Keeping Out the Vote: An Experiment on Voter Demobilization

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ABSTRACT

Many authors have investigated voter mobilization, but voter *demobilization*, or tactics designed to reduce voter turnout, is largely unstudied. This paper presents an experiment on voter demobilization using a mock election conducted concurrently with a real election. We show that misinformation regarding election timing reduces voter turnout by 50 percent relative to a control group, but warning voters of potential misinformation beforehand removes this effect. The effect varies across the population: voters with an interest in politics are unaffected by misinformation, while less politically-interested voters are affected. In addition to providing an initial examination of this phenomenon, the results may be of use to policymakers: they imply that simple pre-election reminders warning against misinformation can guard against attempted demobilization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many researchers have explored modern-day voter mobilization—the methods and messages used by campaigns and nonpartisan groups to get people to choose to vote. But voter *demobilization*—the methods and messages used by political participants in the contemporary electoral process to limit or discourage specific voters or groups of voters from voting—is less well studied.[1] This paper reports the results of a framed field experiment to explore the effectiveness of a particular voter demobilization effort: an official-seeming message that intentionally misinforms voters as to the election's occurrence. We also test whether warning voters against such messages influences their decision to vote by inoculating them against misinformation's effects. Because of ethical and legal concerns of using local, state, or federal elections to test demobilization tactics, we take advantage of a "mock" gubernatorial election held on a university campus concurrently with the actual gubernatorial election. The non-legally-binding nature of the election allows for testing the effect of demobilization messages without preventing any voters from exercising their actual franchise in the gubernatorial election.

This study provides the first empirical investigation into voter demobilization. We find voting patterns that are consistent with misinformation having a demobilizing effect. Turnout is halved between the control group (about 12 percent) and the misinformed treatment group (about 6 percent), but these results are weakly statistically significant on a one-sided t-test (p=0.1029). However, there are sub-groups of voters who are more prone to be misinformed by

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[1] We intentionally differentiate the use of this term—demobilization—from the formal and informal historical exclusion of women and minorities from voting in the United States, as well as from modern U.S. election regulations which other authors might reasonably characterize as demobilization. For example, Overton (2006) argues that voter identification laws, English-only ballots, systematic "cleaning" of voter rolls, and many other formal election regulations reduce voting among specific, targeted groups. All of the practices Overton outlines may raise the cost of voting or directly reduce the ability of some voters to vote, but are not part of this analysis.

misinformation. Voters with government- or politically-related majors exhibit no difference in voting between the control and misinformed groups, while those from other majors (such as those associated with the College of Science) exhibit a strong demobilization effect. Additionally, the group that is both warned against misinformation and then receives misinformation turns out to vote at rates not statistically different from the control group, suggesting that a simple reminder and warning can "protect" voters from misinformation.

As voters targeted with demobilizing misinformation in actual elections are often those with weaker ties to or knowledge of politics (such as less affluent urban voters and college students), it is important to know that misinformation can affect such voters. While one must exercise considerable caution when extrapolating these results to federal, state, and local elections, currently election officials have no hard data on the effect of demobilization on individuals' use of the franchise. Thus, the results presented here are exploratory, but may have some use for policymakers. The study is small (N=380), and despite the many caveats that apply to the environment and treatments, the investigation provides initial evidence of the role misinformation may play in voters' decision to go to the polls, and recommends further study in the area.

Few individuals willingly take credit for their demobilization efforts, but the incidents do not go unnoticed. Demobilization using misinformation is widely discussed in the popular press, and several instances appear in each recent election cycle, all substantively similar to the following example. While the polls were still open in Maryland on November 2, 2010, the company robodial.org placed roughly 15,000 automated phone calls to registered Democratic voters in Maryland with the following message: "I'm calling to let everyone know that Governor

O'Malley and President Obama have been successful. Our goals have been met. ... The only thing left is to watch it on TV tonight. Congratulations, and thank you."

The message—delivered in a woman's voice—was paid for by Universal Elections, a firm contracted by the Republican gubernatorial candidate for campaign services. The Maryland State Police are presently investigating the owner of the Universal Elections for fraud and voter suppression; the owner of robodial.org, who has cooperated with the investigation and claims not to have known the content of the recording, said in an interview that "*we've had a few candidates who've tried to pull the same kind of stunt before*. [emphasis added] If they ask us to set it up, we don't do it." As this event—reported in the *Washington Post* (November 5, 2010)—suggests, not all clients ask, revealing voter demobilization as a regularly-occurring but infrequently-studied phenomenon.

2. VOTER MOBILIZATION: RECENT RESEARCH

There is no shortage of contemporary academic literature discussing voter mobilization: efforts to increase voter turnout. Researchers have explored voter mobilization both as part of a candidate's strategy to win office and as a behavior open to experimental manipulation and measurement through various methods of contact. According to professional political consultants, there are many viable methods of getting out the vote (GOTV); the results of controlled field experiments provide information as to the absolute effectiveness as well as the cost efficacy of these various methods.[2]

Past research has explored the effect of a number of treatments on voters' decision to vote, including direct in-person contact by volunteers and paid staffers, in-person "leafleting",

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[2] See Part XVI of Faucheux (2003), and Green and Gerber (2004, 2008), respectively, for examples.

phone calls, email, text messages to cellular phones, and direct mail.[3] The number of contacts a voter or household receives in these various treatments range from one to as high as nine in some cases. These investigations find that contacting voters increases their likelihood of voting, that more direct contact, such as door-to-door canvassing (Green and Gerber 2004, 2008) results in greater numbers of voters choosing to vote, but that generally speaking, the informative content of the messages (e.g., polling place location) does not affect voters' turnout decisions. There is some evidence, however, indicating the impact of different message content on voters' turnout decisions (see, e.g., Gerber et al. 2008), and also some weak evidence that messages with greater information about how, when, and where to vote serve lead more voters to go to the polls (Green and Gerber 2001). Thus, while there is some evidence that having more information about the election can raise voter turnout, and also that there are messages that can lower voter turnout, there is no evidence as to whether *misinformation* affects voters' turnout decision.

Grose and Russell (2008) use a novel environment—the public voting of the 2008 Iowa Democratic Caucuses—and find that reminding voters of the public nature of their vote at the caucuses completely removes any positive effect of reminding them to go to the polls. Their results indicate that there are messages that can lower voter turnout, and as such provide the first evidence indicating the possibility of active, intentional voter demobilization, albeit not using misinformation. Green and Gerber (2001) have one treatment in which voters receive the

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[3] For examples, see Michelson (2003); Michelson and Villa (2003); Gerber and Green (2000); Bennion (2003); Green and Gerber (2001); Green et al. (2003); Nickerson (2002); Friedrichs (2003); and Nickerson (2003) for direct in-person contact by volunteers and paid staffers; Friedrichs (2003); Nickerson (2003); and Gerber and Green (2000) for in-person "leafleting"; Gerber and Green (2000); Gerber and Green (2001); Arceneaux et al. (2003); McNulty (2003); Green et al. (2003); Friedrichs (2003); Nickerson and Rogers (2010); Ramirez et al. (2003); and Wong (2003) for phone calls; Phillips (2001) for email; Dale and Strauss (2007) for text messages to cellular phones; and Gerber and Green (2000); Gerber et al. (2000); Green (2004); Gerber et al. (2003); Gerber (2004); Wong (2003); Ramirez (2003); Gerber et al. (2008); and Grose and Russell (2008) for direct mail.

location of their polling place in addition to a generic GOTV message; they find that the additional information increases turnout relative to the generic message, but the difference is not statistically significant. Dale and Strauss (2007) use text messages as a GOTV message, including a treatment supplying voters with a voter information hotline where they can learn about the process of voting; the informative treatment is no more effective than the plain GOTV message. In short, while there is ample evidence that merely informing voters of an upcoming election increases their likelihood of voting, there is only a weak suggestion that additional information about voting influences individuals' decision to go vote. And while Grose and Russell have uncovered a message that reduces people's likelihood to go vote—reminding them of the public nature of their vote—it is unclear whether misinformation would effect the turnout decision similarly.

Given the quantity and quality of research on mobilization, it is somewhat surprising that there are no studies of voter demobilization. But there are at least three good reasons for the lack of formal investigation. First, it is difficult to observe naturally occurring demobilization experiments. Researchers and policymakers often find out about the use of voter demobilization purely from journalists' accounts, if at all. Even the best accounts cannot clearly delineate which voters—or even which geographic areas—receive the demobilizing message. Second, it is possible that many researchers feel no harm is done by inducing people to vote, but that it is at best distasteful and at worst unethical to trick citizens out of their franchise to advance the understanding of voting behavior. And finally, for those researchers and political operatives who do not react to the internal sanction of personal ethics, a few states have passed legislation making it a crime to mislead or deceive voters so as to deprive them of their ability to cast a

ballot (Wang et al. 2008). Thus, in order to study demobilization, it is necessary to create a voting environment that lacks these legal and ethical difficulties, such as a mock election.[4]

We turn now to a discussion of the methods used to demobilize voters in naturally-occurring elections, followed by a theoretical approach to voter demobilization built on Riker and Ordeshook (1968), and finally the novel environment we employ to ameliorate the legal and ethical concerns of studying voter demobilization.

3. VOTER DEMOBILIZATION

Popular press accounts use more than one name for voter demobilization; more common terms for the phenomenon are voter suppression or voter intimidation.[5] Writers use these terms both to refer to the particular meaning of demobilization as described above, as well as broader regulatory choices that affect the ease with which individual citizens may vote. This section provides a brief series of examples of the former.

Demobilization tactics fall into three loosely-defined groups: removing registered voters from the voter rolls or preventing them from registering initially, making voting on Election Day difficult through challenging a voter's eligibility, or spreading misinformation as to some aspect of the election, such as the date, location, or the individual citizen's eligibility to vote. In the first

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[4] The author originally attempted to conduct this experiment in a student government election at their institution, a public university of roughly 30,000 students. After consulting with the administration, we were informed that the university would not allow us to "tamper" with student elections. The university officials in question wrote, "although we both think that your idea and theory is sound, we are uncomfortable allowing you to 'tamper' with student elections. Over the past several years the office of Student Activities has worked hard to ensure that both the Student Government and [graduate student government] are legitimate student governance organizations on campus and we are concerned that your research project could potentially tarnish that legitimacy" (personal communication). Having made inquiries into private elections, such as homeowners' associations, we believe performing this experiment in such environments may lead to legal action against ourselves.

[5] For a thorough account of the available information on both voter suppression and voter fraud, see Appendix II of U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2006).

case, a partisan (such as a party official) makes a formal challenge against a list of names currently on the voter rolls. An example from the 2004 presidential campaign:

> Dan Burdish, former director of the state's Republican Party, filed a complaint to remove 17,000 voters from the rolls because they had failed to file a change of address card. State law doesn't require it and, in fact, allows you to vote after moving. When asked why he did it, Burdish told the press, "I am looking to take Democrats off the voter rolls." (Hitt 2004)[6]

The second tactic, increasing the difficulty of voting on Election Day by challenging voters' eligibility, is also called vote caging.[7] Blumner (2007) explains its workings:

> Have you ever received a piece of first-class mail from a political party? Not likely; campaign literature typically comes bulk rate. But in its vote caging effort, the Republican Party sent out registered and first-class mail with "do not forward" instructions to thousands of new voters in certain districts in key states. Then the party waited for some of that mail to come back as undeliverable. Those voters were then placed on a list and subject to challenge on Election Day due to their invalid address.[8]

These tactics, while interesting forms of demobilization worthy of study in their own right, are attempts to remove from individuals the ability to vote, and not affect their decision to vote on Election Day *per se.* As such, they are not the focus of this paper; the third tactic is. Unlike the first two methods of demobilization, partisans may undertake a misinformation campaign anonymously; voters receive misinformation that suggests that they cannot vote, ought not vote, or can vote on a day other than Election Day. In practice, voters rarely learn who misleads them during or even after the election. The nature of the misinformation, however, is often documented. A few examples from past elections:

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[6] Hitt (2004) provides extensive examples of this first method. Many of his examples, however, are actions that mix political partisans and regulatory officials, such as formal lists of purged voters drawn up by elections officials who are also chairs of political campaigns.

[7] James (2007) provides a discussion of modern vote caging efforts in a historical context.

[8] The reader may notice that these U.S. examples tend to be "Republicans against Democrats." Hitt (2004) argues that all stories of voter demobilization in the 2004 general election involve Republicans; stories he finds of Democratic voter irregularities involve invalid voter registration. Fund (2004) argues that Democrats pursue different criminal tactics: they tend to try and inflate vote totals through voter fraud, such as voting individuals who have already voted, are ineligible, or are dead. According to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2006), however, allegations of both types of activities appear to be common across party lines.

> In Lake County, Ohio, officials say at least a handful of voters have reported receiving a notice on phony board of elections letterhead saying that anyone who had registered through a variety of Democratic-leaning groups would not be allowed to vote this year. … [I]n Michigan, Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land said she had to put out a statement in mid-October about where to send absentee ballots after voters in the Ann Arbor area received calls telling them to mail the ballots to the wrong address. (Zernike and Yardley 2004)

> One suppression tactic emerged in Philadelphia recently. Fliers appeared on the Drexel University campus and elsewhere falsely warning that voters would be arrested at the polls for outstanding traffic warrants. (Curry 2008)

These examples illustrate a campaign tactic most similar to voter mobilization, but in each case, the goal is clearly to mislead voters into choosing not to vote. We test an example of this last type of voter demobilization through misinformation.

4. A MODEL OF DEMOBILIZATION

We examine two closely related approaches as to how misinformation might affect a voter's turnout decision. The first builds on the model of voting developed by Riker and Ordeshook (1968), while the other draws from the psychological literature on misinformation. First, consider the Riker and Ordeshook model, which models the decision to vote as the expected benefit of voting exceeding the cost:

[1] $pB + D > C$

where p is the probability a voter's vote is decisive in the contest, B is the differential benefit the voter receives from her preferred candidate prevailing, D is the psychic benefit the voter receives from voting, and C represents the cost of voting. The likelihood a voter will be decisive is near zero, and so the voter compares the psychic benefit of voting to its costs, voting when D exceeds C, and not otherwise. Psychic benefits can be multifaceted, and include both the intrinsic benefit from doing one's "civic duty" as well as extrinsic benefits, such as the social motivations highlighted by Gerber et al. (2008). Costs are similarly multifaceted, and can be represented as:

[2] $C = C_m + C_p + C_c$

where C_m represents the material costs of voting, such as getting to the polls, waiting in line, and so on, C_p represents the psychic costs of voting, such as social pressures when one's vote is known (Grose and Russell 2008), and C_c represents the cognitive cost of voting. Cognitive cost, put simply, is remembering to register to vote, the date and time of the election, the location of the polling place, and other small details of the process of voting without which one cannot cast a vote on Election Day.

In the mobilization experiments discussed above, many treatments serve to prime psychic benefits (e.g., by reminding people of their civic duty). These treatments often simultaneously lower the cognitive cost of voting by reminding voters that there is an election, which may be difficult to remember for the party primaries and off-year or municipal elections in which many of these experiments occur. For more salient elections, it is unlikely that there are many voters who require such a simple reminder. Many get-out-the-vote messages contain much more than a reminder of the existence of the election; they often also include the time and date the polls are open, as well as the voter's polling place. Such information has no impact on a voter's intrinsic or extrinsic benefit from voting; it lowers the cost of remembering to vote. And just as reminding voters as to the correct date, hours, and location of an election lowers the cost of voting, misleading voters as to these details may serve to raise the cost of voting. It may be, of course, that misinformation raises non-cognitive costs, as a voter puts effort into resolving the difference between the misinformation and true information she receives. This modeling difference, while conceptually important, would not change the role of misinformation in raising voting costs.

We conducted our experiment in a "mock" gubernatorial election, which ran concurrently with the 2009 Virginia gubernatorial election. The mock election had no impact on the winner of the election, and presumably, any psychic benefit from voting in the mock election was

negligible, though not necessarily zero. As the benefit was likely near zero, however, we enter

voters who voted in the mock election in a lottery for $1,000. It is the voter's subjective expected

value of the lottery that serves to proxy for the intrinsic benefit of voting. We conducted the

election online, so the material costs of voting in the mock election were near zero, and the

psychic costs nonexistent. The cognitive costs, while low, were not zero; voters had to remember

to go online and vote. Thus:

[3] $D_l > C_c$

where D_l represents any remaining intrinsic value of "voting" as well as the voter's (subjective)

expected value over the lottery. The voter votes when this value exceeds the cognitive cost of

voting. It is worth noting here, though we discuss it below in greater detail, that the mock

election has all the context and trappings of a real election to the extent possible: it is run

contemporaneously with the actual 2009 Virginia gubernatorial election, signing up to participate

is called "registering to vote", and the act of getting one's chance at the lottery is the act of

voting for statewide officials in the mock election. In the taxonomy of Harrison and List (2004),

this endeavor is a "framed field experiment" (pp. 1014): it has many aspects of a conventional

laboratory experiment, but with a field context and information set. The goal is to give what is

otherwise a lottery with information and search costs the context and meaning of voting in an

election with voter suppression.[9]

A second way of thinking about demobilization comes from the psychological literature

on misinformation. Psychologists have long recognized that introducing misinformation into

questions about a recently-witnessed event can cause subjects to misremember the event later,

that is, to remember the misinformation as part of the event (Loftus 2005, for a discussion of the

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[9] Thanks to Marco Castillo for making this point.

misinformation literature). The formal modeling in this literature does not consider this a "cognitive cost" scenario, but demonstrates that misinformation increases incidence of misremembering. In this sense, psychologists provide a broad construct—misinformation-impaired memory—that suggests the possibility of voter demobilization through lying to voters.

Another robust finding from the psychological literature is that warning subjects about the possibility of misinformation raises their resistance to it; they are more likely to remember that the misinformation was not part of the initial event (Eakin et al. 2003). In terms of equation [3] above, we would expect that warnings serve to lower the cognitive cost of voting relative to misinformation, and also possibly lower the cost absolutely by reminding voters of the simple fact of an election. The experimental design developed below builds on this finding from psychology by giving some voters a warning regarding the possibility of misinformation.

The reader may wonder what external validity such an "inoculation" against misinformation has, as analogous messages in actual elections do not spring readily to mind.[10] To that concern we have two replies. First, the warning against misinformation is not meant to represent any one particular message of an actual election, but rather an amalgamation of several. In Kentucky, for example, the county clerk in each county sends all registered voters a simple postcard reminding them when and where they vote leading up to Election Day. This message helped prevent accidental demobilization when a political party erred in sending its own supporters the wrong location information for their precincts.[11] In addition to these government measures, many political actors have an incentive to mobilize their supporters, reminding them

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[10] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer who raised this question.

[11] See http://www.sos.ky.gov/secdesk/mediacenter/pressreleases/article214.htm for the press release from the Kentucky Secretary of State. Details of the incident from personal communication with a Secretary of State employee and a staff member of the state political party.

of the date and time of the election. The warning message in our experiment has elements of all these messages, including factual information regarding the date and time of the mock election.

The second reason is that experiments are an opportunity both to measure rigorously elements of the naturally occurring world as well as to test ideas not yet in existence. Democratic governments have an interest in preserving the franchise of their citizenry, and political parties have an interest in getting their supporters to the polls. As misinformation may interfere with both interests, testing a simple message to warn and potentially protect voters from misinformation is an important element of the research design, even and especially if it is not yet part of the electoral policy of any state, locality, or party.

5. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

We conducted the field experiment during the 2009 gubernatorial election in Virginia using a mock election held at a university in that state. The mock election involved allowing students to vote for their choice of statewide candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general. While candidates for all races waged heated campaigns, it was widely expected prior to the election that the Republicans would win the gubernatorial race, and also likely win the offices of lieutenant governor and attorney general.[12]

The mock election has obvious parallels to official federal, state, and local elections. The mock election coincides with an actual election. Subjects must register to vote voluntarily by the same deadline as in the actual gubernatorial election. They vote on the same day, during the same hours, and for the same statewide slate of candidates as in the actual election. The recruitment email, posters, campus news coverage, all subsequent emails, and the mock election

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[12] R. Creigh Deeds, the Democratic Party candidate for governor, led the race briefly in publicly available polls in June 2009. All polls immediately preceding the election had Robert "Bob" McDonnell winning the gubernatorial race by sizable margins.

website all emphasize that the naturally occurring election and the mock election are coincident and concern the same outcomes. As we have argued above, performing this research in an actual environment is infeasible, as it would be both unethical and illegal.[13] We have constructed this experiment to resemble a naturally occurring election to the extent possible, so that individuals frame their decision to act in this environment as akin to choosing whether to vote on Election Day. Until a jurisdiction allows the performance of a misinformation campaign in an actual election, stylized environments will provide our best estimate of the effect of misinformation in elections.

While the mock election shares many attributes of actual elections, it also has key differences. First, as a mock election, individuals cannot be the pivotal voter, and likely experience little psychic or expressive benefit to voting.[14] Because student voters' psychic benefit may be low relative to an actual election, the mock election included a lottery: all students who registered to vote and subsequently voted in the mock election entered a drawing where they could win a prize of $1,000. Second, while most actual elections involve large segments of the population physically going to the polls, the mock election was conducted online through a web site. Using their private username, students cast their vote from the comfort of their dorm room. This second feature of the election—a zero-material-cost voting environment—may increase voter turnout relative to a local election or an uncontested primary. Conversely, an

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[13] As noted above, the author attempted to conduct this experiment in an election for university student government, but university administrators were concerned with taking the franchise of individuals even in such a limited election.

[14] It does not appear, however, that the expressive benefit is zero: following the experiment, some subjects indicated a desire to participate in the mock election to express views that differed from those of their classmates and Virginia voters generally.

almost purely electronic environment may be less salient overall, irrespective of the treatment the subjects receive.[15]

The sample for this experiment is 380 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who voluntarily registered to vote in the mock election. We randomly assigned the 380 subjects into four groups; 95 subjects are the control group, with the remaining 285 assigned to one of three treatment groups. Students received invitations to register to vote by email sent between September 13, 2009, and October 5, 2009. The [SCHOOL] Mock Election recruitment materials, along with the interface and other information, are available in the supporting information. There were also posters for the mock election in classrooms and buildings around campus, as well as an article in the weekly student newspaper regarding the event. As with the actual Virginia election, students had to register for the mock election by October 5, 2009, at midnight, in order to be part of the mock election. Thus, subjects self-select into the experiment in the same way that individuals in the voting-age population self-select into the pool of registered voters: for whatever reason, they have a sufficiently high valuation of participation. Students of all ages registered for the mock election, from 18 to 71 years of age, though the median registrant is a 22-year-old. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics by treatment.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

There are two messages in this experiment; copies of each message are included in the supporting information. One message serves to warn or inoculate subjects against misinformation; the other is misinformation designed to demobilize subjects from voting. The *Inoculate* treatment group received only the first message. We sent individuals assigned to the

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[15] Because the mock election could lack the salience of an actual election, we sent two emails, three and two weeks before the election, respectively, reminding subjects about both the actual election and the student election. These activities do not vary by treatment; they are meant only to raise the general level of salience of the mock election.

Inoculate treatment group on October 28, 2009, approximately one week before the mock

election. The email comes from the email address

"boardofelections@[SCHOOL]mockelection.com", as did all previous correspondence regarding

the mock election, with the subject line, "Watch Out for Voter Suppression!"

The *Demobilize* treatment group receives only the second message. This message serves

to mislead voters as to the occurrence of the mock election. We sent individuals assigned to the

Demobilize treatment group the demobilizing message on November 3, 2009 (Election Day),

before 6:00AM. The email comes from an individual previously unassociated with the election

("Michael Donovan") from the email address "[SCHOOL]specialelection@gmail.com" with the

subject line "Election Cancelled".

The final treatment group, *Both*, received both the inoculation message and the

demobilization message. Subjects voted online through the Mock Election website; a copy of the

ballot is available in the supporting information. With respect to the simple theory developed

above, the misinformation may serve to raise the cognitive cost of voting. Individuals' aggregate

turnout results consistent with this hypothesis would obey the following pattern of turnout levels:

[4] *Demobilize < Control < Inoculate*

Where *Both* should fall in the above inequality is unclear. On the one hand, if the impact of

warning subjects about misinformation makes them particularly vigilant, then receiving

misinformation on Election Day may actual *raise* their turnout.[16] If this were the case, then the

Both treatment group would have the highest turnout. Conversely, inoculation and

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[16] There is also the possibility that subjects who receive the misinformation message do not actually absorb the content but only the action of receiving a message. In that case, voters who receive misinformation really receive a prod to vote on Election Day. If this is the case, we would expect a turnout pattern such as this:
Control < Inoculate ≤ Demobilize < Both
As demonstrated below, however, the results are wholly inconsistent with this possibility.

misinformation may cancel each other out (one lowering the cognitive cost of remembering to vote, the other raising it), in which case we would expect the turnout rate of subjects in the *Both* treatment to be similar to that of the control group.

6. RESULTS

We first check for random assignment to the treatments by subject covariates. The treatment assignment covaries slightly with major; as seen in Table 1, subjects randomly assigned to the *Both* treatment are somewhat less likely to have a politically-oriented major. Treatment assignment does not covary with age, gender, or citizenship, as demonstrated in the multinomial logit presented in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Before examining the experimental results, there is also the question of the overall salience of the mock election. On the one hand, subjects can win a $1,000 lottery for a few minutes of their time; on the other, the mock election, however motivated, does not have the same organizational history as Virginia gubernatorial elections. The combination of these factors appears to result in lower participation in the mock election relative to the level of turnout for younger voters in the actual gubernatorial election. Only 10.5 percent of registered mock election voters chose to vote in the mock election, compared to 17 percent voter turnout for 18- to 29-year-olds in Virginia during the 2009 gubernatorial election.

Figure 1 shows turnout rates among the experimental groups. The results are consistent with the hypothesis that misinformation lowers voter turnout, and also with the findings of psychologists that warning people against misinformation lessens its impact. The *Demobilize* treatment group has a turnout rate of 6.3%, compared to a turnout rate of 11.6% for the control group. The *Inoculate* treatment group turns out at a rate of 12.6%. Finally, the turnout behavior

of the *Both* group would suggest that inoculation and misinformation cancel each other out; the turnout rate is 11.6%, the same as the control group.[17]

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Testing the differences between treatment groups' turnout reported in Figure 1 using t-tests reveals that they are not statistically significant at conventional levels. The difference between the *Control* and *Demobilize* group is barely significant in a one-sided t-test (p=0.1029). The results, however, do match the pattern of turnout predicted by the simple theoretical model above. Furthermore, a Jonckheere trend test confirms that the data fit the predicted pattern (*Demobilize < Control < Inoculate*), but this result is weakly statistically significant (p = 0.075). Table 3 reports probit estimates of the treatment effect, unconditional and conditional on demographic covariates. None of the effects reported reach the 10 percent level of statistical significance.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

While it is not the case that there is statistically significant evidence of misinformation demobilizing voters across the entire sample, the turnout pattern across treatments is consistent with the theory above. Misinformation may only demobilize some subgroup of the entire population. As discussed above, demobilization tactics are generally employed against individuals in less affluent African-American communities, students, and those who are less likely to seek out or to find truthful information regarding the date, time, and location of voting. In this sample, most of the voters are young (less than 30 years of age), but there is some observable variation in their political interest: whether they have chosen a major with a political

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[17] An anonymous reviewer asked whether *Demobilized* voters attempted to vote the next day, or merely did not vote. We did not have the ability to see which specific individuals came to the website on and after Election Day, but did observe overall page views. The page received only 40 page views on Election Day; it received 180 page views the Wednesday after Election Day.

focus. Presumably students who choose to major in political science and public policy are more aware both of elections themselves and of the possibility of misinformation or voter suppression. As such, they may be less responsive to misinformation. The last four columns of Table 3 present evidence suggesting that this is the case: voters with a political major have no statistically significant differences in behavior across treatments, while voters with a non-political major are about 8 percent less likely to turn out relative to the control group when not controlling for other demographic covariates, and almost 10 percent less likely to turn out relative to the control group when controlling for those covariates.

Finally, there is some evidence that a warning can reduce the impact of misinformation. Across all voters, there is no difference in turnout between the *Control* and *Both* treatment groups. As the difference between *Control* and the *Demobilize* treatment group is weakly significant, this indicates that a simple warning in advance of the election does serve, to some degree, to ameliorate the negative impact of misinformation on turnout. Within the subgroup of voters who are not political majors, turnout is lower in the *Both* treatment group than in the control, though it is not statistically different from either the average turnout in the control or in the *Demobilize* treatment group. Thus, while there is some evidence that warning voters about misinformation serves to inoculate them from its effect, the evidence is less than robust.

7. CONCLUSION

Voter demobilization tactics are not new; they have merely developed over time from overt physical intimidation to subtle coercion and misinformation. Decades of empirical research in psychology suggest that misinformation, when it is not warned against initially, can serve to mislead individuals' memories of events. And a well-developed literature in political science documents myriad ways of positively affecting individuals' decision to vote on Election Day. As

correctly informing voters as to the details of the election increases their likelihood of voting, it seems reasonable that misinforming voters about elections could lead them to choose not to vote, either through causing incorrect memories as to the particulars of the election, or raising the cognitive cost of remembering correctly.

The pattern of the above results is consistent with that possibility, but the statistical significance of these results is admittedly weak. While it is possible that the lack of strong statistical significance is due to an ineffectiveness of voter demobilization, it may also be due to other factors. One such factor is political awareness; it may be that misinformation works only on less politically aware subgroups of the population. The qualitative evidence from press accounts suggests that it is at such groups that political actors target misinformation. We present some evidence as to why: misinformation demobilizes individuals who are less political, in that they do not pursue politically-based academic interests. Of course, this evidence is at best speculative due to the features of the environment itself. An electronic environment with email-based treatments may not generalize to an actual electoral contest. But that there are effects consistent with the hypothesis is a surprising and important finding, and represent the only quantitative evidence of the effect of such active suppression for policymakers at this time.

In closing, this study represents the first empirical examination of voter demobilization. The pattern of the results are consistent with the prediction that misinformation raises the cognitive cost of voting, and can lead to lower turnout. Voters who are warned about misinformation vote at rates no different from the control group; those unwarned vote about half as much. And a subgroup of voters—those whom we would expect to be less politically informed—are particularly affected by the misinformation. They are roughly 10 percent less likely to turn out than the control group. As it is unlikely that political actors will soon stop

attempting to demobilize voters, it is worthwhile to attempt to replicate these findings to determine whether this feature of modern-day elections is indeed determining who does—and doesn't—go to the polls.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	All	**Control**	**Inoculate**	**Both**	**Demobilize**
Age	25.2	25.4	25.5	24.7	25.3
	(8.5)	(9.5)	(9.6)	(6.4)	(8.1)
Female	0.59	0.53	0.58	0.62	0.62
	(0.49)	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.49)	(0.49)
U.S. Citizen	0.92	0.92	0.89	0.93	0.93
	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.31)	(0.26)	(0.26)
Political Major	0.55	0.59	0.57	0.44	0.61
	(0.50)	(0.49)	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.49)
N	380	95	95	95	95

Note: Standard deviations in parenthesis. Having a political major is defined as having a major in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the School of Law, or the School of Public Policy.

Table 2. Treatment Group Assignment as a Function of Demographic Covariates

	Inoculate	*Both*	*Demobilize*
Age	0.002	-0.012	-0.001
	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Female	0.236	0.416	0.380
	(0.295)	(0.299)	(0.297)
U.S. Citizen	-0.266	0.296	0.069
	(0.510)	(0.553)	(0.551)
Political major	-0.075	-0.665**	0.050
	(0.301)	(0.300)	(0.303)
Constant	0.107	0.128	-0.283
	(0.647)	(0.691)	(0.686)

Coefficient estimates from multinomial logit, with control group as base group.

Standard errors in parentheses, p-values in italics.

Regression contains 380 observations, pseudo-R2 of 0.01

* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

Running regression with eleven binary variables denoting the school the student attends within the university, or whether the student is 'undecided', rather than "political major", yields qualitatively similar results without any statistically significant relationships between the characteristics and the assigned treatment.

**Table 3. Unconditional and Conditional Marginal Treatment Effects on Voter Turnout, Probit Estimation**

	All Voters	All Voters	Political Majors	Political Majors	Apolitical Majors	Apolitical Majors
Inoculate	0.01	0.01	0.042	0.054	-0.021	-0.028
	(0.83)	(0.77)	(0.069)	(0.073)	(0.047)	(0.052)
Both	-0.00	-0.00	0.061	0.068	-0.039	-0.056
	(1.00)	(0.96)	(0.077)	(0.081)	(0.044)	(0.049)
Demobilize	-0.05	-0.06	-0.024	-0.026	-0.083**	-0.096**
	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.061)	(0.063)	(0.037)	(0.041)
Covariates?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	380	348	210	201	170	147
Pseudo-R^2	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.04

Marginal effects, P>|z| reported in parenthesis.

* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Covariates included are age, gender, and political major, except where sample split by political major. Note that being a non-citizen perfectly predicts not voting, so non-citizens are dropped in analyses including covariates.

Figure 1. Treatment Effects in Mock Election Voter Turnout
(Mean +/- Standard Error of Mean)
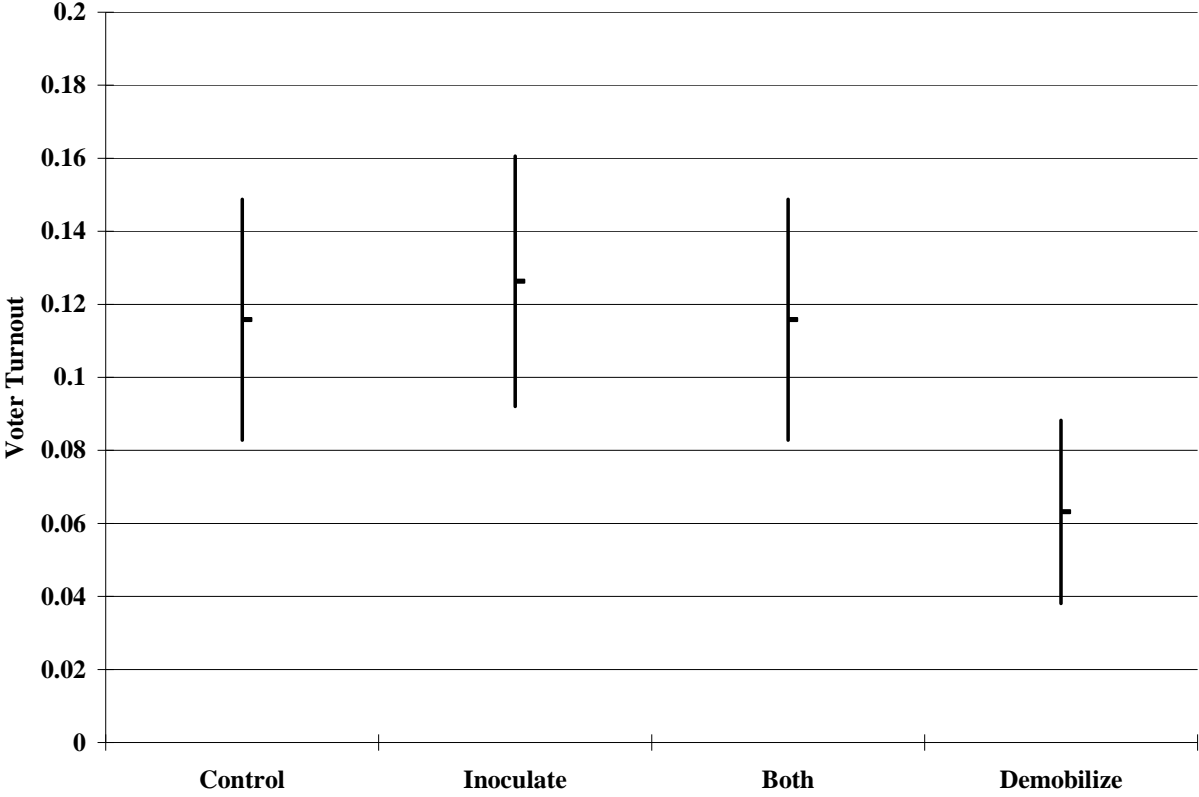
SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Recruitment Email 1

Subject: Introducing the Mason Mock Election

Did you know that this November, there is an election here in Virginia? On November 3, 2009, Virginia will elect a new governor as well as other statewide and local officials. These elected officials make important decisions that affect all of our lives, especially the decisions that relate to the University. Of course, not every student of George Mason University is eligible to vote in the state election, but you can still make your voice heard through Mason Mock Election, and even win some money.

Mason Mock Election is an online election, conducted with the same ballot that folks here in Fairfax have. It lets all the students here at GMU, even those from out of state (and out of the United States) express their views on who should make the decisions that impact all of our lives. After the election takes place, we will send our mock vote to the Virginia statehouse, so the elected officials know the views of Mason's student body.

While we think it's important that all residents be aware of the world around them, we recognize that we all pay attention to different things. That's why the Mock Election is also a lottery! That's right, if you register to participate in the Mock Election, and you also vote in the Mason Mock Election on Election Day, you are eligible for a lottery with a $1,000 prize.

Mason Mock Election takes place on the same day (November 3) and at the same time (6:00 AM to 7:00 PM) as the 2009 Virginia election. To register, go online to masonmockelection.com and fill out the online registration form before October 5, 2009. Then use the links on the website to investigate the candidates for the statewide offices. Finally, vote online on Election Day in the Mason Mock Election, and wait to hear if you won the $1,000 prize.

Oh yeah—if you're a Mason student and a Virginia citizen, don't forget to vote in the real Virginia election, too!

Sincerely,

Mason Mock Election

Mason Mock Election is an independent organization that is not affiliated with George Mason University.

Recruitment Email 2

Subject: Mason Mock Election--Reminder

The 2009 Virginia election is fast approaching; have you registered to vote? Have you registered to vote in the Mason Mock Election?

Why not?

The Mason Mock Election is a chance for all the student of George Mason University to express their view, as a student body, on who should be calling the shots in Richmond. Plus, everyone who registers to vote in the Mock Election, then votes in the Mock Election on Election Day, is entered into a drawing for $1,000!

So what are you waiting for? Go online to masonmockelection.com, register for the Mock Election, read up on the candidates, and go vote on Election Day.

Mason Mock Election

Mason Mock Election is an independent organization that is not affiliated with George Mason University.

TREATMENT EMAIL

Inoculate **Email**

[SCHOOL] Mock Election wants to remind student voters to look out for voter suppression in the 2009 Virginia election. Voter suppression can mean lots of things, from people at polling places trying to disqualify your vote based on small discrepancies (for example, having your name misspelled in the voter rolls or on your ID) to emails or flyers that lie about the time, date, or place of the election.

Remember: the 2009 Virginia Election will take place on November 3, 2009, from 6:00 AM to 7:00 PM, and you vote at your polling place, no matter what. And the [SCHOOL] Mock Election will take place on November 3, 2009, from 6:00 AM to 7:00 PM, no matter what, and you vote online at [SCHOOL]mockelection.com. Don't get suppressed; watch out for voter suppression!

[SCHOOL] Mock Election

[SCHOOL] Mock Election is an independent organization that is not affiliated with [SCHOOL].

Demobilize **Email**

Please note that the [SCHOOL] Special Election has been moved to November 4th. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you.

Michael Donovan

[SCHOOL] Special Election

CREATING SALIENCE OF MOCK ELECTION

Get-Out-The-Vote Email to All Subjects

Subject: Don't Forget to Vote (from the Mason Mock Election)

This is a quick reminder from Mason Mock Election.

Thanks for registering to vote in the Mason Mock Election. Please remember to vote in the Mock Election on Election Day, November 3, 2009, between 6:00 AM and 7:00 PM. Just go online to masonmockelection.com, log in using your Mock Election ID, and vote.

Also, if you're registered to vote here in Virginia, don't forget to vote in the 2009 Virginia Election at your polling place (same time as the Mock Election).

Mason Mock Election

Mason Mock Election is an independent organization that is not affiliated with George Mason University.

Get-out-the-vote Mock Election Poster (below)

MASon Mock election '09

MCDONNELL	**DEEDS**
(republican)	(Democrat)

Go online to <u>masonmockelection.com</u> and register to vote in the Mock Election. Then vote in the Mock Election on November 3rd (just like the actual election), and we'll send the results to Richmond. And everyone who votes in the Mock Election has a chance to win $1,OOO in a drawing!

So make your voice heard! Go to <u>masonmockelection.com</u> today! And if you're eligible, don't forget to vote in the actual Virginia Gubernatorial!

REGISTER. LEaRn. VOTE!

MOCK ELECTION WEBSITE (www.masonmockelection.com)

Mason Mock Election

Home | About | Register! | Learn | Vote

Welcome to the Mason Mock Election. Please take a moment to register to vote, then go to the Learn section to find out more about the 2009 Virginia gubernatorial election.

Mason Mock Election

Home | About | Register! | Learn | Vote

The Mason Mock Election is a voluntary survey of George Mason University students about who they want to see as Virginia's next governor. Because the governor's stance on issues—including his budget priorities—has a big impact on all Mason students, but not all Mason students are eligible to vote in Virginia, Mason Mock Election created this survey as an opportunity for students to learn about the governor's race and to participate in it in some fashion. It is structured like the actual election, with some twists:

1) All Mason students over the age of 18 are eligible to participate.

2) To participate, students must register by October 5, 2009, at 11:59 PM.

3) The survey takes place on Election Day, November 3, 2009, from 6:00 AM to 7:00 PM.

4) To encourage participation, there is a drawing for $1,000 for all students who **register** and **vote** in the Mock Election!

And that's it! So to participate, go and register, then learn about the candidates and their stances, and vote on Election Day! And if you're eligible to vote in the actual gubernatorial election, don't forget to vote!

Mason Mock Election

Welcome to the Mason Mock Election Voter Registration. Please fill out the registration form to become eligible to vote in the mock election.

Voter Registration

First Name

Last Name

* GMU email address (for validation purposes)

* Email address (the one you actually read)

* Age (years--you must be at least 18 to participate)

* Major

* Gender
- ○ Female
- ○ Male

* U.S. Citizen?
- ○ Yes
- ○ No

* Indicates Response Required

Mason Mock Election

Here are some links to important websites that may help you learn where the gubernatorial candidates stand on issues that affect your life!

Creigh Deeds - the Democratic Party candidate for governor

Bob McDonnell - the Republican Party candidate for governor

Race to Richmond - The Washington Post's ongoing coverage of the 2009 Virginia Election

RealClearPolitics.com - A general interest site on politics, with regular op-ed aggregation and polling data.

Politics1.com - A general interest site with a complete list of current officeholders and candidates for office.

Mason Mock Election

Home | About | Register! | Learn | Vote

Come back on election day and vote!

Ballot - Mason Mock Election

Please fill out the following information before casting your ballot. These personal identifiers will be compared with the Mason Mock Election registration files to ensure that you are a registered voter in the Mock Election.

Thank you!

Mason Mock Election

* First Name

* Last Name

* Email (GMU)

Below is your ballot for the Mason Mock Election. It lists all statewide offices. House of Delegate candidates are not listed, as not all Mock Election voters live in the same Delegate district.

Below is your ballot for the Mason Mock Election. It lists all statewide offices. House of Delegate candidates are not listed, as not all Mock Election voters live in the same Delegate district.

GOVERNOR
(Vote for not more than one)

○ Robert F. "Bob" McDonnell - R

○ R. Creigh Deeds - D

○ Write In

ATTORNEY GENERAL
(Vote for not more than one)

○ Ken T. Cuccinelli II - R

○ Stephen C. Shannon - D

○ Write In

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR
(Vote for not more than one)

○ William T. "Bill" Bolling - R

○ Jody M. Wagner - D

○ Write In

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE IN *GMU Broadside*

Mason Mock Election Mirrors Va. Political Race: Apathetic Students Give Mixed Review on Campus-Wide Mock Gubernatorial Election

October 5, 2009

Yasmin Tadjdeh, Assistant News Editor

With the Virginia gubernatorial race heating up, George Mason University will have its chance to cast its own unofficial ballot. Paralleling the election for governor of Virginia is Mason's own mock election.

Over the past few weeks students have periodically received e-mails informing them of the Mason Mock Election. Its creator Jared Barton, an economics graduate student said, "Many students, by virtue of being citizens of other states or countries, don't get to vote on issues here in Virginia. Elected officials and issues in Virginia, though, have a big impact on their time at Mason. The Mock Election allows those students, as well as Mason students who can vote in Virginia elections, to participate a little bit in Virginia politics."

The Mock Election is an unofficial online election, where students can place their vote for governor and, in the end, see who Mason would have voted for.

In order to participate in the Mock Election, students must register by 11:59 p.m. Monday, Oct. 5, which is also the deadline to register for the actual election.

Registered students then may vote on the Mock Election website, www.masonmockelection.com, between the hours of 6 a.m. – 7 p.m. on Nov. 3, the same day and hours that the real gubernatorial election are occurring.

Students who register and vote in the Mock Election will then be entered into a drawing for $1,000, funded by a research project through the Department of Economics, said Barton.

"I think [the Mock Election is] interesting," said Mason Votes Director Christian Smith. "I think anything that raises information about the election is good."

However, Smith hopes that students will not mistake registering for the Mock Election with registering for the real election.

Levan Bokeria, a freshman sociology major, said he doubts that students will take the Mock Election seriously.

"[I think students] will just register and vote for anybody to get a chance to win $1,000 . . . I don't think students will take it seriously, especially the international students like me," said Bokeria.

Senior government major Jennifer Bent said, "I think it would be interesting to see who Mason would vote for. I'm sure some people would [participate in the Mock Election] for the money, but I think it's an interesting concept."

In regard to voter apathy in the gubernatorial race, Bent said, "There are a lot of people in our age group who are passionate about voting . . . [but] some people will just vote for the presidential election, and not for the state and local election."

"[The gubernatorial election is] an important election. We focus on presidential elections … [while] 'off-year' elections generate less attention and have dramatically lower rates of turnout . . . but it's state and local politics that affect many of our day-to-day activities. Remember that the budget for Mason has more to do with Richmond than with the District," said Barton.

In the 2008 presidential election, 48.5 percent of voters between the ages of 18-24 voted. In the 2006 election, only 22.1 percent of the 18-24 bracket voted, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Students who are eligible to vote are encouraged to register to vote in the Mock Election, as well as the real election, while students who cannot vote are encouraged to register and vote in the Mock Election.

So far, a few hundred people have registered to vote in the Mock Election, according to Barton.

"After the election takes place, we will send our mock vote to the Virginia statehouse, so the elected officials know the views of Mason's student body," said Barton.