

THE NULL EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ADS ON VOTER REGISTRATION: 3 TRIALS

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Abstract

Civic organisations and progressive campaigns regard digital advertising as an essential method to register low-participating groups, such as young voters, frequent home movers like private-sector tenants, and ethnic minorities. Digital strategies appear to be promising because the registration process can be completed online. But do typical digital campaigns actually work? We provide evidence from three large-scale randomised trials: 2 with an advocacy organisation and 1 run by the research team, carried out in two kinds of election (general and local), and assigned either at the aggregate (studies 1 and 2) or individual (study 3) level. We find no evidence consistent with the assumption that digital campaigning meaningfully affected voter registrations (and turnout), with null results over three trials done in different ways. Despite a wide reach and high engagement rates on social media, we find at best minimal effects of the campaign on under-registered groups' voter registrations (and turnout). Our findings raise questions about the commonly-used digital strategies to mobilise voters to register to vote and turnout and are consistent with other research studies that report either null or minimal effects.

DESIGN - DESCRIPTIVE STATS

STUDY 1: CIVIC ORGANISATION

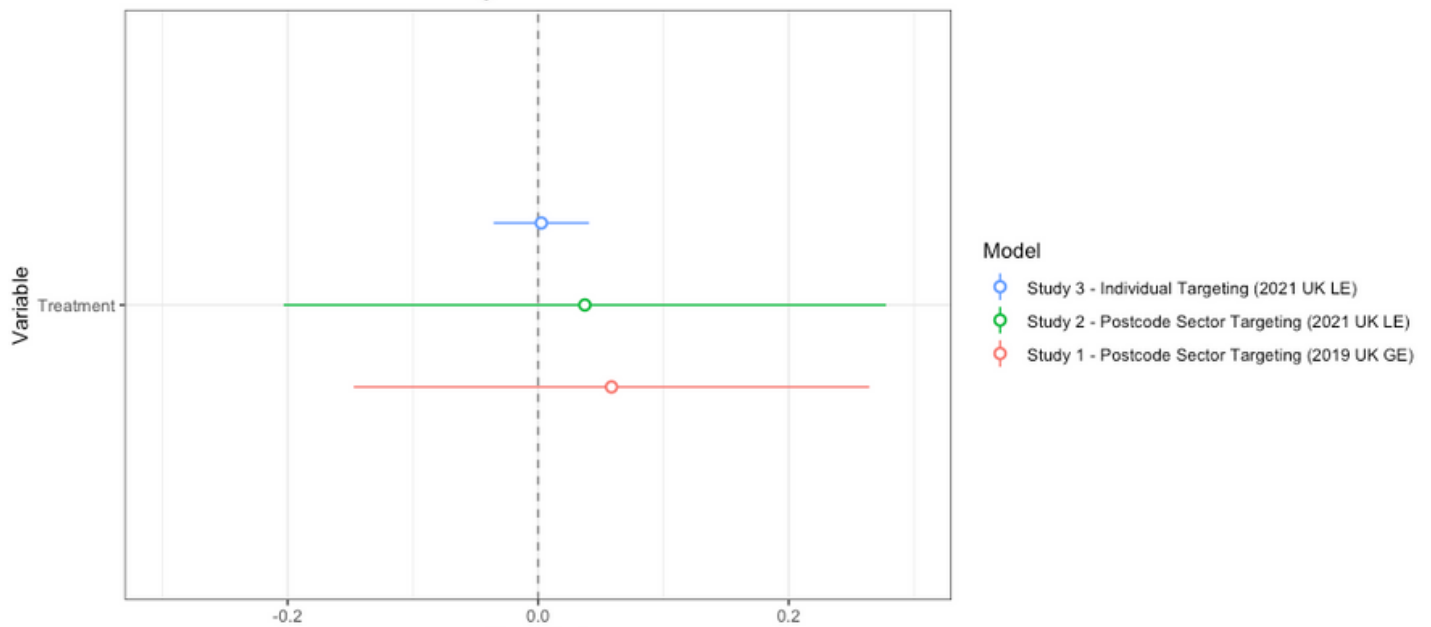
Postcode sectors targeted = 394/437
Instagram & Snapchat Impressions = 2,058,431
Clicks = 18,421

STUDY 2: LARGE-SCALE TRIAL

Postcode sectors targeted = 1,978/1,981
Instagram & Snapchat Impressions = 2,983,790
Clicks = 13,804

STUDY 3: ADVOCACY ORGANISATION

Individuals = 6,298
Facebook



Ads' content: Cognitive & Non- cognitive

The non-cognitive types:

1. **Follow-Through:** A follow-through type aims to nudge individuals by strengthening their sense of grit to tackle obstacles
2. **Anti-Sludge:** An anti-sludge type aims to vary the perception about the costs of voting.
3. **Dynamic Norms:** A dynamic norm type of message appeals to social pressure when given information about what other individuals in the same community are doing.

Interpretation

Coefficients can be interpreted as percent change. Study 1 and 2 coefficients are both from their covariate-adjusted models, where in Study 1 the dependent variable logs the absolute number of young people registered per postcode sector and in Study 2 it logs the absolute number of postal voters registered per sector. Study 3 coefficient is also reported from the covariate-adjusted model, where β_1 is scaled by the control group mean for parallel interpretation to the first two trials.

Results

Our results show that social media-based cognitive and non-cognitive mobilisation messages aimed at young voters and home-renters were ineffective. The causal evidence we provide raises questions about whether increasing the electoral participation of young voters via social media is a promising electoral strategy. We are still working on understanding the large standard errors observed in the regressions.