



UNIVERSITY OF
HOUSTON

BakerRipley GOTV Report

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In an era characterized by political apathy and declining voter turnout, innovative strategies to engage citizens in the electoral process are more crucial than ever. This report presents the findings from a groundbreaking field experiment conducted during the 2023 Houston municipal election, aimed at increasing voter participation among low-propensity voters through targeted mailers and evaluates the efficiency of existing mailer strategies.

BakerRipley, a renowned community-based nonprofit organization, and the research team at the University of Houston partnered to explore the efficacy of place-based identity mailers in four distinct Houston neighborhoods.

The Experiment at a Glance:

- **Objective:** To test whether emphasizing community identity through tailored mailers could increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters while also analyzing current strategies.
- **Methodology:** A total of 43,711 mailers were distributed, with half designed to prime a sense of place-based identity, while the other half served as a control with standard BakerRipley mailers. Each mailer also included content in Spanish to ensure inclusivity.
- **Results:** Although the identity-based treatment did not show a discernible effect on voter turnout compared to the control, the overall efforts significantly mobilized the targeted voter segment when compared to individuals who did not receive any mailer. This underscores the potential of community-focused nonpartisan outreach in enhancing democratic participation and shows how vital the BakerRipley name is in the community.

This report delves into the complexities of voter mobilization in the context of local elections, providing a detailed analysis of our methodology, the execution of the experiment, and a comprehensive discussion of the results. By documenting our findings, we contribute to the broader conversation on effective strategies for democratic engagement, offering insights and recommendations for organizations aiming to foster a more inclusive and representative political landscape.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Place-based conceptualizations of identity can be a powerful mobilization tactic. Individuals are not just from Houston but are from specific communities, such as the East End, Montrose, or East Aldine. Membership in these specific communities constitutes an important form of place-based identity.

Individuals conceive of themselves as not just Houstonians but as East-Enders, which demonstrates their attachment to their hyper-local community. As with other forms of identity, attachment to neighborhood and community fosters a sense of civic duty among residents. When residents are attached to their communities, research demonstrates that they engage in activities to benefit the community as a whole.

Given prior work in this area, we argue that neighborhood attachment can stimulate political participation. We develop this theoretical argument across four Houston neighborhoods: East Aldine, East End, Hobby, and Gulfton.

We conducted the experiment in these neighborhoods due to BakerRipley's long history of work in each, as well as the unique characteristics of each neighborhood. Furthermore, each community center contributes to the character of the surrounding community, helping to formulate a cohesive identity through events, classes, and other programming tailored to the communities.

As with other forms of identity, attachment to neighborhood and community fosters a sense of civic duty among residents.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We engaged in a co-collaborative research process with BakerRipley to stimulate low-propensity turnout based on identity appeals. The research was an iterative process involving both BakerRipley and representatives from each community at large. We detail the process below.

01

Defining Low Propensity Voters

We defined low-propensity voters as those who did not vote in the 2019 City of Houston municipal election and those that voted in no more than one of the three past general elections.

02

Engaging the Community

We conducted focus groups with the community engineers in each neighborhood to workshop the mailer designs. Community engineers provided input on which landmarks symbolized community spirit and which messaging topics were important for the specific communities.

03

Refining the Mailers

After community input, we continued to refine the mailers, arriving at a specific mailer for each community. We include the final mailers as part of this report. Each mailer included a professional photo of important community landmarks, such as the East End esplanade, and a brief message in English and Spanish encouraging recipients to vote.

04

Testing the Theory

We test our theory by randomly sending out regular mailers or identity mailers during the early voting period. We then statistically compare voter turnout among those who received the identity mailer and those who received BakerRipley's usual GOTV mailer.

MAILER DESIGN

We created the following mailers for each neighborhood in collaboration with BakerRipley and the Community Engineers using the specific characteristics of each community.

East Aldine

Focus group members immediately identified the community landmark as the East Aldine town center and reported that it evoked a sense of pride. Participants also reported the continued economic development of East Aldine as an important issue.



East End

Focus group members deliberated on a number of community landmarks, but ultimately decided that the esplanade was the most emblematic of East End. Participants also appreciated the nod to East End's history of civic engagement.



MAILER DESIGN

Gulfton

Focus group participants identified the BakerRipley Gulfton community center as one of the most iconic landmarks in the area. Participants also reported feeling very proud of the diversity within the community.



Hobby

In this neighborhood, community members thought that showing the evolution of the community was important. For this reason, we illustrate the growth of the community through including a historic photo of the airport alongside a contemporary photo.



Community Engineers appreciated being involved in the research design process and enthusiastically offered their opinions and suggestions for improvement.

MAILER DESIGN

General GOTV Mailer

We compared the specific community mailers to BakerRipley's typical GOTV message below, which also encourages individuals to vote.



"Voter turnout in Harris County 'anemic' despite population growth across [the] region."

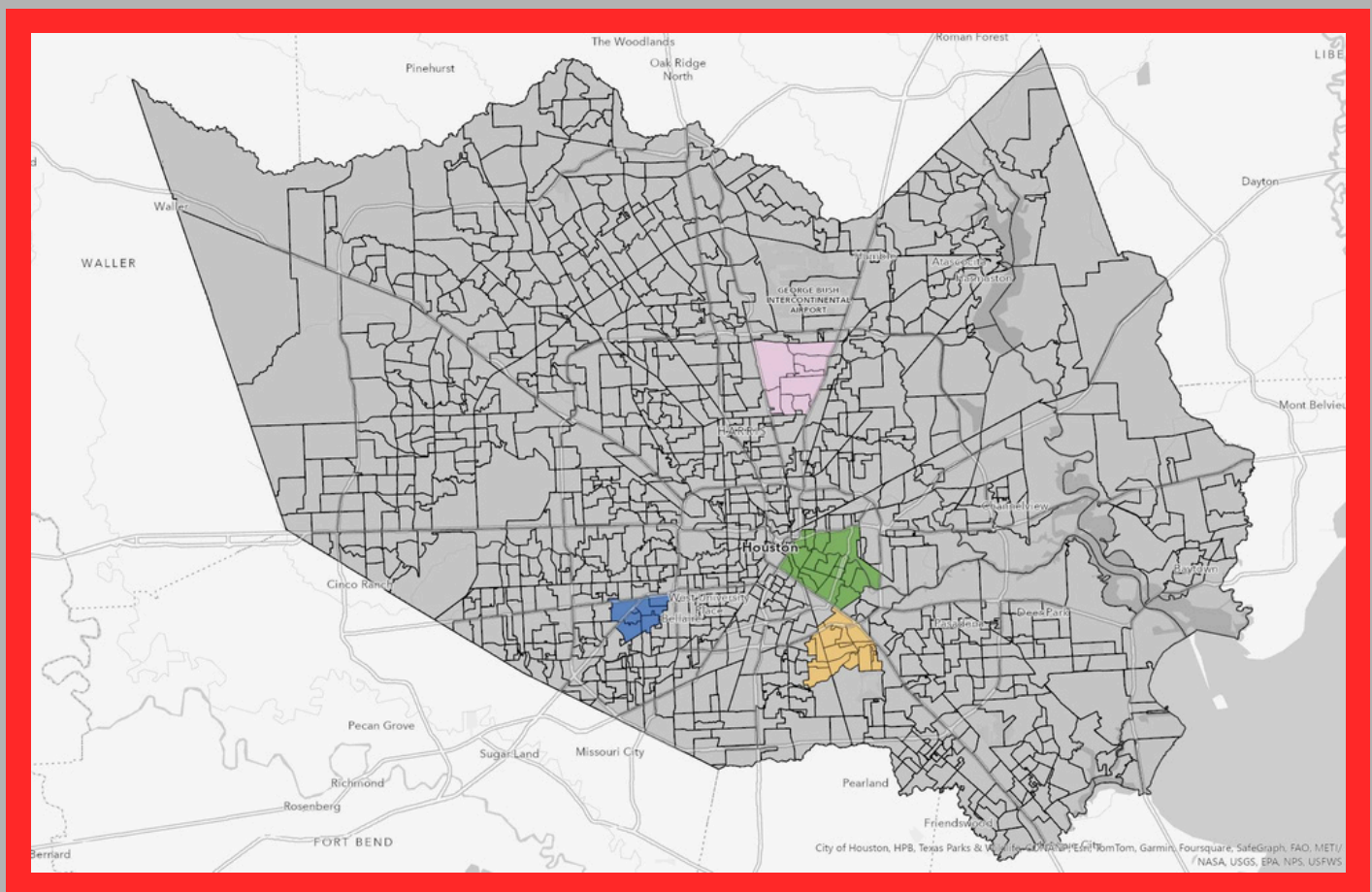
— *Houston Chronicle*

"America is facing a crisis on which, for once, Democrats and Republicans can agree: low voter turnout in local elections."

— *New York Times*

NEIGHBORHOODS EXPLORED

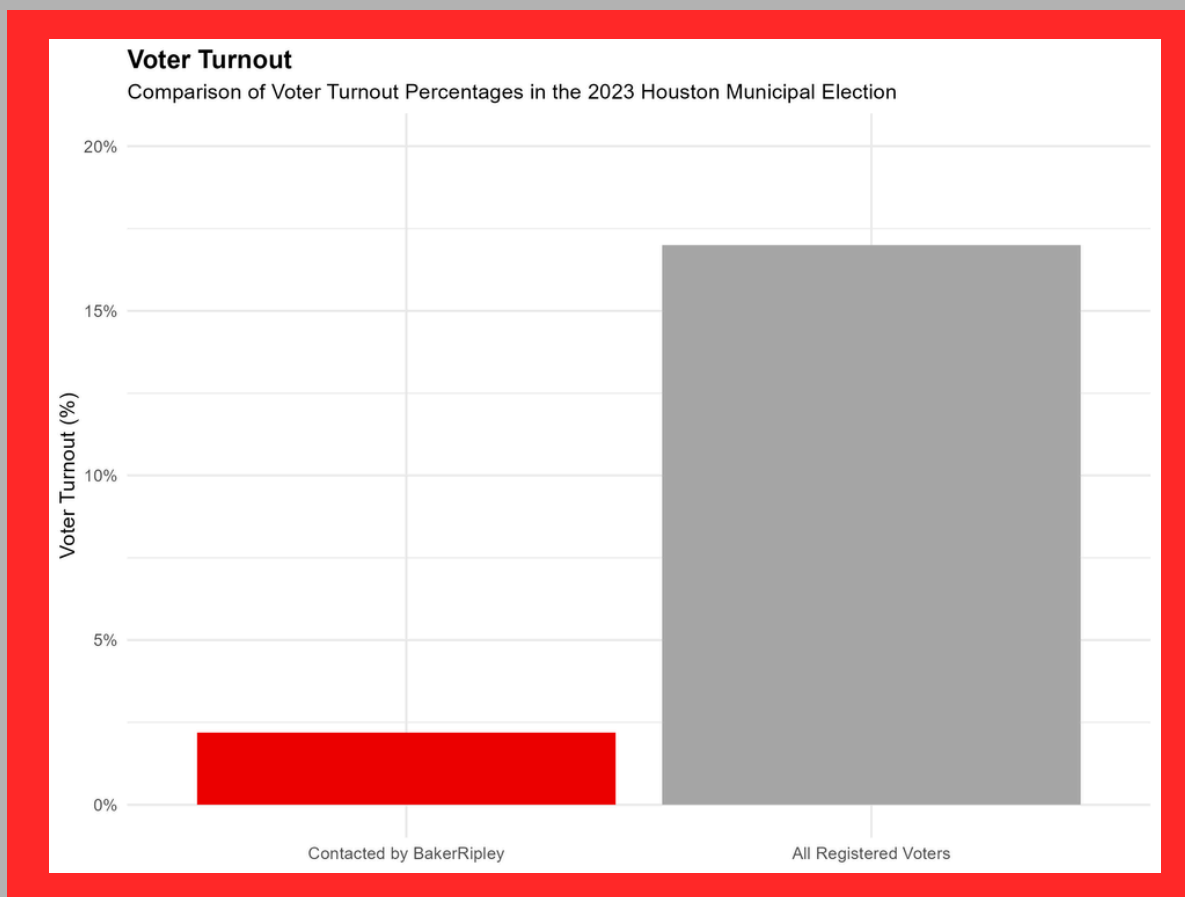
Neighborhood	Number of Mailers	Plain Mailers	Treatment Mailers	Total Voters	Voter Turnout
East End	14,298	7,140	7,158	396	2.77%
East Aldine	7,047	2,350	4,697	110	1.56%
Gulfton	8,564	4,280	4,284	200	2.34%
Hobby	13,802	5,409	8,393	251	1.82%



RESULTS

The experiment involved sending a total of 43,711 mailers across East End, East Aldine, Gulfton, and Hobby neighborhoods, with each mailer customized to reflect local landmarks and community-specific messages.

Our results indicate that 957 individuals, or 2.19% of those contacted, participated in the voting process. The figure below shows that across two distinct populations, BakerRipley effectively mobilizes underrepresented voters.



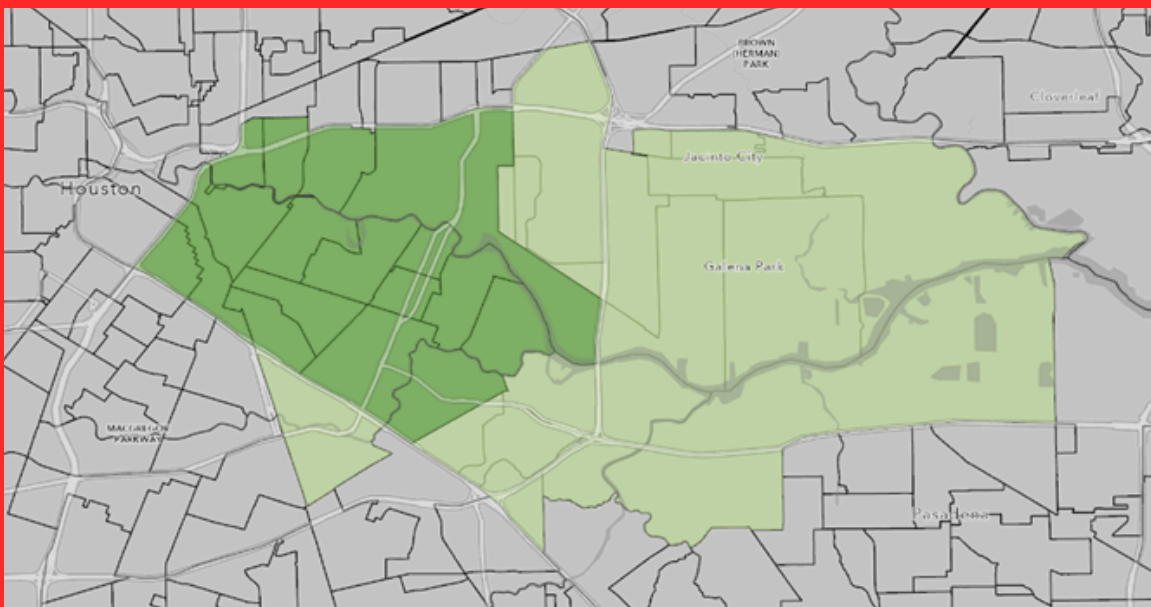
RESULTS

First, when utilizing statistical modeling to analyze the A/B testing of the two types of mailers, there is no statistically significant difference in voter turnout.

However, when we compare the neighborhood of East End, which received either type of mailer, to Greater East End, which did not receive any BakerRipley mailers, those contacted by BakerRipley were two times more likely to vote, and the results are statistically significant.

Results from this study signal community trust in BakerRipley as an organization, showcasing that the messenger matters, not the message.

East End vs. Greater East End Comparison



*Individuals who received a mailer from BakerRipley were **two times more likely** to vote than those who did not receive a mailer.*

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, the lessons learned from this GOTV campaign provide a blueprint for refining and expanding BakerRipley's voter engagement strategies. The steps outlined below aim to sustain and enhance BakerRipley's efforts to mobilize underrepresented communities, ensuring that every voice is heard in future elections. These steps will be implemented in the 2024 election cycle.

01

Clean Experimental Testing

To further explore the effect of community trust in BakerRipley, the team will conduct an experiment that tests contact made versus no contact made in the future election.

02

Digital Advertisements

Utilizing digital advertisement techniques, the team will implement a targeted experiment among low-propensity voters through social media platforms to improve voter turnout.

03

Relational Organizing Program

Relational organizing, or voter mobilization conducted through social relationships with friends and family, is shown to stimulate turnout among low-propensity voters. Utilizing BakerRipley's community engineer program, the team will implement a relational organizing program.

CONCLUSION

While the overall percentage increase might appear modest, the context of a local election and the specific target group—historically low-propensity voters—highlights the significance of this outcome. The presence of BakerRipley in the community, known for its extensive civic engagement and various social services, bolstered the effectiveness of the mailers. This experiment underscores the potential of place-based identity and direct contact in increasing civic participation among underrepresented voter groups.

Impact on Voter Turnout

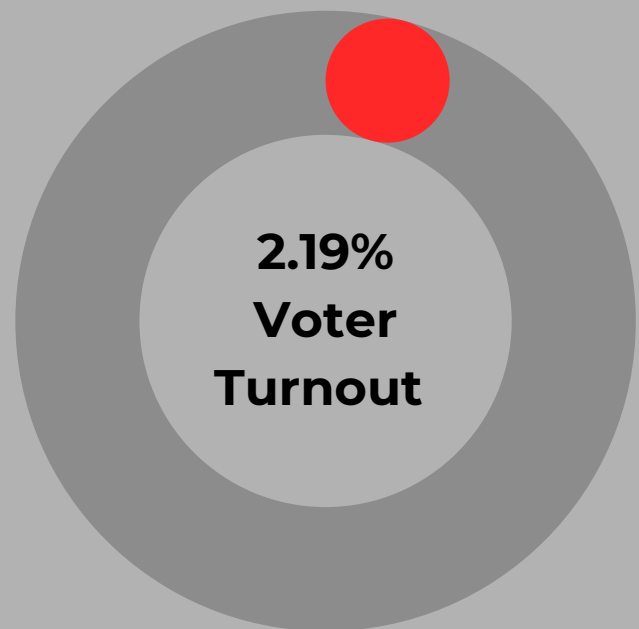
BakerRipley's targeted mailers doubled voter turnout, marking a significant mobilization of low-propensity voters in the local electoral context.

Community Trust

The organization's deep community ties and multifaceted services enhanced the effectiveness of the mailers, demonstrating the powerful role of community-specific outreach.

GOTV Strategies

Despite previous research demonstrating that mailers do not stimulate turnout, we find that mailers do make a significant difference among low-propensity voters..



The insights gained from this initiative are particularly pertinent as they illuminate the challenges and opportunities within GOTV efforts. This study not only reaffirms the vital role of nonprofits in the electoral process but also highlights the nuanced interplay between community identity and political participation, providing a blueprint for future campaigns aimed at enhancing voter engagement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank BakerRipley, their Civic Engagement team, and the Community Engineers for the hard work necessary to bring this project to fruition. Ben Peters and J Herrera, Civic Engagement team members, were instrumental in the design of this project. We also thank Dr. Scott Clifford and Dr. Jerónimo Cortina for their guidance and support throughout the project.

We thank you for your continued support in encouraging everyone to use their voice in the democratic process.

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