

Pilot Study

Effect of Vote By Mail Postcards on Behavior of Registered Democrats in Sarasota County

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Investigators

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Abstract

Some studies have shown that Vote by Mail programs increase voter turnout in Florida¹. Enrolling registered Democrats in Florida's Vote by Mail program is one of the top priorities of the Florida Democratic Party. In the fall of 2019, the SCDP performed a pilot study to assess the effectiveness of using postcards to encourage registered Democrats to enroll in Vote By Mail. We analyzed the voter files in 15 precincts to measure the baseline of Vote by Mail enrollments from June through November 2019. Six precincts were selected for the postcard intervention. There was a low baseline level of Vote by Mail enrollments in the months prior to the intervention. In the month following the intervention, there was a 3.1% increase in Vote by Mail enrollments compared to a 0.66% increase in all 15 precincts and a 0.35% increase in the nine precincts that did not receive the postcard mailing. In the month following the intervention, there was no increase in Vote by Mail enrollments. We conclude that postcard mailings may be an effective strategy to increase Vote by Mail enrollments. Further study is ongoing.

Background

In 2018, overall Florida Democratic voter turnout was 64.2%. Democrats who were registered to Vote by Mail turned out at 87.6% whereas those who were not registered turned out at 55%. In 2020, the Florida Democratic party anticipates that over 90% of Democrats enrolled in the Vote by Mail program will participate in the general election.

About Vote by Mail. In Florida, registered voters can request to receive an absentee ballot for all elections through the next two general election cycles. A vote by mail request form may be made by the voter, the voter's legal guardian, or an immediate family member of the voter or the voter's spouse. Voters who request to vote by mail will receive an absentee ballot 35 days before every election at the mailing address they specify on the request form.

Voters who enroll in Vote by Mail may vote by mailing their ballot to the County Board of Elections, by dropping off the ballot at an early voting site or by bringing it to the polls on Election Day.

Voting in Sarasota County: In Sarasota County, there are 317,000 registered voters, 30% of whom are registered as Democrats. In the 2018 midterm elections, 67% of registered Democrats in the county voted. Republican turnout was even higher, at 72%. In 2018, turnout among registered Democrats in Sarasota County who requested absentee ballots was 94%.

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/letting-people-vote-at-home-increases-voter-turnout-heres-proof/2018/01/26/d637b9d2-017a-11e8-bb03-722769454f82_story.html

Sarasota County Democratic Party Strategy: As of November 1st, 30% of Sarasota's 101,238 registered Democrats were enrolled in Vote by Mail. The Sarasota County Democratic Party (SCDP) plans to contact every registered Democrat who is not currently participating in the program to encourage them to enroll. Tactics for increasing Vote by Mail requests include calling and texting voters, canvassing, and mailing Vote by Mail request forms directly to voters.

With the help of volunteers Joan Blair, Jean Milburn, Betty Salzberg and Susan Labandibar, the SCDP sent approximately 1,250 hand-addressed postcards including a personalized message and a Vote by Mail request form to registered Democrats in North Port, a city located in Sarasota County.

Methods

1. The SCDP created postcards to encourage registered Democrats who were not currently registered for Vote by Mail to enroll.
2. Six of the 15 precincts located in North Port, FL were randomly selected for the postcard mailing. Postcards were mailed to every registered Democrat in the precinct who was not yet registered to vote by mail. (Approximately 1,250 voters.)
3. Postcards were hand-addressed and included a personal message from the volunteer.
4. Voters were advised of three ways to register to vote by mail: online, by mail or by telephone.
5. The postcard included a tear-off Vote by Mail application with return postage provided. [See Figure 1]
6. The postcards were returned to Sarasota, where they were mailed in early September.
7. The Sarasota County Board of Elections processed Vote by Mail requests as they arrived and tracked this information in the voter file. There was no significant time lapse between reception of requests and updates to the voter file.
8. Shortly after the end of each month, the Sarasota Supervisor of Elections sends voter registration and Vote by Mail registration reports to the SCDP.
9. We analyzed the data received from the voter files to assess differences in Vote by Mail registration in the precincts that received postcards versus those who did not.

Results

1. Increases in North Port Vote by Mail registrations were low during the study period, with an average of 0.66% month-over-month. [See Figure 2]
2. In the months prior to the postcard mailing, month-over-month increases in the targeted precincts ranged from 0.13% to 0.32%. In the month following the mailing, Vote by Mail registrations increased by 3.1% [See Figure 3]
3. Precincts that did not receive the postcards continued to see low rates of Vote by Mail registrations, with an average increase of 0.35% between September and October.
4. Two months after the postcard mailing, the enrollment rate in all North Port precincts, including the postcard precincts, returned to a low baseline (0.15%).

Figure 1

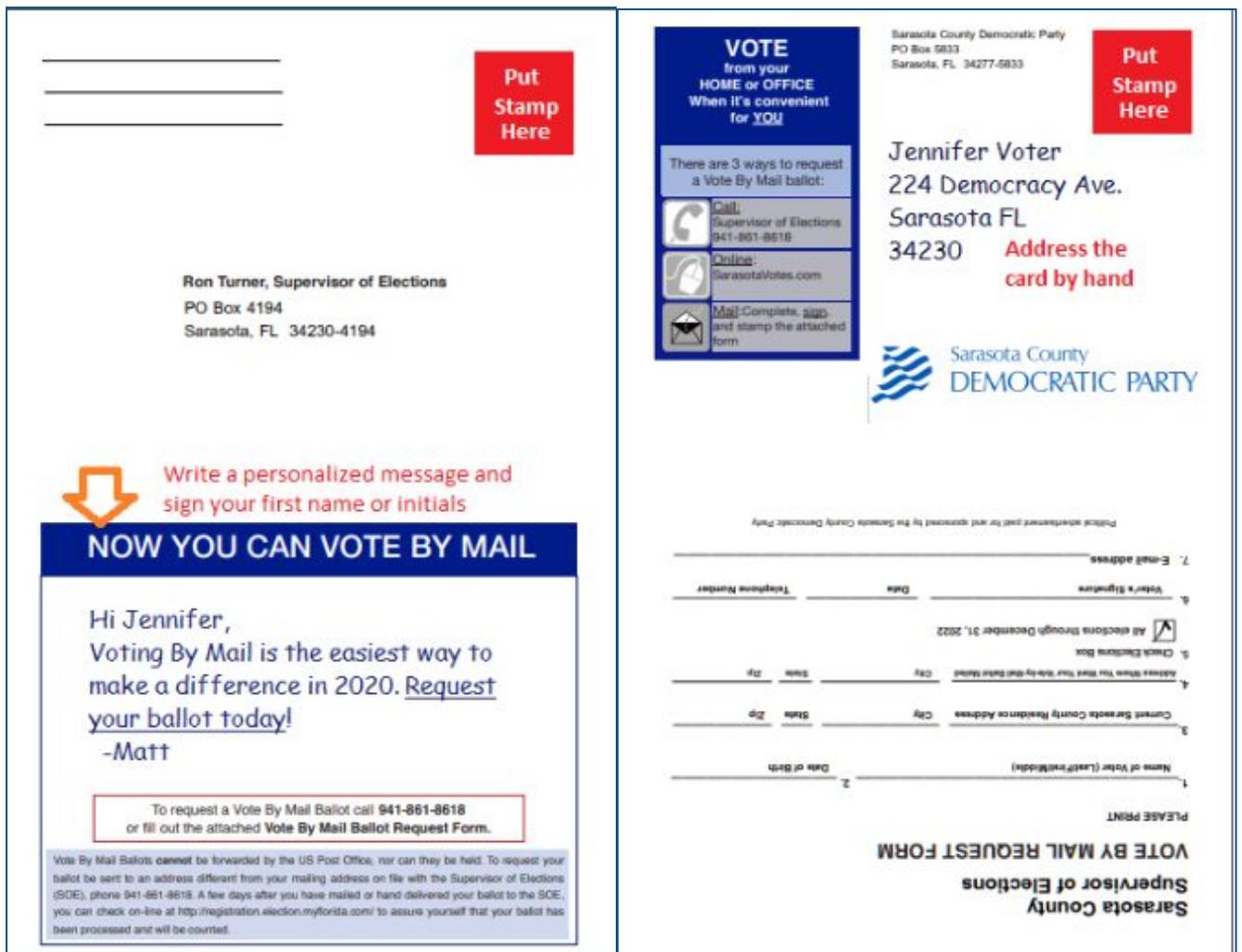
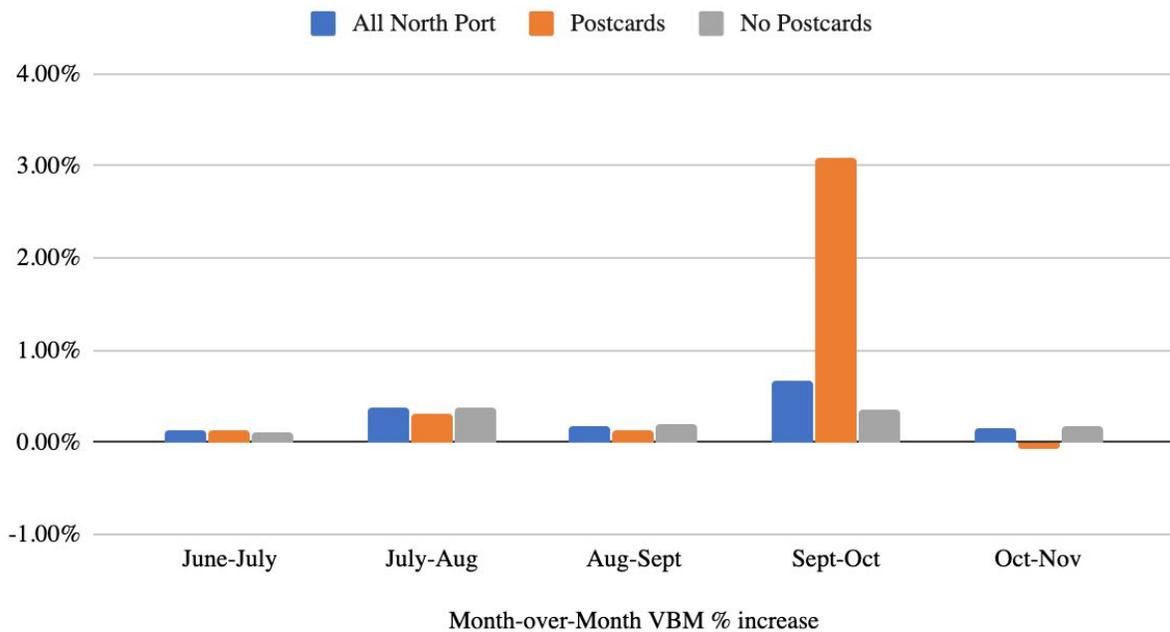


Figure 2

Month-over-Month VBM % increase	All North Port	Postcards	No Postcards
June-July	0.12%	0.13%	0.12%
July-Aug	0.37%	0.32%	0.38%
Aug-Sept	0.18%	0.13%	0.19%
Sept-Oct	0.66%	3.10%	0.35%
Oct-Nov	0.15%	-0.08%	0.17%

Figure 3

All North Port, Postcards and No Postcards



Discussion

This pilot study evaluating the efficacy of postcard reminders demonstrated a fifteen-fold increase in the intervention group -- a promising result.

The fact that the study design included an evaluation of the target population pre- and post intervention, in addition to a geographical control, strongly suggests that the difference in Vote by Mail enrollments was not due to external factors or demographic differences.

A substantial change in the population of registered Democrats in the study area could have been a confounding variable. However, the number of registered Democrats remained stable during the study period, with a total increase in voter registrations of approximately 1.5%.

It should be noted that the exact date of the postcard mailing was not recorded, although the evidence points to a mailing date of October 3rd or 4th. To measure the full effect of a given mailing within a study month, postcards should be mailed just prior to the beginning of the study month and Vote by Mail requests should be processed promptly by the Supervisor of Elections. Finally, it is important to ascertain whether other Vote by Mail enrollment efforts are occurring concurrently within the study area, since other Vote by Mail promotion efforts such as canvassing, robocalls or texting would affect enrollments.

Finally, we do not know whether the population that responded to the Vote by Mail postcard mailing would have registered without the postcard reminder in the weeks or months prior to the 2020 general election.

The data used to create this report is available at this [link](#).

Postscript

While the results of this study are very encouraging, there is a practical problem in scaling this approach because of cost. A followup study of a Massachusetts-based intervention in which the postcards were mailed directly from Massachusetts and did not include return postage for the request card is underway. Early results indicate that this low-cost approach may be equally effective.