

POSTCARDING AND LETTER-WRITING RESEARCH



Definition: Sending fully or partially handwritten postcards or letters to voters in the mail.

Bottom line: The effectiveness of postcarding needs more research.¹ There's evidence that postcarding has small effects on voter turnout and voter registration.

CONSIDERATIONS

- **Pros** - Postcards and letters can reach addresses inaccessible by canvassing; introvert-friendly volunteer activity; relatively cheap; good option for volunteers who are less comfortable with technology
- **Cons** - Not as effective as personal contact methods; handwriting varies in legibility; postcard imaging may vary significantly; limited space for message

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Postcarding generally has a small effect on voter turnout.

- Industry research² generally finds a small, positive boost from GOTV postcarding (~0.1-2.17%). The largest effect (2.17%) was found in the 2020 presidential primary election targeting sporadic Democratic leaning voters.³
- Good targeting matters. Our [2018 GOTV postcard experiment](#)³ found null results, but the voters we sent postcards to were not representative of all Democratic voters in the district, which likely attenuated those results. We saw this issue again in our [2019](#)⁵ and [2020 postcard chase](#)⁶ experiments.

Letter writing may offer promising results with small effects on voter turnout.

- [Vote Forward](#) has conducted several studies with partially handwritten letters across a variety of election contexts and found that they generally provide a small positive boost to special election turnout. Results have ranged from 0.4-3.4%.⁷
- One industry study found that printed letters hand-signed by neighbors had a 1.1% turnout effect in the 2021 Virginia Primary.

Postcarding appears to be effective for voter registration “chase” but letters don’t.

- SDAN ran two studies sending chaser postcards to people who had already received voter registration forms in the mail.
 - In the [first study](#)⁸, people who received chaser postcards registered at a 20% higher rate than people who did not receive postcards.
 - In the [second study](#)⁹, people who received chaser postcards registered at a 12% higher rate than people who did not receive a postcard (increase in registrants of 0.26%)
- [Vote Forward](#) has not found positive results with letter writing and registration.¹⁰



There is only one head to head comparison between postcards and letters.

- SDAN conducted a head to head study with voter registration chase in 2020 and found both modes ineffective compared to controls (not getting a postcard/letter) and no different from one another.¹¹

Social pressure messaging appears effective.

- One industry study found that short social pressure messages on postcards outperformed plan-making messages and increased turnout significantly.
- A study from Postcards to Swing Voters suggests that handwritten postcards with social pressure messaging had a 0.14% turnout effect in the 2020 general election.¹²

Areas for Further Exploration:

- Motivating/educating voters who need a nudge to vote (low propensity voters) but who will likely vote Democratic if they do (high support voters).
- Some industry results indicate that results differ based on demographics, like race, gender, and age.
- Planned/ongoing SDAN studies:
 - New voters of color (Virginia 2021; analysis expected 2022)
 - Votes and values (Virginia 2021; analysis expected 2022)
 - Two wave voter education (2022)

References and notes:

1. We are aware of postcarding/letter writing reports from groups like Tony the Democrat (Postcards to Voters), Blue Virginia and Blue Wave Analytics, but they aren't experiments or they are purely market research studies. Therefore we cannot draw reliable conclusions from these reports and so we have not included them in this overview.
2. Industry source (SDAN has access to various research reports by progressive organizations that we are not allowed to disseminate or cite but are sharing broad strokes of here).
3. <https://sisterdistrict.com/postcard-postmark-location/>
4. <https://sisterdistrict.com/research/2018-gotv-postcarding-results>
5. <https://sisterdistrict.com/b/research/the-skill-of-the-chase/>
6. <https://sisterdistrict.com/b/research/the-skill-of-the-chase-2/>
7. <https://votefwd.org/labs>
8. <https://sisterdistrict.com/research/postcarding-experiment-results>
9. <https://sisterdistrict.com/research/voter-registration-postcards-replication>
10. <https://votefwd.org/posts/Voter-Registration-Experiments-2019-2020>
11. <https://sisterdistrict.com/letters-vs-postcards>
12. <https://www.turnoutpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/People-Powered-Postcards-2020-Results.pdf>