

**Getting Out the Black Vote: The Effect of Racialized Get Out The Vote Messages
on Black Voter Turnout**

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Abstract: Building on previous research on the effects get-out-the-vote (GOTV) messages at increasing voter turnout, this paper examines the effectiveness of racialized GOTV messages at mobilizing African American voters. Given the strong connection observed in surveys between black racial identity and political behavior, we argue that GOTV messages that highlight racial cues such racial in-group identity and black in-group norms of political participation (i.e., highlighting black turnout in previous elections) will influence blacks' willingness to turnout to vote. We also theorize that descriptive social norms can provide the psychological link between identity and behavior. We test this hypothesis with a mail-based voter mobilization experiment conducted during the 2008 Presidential Primary among 134,000 black registered voters in North Carolina. The results of the experiment indicate that while overall the use of racial cues lead to a modest increase in African American turnout, cues that highlighted racial disparities in turnout (where blacks are described as less likely to turnout than whites) can actually depressed black turnout.

Introduction

During the 2004 Presidential campaign, the Democratic-affiliated organization America Coming Together (ACT) targeted black neighborhoods in St. Louis, Missouri with fliers meant to push blacks to the polls in support of Kerry. The fliers featured an image reminiscent of the consequences of civil rights demonstrations: a black man being held up against a building by the force of a fire hose. A caption under the image read, "This is what they used to do to keep us from voting. Don't let them do it again." The flip side of the flier stated, "This is how Republicans keep African Americans from voting now," and listed a number of voter suppression techniques the Republican Party was accused of employing. The implication of the flyer was that blacks should mobilize against Republicans the way they mobilized against disenfranchisement prior to the civil rights gains of the 1960s. Conservative-leaning media outlets were quick to call attention to the tactic, calling it out as, among other things, "fomenting racial tension...to Kerry's advantage."¹ And, indeed, ACT claimed the message was a success, with one spokesman touting that "It's a message that really resonates in the African-American community."²

While conventional wisdom suggests that racial appeals and campaigns that focus on issues that disproportionately affect the African-American community are effective strategies for mobilizing black voters (Cavanagh 1987), questions remain about whether messages that activate race or racial conflict—as in the 2004 ACT message—actually encourage black voter turnout. Some have argued that a belief that the electoral system continues to disadvantage blacks could lead to disillusionment. Political scientist Michael Dawson wrote in 2004 that Democrats faced "a black electorate that is increasingly

¹ Quote from Campbell, Colleen Carroll. October 24, 2004. "The Politics of Division" *National Review Online*. See also FoxNews.com October 18, 2004 "Parties Charge Intimidation, Misrepresentation."

² ACT spokesman Jim Jordan quoted in Justice, Glen. "In Final Days, Attacks Are in the Mail and Below the Radar." *New York Times*, October 31, 2004.

disillusioned, and which could... withdraw from the electoral process,” (Dawson 2004).³ In the lead-up to the 2006 midterm elections, Democratic strategist Donna Brazile, commenting on the issue of black voter disengagement, remarked that the “notion that elections are stolen and that elections are rigged is so common in the public sphere that we’re having to go out of our way to counter them this year.”⁴ Campaign messages that highlight racial tension may depress African American turnout. Reminders of continued inequality may make blacks feel politically disempowered, negating any political resource effect of the group identification such messages may activate.

This paper considers the effects of racialized get-out-the-vote (GOTV) messages on black voter turnout. In particular, we examine the idea that the activation black group identity and black in-group norms of political participation (i.e., highlighting black turnout in previous elections) can influence blacks’ willingness to turnout to vote. Building on previous research on the salience of race in African American political decision-making and the political consequences of black group consciousness and identity, we argue that the use of racial cues in GOTV messages, in particular those that activate black in-group norms of political participation, should increase blacks’ willingness to vote. We test this expectation through a field experiment conducted during the North Carolina 2008 Democratic presidential primary. We find that even during an election featuring a competitive black candidate, GOTV messages featuring racial cues generally boosted black turnout, but activating racial norms of participation had little impact on black turnout. The exception to this finding is that turnout was significantly lower among blacks who received a GOTV message that cued a black disadvantage in racial group competition.

³ Dawson, Michael C. “Progressive Blues.” *Boston Review*, Summer 2004.

⁴ Brazile quoted in Urbina, Ian. October 27, 2006. “Democrats Fear Disillusionment Among Black Voters.” *New York Times*.

Racial Identity, Descriptive Social Norms and Black Voter Turnout

As researchers noted in the wake of the civil rights era that blacks participated in elections at higher levels than conventional resource or SES-based models of political participation would suggest they should, they turned to the idea of group-based political identification as an explanation. In 1972, Verba and Nie identified racial group attachment as an important political resource for African Americans, one that seemed to help them overcome other obstacles to participation such as low socio-economic status and lower levels of political awareness. Their argument was that a black collective identity made blacks particularly aware of their position as a disadvantaged sub-group, and that knowledge gave them incentive for political action. This idea of racial group consciousness as an impetus for political participation was elaborated by others (e.g., Shingles 1981, Miller et al. 1981), to include the notion that participation was most likely among those who both felt particularly attached to the group and perceived that the group was particularly disadvantaged. Dawson (1994), further elaborated on the notion of group-consciousness as political resource by introducing the idea that blacks' understanding of their self-interest as inherently tied to the fate of their racial group—a concept commonly called linked fate—gave blacks an information shortcut for making sense of their political choices, including electoral ones. In essence, these accounts are about the ways in which group identification acts as a supplemental resource for blacks; like education, income, and civic skills, group identification helps blacks bear the cost of participating in politics.

Researchers have also suggested that racial group identification might work as an important tool for the mobilization African Americans. Tate (1991) argues that political context might shape the role that group identity plays in black voting behavior. That is, some electoral contexts might heighten the role group identification plays in turnout decisions such as when race is made a salient issue through campaign messages and mobilization tactics. This research is, however, less clear when it comes to understanding precisely how group identity translates into action. It seems that mapping racial group

identification into a tool that increases voter turnout among blacks necessitates a connection between belonging to the racial group and the political behavior in question. Thus, we argue that descriptive social norms can provide this psychological linkage.

Descriptive social norms convey an understanding that a particular behavior is “correct” within one’s social group, connecting behavior and social groupings. These norms shape behavior by shaping individuals’ understanding of what people in their group do, and their desire to behave in a way that conforms to the group. This type of mobilization has often been invoked as one of many explanations for black participation in the civil rights movement of the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s. Scholars such as Chong (1991) and McAdam (1986) describe in detail how both active exertions of social pressure – such as efforts to embarrass other blacks for their lack of participation – and passive exertions of social pressure – such as simply seeing other blacks participate en-masse – were effective tools for motivating group members to action during the civil rights era.

Applying the theory of descriptive social norms to voter turnout, we would expect that a person learning that peers will vote should feel pressure to conform to the norm and vote. Indeed, recent work by Gerber and Rodgers (2009) has demonstrated that activating descriptive social norms of voting through emphasis of the fact that many people actually do vote can significantly increase an individual’s stated willingness to turnout. After randomly exposing subjects to GOTV messages describing high turnout, Gerber and Rodgers observed significant increases in self-reported intention to vote among infrequent voters.

Psychological research also suggests that the relevance of descriptive norms to an individual’s personal circumstances can condition responses to the norms. Christensen et al. (2004, p. 1295) argue that “norms should only guide behavior to the extent that people have adopted the relevant group identity.” Hence, we argue that the salience of racial group identification among blacks—their strong propensity to identify themselves as members of their racial group—implies a particularly strong

potential for response by blacks to descriptive social norms of *black* voting. By referencing the group to which blacks tend to feel most politically connected, a mobilization message built on the descriptive social norm of voting should be more effective at inspiring black turnout than messages that cue non-racial norms.

Group identities are also necessarily defined in opposition to other groups. Implicit in the notion of black group consciousness is that a white majority exists and serves as a standard by which equality will be measured. Civil rights and material progress for minorities are not measured solely in terms of objective conditions, but also relative to the majority. The oppositional nature of racial consciousness or “linked fate” has two powerful implications for the relationship between group identity, social norms, and political messaging. First, messages that contrast black and white achievement should cue racial identities more powerfully than messages referencing a single race or those with no racial content. To the extent that black group consciousness is associated with higher rates of participation, messages explicitly comparing blacks and whites should increase participation. Second, referencing conditions among whites provides an external benchmark by which black achievement can be evaluated. Whether 50% turnout among blacks in an election is a high or low number is difficult to determine in the abstract. However, knowing that turnout among whites in the same election was only 25% would lead one to a rosy conclusion about black political participation. Similarly, if white turnout was 75%, one would conclude that black participation was lagging. In this manner, descriptive social norms for a social group obtain greater clarity when contrasted against the oppositional group. Thus, messages contrasting whites and blacks should enhance the power of descriptive social norms by both strengthening the identity and clarifying the norm.

Pulling these strands of this argument together, a few predictions can be made. Political messages that emphasize black political success and norms of participation should increase participation

relative to messages that do not invoke such norms. In particular messages highlighting behaviors and instances where blacks are advantaged over whites should increase voter turnout.⁵

Unfortunately, highlighting low levels of participation – especially relative to whites – is likely to decrease participation among blacks. According to the theory of racial group empowerment advanced by Bobo and Gilliam (1990), when blacks do not see themselves as relevant to the political system, they do not have a way to translate their feelings of black racial group interest into formal political participation. White (2007) goes further to argue that cues to race that portray blacks in a negative light may cause subjects to reject racial group interest. If group identity is a positive resource that enables participation, decoupling identity will have the effect of decreasing rates of political participation. One could argue that highlighting disparities in participation across race should spur action by blacks, but the bulk of the social and psychological theorizing suggests that disengagement is the more likely outcome.

To better understand the relationship between racial identity, group competition, descriptive social norms, and political participation, a large scale field experiment was conducted during the 2008 North Carolina Presidential Primary. The experiment manipulated the ways in which race was explicitly cued and the strength of the norms referenced.

Sample and Design

To evaluate this theoretical framework we designed an experiment to assess the effect of different racialized GOTV messages on African American turnout. Our experiment took place during the 2008 North Carolina Presidential primary. Traditionally, late primaries are lightly contested, but the

⁵ This logic also provides a new psychological mechanism by which the success of political candidates can lead to higher rates of future participation among groups identifying with the candidates, whether the identity is racial (e.g., Tate 1991; Washington 2003) or gender (e.g., Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007).

heated contest between Obama and Clinton went down to the wire and both candidates invested considerable organizational and financial resources into North Carolina. Record numbers of people registered to vote in the days leading up to the deadline and turnout was expected to be high (Saslow 2008). Participation among black voters was expected to be particularly high given the presence of a high profile black candidate on the ballot. Prior field experiments have studied the mobilization of ethnic minority groups (e.g., Michelson 2003, 2006; Green 2004), but the explicit cuing of racialized social norms has never been directly manipulated.

To construct our sample, we obtained the official list of registered voters from the North Carolina Secretary of State and matched it against a consumer database using a proprietary fuzzy-matching algorithm to update addresses. Like many Southern states, North Carolina records race as a part of the voter file. In nearly every instance, race was self-reported by the citizen when registering to vote. Subjects in the experiment were black registered voters who met a series of criteria. For obvious reasons, we excluded voters who were deemed “inactive” by the secretary of state, did not have valid in-state mailing addresses, or had a public record of being deceased. To limit the number of people who moved to other addresses, we also excluded people listed at addresses with more than 3 other registered voters (1% of the population). To make the street-level voter history relatively anonymous, we excluded voters residing on streets containing fewer than 10 registered black voters (23% of the population) and streets with fewer than 10 registered white voters (30% of the population). To avoid ceiling effects (i.e., subjects who would vote with a high degree of certainty regardless of the treatment), subjects were excluded if they voted in both the 2004 and 2006 primaries (<10% of the population) or in more than half of the 24 elections since 2000 for which we had data (<4% of the population). To ensure that subjects had a reliable turnout history, we excluded subjects under the age of 24 (<2% of the population). To avoid subjects likely to have already voted absentee or using non-traditional polling stations (i.e., assisted living facilities), we excluded subjects over the age of 75 (5% of

the population). For the households with more than one registered black voter, we then randomly selected one person from the household to be the target of the campaign. All told, these criteria excluded 55% of the black registered voters in North Carolina. The minimum number of registered white and black voters residing on each street are the two requirements that truncate the sample the most (excluding 46% of possible subjects), but the ethical requirement for anonymity necessitated the restrictions. Still, our experiment represents a broad cross-section of the black electorate in North Carolina, 45% registered black voters (N = 134,007).

We partnered with the Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials (ANCBEO) to conduct the experiment. The treatments provided to subjects consisted of brief letters under the name of the Alliance (see Appendix A). Subjects were randomly assigned to the following five primary treatment conditions (see Table 1): a) Control subjects, who received no mail from the campaign (N=78,170); b) Subjects assigned to receive the base letter with no information about turnout included in the correspondence (N=5,076); c) Subjects assigned to receive the base letter with information about past turnout on their street (N=12,690); d) Subjects assigned to receive the base letter with information about past turnout for blacks on their street (N=12,690); e) Subjects assigned to receive the base letter with information about past turnout blacks and pass turnout for whites on their street (N=25,381). All told, the experiment sent 55,837 pieces of mail. The mail arrived on at most households on Saturday, May 3rd -- three days prior to the primary. Turnout in the primary, the dependent variable, was determined using official voter turnout records.

Random assignment assures that the only differences between the experimental groups are the information provided (or not provided) in the mailers. A series of randomization checks found no statistically significant differences on observable predictors of turnout across the treatment conditions (see Table 2). Thus, differences in turnout during the 2008 primary can be attributed to the treatments and the information they provide.

We chose to report turnout for the streets subjects live on for two primary reasons. First, we sought to preserve the de facto anonymity surrounding voter turnout. Specifying which neighbors voted and which abstained is perfectly legal, but may cause subjects to feel their privacy is violated. Our sponsor organization, the ANCBEO, is comprised of election officials and was understandably risk averse when it came to annoying constituents.⁶ Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of race relations, we did not want to single-out particular white people as voters or non-voters. That said, our second consideration was ensuring that the messages were personalized and resonated with subjects. Most subjects are not at all familiar with precinct boundaries or names, so precincts were unlikely to be sufficiently salient. Cities are salient, but so large that subjects may recognize the collective action problem and realize their behavior will not improve the statistic. Providing information about past turnout on streets can satisfy both of these concerns. The turnout behavior of specific individuals is not revealed. Streets also are salient geographic entities, but sufficiently intimate that subjects may have some investment in the behavior of neighbors. Thus, the treatments where subjects learn of past levels of turnout report the actual turnout on her or his street from the specified election.

In general, mail has a very limited ability to mobilize voters (Gerber, Green, and Green 2003; Green and Gerber 2008), but this average finding conceals substantial variation and some mail can be highly effective (e.g., Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008). Past results suggest that the baseline mailer should be the least effective treatment provided, but provide a benchmark by which to compare other treatments. The mailer providing information about turnout on the subject's street should be more effective if it successfully triggers social pressure or primes an identity that "people like me vote" (**HYPOTHESIS 1**). The purpose of this treatment condition is to establish the effect of non-racialized identity and norms in motivating turnout. The first contrast central to this study is the comparison of

⁶ Ultimately, we received eight complaints from the 55,837 pieces of mail.

the subjects mailed turnout among blacks on their street and the subjects mailed non-racial turnout. If black identity and group consciousness plays an important role in motivating turnout, turnout should be higher among the subjects who are explicitly cued with the rate of past turnout among blacks on their street (**HYPOTHESIS 2**).

The second key contrast compares turnout among subjects mailed turnout among blacks on their street to subjects mailed turnout among blacks and whites on their street. Both mailers contain the same information about black turnout and presumably hold group consciousness cues constant. The only difference is that the dual race mailer explicitly cues group competition. If inter-group competition is an important source of motivation to vote, turnout should be higher among the subjects provided information on both races (**HYPOTHESIS 3**).

It is difficult to test the notion that people who identify as voters (i.e., “people like me vote”) because the perception cannot be randomly assigned. By definition, low-propensity voters are not people who vote. Even in our experiment, the rate of turnout reported in the letter is determined by nature. It is possible that people who reside on low-turnout streets are less responsive to blandishments to vote than people who reside on high-turnout streets. To exogenously manipulate the reported performance of peers on the street, we randomly selected the election used in the three conditions where turnout was reported. The three elections used were the 2004 Presidential election (average street-level turnout = 77%), 2006 Congressional election (average street-level turnout = 43%), and the 2006 Congressional primaries (average street-level turnout = 15%). To the extent that self-identifying as a voter is important, receiving information about the high turnout election should increase turnout more than receiving information about a low turnout election (**HYPOTHESIS 4**).

Subjects were assigned to receive a *type* of information (e.g., turnout on street), but the specific information provided to each subject differed. For example, a subject residing on one street may be told that 54% of blacks on his street voted in 2006 while a subject living on a different street was

informed that only 26% of blacks on her street voted in 2006. Intuitively, the first subject would be more likely to infer from the treatment that “people like me vote”, while the second subject may adopt the demobilizing frame that “people like me do not vote.” Thus, it is important to look for heterogeneity in response to information provided in the treatment within each treatment condition.

The existence of the pure control group makes detecting this heterogeneity relatively straightforward. For every subject provided a specific piece of information in a treatment group (e.g., 62% of black registrants and 64% of white registrants on your street voted in 2004), there are subjects in the control group in an identical circumstance but who were provided no information. By interacting the treatment provided, T , with the information for the street in a given election, non-linear effects can be reliably detected.

For the conditions where past turnout is reported for the street as a whole and only for blacks, identity theory would predict that the treatment effect will be larger among people told large differences on their street. There is little reason to expect a non-monotonic effect, so the process can be modeled as follows:

$$\Pr(\text{Vote} = 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \beta_2 T E_s + \beta_3 E_s + \tau_s + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where E_s represents turnout for the election provided, τ_s is the stochastic error term for the election (i.e., random effect), and ε_i is the individual-level error component. Random assignment assures that the coefficients of interest, β_1 and β_2 , are unbiased estimates of the effect of the treatment. If reporting high turnout for the street increases the effect of the treatment, then $\beta_2 > 0$ (**HYPOTHESIS 5**). To avoid making arbitrary modeling decisions on how to pool the data, the models will be run separately for each type of past turnout information provided (i.e., 2004 general, 2006 general, or 2006 primary). Thus, the analysis is essentially examining three distinct experiments. Higher order polynomials were also tested, but the results were substantively identical to the results using Equation 1.

The situation is more complicated for the treatment where both white and black turnout on the street was provided to subjects. On one end of the spectrum, informing subjects that whites vote less frequently than blacks on their street may empower subjects and cause a surge in turnout (**HYPOTHESIS 6**). On the other hand, informing subjects that blacks vote less frequently than whites may cause subjects to think “people like me don’t vote” and depress turnout (**HYPOTHESIS 7**). If both hypotheses are true and symmetric, then a model similar to Equation 1 could be used by replacing turnout in the election, E_s , with the difference in turnout between races, D_s . However, there is no guarantee that both theories are true and imposing linearity might cause erroneously accepting both hypotheses on the strength of the other side of the spectrum. To avoid this problem, a higher order polynomial is used to look for heterogeneous response to treatment. Thus, we model the turnout decision as follows:

$$\Pr(\text{Vote} = 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \beta_2 TD_s + \beta_3 TD_s^2 + \beta_4 TD_s^3 + \beta_5 D_s + \beta_6 D_s^2 + \beta_7 D_s^3 + \tau_s + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where D_s is the difference in turnout among whites and blacks for election S (i.e., $V_{\text{White},S} - V_{\text{Black},S}$). In testing hypotheses **HYPOTHESIS 6** and **HYPOTHESIS 7**, the two key coefficients are β_2 and β_4 where both should be less than zero (since D_s takes on negative values when black turnout is higher than white turnout). Again, to avoid arbitrary modeling decisions, the results for each type of past turnout will be analyzed separately providing three distinct experimental samples to analyze. Higher order polynomials were tested, but the results were found to be substantively identical.

The next section presents the results of the experiment. The differences between the assigned groups will be presented and discussed first. The analysis for heterogeneity will then be presented followed by a discussion of robustness checks.

Results

The first item to check is the top-line result of whether the mail motivated turnout at all. All told, 55.9% of the 78,170 subjects assigned to the control group voted in the 2008 Democratic Primary

in North Carolina. By comparison, 56.9% of the 55,837 subjects assigned to the different treatment conditions voted for a difference of 1 percentage point (see Table 3, top panel). With an associated standard error of 0.3 percentage points, the mobilization is very unlikely to be due to chance and strong evidence that the mail from ANCBEO was read by subjects. In itself, this mobilization shows that mail from black civic organizations can be used to motivate black voters, at least in the context of an election with a prominent black candidate.

Of more direct relevance to the topics of identity, descriptive norms of voting and racial competition are the comparisons across the types of treatments. The middle-panel of Table 3 compares turnout for each treatment condition to the control group. While there is some variation in the specific treatment effect detected (0.8 percentage points for the baseline mail; 1.0 p.p. for the street-level turnout mail; 0.7 pp for the mail reporting street-level turnout among blacks; and 1.1 pp for the mail providing street-level turnout for both blacks and whites), no significant differences between the treatments is detected. All four types of treatment are easily within a standard error of the 1.0 percentage point average treatment effect detected. Given the size of the standard errors, large differences in treatment effects can be ruled out. Thus, we are in a position to answer three of our seven central hypotheses.

First, there is no evidence that providing information about past rates of voter turnout increased turnout over a simple request to vote (HYPOTHESIS 1). That is, the social pressure detected by Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) may only work with individual names attached. Two explanations for this finding are readily apparent. Streets may not be particularly salient sources of identity for subjects. Residing on a street with low-voter turnout may not be a source of shame for an individual. Another possibility is that the collective nature of the information provided, turnout for the street, provides anonymity for the subjects and relieves any sense of personal pressure to participate in the election. These explanations are not mutually exclusive and both could explain this null finding.

Second, there is no evidence that explicitly cueing racial identity and providing a group consciousness frame by reporting black turnout on streets increases turnout (HYPOTHESIS 2). As with all null findings, the experimental cue may have been too weak to spur action by subjects. In this particular setting, this concern has added bite. The subjects in this experiment are all registered black voters in a historic primary campaign featuring a prominent black candidate. Moreover, all of the treatment letters reference the struggle for civil rights and comes from the Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials. It is possible that explicitly referencing black turnout in the letter did little to increase the salience of group consciousness. If this explanation for the null finding is true, then it suggests that there is a fairly low ceiling for appeals to group consciousness with regards to voter mobilization.

Similarly, there is no evidence that cueing racial competition by reporting past turnout rates for blacks and whites did anything to increase turnout (HYPOTHESIS 3). One might be tempted to compare the 0.7 percentage point boost in turnout from the single-race messages to the 1.1 percentage point boost in turnout from the dual race messages and conclude that a 50% increase in effectiveness is a big deal. However, not only is this difference statistically insignificant ($p = 0.69$), but the reader should also bear in mind that the non-racial street-level turnout treatment boosted turnout by 1 percentage point – essentially the same estimate as the dual-race treatment. What accounts for this null finding? Perhaps the electoral contest between Clinton and Obama made a mobilization appeal from the ANCBEO implicitly about racial competition. The null finding suggests that explicitly invoking racial competition does very little to change turnout, higher or lower, much at all among black registered voters in North Carolina.

If merely invoking group consciousness and racial competition does not mobilize voters, perhaps getting subjects to identify as voters will succeed. The bottom panel of Table 3 presents the results of randomly selecting the election whose turnout was shared in order to vary levels of reported turnout. As expected, the mail mobilized voters regardless of the election referenced in the letter. The high,

moderate, and low turnout frames all exhibited treatment effects indistinguishable from one another. Despite a powerful framing device where subjects were truthfully informed that nearly everyone on their street voted (2004 General), very few people on their street voted (2006 Primary), or about half of the people voted (2006 General), turnout remained unchanged across conditions. This null finding could imply that a person's perception of whether "people like me" vote is difficult to change and the prime is not strong enough. If so, then similar findings from social psychology based on weaker primes and much smaller samples are called into question and may constitute evidence of publication bias. Alternatively, it is possible that the effect of descriptive social norm primes is fleeting and sufficient to boost intention to participate in the short term, but wears off by Election Day. It is also possible that subjects intuitively understand that electoral salience and participation varies by election and compared the turnout reported in the letter to a pre-conceived norm for turnout in the type of election. Regardless of the reason, there is no evidence to support the notion that priming high participation norms increased turnout more than priming low participation norms (HYPOTHESIS 4).

Of course, the turnout information provided for each subject varied street by street. A few people lived on streets with very low turnout in the 2004 General (minimum = 10%), while others lived on streets with high rates of participation in the 2006 Primary (maximum = 77%). These deviations from the average are sufficiently rare to not drive the null findings reported on the bottom panel of Table 3, but it does suggest the need to look for different behaviors in response to the heterogeneous treatments provided. The format of the letters was constant within treatment conditions, but the specific information provided varied. Identically situated subjects in the control group can be used to calculate heterogeneous treatment effects.

Figure 1 presents a series of lowess plots in an effort to detect heterogeneity in response to the no race and single race street-level turnout treatments. In each graph, the turnout reported in the letter is mapped on the x-axis and the right-hand y-axis presents the average turnout for subjects receiving

such letters. The histogram presents the distribution of subjects by the street-level turnout. Readers should keep in mind that the experiment contained 134,007 subjects, so even thin tails of the distribution represent thousands of subjects. The red line graphs smoothed average turnout in the primary for subjects in the treatment group, and the blue line does the same for the control group. Again, random assignment assures that treatment and control subjects are identical in expectation, so the lowess plots provide a visual diagnostic tool that is not biased by variables not appearing in the graph.

Looking across the six plots, turnout for the treatment and control groups track each other fairly closely in most instances. In five of the six graphs there is an uptick in the treatment effect (i.e., the red treatment line is higher than the blue control line) when the streets exhibited high rates of turnout in the past, but in only one of the graphs is the effect dramatic. More damning is the fact that four of the six graphs also show an increase in the treatment effect at low levels of past street-level turnout as well. Perhaps subjects are made to feel guilty at very low-levels of turnout – if no one voted, then the subject’s behavior is known – but the theoretical rationale behind such an effect is weak. In sum, the lowess plots indicate that heterogeneity in response to treatment is at best weak and inconsistent.

The regression analysis presented in Table 4 confirms this evidence. Probit models consistent with Equation 1 were run for the three types of election for both the no racial and the single race treatments. The key variable of interest is the interaction between the treatment and past-levels of street-level turnout. As foreshadowed by the lowess plots, in only one instance does this variable approach statistical significance (i.e., non-racial turnout for the 2006 General Election). In fact, in three of the six analyses the coefficient is negative rather than positive. Thus, there is little support for the view that reporting high levels of turnout mobilizes black voters (HYPOTHESIS 5).

The picture is a little different for the racial competition treatment. Figure 2 presents one lowess plot for each of the three elections referenced in the two race letters mailed to subjects. The

graphs are identical to those depicted in Figure 1, only the x-axis is now the difference in turnout between whites and blacks on the street. There are two hypotheses to examine. First, on the left hand side of the graph where black turnout is higher than white turnout, did the estimated treatment effect grow? In two of the three graphs, treatment effect appears larger but the difference is only large for the subjects provided 2006 General election. Thus, the empowerment hypothesis only receives mixed support from the graphs (HYPOTHESIS 6). The second hypothesis to check is whether blacks informed that whites vote at higher rates are less likely to vote. Here the evidence is consistent. For all three elections, the treatment group exhibits lower rates of participation when informed that whites have voted at much higher rates on their street in the past. These graphs are dramatic and strongly support the demoralization hypothesis (HYPOTHESIS 7).

The regression analysis presented in Table 5, based on Equation 2, confirms the story told in Figure 2. The key coefficients of interest are the interactions between the treatment and the difference in turnout between the races taken to different powers. Here we see a powerful downward pressure on the probability of voting when the gap in turnout between whites and blacks becomes large. This effect is robust to the inclusion of control variables and higher order polynomials and not driven by modeling assumptions.

In general, one should be suspicious about drawing inferences from the tails of a distribution. For the most part, whites and blacks residing on the same streets have very similar rates of voter turnout. All of the analysis in this paper suggests that subjects do not respond to subtle differences in turnout but only to large discrepancies, so this demobilization effect is in the tails. However, the tails contain many thousands of people in this experiment – many orders of magnitude larger than the laboratory experiments on racial competition that have been conducted. To demonstrate this point, the top panel of Table 6 focuses only on the 15,917 subjects who reside on streets where white turnout was 25 points higher than black turnout in the relevant election. Comparing the subjects assigned to the two

race mail and identical subjects in the control group, we confirm the de-mobilization for each of the three elections. The two race treatment decreased turnout by 7 percentage points in two of the elections and by 4 percentage points in the other. In all three cases the result is statistically significant and the pooled estimate is a demobilization effect of 5 percentage points. This result is not overly sensitive to where we draw the cut-off for inclusion and demonstrates that modeling assumptions are not driving the results in Table 5.

Unsurprisingly, the picture is murkier with regards to whether or not informing subjects that black residents on the street participated at much higher levels than white residents of the street (see Table 6, bottom panel). One problem is that there are many fewer instances where this is true ($N = 10,299$), so results are less precise. A second problem is that the results varied from essentially no difference in turnout (2004 General) to a large difference in turnout that does not quite reach statistical significance (2006 Primary). Pooling the results together, we derive an estimate that the racially competitive treatment increases turnout by 2 percentage points for subjects residing on streets where blacks had substantially higher turnout than whites, but the result does not approach traditional thresholds for statistical significance. This suggests that the empowerment effect is weak and/or unreliable in comparison to the demoralization effect.

An important robustness check deserves special mention. The turnout information provided to subjects was determined by nature, so it is difficult to know whether the effects uncovered in Figure 2 and Tables 5 and 6 are due to the information itself or the nature of the street that generated the data. To test for the possibility that it is the neighborhoods and not the streets causing the increased treatment effect, we conducted a long series of placebo tests. In each placebo test, we replaced the information actually given to subjects with information for their block that they were not provided. For instance, the treatment might be interacted with black turnout in 2004 or the difference between white and black turnout in 2004 for a subject whose letter provided information on black turnout in the 2006

general election. Given how highly correlated all the measures are with each other and across elections (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72), one might expect the results to be only slightly attenuated. As it happens, interacting the difference in white and black turnout with other treatments yields a series of null findings. Similarly, changing the elections around or replacing the difference between white and black turnout with street-level turnout also yields insignificant results. Surprisingly, the results do not hold up well when just street-level turnout for blacks replaces the difference between blacks and whites. The subjects are clearly responding to the differences in turnout between the races and not just levels of black turnout. All of these placebo tests lead us to believe that the information itself is driving results and it is not a matter of certain types of neighborhoods responding to treatments.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that racialized GOTV messages vary significantly in their ability to inspire black voter turnout. First, we find that mail from a black political organization appears to be somewhat effective at encouraging blacks to turnout and vote. GOTV mail from the ANCBEO lead to about a one-percentage point increase in black turnout. This result is particularly encouraging given the rather minor increases in turnout seen in previous efforts to mobilize black voters and the rather small increases in turnout seen in previous GOTV mail studies.

The other results, however, are somewhat less encouraging for those interested in effective strategies for mobilizing black voters. Additional racial cues which highlight previous black turnout in high, medium or low turnout elections failed to significantly increase black turnout. Simply showing black turnout in a previous election was not enough to encourage participation among black voters. The effect of these messages was no different from either the control or the basic GOTV mail from the ANCBEO.

Finally while messages that simply suggest racial group difference in turnout failed to significantly influence changes in black turnout, highlighting the fact that whites are much more likely to turnout than blacks substantially decreased black turnout. This result suggests that efforts by politicians and those interested in mobilizing black voters that point out the lack of black participation relative to whites may actually demobilize black voters. This result adds to what we know about black voter turnout in that it shows how empowerment explanations can go both ways, when blacks see messages which describe them as politically defeated, instead of rallying and becoming more engaged in electoral politics they instead withdraw.

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Table 1 Assignment of Subjects to Treatment Conditions

	No Election	2004 General	2006 General	2006 Primary	Row Total
(a) Control (No Mail)	78170				78170
(b) GOTV Message	5076				5076
(c) GOTV + Street Turnout		4320	4320	4320	12690
(d) GOTV + Black Turnout		4320	4320	4320	12690
(e) GOTV + Black + White Turnout		8461	8460	8460	25381
Column Total	83246	16921	16920	16920	134007

Table 2 Covariates are Balanced Across Treatment Assignments

Category	Control	Base Letter	Street Turnout	Black Turnout	Compare Turnout	Given 2006 General	Given 2006 Primary	Given 2004 General
White Registrants on Street	144	142	144	149	144	144	145	146
Black Registrants on Street	65	63	65	64	64	64	65	65
Average Age in Years	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51
Average Year of Registration	1994	1994	1994	1993	1994	1993	1994	1994
Female	55%	55%	55%	55%	55%	55%	55%	55%
Subject Voted 2006 General	35%	36%	35%	35%	35%	35%	35%	36%
Subject Voted 2006 Primary	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Subject Voted 2004 General	70%	69%	70%	70%	70%	70%	70%	70%
White Street-level Turnout in 2006 General	45%	45%	44%	44%	44%	44%	44%	44%
Black Street-level Turnout in 2006 General	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%
White Street-level Turnout in 2006 Primary	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%
Black Street-level Turnout in 2006 Primary	14%	13%	13%	13%	14%	14%	13%	13%
White Street-level Turnout in 2004 General	77%	77%	77%	77%	77%	77%	77%	77%
Black Street-level Turnout in 2004 General	75%	75%	76%	76%	75%	75%	75%	76%

Table 3 No Significant Differences in Degree of Mobilization Across Treatments

Condition	Percent Voting	Treatment Effect (vs control)	se	p-value (one-tailed)
Control	55.9% [78,170]			
All Treatments	56.9% [55,837]	1.0%	(0.3)	<0.01
Baseline Mail	56.7% [5,076]	0.8%	(0.7)	0.13
Baseline Mail + Street-level Turnout	56.8% [12,690]	1.0%	(0.5)	0.02
Baseline Mail + Street-level Turnout for Blacks	56.6% [12,690]	0.7%	(0.5)	0.07
Baseline Mail + Street-level Turnout for Blacks and Whites	57.0% [25,381]	1.1%	(0.4)	<0.01
Provided 2004 General Turnout (High Turnout)	56.9% [16,921]	1.0%	(0.4)	0.01
Provided 2006 General Turnout (Moderate Turnout)	56.6% [16,920]	0.7%	(0.4)	0.04
Provided 2006 Primary Turnout (Low Turnout)	57.1% [16,920]	1.2%	(0.4)	<0.01

Numbers in brackets report the number of subjects in each cell.

The treatment effect reported is the difference in turnout from the control.

Numbers in parentheses report standard errors.

Reported p-values test the one-tailed hypothesis of mobilization against the control.

Table 4 Reporting High Turnout on Street does Little to Boost Treatment Effect

	Non-Racial Street-level Turnout			Street-level Turnout for Blacks		
	2004 General	2006 General	2006 Primary	2004 General	2006 General	2006 Primary
Treatment	-0.177 (0.137)	-0.082 (0.060)	0.039 (0.30)	0.087 (0.200)	0.005 (0.082)	0.006 (0.036)
Treatment X Turnout	0.230 (0.179)	0.260* (0.144)	-0.043 (0.165)	-0.058 (0.259)	-0.012 (0.185)	0.157 (0.202)
Turnout	1.909*** (0.040)	1.445*** (0.032)	0.155*** (0.036)	2.193*** (0.059)	1.132*** (0.043)	-0.164*** (0.045)
Constant	-1.290*** (0.030)	-0.426*** (0.013)	0.127*** (0.007)	-1.538*** (0.045)	-0.339*** (0.019)	0.173*** (0.008)
N	82400	82400	82400	82394	82400	82400

Analysis includes subjects from the comparison of relevant treatment for each election and the control group.

Numbers report probit coefficients.

Numbers in parentheses report standard errors.

* implies $p < 0.1$; ** implies $p < 0.05$; *** implies $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

Polynomials up to fourth order were tested with no meaningful difference in results.

Table 5 Reporting Large Advantage in White Participation Depresses Turnout

Election Provided	2004 General	2006 General	2006 Primary
Treatment	0.044*** (0.017)	0.042** (0.018)	0.035** (0.017)
Treatment X Difference	0.142 (0.146)	0.198 (0.122)	-0.010 (0.155)
Treatment X Difference ²	-0.790** (0.392)	-0.372 (0.305)	-0.072 (0.450)
Treatment X Difference ³	-2.581** (1.18)	-2.529*** (0.803)	-2.954** (1.289)
Difference in turnout	-1.056*** (0.045)	-0.946*** (0.037)	-0.462*** (0.046)
(Difference in turnout) ²	-0.749*** (0.123)	0.268*** (0.090)	0.438*** (0.123)
(Difference in turnout) ³	1.518*** (0.363)	0.457** (0.227)	0.595* (0.332)
Constant	0.182*** (0.005)	0.183*** (0.006)	0.150*** (0.005)
N	86623	86630	86630

Analysis includes subjects from the comparison of race treatment for each election and the control group.

Numbers report probit coefficients.

Numbers in parentheses report standard errors.

* implies $p < 0.1$; ** implies $p < 0.05$; *** implies $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

A fourth order polynomial was also tested and the results did not differ meaningfully.

Table 6 Treatment Effect when Racial Differences is Larger than 25 Percentage Points

$V_{White} - V_{Black} \geq 0.25$	2004 General	2006 General	2006 Primary	Pooled
Control Turnout	44.3% [3462]	46.8% [8356]	55.6% [2510]	
Treatment Turnout	37.3% [402]	43.0% [907]	48.6% [280]	
Difference	-7.0% (2.6)	-3.8% (1.7)	-7.0% (3.1)	-5.1% (1.3)
p-value	<0.01	0.03	0.03	<0.01

$V_{Black} - V_{White} \geq 0.25$	2004 General	2006 General	2006 Primary	Pooled
Control Turnout	63.0% [2686]	70.4% [4097]	63.3% [2546]	
Treatment Turnout	62.5% [291]	72.9% [425]	67.7% [254]	
Difference	-0.5% (3.0)	2.6% (2.3)	4.4 (3.2)	2.2% (1.6)
p-value	0.87	0.27	0.16	0.17

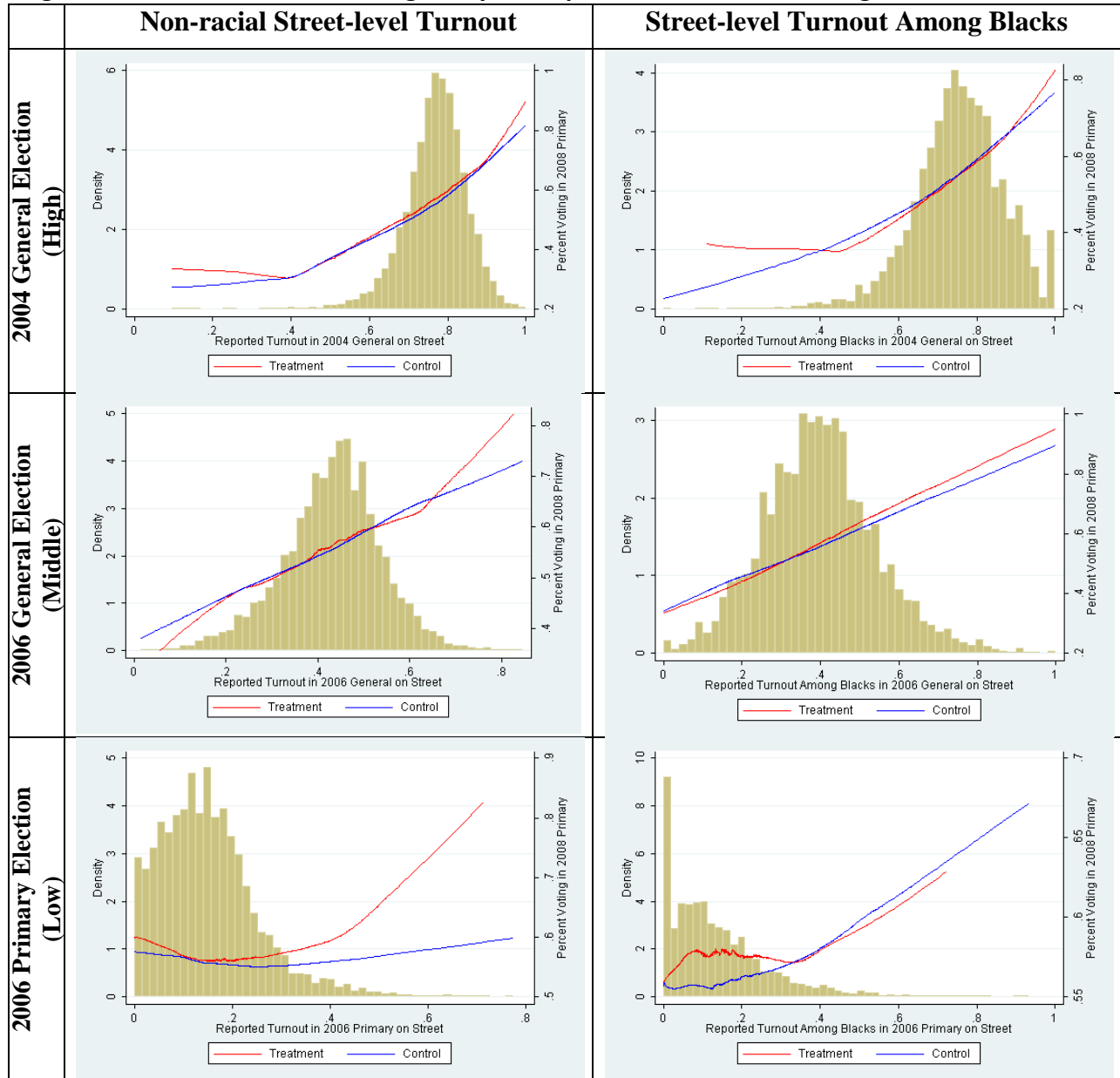
Subjects drawn from the control group and Racial difference condition when the difference is greater than 25 percentage points.

Numbers in brackets report sample size.

Numbers in parentheses report standard errors.

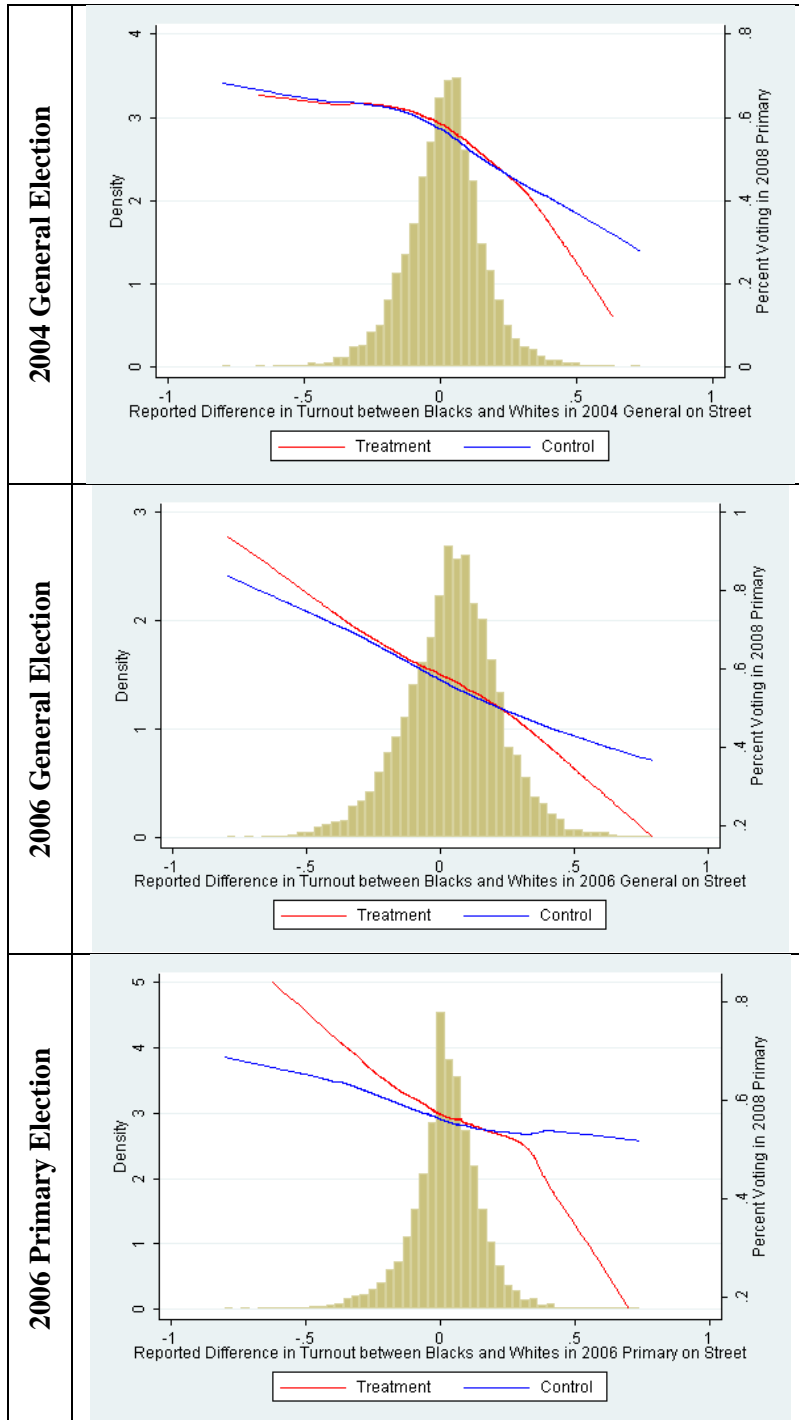
P-values test the two-tailed hypothesis that turnout in treatment group differs from control turnout.

Figure 1 Little Evidence of Heterogeneity in Response to No Race and Single Race Treatments



X-axis is the street-level turnout for the election in the row.
 Left Y-axis is the density of subjects.
 Right Y-axis is turnout in the 2008 Presidential Primary.
 Red line reports turnout among the treatment group for column.
 Blue line reports turnout among control group.

Figure 2 Evidence of Heterogeneity in Response to the Dual Race Treatment



X-axis is the street-level turnout for the election in the row.

Left Y-axis is the density of subjects.

Right Y-axis is turnout in the 2008 Presidential Primary.

Red line reports turnout among the treatment group provided turnout information on both races.

Blue line reports turnout among control group.

Appendix A

Base Letter

For more information: 919-833-5996
The Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials
P.O. Box 26615
Raleigh, NC 27611

NONPROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
DMI

THE XXXXX FAMILY
XXX XXXXX ST
Charlotte, NC 27703

Dear [GREETING]:

MANY PEOPLE HAVE FOUGHT HARD FOR OUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

It took 100 years to get the right to vote and another 100 years to make it meaningful.
So why don't more people vote?

Please do your part to make our community's voice heard and **vote Tuesday, May 6th!**

This message is brought to you by **The Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials.**

P.O. Box 26615
Raleigh, NC 27611

Webpage: <http://ncbeoalliance.org>
Phone: 919-833-5996
Fax: 919-833-6013

Body of letters containing Street-level turnout:

Dear [GREETING]:

MANY PEOPLE HAVE FOUGHT HARD FOR OUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

It took 100 years to get the right to vote and another 100 years to make it meaningful.
So why don't more people vote?

In the [ELECTION NAME], [TURNOUT 1] of people on [STREET NAME] voted.

Please do your part to make our community's voice heard and **vote Tuesday, May 6th!**

This message is brought to you by **The Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials.**

P.O. Box 26615
Raleigh, NC 27611

Webpage: <http://ncbeoalliance.org>
Phone: 919-833-5996
Fax: 919-833-6013

Body of letters containing street-level turnout among blacks

Dear [GREETING]:

MANY PEOPLE HAVE FOUGHT HARD FOR OUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

It took 100 years to get the right to vote and another 100 years to make it meaningful.
So why don't more people vote?

In the [ELECTION NAME], [TURNOUT 1] of black people on [STREET NAME] voted.

Please do your part to make our community's voice heard and **vote Tuesday, May 6th!**

This message is brought to you by **The Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials.**

P.O. Box 26615
Raleigh, NC 27611

Webpage: <http://ncbeoalliance.org>
Phone: 919-833-5996
Fax: 919-833-6013

Body of letters containing street-level turnout for both whites and blacks

Dear [GREETING]:

MANY PEOPLE HAVE FOUGHT HARD FOR OUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

It took 100 years to get the right to vote and another 100 years to make it meaningful.
So why don't more people vote?

In the [ELECTION NAME], [TURNOUT 1] of black people on [STREET NAME] voted.

In contrast, [TURNOUT 2] of white people on [STREET NAME] voted in the [ELECTION NAME].

Please do your part to make our community's voice heard and **vote Tuesday, May 6th!**

This message is brought to you by **The Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials.**

P.O. Box 26615
Raleigh, NC 27611

Webpage: <http://ncbeoalliance.org>
Phone: 919-833-5996
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