

# What Messages Encourage Young South Africans to Register and Vote? A Proposed Randomized Controlled Trial during the 2016 Municipal Elections in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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**Overview:** Widespread electoral participation is a foundational element of a healthy democracy, and an important mechanism by which voters exercise governance oversight. Existing work attributes low voter turnout in developing countries to poor voter knowledge, or to disillusionment with flawed electoral institutions. Yet turnout often remains low and sometimes declines as democracy matures, despite voters gaining basic knowledge about, and trust in, electoral processes. This study considers a driver of participation not previously explored in developing countries—motivation to vote stemming from the intrinsic value of the act itself. We examine the relative efficacy of informational messages about how, when, and where to vote; motivational messages about why voting is important; and a combination of both, on voter registration and turnout in a field experiment targeting 6,000 youth in Gauteng, South Africa. This project, conducted with South Africa’s Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), Activate!, a network of youth leaders, and JPAL Africa, will produce actionable evidence to improve outreach, bolster participation, and improve governance in South Africa and similar developing countries.

## Motivation and Background

Conventional approaches to encouraging electoral participation in new democracies are geared toward contexts where elections are flawed, voters uneducated, and media constrained. Researchers have evaluated interventions to improve the quality of electoral systems (Ichino and Schundeln 2012, Callen and Long 2012) and campaigns encouraging citizens to improve electoral processes themselves, by, for example, reducing electoral violence (Collier and Vicente 2014), reporting electoral fraud (Aker et al. 2011), or being less susceptible to vote-buying (Vicente 2014). Researchers have also examined the effects of improving information about candidates’ performance (Ferraz and Finan 2009, Banerjee et al. 2010, Humphreys and Weinstein 2012, Chong et al. 2014) and policies (Fujiwara and Wantchekon 2013). Finally, researchers have run non-partisan campaigns providing information about voting processes and the act of voting itself. Aker et al. (2011) find that a door-to-door campaign providing basic information on voting improved turnout 4.9 percentage points in Mozambique; Gine and Mansuri (2010) find a door-to-door campaign with women emphasizing electoral process and ballot secrecy increased turnout 15.2 percentage points in Pakistan.

In middle-income democracies such as Botswana, Colombia, India, Ghana, or South Africa, governance and accountability challenges remain severe, yet turnout is low and sometimes declining. In South Africa, the setting we study, turnout has declined dramatically since the first democratic election in 1994, in which 86% of the voting-age population participated. This dropped to 72% in 1999, 58% in 2004, rose slightly to 60% in 2009, and then dropped again to

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57% in 2014 (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014). Conventional approaches to increasing voter participation—often developed in lower-income contexts—are poorly suited to middle-income settings like South Africa. Literacy is relatively high, there is credibly free media, citizens have widespread access to information about candidates or parties and there is widespread knowledge about how to vote. The decline in participation rates in middle-income countries may instead reflect higher opportunity costs on voters' time, or more informed disillusionment with politics. Our first contribution will be to illuminate how to stimulate electoral participation in a middle-income political context unlike those studied previously.

Our second contribution will be to test the relative importance for electoral participation of information about how and where to vote and information about why one should vote. Theory in political science differentiates between these two inputs to political participation (Harder and Krosnick 2008). It suggests that procedural knowledge about when, where, and how to vote is likely to act only on ability and not motivation. Learning why to vote may, however, generate greater motivation to participate. Theory suggests that campaigns to get out the vote in middle-income democracies should focus on motivation rather than information.

Limited evidence from low-income countries suggests motivational messages are not always effective. Gine and Mansuri (2010) found large effects on turnout by providing procedural information (outlined above), but found that a motivational message based on the premise that voting influences policy had no effect. Procedural information in Ferree et al. (2011) actually reduced turnout (possibly due to fear of intimidation), while a message providing both information (a reminder of the election date) and motivation (discussing the importance of voting) had no effect. However, the current literature cannot separate the effects of information and motivation because interventions have invariably included elements of both types. Our study will bridge the gap between a practical experiment and underlying theory in political science by disentangling the effects of:

1. Procedural knowledge about when, where, and how to vote;
2. Motivations for voting; and
3. Interactions between procedural knowledge and motivations.

Explicitly, we test whether providing eligible but currently unregistered voters with a carefully piloted, clearly expressed motivation for why they should participate in the upcoming elections, delivered face-to-face, will improve their propensity to register and to vote. Using a factorial experimental design, we test the relative efficacy of motivational appeals compared to procedural information, and whether the two combined are more effective than each separately. Further, we examine whether relationships differ by gender.

Our third contribution is a focus on broader electoral participation—the dual acts of registration and actually voting. Most studies consider only how best to generate turnout among registered citizens. We focus on those not registered to vote, which is novel in studies of election mobilization in the developing world. Indeed, one of the open research questions identified in the J-PAL Governance Initiative's Governance Review Paper is how the institutional design of elections and community programs may influence entry into politics. In South Africa, where there are costly bureaucratic barriers to registration, establishing how to encourage entry is key.

Another novel aspect of our project is its focus on youth—a population that is often politically and economically marginalized. In South Africa, the “Born Free” generation—the cohort of under-30s whose formative years did not involve any experience of apartheid—participates at much lower rates than their older compatriots or youth in other African countries (Scott et al 2011). In 1999, 77% of youth 20-29 were registered to vote, but this dropped to 65% in 2009 and 59% in 2014. Older cohorts, meanwhile, have registered at rates of between 85 and 90% throughout the post-apartheid era (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014). Youth are also less likely to vote when registered: only 58% of registered 20-29 year olds voted in 2009, compared to between 80 and 90% of older registered voters (Scott et al 2011). Evidence suggests that this divergence is only growing: in a nationally representative 2013 survey, youth aged 16-19 and 20-24 were much less likely to report intending to vote in the 2014 elections than youth of the same age in 2008 (Roberts et al 2014).

This low level of participation among South African youth appears not to be due to a lack of awareness about how to register or to vote. South Africans under 30 are actually more knowledgeable about how to register and vote and more trusting of the electoral process than older cohorts (Roberts et al 2014). This may be due to a focus on procedural information in the school civics curriculum implemented in 1998 (Allais 2009). However, discussion of the value of voting is absent from the curriculum. Unsurprisingly, higher proportions of youth than adults think their vote makes no difference; lower proportions think it is their civic duty to vote; and youth are less interested in politics (Roberts et al 2014). Many of the young focus group participants in our pilot work told us that participation was unimportant because government did not react to their wishes.

## **Experimental design**

Our study will be situated in the lower-income, lower-literacy communities on the outskirts of Johannesburg and Tshwane, two large cities in Gauteng, South Africa’s most populous province and the country’s economic center. In Gauteng, we will target young South Africans aged 18 and 29 who are eligible but not registered to vote. Gauteng had the lowest rates of youth voter registration in 2014, with 46% 18-29-year olds registered compared to 57% nationally. The study will take place during the run-up to the registration period for the 2016 local government elections (LGEs).

The study constitutes the final phase of a 3-phase trial. Phases 1 and 2, now complete, involved extensive qualitative and quantitative piloting of our motivational messages. In phase 1 we conducted qualitative research with 72 young people, both registered and unregistered voters, in two urban sites in Gauteng and one rural site in Limpopo. The discussions were designed to collect participants’ thoughts about the importance of voting and their reasons for (not) registering and voting, as well as information about where they get information related to politics and who or what influences their decisions about political participation. Participants also provided feedback on several different motivational messages that we had designed based on the South African context and the political science literature on political participation. We

specifically asked participants to explain why they were convinced or unconvinced by each of the messages and asked them to advise us on how they could be made more effective.

Phase 2 was a large-scale lab-in-the-field experiment to assess the effectiveness in stimulating the intention to register and the intention to vote of seven different motivational messages, which we revised and updated based on the feedback we received in phase 1.<sup>2</sup> We interviewed 3,189 participants in 23 sites around Gauteng. After a short common baseline text reminding participants that the next elections are just around the corner and emphasizing the importance of voting, individuals were randomly assigned to receive one of the seven messages (or a control), and were then re-surveyed about their political behavior and beliefs. The messages invoked:

1. One's duty to vote as a responsible citizen (*obligation as a citizen*)
2. One's special obligation to vote as a young person, given that most young people do not vote (*obligation as youth*)
3. One's obligation to take advantage of a right that was born from years of struggle and sacrifice (*obligation from history*)
4. The fact that every vote counts and can make a difference (*efficacy*)
5. The fact that youth are underrepresented in parliament (*descriptive representation*)
6. The fact that issues of concern to youth—especially unemployment—are accorded insufficient priority by the country's elected leaders (*substantive representation*)
7. The fact that your friends and neighbors will know if you do not vote because your thumb will not be marked (*social pressure*)

The results of the pilot suggest that motivational messaging can have significant effects on intentions to register and to vote, but not on intentions to obtain additional information (see Figures 1-3 below).<sup>3</sup> In particular, messages focusing on youth-centric motivations like citizens' obligations as young people or the need to address youth unemployment were particularly successful, raising the intention to register and to vote by between seven and eight percentage points. We also find that messages invoking efficacy and social pressures can increase stated intentions to register and to vote by similar amounts. The average effect across all messages was a 6.2 percent increase in stated intention to register and a 6.4 percent increase in stated intention to vote. These results suggest that we should be able to design a powerful and resonant motivational message for the main study. The lack of a statistically significant effect on intention to obtain information about voting is somewhat disappointing, but perhaps not surprising given that, as stressed earlier, a lack of information about how to register or how to vote is not a major obstacle to participation in a middle-income setting like South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The pre-analysis plan for the pilot is available at both <http://egap.org/registration/1308> and <http://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/845>.

<sup>3</sup> All reported estimates are from regressions that include controls for age, gender, education, employment status, religiosity, party affiliation, pre-treatment levels of political interest, knowledge, and access to political news, as well as fixed effects for language, surveyor, and day and place of survey (adjacent to a college campus or not).

<sup>4</sup> The "intention to obtain information about registration and voting" measure is a composite variable built from questions about whether the individual says s/he is likely to seek out additional information about how to register to vote and whether s/he would like us to send information about how to register to vote.

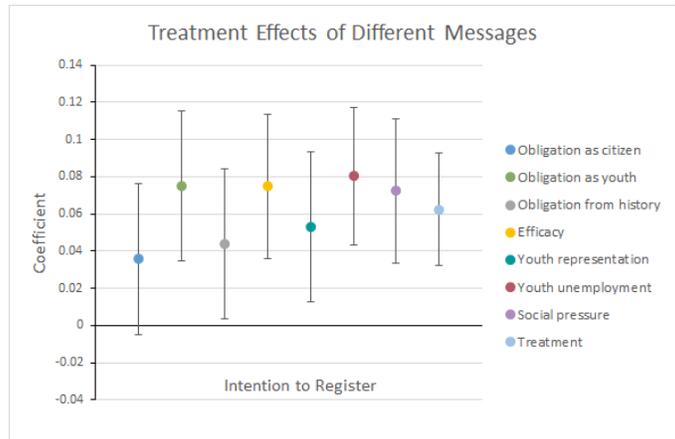


Figure 1: Effects of Different Motivational Messages on Intention to Register to Vote

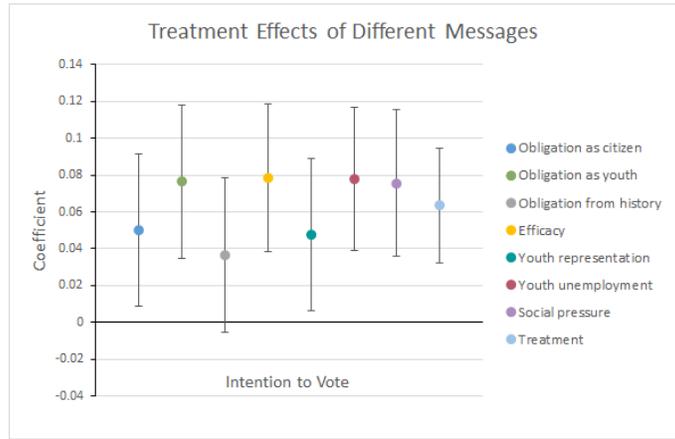


Figure 2: Effects of Different Motivational Messages on Intention to Vote

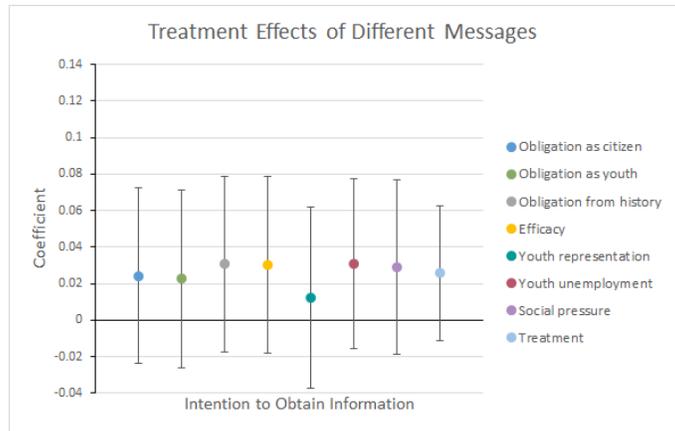


Figure 3: Effects of Different Motivational Messages on Intention to Obtain Information

We now plan to conduct a large-scale field experiment in Gauteng during the open registration period in the lead-up to the 2016 LGEs, which are currently scheduled for August 2016. Using data from the 2011 census and publicly available IEC data, we will select 120 lower-income, lower-literacy, largely black African voting districts that experienced either low or medium turnout in previous elections (one voting district attaches to one polling station, with around 2,000 people per district). We will screen all households in these districts to create a sampling frame of all individuals in the target population: young people between 18 and 29 who are South African citizens and eligible but not registered to vote.<sup>5</sup> We will then survey a random sample of 6,000 of these citizens.

All 6,000 subjects will participate in a 30-minute baseline survey to capture demographic information, political attitudes, political efficacy, and political knowledge. We will then randomly assign individuals to one of four groups, blocking on voting district and multiple covariates to maximize efficiency. The four groups are determined by a fully-crossed factorial design, using two factors, information and motivation. We thus have four arms:

1. Control (C): individuals are surveyed, baseline and endline
2. Information only (T1): procedural and bureaucratic information about where/when to register and vote
3. Motivation only (T2): motivational messaging based on phase 2 results
4. Information and motivation (T3): individuals receive both messages

Approximately one week after the original baseline, individuals not in the control group will receive one of the three treatment messages (T1, T2, or T3). Messaging will consist of a one-on-one 3 to 5 minute face-to-face communication from a voter educator using a script and a flyer. Face-to-face communication is the strongest possible medium (Gerber and Green 2000), and is widely used by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in South Africa, and by other electoral commissions in Africa. Groups will be re-surveyed shortly after the election to measure their registration, voting status, political opinions, beliefs about voting, political efficacy, and political knowledge. We will compare registration data with administrative data on registration (available publicly). We are also in negotiations to acquire individual-level voting data from the IEC. We will estimate the main effect of information (comparing T1+T3 with C+T2) and the main effect of motivation (comparing T2+T3 with C+T1). Comparisons of T1, T2, T3, and C will yield estimates of various marginal effects (and comparisons of effects).

### *Power Calculations*

We calculate the minimum detectable effect size (MDES) in standard deviations for an individual-level trial clustered by site (voting district) with power = 0.8, alpha = 0.05, covariate  $R^2 = 0$ , blocking  $R^2 = 0.05$ , and  $\sigma^2 = 0.05$ . We adjust the calculations to account for our binary dependent variable. These assumptions are conservative: we will block on baseline covariates and control for additional covariates. We calculate MDES for 120 clusters with 50

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<sup>5</sup> We will confirm each participant's registration status by using their South African ID number to querying the IEC's online database, which provides real-time information about registration status.

subjects per site, divided into the four factorized arms above. For marginal effects, such as information (T1) v motivation (T2), we compare 12 individuals in T1 to 12 in T2 in each site. The MDES is 0.121. For our main outcome, registration rates, we assume a baseline registration rate in the control of 50% (before registration drives for the 2014 election in Gauteng, 48% of young voters were registered), so the standard deviation is  $\sim 0.5$ . For marginal effects on registration, we can thus detect changes of  $\sim 6.05$  percentage points. Main effects compare 25 v. 25 per site, such as comparing T1 and T3 (pooled) v C and T2 (pooled) to give the average effect of providing information. The MDES for main effects is 0.093, so we can detect changes of  $\sim 4.65$  percentage points. The minimum detectable effect (MDE) for binary interactions with main effects (e.g. main effects interacted with gender) is 6.05 percentage points, the same as for marginal effects. For interactions with marginal effects (e.g. T1 v T2 by gender), the MDE is 7.8 percentage points.

In general, these minimum percentage point effects are in line with the magnitudes we find in our piloting study, which typically range from 4 to 8 percentage points (see Figures 1 and 2)—although we cannot completely rule out that these effects will be somewhat lower when we measure them via behavioral outcomes rather than through self-reported intentions to register and to vote. Previous studies providing information and motivation combined in developing countries find effects on turnout between 3.2 and 15 percentage points. Our estimated detectable effects are at the lower end of this spectrum.

However, unlike these studies, we focus on the unregistered. The only other study of registration campaigns finds that a door-to-door campaign in France increased voter registration by 2.4 percentage points when only 7% of individuals are not registered to vote (Braconnier et al 2014). In our study setting, by contrast, trends from previous elections suggest close to 52% of our target population will be unregistered, so the potential effect of our study is much larger. For secondary outcomes like political attitudes (e.g. a 5-point scale with standard deviation of 0.25), our MDE is even smaller: 3.02 percentage points for marginal effects and interactions with main effects and 2.33 percentage points for main effects.

### *Spillovers*

A major threat to the validity of our study is within-site spillover. While we will only work with 50 subjects per voting district (of roughly 2,000 people), there is a small risk that participants in our study will talk to each other. To insure against spillovers we will implement a randomized saturation design (Baird et al. 2012). We will evenly block-randomize all 120 voting districts into three saturation levels—low, medium, and high. In the low condition, 29/50 subjects will be in control, and 21/50 (7 subjects per treatment arm) will be treated. In the medium condition, 17/50 will be in control, and 33/50 (11 per arm) will be treated. In the high condition, 8/50 will be in control, and 42/50 (14 per arm), will be treated. To detect spillovers, we will compare control subjects across saturation levels, and make the adjustments necessary to estimate unbiased effects.

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