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Incerti, T.

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# Countering Capture in Local Politics: Evidence from Eight Field Experiments

Trevor Incerti, University of Amsterdam

In the first field experiments to encourage participation in local civic bodies, I examine whether outreach can reduce inequalities in who participates in city council meetings. Renter participation in local politics lags that of home owners, who often participate to oppose housing growth. A total of 19,951 renter households received randomly assigned emails encouraging them to comment at their city council meetings and support housing growth. Opening a message highlighting potential costs of abstention from local politics increased public comments by 1.4 percentage points versus a placebo. These effects are substantively large: treatment-induced comments represented 8% of total comments and 46% of pro-housing comments across all targeted meetings. The results suggest that even low-cost outreach strategies can meaningfully increase participation in lesser known settings like city councils and make these bodies more reflective of the general public. Further, increasing the perception that abstention is costly appears to be an effective motivator of collective action.

Home owners are more active in local politics in the United States than renters (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019; Hall and Yoder 2022; Yoder 2020). This participation gap is reflected in land use policies that prioritize home owners' economic interests (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2019; Fischel 2005; Marble and Nall 2021). Yet these policies also decrease access to housing and increase rents (Glaeser and Gyourko 2018; Glaeser, Gyourko, and Saks 2005), giving renters an incentive to participate in local politics and support housing growth.

Differences in the nature of home owner and renter economic incentives partly explain the participation gap. Self-interest typically motivates political behavior only when benefits are “tangible . . . large, visible, and certain” (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990, 1126). Home owners tangibly benefit from halting nearby development, preserving property values, while increased housing gradually lowers rents regionally.

How can those with uncertain, long-term gains (such as renters) be motivated to engage in costly political behavior?

In the first field experiments to motivate participation in local civic bodies, 19,951 renter households in eight cities in Los Angeles (LA) County received emails encouraging them to comment at their city council meetings and support pro-housing regulatory policies. Three mechanisms of mobilization were tested: attendance instructions, economic self-interest emphasis, and highlighting costs of political inaction. Receipt of any treatment increased public comments by 1 percentage point (pp), with a 1.4 pp increase when emphasizing costs of abstention. Local election voters were more responsive (2.3 pp) than nonvoters (0.9 pp). These effects are substantively large, as council meeting attendance is typically low. Treatment-induced comments made up 8% of all comments and 46% of pro-housing comments in treated meetings, and over 50% of treated meetings had majority pro-housing comments.

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Trevor Incerti (t.n.incerti@uva.nl) is an assistant professor of political economy in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Noord-Holland 1018WV, Netherlands.

The human subject protocol of the research was evaluated and approved by an ethics committee at Yale University (IRB Protocol ID 2000030461). The research design and analyses were preregistered at <https://osf.io/c84j7>. Any and all errors are my own. Support for this research was provided by the Center for the Study of American Politics and the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University. Replication files are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>) and on GitHub (<https://github.com/tincerti>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the *JOP* replication analyst. An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/729949>.

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The results suggest that in contrast with voter turnout, low-cost outreach like email can meaningfully boost political participation in remote settings like city council meetings. Outreach to underrepresented groups can therefore make low-turnout civic bodies more reflective of the broader public, unlike allowing remote access alone. In terms of messaging, increasing perceived costs of abstention appears to be an effective motivator of participation.

### HOME OWNERSHIP AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This article examines whether direct outreach can make participation in local civic bodies more reflective of the broader public.<sup>1</sup> Research using administrative data finds that home ownership increases participation in city council, planning, and zoning meetings (Hall and Yoder 2022; Yoder 2020). Examination of mechanisms suggests that home owner participation is consistent with rational economic behavior and protection of property values (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019; Hall and Yoder 2022; Hankinson 2018; Marble and Nall 2021; McCabe 2016; Yoder 2020). By contrast, renters do not consistently oppose new housing (Marble and Nall 2021; Monkkonen and Manville 2019), leading to disparities between council meeting comments in favor of more housing and ballots cast in favor of more housing (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019). The makeup of local political participation in majority-renter cities therefore often does not reflect general public opinion. However, it remains unclear whether making the economics of housing policy salient for renters would increase their participation.

### ENCOURAGING REMOTE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

COVID-19 opened city council participation to email, phone, or video call, but remote access did not reduce participatory gaps (Einstein et al. 2023). Prior research offers lessons and conflicting predictions for encouraging remote political participation.

Experimental research largely finds digital outreach ineffective for in-person political mobilization. Yet the impact of digital outreach on remote political participation is underexplored. Exceptions are absentee voting and online voter registration, where email outreach was ineffective (Green and Gerber 2019). However, digital outreach may boost remote expressive political participation—such as petition signatures and small donations—through personalized appeals (Coppock, Guess, and Ternovski 2016; Gaynor and Gimpel 2024).

1. Similar outreach campaigns could be used on different populations to increase participatory gaps.

An expressive action like public comment may therefore also be responsive to digital outreach.

In-person campaigns offer insights for successful appeals. Field experiments suggest merely providing information that one can participate does not increase voter turnout (Green and Gerber 2019). However, providing a clear plan for participation has proven effective (Nickerson and Rogers 2010). Given renters' lower local political participation (Ansolabehere 2012; McCabe 2016), offering them guidance on how to participate and providing a direct, clickable public comment link may facilitate their engagement. Additional research suggests that economic motivations drive political participation. Home owner participation is hypothesized to be driven by economic self-interest, as blocking development can have a large, immediate impact on nearby property values. However, as benefits to renters are longer term and less tangible, it is unclear whether economic motivators will increase renter participation (Citrin et al. 1990). I therefore test whether priming economic self-interest can increase renter participation, despite the lack of a tangible asset such as a home. Other studies suggest psychic motivators are most effective at driving participation (Citrin et al. 1997). Aytac and Stokes (2019) posit that high psychological costs of abstention combined with low participation costs maximize collective action. I test this theory with messaging that highlights lack of renter participation as a contributor to policy capture and personal economic harm, increasing the perceived cost of abstention.

The theory above leads to three hypotheses of motivation to collective action, which are tested with three treatment messages. Treatment 1 (T1) reduces participation costs with detailed instructions, but effects may be minimal. All treatments thus provide a Zoom link for spoken comments and an email link for submitting a sample written comment (while noting that individuals may draft their own comment).<sup>2</sup> Treatment 2 (T2) primes economic self interest by providing information that lack of housing supply increases rents and should increase attendance more than instructions only. Treatment 3 (T3) highlights costs of abstention and should increase attendance more than instructions or economic self-interest alone.

Past research presents conflicting theories on encouraging remote political participation. Digital outreach may prove ineffective in real-world settings, regardless of digital access. Alternatively, expressive participation like public comments may respond to outreach with the right appeals. I adjudicate this debate and offer empirical and theoretical advancements to the literature on political participation. First, I document

2. See the "sample comment" in the appendix for wording of the sample message.

the real-world response of a low-participation group to instructional, economic, and psychological motivators to collective action and show that highlighting costs is more effective than instructional appeals. Second, I challenge conclusions that digital outreach is a poor motivator by looking beyond voting to a domain where expressive real-world political participation can be conducted remotely.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

The experiment was fielded in LA County in collaboration with a pro-housing nongovernmental organization as cities updated their 2021–29 Housing Elements (HE)—a required analysis of a city’s housing needs and strategies to meet those needs—and targeted city council meetings with the HE on the agenda. Written comments could be submitted by email and were read during or distributed to council members before the meeting. Council members should therefore be aware of the sentiments in spoken and written comments. Interventions involving governmental processes should be held to high ethical standards. For discussion of research ethics, please see the “Ethics” section in the appendix.

The experiment proceeded as follows: (1) renters in the voter file were identified using City Planning records, (2) council meetings discussing the HE were identified for the messaging campaign, (3) renters were randomly assigned to one of the three email treatments encouraging comment or a placebo control, (4) names in treatment groups were matched with names of those who submitted a public comment, and (5) preregistered analysis was performed.

Renters were identified by matching addresses in the LA County voter file with City Planning records of multiunit apartment buildings using the FastLink linkage algorithm (Enamorado, Fifield, and Imai 2019). This yielded 641,184 matched renters, including 266,057 with listed email addresses. City council meetings in LA County were monitored for HE agenda items throughout fall and winter 2021, and renters with email addresses living in cities with HE agenda items during this period received emails before their meeting.

Identified renters were randomly assigned to an email treatment encouraging public comment at their city council meeting or a placebo control. Individuals were block randomly assigned by city and cluster randomly assigned by address. Assignment probabilities were 10% for placebo and 30% each for T1, T2, or T3.<sup>3</sup> All treatments included identical subject lines and preview texts to ensure equal compliance rates across treatment arms.

3. Balance tables by treatment status and treatment group can be found in the appendix.

The primary outcome is a binary indicator of whether an individual submitted a spoken or written comment. Names in treatment groups were matched with comments using administrative records and video recordings. I also examine the nature of comments by creating separate indicators for spoken, written, prewritten, custom, pro-housing, and anti-housing comments. Further, I investigate whether the treatments changed overall comment makeup by comparing the number of comments that were treatment induced with those that were not.<sup>4</sup>

The primary estimand is the complier average causal effect (CACE) of email opening on public comment submission. I use a placebo-controlled design—rather than assignment to treatment as an instrument—to mitigate statistical uncertainty. I estimate the CACE including pretreatment covariates using the estimator derived by Lin (2013).<sup>5</sup> Standard errors are clustered at the address level. Results are analyzed as one experiment with city fixed effects as well as aggregated using meta-analysis. As the outcomes are “rare event” right-skewed binomial distributions (see fig. A13), I calculate randomization inference (RI) *p*-values free from distributional assumptions and reestimate all models using penalized maximum likelihood (tables A14 and A15; Cook, Hays, and Franzese 2020). I also examine heterogeneous treatment effects by building density, income, and local election turnout by regressing comments on treatments and the treatment-covariate interaction, and I use RI as a robustness check. More detailed description of the procedures in this section are in “Analytical procedure details” section in the appendix.

## RESULTS

Across all council meetings, the CACE was 1.02 pp (RI *p* = .044; 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.66, 1.38]). The effect of assignment to treatment (the intent to treat [ITT]) on submitting a comment was 0.19 pp (RI *p* = .075; 95% CI [0.06, 0.31]). Both estimates are depicted in figure A1. Compliance rates were 17% in placebo, 17% in T1, 16% in T2, and 18% in T3 (see fig. A8). CACEs for individual council meetings can be found in figure A2, which also contains meta-analytic estimates of the aggregate CACE. The point estimate using fixed effects meta-analysis is 0.91 (95% CI [0.56, 1.25]; see fig. A12).

Figure 1 shows that T3 had the largest effect on turnout (CACE = 1.44 pp; RI *p* = .011; 95% CI [0.73, 2.15]), T2 was

4. I define “treatment induced” comments as those submitted by individuals in the three treatment groups. This seems reasonable, as no comments were made by compliers in the placebo group.

5. Covariates are city, number of units in the building, gender, age, building age, primary language spoken, vote history, and party affiliation.

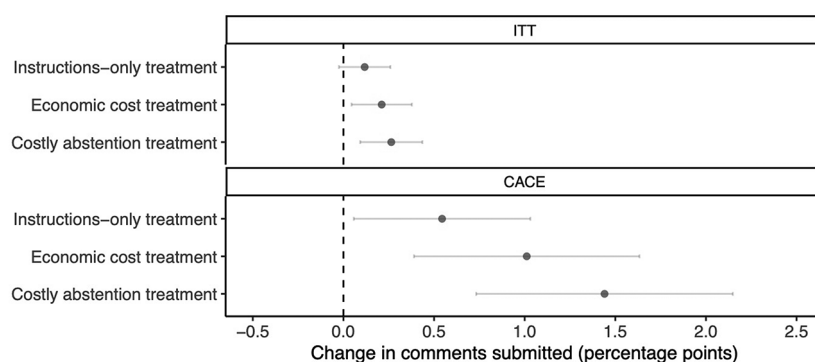


Figure 1. Effects by treatment group, all cities

second most effective (CACE = 1.01 pp; RI  $p = .071$ ; 95% CI [0.39, 1.63]), and T1 was least effective (CACE = 0.54 pp; RI  $p = .386$ ; 95% CI [0.06, 1.03]).<sup>6</sup> This translates to one comment per 67 emails opened in T3, one per 96 in T2, and one per 201 in T1. T3 and T1 are significantly different from each other at the 5% level based on RI and two-tailed linear hypothesis tests, while T2 and T1 are significantly different from each other at the 10% level based on one-tailed tests (see tables A9 and A14).<sup>7</sup> When grouped together, T2 and T3 are significantly different from T1 at the 5% level using both RI and a two-tailed linear hypothesis test.

To further assess confidence that T3 was most effective, I fit a Bayesian linear multilevel model using prior distributions from my preregistration power analysis, and compute Bayes' factors for hypotheses that the differences between treatments are greater than zero (see figs. A14 and A15). This analysis suggests that T3 is five times as likely to be larger than the T2 than not and 97 times as likely to be larger than the T1 treatment than not.

These results align with the preregistered theoretical predictions. Participation instructions led to a minor increase in participation. Priming economic concerns appears more effective than lowering participation costs. The strongest evidence is that highlighting costs of abstention is more effective than lowering attendance costs. The combined efficacy of the economic cost and costly abstention treatments suggests that economic or psychological motivators are more effective than instructions or a clickable link alone.

Turnout in local elections is also associated with an increase in the likelihood of making a public comment. Voters were more likely to open the emails (see table A6) and 1.4 pp more likely to comment than nonvoters (see fig. A3; RI

$p = .06$ ).<sup>8</sup> Participation in local politics through voting appears to encourage other forms of engagement. Further research is needed to understand this link. Perhaps voters in low-turnout municipal elections may particularly not want to miss a chance to be heard or may be more responsive to treatment due to preexisting interest in housing policy.

#### COMMENT CONTENTS, SUBSTANTIVE IMPACT, AND CHANGES IN REPRESENTATION

I also examine the types of comments individuals submitted (spoken or written, custom or prewritten, pro- or anti-housing) in figure A4. The majority of individuals (93%) submitted written comments, and the effect for spoken comments is only significant at the 10% level. However, even written submissions were not costless. While most used the sample message, 29% included personal, custom comments. Custom comments touched on personal experiences with high housing costs, such as homelessness, concerns of being priced out of subsidized senior housing, and young renters lamenting their inability to buy a home like their parents. Anti-housing comments constituted only 4% of total comments.

Comments by treated individuals represented 8% of total written public comments across all meetings and 46% of all pro-housing comments (see table A1). This shifted the balance of pro- versus anti-housing comments and made council meeting comments more representative of the broader public when remote access alone did not. These large effects on turnout contrast sharply with get out the vote.<sup>9</sup> In voter turnout settings, the large number of voters makes campaign-induced changes in turnout relatively small. However, even a few new participants in council meetings can significantly influence comment composition because of low participation rates.

8. The uncertainty of the estimates is a result of low turnout (9.4% in the sample population).

9. Cost effectiveness is also notably different, with comments costing \$4.80 each, compared to over \$450 per vote in GOTV Facebook campaigns and \$37 per vote in the most effective text messaging campaigns.

6. ITT RI  $p$ -values are .380 for T1, .089 for T2, and .039 for T3.

7. A one-tailed test may be justified because of preregistration of the relative magnitudes of effect sizes.

Council members in observed meetings also referenced the makeup of comments when discussing and voting on issues, indicating their awareness of comment dynamics.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding how to increase collective action when gains are long-term and uncertain is an enduring question in political economy. While home owners with direct financial stakes actively engage in local politics, there is little evidence of how to motivate groups with uncertain payoffs such as renters to engage in costly political behavior. I contribute to our understanding using eight email-outreach field experiments encouraging renters to comment at city council meetings. Three treatments tested the effectiveness of messages that (1) reduced participation costs, (2) primed economic self-interest, or (3) highlighted the costs of abstention. Receipt of any treatment increased public comments by 1 pp, while highlighting abstention costs increased comments by 1.4 pp. Local election voters were more responsive to treatment. Treatment-induced comments comprised 8% of all and 46% of pro-housing comments across all meetings. The treatments therefore overcame many traditional barriers to renter collective action, making civic bodies more representative of the broader public.

The results yield the following key insights. First, unlike with voting, email can increase local political participation when remote participation is possible, particularly among those already engaged in local politics. Second, low-cost outreach can significantly increase political participation in low-turnout settings like city council meetings. Third, outreach can make representation more reflective of the broader public when increases in accessibility alone—such as online access—do not. Fourth, informational outreach alone is not particularly effective, but increasing perceived costs of abstention appears to motivate collective action.

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