Housemate social pressure mail RCTini

NY-03 special election results writeup, July 2024

Introduction

A common finding in the GOTV literature is that social pressure increases turnout (see e.g., the Analyst Institute's Meta-Analysis 4.0). For example, sending a letter with a voter's voting record and promising to publicize it to their household or neighbors increases turnout.[1] A different finding in the literature is that, in some contexts, relational reminders (i.e., when a person reminds someone they know to vote) increase turnout.[2] In this pilot study, we combined these two ideas to see if "Housemate Social Pressure Mail" (HSPM) is an effective way to increase turnout. In HSPM, we mail eligible recipients their voting records and that of their housemates (i.e., people who are registered to vote at the same address). In the context of the NY-03 congressional district special election, which took place on February 13, 2024, we sent letters to 500 randomly selected recipients asking them to remind one or two housemates whose voting records we included in the letter to vote in the election. The trial was not designed to produce significant results but rather to learn about the logistics for implementing this tactic. Nevertheless, we implemented this pilot as a randomized controlled trial because we had free access to the NY state voter file through a FOIA request.

This methodological pilot was not powered to detect significant effects at any plausible sample size, and no group differences were significant. However, in our post-hoc analyses, **we find suggestive evidence that the letter might increase turnout in households where the recipient has a worse voting record than their housemates**.

Study design

We used the NY Secretary of State's publicly available voter file to identify all voters registered to vote at the same address as at least one other registered voter in NY-03 (i.e., they have a registered "housemate")[3]. This pilot was designed as a clustered

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[1] See e.g. Green et al. (2008) and Gerber el at (2017) among many others.
[2] See e.g., Vote Rev Action Fund (2023), Kravitz and Roseman (2021), Liu (2017), among others.
[3] Housemates can be domestic partners, spouses, parents, adult children, roommates or any other person registered to vote at the same address.

randomized controlled trial (see the protocol for more information). Recipients and their households were randomly assigned to either treatment (receive the letter) or control (did not receive a letter). To do this, we randomly selected one voter for each address to be the letter recipient. We allocated the other registered voters in the household to be "housemates".[4] We then randomly selected 500 recipients to receive a letter, and treated all other eligible households in the congressional district as the control group. The number of participants in each arm can be found below in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of participants in each treatment arm

	Recipients	Housemates
Treatment	500	735
Control	151,475	230,054

We hypothesized that the letter would encourage recipients and housemates to vote through two mechanisms. First, in cases where housemates had a worse voting record than the recipient, we hypothesized that the recipient would remind their housemates to vote (or even take them with them to vote) to improve their voting record. Second, in cases where housemates had a better voting record than the recipient, we hypothesized that the housemates' voting record would act as a motivating social comparison – the recipient would want to improve their behavior to match their housemates'.

Among other information, the letter contained details about the election; a voting report card with the voting record of the letter recipient and their housemates; and a customized request for the recipient to remind their housemates to vote. The phrasing of the request varied depending on whether the recipient had a better, worse, or equal voting records as their housemates.[5] An example can be found in Appendix 1.

Results

The graphs below show the percentage of recipients (Graph 1) and housemates (Graph 2) voting in each condition with 90% confidence intervals. Graph 1 shows that about 30.2 percent of potential recipients who were not sent the letter (the control group) and 29.4 of

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[4] We limited the number of potential housemates in each address to two. This means that for addresses with more than three registered voters we randomly selected three to be part of the trial, one as a potential recipient and two as potential housemates.

[5] The comparison was based on voting records for the 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 General Elections. If a recipient had voted in more elections than their housemates on average, they were coded as having a better record; if they had voted in the same number of elections on average, they were coded as having the same record; if they had voted in fewer elections than their housemates on average, they were coded as having a worse record.

the ones who were sent the letter (the treatment group) voted in the NY-03 special election. Results from a regression using covariates[6] show that the estimated treatment effect is not distinguishable from zero for recipients. The average effect of receiving the letter for a recipient is -1.6 percentage points (pp) (std. error=2.0 pp, p=.438 double-tailed). This means that we cannot conclude that the letter affected recipients' turnout. The results from the regression can be found in column 1 of the table in Appendix 2.

Graph 1. Recipient turnout by treatment condition
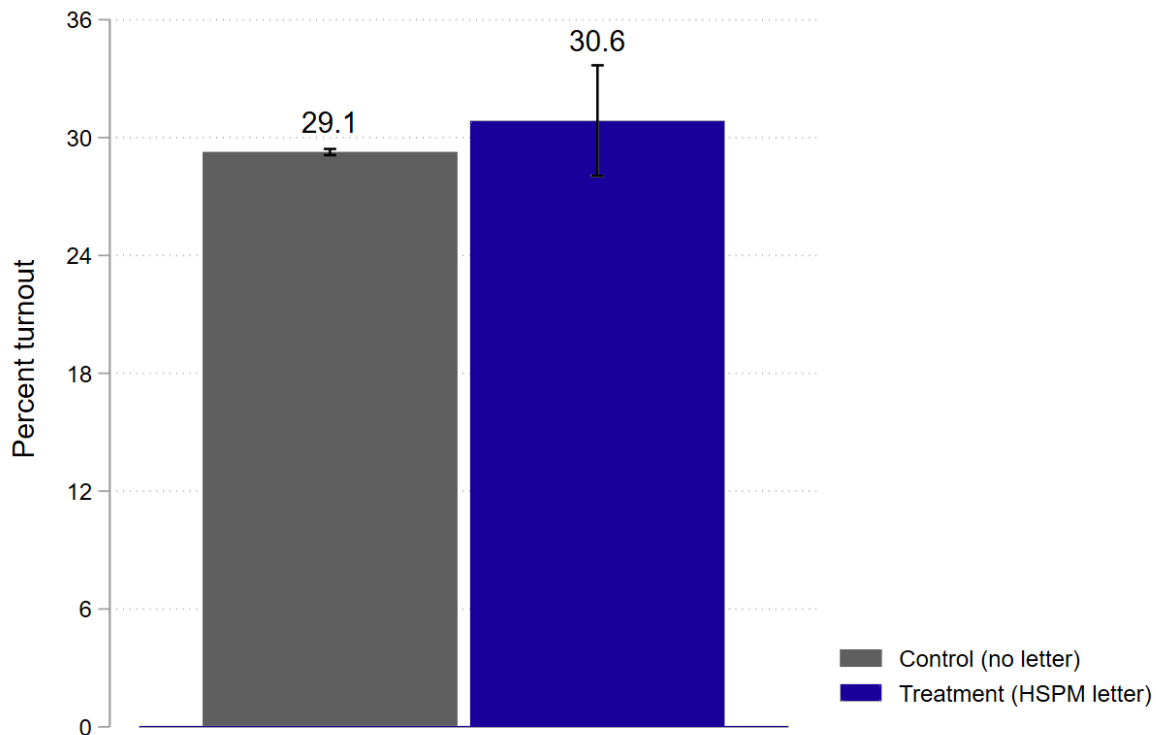**(with 90% confidence intervals)**
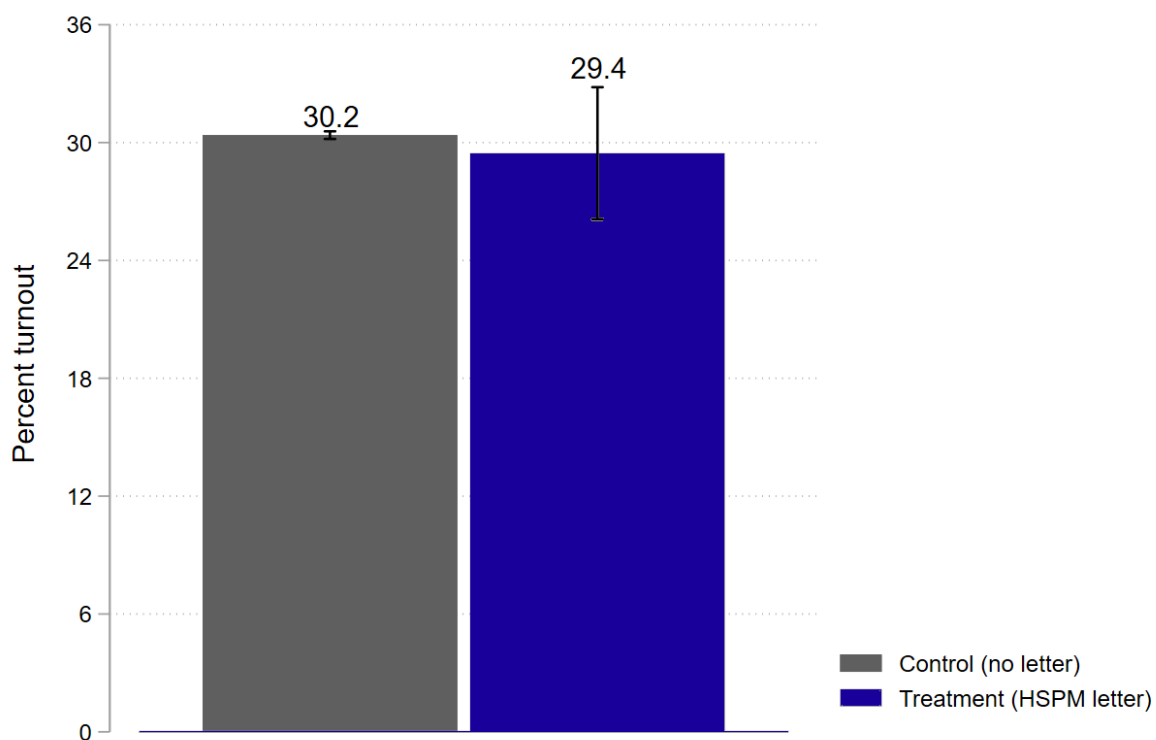
Notes: N=151,292, with 499 in treatment and. 150,793 in the control. The N is smaller than the original sample size because some participants were not found in the updated voter file. We cannot discard the hypotheses that missingness is at random.

Graph 2 shows that about 29.1 percent of the housemates in the control group voted and about 30.6 in the treatment group voted. Similar to the case of recipients, results from a regression using covariates show that there is no detectable effect for housemates (average effect is 1.4 pp, std. error =1.9 pp, p=.451, double-tailed), meaning that we

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[6] Covariates include age, age squared, and indicator variables for gender, type of letter sent (better, same, or worse turnout than housemates), and number of housemates included.

cannot conclude that the letter affected housemates' turnout. These results can be found in column 2 of the table in Appendix 2.

**Graph 2. Housemate turnout by treatment condition
(with 90% confidence intervals)**

Notes: N=229,745, with 729 in treatment and 229,016 in control. The N is smaller than the original sample size because some participants were not found in the updated voter file. We cannot discard the hypotheses that missingness is at random.

It is important to note that the treatment was not the same for all recipients:
- Letters sent to recipients whose housemates' voting record was better than their own include the following phrase: "Voting is important to your housemates, so impress them by voting in this election."
- Letters sent to recipients with the same voting record as that of their housemates said: "Your voting record is the same as your housemates'. Keep it up by going to vote together this election!"
- Finally, letters sent to recipients with a better voting record than their housemates included the following phrase: "Your voting record is BETTER than your housemates', so it's up to you to make sure they vote --- remind them to vote in this election."

Graphs 3 (for recipients) and 4 (for housemates) present the results of an exploratory analysis that estimates differing effects depending on which letter was sent to recipients. They show suggestive evidence that the treatment might increase turnout when sent to

recipients with a worse voting record than their housemates. The results show large estimated effects of 4.0 pp for recipients (std. error=3.3 pp, p=.22) and 6.4pp for their housemates (std. error=3.6 pp, p=0.074), though the results are only statistically significant for housemates. The results also show a potentially detrimental effect when the letter is sent to recipients with better turnout than their housemates. The estimated effect is -5.0 pp (std. error=3.6 pp, p=.162) for recipients and -2.2 pp for housemates (std. error=2.7 pp, p=0.42), though none of these quantities is statistically significant.

Graph 3. Letter effect on recipient turnout by voting record compared to housemates (with 90% confidence intervals)
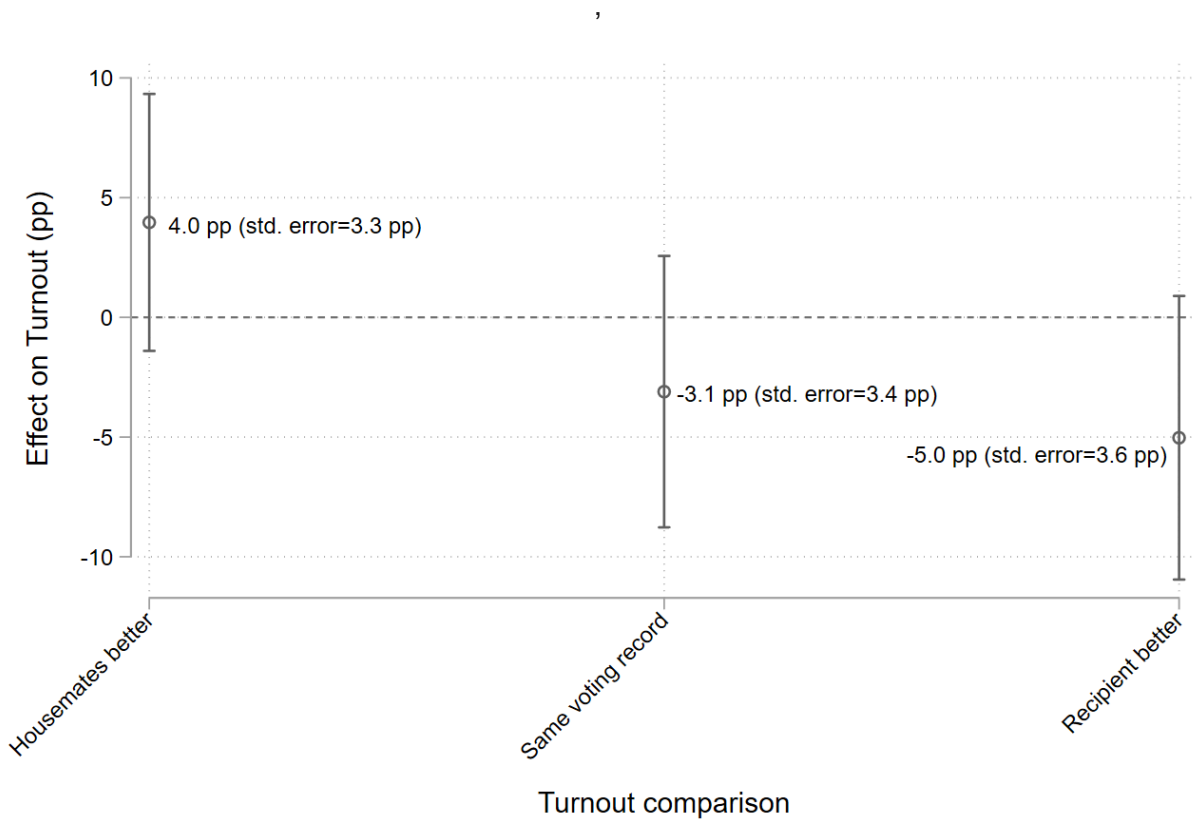
Notes: N=151,292, with 49,985 in housemate better, 50,676 in same voting record, and 52,314 in recipient better.

Graph 4. Letter effect on housemate turnout by recipient voting record compared to housemates (with 90% confidence intervals)
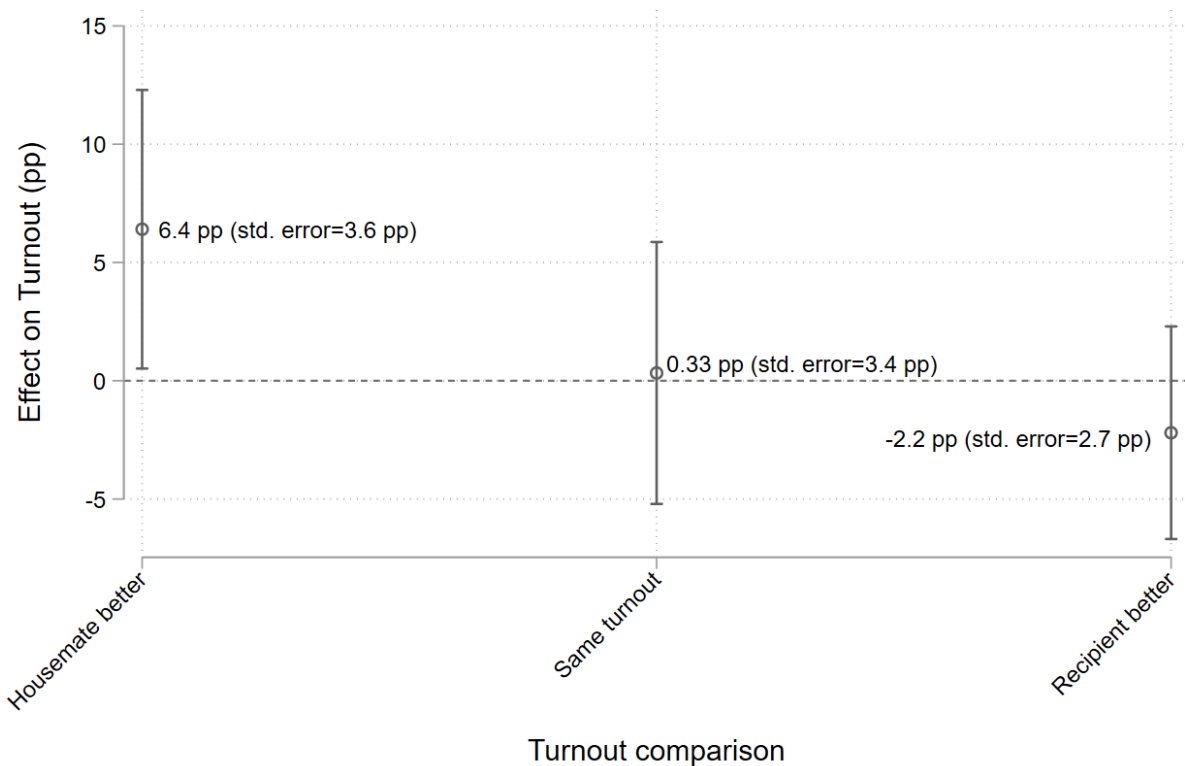
Notes: N=229,745, with 79,378 in housemates better, 64,668 in same turnout, and 86,109 in recipient better.

Discussion

The trial we ran during the NY-03 special election found that, on average, we cannot conclude that HSPM letters affect turnout for recipients or their housemates. In fact, we observed average effects in different directions for recipients and housemates. However, at least in the case of housemates, we observed an effect size that would be quite large for an inexpensive mail intervention, but because this was a methodological pilot with a very small sample size, we couldn't confidently distinguish this result from noise. Given our sample size, our power analyses estimated that this test should be able to detect a turnout effect of about 4.2 percentage points for housemates and 4.8 percentage points for recipients.

The average result might, however, be masking heterogeneity among different subgroups. Analyzing the results of the test broken down by the type of letter sent suggests that this might be the case. Recipients who have a worse voting record than their housemates might be incentivized to vote by the social pressure they feel when receiving the letter. To

conform to the norm in their household they might become more likely to vote. This might also have positive spillover effects on their housemates, as the norm is reinforced. Similarly, when recipients who have better turnout records than their housemates receive a letter, they might become less likely to vote to conform to the norm in their household. This might also have spillover effects on housemates as the norm of not voting is reinforced.

If the propensity dyad patterns that this test suggests are true, these findings could be crucial to campaigns and organizations planning to implement social pressure mail interventions during this year's presidential election and beyond. To maximize the impact of social pressure mail sent during this year's election we recommend running two more tests of this tactic in 2024:

1. **Primary election small scale RCT:** Using the results of this NY test, we think we could strengthen the content of the letter by focusing a follow-up test on only housemate better dyads. The Wisconsin primary on August 13th presents a good opportunity that would likely allow us to have results ready ahead of a larger test in November.
2. **Presidential election LargeCT:** Running a well-powered RCT on this tactic during the November presidential election would help us generate more definitive evidence on the effectiveness of this tactic. We recommend that this LargeCT be powered for a MDES somewhere **between 0.12 and 0.25pp**. See Table 2 below for more details on RCT cost and size.

Table 2. HSPM VPK and RCT costs

MDES	VPK	CPNV	RCT cost	RCT households required
0.025pp	0.7	$1,404	$6.1M	16.2M
0.05pp	1.4	$702	$1.6M	4.1M
0.12pp	3.4	$292	$313.9k	703.7K
0.25pp	7.1	$140	$110.8k	162.1K
0.5pp	14.3	$70	$65.2k	40.5K
1pp	28.5	$35	$53.8k	10.1K

For comparison, VPC's 2022 turnout study found a boost of 0.30pp for a single wave of mail to extremely high-propensity voters, or 0.56pp for four waves sent to lower-propensity voters. If we adjust by 40% for a presidential year, we might expect a range of effects from 0.12 to 0.22pp.

Appendix 1: Letter

Voting report card for Simone Lewis and residents of 637 Sterling Pl Apt 2L.

Dear Simone,

There is an important **special election coming up on Tuesday, February 13th**. Our democracy depends on people like you Taylor and Travis selecting a new member of Congress by voting.

This report provides a summary of how often you and your housemates have voted. Voting is important to your housemates, so impress them by voting in this election.

No one knows how you vote, but IF you vote is a matter of public record.

Voting record* for:	Simone Lewis	Taylor Swift	Travis Kelce
2022 General Election:	Voted	Voted	Voted
2021 General Election:	Voted	No vote	Voted
2020 General Election:	No vote	Voted	No vote
2019 General Election:	NA	N/A	No vote

Remind Taylor and Travis to vote! This special election may be decided by a very small number of votes. We'll be reviewing public records after the election and we'll write to you to let you know whether you successfully encouraged your housemates to vote!

If you've already voted, thank you! If you haven't voted yet, you can vote in person on Election Day from 6am to 9pm or early in person February 3rd through 11th. To find early voting hours and locations, to track a mail-in ballot, and for more information about voting, please visit voterlookup.elections.ny.gov or call 1-800-367-8683.

Sincerely,

Robert Reynolds

Robert Reynolds
*Founder & Executive Director, Vote Rev Action Fund*

P.S. Public records show whether or not **you, Taylor and Travis** cast a ballot, but who you vote for is private. We look forward to seeing that you and your housemates voted this year. Election Day is Tuesday, February 13th.

*In your voting record above, Voted means public records suggest you voted in that election; No Vote means they suggest you may not have voted; and N/A means you either were not registered at this location, were not eligible, or there wasn't enough publicly available data. Your and your housemates' voting records were calculated by Vote Rev Action Fund using data from publicly available NY state voter files. If you wish to be removed from our mailing list, email this code: LEWIS502 to unsubscribe@voterev.org. This information is provided to you by the Vote Rev Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization, voterev.org/action-fund.

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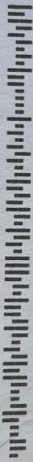611 Pennsylvania Ave SE, Ste 143
Washington, DC 20003

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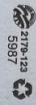
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Andrea Vasquez
189 Claremont Ave. Apt 44
New York, NY 10027-4028

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Appendix 2: Regression table

Table 2.1 Estimated percentage point effects of letters on turnout for recipients and their housemates

	Recipients	Housemates
Treatment	-1.55	1.40
(std. error)	(2.00)	(1.86)
Covariates	Yes	Yes

Notes: Robust standard errors for recipients and clustered standard errors for housemates in parentheses. Covariates include age, age squared, and indicator variables for gender, type of letter sent (better, same, or worse turnout than housemates), and number of housemates included.