The Effect of Priming Racial In-Group Norms of Participation and Racial Group Conflict on Black Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment

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Abstract: This paper examines the effectiveness of racialized Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) messages at mobilizing black voters. Here we use a mail-based voter mobilization experiment containing 134,000 black registered voters conducted during 2008 North Carolina Democratic Presidential primary to test two different explanations for how racialized voter mobilization messages might increase black voter turnout (in the context of a campaign featuring a viable black presidential candidate). The first test examines the effectiveness of GOTV messages that prime simple in-group norms of voting (i.e., other blacks vote or don't) at increasing black voter turnout. The second test examines the effectiveness of GOTV messages that highlight black advantage/disadvantage in black/white electoral competition (i.e., blacks turnout at higher rates than white or vice versa). While we find little evidence that priming in-group norms of voting has any effect on black turnout, we do however find that racial group conflict messages highlighting black *disadvantage* in political competition with whites had the unsettling effect of *de*mobilizing black voters.

The effect of priming racial in-group norms of participation and racial group conflict on Black voter turnout: A field experimental test

In his classic examination of Southern politics in the mid-20th century, V.O. Key (1949) observed just how deeply entrenched white supremacy was in the everyday politics of the pre-Civil Rights South. Describing voting patterns among white southerners in the black belt, Key illustrated just how threatened whites in the South were by growing political strength of Black Southerners:

> ...higher proportions of whites vote in rural counties with large proportions of Negro population than in counties with comparatively few Negroes. To the extent that keen political awareness prevails among black-belt whites, it maximizes the strength of the groups most immediately concerned in the maintenance of white dominance (513).

Key's observation that white electoral participation in the South was linked to the political threat posed by Blacks would later become the theoretical foundation of numerous studies seeking to explain the effects of both realistic and perceived racial threat/conflict on the political behavior of white Americans (both within and outside of the southern United States). Despite the effectiveness of Key's theoretical framework at explaining the political behavior of whites, the theory's utility for explaining the political behavior of racial minorities, particularly African Americans, remains unclear. Theories of African American political behavior in the post-Civil Rights era have paid little attention to the effects of inter-racial competition on African American political behavior, instead focusing on identifying the ways in which racial in-group connections and in-group resources mobilize African Americans (Tate 1992; Verba and Nie 1972). Can African Americans be mobilized to political action by racial group competition like Key's southern whites were? If so, how might this competition incentive compare with in-group motivations to participate in politics?

This paper directly tests the effects of priming either racial group competition or in-group connections on black voter turnout. Building on ideas derived from group identity theory, we first test whether simply activating black in-group descriptive norms of participation (i.e., suggesting that blacks as a group tend to turnout and vote at high rates) will increase black voter turnout. We then contrast these results against a second test, derived from theories of racial group conflict, which examines whether highlighting black/white electoral competition (i.e., blacks turnout to vote at higher rates than white or vice versa) will also increase black voter turnout. We test these expectations through a GOTV field experiment conducted during the 2008 North Carolina Democratic Presidential primary. Although, we do not find much support for the in-group mobilization hypotheses, we do find that priming racial group conflict in the form of highlighting black *disadvantage* in electoral competition with whites has the effect of *de*mobilizing black voters. This result suggests that empowerment explanations of black political participation can go both ways; when blacks see messages which describe their group as politically defeated, instead of rallying and becoming more engaged in electoral politics they may instead simply withdraw.

How Race Enters African Americans' Turnout Decisions

In the sixty years following Key's publication of "Southern Politics," a number of researchers have retested Key's original claim that white racial hostility is linked to the social and political threat posed by blacks, both within and outside of the south. This research has found that racial proximity is related to increases in white voter registration and turnout rates (Giles and Hertz 1994; Key 1942), increases in whites' efforts to suppress black political action (Matthews and Prothro 1966), increases in white support for racist candidates (Black 1973; Wright 1977; Giles and Buckner 1993) and increases in white support for hostile ballot initiatives targeting minorities (Tolbert and Grummel 2003). Proximity to African Americans has also been shown to be related to

holding more racially antagonistic attitudes and greater opposition to policies targeted towards African Americans (Giles, Cataldo, and Gatlin 1975; Giles and Evans).[1]

Despite the consistency with which racial threat arguments are able to explain white political behavior, we know surprisingly little about how racial minorities respond to white racial group threat. In part, this gap in our understanding is due to a bias in the conceptual focus of group conflict theories, which focus largely on explaining the consequences of challenges to the authority and social position of dominant groups in society (Blumer 1958; Key 1942; Blalock 1967). The literature generally reflects the line of reasoning that responses to out-group "threat" will be most consequential for dominant societal groups as they have the most to lose from any sort of inter-group conflict. This view is perhaps best articulated by Blumer, who notes that "...the dominant group is not concerned with the subordinate group as such but it is deeply concerned with its position vis-a-vis the subordinate group" (p.4). Similarly, Key's description of Southern politics as revolving, "around the position of the Negro," and his focus on black belt whites' need to preserve "white superiority" and "white dominance" further illustrates this central concern about dominant group position.

If the need to maintain status as the dominant group in society is central to translating racial group conflict into political action among whites, group threat as an explanation for political action among African Americans may seem untenable. A need to preserve social position and power (political or otherwise) makes little sense as incentive for political action among racial minorities who are relatively disadvantaged in society. Yet, some have argued that perhaps for racial minorities political action in response to racial threat/conflict has more to do with an effort to secure basic political freedoms and economic opportunities than the need to preserve power (Bobo 1998; Giles

[1]One exception to this general finding is Oliver and Mendelberg (2000) who find that the racial threat can often mask out-group hostility generated by lot status context.

and Evans 1986). Indeed, the desire to gain political and economic freedoms from whites would seem an important tool for inspiring black political action given that the specific goal of black political action has so often been alleviation of repression by whites. Rebellions by black slaves may represent some of the earliest and most vivid political responses of African Americans to white repression. Blacks' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century and the race riots that followed could also be understood as political participation by blacks in response to the political and economic repression they faced at the hands of whites (Abels 1976). Thus, for racial minorities, the racial group threat incentive for political action would seem to arise from the need to secure basic political and economic freedoms from whites, rather than a desire to maintain political power.

The advances in civil rights made over the past 60 years may not have changed that dynamic. A recent study by Hutchings, Wong and Jackson (2009)concludes that contemporary blacks see themselves as in deeply engaged in conflict with whites over scarce economic and political resources. The authors found that 57% of black respondents agreed that white successes in politics represented a direct political threat to them, and 47% agreed that white economic successes represented a competitive economic threat (at least when it comes to jobs).[2] Thus, racial competition may remain an important motivation for political action by American blacks.

How then might perceptions of conflict with whites, such as the ones noted above, translate into black political action? As noted earlier the existing literature on racial group conflict is unclear on this question, but within the research on African American political decision making there is some suggestion that the likelihood of action ought to increase as the level of conflict increases.

[2] In the same study, only a small proportion of white Americans viewed blacks as political or economic competitors, 12% and 13% respectively. Additionally, while Blacks do exhibit some sense of competition with Latinos (Latino (33% - political and 34% - Jobs) and Asian Americans (33% - political 34% - jobs)) perceptions of group competition with these groups are small when compared to black perceptions of competition with white Americans.

Here researchers have shown that racial in-group identification, in the form of black's propensity to express a strong psychological connection with their racial group, can powerfully shape African American political behavior (Dawson 1994). For example, the salience of racial group identification to black's assessments of important political issues such as welfare and crime policy has been shown to powerfully influence black support these issues (Tate 1992; Dawson 1994). Research has also shown that when political elites frame ostensibly non-racial issues (such as welfare and crime policy) in ways highlighting important racial implications, they can alter black support for the issues (White 2007). While this research provides support for the idea that increasing the salience of racial group identity will mobilize black support for important political issues, it is, however, less clear when it comes to understanding precisely how group identity might give rise to political action.

Using racial group identification as a tool to increases voter turnout among blacks necessitates a connection between belonging to the racial group and the political behavior in question. We argue that the activation/priming of 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 expect that a person learning that peers will vote should feel pressure to conform to the norm and vote. Recent work by

Gerber and Rodgers (2009) demonstrates 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 individuals' personal circumstances conditions 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." Thus, racial group identification among blacks 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 for the role that activating race, in the form of racial in-group norms of participation and racial group conflict, might have on Black voter turnout. First, the ability of political elites to mobilize black Americans with messages that emphasize black political success and norms of participation should increase political participation relative to messages that do not invoke such norms. In particular messages highlighting positive black political participation should increase black voter turnout. Secondly, with regard to the mobilizing ability of racial group conflict, we would expect that messages that emphasize black political success and norms of participation would be even more effective if they can contrast black political successes with white political failures. In other words, highlighting behaviors and instances where blacks are advantaged over whites should empower blacks and thus increase black voter turnout even further.

Sample and Design

To evaluate these expectations we designed a GOTV field experiment that assess the effects of racial priming on voter turnout. Typically, studies of racial priming are concerned with the effects of racial cues on political attitudes. Because most racial priming studies are conducted in laboratory settings it difficult to assess the effects of racial cues on political participation, thus very little is

known about how racial cues of any sort affect an individual's willingness to participate in politics. Similarly, very few GOTV field experiments have focused on the role of race in mobilizing minority voters (e.g., Michelson 2003, 2006; Green 2004) and fewer still have offered a psychological mechanism for how these messages might influence turnout. Here we have designed a GOTV field experiment that tests the effects of priming either racial in-group norms of participation or racial group conflict on black voter turnout. The strength of this design is that it takes ideas about the effects of racial priming on black Americans developed in the laboratory (White 2007) and tests them in the real world setting of a field experiment (Gerber, Green, and Green 2003; Nickerson 2007; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) on one of the most fundamental forms political expression, voting.

The experiment took place during the 2008 North Carolina Presidential primary. Traditionally, late primaries are lightly contested, but the 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.

We partnered with the Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials (ANCBEO) to conduct the experiment. The experiment's participants included 45% percent of the black registered voters in the state of North Carolina (N=134,007).[3] The treatments provided to the subjects

[3]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 highdegree of certainty regardless

consisted of brief letters mailed to their homes under the name of the Alliance (see Appendix A). The mail arrived at most households on Saturday, May 3rd -- three days prior to the primary. The Subjects were randomly assigned to one of five primary treatment conditions described in Table 1.

The first set of subjects were assigned to receive the base letter with no information about turnout included in the correspondence (N=5,076). This condition presented subjects with a simple GOTV message that came from The Alliance of North Carolina Black Elected Officials. Besides encouraging readers to vote on May 6th, the letter also offer a thinly veiled racialized message which stated that "It took 100 years to get the right to vote and another 100 years to make it meaningful." The results of previous studies suggest that the baseline mailer should be the least effective treatment, and it should provide a benchmark by which to compare other treatments.

In the next condition, subjects were assigned to receive the base letter with information about past turnout on their street (N=12,690). This condition provided its readers with a non-racial, in-group norms of participation message that described past turnout on their street while also providing subjects with the simple racialized GOTV message described in the baseline condition. [4] We expect that the mailer providing information about turnout on the subject's street should be

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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).

[4] 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. 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.

more effective than the baseline if it successfully triggers social pressure or primes an identity that "people like me vote." The purpose of this treatment condition is to establish the effect of non-racialized identity and norms in motivating turnout.

Subjects in the third condition were assigned to receive the base letter with information about past turnout for *blacks* on their street (N=12,690). This condition presents subjects with cues to racial in-group norms of participation in the form of a description of past black turnout on their street. Most important to our interest is the contrast of subjects exposed to this condition with those exposed to the condition which only describes 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.

In the fourth condition subjects were assigned to receive the base letter with information about past turnout of *both blacks and whites* on their street (N=25,381). We refer to this condition as the racial group conflict condition as it contrast black turnout with white turnout. Here, the key comparison is turnout among subjects exposed to the condition which describes past turnout among only blacks on their street to subjects mailed letters which feature turnout of both 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.

Lastly, we had a control condition where subjects received no mail from the campaign (N=78,170). All told, the experiment sent 55,837 pieces of mail. Turnout in the primary, the dependent variable, was determined using official voter turnout records. Random assignment assures that the only differences in expectation between the experimental groups are the information provided (or not provided) in the mailers. A series of balance checks found no statistically

significant differences on observable predictors of turnout across the treatment conditions (see Table B1). Thus, differences in turnout during the 2008 primary can be attributed to the treatments and the information they provide.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

We needed to select an election to use for reporting past turnout behavior. The findings of Gerber and Rogers (2009) suggest that reporting higher turnout might increase the effectiveness of the mail, while lower turnout could decrease the mobilization effect. 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

Heterogeneity in Response

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 a demobilizing frame that "people like me do not vote." Thus, it is important to account 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 of high turnout on their street. There is little reason to expect a non-monotonic effect, so the process can be modeled as follows:

$$\Pr(Vote = 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \beta_2 T E_S + \beta_3 E_S + \tau_S + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

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 $\beta_2 > 0$. 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 can cause a surge in turnout.

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. 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:

$$\Pr(Vote = 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \beta_2 TD_S + \beta_3 TD_S^2 + \beta_4 TD_S^3 + \beta_5 D_S + \beta_6 D_S^2 + \beta_7 D_S^3 + \tau_S + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where D_S is the difference in turnout among whites and blacks for election S (i.e., $V_{White,S} - V_{Black,S}$). In testing hypotheses H6 and H7, 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

We begin by testing the basic question of whether simply receiving any GOTV mail motivated Black turnout. 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 2, 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 and acted on. 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 our interest, however, are the effects of the treatments that activate descriptive norms of voting and racial competition. The middle-panel of Table 2 compares turnout for each treatment condition to the control group. Remember we expect that any of the mailers providing information about turnout on the subject's street should be more effective than the baseline mailer at mobilizing blacks if it successfully triggers social pressure or primes an identity that "people like me vote."

Beginning with the condition that provides turnout information at the street-level, we see that although relative to the control condition we are able to observe a statically significant 1 percentage point increase in turnout, relative to the baseline mail we see only a very small .2 percentage point increase. Thus, there is little evidence that providing information about past rates of voter turnout at the street level increased turnout over a simple request to vote. 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, and 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.

There is also little evidence that explicitly cuing racial identity and providing a group consciousness frame by reporting black turnout on streets increases turnout. In the "Street-level Turnout for Blacks" condition we observe only a small statically insignificant .7 percentage point increase (p=.07) in turnout relative to the control condition and a .1 percentage point *decrease* relative to the baseline condition. Suggesting that much like the non-racial street-level turnout condition this condition also failed to increased turnout over a simple request to vote. As with all null findings, however, 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. 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 2 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 (contra Gerber and Rogers 2009).

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Results for Heterogeneity in Response

Thus far we have found little support for our central expectations that priming in-group norms of participation and racial competition will increase black voter turnout, however to fully

understand the results of this experiment we need to also account for the heterogeneous nature of the treatments that each of the subjects were exposed to. 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%). Although these deviations from the average are sufficiently rare to not drive the null findings reported on the bottom panel of Table 2, they do 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 single race 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 the single race treatment is at best weak and inconsistent.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

The regression analysis presented in Table 3 confirms this evidence. Probit models consistent with Equation 1 were run for the three types of election for both the non-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.

The picture is 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 receives mixed support from the graphs. 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.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

The regression analysis presented in Table 4, 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.

[Insert Table 4 Here]

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 priming that have been conducted. To demonstrate this point, the top panel of Table 5 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 4.

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 5, 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.

[Insert Table 5 Here]

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.

In sum, we began our exploration of the effects of priming racial group competition and racial identity on black voter turnout with the expectation that we would observe increased turnout among blacks when we primed them with a previously existing norms of voting (of either others on their street or other blacks on their street). What we found, however, was the opposite; that black voters are more likely to adopt of norms of "not" voting when it seemed like the norm among other blacks in previous elections was to "not" vote. We suspect that this result is likely due to the ways in which these messages altered black's perception of the value of voting. Because of the nontrivial costs associated voting and because of black's strong sense for collective identity a message which suggests that "people like me don't vote" is likely to cause blacks to question the utility gained from voting in this election (and perhaps later elections). This outcome is also perhaps exaggerated by the presence of a high profile black candidate. In other words, motivation to vote might further have been decreased by viewing the past results reported in the treatment as predicting that Obama – the candidate preferred by most blacks in North Carolina during the 2008 primary – was unlikely to defeat Clinton. Unfortunately, we were unable to survey the subjects in the experiment and can only measure the effect of the treatment postcards on electoral behavior rather than psychological state so these hypotheses cannot be confirmed.

Conclusion

Racialized GOTV messages vary significantly in their ability to inspire black voter turnout. Mail from a black political organization is generally effective at encouraging blacks to turnout and vote. GOTV mailings from the ANCBEO (on the whole) lead to about a one-percentage point increase in black turnout. Although small, this result is larger than 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. Thus, despite the strong connections blacks have to their racial group, messages which evoke simple in-group norms of black voter participation seem to have little or no effect on black turnout - above and beyond the control or the basic GOTV mail from the ANCBEO.

While messages that simply suggest racial group difference in turnout failed to significantly influence changes in black turnout, highlighting instances where whites are much more likely to turnout than blacks, substantially *decreased* black turnout. This result not only reveals what we believe is a disturbingly effective tool for politicians interested in demobilizing black voters but it also suggests that politicians and those interested in increasing black turnout should think twice before using GOTV messages that point to the lack of black participation relative to whites. Reminders of continued inequality may make blacks feel politically disempowered, negating any political resource effect of the group identification such messages may activate.

The effect of these group conflict frames on demobilizing black voters also presents some interesting theoretical insights about how race matters to black voting behavior. This particular outcome speaks to research on the effects of racial empowerment, which suggest black turnout will increase when there are black candidates running for office as this type of descriptive representation should make blacks feel more relevant to and invested in the political system. What the results presented here demonstrate that the opposite is also true, when blacks do not see themselves as relevant to the political system – through their presumed ability to achieve political victory –they do not have a way to translate their feelings of black racial group interest into formal political participation and thus withdraw from politics. This suggests the need for a more comprehensive theory of black voting behavior, one that focuses not only on why blacks vote but also why they don't.

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Table 1 Assignment of Subjects to Treatment Conditions

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

Table 2 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 3 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 4 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

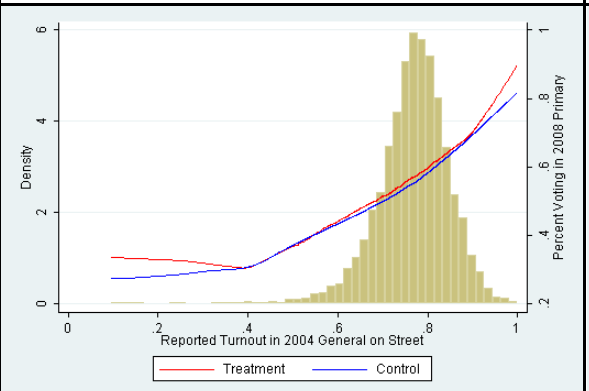
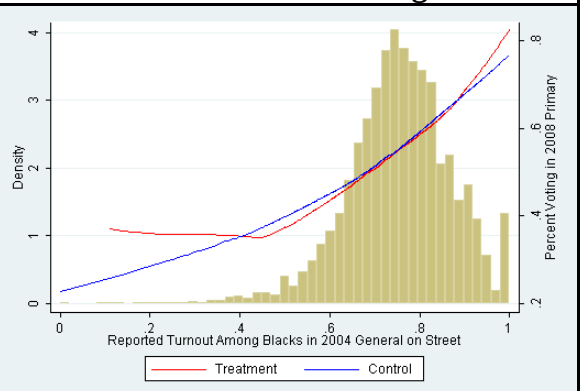
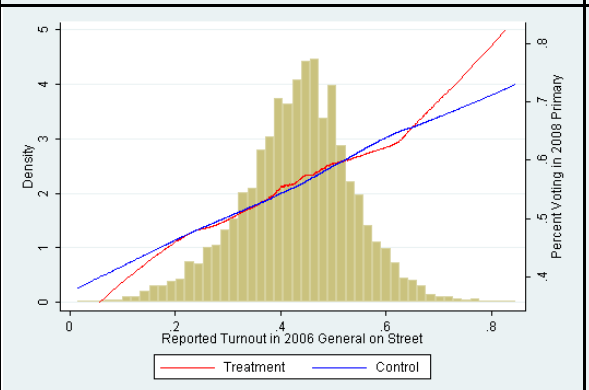
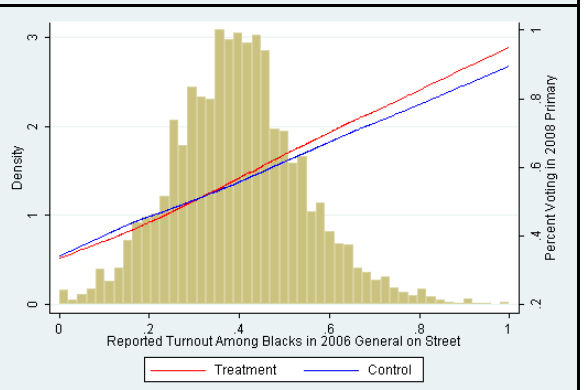
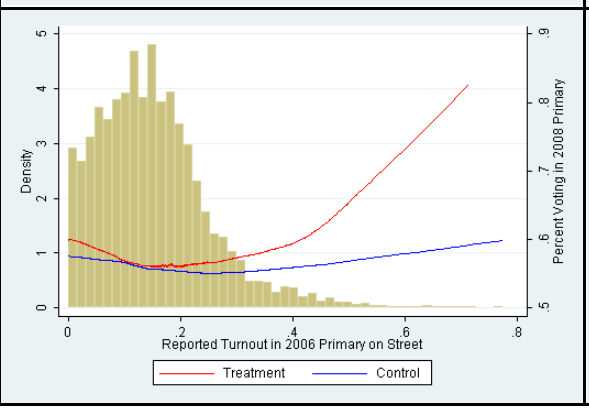
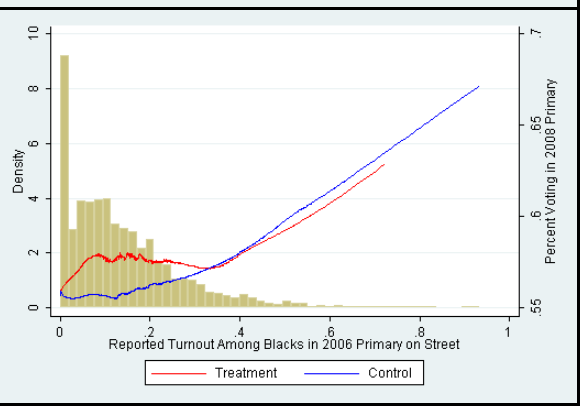
Analysis includes subjects from the comparison of race treatment for each election and the control group.
Numbers report probit coefficients.
Numbers in parentheses report standard errors.
* implies p<0.1; ** implies p<0.05; *** implies p<0.01 (two-tailed).
A fourth order polynomial was also tested and the results did not differ meaningfully.

Table 5 Treatment Effect when Racial Differences is Larger than 25 Percentage Points

	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
	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

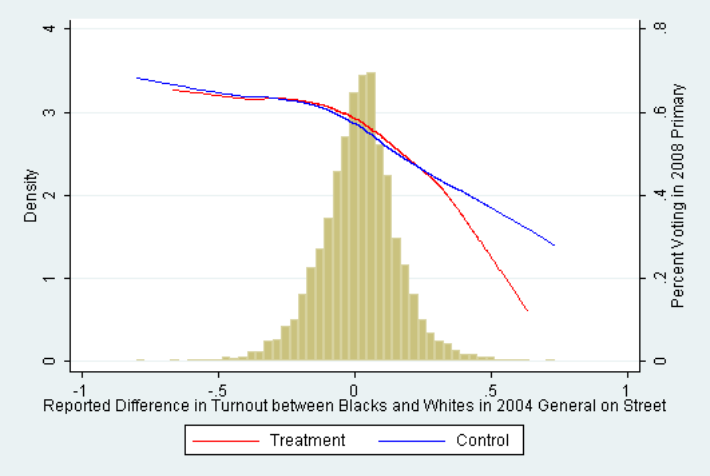
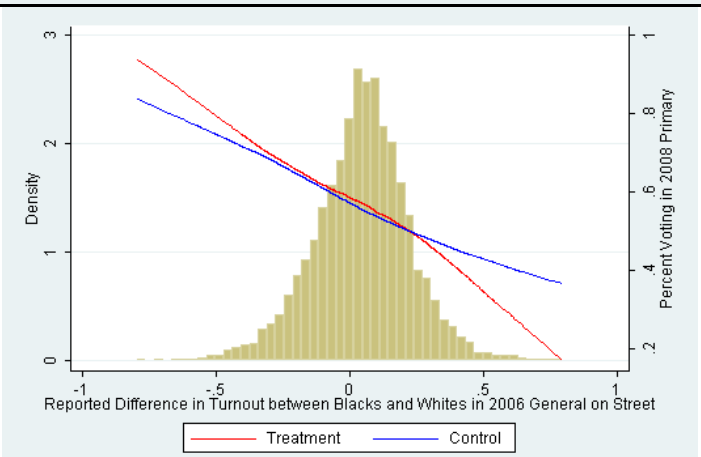
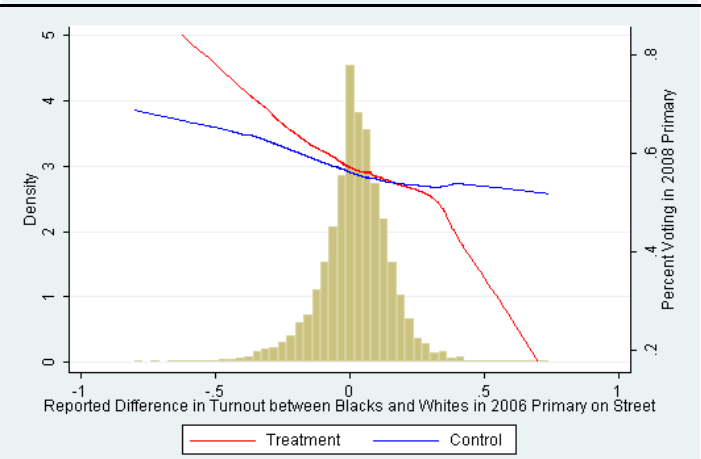
Subjects drawn from the control group and Racial difference condition when the difference is greater than 25 percentage points.
Numbers in brackets report sample size.
Numbers in parentheses report standard errors.
P-values test the two-tailed hypothesis that turnout in treatment group differs from control turnout.

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

	Non-racial Street-level Turnout	Street-level Turnout Among Blacks
2004 General Election (High)		
2006 General Election (Middle)		
2006 Primary Election (Low)		

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

2004 General Election	
2006 General Election	
2006 Primary Election	

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
Fax: 919-833-6013

Table B1 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%