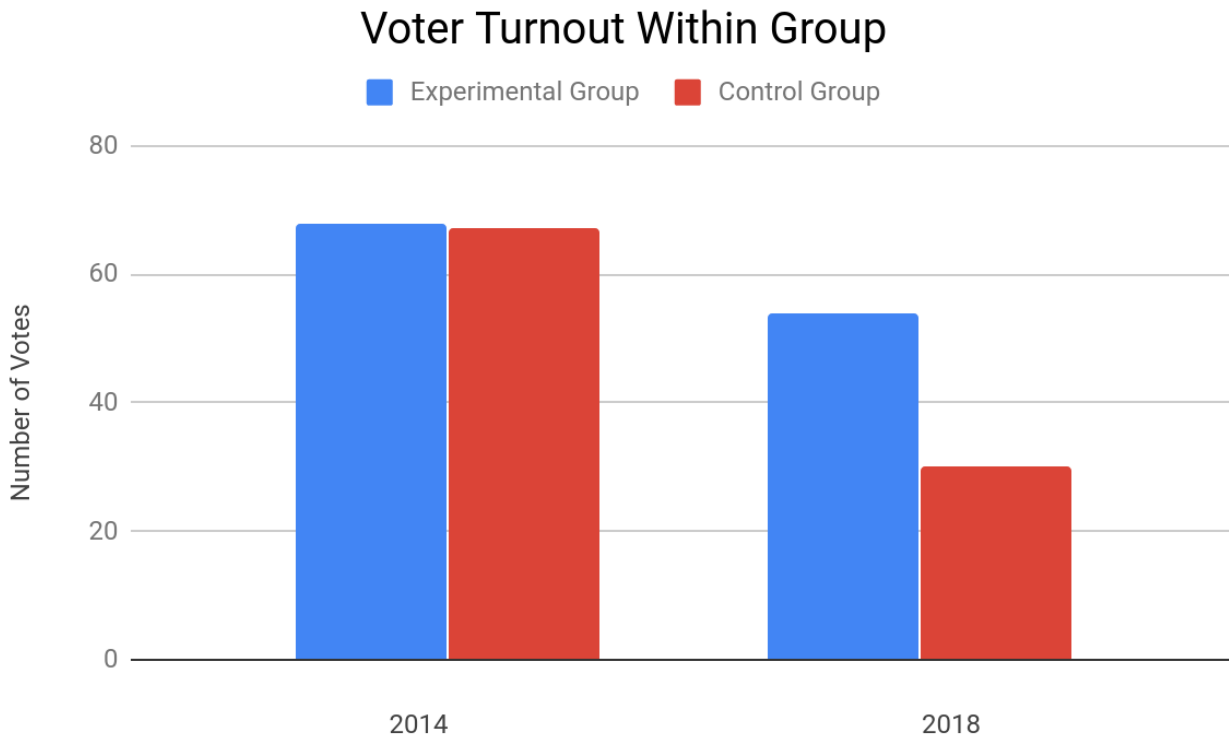


Figure 2. This figure shows the voter turnout within the control and experient groups.

This figure shows that in the experimental group 14 persons who voted in the 2014 midterm election did not vote in the 2018 election. Also, this figure shows that in the control group 37 people who voted in the 2014 midterm election did not vote in the 2018 midterm election.

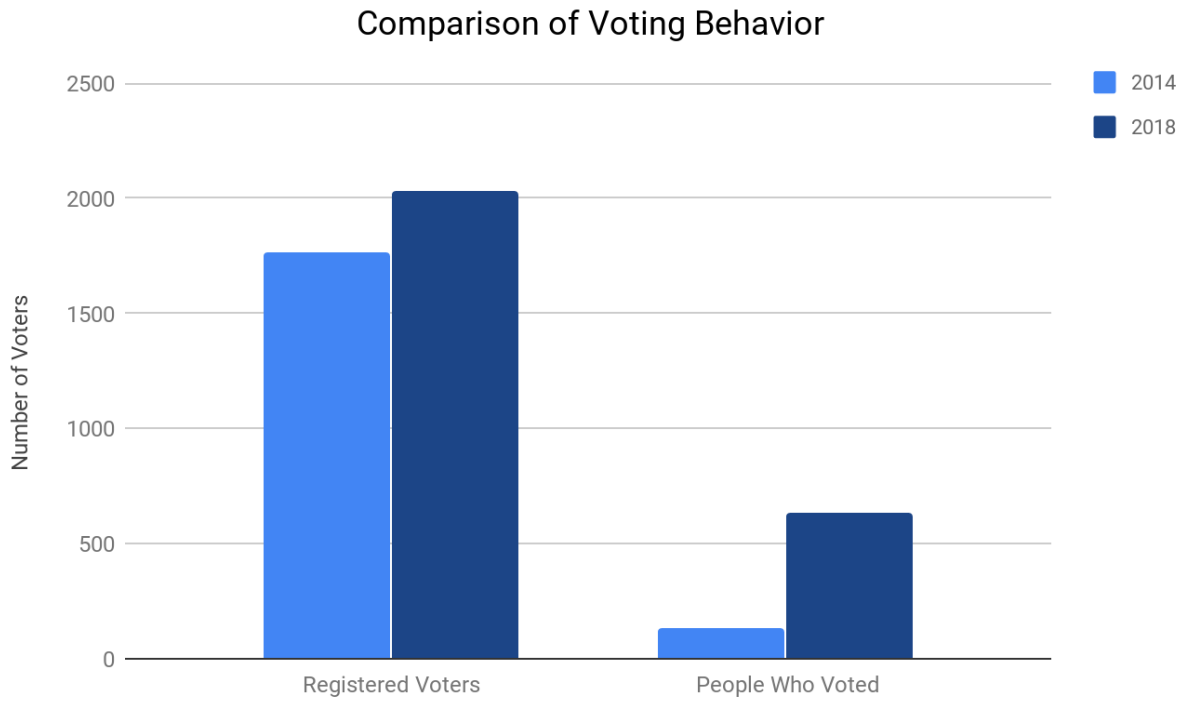


Figure 3. This figure shows for District 4 the number of registered voters in the 2014 and 2018 mid-term and the number who voted.

Appendix

Postcard and flyer mailed to participants in the experimental group.



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| <p>GOVERNOR AND LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gretchen Whitmer and Garlin D. Gilchrist II (D) issues they promise to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Making Health Care More Affordable ○ Cleaning Up Our Drinking Water ○ Michigan’s Economy ○ Holding Government Accountable ○ Fighting Urban Poverty ○ Women’s Rights ○ Serving Veterans ○ Repeal Retirement Tax ○ Improving Education https://www.gretchenwhitmer.com/issues/ ● Bill Schuette and Lisa Posthumus Lyons (R) issues they promise to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Defending the Right to Life ○ Holding Lansing Accountable ○ Protecting Michigan Families ○ Accessible Healthcare for All ○ Tackling the Opioid Crisis ○ Cut Auto Rates ○ Better Schools ○ Guarding the Environment ○ Rebuilding Roads https://billschuette.com/bills-plan/ ● Jocelyn Benson (D) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ban Fee Increases on College Tuition ○ Provide Election Security ○ Ensure Ethics and Transparency in State Government https://votebenson.com/issues/ ● Mary Treder Lang (R) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Security of Elections ○ Optimization of Election Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bring Stability to the Branch Offices https://marytrederlangforsos.com/issues/ <p>ATTORNEY GENERAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dana Nessel (D) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Protecting the Environment ○ Legalizing and Regulating Cannabis ○ Protecting Consumers and Students https://www.dana2018.com/issues/ ● Tom Leonard (R) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Elder Abuse ○ Civil Asset Forfeiture ○ Mental Health https://leonardforag.com/issues/ ● Debbie Stabenow (D) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Michigan’s Economy ○ Veterans ○ Equality and Justice for All https://debbiestabenow.com/issues/ ● John James (R) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pro-2nd Amendment ○ Social Security ○ Entitlement Reform https://johnjamesforsenate.com/issues/ <p style="text-align: center;">REPRESENTATIVES IN CONGRESS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Matt Longjohn (D) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Healthcare ○ Equality and Equity ○ Gun Legislation https://www.matlongjohnforcongress.com/matts-values-2/ ● Fred Upton (R) issues he promises to address are | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 21st Century Cures ○ Agriculture ○ Fiscal Responsibility <p style="text-align: center;">STATE SENATOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sean McCann (D) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improving Small Business ○ Ensuring Competitive Jobs ○ Keeping Our Area Prosperous http://seanamccann.com/the-mccann-plan/ ● Margaret E. O’Brien (R) issues she promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fighting for Jobs ○ Transparency in Government ○ Leadership https://www.margaretobrien.com/about/ <p style="text-align: center;">REPRESENTATIVE IN STATE LEGISLATURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jon Hoadley (D) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improving the Economy ○ Education ○ Environment ○ Healthcare https://www.jonhoadley.com/on-the-issues ● William Baker (R) issues he promises to address are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Taxes (there’s no official website for this candidate) https://ballotpedia.org/William_Baker |
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***NOTE: THE VOTING POLL FOR YOUR ADDRESS IS AT WMU BERNHARD CENTER. PLEASE VOTE NOVEMBER 6TH**