

# Can Local Election Officials Expand the Pool of Registered Voters? Face-to-Face, Traditional, and Social Media Outreach And Voter Registration

Mara Suttman-Lea and Thessalia Merivaki <sup>‡</sup>

July 19, 2021

## Abstract

Local election officials utilize multiple tools to educate voters about the election process, from conducting face-to-face and traditional media outreach to using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. In this paper, we test the impact of three LEO-directed modes of outreach – face-to-face, traditional media, and social media – on new voter registrations and on-line registration transactions in Florida. We use Florida’s Voter Education Surveys to evaluate the impact of voter registration outreach on the rates of newly registered voters between 2014 and 2018. We then use a dynamic dataset of Florida County Supervisors of Elections’ (SoEs) Facebook monthly activity during the 2020 Election to examine the relationship between social media outreach and voter registration. We find that traditional media outreach and training for face-to-face outreach have a positive impact on new registrants. We also find that social media outreach is a strong predictor of OVR usage, but not new registrations. Our findings suggest that campaigns and third-party groups may be more effective in reaching new voters, but SoEs’ social media usage can incentivize new and existing voters to use OVR platforms to update their information prior to Election Day.

**Keywords:** Voter education, social media, voter registration, Florida

---

<sup>‡</sup>csuttmann@conncoll.edu; lia.merivaki@pspa.msstate.edu

Among the many challenges associated with running an election during a pandemic, the 2020 United States Presidential election highlighted the vital role voter education can play in ensuring that prospective voters are equipped with the information needed to cast a valid ballot. Local election officials (LEOs)— the nearly 8,000 officials in charge of administrating elections in the United States— are an integral source of information for voters as they navigate voting requirements (Adona et al. 2019; Kimball and Kropf 2006). However, LEOs have significant discretion in whether and how they engage in voter education and outreach, and the resources they dedicate to these efforts (Burden et al. 2012). As a result, voter access to information about election varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2021; Suttman-Lea 2021).

LEOs now have a variety of tools they can use for both in-person and online for voter education and outreach. The use of social media can be a very powerful instrument to reach new and existing voters in particular, especially when in-person outreach is not available, as was the case with COVID-19 during the 2020 election cycle. In this paper, we assess the effects of in-person, traditional media, and online outreach by LEOs, focusing specifically on new voter registrations and online voter registration transactions in Florida. To assess the effects of these different modes of outreach, we use an original data set that captures social media use by every jurisdiction in the state that has an active Facebook account, alongside data from Florida’s Voter Education and Outreach Survey between 2014 and 2018, a statutorily mandated survey administered to all 67 counties in the state each federal election year. Given the significant shifts in the availability of in-person education and outreach tools necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we also incorporate a monthly time-series analysis for 2020 to examine the effectiveness of appeals to voters to register and update information online through social media.

Our findings show that traditional media outreach, such as posting newspaper ads, as well as training of third-party voter registration groups (3PVROs in Florida) positively affect the rates of new voter registrants, and more so in counties with Democratic and No-Party Affiliated County Supervisors of Elections. We also find that the frequency of Facebook posts during the 2020 election cycle was not associated with changes in new voter registrations. However, it did increase the rates of OVR transactions, which are used by both new voters and existing voters to update their registration information. These findings highlight important dynamics of LEO voter outreach, and suggest that political campaigns and third-party groups may be more

effective in expanding the electorate with new registrations, while LEOs are more effective in ensuring that voters' information is accurate prior to casting a vote. The 2020 analysis also underscores the significance of OVR in facilitating access to voter registration, as Supervisors of Elections (SoEs) were able to direct voters to Florida's OVR platform in their Facebook posts during the election cycle.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first review existing research on voter education and outreach initiatives in the United States, positioning these efforts as activities that can reduce costs for voters to overcome information barriers in the process of voting. We note how much of this research focuses on the effects of interventions within specific election jurisdictions, rather than a cross-sectional comparison of activities across jurisdictions. We then turn to the empirical focus of our paper, namely the effects of voter education and outreach efforts on voter registration, drawing from literature on the effectiveness of voter registration interventions to develop the expectations for our analysis. We then lay out the rest of our data collection and methodological decisions before turning to an overview of our findings and the results of our multivariate modeling strategy.

## **Existing Research: The Cost-Reducing Effects of Voter Education**

Given the hyper-federalized nature of American elections, researchers, policymakers and election officials have studied how election reforms can improve the administration of elections and increase voter participation. Much of this research has focused on how changes to election laws, both restrictive or expansive, shape and affect voter turnout, either by changing the accessibility of registration, the method of voting, or the identification required to cast a ballot (Burden et al. 2014; Hajnal, Lajevardi and Nielson 2017; Springer 2012). Far less attention has been paid to other policies that lower the costs of voting by educating prospective voters about the steps they need to take to vote in elections, and inform them of changes to requirements and methods for registration and voting. Voter education relates to equally important outcomes in the voting process outside the act of voting itself, which are necessary for voters to know in order to cast a valid ballot: registering to vote on time, making sure their information is up-to-date, being prepared to verify their eligibility in case they are asked to vote provisionally (Merivaki and Smith 2020), as well as minimizing the risk of errors in the process of completing mail ballots, which can lead to a rejected vote (Shino, Suttman-Lea and Smith 2021).

Lack of adequate information about how to vote can be a potential barrier and increase the costs of voting, which local election officials can help overcome. The 2020 election showcased that even frequent voters have incomplete knowledge about election processes in their state ([USVote N.d.](#)) and that the spread of election misinformation makes it difficult for voters to distinguish between what is factual and what is not ([Rhodes 2021](#)). As a result, election officials are encouraged, if not expected, to "establish trusted channels of communication with voters," and ensure that voters have "a start-to-finish story for each voter's ballot" has increased ([EIP 2021](#)).

The literature on voter mobilization shows that outreach and educative interventions, relying on a range of communication tactics, can positively affect voter registration and turnout ([Green and Gerber 2015](#)). This research finds that even low-cost outreach activities informing voters about how to register and vote, like mailings and robocalls, can move the needle of voter behavior. These activities are meant to provide voters with information that "lower[s] the costs of political participation— especially for citizens unfamiliar with the voting process" ([Mann and Bryant 2020](#), 3). Importantly, this evidence also highlights that communication from state and local election officials in particular, rather than non-profits or other third-party entities, can be the most effective at encouraging new voter participation and existing voters to shift their behavior ([Mann and Bryant 2020](#); [Herrnson et al. 2015](#); [Herrnson, Hanmer and Koh 2018](#)).

In short, evidence from recent elections, as well as field experiments, highlights the potential impact of interventions by state and LEOs to educate and inform voters. However, they offer an incomplete picture of voter education and electoral outcomes, primarily because the term "voter education" is used as a blanket term for any intervention. Thus, it does not capture how various voter education and outreach efforts can affect political participation. In addition, existing research only gives a sliver of the picture of what state and local election officials actually do for voter education, and are typically done through collaboration between election officials and researchers in specific jurisdictions. While informative and useful for demonstrating the positive impact of voter education interventions within specific contexts, existing research may be capturing efforts from election officials who may already be proactive in educating voters, and transparent about their practices ([Hanmer and Michael W. Traugott N.d.](#); [Sumner, Farris and Holman 2020](#)). As such, our work aims to strengthen the robustness of existing empirical findings, and expand our understanding of how various voter education activities impact voter behavior across multiple jurisdictions and across different electoral contexts.

## Modes of Outreach for Voter Registration: Expectations

Our analysis evaluates the effects of voter education and outreach activities across Florida's 67 counties between 2014 and 2020 on new voter registrations and electronic voter registration transactions. While there are a range of outcomes we might consider when examining the effectiveness of these activities, we focus on voter registration not only because it is a fundamental step in the voting process, but also because Florida's online voter registration (OVR) system allows us to investigate the relationship between social media outreach and OVR usage more closely, particularly during the 2020 election, where face-to-face interactions between voters and LEOs, as well as political campaigns and third-party voter registration groups were limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The underlying theoretical assumptions of our hypotheses center around *one*, how these efforts reduce the costs of voting by helping voters overcome information barriers (Mann and Bryant 2020), and *two*, the source/messenger effects that election officials can have that encourages shifts in voter behavior (Herrnson et al. 2015). The latter assumption in particular suggests there are distinctive source effects of messages from LEOs that are especially effective for informing voters and encouraging shifts in voter behavior. For example, in one study encouraging voters in the state of Maryland to shift modes of voting, findings suggested that election officials may have a distinct "source credibility." More precisely, messages from election officials had a greater impact on voter behavior compared to messages sent by other entities, like non-profits (Herrnson, Hanmer and Koh 2018). LEOs also have a diverse set of "tools" to reach voters, which suggests that the more voter education and outreach activities they engage in, the more potential voters they can reach (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2021). As such, our key expectation is that jurisdictions with more robust voter education and outreach activities will have higher levels of new registrations, because of the position of LEOs as trusted and effective sources of information for voters (Adona and Gronke 2018; EIP 2021), as well as the potential to reach a broader electorate through the use of various voter education methods.

We consider multiple modes of voter education outreach at the local level that include *face-to-face activities*, such as visits to local high schools, colleges, community centers, and training for third-party voter registration groups, *traditional media*, like television and radio advertisements, as well as print media, like newspaper advertisements and mailings, and *online outreach* through social media. Established research offers insight into the effects we might

expect with these different modes of outreach. For *face-to-face activities*, this evidence suggests that a range of different face-to-face activities can improve registration and turnout rates. Training for groups who conduct voter registration drives can be effective at boosting voter registration rates, especially in places with otherwise restrictive voting systems (Herron and Smith 2013). Field experiments have further confirmed that voter registration drives using door-to-door canvassing can have positive effects, and that these drives help prospective voters overcome information barriers (Nickerson 2015; BRaconnier, Dormagen and Pons 2017). Among groups of low-propensity voters, such as college students, face-to-face outreach in the form of presentations on how to register also help lower information barriers to voting and have positive effects on registration and overall turnout (Bennion and Nickerson 2016). Thus, our first hypothesis is as follows:

*H1*: Counties with a more robust face-to-face voter education and outreach program will have higher rates of new voter registrations.

While face-to-face outreach tools show consistently positive effects across studies, there is limited research testing whether LEO usage of traditional media such as television and radio advertisements, newspaper advertisements and print media, affects voter behavior. We draw our expectations from research on political campaign mobilization, and outreach from state election officials which find that advertising tone (Richard and Rovner 2009), timing (Krupnikov 2011), context (Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz 2016), and characteristics of the messenger (Krupnikov and Bauer 2014) can mobilize prospective voters. Considering that political campaigns spend a significant amount on resources on television and radio advertisements to reach prospective voters (Fowler and Ridout 2013; Overby and Barth 2006), it is reasonable to expect that their usage by LEOs will also have positive effects. Print media, such as newspaper advertisements and mailings can also be an effective outreach tool, as it is less costly to run an advertisement in a local newspaper, and mailings from LEOs may be received more positively from voters, particularly those in whom political campaigns are not interested, or do not have the resources to reach (Mann and Bryant 2020).

*H2*: Counties who use traditional media (TV and radio ads) for voter education and outreach will have higher rates of new voter registrations.

*H3*: Counties who use print media (newspaper ads and/or mailings) for voter education and outreach will have higher rates of new voter registrations.

Finally, we also consider the burgeoning role of education and outreach that happens online.

Research on voter registration outreach shows that e-mails can be useful in reaching young voters and remind them to register to vote, although the evidence suggests that a procrastination effect takes place when registration does not happen at the same time as the reminder, leaving many new registrations submitted too late or never submitted (Merivaki 2021; Bennion and Nickerson 2011). This research strongly highlights the challenges of voter registration outreach in states where the process is paper-based and requires voters to take multiple steps to complete their registration. The availability of online voter registration, however, helps mitigate these procrastination effects for new registrants. When individuals are e-mailed reminders about registering to vote that include links people can follow and immediately register to vote online once they receive the reminder, there is a large positive effect on both overall voter registration and turnout relative to reminders that provide recipients with a link to download a registration form, that they then have to submit to their local election office in a separate step Bennion and Nickerson (2021).

We suggest similar dynamics may be at play when considering the impact of social media posts by LEOs that direct users to register to vote online. As we detail in our analysis below, many LEOs use their official social media platforms to post information about how to register as a new voter and update one's registration information, that often directs voters to the state's OVR portal. Similar to an e-mail, users are exposed to the reminder to register, and are directed to do so online in a single step. More broadly, we suspect that jurisdictions with a more active online presence through social media may see higher new registration rates. Accessibility of information online is one of the most-low cost ways voters can get information about what is needed to vote; the more accessible jurisdictions are through online platforms like social media accounts and web pages, the easier it is for voters to learn about and take advantage of online resources like online voter registration.

*H4*: Counties who use social media for education and outreach will have higher rates of new voter registrations.

Finally, given that online voter registration in Florida was available for the 2020 presidential election, we also expect that social media outreach will have driven more voters use the OVR platform more than any other voter registration method during the 2020 election cycle. Using the OVR portal, eligible Floridians can submit a new voter registration application and update their voter registration information. This means OVR is not exclusively utilized by new prospective voters, which is why we use the term transactions, rather than registration. Since

its adoption in 2016 and implementation in 2017, Floridians have been using OVR at higher rates, particularly closer to voter registration deadlines, which is a result of increased mobilization activity by political campaigns and third-party voter registration groups (Merivaki 2021). Because the OVR platform is used by both prospective registrants and registered voters, LEO outreach on social media should directly result in more OVR transactions.

*H5*: Counties with higher volume of social media outreach education and outreach will have higher rates of online voter registration transactions.

Overall, we expect that jurisdiction's with more robust activity for each mode of outreach will see higher volumes of new registrations, and these expectations are driven by previous research that has considered the effects of these different modes within specific contexts. We argue that the underlying mechanism explaining centers both on the cost-reducing effects of LEOs lowering information barriers for voters, as well as their role as trusted sources of information about the election process.

## Research Design, Data, and Variables of Interest

To assess how various types of LEO-directed outreach can impact voter registration, we utilize annual and monthly-level voter registration data from Florida's Division of Elections, spanning four federal elections (2014-2020). We test our hypotheses in two steps. First, we take annual measures of Supervisors of Election (SoE) voter outreach from 2014, 2016, and 2018, drawn from Florida's bi-annual County Voter Education Surveys. We then utilize monthly-level measures of SoE Facebook activity during the 2020 election cycle to assess the impact of social media on voter registration within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face interaction between voters, SoEs, campaigns, and third-party groups was limited.

In compliance with the Help America Vote Act's voter education provision<sup>1</sup>, Florida's state voter education program requires that all 67 SoEs complete a Voter Education Survey (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2021; MacManus 2005). Since 2012, the survey has been administered every two years.<sup>2</sup> These data were obtained through public record requests for surveys completed in

---

<sup>1</sup>The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 required that states design and implement voter education programs to inform prospective and existing voters about the election process. Responses to the mandate were different across states, with some submitting comprehensive plans for voter education, and others submitting broad commitments without specifying details (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2021).

<sup>2</sup>We are grateful to Lori Edwards, Polk County Supervisor of Elections, who informed us about this



2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. We have submitted a records request for the 2020 survey responses. Due to differences in question wording and the provided format of responses, we do not include 2012 in our analysis.

The survey is organized in nine (9) thematic categories, including a category for voter registration training and outreach, and advertisements and publications.<sup>3</sup> We utilize county responses on these items to construct our measures of face-to-face, traditional media– TV/Radio, print– and social media–those operating an active Facebook account. For face-to-face outreach, we draw from the "voter registration education and training" section of the survey, which asks SoEs whether they conduct a series of given activities every election year (Table 1)

There is significant variation across the counties in which registration activities SoEs consistently engage every election year. For example, as shown in Table 1, all but a few counties reported that they visit local high schools for voter registration, as well as conducting community events and encouraging voter registration at the local elections office. Most of the variation is found in outreach to colleges, churches, libraries, and racial and ethnic minority communities. It is also notable that a sizeable number of counties do not report training or conducting outreach to third-party voter registration groups, activities required in order to register with the State of Florida to conduct voter registration drives (Merivaki and Shino 2021).

---

resource

<sup>3</sup>Florida Division of Elections. 2013. "Voter Education Program, 2012 Survey and Analysis: [https://www.myfloridaelections.com/portals/fsase/documents/FSASE\\_Conf2013\\_Voter\\_ED\\_Survey\\_Analysis\\_Final6-7-13.pdf](https://www.myfloridaelections.com/portals/fsase/documents/FSASE_Conf2013_Voter_ED_Survey_Analysis_Final6-7-13.pdf).

Table 1: Variation Across FL’s 67 Counties on Face-to-Face Voter Registration Outreach

Counties with Least Compliance	2014	2016	2018
Community Colleges and Universities	20 (29.8%)	18(26.8%)	17 (25.4%)
Churches	23 (34.3%)	17 (25.4%)	28 (41.8%)
High Schools	1*(1.5%)	2**(3%)	2**(3%)
Events	8 (12%)	6 (9%)	5 (7.4%)
Libraries	23 (34.4%)	25 (37.3%)	21 (31.3%)
Immigration Offices	34 (50.7%)	39 (58.2%)	42(62.7%)
SoE Office	8 (12%)	10 (15%)	9 (13.4%)
3PVROs	26 (38.8%)	23 (34.3%)	23 (34.3%)
Minority Communities	19 (28.4%)	13 (19.4%)	16 (23.9%)

**Notes:** Question: “Did your County participate in Voter Education Activities for the given Topic and Category?”

\*Franklin, Union; \*\* Franklin, Union, Columbia

Regarding the use of traditional media like TV or radio advertisements, and print media such as mailers, brochures, and newspaper advertisements, there is also notable variation across the three years. As Table 2 shows, print media seem to be the most common type of traditional outreach, with only three counties– Liberty, Orange, and Wakulla– reporting not utilizing them in 2016. Newspaper and magazine advertisements are also used by the vast majority of counties to reach voters. The descriptive findings suggest that most counties allocate financial resources for voter education to traditional media, although it is possible that local newspapers are facilitating their usage by offering advertising space free of charge. The use of social media opens possibilities for cost-effective outreach, which can be shared online, and thus maximize the reach of the electorate. Among the responses to the social media ads question in the survey, very few counties reported that they paid for an ad on Facebook, with most reporting, however that they do operate a Facebook account.

Table 2: Variation Across FL’s 67 Counties on Publications and Advertisements

Least compliance (responded no activity)	2014	2016	2018
Television, Radio, and Movie Theater Ads	30 (44.8%)	26(38.8%)	27(40.4%)
Newspaper and Magazine Ads	1* (1.5%)	7 (10.4%)	9 (13.4%)
Public Transportation Ads (Buses, Taxi-cabs, etc.)	61(91%)	37(55.2%)	40(60%)
Social Media Ads (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	36(54.7%)	21(32.3%)	18(26.8%)
Billboards, Banners, and Posters	7(10.4%)	12(18%)	17(25.4%)
Mailers, Brochures, Newsletters, Utility Bill Inserts	0 (0%)	3**(4.5%)	0(0%)
Precinct Maps	(27(40.3%))	24(35.8%)	17(25.4%)

*Notes:* Question: “Did your County participate in Voter Education Activities for the given Topic and Category?”  
 \*Alachua; \*\* Liberty, Orange, Wakulla

Using the "Publications and Advertisements" section of the Florida Voter Education Survey, we created three proxies for traditional, print, and social media outreach: TV/Radio Advertisements, Newspaper and Magazine advertisements, mailers/brochures or pamphlets, and social media advertisements. We did not incorporate public transportation advertisements, billboards, and precinct maps because it is likely these outreach efforts may be more heavily used for Get Out The Vote (GOTV) efforts rather than to inform voters about the voter registration process. To further flesh out how SoE social media activity may shape voter registration, we include a measure of how many Facebook posts SoEs posted per year (between 2014-2018) and per month (for 2020) as a rough measure of social media activity, which were pulled from Crowdtangle.

Table 3: Rates of New Voter Registrations and OVR Transactions in Florida, 2014-2020

Year	New Valid Registrations	OVR Transactions
2014	533,082—(88%)	—
2016	974,606—(91%)	—
2018	750,353—(88.9%)	142,918 (17%)
2020	608,790—(51.5%)	458,197 (39%)

Our first dependent variable is the proportion of new voter registrations, from the total applications submitted in a county during an election year (2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020).<sup>4</sup> In our analysis of 2020 monthly voter registration data, we also evaluate the relationship between SoE social media outreach and online voter registration (OVR) transactions. Using the OVR portal, eligible Floridians can submit a new voter registration application and update their voter registration information. This means OVR is not exclusively utilized by new prospective voters. In effect, the vast majority of OVR submissions in 2020 were updates to a voter's information rather than new registration.<sup>5</sup> Our second dependent variable, therefore, is the proportion of OVR transactions from the total of all voter registration applications submitted during an election cycle.

As Table 3 shows, new voter registrations are high overall, ranging from 68% in 2014 and 75% in 2018 to about 98% across all three years. In 2020, there was a notable drop in new valid registrations, from 47% to 62%, mainly, we suspect, due to COVID, which limited the opportunities for face-to-face outreach for SoEs, campaigns, and third party groups (CEIR 2020). Regarding OVR transactions, the increase between 2018 and 2020 is substantively large, although it also appears that OVR usage was low in 2020, accounting for 39% of all voter registration submissions, including applications submitted in-person, in departments of motor vehicle, and by mail.

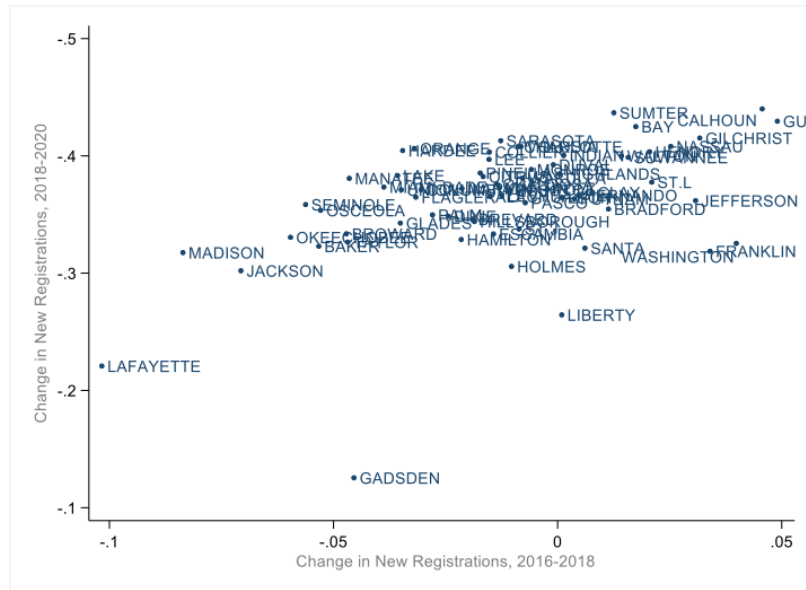
Comparing across years, 2018 was strong in terms of voter registration even though mid-term elections years usually lag in registration rates compared to presidential election years (Figure 1). The loss in new voter registrations from 2018 to 2020 is unprecedented, validating concerns that the COVID pandemic created challenges for voter registration. All 67 counties in Florida experienced losses between 2018 and 2020, including those that had significant gains between 2016 and 2018 like Calhoun, Franklin, Gulf, and Washington.

---

<sup>4</sup>Florida Division of Elections, Voter Registration Statistics. <https://www.dos.myflorida.com/elections/data-statistics/voter-registration-statistics/>.

<sup>5</sup>Quarterly counts of voter registration by source, obtained through public records requests.

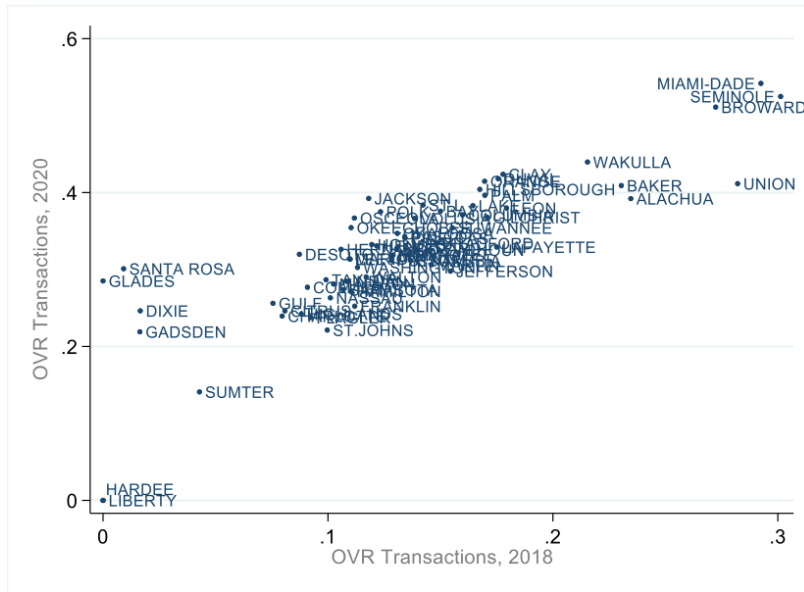
Figure 1: Change in Proportion of New Voter Registrations in Florida, 2016-2020



Compared to 2017, when OVR was first available in Florida, OVR usage picked up in 2018 compared to all other available methods of registration, and in 2020 it was higher than 2018, with some counties reporting more than half of their registration submissions coming from OVR, such as Broward, Miami-Dade, and Seminole Counties.<sup>6</sup> This suggests a shift in voter registration dynamics in the state, with OVR being the more viable option during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020. That said, there is still notable variation across counties in terms of OVR usage, with counties like Liberty and Hardee reporting minuscule rates of OVR transactions in 2020. The overall pattern presented in Figure 2, however, is that voters in most counties relied on OVR for either registering new voters, or updating their voter registration information.

<sup>6</sup>Although we use the term "transaction" to describe the usage of OVR in Florida, the Florida Department of Elections uses the term "submission" for voter registration forms submitted by any method of registration.

Figure 2: Proportion of OVR Transactions in Florida, 2018-2020

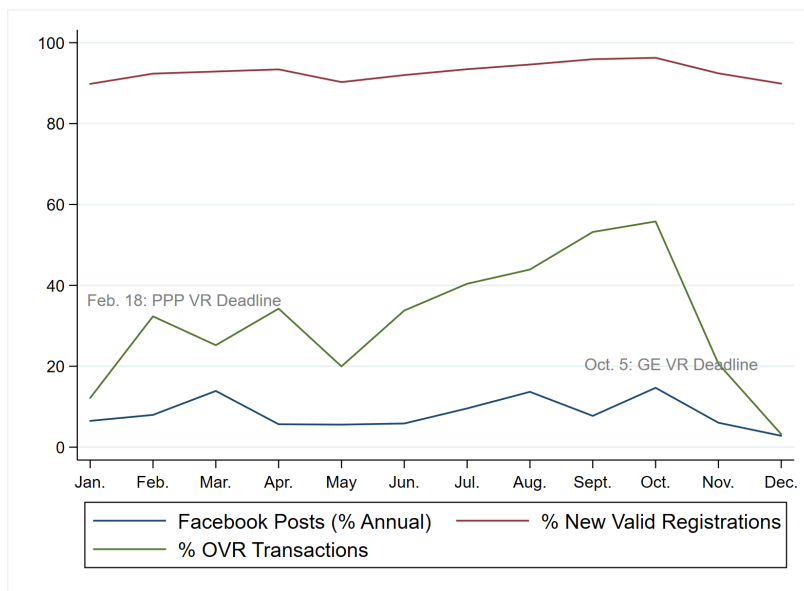


We theorized that in the absence of face-to-face outreach, counties might have instead been more active on social media to encourage voter registration, especially the state’s OVR system for new registrations and updates, and identifying nuances in the voter registration process by looking at annual data is limited (Merivaki 2019). For this reason, we turn our attention to monthly voter registration statistics in 2020 merged with an original data set of social media outreach from Florida County SoEs by month to evaluate the relationship between SoE social media outreach and new registrations, and OVR transactions. We expect that SoEs encouragement for prospective and existing registrants to use the OVR portal to be especially active during 2020 given that most face-to-face options were limited. Monthly-level data also allow us to observe the temporal dynamics of SoE outreach during an election cycle, such as those close to voter registration deadlines prior to the presidential primary in March and the General Election in November.

SoE Facebook activity in Florida peaked during the month of March in the middle of the Democratic Primary, and in September and October before Florida’s general election voter registration deadline at the beginning of October. As Figure 3 shows, there seems to be a closer connection between OVR submissions and Facebook posts per month. The peaks in Facebook posts increase closer to Election Day, rather than the voter registration deadline, indicating that SoEs may use social media for GOTV, such as informing voters about different

voting options, and to inform voters about using OVR for information changes as opposed to new registrations. Indeed, the correlation between monthly posts as a percentage of all posts in a year suggest that SoE social media outreach is a driver of OVR transactions ( $r=0.62$ ). Evidence from specific SoE Facebook posts suggest that this is the case. Hillsborough County serves as useful example, where followers of the county’s SoE Facebook account were encouraged several times to use the OVR portal to "register or update your information" in October of 2020.

Figure 3: Rates of New Registrations, OVR Transactions and Facebook Posts by Month in Florida, 2020



In our annual and monthly analyses, our key independent variables measure different modes of SoE voter education and outreach. We control for the partisanship of the SoE with a simple binary measure of whether the SoE is a Republican or not.<sup>7</sup> We include proxies for electoral and campaign dynamics with a dummy variable for whether the county went Democratic or Republican in the race for the highest office on the ballot during a given election year (presidential and governor). Given that racial and ethnic minority communities are less likely to have access to high quality election administration (Pettigrew N.d.; Barreto, Cohen-Marks

<sup>7</sup>In a few counties, Supervisors of Elections have run as No-Party Affiliated in partisan elections (Calhoun County) or in non-partisan elections (Columbia County)(see Merivaki 2021). Theoretically, SoEs regardless of partisanship should engage in voter registration education and outreach. For simplicity, we use a binary measure of partisanship where an observation = 1 if the SoE is a Republican, and 0 if they are Democratic or non-partisan.

and Woods 2009)– which may extend to voter education and outreach—we also control for county demographics by including the rates of Black and Hispanic Population and county population size.<sup>8</sup>

## Analysis and Findings

We run beta and fractional logistic regressions with robust standard errors, which implement maximum likelihood and quasi-likelihood estimators, and report predictive margins with confidence intervals.<sup>9</sup> Starting with the annual time-series analysis from 2014-2018, we run a restricted model using voter registration outreach as an additive index which ranges from 0-10 as a key independent variable, and a full model where each face-to-face activity as outlined in Table 1, is a dummy variable.

Our findings uncover interesting dynamics in terms of the effects of voter education and outreach by SoEs in Florida and expanding the electorate.<sup>10</sup> Newspaper ads positively effect new voter registrations, while TV and radio ads, and mailers and brochures do not. Our annual analysis also yields null-results for the effect of Facebook posts on new registrations. Interestingly, we find that having a Facebook account is negatively associated with new voter registrations, all else equal. The negative relationship between an SoE’s Facebook account and new voter registration merits further exploration, as it is likely the mere presence of a social media account may not be indicative of active efforts to reach out to prospective voters. Rather, we suspect that *how frequently* an SoE uses social media to engage in voter outreach shapes the effects on new registration.

Our additive measure of voter registration outreach is positive and statistically significant, indicating that engaging in more voter registration activities yields new voter registrations. To understand which activities have a greater impact on new registrations, we run our analysis using dummy variables for each activity. We find that training and/or outreach to third-party voter registration groups (3PVROs) was the only activity that yielded statistically significant and positive results. This finding is substantively significant because it confirms that regis-

---

<sup>8</sup>Florida’s County demographic data were obtained from the University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research’s Population studies program: <https://www.bebr.ufl.edu/population>.

<sup>9</sup>Beta regression for dependent variable. measured as a proportion. This fits a regression model for the mean of  $y$  conditional on  $x$   $E(y/x) = ux$ . Beta regression implements maximum likelihood estimators.

<sup>10</sup>We present full regression tables in the Appendix.

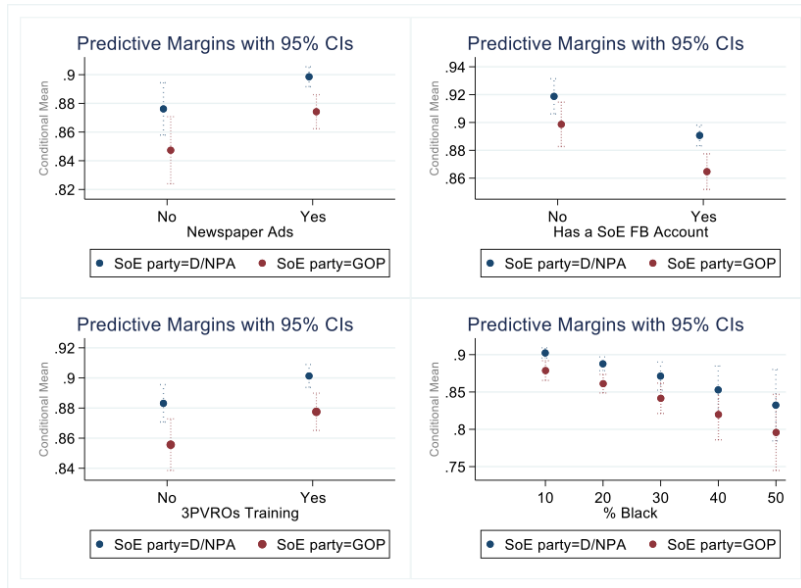


tration drives play an important role in reaching prospective voters and assisting them with registration.

We find that counties with Republican SoEs were less likely to see increases in new voter registrations compared to counties with Democratic or No Party Affiliated SoEs, all else equal. To more thoroughly flesh out the dynamics between the SoE's partisanship and outreach, we present predictive margins for the three methods of outreach, namely newspaper ads, operating a Facebook account, and conducting voter registration drives (3PVRO) training. Figure 4 uncovers interesting nuances in the effectiveness of face-to-face, traditional media and social media outreach on new voter registration conditional on the partisanship of the SoE. Whereas posting newspaper advertisements has an overall positive impact on expanding the electorate, all else equal, it appears to have a greater impact in counties with Democratic or No Party Affiliated SoEs. For these counties, the use of newspaper ads increased the conditional mean of the probability of new voter registrations by 3%. For counties with Republican SoEs, the increase was 2%.

We find a similar pattern for 3PVRO training. In terms of the operation of a Facebook account, however, we find that the decline in new voter registrations is steeper in counties with Republican SoEs who report they have a County SoE Facebook page. These findings suggest that traditional outreach may be more effective, although it is also possible that a simple binary measure of whether a county has an active Facebook account does not adequately capture the nuanced effects of social media activity. For this reason, we explore these nuances more in-depth with our monthly analysis of voter registrations during 2020.

Figure 4: Figure 4. Predictive Margins for Proportion of New Voter Registrations by method of outreach, 2014-2018



With respect to county demographics, counties with more Black residents have lower numbers of new registrations, all else equal. Moreover, in counties with more Black residents that also have Republican SoEs in particular, the decrease in the proportion of new registrations is steeper. This finding highlights persistent challenges with expanding the electorate in racial and ethnic minority communities (Pettigrew N.d.). That said, when we accounted for whether a county conducts training for voter registration drives and controlled for the partisanship of the SoE, we also found that the proportion of new voter registrations decreased. This is counter intuitive given that registration drives often prioritize minority communities in voter registration outreach (Merivaki and Shino 2021).

Overall, our annual findings suggest that traditional media and face-to-face outreach through training for registration drives in particular were stronger predictors for new voter registration than social media outreach during the 2014, 2016, and 2018 elections. One limitation of this analysis, however, is that it aggregates by election year and does not show the dynamics of voter registration during a particular election cycle. This is especially important when comparing SoE outreach to outreach done by campaigns and third-party groups. In theory, SoE outreach should be fairly consistent over time, but also increase closer to important voter registration deadlines. Campaigns and third-party groups mobilize heavily closer to

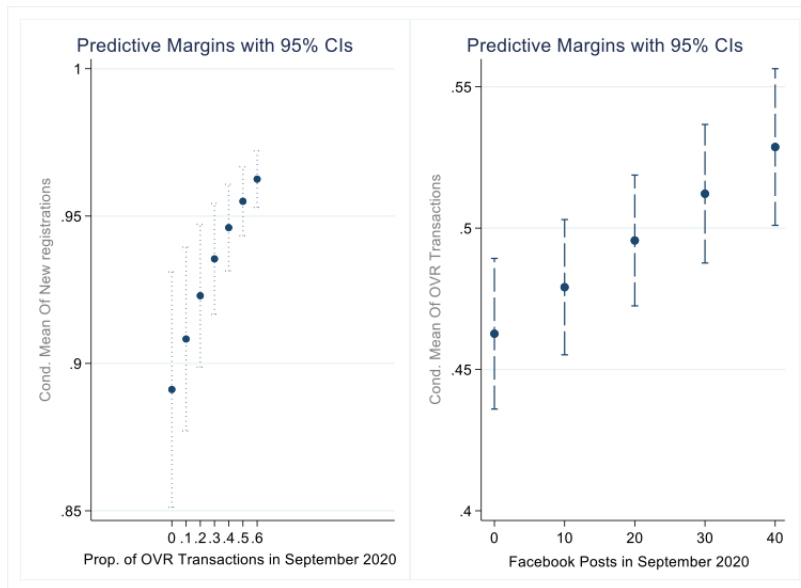
these dates, which explains the surge in voter registration activity especially during Presidential elections (Merivaki 2021).

Turning to our monthly-level analysis of the 2020 election cycle, we argue that COVID-19 incentivized campaigns and election administrators to engage in outreach on social media more than they might during an election not affected by a pandemic. By 2020, only 16 out of the 67 counties did not have a Facebook account, a decrease from 35 since 2014, indicating that social media activity, at least through Facebook, is something that Florida SoEs consider as a part of their voter education and outreach.

For new monthly registrations during 2020, we examine the relationship between the number of Facebook posts per month by a given SoE and new registrations, finding null effects. This suggests that campaigns may be more effective in getting new registrants to register to vote than local election officials. In counties where Trump won in 2016, for instance, we find that the proportion of new registrations was more likely to increase than in counties won by Clinton. This finding may be due to limited voter registration efforts by campaigns in the latter counties, or reflect different approaches by the two parties in how they mobilized given their divergent approaches to voter outreach during the pandemic.

Voter enthusiasm peaks in the lead up to an election. In the context of COVID-19, OVR transactions gradually increased starting in June and peaked between September and November (Figure 3). September was an important month for voter registration in 2020 in Florida given the October 5 voter registration deadline. As shown in Figure 5, OVR transactions heavily contributed to increases in new voter registrations in September. Thus, even though the Facebook activity of SoEs may not have affected new voter registrations, this finding suggests that SoE social media activity is more directly connected to OVR transactions during which a prospective voter can register to vote, as well as update their voter information. Using the proportion of OVR transactions as our dependent variable, we find a strong positive relationship between the two. As Figure 5 shows, the increase in Facebook posts in September significantly increased the proportion of OVR transactions, compared to all other methods of voter registration. This suggests that SoE outreach on social media can draw prospective voters to the OVR portal, although it is not clear from our analysis whether there is a direct or indirect relationship between SoE social media activity and new registrations.

Figure 5: Predictive Margins for Proportion of New Voter Registrations and Proportion of OVR Transactions in September of 2020



## Discussion

Our paper contributes to the literature on election administration and voter mobilization in two substantive ways. One, we evaluate how various voter education outreach modes, face-to-face, traditional and print media, and social media (Facebook) affect new voter registration rates. We find that traditional media, particularly newspaper advertisements, can be an effective tool in expanding the electorate when used by local election officials. We also find that training of third-party voter registration groups increases the rates of new registrants, which confirms existing findings that such groups are instrumental in getting prospective voters to register to vote.

Our second contribution lies in a clearer understanding between LEO mobilization on social media, OVR and voter registration. We find that high activity on Facebook during an election cycle increases OVR usage, but does not affect new voter registrations. This finding is substantively significant, because it highlights which voters LEOs can reach through social media. Our analysis shows that LEOs can direct their social media followers to use the OVR portal to either register to vote or update their voter registration information. Considering that the relationship between outreach by Supervisors of Elections' Facebook accounts and new registrations is null, it is possible that LEOs are effective in ensuring that registered voters

have their information updated prior to casting a vote, minimizing the risk of having their vote invalidated.

The null relationship between social media activity and new registrations also suggests that political campaigns and third-party groups may be more effective in expanding the electorate than LEOs, and that LEOs may be using social media as a tool to promote voter turnout, as we show in our descriptive analysis of monthly voter registrations in 2020 (Figure 3). SoE Facebook posts increased during the Primary and General Elections in 2020, instead of increasing both before the deadline to register to vote, and Election Day. SOE social media activity, however, was at similar levels in both the primary and general elections, which strongly indicates that LEOs are committed to informing voters about the election process, regardless of the type of election.

Finally, our analysis has important implications about how local election officials can reach voters in their jurisdiction, and encourage them to register to vote using social media, when in-person options are not available. The availability of OVR undoubtedly facilitated this interaction. Even though new registration rates in 2020 were lower compared to 2018 in Florida, as we show on Table 3, OVR transactions accounted for 39% all voter registration submissions. In the absence of OVR, it is possible that the new voter registration rates, and possibly updates to voters' information, would be depressed, since voters would have to do these transactions in-person.

According to the Election Assistance Commission, states and localities have multiple tools in their voter education and outreach toolbox to inform voters about elections (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2021). Although our analysis does not use an exhaustive list of tools, it demonstrates how different activities can positively affect voter behavior, especially voter registration. More broadly, it shows highlights the important role LEOs play as arbiters of election reforms for voters, and that voter education and outreach by LEOs should be carefully considered as a part of the "indirect effects" of these reforms (Burden et al. 2014). More research needs to be done to better understand how LEOs use social media other than Facebook to reach voters, because the demographics of each platform vary, and so the target audience also varies. Additionally, more research should be done to evaluate how LEO-directed outreach affects turnout. In the context of Florida, where voters have the option to vote early in-person, by mail, and in-person on Election Day, understanding how LEOs use social media to educate voters about these different processes is an important next step.

## References

Adona, Natalie and Paul Gronke. 2018. Understanding the Voter Experience: The Public's View of Election Administration and Reform. Technical report : . [https://www.democracyfund.org/media/uploaded/2018\\_CCESReport\\_vFinal.pdf](https://www.democracyfund.org/media/uploaded/2018_CCESReport_vFinal.pdf).

Adona, Natalie, Paul Gronke, Paul Manson and Sarah Cole. 2019. "Stewards of Democracy: The Views of Local Election Officials." *Democracy Fund* .

**URL:** <https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2019DemocracyFundStewardsOfDemocra>

Barreto, Matt A, Mara Cohen-Marks and Nathan D Woods. 2009. "Are All Precincts Created Equal? the Prevalence of Low-Quality Precincts in Low-Income and Minority Communities." *Political Research Quarterly* 62(3):445–458.

Bennion, Elizabeth A and David W. Nickerson. 2011. "The cost of convenience: An experiment showing e-mail outreach decreases voter registration." *Political Research Quarterly* 64(4):858–69.

Bennion, Elizabeth A and David W. Nickerson. 2016. "I will register and vote, if you teach me how: a field experiment testing voter registration in college classrooms." *PS: Political Science Politics* 49(4):867–871.

Bennion, Elizabeth A and David W. Nickerson. 2021. "Decreasing hurdles and increasing registration rates for college students: An online voter registration systems field experiment." *Political Behavior* .

BRaconnier, Celine, Jean-Yves Dormagen and Vincent Pons. 2017. "Voter registration costs and disenfranchisement: experimental evidence from France." *American Political Science Review* 111(3):584–604.

Burden, Barry C, David T Canon, Kenneth R Mayer and Donald P Moynihan. 2012. "The Effect of Administrative Burden on Bureaucratic Perception of Policies: Evidence from Election Administration." *Public Administration Review* 72(5):741–751.

Burden, Barry C, David T Canon, Kenneth R Mayer and Donald P Moynihan. 2014. "Election Laws, Mobilization, and Turnout: The Unanticipated Consequences of Election Reform." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(1):95–109.

- CEIR. 2020. New Voter Registrations in 2020. Technical report : . [https://electioninnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/New\\_Voter\\_Registrations.pdf](https://electioninnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/New_Voter_Registrations.pdf).
- EIP. 2021. The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election. Technical report : . <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:tr171zs0069/EIP-Final-Report.pdf>.
- Fowler, Erika Franklin and Travis N. Ridout. 2013. “Negative, Angry, and Ubiquitous: Political Advertising in 2012.” *The Forum* 10(4):51–61.
- Green, Donald P. and Alan S. Gerber. 2015. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*. 3rd ed. Brookings Institution Press.
- Hajnal, Zoltan, Nazita Lajevardi and Lindsay Nielson. 2017. “Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes.” *The Journal of Politics* 79(2):363–79.
- Hanmer, Michael J. and volume=32 number=4 pages=375-405 year=2004 publisher=Sage Journals Michael W. Traugott, journal=American Politics Research. N.d. “The Impact of Voting by Mail on Voter Behavior.” . Forthcoming.
- Herrnson, Paul, Ho Youn Joh, Michael Hanmer and Claire Smith. 2015. “Message, Milieu, Technology, and Turnout Among Military and Overseas Voters.” *Electoral Studies* 30:142–52.
- Herrnson, Paul, Michael Hanmer and Ho Youn Koh. 2018. “Mobilization Around New Convenience Voting Methods: A Field Experiment to Encourage Voting by Mail with Downloadable Ballots and Early Voting.” *Political Behavior* 41(4):871–95.
- Herron, Michael C and Daniel A Smith. 2013. “The Effects of House Bill 1355 on Voter Registration in Florida.” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 13(3):279–305.
- Kimball, David C. and Martha K. Kropf. 2006. “The Street-Level Bureaucrats of Elections: Selection Methods for Local Election Officials.” *Review of Policy Research* 23(6):1257–1268.
- Krupnikov, Yanna. 2011. “When does negativity demobilize? Tracing the conditional effect of negative campaigning on voter turnout.” *American Journal of Political Science* 55(4):797–813.

- Krupnikov, Yanna and Nichole M. Bauer. 2014. "The Relationship Between Campaign Negativity, Gender and Campaign Context." *Political Behavior* 36:167–88.
- MacManus, Susan A. 2005. "Implementing HAVA's Voter Education Requirement: A Crisis and a Federal Mandate Improve State-Local Cooperation in Florida." *Publius* 35(4):537–558.
- Malloy, Liam C. and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. 2016. "Going positive: The effects of negative and positive advertising on candidate success and voter turnout." *Research Politics* 3(1):1–16.
- Mann, Christopher and Lisa Bryant. 2020. "If you ask, they will come (to register and vote): Field experiments with state election agencies on encouraging voter registration." *Electoral Studies* 63:1–10.
- Merivaki, Thessalia. 2019. "Access denied? Assessing voter registration rejections in Florida." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 19(1):729–747.
- Merivaki, Thessalia. 2021. *The Administration of Voter Registration: Expanding the Electorate Across and Within States*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Merivaki, Thessalia and Daniel A Smith. 2020. "A failsafe for voters? Cast and rejected provisional ballots in North Carolina." *Political Research Quarterly* 73(1):65–78.
- Merivaki, Thessalia and Enrijeta Shino. 2021. "Measuring the Activity of Voter Registration Drives and Their Impact on Registration Success: Evidence from Florida." Paper presented at the 2021 Southern Political Science Association Annual Conference.
- Merivaki, Thessalia and Mara Suttman-Lea. 2021. "Designing Voter Education Across the States: State Responses to the Help America Vote Act."
- Nickerson, David W. 2015. "Do voter registration drives increase participation? For whom and when?" *Journal of Politics* 77(1):88–101.
- Overby, Marvin L. and Jay Barth. 2006. "Radio Advertising in American Political Campaigns: The Persistence, Importance, and Effects of Narrowcasting." *American Politics Research* 34(4):451–478.



- Pettigrew, Stephen. N.d. "The Downstream Consequences of Long Waits: How Lines at the Precinct Depress Future Turnout." Unpublished working paper.
- Rhodes, Samuel C. 2021. "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Fake News: How Social Media Conditions Individuals to Be Less Critical of Political Misinformation." *Political Communication* Online First.
- Richard, Lau R. and Ivy Brown Rovner. 2009. "Negative Campaigning." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12:285–306.
- Shino, Enrijeta, Mara Suttman-Lea and Daniel A. Smith. 2021. "Determinants of Rejected Mail Ballots in Georgia's 2018 General Election." *Political Research Quarterly* Online First.
- Springer, Melanie J. 2012. "State Electoral Institutions and Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1920–2000." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 12(3):252–283.
- Sumner, Jane Lawrence, Emily M. Farris and Mirya R. Holman. 2020. "Crowdsourcing Reliable Local Data." *Political Analysis* 28:244–62.
- Suttman-Lea, Mara. 2021. "Voter Education in the Digital Age: Local Election Official Use of Social Media." Paper presented at the 2021 Southern Political Science Association Annual Conference.
- USVote. N.d. Technical report.

## Appendix

Table 4: Average Marginal Effects: Annual Time Series 2014-2018

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Proportion New Valid Registrations
TV and Radio Ads	-0.006 (0.005)
Newspaper Ads	0.019 ** (0.074)
Print Media	-0.000 (0.005)
Facebook Account	-0.028*** (0.008)
Facebook Posts / Year	0.002 (0.003)
Church Outreach	-0.003 (0.007)
College Outreach	-0.006 (0.007)
High School Outreach	-0.018 (0.023)
Community Outreach	0.011 (0.011)
Senior and Disabled Communities	-0.006 (0.008)
Racial and Ethnic Minority Communities	0.005 (0.007)
Library Outreach	-0.005 (0.005)
Immigration Office Outreach	-0.001 (0.003)

SoE Office Outreach	0.005 (0.008)
3rd Party VR Training	0.012*** (0.005)
SoE Party ID	-0.009*** (0.003)
Midterm	-0.007* (0.004)
Vote Highest Office	0.003 (0.002)
Population	0.001 (0.004)
Percent Black	-0.024*** (0.007)
Percent Hispanic	0.004 (0.005)
<hr/>	
Observations	153
<hr/> <hr/>	

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Table 5: Average Marginal Effects: 2020 Monthly Time Series- New Valid Registrations

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Proportion of New Valid Registrations
Proportion OVR Applications	-0.031*** (0.004)
September	0.000** (0.000)
October	-0.000 (0.000)
SoE Party ID	-0.002*** (0.003)
Percent Black	-0.010* (0.006)
Percent Hispanic	-0.009*** (0.003)
Posts Per Month	-0.003 (0.002)
2012 Presidential Vote	0.001 (0.002)
2016 Presidential Vote	-0.005*** (0.001)
2018 Gubernatorial Vote	0.000 (0.002)
Observations	612
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 6: Average Marginal Effects: 2020 Monthly Time Series- OVR Transactions

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Proportion OVR Transactions
September	0.023*** (0.001)
October	-0.024*** (0.001)
SoE Party ID	-0.000 (0.007)
Percent Black	0.001 (0.012)
Percent Hispanic	0.015* (0.003)
Posts Per Month	0.024*** (0.005)
2012 Presidential Vote	-0.017 (0.007)**
2016 Presidential Vote	0.003 (0.005)
2018 Gubernatorial Vote	0.034*** (0.007)
Observations	612
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01