2022 midterm elections HNPC RCT results memo

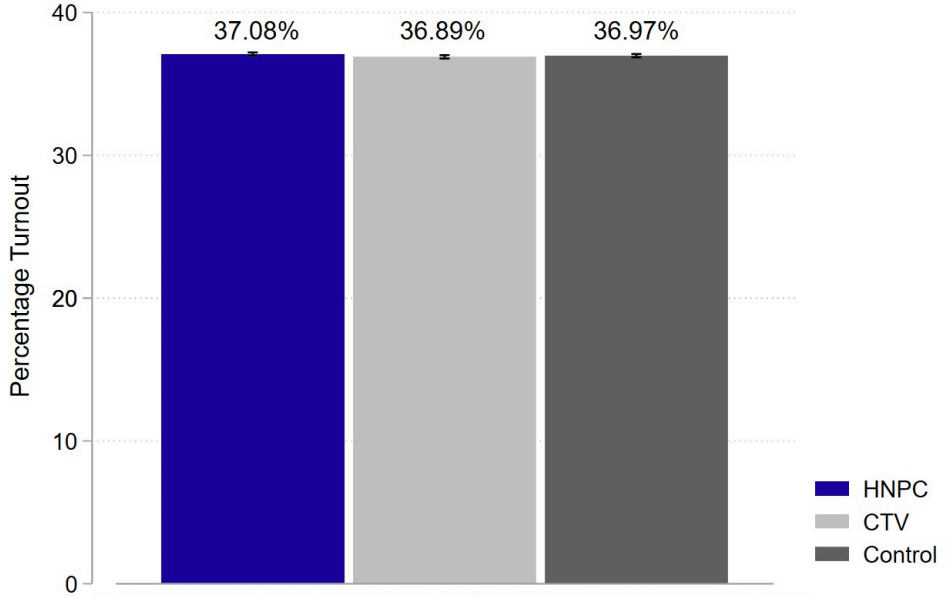
January 2024

Executive summary

During the 2022 general midterm elections, Vote.org (VDO) and Vote Rev Action Fund (VRAF) collaborated to run a randomized controlled trial (RCT) in ten states to test the impact on turnout of Housemate Naming Pledge Collection (HNPC), a get-out-the-vote tactic via SMS. In this tactic, we ask text recipients to remind their housemates by name to vote. The trial included over 1.4 million recipients and their almost 2.8 million housemates. Besides the HNPC condition and control condition, the trial included a commit-to-vote (CTV) condition in which we sent texts asking recipients to pledge that they would vote in the election.

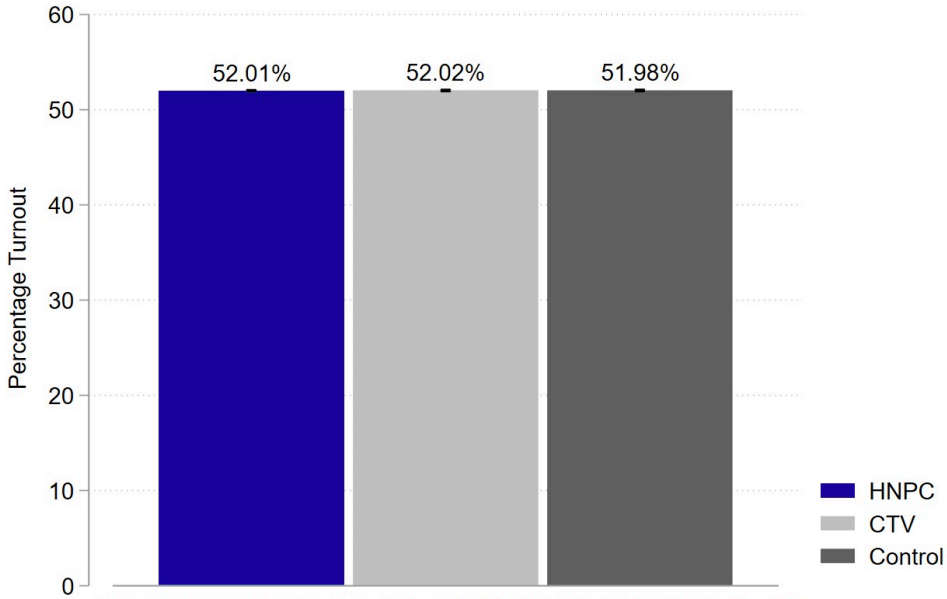
The results show that across conditions, about 37 percent of recipients (see Figure 1) and 52 percent of housemates (see Figure 2) voted. There is no evidence that either HNPC or CTV increased turnout among recipients or their housemates.

Figure 1. No difference in recipient turnout rates across conditions



Note: N=1,358,927. Error bars are 90% confidence intervals of the turnout in the group.
(p-value of the effect of HNPC=.07, single-tailed; p-value of the effect of CTV=.60, single-tailed).

Figure 2. No difference in housemate turnout rates across conditions



Note: N=2,589,155. Error bars are 90% confidence intervals of the turnout in the group.
(p-value of the effect of HNPC=.55, single-tailed; p-value of the effect of CTV=.26, single-tailed)

Contents

Introduction

During the 2022 general midterm elections, Vote.org (VDO) and Vote Rev Action Fund (VRAF) collaborated to run a randomized controlled trial (RCT), the gold standard of evaluation methods, to test the turnout impact of Housemate Naming Pledge Collection (HNPC), an SMS get-out-the-vote tactic. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to either receive a series of HNPC texts encouraging them to remind their housemates to vote; a Commit-to-Vote (CTV) series of texts asking recipients to pledge that they would vote in the election; or no text at all. We then obtained recipients' and their housemates' voting records for the 2022 midterm election. The results show that there is no evidence that either the HNPC or the CTV texts increased turnout among either the text recipients or their housemates. This document summarizes our learnings, beginning by describing the HNPC program. We then present a summary of the intervention followed by the results. We conclude by discussing the results and their implications.

What is HNPC?

HNPC is a novel, highly personalized SMS-based get-out-the-vote tactic. Its goal is to increase turnout among *recipients* of the text and to increase turnout among people registered to vote at the same address as the recipient (their *housemates*). Thus, in

HNPC, we focus on texting only registered voters who are registered to vote at the same address as at least one other person. In the text, we encourage voters to remind those housemates specifically by name. By naming the housemates, we believe recipients are more likely to remind them to vote than if we only asked them to remind their housemates.

This method has been tested before in a California special election, a Maryland special election, and in a Texas primary election. The first study did not find a statistically significant effect on voter turnout but had low power. The second study showed a significant increase in turnout among both recipients and their housemates, but also had low power. The third study showed a significant increase in turnout among recipients, particularly among Black and Latino voters, but not among their housemates. However, the three studies were conducted in low-salience elections, where awareness and intention to vote are low at baseline, and encouragement to vote from a housemate could seem strange. In this study, we aimed to test the effectiveness of HNPC in a higher salience election in multiple states.

What did we do?

Study design

We collected a list of 1,403,146 registered voters living with at least one other registered voter in the states of Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Mississippi, Colorado, and Illinois (see the next subsection for the characteristics of the sample) who were the potential targets or *recipients* of our intervention. We also collected information about 2,791,541 *housemates* who were registered to vote at the same address as the recipients.[1] Recipients and their housemates were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions: HNPC, CTV, or control.[2] Eight days before Election Day, we sent participants in the HNPC condition a text asking them to remind up to three housemates by name to vote, we then sent them a reminder the day before the early vote period ended and one more the day before Election Day.[3] On the same schedule, we sent texts to recipients in the CTV condition, asking them to make a commitment that they would vote.[4] Finally, we did not text recipients in the control group. The full schedule and content of the messages can be found in Table 1.

[1] We included at most three housemates per recipient in the trial. When recipients had more than three housemates, three were selected at random.
[2] Randomization was done at the recipient level in blocks by age of the recipient, number of housemates, state, gender of the recipient, and race/ethnicity of the recipient. Housemates registered at the same address are thus part of the same clusters.
[3] The reminder was sent on different days depending on the state.
[4] Recipients that opted out were removed from our reminder lists.

Table 1. Content and schedule of messages

Treatment groups	Initial message (8 days before Election Day)	Reminder 1 (Day before early voting ends)	Reminder 2 (Day before Election Day)
Housemate Naming Pledge Collection (HNPC)	Hi Alex, vote.org here! [STOP2quit] Voter records show you live with Andrew and Amelia. Right now, can you remind them to vote on 11/8?	Hi Alex! It's vote.org following up. [STOP2quit] Early voting ends tomorrow, Fri 11/4. You can check your polling location at vote.org/polling-place-locator/?campaign=p2p2022. Right now, can you remind Andrew and Amelia to vote?	Hi Alex, Election Day is tomorrow, Tues 11/8! [STOP2quit] You can check your polling location at vote.org/polling-place-locator/?campaign=p2p2022. Will you ask Andrew and Amelia to vote before polls close at 7pm?
Commit-to-vote (CTV)	Hi Alex, vote.org here! [STOP2quit] Can we count on you to vote in the 11/8 election?	Hi Alex! It's vote.org following up. [STOP2quit] Early voting ends tomorrow, Fri 11/4. You can check your polling location at vote.org/polling-place-locator/?campaign=p2p2022. Can we count on you to vote?	Hi Alex, Election Day is tomorrow, Tues 11/8! [STOP2quit] You can check your polling location at vote.org/polling-place-locator/?campaign=p2p2022. Can we count on you to vote before polls close at 7pm?
Control	N/A	N/A	N/A

Sample

Our study focused on young voters from historically marginalized communities in the ten states mentioned above. As a result, recipients were limited to be between 18-35 years of age and modeled as Hispanic, Native American, Asian, African-American, Multiracial or Other by TargetSmart, or between 18-21 years of age and are modeled as white or uncoded.[5] To avoid contamination, only one person per address was included as a recipient. The only restrictions for housemates were that they were listed as active voters. We included at most three named housemates in the texts we sent to recipients. As

[5] We included some additional restrictions on recipients such as having a cell phone listed that is highly likely their own, having at most 20 people registered at the same address, not having information that all of their household had already voted during early voting at the time of the randomization, and having a name and last name that were at least two characters long.

pre-specified in our evaluation protocol, we dropped people for whom we had information that they had voted previous to the intervention from the analysis.[6] The resulting characteristics of the sample included in the analysis are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample characteristics

	Recipients	Housemates
Average age*	25.5 (5.4)	44.5 (15.8)
Average turnout score*	47.3 (24.1)	61.8 (29.0)
% Non-white	69%	56%
% Female	48%	51%
N (included in analysis)**	1,358,927	2,589,155

* Standard deviations in parentheses.
** We dropped people who had voted previous to the intervention or who could not be matched back to the voter file to obtain outcome data.

Results

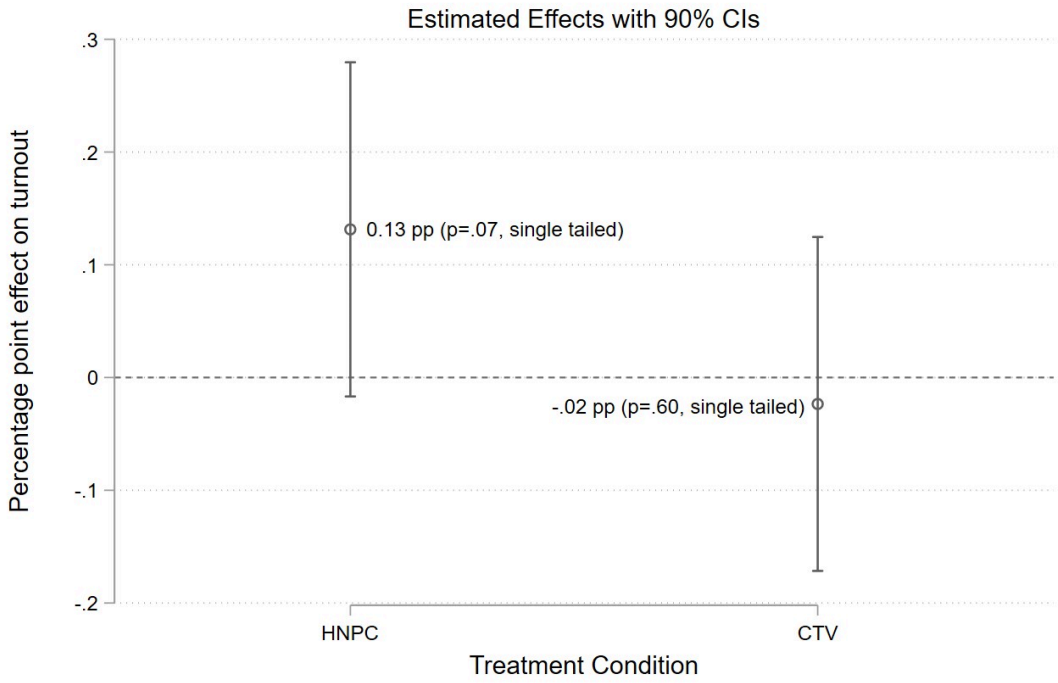
Recipients

As noted in the executive summary in Figure 1, about 37% of recipients voted in the 2022 midterm elections. Figure 2 shows the results of a regression analysis in which we control for demographic covariates. It shows the estimated effect of both the HNPC and CTV interventions along with 90 percent confidence intervals. The graph shows that although there is a 0.13 percentage point increase in turnout among recipients in the HNPC condition, this difference is not statistically significantly different from zero (p=.07, single-tailed). This means that we cannot say for sure that the difference was not due to chance. The graph also shows no difference between the CTV condition and the Control condition.[7] Similarly,the effect of the HNPC intervention and the CTV intervention are not different from each other (p=.09). The appendix shows results by race, gender, age

[6] Since attrition was balanced across treatment conditions, we also did not include people that we could not match back to the voter file after the turnout results were reported.
[7] These results are robust to alternative specifications, such as dropping the control variables and dropping the small number of recipients that did not have unique phone numbers in the dataset. As a handful of phone numbers were not unique and some others were unreachable, we also conducted instrumental variable regressions to estimate the treatment-on-the-treated effect. We instrumented treatment received (i.e., receiving at least one of texts for each treatment) with treatment assigned. In the regression for HNPC we find that the treatment-on-the treated effect was 0.14 (p=.07, single tailed). In the regression for CTV, we find that the treatment-on-the treated effect was 0.03 (p=.60, single tailed).

group, state, and turnout score group. Overall, we do not have evidence that either HNPC or CTV increased turnout among recipients across any subgroup.

Figure 3. Recipient treatment effects



Note: Primary analysis. N=1,358,927.

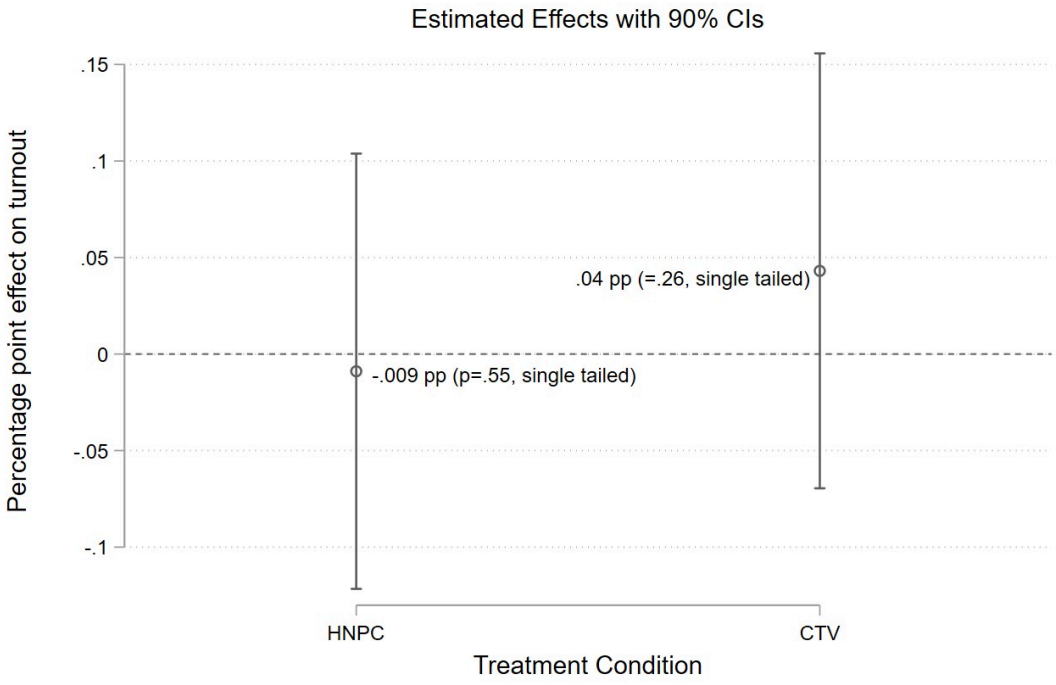
Housemates

As discussed in the executive summary, in each condition, about 52% of housemates voted in the 2022 midterm elections. The difference in turnout between recipients and housemates can be explained by the differences in turnout score. As can be seen in the sample characteristics in Table 2 above, the average turnout score for housemates was larger than that of recipients, which is largely due to the fact that, on average, recipients were younger than their housemates.

Figure 4 shows the results of a regression analysis in which we control for demographic covariates. It shows the estimated effect of both the HNPC and CTV interventions along with 90 percent confidence intervals. The graph shows no evidence that either HNPC or

CTV increased turnout among housemates.[8] Similarly, the effect of the HNPC intervention and the CTV intervention are not different from each other (p=.45). The appendix shows results by race, gender, age group, state, and turnout score group. Overall, we do not have evidence that either HNPC or CTV increased turnout among housemates across any subgroup.

Figure 4. Housemate treatment effects



Note: Primary analysis. N=2,589,155.

Discussion

Though this RCT of HNPC found null results on turnout, previous studies have found it to be effective at increasing turnout, at least among recipients of the text. Importantly, identifying the messages and programs that resonate best depends upon trial and error, and understanding why the intervention did not increase turnout will allow us to set up future, successful experiments. We have several hypotheses about why we didn't see an effect here, but we don't know for sure. Below, we outline some possibilities.

[8] These results are robust to alternative specifications, such as dropping the control variables and to dropping the small number of housemates with recipients that did not have unique phone numbers in the dataset. As a handful of phone numbers were not unique and some others were unreachable, we also conducted instrumental variable regressions to estimate the treatment-on-the-treated effect. We instrumented treatment received (i.e., the recipient receiving at least one of texts for each treatment) with treatment assigned. In the regression for HNPC we find that the treatment-on-the treated effect was 0.009 (p=.55, single tailed). In the regression for CTV we find that the treatment-on-the treated effect was 0.05 (p=.27, single tailed).

- **Even in a saturated space, HNPC is effective, but we were underpowered to detect a statistically significant effect.** Our analysis found a small but positive turnout effect of HNPC of 0.13 percentage points among recipients. The effect was not statistically significant, meaning that we cannot say for sure that it was not caused by chance. Though large, our study was not sufficiently powered enough to detect such small effects. It is possible that HNPC did increase recipients' turnout, but only slightly, in a way we could not detect. Even with such a small increase in turnout, HNPC may be a cost-effective GOTV strategy because SMS texts are a cheap way to reach registered voters.

- **Text messages might be effective at increasing turnout, but the marginal text is not.** By some estimates, 15 billion political text messages were sent in 2022, an average of about 50 per phone number. It is possible that, in general, using SMS as a GOTV tactic is effective at getting people to vote, and if campaigns and non-profits stopped sending text messages, turnout would be reduced. However, the large number of political texts being sent could also mean that there is less space for additional texts to have an impact than if fewer political texts were sent. Indeed, HNPC having a very small impact on text recipients (see above) would be consistent with this hypothesis – with the barrage of texts already being sent, most people that will be influenced by text messages are reached by other campaigns, leaving only a few people who will be influenced by text messages that only received our texts. Previous studies of HNPC that had a positive, statistically significant impact on the text recipient were run in less salient elections. These elections were less saturated with text messages leaving more space for HNPC to have an impact.

- **People's housemates, particularly those with lower turnout scores, might not be the best messengers to ask people to vote.** In our study, we were particularly interested in targeting young people as text recipients. This resulted in, on average, younger text recipients with lower turnout scores being asked to remind older people with higher turnout scores. It is possible that housemates in general, and particularly ones with lower turnout scores, aren't best placed to remind their household members to vote – they could seem hypocritical if they often fail to vote themselves. Future research should focus on whether asking household members with higher turnout scores to remind housemates with lower turnout scores produces positive results. We are aware of two studies currently being conducted that focus on this. One caveat, however, is that this explanation only helps explain why HNPC had no effect on housemate turnout, but it does not explain why it did not impact recipient turnout. It also does not help us explain why CTV did not impact recipient turnout.

- **Our message might have been perceived as invasive.** Calling out public records and the names of people registered to vote at the same address as the recipient may have been perceived as invasive, particularly among communities of color that have been historically marginalized, who were oversampled in our study. It is also possible that voter file registration records might be outdated or list housemates at the wrong address, making recipients perceive the texts as spam. This may have prompted recipients to not follow through with the request of the HNPC text. Though this may explain the lack of effectiveness of the HNPC intervention, it does not explain the lack of effectiveness of the CTV intervention. Moreover, a counterpoint to this argument is the fact that HNPC successfully increased turnout among text recipients who are members of historically marginalized communities in a previous study in the Texas primary.

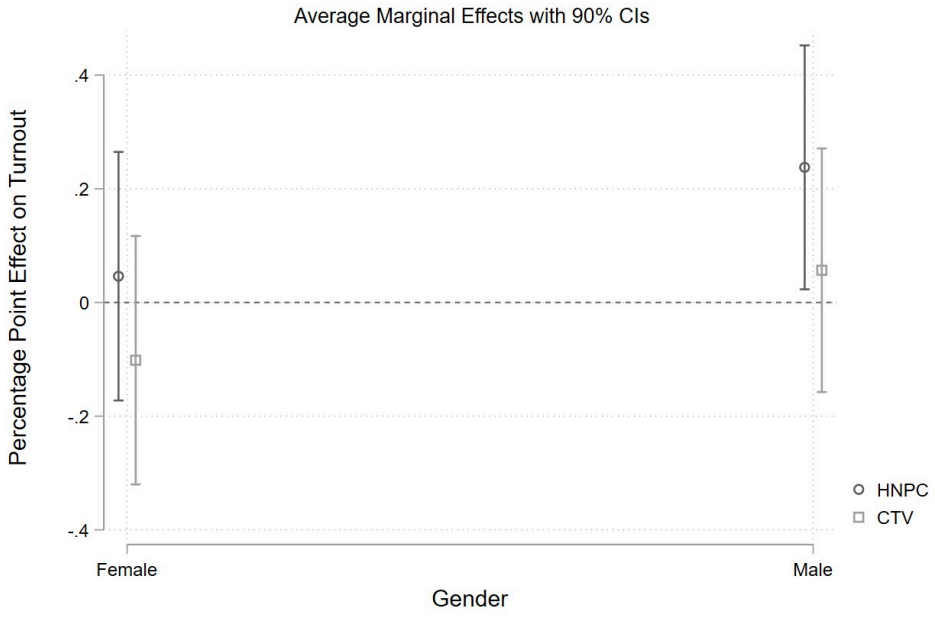
Appendix

In this appendix, we present the results of analyses of the effect of both the CTV and HNPC interventions by the subgroups that we had pre-specified in our evaluation protocol.

Recipients

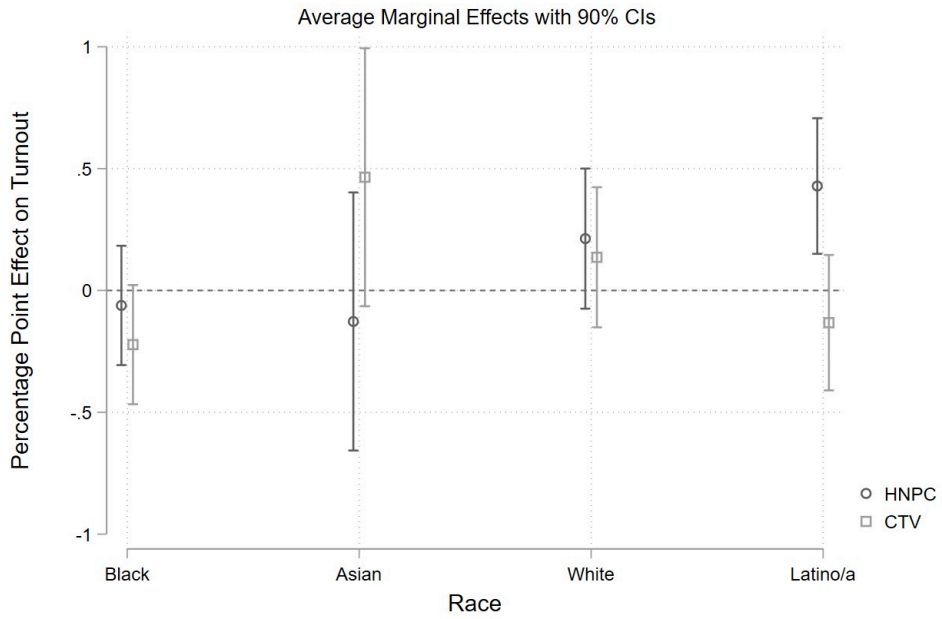
Figures A1-A5 present recipient subgroup analyses by gender, race/ethnicity, state, age group, and turnout score group. In Figure A1, the graph appears to show a small but significant increase in turnout among male voters in the HNPC condition. However, this effect is not significant when controlling for multiple hypotheses testing. This is also the case for Figure A2, where the graph shows an increase in turnout among Latino/a recipients. However, this effect also disappears when controlling for multiple hypothesis testing. In Figure A3, The graph shows a large but not statistically significant effect in Wisconsin for HNPC, as the sample size in Wisconsin was small. Moreover, though the graph appears to show a significant increase in turnout among voters from Minnesota, this effect is not significant when controlling for multiple hypotheses testing. Figure A4 shows that the interventions did not increase turnout for any age group. Finally, Figure A5 shows that though the interventions appear to have impacted some turnout score groups (in the case of CTV, even negatively for some groups), none of the effects are significant once we control for multiple hypotheses testing.

Figure A1. Recipient turnout effects by gender



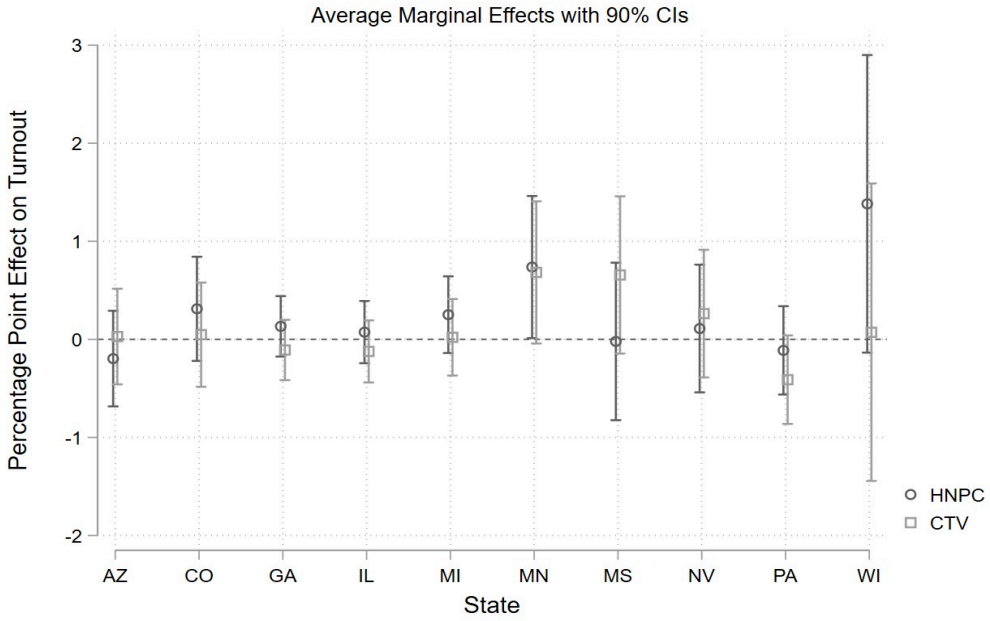
Note: Secondary analysis. N=1,358,927.

Figure A2. Recipient turnout effects by race/ethnicity



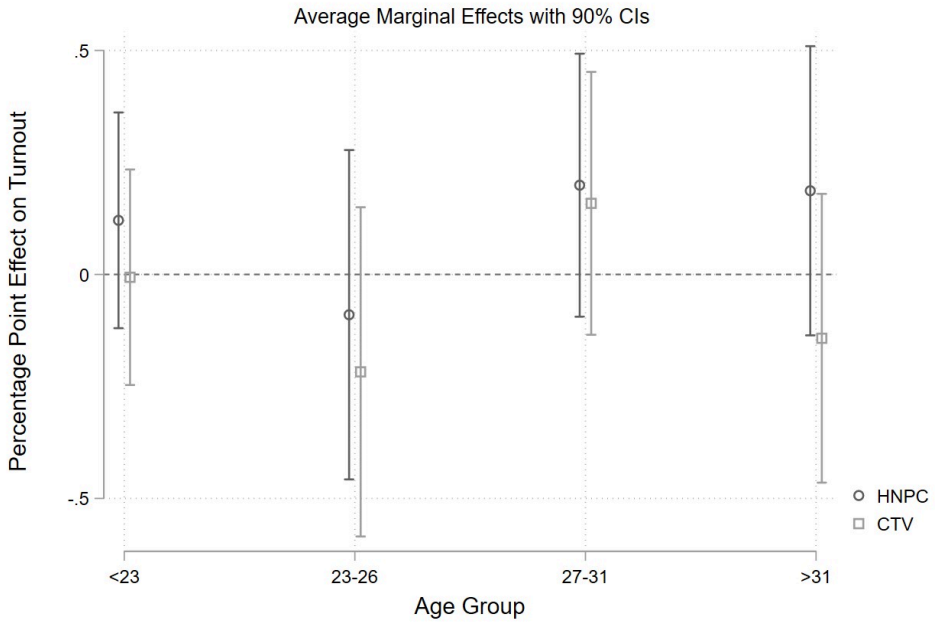
Note: Secondary analysis. N=1,358,927.

Figure A3. Recipient turnout effects by state



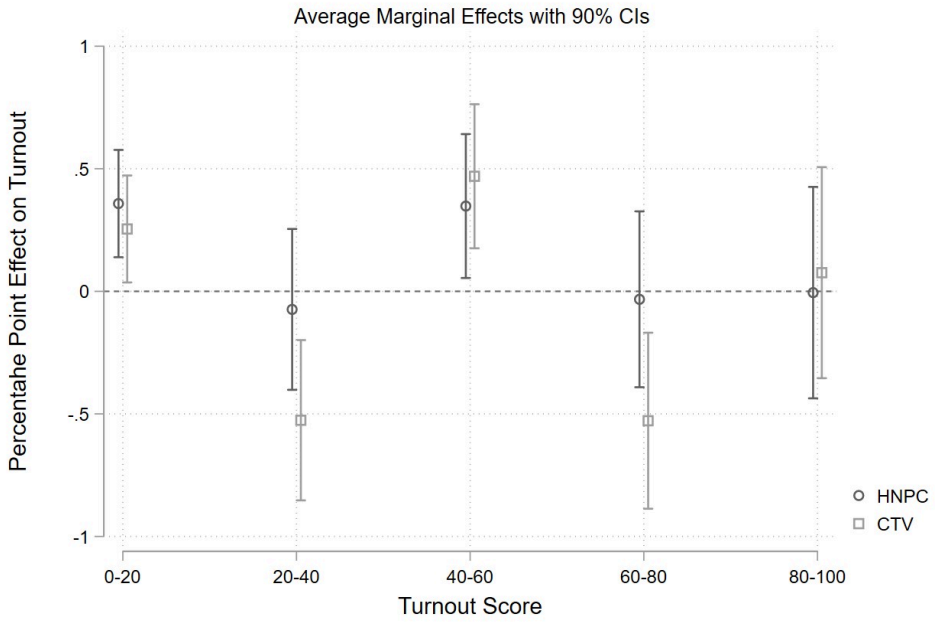
Note: Secondary analysis. N=1,358,927.

Figure A4. Recipient turnout effects by age group



Note: Secondary analysis. N=1,358,927.

Figure A5. Recipient turnout effects by turnout score group

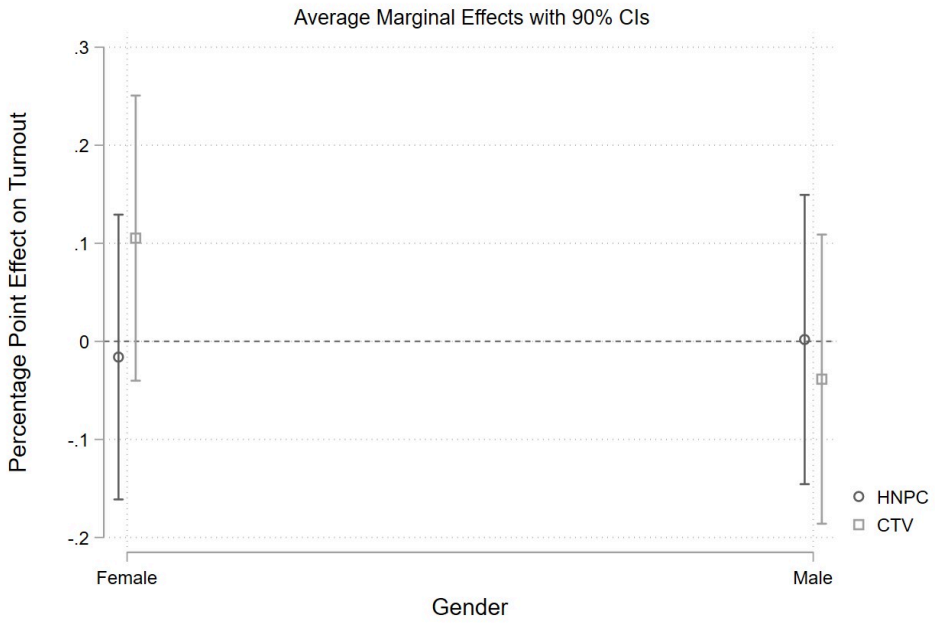


Note: Secondary analysis. N=1,358,927.

Housemates

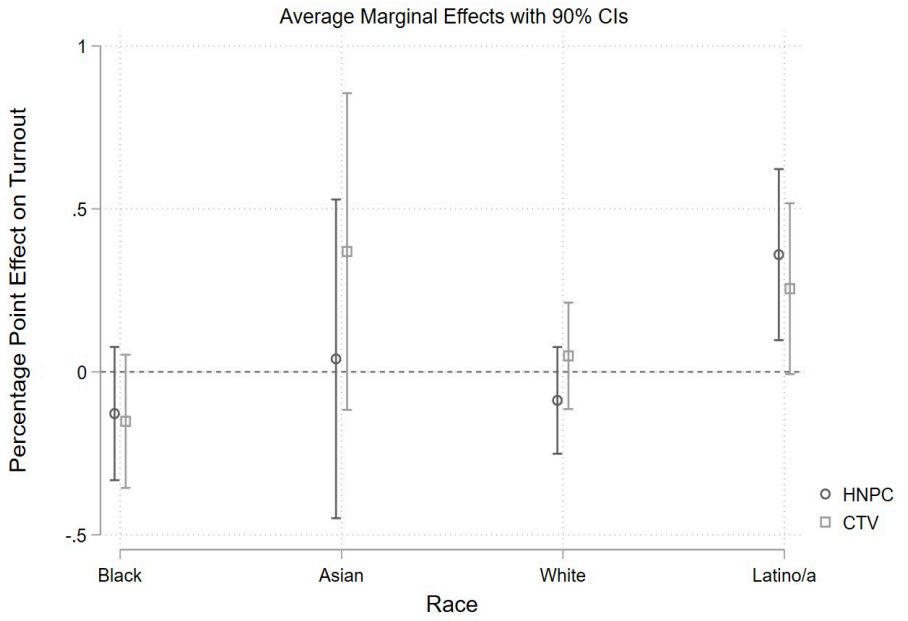
Figures A6-A10 present housemate subgroup analyses by gender, race/ethnicity, state, age group, and turnout score group. Figure A6 shows that there is no evidence of an increase in turnout for either male or female housemates. In Figure A7, though the graph appears to show a small but significant increase in turnout among Latino/a voters in the HNPC condition, this effect is not significant when controlling for multiple hypotheses testing. As a result, across housemate-modeled race, there is no evidence that CTV or HNPC affected turnout. Figure A8 shows that there is no evidence of an increase in turnout for either treatment condition in any of the 10 states. Likewise, Figure A9 shows no evidence of an increase in turnout for housemates of any age group. It is worth noting that the first two age groups correspond to housemates who were in the same age range as the recipients, while the three last ones correspond to housemates who were older. The graph shows that there is no evidence that either CTV or HNPC affected turnout for housemates in the same age range as recipients nor for housemates that were older. Finally, Figure A10 shows that there is no evidence that the treatments increased turnout for housemates in any turnout score group.

Figure A6. Housemate turnout effects by gender



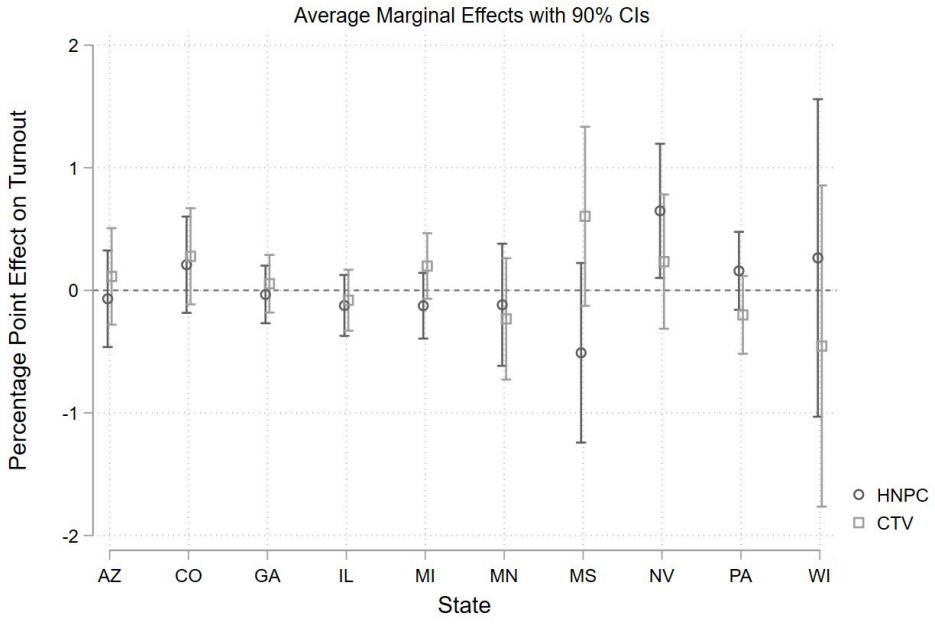
Note: Secondary analysis. N=2,589,155.

Figure A7. Housemate turnout effects by race/ethnicity



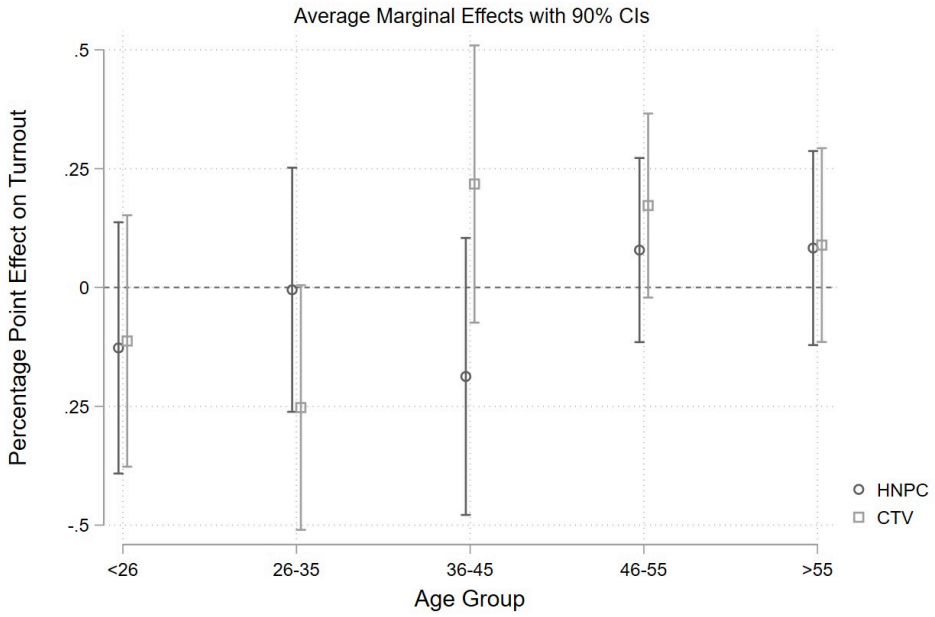
Note: Secondary analysis. N=2,589,155.

Figure A8. Housemate turnout effects by state



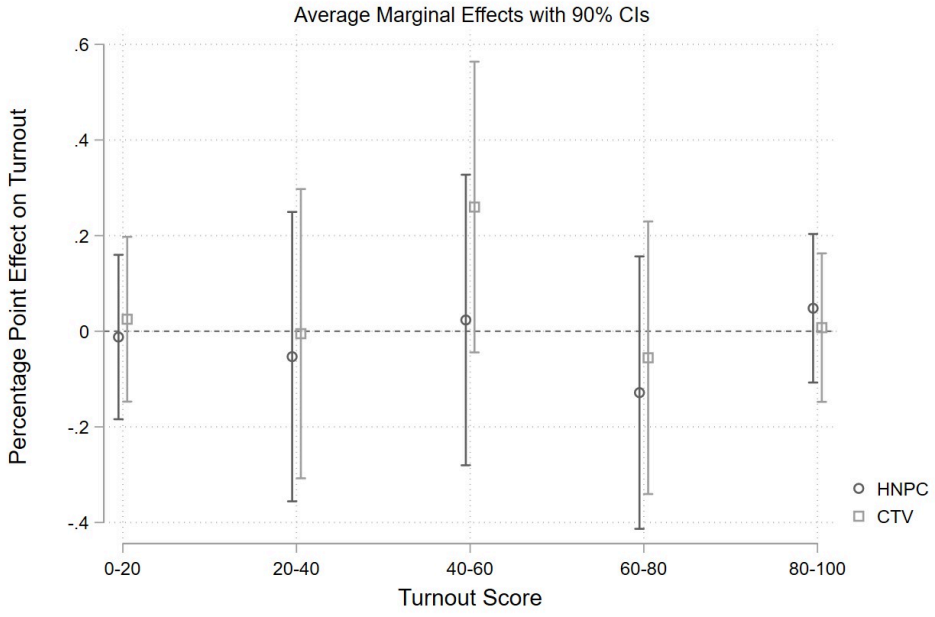
Note: Secondary analysis. N=2,589,155.

Figure A9. Housemate turnout effects by age group



Note: Secondary analysis. N=2,589,155.

Figure A10. Housemate turnout effects by turnout score group



Note: Secondary analysis. N=2,589,155.