2022 MIDTERM ELECTIONS PROGRAM REPORT

Key Learnings from Research and Impact Voter Registration and Mobilization Campaigns

May 2023

the Voter FORMATION project

CONTENTS

FROM THE CEO

Hi there,

My name is Tatenda Musapatike and I'm the CEO and founder of Voter Formation Project. When I started VFP in the winter of 2020, I knew that I wanted to build an organization that not only ran innovative and creative campaigns, but also invested in research, took risks, and was a place where employees could build careers while having a life outside of work. This first midterm election cycle has proven that VFP can and will be all of those things.

In writing this paper and sharing what VFP learned this cycle, our goal is to strengthen the entire movement working to build a more resilient and representative democracy. We won't claim to have it all right, but we want this work to spark discussion about how we run our online campaigns, how we treat our staff, and how we fund this movement.

What VFP accomplished this cycle as a new organization in a challenging political environment is incredible. I am deeply grateful for the foundations, individuals, and companies who have supported our work. There are a few in this bucket who I feel compelled to acknowledge directly for going above and beyond. Everybody Votes Campaign, TargetSmart, Swayable, Alex Hughes, and Mike Rivera: Thank you for your outsized commitment and for working with us as we faced the typical challenges of a new organization. We deeply appreciate your support as we maintained our rigor, candor, and my (often direct) feedback.

Most importantly, though, thank you to the Voter Formation Project staff. You impress me every single day as you work through challenges, inspire creativity, and invite curiosity, and are so pleasant to work with even when things are hard. This work wouldn't exist without you and I am so incredibly proud to lead this talented group of individuals toward a common goal of improving our country. I am privileged to be among you.

All my best,

Tatenda

INTRODUCTION

Voter Formation Project is a 501(c)(3), nonprofit organization whose mission is to increase participation in elections using innovative, long-term, and data-driven digital communications strategies to engage, register, and mobilize new and infrequent voters of color.

VFP was founded to fill a significant gap in the elections ecosystem. Founder Tatenda Musapatike noticed that many civic engagement campaigns were fixated on understanding how to get voter registration forms filled out online, but not thinking about the entire "user experience" from the corporate lens, where people's attitudes about products and services are addressed before asking them to make a purchase. This methodology is profitable for sales and yet, a similar communications funnel for voting and civic engagement did not exist year-round online. VFP's primary strategy is therefore to share ongoing pro-democracy, pro-voting online messaging with Black and Brown communities to shift attitudes and bring people into the electorate.

Additionally, she noticed that the way that people work in organizations that center around elections was toxic. Specifically, workers in the space were paid too little for too many hours of work, often at a disparity to their white and/or male coworkers. It wasn't just burning out talent; it was also limiting the quality of work produced and reducing the number of staff from disadvantaged communities rising to leadership positions.

Voter Formation Project isn't just a voting organization, but rather we want to set an example for what impactful, modern, sustainable, and worker-thriving voter mobilization programming can look like. In our current political climate, the work of voter registration isn't just to bring in more voters, but to continue to engage voters so that we reduce the harm from a turbo-charged anti-democracy ecosystem that's implementing their fascist agenda with alarming speed. In times of crisis, the urgency of the moment requires great work that can be scaled and executed for the long-term.

The findings of our programmatic research support this viewpoint. We ran research programming in Pennsylvania during the 2022 midterm election cycle and found that two years after one of the largest presidential turnouts in decades, voter registrations across the state dropped, and even more precipitously with Black voters. Our program's strongest impact was reducing harm through maintaining voter registration levels in our targeted communities, while also increasing the number of registrations. The following pages will detail what we did and what we learned, but we'll start with how VFP is determined to operate in a way that allows our people to thrive while they are fighting for our democracy.

HOW WE WORK

When Voter Formation Project was established in December 2020, our founder was clear that the organization needed to be an appealing, healthy place to work to ensure long-term program growth and sustainability. As someone working in the political and mission-driven space, she had observed the norm of overworking and underpaying employees, leading to burnout and turnover. All of this takes a toll on organizations, which leads to the loss of institutional knowledge and key skills.

To address all of these issues, within a year of formation, VFP had a compensation philosophy, transparent compensation scale, semi-annual performance review process, competitive benefits package with 100% of medical premiums covered for employees, and an unlimited vacation policy with a mandatory 15-day annual usage. In addition to building a strong benefits package and transparency with staff, Voter Formation Project prioritized early investment in systems and processes to attract and retain talent.

At the start of 2022, Voter Formation Project consisted of just 6 employees—the CEO, the Director of People & Culture, a Data Analyst, a Media Buyer, a Media Planner, and a Senior Program Coordinator. To fill short-term labor needs and supplement our limited staff roster, contractors were used in a variety of functions, from creative to technology.

To scale for future programs and organizational sustainability, a significant hiring push was made starting in the first quarter of the year and extending to shortly before the election. First, the leadership team was solidified, bringing on a Director of Development, a Director of Data & Technology, and a Director of Digital Programs. Then, those new functional heads mapped expansion plans for their

teams while strategizing for a variety of potential organizational sizes, allowing us to pivot in response to different levels of funding.

Within the Programs department, a creative team was added, consisting of a Creative Director, Graphic Designer, and Videographer. The Programs department also expanded the media function, internally promoting a Media Director, and maintaining one Media Buyer and one Media Planner. Another member of the team was promoted to a Creative Project Manager role to support tight coordination between the media and creative teams for more efficient program operations.

In the Technology department, internal title adjustments and hiring processes brought the team to four members—a Director of Data & Technology, a Data Engineer, a Media Analyst, and a Full-Stack Developer. Much like the Creative Project Manager role, the Media Analyst role was built in direct response to experience in the industry. The role tightly links the media and technology teams to allow for swift communication during program season so that adjustments can be made efficiently and effectively.

By the end of the year, VFP consisted of 15 roles spread between four departments—Operations, Development, Programs, and Data & Technology. We regularly re-evaluate our processes, systems, and roles to ensure that we have the most functional and efficient organization, all of which served us well during the 2022 program cycle.

KEY LEARNINGS

Digital advertising works as a motivator to encourage our intended audience to check their registration in order to maintain their voter status or to start the registration process for the first time. Both our research and impact programs had significant, cost efficient, and scalable results.

Structural inequality and discrimination have left people of color out of the electorate and disenfranchised them from participating in civic engagement. However, we believe that with adequate program time, funding, and tailored messaging, we can rebuild these relationships, learn what matters to these citizens, find out where to reach them online, and get them the information they need to register and get out to vote.

Having an impact on an underserved population and conducting research are not goals in opposition to each other. In fact, we see them as supporting and co-equal pillars of our efforts to produce reliable learning about the effectiveness of messaging and targeting while being as effective as possible in our efforts to increase participation in elections among people of color.

CAMPAIGN SNAPSHOT

	REGISTRATION	MOBILIZATION
Where did the ads run?	Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin	Pennsylvania
Where did we run experiments?	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania
Whom did they target?	Latiné audiences in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin. Black audiences in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin	Black audiences
How long was the campaign?	Our Pennsylvania program ran for three months. Our programs in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and Wisconsin were live for 4 to 6 weeks.	Four weeks
What platforms did we run on?	Social platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube; Programmatic audio, video, display, native, and streaming TV	Social platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok; Programmatic video, display, native, and streaming TV
Campaign highlights	Reached over 3.6M unregistered people across five states with digital ads in both English and Spanish	Engaged over 1.6M voters in Pennsylvania with mobilization messaging ahead of Election Day

Voter Formation Project was the first voter registration / mobilization nonprofit to run ads on TikTok. |

In 2022, Voter Formation Project (VFP) ran digital advertising campaigns in five states: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Our ads were placed on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube; video, graphic, and audio ads were also placed on high-traffic websites across the internet as well as on streaming TV and audio platforms.

Our registration program ran in all five states listed above and our mobilization program ran only in Pennsylvania. To assess the effectiveness of our campaigns, we ran two experiments in Pennsylvania alongside our program that ran in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and Wisconsin. These experiments targeted Black people in Pennsylvania using zip code randomization for registration and low propensity-to-vote individual-level data from the voter file for mobilization.

These experiments sought to measure the following:

- **Registration:**
  - Does long-term messaging maintain and grow more registrants than short-term messaging?
  - Does messaging—of any duration—maintain and grow more registrants than no messaging?
- **Mobilization:**
  - Can dynamic, modern mobilization ad creative increase turnout among low-propensity Black voters in Pennsylvania?

PROGRAM IMPACT

Running experiments is crucial to the work we do at VFP and to the industry at large, but cost and time often limit the amount of testing we are able to do in each particular election cycle. Because we only had funding to run experiments in Pennsylvania during the 2022 midterm elections, we are able to glean more in-depth results for that specific state—therefore, much of the research in this report is drawn from our Pennsylvania work.

In the other four states, where we ran direct impact programming without a research design and plan, we can only report observational findings like platform insights, user interactions, form completions, and ad performance. This means that we cannot drill down to the same level of detail about the program's effectiveness. However, what we learned in Pennsylvania in 2022 will help inform how we run all of our programs, across all states, in coming years.

Through our registration program alone, we reached over 3.6 million people across five states that proved critical to the outcome of the 2022 midterm elections and helped nearly 9,000 people check their registration or register to vote. Through our research, we also know that 20,000 people in Pennsylvania would have fallen off the voter registration rolls without being exposed to our program. In addition, we engaged with 1.6 million low-propensity voters

in Pennsylvania with messaging encouraging them to vote on or before Election Day and directed them to check their voter registration and make a plan to vote.

As mentioned throughout this report, cost is not an efficient or reliable measure for determining the effectiveness and success of a program like ours. We believe it's vital to perform a mix of experimentation and impact work in order to learn as much as possible while ensuring we are making real change in the communities we are striving to serve through our programming—and the reality is that this takes time, long-term strategic planning, and thoughtful investment.

For the sake of transparency, however, we want to provide estimated costs for both our research and impact work in 2022. These estimates reflect the cost of buying the ads themselves and also include staff time and other expenses necessary to run an organization, develop quality work, and balance research and impact in a way that ultimately leads to making strides toward expanding the electorate and reaching our target audience.

Our research costs are broken down by cost per created and maintained registration and our impact program costs are broken down by cost per form completion, as these were our main success metrics. Explanations of these metrics and learnings from our research and impact programs will be outlined in later sections of this report.

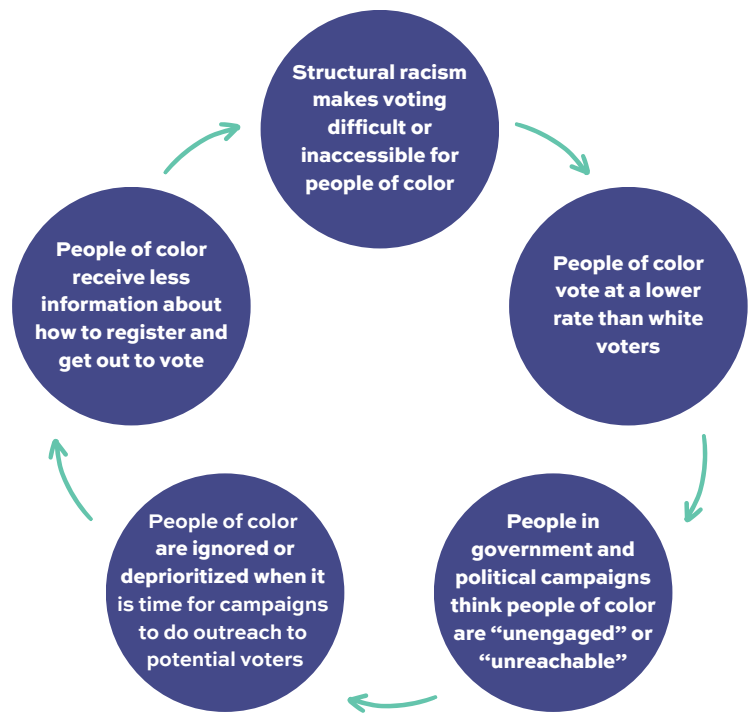| Research program	~20,000 created and maintained registrations $35 per created/maintained registration
Impact program	~9,000 registration form completions $80 per form completion

THE PROBLEM

Voting in our country is difficult and voter suppression legislation continues to limit access to the ballot box at a disproportionate rate for people of color. In the first two months of 2023 alone, state legislators introduced 150 restrictive voting bills and 27 election interference bills.[1]

From this structural inequality comes a vicious cycle that keeps people of color out of the electorate and makes it incredibly difficult for organizations that do voter registration and mobilization work to find and engage with these audiences in a meaningful way, especially online.

Bringing nonvoters of color into the electorate requires more than placing voter registration ads online every other year just prior to voter registration deadlines. People need to be convinced that participating in democracy can make a difference in their lives and in their communities, but this kind of attitude shift does not happen quickly. It requires consistent, concerted, and targeted messaging efforts to demonstrate the impacts of voting in communities and give people the knowledge and confidence to vote.

In addition to being seen as "disengaged," potential voters of color are also extremely difficult to find and target with digital advertising due to structural inequality built into the technology used to reach people online. The data and algorithms that power these tools are inherently racist in a way that is challenging to overcome when attempting to reach people of color with important information about civic engagement and voting.

Cycle diagram

- Structural racism makes voting difficult or inaccessible for people of color
- People of color vote at a lower rate than white voters
- People in government and political campaigns think people of color are "unengaged" or "unreachable"
- People of color are ignored or deprioritized when it is time for campaigns to do outreach to potential voters
- People of color receive less information about how to register and get out to vote

1 Brennan Center for Justice: https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-february-2023

THE SOLUTION

Our strategy centers on developing and placing culturally relevant, pro-democracy, pro-civic engagement digital advertising well before promoting registration and mobilization opportunities. And we specifically test and run our programs on platforms that we know will reach our intended target audience.

Voter Formation Project therefore fills a significant gap in the voter engagement ecosystem as the sole digital-only, Black-led organization to focus on this kind of year-round, ongoing pro-civic engagement messaging to hard-to-reach communities of color. This sustained messaging also pushes back on the disinformation campaigns that are often targeted at these communities.

Using innovative ad buying targeting techniques, we are able to place our culturally relevant content directly in front of people who would otherwise not be exposed to online civic engagement and voting information. Because these communities are harder to reach and seen as "disengaged" or unlikely to vote, most voter engagement efforts chose not to target them, instead targeting voters who are easier to reach and more likely to turn out to vote with little to no persuasion.

OUR MISSION

Voter Formation Project's mission is to increase participation in elections using long-term, innovative digital advertising campaigns to engage, educate, and mobilize new and infrequent voters of color.

CREATIVE

Customized and tested messaging and design are vital to reaching under-engaged audiences

A mix of official and culturally relevant creative is the most effective design strategy to reach different demographics within target audiences

CREATIVE APPROACH

Creative advertising for voter registration and mobilization has, for the most part, been "traditional" in look and feel. Organizations tend to choose visuals that have a governmental or "official" look because historically the data shows that this type of content tends to perform better at compelling audiences to take action (e.g., completing a form to register to vote). However, these results have largely been shown when trying to reach people who already display a higher propensity to vote. As younger, more diverse generations of voters cycle into the election ecosystem, VFP believes it's necessary to challenge this commonly held belief about the efficacy of "official" looking graphic design.

To test this hypothesis, we developed two different brands for our ad campaigns. First, using "Voter Formation Project" branded creative, we developed more contemporary visuals by tapping into modern trends and making a shift toward content that is both culturally relevant and culturally resonant. Second, using "How to Vote" branded creative, we developed more official, more government-looking imagery that was inspired by the look and feel of state and local elections offices.

We then tested these two distinct brands with different audiences and at different points along our marketing funnel to generate findings about what actually motivates people to register and vote. What we found was that the more contemporary VFP brand was more effective at the top of the marketing funnel–during the persuasion phase–and the more official How to Vote brand was more effective at the bottom of the marketing funnel–direct registration and mobilization asks.

Developing creative with this framework supports our media buying efforts and acts as another form of targeting when done correctly because our audiences are more likely to spend time with content that appeals to them, signaling resonance in the algorithm.

Our tests showed that for some audiences, our two brands can actually work together as complementary parts of a full-funnel approach to voter registration and motivation advertising.

CREATIVE STRATEGY

The current landscape of digital advertising is in flux, with social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube undergoing massive shifts due to new regulations and competition from companies like TikTok. Each platform's advertising algorithm is constantly evolving and is increasingly unforgiving when it comes to what content gets delivered to an advertiser's intended audience and what doesn't.

For us, that meant we had to think critically and creatively about how to design our Voter Formation Project-branded content in a way that would not only result in successful delivery of our ads to our audience—Black and Brown people who have traditionally been left out of the electorate—but grab their attention and motivate them to take action, i.e., register and get out to vote.

We started by assessing what's traditionally worked in the space and synthesized that with a more modern creative approach. We wanted to re-think our visual direction so it complemented our innovative approach to political messaging, allowing us to stand out aesthetically and reflecting us as an organization in a creative way. We wanted to make content about the voting and civic engagement process that didn't look or feel "political" or traditional.

This meant relying less on traditional imagery and stock photography or, alternatively, using it in a new, unexpected way. We did this by bringing in a diverse color palette, pivoting to a grittier and "urban" aesthetic, utilizing unexpected visual elements and shapes, and incorporating unpolished fonts and images.

Our guiding principle when creating first drafts of our content? "Crazy is better than conservative."

With this in mind, we developed creative that was empowering, inclusive, and boldly designed with unique layouts, captivating geometric shapes and lines, vibrant colors, and unconventional animations to both capture the attention of our audience and reflect the culture of those we are trying to reach with our ads.

Additionally, it may seem obvious that it is important to feature the community we're trying to reach in our ads, but this is something that many advertisers take for granted and don't always prioritize in their creative. Including familiar imagery such as landmarks or other state imagery can also help the target audience make an immediate visual connection with the design in a way that catches their attention.

AUDIENCES + MESSAGING

Our audiences were diverse across multiple states and cultural-ethnic groups, representing in part, the vast amount of diversity present in the United States. Each state we advertised to—Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—posed unique challenges and demanded a customized approach.

In developing our messages for each audience, we wanted to look at which of four message types most resonated with our targets:

- Informational messages: emphasizing facts like dates, times, and methods to register or vote.

- Empowerment messages: tying the importance of voting back to specific issues that people might care about (climate change, reproductive rights, gun laws) and emphasizing that voting gives people the power to impact these issues.

- Community messages: emphasizing the vibrancy of a culture and the importance of being part of a community as well as the significance of taking collective action.

- Social pressure messages: telling people to register/vote because their friends and family do.

We conducted several tests to measure the extent to which different messaging and creative tactics moved our audience toward a higher intent to register and vote. After each test, we shifted campaign strategy and budgets in part to reflect the results and optimize our program. In that way we could serve our audience with more creative content that had been proven to have a positive impact on their likelihood to register and vote.

- An empowerment video that tied the importance of voting back to specific issues was more effective at moving the audience toward an intent to register than was a video that employed a more generic motivational message. We incorporated this result into creative and budget decisions as we moved through the rest of our program.

- A video using empowerment messaging with a female voiceover was more effective at moving an audience of Black, unregistered people toward an intent to register than that same video with a male voiceover. As a result, we pulled the male voiceover video from our campaign and only ran the female voiceover video for the duration.

- Social pressure messaging produced a backlash in intent to register to vote when shown to an audience of Black, unregistered people in Pennsylvania. This message track was the only one to produce a negative impact in a group that also included informational and power messaging. As a result of this test, we did not utilize social pressure messaging at all and utilized only informational and empowerment messaging for our Black audience.

We always run creative testing as part of our live program in order to get real-time data and insights from our target audience and to make campaign optimizations as we go. However, creative and message testing would also ideally take place during the pre-launch planning stages of any program or campaign in order to incorporate results into initial creative and media plans. Due to the often cyclical nature of our work, this is not always possible, but we recommend incorporating pre-launch creative testing as much as possible while keeping budget and timing constraints in mind.

Drawing on all of our learnings, in Arizona, for example, we targeted the Latiné community with English and Spanish language creative and messaging that tapped into the vibrancy of their diverse culture and the importance of community. In Georgia and Pennsylvania, we focused on Black populations with an emphasis on empowerment-based messaging and creative calls to action that connected with the arc of African American history and culture.

The following matrix breaks down more information about which messages we utilized for which audiences:

AUDIENCE MATRIX

STATE	DEMOGRAPHIC	LANGUAGE	MESSAGING
Arizona	Latiné	Spanish/English	Community + Information
Georgia	Black	English	Empowerment + Information
Michigan	Black	English	Empowerment + Information
Pennsylvania	Black	English	Empowerment + Information
Wisconsin	Latiné	Spanish/English	Community + Information

REBRAND STRATEGY

Ahead of launching our 2022 voter registration and mobilization campaigns, we underwent a rebranding process to update Voter Formation Project's visual identity to reflect the more mature and resourced organization that we had become, and allow for us to remain relevant across emerging channels and platforms.
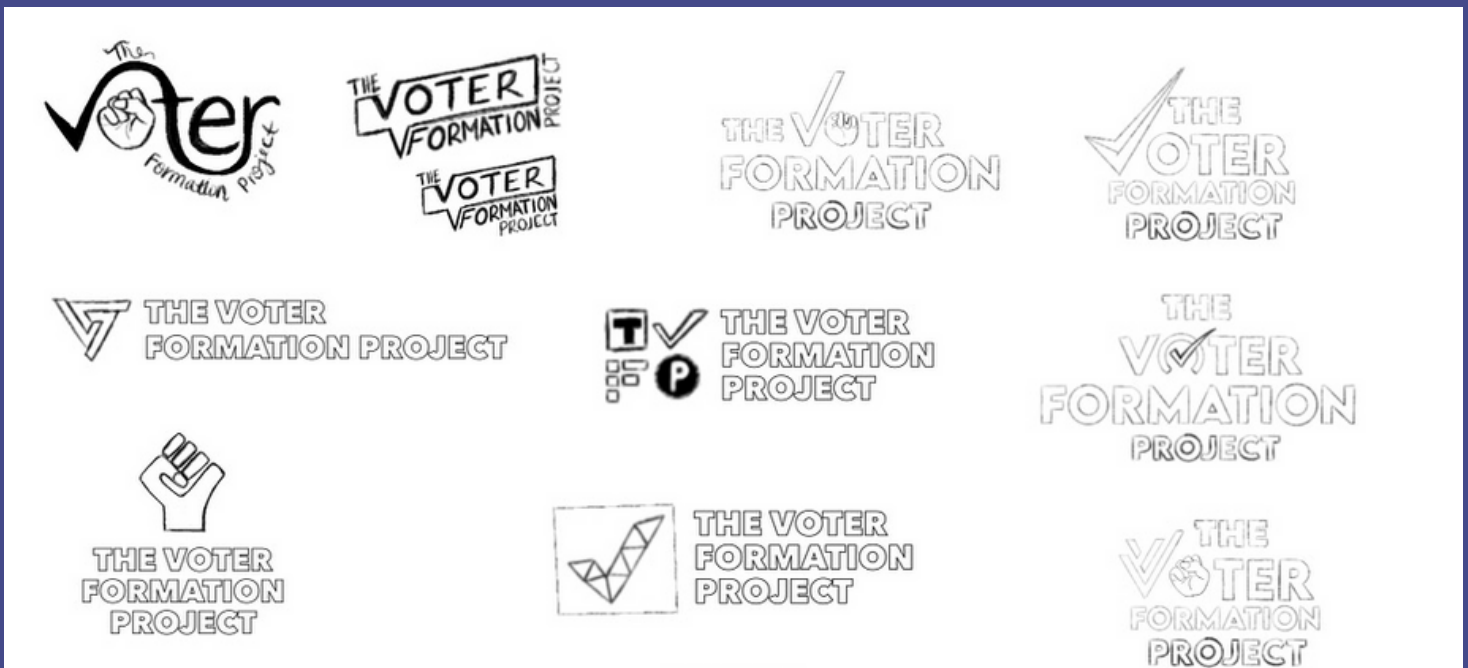
We held multiple all-staff workshops where we reviewed and iterated on our mission, vision, and purpose, in addition to our values and beliefs as a team. Aligning our goals as an organization with the values of our team was vital to building a new and inclusive brand that reflected us internally as well as those in the audience we are trying to reach and bring into the electorate.

We then took the process one step further and created mood boards to visualize the work and align on the direction we were taking with our new brand.

This helped us to narrow down elements like colors, typography, and visual elements.

Ultimately, our new brand and visual identity reflects the ethos of our organization: We aim to be bold and embody a spirit of empowerment that alludes to the greater mission of mobilizing underrepresented communities.

We strongly believe in the power of brand, whether it be for the organization or the channels it creates for its programs. This step of the process is often rushed for the sake of running program; however, developing strong and consistent brands for organizations and all of their properties aids in running stronger programs because audiences grow to trust these brands based on consistent content.

RETURN YOUR BALLOT NOW

OCT 24TH

YOU USE IT.

power

MAKE A PLAN TO VOTE!

REGISTER TO VOTE NOW!
BLACK LIVES MATTER

LESS THAN ONE WEEK LEFT

TO HAVE YOUR

REGISTER TO VOTE NOW!
BLACK LIVES MATTER

THE VOTER REGISTRATION DEADLINE

CHECK YOUR VOTER REGISTRATION STATUS!
NO JUSTICE NO PEACE
BLACK LIVES MATTER
VOTE

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

TO USE YOUR VOICE

the VOTER FORMATION project

VOTE ON NOV 8!

REGISTER TO VOTE NOW

MEDIA

KEY LEARNINGS

We cannot solely rely on cost efficiency as a measure of success. It is easier, and therefore cheaper, to persuade a likely voter to check their registration status. Optimizing for the cheapest costs would hurt our ability to engage our intended audience. Engaging hard-to-reach populations requires innovative tactics and more investment.

Because platforms do not allow targeting by race, effectively reaching our intended audience of unregistered people of color requires a creative, multi-pronged targeting strategy. It is necessary to layer several targeting tactics—including voter file, geography, interest, and contextual-based targeting—as well as a variety of campaign objectives—including reach, video views, and conversions—in order to reach our desired audience.

The media landscape has changed since our first program in 2020, but our most significant challenges have remained consistent.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

We believe that before we ask our audience of new or infrequent voters to register or make a plan to vote, we first need to persuade them that they should participate in the electoral process. We designed our program accordingly by including both persuasion and direct response components. Our approach to planning, evaluating, and optimizing the media was different for each.

Persuasion

Goal	To shift our audience's perspective so they're more likely to vote.
Time frame	Ideally, long-term and ongoing media that runs whenever the direct response component of our work is not live. For our 2022 program, our "long-term" period was 3 months.
Creative types and placements	We prioritized running video and audio ads in high-impact placements—including connected TV (streaming services like Hulu), audio, and non-skippable YouTube ads—that allowed us to deliver nuanced messages. We reinforced these ads with graphics and shorter videos that ran across platforms.
Evaluating creative	We relied on lift studies that allowed us to track whether a particular ad or message successfully moved our audience toward a higher intent to vote. These studies are performed directly in platform and/or are available to higher dollar buyers through ad sales teams.
Media optimization	We optimized our persuasion campaigns to reach as many in our audience as possible at an impactful frequency. For video and audio ads, we also optimized for higher completion rates.

Direct Response

Goal	To generate as many efficient form completions as possible among our intended audience.
Time frame	Live during the four to six weeks leading up to a deadline, whether it's a registration deadline or Election Day.
Creative types and placements	We prioritized what generated efficient form completions: Facebook and Snapchat graphics. To make sure we continued to reach a broader swath of our audience, we supplemented these with other cost-effective placements, including display and native ads, as well as short-form videos on YouTube and Snapchat.
Evaluating creative	We relied on conversion rates and costs to determine the success of direct response ads. We also ran A/B tests to better understand what converted.
Media optimization	We optimized for the creative types and placements that generated efficient conversions among our intended audience of new or infrequent voters of color.

WHAT IS A FORM COMPLETION?

Voter registration advertising campaigns typically include a component that drives people to a website to fill out a form in order to "register to vote" or "check your voter registration status." This form checks data from the user's Secretary of State website and lets the user know whether they are registered to vote or not based on the data they provide.

If they are not registered to vote, the form redirects them to visit their Secretary of State website to complete their voter registration. Because voter registration data is not immediately available and can take months to be reported, for the purposes of this report we consider form completions on our website to be a "conversion."

TARGETING + REACHING OUR AUDIENCE

BUILDING AN ACCURATE AUDIENCE POOL

A persistent challenge we face is targeting our intended audience. Neither first-party data sets, such as the voter file, nor the targeting options native to the advertising platforms make it possible to build comprehensive audiences made up exclusively of unregistered or infrequent voters of color.

The benefit of the voter file is that it allows us to be specific: we are able to filter for individuals who are both low-propensity voters and persons of color. However, unregistered and infrequent voters are underrepresented in the voter file, as is complete and accurate information about people of color. As a result, these lists fall short of encompassing our intended audience, and, due to match rates that rarely exceeded 60% in 2022, their size was only further reduced when we loaded them in to advertising platforms.

To supplement the voter file, we leveraged the platforms' native targeting options wherever possible. However, platforms do not allow advertisers to target based on race or voting propensity. Our only option was to rely on lookalike audiences and cultural interests as targeting parameters to best approximate our intended audience. This process was more of an art than a science, and one that likely allowed white individuals and high-propensity voters to filter into our audience pools. We mitigated this downside by also excluding voter file lists of high-propensity and white voters, but no combination of tactics will be 100% accurate when aiming to target any BIPOC audience.

REACHING OUR INTENDED AUDIENCE

Because we could not exclusively target our intended audience, we wanted to understand—to the extent possible—whether platforms disproportionately delivered ads to those within our audience pool for whom our program was not intended.

Platforms do not allow us to track campaign delivery by race or voting propensity, so we analyzed delivery by available demographic breakdowns: age and gender. In doing so, we found that certain types of campaigns disproportionately delivered impressions to segments of our audience pool correlated with segments of the general population who are more likely to vote: older people and women. (It's important to note that we can prove only this correlation. We cannot prove disproportionate delivery to white or high-propensity voters.)

Whether and how strongly a campaign followed this delivery pattern depended on the campaign's "objective," a setting that allows advertisers to indicate the goals for the campaign. See a list of common campaign objectives below:

COMMON ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

IF AN ADVERTISER SELECTS THIS OBJECTIVE…	… AN ADVERTISING PLATFORM WILL
Reach	Deliver ads to as many people as possible in a given audience.
Traffic	Deliver ads to those most likely to click through the ad to a website.
Video Views	Deliver video ads to those most likely to watch them.
Conversions	Deliver ads to those most likely to take a specific "conversion" action (signing up for a newsletter, filling out an online form, etc.) after seeing an ad.

Delivery by age and gender differed, sometimes drastically, depending on the campaign objective. For example, as part of our registration program in Pennsylvania, we used both the reach and conversion objectives on Facebook to deliver ads to the same audience. The reach objective delivered a larger share of impressions to groups correlated with those who are less likely to vote, while the conversion objective did the opposite.

Broken down by age, the reach objective delivered 84% of impressions to 18–34 year olds, an age group that is less likely to vote. The conversion objective delivered a majority of impressions to those who were 35 and older, a group more likely to vote.

There was a similar dynamic by gender. The reach objective delivered a slight majority of impressions to men, who are less likely to vote, while the conversion objective delivered a strong majority of impressions to women.

AGE	REACH	CONVERSIONS
	% of Impression	% of Impression
18–34	84.5%	45.6%
35+	15.5%	54.4%

GENDER	REACH	CONVERSIONS
	% of Impression	% of Impression
Male	53.0%	38.2%
Female	46.3%	61.1%
Unknown	0.7%	0.7%

The logic of these delivery patterns makes sense based on what has been widely observed about social media platforms: algorithms select which content to deliver to users based on predictions about what those users will like. The reach objective may help cut through the resulting "filter bubbles" as the campaigns deliver impressions to as many people as possible within an audience, regardless of their predicted interests. But when an advertiser selects an objective that requires audience engagement—video views, form completions, etc.—algorithms will deliver those campaign impressions to the audience members who are predicted as the most likely to engage.

In our case, it makes sense that conversion campaigns would prioritize delivering ads about voting to those who are more likely to vote—but it does not align with our program's goals. To prevent our overall program from potentially delivering a disproportionate share of impressions to likely voters, we employed several tactics:

- We utilized a variety of campaign objectives on each of our advertising platforms. Different objectives reach different pockets of our audience, so utilizing a wide variety helped ensure that we reached a broad swath of the audience pool. This tactic also tied back into our overall program structure: the persuasion component of our program relied on objectives such as reach and video views, whereas our direct response component primarily relied on conversion objectives.

- We segmented our audience when running conversion campaigns. Because conversion campaigns disproportionately delivered impressions to segments of our audience pool that correlated with groups more likely to vote, we often split our audience into smaller segments and ran conversion campaigns to all of them. This forced platforms to deliver impressions to audience segments that the conversion campaigns would not have prioritized otherwise.

- **We did not prioritize "performance metrics" at the expense of reaching our intended audience. For direct response programs, it is common to allocate budget to only the campaigns or audiences that produce the most cost-effective results. In our case, this would have meant running only the direct response campaigns that produced the cheapest cost per form completion. However, it is likely that higher-propensity voters produce cheaper form completions; running only those campaigns would have undermined our goal of reaching new or infrequent voters of color.**

OTHER LEARNINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Our 2020 Learnings Were Reinforced

In 2020, our media strategy focused on testing direct response tactics to understand which platforms, creative types, and message tracks drove the most efficient form completions among people of color.

Our 2022 program reinforced what we learned two years prior:

- The Facebook advertising ecosystem is the most effective at driving efficient form completions at scale.
- Straightforward or "official" looking creative is generally more effective than a cultural-first aesthetic at driving efficient form completions.
- Messages that inform and educate are more effective at driving efficient form completions than are message tracks focused on motivation or empowerment.

It's important to note that these learnings are specific to the direct response component of our program and do not apply to our persuasion work, which utilizes more culturally resonant messaging and creative.

TikTok's Audience Is Ideal, But Its Ad Policies Are Not

TikTok is an ideal advertising platform for our program: higher shares of Black and Hispanic adults report using TikTok compared to white adults, the platform's users are overwhelmingly young, and the app has exploded in popularity. However, due to TikTok's constantly changing electoral advertising policies, we were able to run ads on the platform for only one day during our 2022 program.

As we prepare for the 2024 general election, it is unclear what TikTok's policies will be or whether the platform will stick to the policies once they're in effect. As a result, we cannot currently design plans that rely on TikTok as one of our primary advertising platforms.

Certain Settings Increased Facebook Conversion Performance

Because Facebook remained the most effective platform for driving form completions at scale, we deployed a number of A/B tests among our conversion campaigns to understand how to further optimize performance. We found that:

Ads placed on Facebook far outperformed those placed on Instagram.
The ads placed on Instagram drove over 12x the number of clicks to our registration check landing page, but the Facebook placements drove more form completions and a cheaper cost per completion.

Optimizing for "conversions" outperformed optimizing for "landing page views."
Within a conversion campaign's settings, we could instruct Facebook to focus on generating either:

- Visits to our registration check website page (landing page views)
- Submissions of the form embedded within that page (conversions)

Optimizing for landing page views was more successful at driving traffic to the page, but optimizing for conversions ultimately drove more efficient form completions.

Ads set up with alternate headline and body copy variations outperformed ads without variations.
Facebook allows advertisers to append multiple copy options to each ad. When delivering an ad to an individual user, the platform then selects the copy it predicts that person is most likely to respond to. Ads with these extra copy variations proved more effective at driving lower form completion costs.

RESEARCH

KEY LEARNINGS

Amidst a climate of declining registrations and voter purges, zip codes where we targeted Black eligible voters with voter registration messaging maintained significantly more registered voters than comparison zip codes, translating to more than 20,000 registered voters created and maintained by our program efforts.

Because Black voters have been suppressed from voting through discrimination and are subject to registration purges at disproportionate rates, the community is typically modeled with a lower propensity to vote. This leads advocacy groups and political campaigns to leave a higher proportion of Black citizens out when building targets for outreach and continue to message only to those who they can reliably register and turn out to vote at a low cost.

It is incredibly difficult to mobilize low-propensity voters who have been systematically left out from civic engagement and political conversations until just weeks before Election Day. Longer term outreach is needed to learn more about what issues matter to these voters, how to reach them, and what information they need in order to make a plan and get out to vote.

INTRODUCTION

At Voter Formation Project, we aim to effectively develop, target, and deliver messaging using modern digital advertising approaches while also evaluating the impact of these approaches. The dynamic nature of modern message delivery and the slower pace of research can seem to counterbalance one another, as modern message delivery can adapt quickly to early learning while research requires adherence to a randomized plan that may be months old for statistical rigor. Even in the best of circumstances, measuring outcomes in political messaging is challenging, as voter registration and mobilization teams can only move as fast as citizens and state agencies provide records of their actions.

This means that learning in political messaging occurs both quickly and slowly in the sense that we can see the immediate effectiveness of messages and adapt accordingly on a campaign by campaign basis. At the same time, in order to more concretely assess the actual outcomes of our work, we have to wait for hard data to come back from state agencies.

In this sense, the aims of our project are unique in that we attempted to have as big an impact as possible on our target audiences while also maintaining the validity of our experiments and learning from what we were doing.

The short shelf life of what we learn from experimentation makes this process challenging. The rapidly changing nature of the media landscape ensures that insights generated over time do not have as much staying power: targeting best practices learned as recently as the 2020 election are already far less effective. Newly imposed regulations and safeguards that strengthen citizens' privacy (such as Apple's App Tracking Transparency) have a direct, detrimental effect on the ability of organizations to target potential voters. Ultimately, we believe that both the quick and slow methods of learning are necessary for an organization to produce results over time.

Other organizations might characterize the relationship between program and research as **"in tension"** rather than **"in counterbalance."** However, rather than see program and research as being in tension, we see the slower learning facilitated by research as providing several benefits, including agreed-upon guidelines for monitoring and evaluation, ensuring internal validity, and producing fair, scientific evaluations. This process allows organizations to focus on the success of voter encouragement programming, and organizers to direct their attention and resources toward the most effective mobilization messages.

This framework's appeal is its investment in sound, rational, scientific grounds, which can move activity away from "politics as politics" and toward a more stable and reliable approach. At VFP, we see research and programming as supporting and co-equal pillars of our efforts to produce reliable learning about the effectiveness of messaging and targeting while executing on the goal of being as effective in the current election as possible.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the 2022 general election, VFP engaged in research to investigate a constellation of questions about fostering higher levels of participation among historically underserved populations. At its broadest, this research investigates how digital messaging fits into a comprehensive strategy to register and mobilize voters.

This research addresses the formation of a voter at two distinct phases necessitated by U.S. election laws: first, registration; and second, mobilization. While there is considerable discussion within the academic literature[2] and the applied literature, the landscape for political messaging is rapidly shifting. Consequently, there is reason to reexamine what knowledge may exist, and to fill in gaps where it does not. In particular, very little is known about how political messaging can be utilized to create net-new voters among populations that have either (a) been historically under-messaged to; or (b) failed to respond to previous messaging attempts.

In some cases, despite recent advances in the ability to target messaging, some demographics of potential registrants and potential voters have not been specifically targeted because campaigns have viewed these groups as either too costly or too difficult to target. We share this concern—because match rates between available targeting lists and actual potential

voters are low and mismatches may lead to messaging unintended, and strategically counterproductive, populations. Tailoring and targeting messages to Black potential voters in predominantly white areas may be a goal for campaigns. However, if a message intended for this group is served to someone who does not fit the targeting profile, there is the potential that it will demotivate or demobilize that individual.

Even in cases where the campaign believes that a targeted message may be dutifully delivered to its intended recipient (i.e., a successful match), campaigns often set explicit propensity-to-vote thresholds for targeting. For example, a common threshold is to only target individuals who have a propensity-to-vote score that is greater than 70—meaning they are at least 70% likely to vote in an upcoming election.

These propensity-based targeting determinations are deeply problematic. Although they differ in specifics, propensity-to-vote models all utilize prior vote history as a part of the model.

Black voters have been—and continue to be—subject to higher levels of scrutiny at the ballot box, targets for discrimination, and subject to registration purges at disproportionate rates.

2 For example, Rosenstone and Hansen (1992); Brady, Verba and Scholzman (1999); Highton (2017).

Taken together, state election systems have placed a considerably greater burden on Black voters and systematically depressed turnout within the community. It is little surprise that these groups typically have lower modeled propensity-to-vote: after all, many parts of the system have worked in concert to increase the costs of voting borne by these groups in past elections.

Here is the insidious nature of the problem: **If message targeting choices are made based on modeled propensity-to-vote, groups that have an interest in growing the electorate may instead be exacerbating the problem.** It is possible that the existence of voter propensity scores and voter message targeting has paradoxically shrunk the group of individuals targeted to receive messaging. This, in turn, leads advocacy groups to overspend on mobilizing individuals who are more likely to turnout, while missing opportunities to message and mobilize voters who, if only contacted, might become politically active.

In light of this possibility, we designed a research program in Pennsylvania to evaluate two high-value research questions:

1. How effective is long-term, digital registration encouragement messaging?
    a. Can this long-term messaging yield more net-new registrations than similar short-term messaging?
2. How effective are modern digital mobilization campaigns?
    a. Does digital voter engagement yield more new votes than no-engagement among Black registered voters?
    b. Is the effect of voter encouragement different among low modeled turnout than average modeled turnout Black registered voters?
        i. For our mobilization program, we used TargetSmart's propensity-to-vote model for the 2022 midterm election, described as: "An ensemble method classifier model was created to predict the likelihood that an individual will vote in the 2022 midterm general election. The model was constructed using a random sample of TargetSmart's national Voterbase file. The model scores are expressed from 0-100, with the score representing the probability that person will vote in the 2022 general election. The model was used to score over 262 million voting age persons nationwide."
    c. Is tailored messaging designed to resonate within targeted communities more or less effective than general messaging?

While these are broad questions, understanding how to answer them is essential to modern registration and mobilization campaigns.

EXPERIMENT UNIVERSE

PENNSYLVANIA

Our research efforts focus on registering and mobilizing Black voters in Pennsylvania. The state is perennially competitive, and the 2022 election was no exception, with Senate and gubernatorial contests that drew national attention. The fifth most populous state, Pennsylvania's demographics and settlement make it a useful test balloon for modern messaging campaigns. TargetSmart's modeled race identifies 84% of the state's residents as white, 9% as Black, 4% as Hispanic, and relatively smaller shares of voters as Asian American and Native American. Philadelphia and Pittsburgh are ethnically diverse, urban metropolitan areas; much of the center of the state is home to smaller towns and rural hamlets.

VFP's **registration experiment universe** was all unregistered Black people who were eligible to vote and the **mobilization experiment universe** was low propensity-to-vote, registered Black voters. Originally, we hoped to run individual-level experiments for both registration and mobilization programs, but due to voter data limitations, it became clear that the estimated registration audience size was not big enough to run an individual-level digital registration experiment.

While we have access to a dataset of unregistered voters, voter file data is typically unreliable and has a low match rate in platforms because of a lack of identifying information (i.e., email address) to enrich the data. At the time of constructing our registration audience, TargetSmart's data showed approximately 120,000 likely unregistered Black people in Pennsylvania. Based on Census' Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) data, this number seems low (see Table 1).

In addition, this data is based on what is commercially available, which tends to be unreliable. If we had used this data, it would have been difficult to obtain a statistically significant sample size for our treatment and control groups.

Furthermore, we would not have been able to communicate with people who are not included in TargetSmart's data, minimizing our overall impact.

[Table 1]: 2021 Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) by Race and Ethnicity

EST. BLACK POPULATION IN PA	EST. BLACK ELIGIBLE VOTERS IN PA	BLACK REGISTERED VOTERS IN PA	EST. BLACK UNREGISTERED VOTERS IN PA
1,420,000	990,995	720,979	270,016

Due to the lack of high quality unregistered voter data for our target audience, another limitation for digital experiments in general is platform match rates. When advertisers upload target lists of people, platforms match those names to social media profiles as best they can, based on names, email addresses, and so on. But not all names can be matched, we don't always receive the match rate results, and the rate itself varies based on the platform used. For example, when targeting a first-party list consisting of our treatment group on Facebook, we are restrained by the number of targets that Facebook can actually find on their platform. If we had a treatment group of 100,000 unregistered voters, after matching, this audience could be reduced by 60% to 80% (leaving only 20,000 to 40,000 individual targets), depending on the platform. Given the challenges of building adequately sized treatment and control groups using individual-level data, we decided to build our groups based on exclusion lists and zip codes for our voter registration experiment.

For our voter registration experiment targeting unregistered Black people, we built an exclusion list from the voter file and uploaded it to digital platforms to try and mitigate anyone outside of our target audience from receiving our treatment. The exclusion list included all registered voters in Pennsylvania and nearby states. We then used geo targeting techniques based on the zip codes we randomized into two treatment groups. The two treatment groups were about the same size—one group received short-term messaging and another that received long-term messaging—as well as a control group that received no treatment.

[Table 2]: Pennsylvania Registration Experiment Conditions

TOTAL BLACK ELIGIBLE VOTERS	REG (SHORT-TERM TREATMENT, ZIP CODE ESTIMATED BLACK ELIGIBLE VOTERS)	REG (LONG-TERM TREATMENT, ZIP CODE ESTIMATED BLACK ELIGIBLE VOTERS)	REG (CONTROL, ZIP CODE ESTIMATED BLACK ELIGIBLE VOTERS)
1,324,445	526,149	512,010	286,286

For our **mobilization/get-out-the-vote experiment** targeting **registered but low propensity-to-vote** Black voters, we built a voter file list of Black voters who had a modeled midterm turnout score of less than 70. We also included information on age and gender as well as scores for income, ideology, wireless connectivity, and vote history so that we could randomize our trial using these fields. The universe is described in more detail in Table 3.

[Table 3]: Pennsylvania Mobilization Experiment Demographic Breakdown

	EXPERIMENT UNIVERSE (N=395,642)
TS RACE: AFRICAN- AMERICAN	100.00%
GENDER: FEMALE	48.24%
GENDER: MALE	45.71%
GENDER: UNKNOWN	0.06%
AGE: 18-24 YEARS	13.78%
AGE: 25-34 YEARS	30.03%
AGE: 35-44 YEARS	19.87%
AGE: 45-54 YEARS	13.36%
AGE: 55-64 YEARS	11.54%
AGE: 65+ YEARS	11.39%
VOTED IN 2016	38.20%
VOTED IN 2018	19.74%
AVERAGE INCOME SCORE	14.38%
AVERAGE MIDTERM TURNOUT SCORE	34.29%
AVERAGE IDEOLOGY SCORE	84.83%

We then randomized the experiment universe into four distinct groups: three treatment groups of about the same size and one control.

[Table 4]: Pennsylvania Mobilization Experiment Conditions

MESSAGE GROUP	POPULATION ASSIGNED	PERCENT ASSIGNED
Hold Out	69,708	17.62%
Generic	108,648	27.46%
VFP Light	108,627	27.46%
VFP Banquet	108,659	27.46%

- **Hold Out:** voters in this group received no treatment.
- **Generic:** voters in this group received treatment that was more typical of large voter turnout campaigns, meaning social pressure messaging with simple, bland creative and a more political look. This group was primarily targeted on Facebook, with some minor YouTube ads.
- **VFP Light:** voters in this group received culturally relevant graphics and power and informational messaging. In addition, this group was targeted on all platforms.
- **VFP Banquet:** voters in this group received the same graphics and messaging as the VFP Light group, but were reached using a wider variety of techniques like lookalike and interest targeting.

As discussed above, because we still needed to use lists as one part of our audience building, there were limitations to this approach, mostly relating to the platform match rates. Since our match rates were between 60% and 70%, it is likely that certain people were included in our treatment groups despite being present on an exclusion list and vice versa for our targeting of low turnout Black voters. Other targeting methods, like lookalike audiences, are effective in reaching more users but almost certainly lead to "spillover" between groups. For example, if we included someone on our exclusion list but we weren't able to match them in the platform, this person might have received ads if they were included in a lookalike audience. Given these inherent and unavoidable limitations of running an experiment in the digital landscape, we do our due diligence to ensure the credibility and rigor of our research.

EXPERIMENT: REGISTRATION

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How effective is long-term, digital registration encouragement messaging? Can this long-term messaging yield more net-new registrations than similar short-term messaging?

VFP's 2022 messaging campaign did not generate a measurable change in net-new registrations. However, our program did mitigate Pennsylvania's statewide trend of shrinking registrations which, according to TargetSmart, was an approximately 0.46% decrease in total registered voters between August 2022 and March 2023.

Specifically, zip codes with Black eligible voters that were targeted with our messages maintained 0.2 percentage points more registrations than comparison zip codes. This statistically significant result likely created and maintained 20,000 registrations (95% robust confidence interval [5,400 - 37,200]) across the 600 experimental zip codes. In a competitive state like Pennsylvania, keeping 20,000 people on the voter rolls who would otherwise have dropped off is a very positive result.

We saw similar effects across both our long-term and short-term message groups, with no significant difference in results. However, it is important to note that for the purposes of this experiment, the difference in length of time between our long-term and short-term messaging groups was only six weeks. This was due to a variety of limitations, particularly funding, that prevented a timely program launch. In an ideal scenario, we would begin running messaging a minimum of six to nine months ahead of voter registration deadlines in order to gauge impact versus short-term messaging.

EXPERIMENT DESIGN

The registration experiment utilized a zip code based, cluster randomization scheme.

In essence, cluster randomization schemes place all **potential** targets who reside in a zip code into a common messaging group.

As an example, in Mercer County, all individuals who live in the Jamestown zip code 16134 were randomized into a "Long-Term Messaging" condition, all individuals who live in the Farrell zip code 16121 were randomized into a "Short-Term Messaging" condition, and all individuals who live in the county seat (the city of Mercer) were randomized into a "No Contact, Hold Out" condition. Cluster-based randomizations are common and have both a long and a current history in voter participation research.

There are several benefits of a cluster randomization scheme. First, these schemes are relatively easier to execute than individual-level randomizations because resources can be consolidated within a smaller number of geographies, thereby reducing the targeting costs associated with individual-level randomizations. Second, when cluster randomization occurs at electorally relevant levels (i.e., the precinct or city-level), effectiveness can be gathered without necessitating the purchase of individual-level voter roll data. For our study, we determined that randomization at the zip code level, rather than the precinct-level, would maintain an effective randomization and measurement system and was more practical as a digital advertising targeting method. Third, cluster randomization reduces problems of "spillover," where messaging directed toward one voter inadvertently has an effect on some other voter.

For reasons detailed earlier in this report, VFP had a well-informed belief that targeting match rates for commercially available election data products like TargetSmart were likely to be low. Under an individual-level randomization, a mismatched target would mean delivering inaccurate messaging to a potential registrant. This inaccuracy could lead to us paying to target people who are already registered or people who are unlikely to be part of our desired demographics.

The benefits of cluster-based randomizations are balanced against one principal cost: **statistical power**. Statistical power is a forecast of the monitoring and evaluation plan's ability to produce significant results. Importantly, this forecast is made after program and content decisions but before a messaging campaign is actually executed.

Statistical power forecasts are useful insofar as they aid teams in deploying resources to balance exploration (i.e., "Should the team deploy resources toward another message variant?") against evaluation (i.e., "The campaign requires 100,000 successful impressions to show a statistically significant difference between Message A and Message B.").

RANDOMIZATION PROCEDURE

In response to on-the-ground considerations that necessitated a cluster-based randomization, VFP elected to employ a blocked-clusters randomization. We detail this process below, but first provide a justification: **program comes first**. Working in concert, our research and program teams chose a randomization scheme that best balanced the organization's strategic, practical, and learning goals.

Our randomization was informed by several realities in Pennsylvania. First, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh are home to the majority of the target population. Black residents are concentrated in just 27, or 3%, of the state's zip codes, where they make up at least half of the total local residents. However, this small number of zip codes is home to more than 500,000 Black potential voters—42% of the state's total Black population. The simplest cluster-randomized designs would have placed several of these areas into a hold out group, severely restricting impact of the campaign in the service of research for the campaign.

To balance **impact** and **learning**, the randomization prioritized high population zip codes to receive messaging. This effectively fenced sixteen zip codes into some form of treatment messaging—eight designated for long-term messaging, and another eight for short-term messaging. An alternative we considered, but ultimately rejected, was to place six of these zip codes into a hold out condition; we determined that the small potential gains in statistical power did not warrant holding back messaging from as many as 160,000 members of the target population.

The randomization further segmented Pennsylvania zip codes into blocks, and then randomized within these blocks. Eleven zip codes in the Philadelphia metropolitan statistical area with between 10,000 and 20,000 members of the target population

were blocked together into a randomization set; four zip codes in Pittsburgh into another randomization set; Harrisburg, Coatesville, and Norristown into a third set; and then several other smaller groups of zip codes. While this form of randomization requires some care in analysis, it produces clean, well-powered comparisons that are directly interpretable by strategic decision makers.

Furthermore, this strategy created blocks that are highly similar, and ensured that the design maintained as much power as possible given the requirement to randomize at the zip code level. Table 5 reports that this blocking was successful in identifying zip codes with similar population characteristics.

[Table 5]: Pennsylvania Registration Experiment Conditions

MESSAGE CONDITION	NUMBER OF ZIP CODES	EST. TOTAL ELIGIBLE VOTERS	EST. BLACK ELIGIBLE VOTERS
Hold Out	302	3,710,831	286,286
Long-Term Message	312	3,980,271	512,010
Short-Term Message	313	4,095,961	526,149

OUTCOMES AND MEASURES

The principal outcome of interest for the campaign is a difference measure between the rate of new registrants in zip codes that were assigned to long-term, short-term, or no-encouragement messaging conditions. Registration data is maintained by TargetSmart and provided to VFP by Community Tech Alliance.

CHALLENGES AND DECISIONS

When possible, individually randomized designs are preferable to cluster-randomized designs. They make the storytelling easier from evaluation teams to strategic teams, and are relatively better powered. However, when field circumstances are not amenable to individually randomized experiments—as was the case in Pennsylvania during the 2022 cycle—evaluation plans have to secure a fallback position to produce the best possible learning. To conduct an individually randomized trial in the presence of low-targeting success potentially jeopardizes any evaluation claims.

Our determination to conduct this evaluation as a cluster-randomized experiment will, no doubt, raise questions within the evaluation community. We reiterate that we made this choice cognizant of platform, data governance, and state demographic constraints on the design. Then, after determining that a cluster-based randomization was necessary, we took steps to both mitigate the loss of statistical power attendant to a clustered design and to manage the balance between learning and performance.

EXPERIMENT RESULTS

The evidence appears clear—the 2022 registration encouragement messaging undertaken by VFP caused a measurable and statistically significant improvement in Pennsylvania's registrations. The most credible estimates find that zip codes randomly assigned to receive VFP messaging created and maintained significantly more registered voters than comparison zip codes assigned to a hold out condition.

According to TargetSmart, between August 2022 and March 2023, Pennsylvania experienced a statewide 0.46% decrease in the total number of registered voters. We used these two snapshots since August 2022 is the last TargetSmart data extract available before the election and messaging campaign, and March 2023 is the first TargetSmart data extract available after the election and our campaign. This kind of decrease in the voter rolls is common and can be caused by people moving and failing to re-register, dying, moving out of state, or being purged from the rolls. Because the state overall had a decrease in registrations, it was important for us to understand whether the zip codes that received our messaging had the same kind of drop off as the rest of the state, or whether our program was effective in keeping people registered.

At this time, Pennsylvania purges voter rolls by marking registered voters as "inactive" if a voter hasn't participated in two consecutive federal elections. "Inactive" voters are sent a written notice to verify their address, and ultimately are removed from the system if they fail to respond within 30 days and don't participate in the following federal election. Thus, when we refer to "created and maintained registered voters" we are specifically referring to the following possible actions:

becoming a newly registered voter, updating one's voter registration information (i.e., address change), or maintaining one's voter registration status if marked as inactive.

Our preferred model finds that VFP registration encouragement created or maintained an average of 33 more registrants per zip code, meaning active registrations remained higher in our treatment zip codes than elsewhere.[3] Across the 600 zip codes assigned to receive messaging, **this estimate translates to more than 20,000 registrations created and maintained by VFP messaging**, or about 0.2% of the statewide citizen voting age population (CVAP). TargetSmart estimates Pennsylvania's CVAP (of all races and ethnicities) to be 9,702,292 in the March 2023 extract. The 2021 US Census ACS estimates the CVAP (of all races and ethnicities) to be 9,893,010. When we report the 0.2% effect, we rely on the slightly more conservative ACS estimate. Because this messaging campaign targeted Black CVAP (rather than all races and ethnicities CVAP), we believe that this statistically significant, 0.2% estimate actually understates the campaign's success. Since digital platforms do not consistently report reach, this makes producing reliable, per-target effect estimates impossible. Per-target effect estimates depend on the numerator of "targets reached," so one approach could be to use the 2021 ACS estimate of "Black or African-American Alone," which is 990,995. However, this would likely overstate the program's effectiveness because message targeting is imprecise and could possibly target voting age citizens who may not be a part of the "Black or African-American Alone" census category.

Although the average effect across our treatment zip codes is approximately 0.2%, it is important to note that we included rural zip codes in our targeting that would generally be untouched from traditional registration campaigns. According to the CVAP estimates, there are an estimated 500 Black eligible voters for each rural zip code and although these are considered low POC zip codes individually, in total, they are home to almost 33% of the state's Black eligible voting population.

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3 The preferred model includes one feature that was not identified before analysis. It includes an indicator for whether data was observed in zip codes near the following universities and colleges: Penn State University, Dickinson College, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Lehigh College, and Villanova University. The 95% heteroskedastic consistent confidence interval is between 10 and 62 registrations per zip code.

[Figure 1]: Percentage Point Changes in Registration by Message Condition

MEAN CHANGE IN REGISTRATIONS
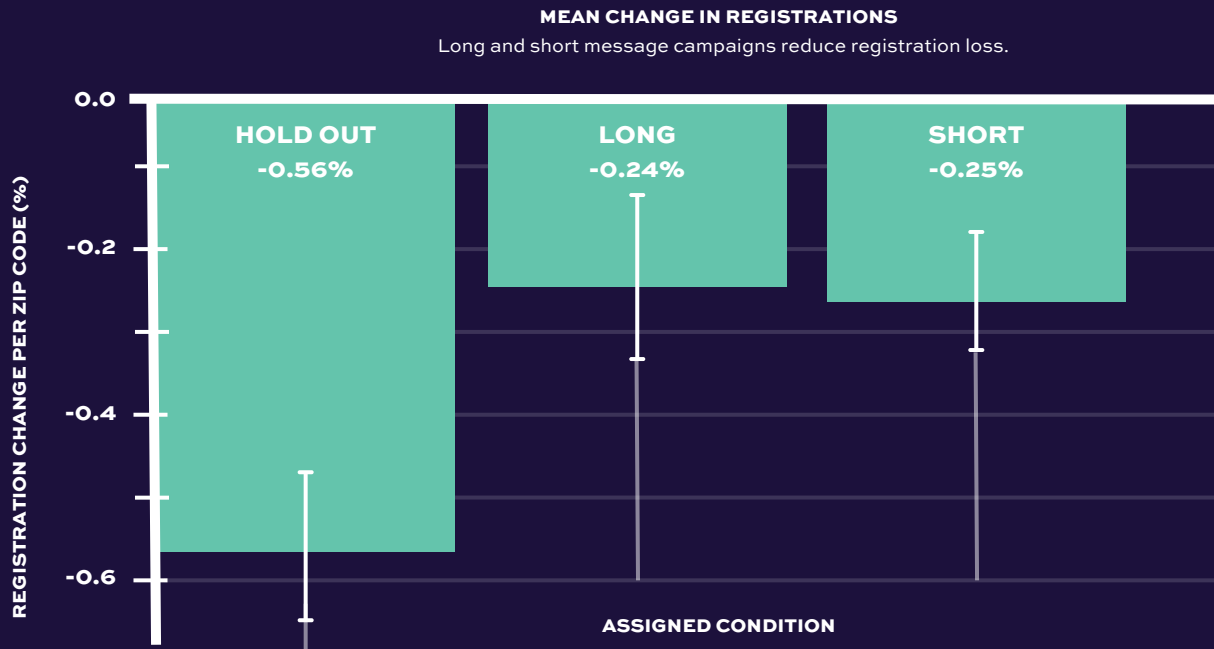Long and short message campaigns reduce registration loss.

Figure 1: Percentage point changes in registration by message condition. Error bars are standard errors of the mean. Tests from our preferred regression model reject the null effect of no-effect between the Hold Out group and both message conditions (Hold Out vs. Long-Message robust p-value = 0.019; Hold Out vs. Short-Message robust p-value = 0.018).

As mentioned, the voters in these rural zip codes are harder to reach from a traditional campaign standpoint, so creating and maintaining voters in these regions is crucial in VFP's eyes. We are engaging them with important election information that they otherwise would probably not receive. All this to say, that even though the average effect size is the same across all of our treatment zip codes, we want to highlight that without VFP's program, more registration decreases in these rural zip codes would have contributed to significant drop off of Pennsylvania's Black voting community as a whole.

In an attempt to understand the registration maintenance caused by messaging, we further investigated whether our messaging caused increases in the rate of net-new registrations and roll-changing registrations. Given the statewide decrease in registrations, there is no evidence that VFP messaging caused increases in either net-new or roll-changing registrations.

EXPERIMENT: MOBILIZATION

Our mobilization research begins from a simple observation: issue messaging campaigns underinvest in and undermobilize Black voters. These voters, a dynamic group with strongly held regional, generational, and personal identities, play a pivotal role in elections, yet campaigns consistently underspend and undermessage voters in these groups.

While our research in this cycle is not designed to directly address the issue, we think that it is important for the voter engagement community to consider why turnout rates are consistently lower among Black voters than neighboring white voters. One obvious reason for the disparity is the systemic racism designed to increase the effort required for Black citizens to cast a ballot.

Another, more insidious, problem is the widely held belief that Black citizens cost more to mobilize. While we acknowledge the existence of this disparity, we refuse to believe that it is either inevitable or durable. Indeed, our core mission seeks to change this equilibrium and invest in the formation of a voter identity.

Several possibilities could lead to the cost-per-vote difference. First, the structural and legal barriers faced by this community may simply set a higher bar. Second, and beyond the higher institutional hurdles faced by the community, we believe that past messaging efforts have been developed, targeted, and focused in ways that do not resonate with, successfully reach, or fully concentrate on a Black target audience.

We view the ability to target community members as a watershed change in how nonprofit issue and advocacy groups can invest in broadening the electorate. With the ability to target messaging, groups can invest in developing encouragement messages and imagery that resonates with members of the target audience. If relatively higher cost-per-vote with the Black community has been the result of broadcast messaging that fails to address the issues within the community, then targeting and specific messaging may drive this cost down. Finally, and possibly related to the increased institutional hurdles faced by the community, perhaps the density of messaging needs to be slightly higher to yield new voters.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

VFP's utilization of thoroughly modern messaging systems sets it apart among organizations engaged in voter mobilization messaging. The modern tech stack, targeted delivery, and community-responsive message and imagery are all motivated by the goal of creating a more effective, more efficient messaging system. In this experiment, VFP held both a **performance** goal, and an **impact** goal.

Performance Goal: Can dynamic, modern message creation and platform targeting successfully pair with structured research using tools available to political organizations?

We preview our learning here: Yes, dynamism and research can support one another! When creative, targeting, data, and research teams communicate clearly about each team's needs, and when each is able to communicate the tradeoffs attendant to operational decisions, it is possible for a single messaging campaign to achieve each team's—and therefore the larger organization's—goals.

Impact Goal: Can dynamic, modern message creation and platform targeting cause increased turnout among Black voters in Pennsylvania?

Black voters in Pennsylvania turnout at a rate 37% lower than neighboring white voters. This disparity is even more pronounced in midterm elections. This drop off—the marked decrease in voter participation in non-presidential election years—is well known in both academic and campaign circles. Less well understood is that this drop off rate is even higher among voters of color (see, e.g. Gartner (2015)), and higher even still in areas that were covered with Voting Rights Act protections before the rollback in the Shelby Supreme Court decision.

In the 2022 Pennsylvania election, VFP sought to mobilize new Black voters using tailored digital messaging campaigns. We refined these organizational goals into three research questions that together aim to answer the broader question of "How effective are modern digital mobilization campaigns?"

1. Does digital voter engagement yield more new votes than no-engagement among Black registered voters?
2. Is the effect of voter encouragement different among low modeled turnout than average modeled turnout Black registered voters?
3. Is tailored messaging designed to resonate within targeted communities more or less effective than general messaging?

EXPERIMENT DESIGN

Message Conditions

The mobilization experiment individually randomized registered voters into four distinct groups that differed in levels of VFP messaging engagement.

First, one group of voters was held out from contact. This hold out group may still have received messages from other advocacy and interest groups, but they were not assigned to receive messaging from VFP. In dynamic online messaging auction environments, it requires care to produce a reliable hold out group, and even best practice hold out groups are likely to receive some treatment through mistargeting and algorithmic targeting. To reduce mistargeting as much as possible, we assign individuals in the hold out condition to exclusion lists on each advertising targeting platform.

A second group of voters assigned to the lowest level of VFP engagement were contacted using generic, staid messaging materials that are closely aligned with broadcast messaging best practices. This generic messaging made appeals to urgency—using language like "the election ends soon" and "make a plan to vote"—and imagery that is consistent with national civic duty.

A third group of voters were assigned to receive VFP-branded messaging and imagery, but not advanced targeting. Within the experiment, we term this group VFP Light.

The VFP imagery is considerably more dynamic than the comparison group imagery and was specifically developed to resonate among the target population. This creative content utilizes empowerment messaging, moving imagery, and very short (i.e., 6-second) streaming platform videos. The creative team made deliberate choices that this messaging condition would show persons of color as voters and use color themes and language intended to resonate within the community.

Finally, a fourth group of voters was assigned to not only receive this same VFP-branded, dynamic messaging, but also to use advanced message targeting available on platforms. We refer to this condition as the VFP Banquet. This targeting includes lookalike targeting and more general interest targeting (see Appendix A). This lookalike and interest targeting creates some imprecision in the interpretation of any contrast found between this and other groups.

RANDOMIZATION PROCEDURE

To create balanced message groups, we block randomized on the following voter characteristics: age bucket (i.e., 25-34), income, modeled propensity-to-vote, and the condition assigned to the zip code in the registration experiment. Within this experiment, we chose to balance impact and learning by including relatively higher proportions of the target population in message conditions, and a relatively lower proportion of the target population in the hold out condition. Namely, we assigned 17.5% percent of the target population to the hold out messaging group, and 27.5% each to the generic, light, and banquet conditions (see Table 4, page 28).

OUTCOMES AND MEASURES

The outcome for this research is a validated vote measured using the March 2023 voter file extract provided by TargetSmart. We consider any form of vote—mail-in, early, election-day in person, provisional—to be voting events. All forms of voting occurred after the campaign launched, so they are all considered as valid outcomes.

CHALLENGES AND DECISIONS

VFP's use of best-available, advanced targeting methods stands to improve the specificity of registered voters who are targeted to receive messages, and in turn dramatically improve the efficiency and effectiveness of donors' funding. At the same time, the use of these targeting methods creates considerable challenges for monitoring and evaluation teams. The very nature of interest and lookalike targeting break down rigid group assignment; in turn, group-based message effectiveness evaluations become challenging. Specifically, there is no method to ensure that a potential voter assigned to one group is not identified by an algorithm as a potential lookalike, and so served VFP-branded advertising.

EXPERIMENT RESULTS

Main Results

There is little evidence to suggest that mobilization encouragement, of any form assigned in this research, affected turnout. In Figure 2 we show that among our target population of low modeled propensity-to-vote, Black citizens, turnout in the 2022 Pennsylvania general election was around 23.5% no matter the mobilization encouragement assigned to the individual. Our preferred statistical model, which includes indicators for randomization blocks and treatment assignment, finds results that are consistent with Figure 2—low modeled turnout, Black registered voters in all experiment conditions voted at nearly identical rates, and tests for differences between message groups all fail to reject the null hypothesis of no result.

[Figure 2]: Turnout Rates by Message Condition

TURNOUT BY CONDITION
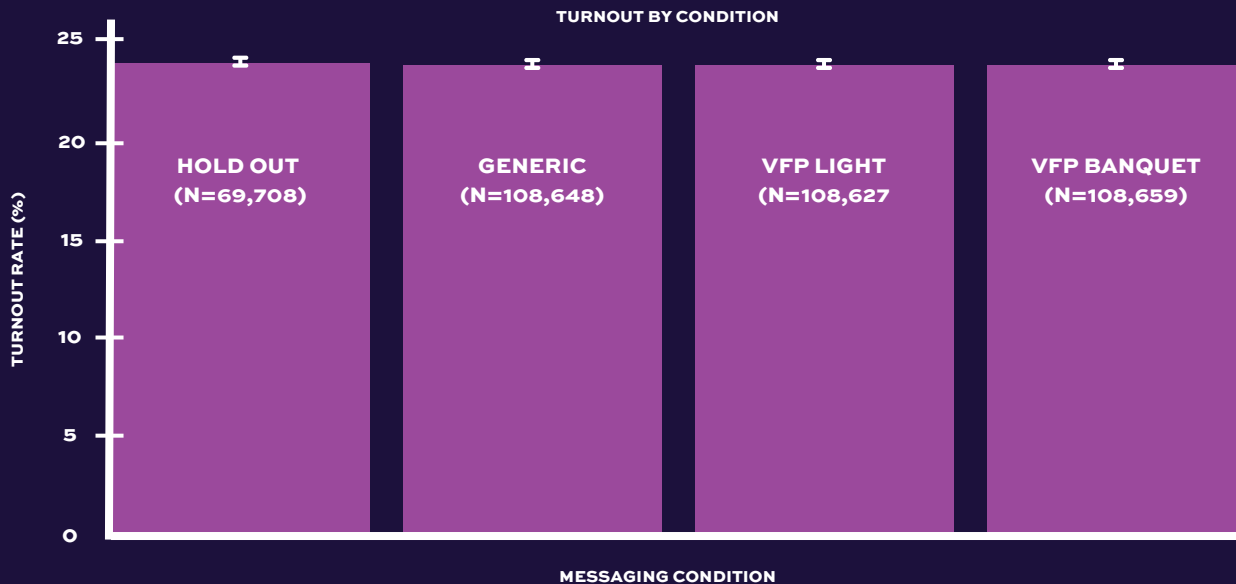
Figure 2: Turnout rates in each condition. Bars are the mean turnout rate, and error bars are standard errors of the mean. Turnout is statistically indistinguishable between any treatment condition. Any tests for difference between groups fail to reject the null hypothesis of no-difference between groups.

Subgroup Results

The block randomization employed—blocking on age, income, modeled turnout, and earlier registration experiment assignment—allows for the structured comparison of message effects within the block-randomized groups. To be quite clear, however, we hold little expectation that there is a meaningful effect within these groups with such a consistent turnout rate at the message level.

We evaluated whether the effects of the mobilization program varied across age and turnout scores. We did not identify any statistically significant differences across subgroups. The consistency of effects across subgroups is not surprising given the small main effect.

DISCUSSION

Getting Americans registered to vote and participate in their first election is crucially important for the function of our electoral system. Unfortunately, these steps are time consuming, frequently confusing, and borne more acutely by Black and Brown citizens who already face greater structural impediments to political participation than non-minoritized citizens. Too often in our view, non-partisan groups focused on increasing voter participation fail to engage with these communities; or, when they do, it is only superficially or clumsily messaged.

In this research, we evaluated whether best practice voter encouragement can effectively increase access to the ballot in Pennsylvania. To do so, VFP developed culturally relevant, full-funnel targeted messages and rigorously evaluated these messages' and systems' effectiveness against common practice.

In the context of a shrinking electorate in Pennsylvania, we found that culturally relevant voter registration encouragements can effectively curtail election roll losses. In fact, through this research, we estimate that more than 20,000 Pennsylvania voters created and maintained their registrations because of our program. Curiously, the successes from these election cycle messages did not come from net-new or roll-changing registrations; instead, the successes seem to be generated from individuals who take actions to maintain their status on the voter rolls.

Mobilization to actually cast a ballot proved to require a greater level of activity to generate a vote. Our mobilization campaign shows that it is possible for rigorous evaluation and dynamic digital media to co-exist and produce the opportunity to learn about message and platform effectiveness. However, this campaign also elucidates that mobilization requires more than short-term efforts. None of the three treatment conditions were able to change turnout rates among our target audience of low propensity-to-vote, Black citizens: across all treatment conditions, we observed turnout rates of 23.5%, and the very small difference between these conditions is likely attributable to chance.

However, people in this universe were more likely to vote in the 2022 midterm election than they were to vote in the 2018 midterm election, for reasons unrelated to this program. Among people in this universe who were old enough to vote in both elections, turnout increased from 19.7% in 2018 to 21.7% in 2022—a 10% increase in turnout for low turnout Black voters in Pennsylvania! This increase in turnout presents an opportunity for further exploration as there was a decrease in turnout across the electorate in 2022 midterms from the 2018 highs. Among all registered voters, turnout decreased from 56.8% in 2018 to 51.6% in 2022—a 9% decrease.

There are many factors that contribute to our results and more research is needed to verify the reasons behind low turnout among those who received our messaging; however, as with our registration experiment, limitations including lack of adequate funding and short-term launch dates led to a less than ideal scenario with which to run this experiment. In future programs, VFP will continue exploring the following questions to increase our programs' effectiveness:

- Testing our **customized digital tools** to determine which features are most effective in increasing turnout rates.
- Comparing the effectiveness of **personalized messages**, such as culturally relevant imagery and text versus more official-looking, stately imagery and text, on which types of content drive more voter registration and engagement.
- Measuring the effectiveness of **different campaign lengths** for fostering a longer narrative with "long-term" message testing of typically disengaged voters.

TECHNOLOGY

KEY LEARNINGS

By moving off of vendor solutions and building our tech in-house in 2023, we can save money while investing in customizable user experiences for our voter registration and mobilization tools.

Building our own "Make a Plan to Vote" tool will allow us to have more control over our data so that we can identify insights in real time to make campaign and product optimizations.

WEB APPLICATION

The core of Voter Formation Project's technology is an in-house web application offering two key features: **voter registration check** (Reg Check) and **make a plan to vote** (MAPTV). By building tools in-house, VFP has complete control over its tech stack and data, and can fully customize user experiences from end-to-end. Migrating off of vendor solutions can also significantly reduce VFP's tech overhead costs by only paying for what we need as we need it.

Given the complexity of VFP's paid advertising programs, most voter registration tools on the market do not have the tracking and data capabilities that we require. Using a commercially available tool, organizations have limited control over how and when data is delivered and what is included. This leads to significant gaps and delays in data reporting, which doesn't work for VFP's high standards for its data.

But most importantly for VFP, those tools do not allow for robust tracking of user behavior, including which

ad they saw that prompted them to come to the form, what platform they were coming from, and what their actions were as they went through the flow (where people drop off, for instance). Because we are usually running dozens of ads across multiple platforms at the same time, all of this information is vital to VFP's ability to design and implement effective advertising programs. In addition, our tool gives us this information in real time, allowing for program and cost optimization as ads are running.

By innovating VFP's tech and bringing it in-house, we have positioned ourselves to support our robust digital campaigns and optimize the user's journey to becoming a registered, engaged voter. VFP is breaking new ground by developing our own full-funnel, fully customizable, and highly scalable voter registration and voter mobilization tools.

Below, we run through how each of these tools were built and their respective user flows.

REGISTRATION CHECK (REG CHECK)

With the Reg Check feature, users can submit a form to check their voter registration status and receive the result in real time. To make this determination, VFP connects to TargetSmart's voter file and APIs[4] to identify users as registered (i.e., user information matches to a voter file record) or not. It is important to note that this feature cannot definitively say that a given user is unregistered. For example, there could be delays in voter file updates for newly registered voters, or the user might have entered the wrong address for their record on the voter file. To mitigate this, our team decided that if someone's registration status cannot be matched to a voter file record, then the app will display the results of the registration check as unknown rather than confirmed as unregistered.

Example User Funnel:

- A user clicks through a digital ad and lands on a VFP-branded website.
- A user submits the Reg Check form with their personal details and address information.
- If a user cannot be confirmed as registered to vote, then they are provided with information specific to their state and prompted to visit their Secretary of State's website.
- If a user is confirmed as registered to vote, they are fed into VFP's make a plan to vote flow.
- All users receive an automated email with tailored content depending on their registration check result and whether the registration deadline has passed in their state. The email contains multiple calls to action, to support users completing their own registration (if applicable) or making a plan to vote (See Appendix C).

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4 Application Programming Interface (API): a software intermediary that allows two applications to talk to each other. An accessible way to extract and share data within and across organizations. For our use case, we access TargetSmart's API by sharing the user's personal information to see if they match to an existing record on TargetSmart's voter file.

MAKE A PLAN TO VOTE (MAPTV)

Users land on VFP's MAPTV tool either directly from a get-out-the-vote ad or through our Reg Check flow. In 2022, our MAPTV tool was white-labeled from a vendor. Although this white-labeled tool had all of VFP's branding, it had low conversion rates, likely because users had to click through to another website. Aside from the funnel issues and user dropoff, the data provided by the vendor wasn't automated to deliver on a regular cadence, had missing data fields, an inconsistent data schema, and even had missing entries for certain downtime periods.

Therefore, for the 2024 cycle, VFP plans to build its own MAPTV tool and integrate it seamlessly with Reg Check. If registration is verified, users will automatically enter the MAPTV flow, where they will see election-related information, make a plan to vote, and schedule email reminders. With the ability to fully customize our user experiences, we can also execute experiments like A/B testing landing pages and form design. This will enable us to continually optimize our user funnels as we learn more about how users interact with our tools.

Example User Funnel:

- A user clicks through a digital ad and lands on a VFP-branded website.
- A user submits the Reg Check form with their personal details and address information.
  - Users must submit a Reg Check form to confirm if they are registered to vote BEFORE going to our partner's external landing page to make a plan to vote. In future iterations of the product, we hope to fully integrate this "redirection" to make a plan to vote into the existing Reg Check feature of VFP's app to prevent as much user drop-off as possible.
- If a user cannot be confirmed as registered to vote, then they are provided with information specific to their state and prompted to visit their Secretary of State's website.
- If a user is confirmed as registered to vote, they are prompted to make a plan to vote and to click through to the vendor's landing page where their address information is automatically populated.
- On the vendor's landing page, the user can decide how they want to vote (i.e., in person or by mail), find information about their polling location, and set up a calendar event or email reminder.

DATA PIPELINES

The success of VFP's programs relies on having clean, accurate, up-to-date data. Our systems need to interact with the voter file, pull in campaign performance data from each digital platform, and collect information about website visits and form submissions. All of this helps us gain a better understanding of voters' behavior and how they interact with our messaging, which in turn allows us to make more informed decisions about our campaigns and ultimately drive better results.

In order to better integrate data from multiple sources, we are now using Community Tech Alliance (CTA) tools to sync data into our instance of Google Cloud Platform (GCP). A detailed description of CTA's data pipelines can be found in Appendix D.

Our hope is to create all of the systems we will need for future cycles in-house, so that we can mesh website events with campaign metrics and form submission data to more accurately compute cost per conversion to optimize future campaigns. Specifically, we are building an in-house tool to track website interactions and form submissions for checking voter registration and making a plan to vote. We are confident that moving these processes in-house will give us a higher quality of data and allow us to make better decisions about what campaigns to invest in. This, in turn, would make it easier for us to test the percentages of our conversions that are generated by people of color, our target audience.

By reallocating resources to campaigns that are performing well, and specifically performing well with people of color, we will be able to achieve a better return on our investment and drive higher voter turnout and registration.

While our new pipeline will enable us to make significant improvements to our campaigns, some of our significant limitations are related to data validation and consistency across different platforms. In the future, we plan to implement more robust data validation and cleaning tools to ensure that our data is accurate and consistent across all platforms.

In addition to our new pipeline, we are also planning to utilize retargeting and user funnels more in the future to further optimize our campaigns. By retargeting users who have shown interest in our ads, we are able to drive more conversions at a lower cost. Additionally, by mapping out user funnels, we can identify where users are dropping off in the conversion process and make necessary adjustments to improve the user experience. Transitioning to our own systems will give us more insight into what these dropoff points are. While there are still some limitations to our approach, we are confident that with continued innovation and improvement, we will increase our impact in the communities we care about.

NEXT STEPS

One of the main takeaways from 2022 was that, moving forward, VFP needs to break away from legacy technology and contracts. Our goal for 2023 is to work toward building fully customizable, scalable systems that can support robust digital campaigns focusing on long-term messaging and impact on marginalized communities. The team has already begun designing solutions for bringing the web application features in-house, and in Q3, we plan to deploy the web app so that it is "containerized," meaning it can be white labeled for future VFP partners to take advantage of their own full funnel, fully customizable, and highly scalable voter registration and voter mobilization tool.

LOOKING FORWARD

Voter Formation Project is intensely proud of the programming and research that we implemented in our very first midterm cycle. We were able to scale our organization quickly and have a real impact in the 2022 elections. Voting advocacy campaigns and organizations like ours are required to be nimble to respond to the shifting dynamics of policies that are designed to harm and often immediately endanger our communities.

What's different about VFP is our commitment to sharing everything that we've learned: the good, the bad, the confusing, and the surprising. We are committed to building lasting digital infrastructure for our communities, which requires sharing our findings across coalitions to strengthen the entire sector. We are also striving to break the continuous "cycle to cycle" norm of scaling up and scaling down every two years, as that ultimately damages all of our work by decreasing learning, innovation, and organizational stability.

We noted earlier that research and programming are often thought to be "in tension" rather than "in counterbalance," but this extends beyond how research and program impact one another during implementation. The reality is that these functions are often explicitly separated due to funding opportunities and donor prioritization. This dynamic can make it incredibly difficult to run impactful programming alongside expansive research.

By challenging this paradigm, VFP aims to demonstrate the cost of separating these two functions, as well as highlight the benefits of running impact and research programming in tandem.

Our research delivered results that we did not anticipate—such as the retention of voters on the rolls and the impact in more rural communities. We may have never noticed these impacts had we not insisted on running research, which frankly was underfunded. Impact campaigns are important to drive results, but research embedded in program is equally as important so that we understand how scale impacts all of our learnings

It is not enough to only ask discrete questions about program details. We all have to revisit our methods and assumptions for ever-changing online and political landscapes, so that we aren't missing out on opportunities to drive change in our communities' hearts and minds.

So what's next? VFP is looking forward to understanding the connection between how our communities *feel* about civic engagement and their *actions* about civic engagement. Our theory is that if we can run campaigns designed to address our communities' trust in the system, we can have more effective voter registration and voter mobilization outcomes. This work will be supported by our in-house infrastructure so that we are running these programs as efficiently as possible. These are big questions and big goals, and we'll share what we learn every step of the way.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TARGETING STRATEGIES

All of the strategies identified below were used on one or more platforms, alone or in combination, as VFP worked to find and deliver ads to the program's target audiences.

VOTER FILE MATCHING

- Custom matching to first-party lists empowers you to target your audience from an uploaded data file. Typically, this involves using online and offline data including information that your audience has shared with you (i.e., personal identifiable information via website forms) to create targeted ads for this audience and others like them. In this case, the primary lists used for matching were segments created from the TargetSmart voter file.

- The performance and reach of matching to first-party lists is dependent on the quality of the platforms' match rates. For example, if your list is small and the match rate is under 30% (which is Facebook's average), then you will likely have difficulty reaching your target audience. VFP also identified that this method could result in incorrect matches on the platforms, most notably due to data quality issues with email addresses and phone numbers on the voter file.

- Due to challenges with list matching on platforms that do provide this functionality and the fact that list matching is only available on a subset of platforms, a wide range of additional targeting strategies were also executed, either alone or in combination with voter file list inclusion or exclusion.

AFFINITY/INTEREST

- This is a wide audience targeting option that helps reach a broad group of people who might have an interest in a certain topic or influencer. You can create custom affinity audiences to reach an audience that has taken an action on your website or other factors.

- Affinity audiences are valuable to target for brand awareness purposes.

CONTEXTUAL

- A form of targeted advertising in which the content of an ad is in direct correlation to the content of the web page the user is viewing.

- The ads are selected and served by automated systems, usually provided by a vendor in charge of running programmatic ads, based on the context of what a user is looking at.

DEMOGRAPHIC

- Detailed demographics empower you to reach broad segments of the population that share common traits. Information like gender or age is used to categorize users across platforms.

- You can use demographic targeting to reach groups of people who might be interested in your content, such as homeowners, single parents, suburban women, or college grads.

LOOKALIKES

- Lookalike audiences lists (LaLs) help you target people who have similar characteristics and behaviors to previous website visitors or visitors who converted depending on what you specify.

- LaLs are an example of machine learning in action provided that the platforms you are using provide this as an option. LaL algorithms are able to discover correlations between online behaviors to determine who is likely to be interested in your content.

- VFP utilized LaLs in a number of different ways, most notably:

    - To find additional audiences like those identified directly on the voter file, and
    - To find people like those that the program had successfully reached: Black and Latinx people who were found to be unregistered and completed the registration flow on VFP's app.

RETARGETING

- Retargeting audiences provide an opportunity to customize your ad campaigns for people who have previously visited your site, but may not have completed a final action (i.e., conversion event such as a form completion).

- Depending on the industry, reports generally claim that retargeting campaigns typically see an average increase of 70% in conversions.

ZIP PROPENSITY

- People of color voter propensity by zip code was extrapolated from the Census Bureau American Community Survey (free public data about the size and characteristics of the residential population in specific geographic areas).

APPENDIX B: TECHNOLOGY, CONTINUED

The VFP application is implemented on multiple standalone websites, using different branding to support different programs and partners. Content on the sites is managed using Contentful, a headless CMS. The headless CMS makes it easy to manage and evolve content across all VFP sites, and also provides multilingual support. There were two active brands implemented during the 2022 cycle:

- Voter Formation Project
  - A more fun, colorful, contemporary brand
  - To be integrated with the company's marketing website in 2023
- How to Vote
  - A more official-looking brand
  - Mimics the design of traditional state government websites

CURRENT TOOLKIT

Below is a list of the tools and services that supported the web application in 2022:
- Reg Check
  - Hosting using Netlify
  - Website event tracking using Segment IO
  - Content management system using Contentful
  - Codebase using legacy code in Preact
  - A/B testing functionality available
- MAPTV
  - Vendor white-labeled landing page
    - Limited in page design and customizability of user funnel
    - PII and website events from the vendor are delivered via data pipelines to BigQuery

FUTURE TOOLKIT

One of the most exciting projects we are working on in 2023 is combining the Reg Check and MAPTV features so that they are integrated into the same codebase with the ability to toggle either functionality. Going forward, we plan to use the following tools and services:
- Reg Check + MAPTV
  - Hosting using Kubernetes (GKE)
  - Website event tracking using Firebase
  - Website designed using React
  - Content management system using FireCMS
  - A/B testing functionality available

WEB APPLICATION

Registration Check landing page with VFP branding.

Make a Plan to Vote landing page with VFP branding.

Registration Check & Making a Plan to Vote website with HTV branding.

EMAIL CONFIRMATION

Example bilingual email confirmation of voter registration results to all Reg Check users.

Jane,

You just checked to see if you were registered to vote. We didn't find the following information on your state's voter rolls:

Jane Doe
09/4/1994
1234 Voter Lane
Washington DC, 20002

Even though we did not find your information, you may actually be registered. Check on your state's website to make sure.

CHECK REGISTRATION

Thanks for registering to vote.

Together,

Your friends at
Voter Formation Project

Jane,

Acaba de verificar si cuentas con una inscripción electoral. No encontramos la siguiente información en los registros electorales de tu estado:

Jane Doe
09/4/1994
1234 Voter Lane
Washington DC, 20002

Aunque no hayamos encontrado tu información, puede que realmente sí cuentes con una inscripción electoral. Consulta el sitio web correspondiente a tu estado para verificar.

CHECK REGISTRATION

Gracias por inscribirte para votar.

Saludos solidarios,

El equipo de
Voter Formation Project

APPENDIX C: DATA PIPELINES, CONTINUED

Community Tech Alliance (CTA) syncs data on behalf of its partner organizations (including Voter Formation Project) from a number of data sources into Progressive Action Database (PAD, hosted on Google BigQuery). As of this writing, CTA offers syncs for over 35 different data sources. This list includes commonly used data warehouses like S3 and Redshift, digital media tools like Facebook and Snapchat, voter mobilization and CRM tools like NGPVAN and Mobilize, and any other sources of data that organizations need in order to run their programs effectively. This page lists all of the syncs that are either currently available or planned for future development.

CTA syncs data using a number of different strategies, including direct warehouse-to-warehouse syncs, SQL mirrors, and vendor APIs. For vendor organizations that deliver data via API access, data is typically extracted and loaded into BigQuery using Airbyte, an open-source ELT[5] tool that maintains source connectors for many commonly used tools (a full list of their offerings is available here). When a connector does not already exist, CTA develops a custom Airbyte integration that takes advantage of the platform to request data from vendor APIs.

Once data have been extracted and loaded into BigQuery, CTA uses dbt[6] to perform additional transformations to flatten raw JSON payloads[7], cast data fields to their appropriate data types[8], and conduct any additional operations needed to deliver data to partners in a familiar and usable format. Specifically, data is delivered in the form of BigQuery materialized views. All of the dbt we run in production is publicly available in a dbt-cta repository, enabling PAD users to view the exact code that is transforming their raw data and delivering it into PAD. CTA welcomes collaboration on these projects and invites PAD users to submit feature requests or report bugs by engaging with the repository - read more about how to get involved here!

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5 ELT ("Extract Load Transform"): Describes the process of transferring raw data from a source server to a data system on a target server and then preparing the information for downstream uses. For example, CTA used Airbyte to extract data from Facebook, load the data into PAD, and transform that data into a format that the VFP tech team could use to pull insights on Facebook ad performance.
6 dbt ("Data Build Tool"): an open-source tool that helps analysts and engineers transform data in their systems more effectively.
7 JSON payloads: A specific format for sending or receiving data from a source server. For example, other formats for data could be a CSV file or a Google Sheet.
8 Cast data fields into their appropriate data types: Describes the process of standardizing and cleaning the data so it is stored in an expected, consistent format. For example, making sure that date fields (i.e. Birthday) are correctly formatted as a date (01/01/2000) and not a numeric value (01012000).
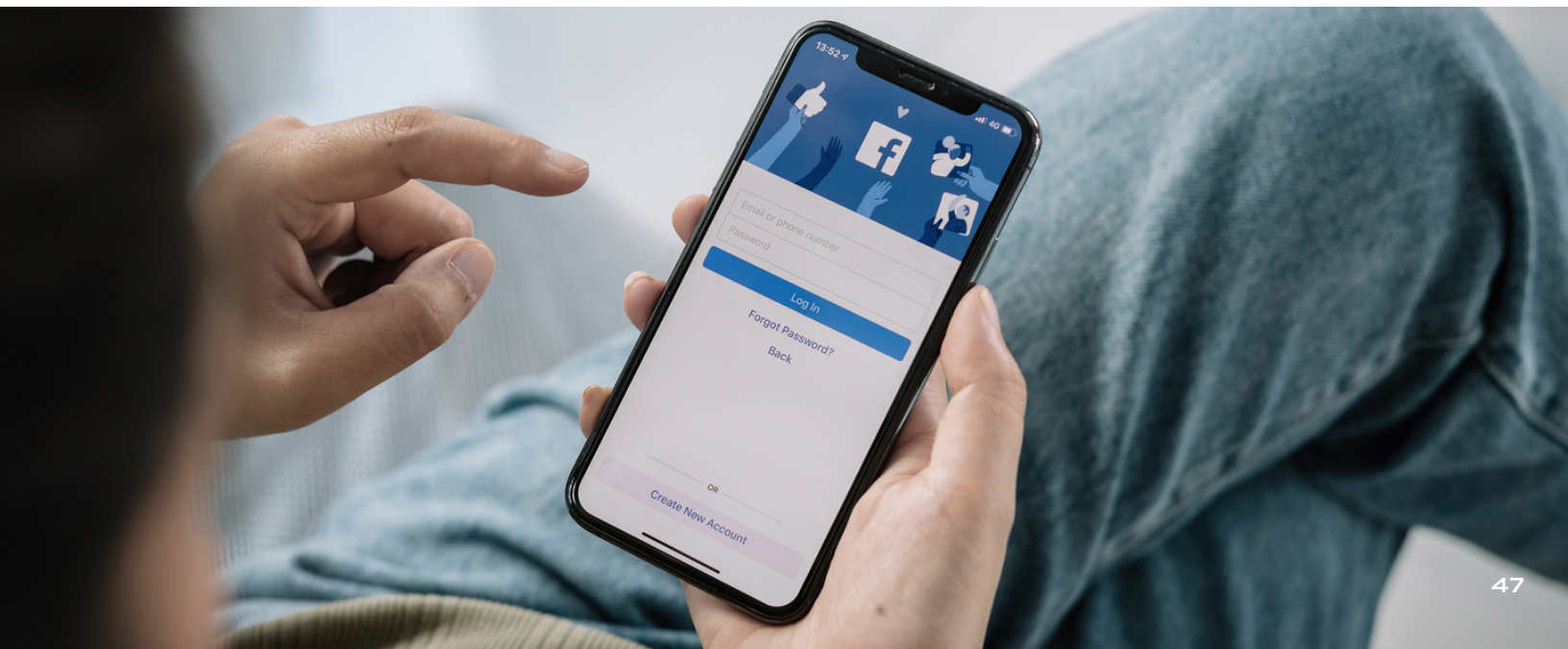
THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT!

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May 2023

the **VOTER FORMATION** *project*