

# The Impact of E-mail on the Use of New Convenience Voting Methods and Turnout by Overseas Voters: A Field Experiment to Address Their Challenges with New Technology

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## ABSTRACT

Research on absentee and early voting laws has led many scholars to conclude that these convenience voting methods do little to boost turnout. But most of this work has evaluated these methods well after their implementation and without consideration for how information campaigns about them might alter voter behavior. Voter mobilization research shows that impersonal communications produce little-to-no effect on turnout. But we know much less about how mobilization might influence changes in the method of voting. Using a field experiment during the 2010 midterm primary and general elections in Maryland, we demonstrate that e-mail messages with concise subject lines that appeal to relevant reference groups combined with an easy-to-use electronic absentee ballot delivery system, increase the likelihood that overseas voters will use a new technology when they participate in elections. Our findings have scholarly and practical implications for election reform, campaign communications, and voter mobilization.

**W**ITH THE RISE OF CONVENIENCE VOTING reforms, such as early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, candidates, political parties, and other political practitioners have sought to gain advantage by using relatively inexpensive mass

communication techniques to encourage their supporters to vote using these methods. However, most of the extant literature on convenience voting and mass communications shows that these reforms do not substantially increase participation in elections. Nevertheless, states, localities, and political campaigners continue to innovate. Some recently introduced programs that have the potential to facilitate turnout and change the method voters use to participate in elections involve electronically delivered absentee ballots and e-mail messaging.

This study addresses some key questions related to convenience voting laws and campaign communications: Does providing citizens with information about a new, easy-to-use convenience voting method increase the likelihood of its use? Does such information boost turnout? Does the way this information is presented matter? Can this combination of factors influence the participation of a group of citizens that have some commitment to voting but traditionally has demonstrated abysmal voter

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turnout? We develop a set of hypotheses by drawing on the literatures on voter mobilization, political communications, election reform, marketing, and survey research. To test these hypotheses, during the 2010 midterm elections we implemented a unique field experiment (see e.g., Gosnell 1927; Gerber and Green 2000) in which we sent overseas and military voters [herein referred to as Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters] from Maryland e-mail messages that provided information about a new electronic absentee ballot delivery system (EABDS) that allows voters to obtain a blank absentee ballot anywhere they have access to the internet and a printer.<sup>1</sup> Across all states, UOCAVA voters account for 4 to 5 million voting eligible citizens (greater than 2% of voting eligible citizens).<sup>2</sup> This diverse and growing group includes military personnel and their families, government and private sector employees, retirees, and college students studying abroad. Moreover, 31 U.S. states have voting eligible populations smaller than 4 million. Of course, votes are still aggregated by state but over 760,000 overseas citizens are estimated to be part of the voting eligible population in the key battleground states of Florida, Ohio, and North Carolina, making these individuals quite relevant in this era of close elections.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Mitt Romney campaigned overseas for votes and contributions among this group in the 2012 presidential election.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the size, growth, and diversity of UOCAVA voters, they are interesting and important to study because they face a number of structural disadvantages relative to civilians residing in the U.S.

Our findings demonstrate that information conveyed in the subject line (or heading) and in the body of an e-mail increased the likelihood an individual used the new voting method. Although our results were suggestive, we did not find sufficiently strong evidence to conclude that a well worded e-mail message increased turnout. In addition to contributing to the study of voting behavior, voting technology, and election reform, our work has practical implications for voter mobilization efforts and survey research, especially with respect to e-mail, an area of research that is in its developmental stages.

### POLITICAL REFORM AND VOTER MOBILIZATION

The introduction of electronically delivered ballots, like most election reforms implemented over

the last several decades, aims to make it easier to vote.<sup>5</sup> Although many scholars assume that lowering the costs of voting will increase turnout (e.g., Downs 1957), most of the literature shows that voter registration reforms (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) and convenience voting methods, including early in-person voting and no-excuse absentee voting (Bergman and Yates 2011; Gronke et al. 2007, 2008; Cain, Donovan, and Tolbert 2008), do little to boost turnout (Berinsky 2005; Hanmer 2009). Moreover, convenience reforms tend to exacerbate the turnout gap between the resource rich and resource poor, because these reforms work mainly as substitutes to Election Day voting for those who were already likely to vote, rather than forces that mobilize the least engaged (Berinsky 2005; but see Stein and Vonnahme 2008; and Gerber, Huber, and Hill 2013).

Nevertheless, an important question that this literature has just recently begun to address is: How do communications informing citizens about the reforms increase their use or turnout more generally?<sup>6</sup> It seems obvious that for a voting reform to be effective voters must be informed about it. Several studies have examined the effect of mobilization efforts on encouraging registrants to switch their method of voting (Monroe and Sylvester 2011; Smith and Sylvester 2013; Mann and Mayhew forthcoming).<sup>7</sup> For example, both Monroe and

<sup>1</sup>“UOCAVA voters” refers to those voters covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986, which encompasses military personnel and overseas Americans.  
<sup>2</sup>The estimate of overseas citizens eligible to vote is from McDonald (2012).

<sup>3</sup>According to McDonald’s (2012) latest estimates (for 2008) Florida had an overseas eligible population of 451,907, Ohio had 174,703, and North Carolina had 133,483.

<sup>4</sup>See for example, Tom Curry, “Romney Foreign Trip Highlights Significance of Overseas U.S. Voters.” NBC Politics. July 12, 2012, <[http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/07/17/12794865-romney-foreign-trip-highlights-significance-of-overseas-us-voters?lite](http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/07/17/12794865-romney-foreign-trip-highlights-significance-of-overseas-us-voters?lite)>.

<sup>5</sup>Although the trend is toward reforms that make voting easier, some reforms adding restrictions have passed in recent years, such as photo identification requirements.

<sup>6</sup>Indeed, Stein and Vonnahme’s (2011) extensive literature review identifies no studies of the effect of randomized mobilization efforts on usage of a convenience voting reform.

<sup>7</sup>Arceneaux, Kousser, and Mullin (2012) combine a field experiment and natural experiment to examine the effect of traditional mobilization efforts on turnout across contexts defined by the voting methods that election officials make available to registered voters, but their goals differ in several respects from these studies.

Sylvester (2011) and Smith and Sylvester (2013) worked with election officials in San Joaquin County, California, to implement field experiments designed to persuade registered voters to convert to permanent vote-by-mail status. However, most studies suffer from a methodological issue that is difficult to overcome—they examine election reforms well after they have been in place and thus are unable to isolate the impact of information campaigns. Our experiment is among the first to assess the effects of an information campaign conducted in conjunction with the initial implementation of a new voting method (e.g., Mann and Mayhew, forthcoming). It also is unique in that it assesses the impact of impersonal e-mail communications on turnout and the method of voting.

Previous research on voter mobilization and political communications has demonstrated that personal approaches to voter mobilization, such as door-to-door canvassing or personal phone calls, are more effective than impersonal approaches, such as e-mail, because the former are based on a stronger social connection between the voter and the political process (Green and Gerber 2008; Nickerson 2007; Bennion and Nickerson 2011). But more recent research challenges the view that a personal connection is necessary for a voter mobilization effort to succeed. Dale and Strauss (2009) argue that “a perceived net benefit of voting *and a noticeable reminder* are sufficient conditions for successful voter mobilization” (emphasis in original, 790–791). Their finding that impersonal text messages can boost voter turnout suggests that, under certain conditions, e-mail communications might also be effective in altering political behavior. Moreover, Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela (2012) find that e-mail from an official source (a county registrar) increased turnout by about half a percentage point. Together, these studies suggest that the null results from previous research on e-mail (e.g., Nickerson 2007) might be driven by the subpopulations under study and features of the messages themselves. Additionally, Vissers et al. (2012) show that online, but not offline, mobilization messages have a positive effect on online behavior, suggesting a link between the method of contact and method of activity. We contend that individuals who have opted in to an e-mail list maintained by an election administrator, political party, or other group that provides information about

voting or assistance with voting, by virtue of their actions, demonstrate they perceive benefits to participating in elections. We expect these individuals to be receptive to e-mail messages that encourage voting and the use of a particular voting method that involves online behavior—provided the messages are able to capture their attention.

Our review of the literature across a variety of fields, prior to designing our messages, turned up very little evidence on the effect of e-mail solicitations. We had hoped to leverage research on survey response rates from e-mail solicitations when designing our subject lines, but we discovered there is a dearth of literature on the topic. However, the limited literatures on survey methodology and marketing inform our expectations regarding the design of an effective e-mail mobilization campaign. These literatures have obvious differences from the subject we study, but there are important similarities, including the significance of message source and the information conveyed in the subject line and the body of an e-mail. With respect to the source, government sources bring about the highest response rates to surveys (Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978); Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela’s (2012) results are consistent with our expectations for voter mobilization. With regards to subject line, Chittenden and Rettie (2003) show there is a positive relationship between the appeal of the subject heading and the desired behavior, such as retention on the e-mail list. Donahue (2009) and Stallings (2009) demonstrate that shorter subject lines are associated with a more positive response than long ones, which is of little surprise given that some e-mail systems limit the number of characters that are visible. Porter and Whitcomb (2005) found that a blank subject line led to greater participation on a survey than one indicating the message was from a university. They speculate that curiosity drives this behavior.

The above literatures inform our expectations that the clear, concise presentation of a message that 1) is sent to an audience that has some commitment to performing an action, 2) reminds the recipients of their attachments to their home state and reference group, and 3) suggests, without providing details, a method to lower the costs of that action (so as to attract the recipient’s attention and curiosity) should be effective in promoting that action. These insights provide the foundation for three hypotheses regarding the

impact of information campaigns about new voting methods.<sup>8</sup>

H1: A clear, concise subject heading announcing a state has initiated a method that reduces the costs of voting (without providing details) will increase the probability that the e-mail will be opened. We believe that this message will prime recipients to think about their connections to their state and to voters who share their circumstances, pique the interest of individuals who have a commitment to voting, and encourage them to open the e-mail to learn more.

H2: A clear, concise subject heading and message that primes recipients to think about their connections to their state and voters who share their circumstances and introduce a new method that will reduce the costs of voting, will increase the probability that an individual will vote. We expect this e-mail will encourage voting by members of a receptive audience.

H3: A clear, concise subject heading and message that primes recipients to think about their connections to their state and voters who share their circumstances and introduces a new method that will reduce the costs of voting will increase the probability that an individual will use that voting method. Our expectation here is that in addition to the potential mobilization effects anticipated in H2, e-mail will encourage a substitution effect among individuals who previously voted using ballots delivered by mail.

## STUDY DESIGN AND DATA

Our field experiment involved testing the efficacy of different messages about a new electronic absentee ballot delivery system that were sent prior to the system's first implementation in 2010. Maryland created its system in response to the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act, which Congress introduced to reduce the time it takes for an overseas voter to receive a ballot, a major hindrance to participation (see Hall and Smith 2011; Cain, MacDonald, and Murakami 2008).<sup>9</sup> The diversity and size of the population of UOCAVA citizens has created a significant challenge for modern democracies—effective transmission of the ballot to this group. The Act addressed time considerations on the front-end of the voting process by mandating that states offer an electronic alternative to the traditional posted mail ballot.<sup>10</sup> The more rapid delivery of the ballot to where the

voter is, rather than a fixed physical address, might well make the difference between the ballot being returned on time or not.

The characteristics of Maryland's population, politics, and its new ballot delivery system make it an appropriate case for testing the impact of an information campaign on citizens' propensities to use an electronic absentee ballot delivery system.<sup>11</sup> Available for use during the 2010 election cycle, Maryland's EABDS provides voters with the same ballot, instructions, and oath that are distributed with a traditional mail absentee ballot and instructions to print an envelope similar to the one that accompanies these ballots. To arrange for a ballot to be delivered via EABDS, voters may simply check the appropriate box on their absentee ballot request form (available from the state's and counties' boards of elections and online) and provide their e-mail address. Individuals could request to receive their absentee ballot for the primary election, general election, or both. Those who opt to use EABDS receive an e-mail notifying them when their ballot is ready and instructions on how to download it from a secure website. Once they download and print the ballot, voters fill it in and return it, as they would a paper absentee ballot. During the 2010 general election, electronic ballots represented 37% of the total issued to UOCAVA voters. The return rate of these ballots was 28.6%, compared

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<sup>8</sup>We present our hypotheses generally here and link them to our treatments below, when we discuss the research design in more detail.

<sup>9</sup>The Pew Center on the States found that prior to the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act, obtaining and casting a ballot by military personnel overseas took between two weeks to two-and-a-half months to complete (PEW 2009, 40).

<sup>10</sup>The MOVE Act also sought to increase the time voters have by requiring that ballots be sent 45 days before Election Day.

<sup>11</sup>Maryland has a mid-sized population, a professional state government, and fairly competitive elections. Its population closely resembles that of other states on the East Coast, and is somewhat more racially diverse, more educated, and more affluent than the national average. The state's politics have been historically dominated by one party (the Democrats), but reasonable two-party competition is evident, as Republicans have recently run competitive races for governor and occupied the governor's mansion. In 2010 the main contest on the ballot was for governor. The race was a rematch that pitted incumbent Democrat Martin O'Malley against former Republican Governor Bob Ehrlich, whom O'Malley defeated in the 2006 contest. O'Malley won in 2010 with 56% of the vote. Fifty-four percent of registered voters cast ballots in Maryland; this was about 3.5 percentage points lower than turnout in the 2006 gubernatorial contest.

to only 23.5% for ballots delivered by mail (difference is statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$ ).

We contacted Maryland UOCAVA voters using an e-mail list compiled by the Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to “facilitate and increase participation of American overseas voters and military voters and their dependents in federal elections by providing public access to innovative voter registration tools and services.”<sup>12</sup> UOCAVA voters are a reasonable test group for this experiment because e-mail and the Internet connect them to personal networks, events, and politics in the United States. OVF represents a trusted source of information among UOCAVA voters and its list contains only e-mail addresses that were voluntarily provided by its members. This is important for two reasons. First, we do not expect the e-mail recipients to ignore or delete the e-mail due to fear that it might contain harmful information. Second, we know that those who receive an e-mail have at least some interest in voting. These considerations led us to expect that our target population would be responsive to a well-crafted message. Although our study involved only UOCAVA voters, other voters who possess similar traits and needs are likely to respond to e-mail messages about voting. These include salespersons, students, and other voters who frequently travel or move or rely heavily on online services for information and communications. They also include seniors, the disabled, and other citizens who face obstacles in getting to a polling place and wish to vote in private and at their convenience rather than when mailed absentee ballots are distributed by care providers at an assisted living facility, who may offer to provide voting assistance.<sup>13</sup>

We randomly assigned the roughly 1,400 registered Maryland voters on OVF’s e-mail list to one of four groups. For the first group we did not provide any direct information about the new system (control). For the other three groups we sent e-mail messages containing detailed information about the new system. All of the messages we sent to these three groups contained a link to the absentee ballot request form. By virtue of our experimental design, we reduced threats to internal validity present in observational studies, particularly those caused by confounding factors or historical events, giving us confidence that any effects are the result of the treatments rather than other factors (e.g., Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). As

expected, a randomization check indicates that the assignment to treatment was not a function of age, sex, or previous voting history (LR test:  $\chi^2 = 6.83$  (9 d.f.)  $p = .66$ ). As we show in Supplementary Appendix Table A1 (supplementary materials are available online at <http://www.liebertpub.com/elj>), there was good balance across conditions with respect to the subjects’ background characteristics. Moreover, our results hold even when controlling for these characteristics (see Supplementary Appendix Figures A1 and A2).

We varied two important features of our e-mail communications: the subject heading and the content in the body of the message. (Our sample was too small to enable us to individually test each of the components that might make an e-mail message noticeable). The first group in our experimental design received the control message (see Appendix A1 for the full text of the messages sent). This e-mail was the standard voter alert e-mail that OVF sent during the 2010 election. The subject heading for the e-mail sent to Maryland voters was: “Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert.”<sup>14</sup> The body of the e-mail did not highlight or draw attention to Maryland’s new voting method. Some

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<sup>12</sup>Since 2006, Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF) has maintained a mailing list and e-mailed messages to inform voters of important changes in voting laws and the organization’s activities on their behalf ([www.overseasvotefoundation.org](http://www.overseasvotefoundation.org)). In 2010, OVF sent a series of targeted “voter alert” e-mails directly to the more than 100,000 overseas and military voters that comprise its membership. These e-mail messages were tailored to the voter’s state and contained important information regarding deadlines and voting options. In 2010, OVF sent eleven informational e-mails that were not part of our treatments to its Maryland members, nine of which were also sent to the full membership across all states. Since our messages were randomly assigned and all OVF members received the other contacts (i.e., receipt of other e-mails was not tied to our random assignment process) these other messages do not pose threats to our ability to draw conclusions comparing our conditions to one another.

<sup>13</sup>Tests on these groups are beyond the scope of this project and we hope that future research will examine this empirically. We recognize that some of the features of our sample limit the extent to which the results will generalize; however, UOCAVA voters are an important group. Federal and state governments have passed significant legislation and committed substantial resources to address their situation, media reports about members of the armed forces (and others) facing obstacles to voting are rich with symbolism, and candidates have recognized this group to be an important source of votes.

<sup>14</sup>The subject heading for e-mail alerts sent to other voters substituted the name of their state for Maryland, but no experiments were conducted around the messages for individuals from other states.

information was mentioned, but it was located at the end of the message and presented indirectly, as a part of instructions for those who might opt for the downloadable blank ballot. Although we had complete control over the messages, we were unable to assign a more traditional control group that would have received no information. Doing so would have been inconsistent with OVF's mission of contacting all of its list members with information about upcoming elections. This is an issue that is common when working with citizen groups. When faced with accepting this feature or not studying this important group we concluded that the benefits outweighed the costs. First, through an extensive search we concluded that OVF represented the best source of contact information for UOCAVA voters that would be available to researchers. Additionally, it is typical for groups to send a variety of communications to their members. These messages often focus on candidates or issues and place less emphasis on the method of obtaining and casting a ballot. It is also important to note that from a methodological perspective, the structure of the control message makes it more difficult for us to find effects to support our hypotheses. That is, because everyone was informed via e-mail from the same source about the election and the new policy in some way, our results for the effect of the treatments on turnout and the use of the electronically delivered blank ballots represent conservative estimates.

To the second group, we also sent the standard subject heading that fully referenced OVF, and as with the control message, made no mention of the EABDS ("Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert"). But unlike the control message, it included a "policy alert" near the top of the body of the e-mail that contained just the facts about the new voting method without any appeal to UOCAVA voters regarding the state's efforts to address their particular interests. The rest of the e-mail message was identical to the control message. We expect that the open rate and turnout rate for this e-mail will not differ from the control but that usage of the new system will be higher.

The third group received an e-mail highlighting two pieces of information: the e-mail's source and Maryland's new policy. The body of the e-mail contained the same information that was sent to the control group, plus a short policy alert located near the top of the message highlighting that EABDS represented an effort to assist UOCAVA voters. These features suggest this treatment has the potential to

increase turnout and EABDS usage—that is, if the voter actually read the e-mail. As was the case with the e-mails sent to the first two groups, the subject for this e-mail might not possess all of the attributes necessary to gain the recipients' attention. The subject line was: "Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters." Many e-mail systems would truncate the line so only the sender's name (Overseas Vote Foundation) would appear. If the entire subject line did appear, recipients might not read beyond the information it led with (the sender's name), resulting in the subject line doing little to encourage a voter to read the policy information that appeared later. In both of these cases, and as stated in H1, the subject of message 3 is less than ideal for getting the recipient to open the e-mail, rendering the e-mail less than ideal for increasing EABDS usage and boosting turnout.

For the fourth group, the body of the e-mail was identical to the one sent to those randomly assigned to group 3. However, the subject heading was varied to be more concise, focusing solely on Maryland's new voting policy, and excluding any mention of OVF. It read: "Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters." By leading with the name of the state, the e-mail's subject heading should boost the message's credibility; some voters might even have thought the message came from an official state source. Mentioning the recipient's reference group should provoke interest. The lack of superfluous information should focus the voter's attention on the essential components of the subject. In accordance with H1, we anticipate that this subject heading will have the biggest impact on getting individuals to open and read the e-mail. We also expect this message to be the most likely to be effective in boosting voter turnout (H2) and promoting EABDS usage (H3).

We sent each group member their respective e-mail message on the same date, August 30, 2010. The e-mails were sent using the VerticalResponse mailing system. This system allowed us to control which e-mail message the individual received and to track bounces and whether it was opened.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Just under 99% of the e-mails got through to the recipients; only 15 e-mails came back as undeliverable. With such a high contact rate we report all results as intent-to-treat effects. Of course, as in other studies on e-mail or mail campaigns we have no information regarding which respondents read the messages, but given our randomized design comparisons across conditions remain valid.

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF OVERSEAS VOTE FOUNDATION LIST MEMBERS OPENING THE E-MAIL BY SUBJECT LINE

| Group                | Subject line   | Open rate | p-Value (two-tailed)<br>on difference with the control |
|----------------------|--|-----------|--|
| Group 1<br>(Control) | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation:<br>Maryland Voter Alert                                 | 21.0%     | na   |
| Group 2              | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation:<br>Maryland Voter Alert                                 | 18.7%     | 0.503  |
| Group 3              | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation:<br>Maryland’s New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters | 21.0%     | 1.000  |
| Group 4              | Subject: Maryland’s New Policy<br>Reaches Out to Overseas Voters                           | 27.2%     | 0.069  |

Notes: The N for each group follows: Group 1 =296; Group 2 =305; Group 3 =296; Group 4 =287. The open rate for Group 4 is also statistically different from Group 2 and Group 3 ( $p=0.013$  for comparison with Group 2 and  $p=0.069$  for comparison with Group 3, two-tailed tests).

The Maryland State Board of Elections provided additional data that recorded whether an individual voted in the 2010 primary or the 2010 general election and the voting method used.<sup>16</sup>

**RESULTS**

We begin our analysis by examining the effect of the messages on the most immediate behavior of opening the e-mail (see Table 1). We note that this measure does not fully capture all those who read the message. For example, some e-mail systems allow users to preview the message in a panel without opening the e-mail, something our measure does not capture. Additionally, some might have their messages forwarded to another account, which we would also miss. That said, as we expected, the open rate for group 4, the only group sent a message with a subject line that focused solely on Maryland’s new voting policy, was the highest (27.2%). The open rates for the other groups were considerably lower. In addition to being at least 6 percentage points higher, the open rate for group 4 was statistically different from each of the other groups ( $p=0.069$  for comparison with group 1,  $p=0.013$  for comparison with group 2, and  $p=0.069$  for comparison with group 3, two-tailed tests). Although we were unable to replicate our experiment elsewhere, evidence from e-mails to voters from other states (which had the subject “Overseas Vote Foundation [state] Voter Alert”), suggests that recipients were more responsive to the subject headings that identified specific policies. The open rate for Maryland was about average in comparison to virtually identical e-mails sent to voters in other states. However, the open rate for message 4 was the second highest,

only surpassed by the message sent to OVF members in Minnesota, a state that ranks among the highest in turnout and has a history of extensive outreach to UOCAVA voters (OVF 2009).

Turnout and usage of the blank ballot delivered over the Internet are the most relevant measures of political behavior in this experiment. Overall, 8.4% of the sample voted in the 2010 primary and 20.3% turned out for the general election. Table 2 presents the turnout rates in the 2010 primary and general elections. In the primary election, none of the new messages significantly boosted turnout over the level achieved among those who received the standard OVF message. In the general election, as expected message 4 is associated with the highest degree of turnout. Turnout among message 4 recipients is 3.4 percentage points higher than the turnout rate for those in the control group, an increase of 16%. Although the effect is not statistically

<sup>16</sup>We would have preferred to match the OVF list with the voter file prior to sending the treatments, but were not able to do so. When we performed the match, we could not match 179 of the list members to the Maryland voter file. Some individuals may have changed their voting addresses but not informed OVF; some may have been interested in acquiring information about the voting process but decided not to register to vote; some might have incorrectly selected MD as their state of residence when signing up on the OVF website; and it is possible that a few signed up for voter alerts so they could pass information to family members who are overseas and military voters. Since our universe consists of OVF members who are registrants in Maryland, we excluded these cases from our analysis. As expected, a multinomial logit model indicates that finding a match is not a statistically significant predictor of treatment assignment (LR test:  $\chi^2=4.32$  (3 d.f.)  $p=.23$ ). Moreover, treating the cases we could not match to the voter file as nonvoters does not alter the substantive conclusions. After dropping the unmatched cases the number of cases in each condition was as follows: Group 1 =296; Group 2 =305; Group 3 =296; Group 4 =287.

TABLE 2. TURNOUT RATE IN THE 2010 PRIMARY AND GENERAL ELECTIONS BY MESSAGE

| Group                | Messages   | 2010 Primary Election |   | 2010 General Election |   |
|----------------------|--|-----------------------|---|-----------------------|---|
|                      |  | Turnout Rate          | p-Value (two-tailed) on difference with the control | Turnout Rate          | p-Value (two-tailed) on difference with the control |
| Group 1<br>(control) | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation:<br>Maryland Voter Alert<br>Policy Note: None  | 8.5%                  | na  | 20.9%                 | na  |
| Group 2              | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation:<br>Maryland Voter Alert<br>Policy Note: Facts only  | 6.9%                  | 0.474   | 17.0%                 | 0.235   |
| Group 3              | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland's<br>New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters<br>Policy Note: Policy reaches out to overseas voters | 8.2%                  | 0.881   | 19.0%                 | 0.553   |
| Group 4              | Subject: Maryland's New Policy Reaches<br>Out to Overseas Voters<br>Policy Note: Policy reaches out to overseas voters                           | 9.8%                  | 0.575   | 24.4%                 | 0.301   |

significant, in the context of other mobilization experiments this is a substantively significant increase. It is well above the null effect Nickerson (2007) finds for e-mail on a college student sample, larger than the 0.5 to 0.7 point effect Malhotra et al. (2012) find in San Mateo County, California, larger than the typical effect of direct mail (Green and Gerber 2008), and similar to effects from volunteer phone calls and text messages (Dale and Strauss 2009). This result is especially important since our test was quite conservative because even those who received the control message were informed about the election. Moreover, our treatments were subtle and did not contain explicit social pressure (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) or expressions of gratitude (Panagopoulos 2011) that have been shown to be effective in direct mail campaigns. It is noteworthy that the effects of the other messages were in the wrong direction and not statistically significant at conventional levels.<sup>17</sup>

Table 3 presents the percentage of OVF members registered in Maryland, across conditions, who used an absentee ballot that they received via the state's EABDS. Consistent with H3, the usage rate of Maryland's new voting system was substantively and statistically larger in both elections for those who received e-mail message 4 than those in the control group.

In the primary election, e-mail message 4 led to a usage boost of 2.5 percentage points. Given the low level of overall usage in the control condition (1%), this is a substantively meaningful increase. The usage rate for those who received this message is three and a half times larger than the rate of usage

among those who received the control message. Messages 2 and 3 led to small increases in usage beyond the rate of usage among those in the control group, but these differences were not statistically significant. We also ran models in which we control for age, gender, and previous voting history (see Supplementary Appendix Figures A1 and A2). After running a probit model and using the observed value approach as recommended by Hanmer and Kalkan (2013), we estimate that message 4 increased the probability of using the EABDS by 2.6 percentage points (statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed).<sup>18</sup> In sum, whether we include controls or not, message 4 had a substantively and statistically significant effect on EABDS usage.

Message 4 also had a substantively large effect on the likelihood of voters using the EABDS in

<sup>17</sup>Given our experimental design, unless otherwise stated our results are simply presented as means. We also examined the treatment effects for turnout and usage after controlling for age, gender, and previous voting history, but doing so did not change the overall conclusions. Consistent with other e-mail mobilization studies (see e.g., Nickerson 2007) and concerns with our measure for opening the message (mentioned earlier), we do not define the contact rate in relation to this measure.

<sup>18</sup>Hanmer and Kalkan (2013) argue that researchers should set all of the variables not being manipulated to their observed values in order to provide the most complete test of one's theory, to use the data most efficiently, and to avoid rare or non-existent counterfactuals. Here, we set age, gender, and previous voting history to their observed values and compared the probability of using the electronic absentee ballot delivery system (EABDS) under treatment 4 to the probability under the control. We determined statistical significance by calculating confidence intervals around the predicted effects using the process of statistical simulation (see Herron 1999).



TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE VOTING WITH BALLOTS DELIVERED VIA THE INTERNET, 2010 PRIMARY AND GENERAL ELECTIONS, BY MESSAGE

| Group             | Messages  | 2010 Primary Election |   | 2010 General Election |   |
|-------------------|---|-----------------------|---|-----------------------|---|
|                   |   | Usage Rate            | p-Value (two-tailed) on difference with the control | Usage Rate            | p-Value (two-tailed) on difference with the control |
| Group 1 (control) | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert<br>Policy Note: None  | 1.0%                  | na  | 5.7%                  | na  |
| Group 2           | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert<br>Policy Note: Facts only  | 2.3%                  | 0.297   | 4.6%                  | 0.566   |
| Group 3           | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters<br>Policy Note: Policy reaches out to overseas voters | 2.4%                  | 0.270   | 5.1%                  | 0.745   |
| Group 4           | Subject: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters<br>Policy Note: Policy reaches out to overseas voters                           | 3.5%                  | 0.046   | 10.8%                 | 0.013   |

Note: Group 4 in the general election is also statistically different from Group 2 and Group 3. ( $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed).

the general election. Almost 11% of those who received the message used the new technology to vote, compared to roughly 6% of those in the control group. In other words, message 4 boosted EABDS usage by 88%. Neither message 2 nor 3 were associated with an increase in usage of the new system over the control message. Not only did message 4 lead to substantively significant increases in EABDS usage over the control message and the other two messages, these increases were also statistically significant ( $p = 0.013$  for comparison with group 1,  $p = 0.002$  for comparison with group 2, and  $p = 0.005$  for comparison with group 3, all two-tailed tests). The overall conclusions hold up when we run the probit model controlling for age, gender, and voting history; using the observed value approach (Hanmer and Kalkan 2013) we estimate that message 4 increased the probability of EABDS usage in the general election by 4.1 percentage points ( $p < 0.074$ , two-tailed).

**CONCLUSION**

Our findings demonstrate that the combination of a new voting method and an effective e-mail communication can influence political behavior. This is an important consideration for understanding election reform. The findings also provide insight into how e-mail campaigns, which are impersonal but also inexpensive, can influence the method of voting.

Our study underscores that citizens must become aware of a new voting method if it is to provide a viable alternative to more traditional voting options. The results indicate that a well-crafted e-mail communication can result in substantial numbers using the voting system and suggests potential for increasing turnout.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, they show that the content of an e-mail subject line can be a critical conditioning factor. The subject line that led with the name of the state and was followed by its new policy for overseas voters had the greatest impact, suggesting the effectiveness of a communication from an official entity that primes voters' connections to their home state and a relevant reference group. Our results also demonstrate the importance

<sup>19</sup>The message that we anticipated would have the greatest impact (short subject line, referenced the state, and addressed relevant groups) was associated with a substantively large effect on turnout, but the estimate did not achieve statistical significance. Given our relatively small sample size and use of subtle messages we believe there is good reason for scholars to conduct additional research on the potential of e-mail messages to boost turnout. Note that Nickerson (2009, 149) calls for researchers to use larger samples for tests of e-mail but concludes his results "should not be taken to imply that e-mail is ineffective as a campaign tool." We agree on both points and note that our sample was small by necessity; if there existed a larger sample of overseas citizens who were able to use a new voting system for the first time and could have been matched to a voter file we would have leveraged it. But we had an appropriate sample of overseas citizens and certainly enough to draw more solid conclusions about usage of the new voting method.

of how e-mail systems display information, particularly lengthy subject lines.<sup>20</sup>

These findings have important implications for scholars, political practitioners, reform advocates, and others concerned with voter mobilization. They suggest that compiling the e-mail addresses of targeted voting populations is a worthwhile investment for those who run or have a stake in elections. Combined with the findings of recent research on text messages, they confirm that e-mail and perhaps other social media can be effective when used in well-targeted voter mobilization campaigns. Given the greater efficiencies and reduced costs associated with internet-based ballot delivery systems, states that currently use them should consider publicizing them better. Moreover, election officials should collect e-mail addresses as part of their voter registration maintenance activities so that this and other changes in election administration can be communicated directly to registrants. For states that do not provide all absentee voters with an online ballot retrieval option, we recommend they contemplate making it available. This type of system would probably have particular appeal to younger voters, who make greater use of e-mail than traditional mail. It also might appeal to senior citizens or voters with disabilities because it enables them to vote with an absentee ballot in private and at their convenience rather than when absentee ballots arrive at an assisted care facility *en masse* and caretakers offer to provide assistance.

The findings also suggest that the number of citizens who use an internet-based ballot delivery system will grow as governmental entities, candidates, political parties, advocacy groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the media begin to more effectively publicize these systems and increase voter awareness. This does raise normative concerns. Since convenience reforms tend to increase the unrepresentativeness of the electorate (Berinsky 2005), to avoid exacerbating the situation citizen groups and election administrators should increase efforts to mobilize the least engaged.

Regardless of these implications and possibilities, our study demonstrates that informing voters about innovations in election technology in an effective manner has the potential to enhance participation in elections. The perceptions of future generations about the conveniences and risks of various voting methods will undoubtedly differ from those of contemporary voters. It is likely that

voters will become more comfortable with and reliant on ballots downloaded from the Internet than ballots delivered through the mail or cast at traditional polling places. Of course, current and future voters will need to learn about new voting methods before they actually use them. This emphasizes the importance of further research on the impact of new voting methods and communication techniques on voter mobilization.

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<sup>20</sup>Although our goals were not focused on developing insights for survey research, given the dearth of evidence on e-mail subject lines we believe our results provide guidance; i.e., scholars, election administrators, and others seeking to solicit survey participation via e-mail should craft subject lines that are short and leverage connections to the recipients. There is much to gain from additional research that investigates this further for the citizenry as a whole and various subgroups.

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(Appendix follows →)

**APPENDIX A1: E-MAIL TEXTS AND TREATMENTS***E-mail 1: Control group*

*Subject:* Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert

Maryland Overseas and Military Voter Alert  
SUMMARY: Last Chance to Vote in Maryland State Primary Election  
Act Now to Cast Your Ballot

**STATE PRIMARY**

Maryland will hold a State Primary Election on Tuesday, 14 September 2010 to choose the candidates for all eight Congressional districts and the Senate seat now held by Sen. Barbara Mikulski.

**REQUEST YOUR BALLOT**

Maryland registered voters must submit a ballot request via regular mail by 7 September 2010.

Complete your registration and ballot request forms here.

**CONTACT INFORMATION - ELECTION DATES AND DEADLINES**

The OVF Election Official Directory and State-specific Voter Information Directory provides complete contact information for local election offices, state-by-state filing deadlines, options for sending and receiving voting material and state-level contact information.

**YOUR BALLOT AND WHAT TO DO IF IT IS LATE**

Voted ballots must be postmarked by Election Day and returned via regular mail by 22 September 2010.

If you ask to receive your absentee ballot by email, your ballot will be posted to a website Maryland has developed for delivering absentee ballots. You will receive an email with the link to the website and instructions on how to access your ballot. You will need a printer so you can print your ballot which must be mailed.

For all others, the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) is a downloadable ballot for use by Registered Voters when your ballot does not arrive in time. If you filed the Registration/Ballot Request Form and your ballot has not arrived by ten days prior to the election, use the FWAB. Complete and print your FWAB here.

*E-mail 2: Subject line same as control group/policy alert in message*

*Subject:* Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert

Maryland Overseas and Military Voter Alert  
SUMMARY: Last Chance to Vote in Maryland State Primary Election  
Act Now to Cast Your Ballot

**POLICY ALERT**

The state of Maryland has implemented a new policy to speed up the delivery of absentee ballots to voters. If you are registered to vote in Maryland you can now request to have a blank ballot delivered to you through the Internet.

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*E-mail 3: Subject line references OVF and policy/message highlights policy and reinforces appeal to overseas voters*

*Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters*

Maryland Overseas and Military Voter Alert  
SUMMARY: Last Chance to Vote in Maryland State Primary Election  
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*E-mail 4: Subject line only references policy/message highlights policy and reinforces appeal to overseas voters*

*Subject: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters*

Maryland Overseas and Military Voter Alert  
SUMMARY: Last Chance to Vote in Maryland State Primary Election  
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