

# BEST PRACTICES FOR GOTV AND VOTE-BY-MAIL EFFORTS

Unlike typical persuasion campaigns, successful get-out-the-vote efforts must elicit behavior change — we need to build up our audience’s habit of going to the polls or mailing in their ballots. The following principles, drawn from years of research, form basic best practices for GOTV.

## WILL YOU BE A VOTER? -

Identity precedes action

Research has consistently shown that identity precedes action for GOTV. In other words, the key to getting someone to vote is to first get them to identify as a voter. Although it can be clunky, it is far more effective to always ask people to “be a voter” rather than to ask them to vote. Once they claim that identity, they’re more likely to follow through.

Since identity precedes action, we should never call people non-voters, low-propensity voters, etc. — labels which reinforce the opposite identity from what we’re trying to instill. Refer instead to target audiences as *high-potential voters*.

## PEOPLE LIKE YOU ARE VOTERS -

Social Proof

Social proof, or showing someone that people like them are engaged in the behavior you desire to inspire, is one of the most effective ways to boost registration and turnout. We need people to identify as voters, and they’re more likely to do so if “being a voter” is tied to other identities they already hold.

This can be implicit or explicit, from ensuring our messengers reflect the communities we target, to highlighting x community is voting in record numbers, to outright stating “as [x type of people], we are y, we are z, and we are voters.” For example, instead of saying “young people like you haven’t been voting, we need you to register!” say “young people are turning out in record numbers as voters, join them by registering today.”

## **WHO YOU VOTE FOR IS PRIVATE, BUT WHETHER OR NOT YOU VOTE IS PUBLIC RECORD -**

Social Pressure

Reminding people that anyone can look them up after the election and see if they voted might be one of the more invasive approaches to GOTV, but it's also incredibly effective. Social pressure messages can be combined with social proof; for example, "your neighbors are voters, and after the election, they can see if you voted."

For a subtler approach, messages can imply to voters that their record is public by thanking them for voting in prior elections, when applicable, and expressing hope you'll be able to extend this gratitude to them after this election.

## **OUR VOTE IS OUR POWER -**

Empowerment messages win out over fear-based appeals

Given the stakes of the 2020 election, it's an understandable impulse to focus on the dangers of losing — but unfortunately, it's a harmful one. Fear makes people want to retreat and shut down. We need to tap into emotions that do the opposite: motivate people to take action.

Empowerment messages — e.g., "Your vote is your power. Use it." — achieve that goal, consistently performing well in turning out voters, better than fear-based appeals like "vote like your life depends on it" or "if we don't vote, we could lose everything." This holds true for VBM efforts, where we've generally found that an empowerment focus beats an emphasis on safety (which is ultimately a fear-based message: "voting by mail is the safer choice").

Relatedly, we should always emphasize what we are for and not what we are against. Several recent studies have documented the harm we inadvertently cause when we focus on Trump. Trump-centered GOTV messages are particularly ineffective with the people our efforts most often target: high-potential voters.

## **TURN IN YOUR BALLOT HERE BY X DATE -**

Focus on process and plans, not issues

Since our goal is habituation, talking about the act of voting and illustrating the logistical steps involved is more effective than focusing on the issues at stake. Studies of GOTV ads delivered by mail have found that boring, official-looking ads perform better than glossy, partisan ones. Wherever possible, prompt people to share their detailed plan for how they will be a voter: what time of day they'll head to polls, where they'll drop their mail-in ballot, who they'll bring with them, etc.

These process-focused appeals can and should be combined with empowerment messages: “By coming together as voters, we make the future and make our voices heard. Be a voter by registering here/mailing in your ballot by [deadline].”

## **BE A VOTER. BE A VOTER. BE A VOTER. -**

Persistence, with repeat and follow-up appeals, is critical

Perhaps more important than the substance or form of our GOTV appeals is persistence. Getting someone to create a new habit is hard, and frequent reminders help immensely. Whether mail, digital, or SMS, campaigns should send at least one follow-up to the initial outreach, and more if possible, to chase voters and reach them with multiple points of contact. Recent experiments have shown even a single follow-up can as much as double the campaign's impact.

*For a collection of GOTV digital resources from Race Class Narrative Action, [click here.](#)*