

FIGHTING INJUSTICE

AT THE BALLOT BOX

2025

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Using Relational Organizing to Fight Felony Disenfranchisement

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Authored by research team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grassroots Leadership (**GRL**) and academic partners sought to improve voter engagement among justice-impacted people in Texas who retain the right to vote. In Texas, people with felony convictions lose the right to vote while serving their sentence – but upon completion, one's right to vote is automatically restored. Yet eligible voters with convictions vote at very low rates.

Organizers suggest that the loved ones of people with convictions are best situated to help them overcome the informational, logistical, and attitudinal barriers to voter engagement. Building on strategies already employed by GRL organizers, in the lead-up to the 2024 election we completed a voter education project to test the value of relational (peer-to-peer) organizing among a group that is distrustful of the state, and for whom there is a lot of confusion about their rights.

We fielded two related tests:

Mailers

We sent mailers to felony-impacted¹ voters living in Texas. We randomly assigned individuals to either receive a direct mailer with information about their rights, signed by GRL leadership; a similar mailer signed by a formerly incarcerated organizer; or a third mailer sent to the already-registered social tie of the person with a conviction asking them to help their loved one get registered. We assessed the impact of these mailers against an uncontacted control group.

¹The term felony-impacted includes both people who were convicted of a felony and people who were charged with a felony even if not finally convicted, as is the case with those who receive deferred adjudication.

Captains Model

We recruited mobilization captains who are embedded in justice-impacted communities. We asked them to build a list of individuals in their lives who they thought were justice-impacted and unlikely to vote. We randomized half their list into a no contact control group, and half into the treatment group. In the two weeks leading up to the registration deadline, they educated the people in their treatment group about their rights and encouraged them to register.

Field Test Results

Mailers:

- All three mailers improved new and updated registrations relative to the uncontacted control group, with the individual mailers improving registration by between **18 – 25%**.
- The mailer sent to the loved one of the justice-impacted person was most effective when the loved one was a **family member living with** the focal individual. For this group, the indirect mailer improved new and updated registrations **19%** relative to the uncontacted control group.
- Among those who did not have politically active social ties, a direct mailer sent from GRL was **still effective** at improving rates of voter registration.
- Overall, the mailers yielded **8,934 newly registered or updated voters** who are felony-impacted. An additional **922** return envelopes were used that can't be linked back to the experimental list, suggesting that GRL's mailer campaign reached even beyond the target individuals.

Captains Model:

- The relational organizing treatment improved new and updated registrations by 35% relative to the uncontacted control group. However, statistically, it cannot be ruled out that this increase is **due to chance** rather than the treatment.
- Many individuals in the treatment group were already registered prior to the treatment. Among those who were **not previously registered**, the relational organizing treatment **improved registration** by about **six percentage points** – an effect that **can** be statistically attributed to the relational organizing treatment.

Implications for Organizers

- The relational approach is a powerful tool for organizers working with hard-to-reach populations who distrust mainstream politics, and who lack literacy to navigate electoral politics.
 - Loved ones who have a close and active relationship with the focal person are the best positioned to educate and mobilize.
- Even in the absence of close personal relationships with already mobilized people, community based organizations like GRL can be effective at educating and mobilizing people who are otherwise unlikely to participate.

Policy Recommendations

- The findings from the field tests indicate that providing justice-impacted people who retain the right to vote with information about their rights can be an

- effective way of engaging them in political life. At present, the Texas legislature is considering a proposal (SB 2227)² to require the state to send people with convictions who regain the right to vote information about their eligibility. Our research suggests that this could be successful. But, we also offer words of caution:
 - Negative contact with the state may mean some distrust these messages. Our research suggests that those who mistrust the state may still benefit from conversations with a trusted individual.
 - Reasons for not participating are more varied than lack of information, and many justice-impacted people need to be persuaded that voting is valuable. Loved ones are especially well suited to help people adopt this attitude.
- Future advocacy efforts should focus on expanding access to the vote through reducing barriers to the ballot box. This might include expanding access to the franchise for people with felony convictions who are still serving their sentence (as SB 631, currently considered by the Texas legislature, would do)³; reducing the penalty for voter fraud (as the Texas Legislature did in 2021 before reversing course in 2023)⁴; and making it easier to register through online registration (as HB 311 would have done).⁵

The peer-to-peer strategy is a novel approach we hope can be used to reach and mobilize many different kinds of low-propensity voters, even if they are not justice-impacted. In what follows, we detail the implementation and findings of the field tests, as well as lessons learned for both organizers and researchers.

³<https://www.billtrack50.com/billdetail/1760303>

⁴<https://www.texastribune.org/2023/05/24/texas-felony-illegal-voting/>

⁵<https://www.texastribune.org/2025/05/15/texas-online-voter-registration-bill/>

²<https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/89R/billtext/html/SB022271.htm>

THE STAKES: Organizing Justice-Impacted⁶ People in Texas

Felony disenfranchisement laws find their roots in post-Reconstruction era efforts to disenfranchise Black Americans following the civil war and the abolition of slavery.⁷ The adoption of these laws by Southern states coincided with the passage and implementation of numerous criminal codes targeted to Black citizens, leading one historian to characterize them as political interventions, “that would interrupt the revolutionary social changes facing the defeated confederacy.”^{8,9} As Brother Rob, lead organizer for this project, noted in a recent op-ed: “These laws have their roots in racist Jim Crow laws that sought to suppress the Black vote... In an 1897 speech at the National Prison Congress, George T. Winston, then-president of the University of Texas, argued that ‘to protect their property and civilization,’ the ‘Southern white population’ would need to incarcerate more Black Americans.”

The political movement to organize justice-impacted people into electoral politics, then, is rooted in a longer struggle for civil rights in the United States. Access to democracy is a cornerstone of citizenship, and the stripping of that right sits at the heart of long-standing questions around power and hierarchy in the

American political landscape. Explaining his own motivations to educate people with convictions about their right to vote, Brother Rob says:

Brother Rob Lead project organizer, GRL



I [take] offense at how persons with felony convictions have been excluded from the electorate... I believe that **it is oppressive** and is designed to disempower entire segments of our community – particularly, it’s biased against the African-American community ... so that to me was offensive... I feel like we need to have a more earnest conversation around: **why are we even allowing voter disenfranchisement?** Like, we are just accepting it as a norm. And I feel like that is... that there has to be a voice, or voices, that raise up and say, no... There’s no real logical rationale that supports this... **It, in fact, is criminogenic.** It creates the exact opposite effect. It harms our communities.

Brother Rob joins a longer legacy of justice-impacted organizers in Texas mobilized to defend their rights and fight for the well-being of their communities. Steve is the executive director of the Texas chapter of **All of Us or None**.¹¹ Discussing his early work organizing justice-impacted people in San Antonio, he

⁶We use the term justice-impacted to refer to the broad community of people who have had contact with the criminal legal system, even if it did not lead to a conviction or incarceration. The loved ones of people who experience incarceration are also impacted by the justice system. In this project, we enlisted the help of the politically active loved ones of people who have had direct contact with the criminal legal system to educate them about their right to vote. We identify when we are specifically referring to people with misdemeanor or felony convictions, even as the project includes many more people impacted by the system who may never have incurred a conviction.

⁷Kelley, Erin. 2017. “Racism & Felony Disenfranchisement: An Intertwined History.” Brennan Center for Justice.

⁸Holloway, Pippa. 2013. *Living in Infamy: Felon Disfranchisement and the History of American Citizenship*. New York: Oxford University Press, pg. 2

⁹Blackmon, Douglas A. 2008. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Doubleday

¹⁰<https://www.austinchronicle.com/columns/2024-07-26/opinion-with-elections-looming-texas-should-expand-the-right-to-vote/>

¹¹<https://prisonerswithchildren.org/about-aouon/>

describes learning the difference between votes and power, and that power grows from the ground up – while he and his formerly incarcerated colleagues could not run for public office, they learned they could be political agents, and very easily, they could become precinct chairs:

We decided, well, let's take those seats. We did that and in one election we kind of wiped out about 54 judges that were all Republicans and replaced them all with Democrats. And then that's the first time we realized that we could do this and that **we had power in ways that we didn't realize**, that it wasn't just about organizing voting in the community... We recruited about 150 something former incarcerated people into the precinct chairs and just – just began the journey of us creating an organization known as the Second Chance Democrats, the first Democratic chapter in the country of formerly incarcerated people.

Steve notes that the work to organize the justice-impacted is difficult and ongoing, stating that “Figuring out how we made that connection to everybody in a way that got us to move people to vote in ways that benefit their communities was not an easy task. And a lot of times we are not as successful as we want to be.”

The stakes are high. Efforts to educate justice-impacted people who are eligible voters about their rights are rooted in the basic need to have a say in the real policies that govern people's lives, a longer struggle for civil rights, and a forward-looking effort to build political power. As Brother Rob puts it: “To this day, I carry my last voter registration card with me as a reminder of the last time I had a say in my representation and the policies that govern my life. While I am currently unable to

vote in the state of Texas, I will continue to fight until every individual in Texas regains the right to vote.”

Texas' Legal Landscape

Texas law states that in order to be eligible to vote, one must meet the following criteria¹²:

- Are over the age of 18 on election day.
- Are a US citizen.
- Are a resident of the Texas county where one applies for registration.
- Have not been finally convicted of a felony, or if so, have completed the terms of the prison/jail sentence and/or terms of probation and parole.
- Have not been determined by a court to be ineligible to vote due to mental incapacitation.

Moreover, one must be registered to vote at least 30 days prior to the election in order to be eligible to cast a ballot. During the 2024 election cycle, the voter registration deadline was October 7.

Under Texas law, people who are serving time in jail or on probation or parole for a misdemeanor conviction retain the right to vote. People convicted of a felony lose the right to vote, and that right is automatically reinstated upon the completion of their sentence. Texas courts also use the category of felony deferral, or deferred adjudication, in their sentencing practices. Under deferred adjudication, someone charged with a felony may be sentenced to probation and avoid a final felony conviction if they successfully complete the probation sentence. Individuals who have deferred adjudication retain the right to vote.

¹²<https://www.votetexas.gov/register-to-vote/eligibility-for-registration.html>

Our efforts to teach justice-impacted individuals about their right to vote faced chilling effects from Texas' political environment. First, Texas law tightly restricts voter registration drives: unlike in other states, one may not fill out, collect, and/or mail registration forms on behalf of another person, unless one has been certified as a volunteer deputy registrar in the county where they are helping people register.¹³ Conducting any of these tasks without becoming a certified volunteer deputy registrar is a class C misdemeanor.¹⁴

Recent state prosecutions have also made voter education more difficult, especially for people with previous convictions. Registering to vote in Texas when ineligible is not a criminal offense. Voting when ineligible, however, is considered voter fraud, a second degree felony.¹⁵ There have been two recent high-profile prosecutions of individuals voting while under felony supervision in Texas. Crystal Mason was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison for submitting a provisional ballot in the 2016 general election in Tarrant County while on supervised release. Mason was acquitted on appeal in May of 2024, because there was no evidence that she knowingly voted while she was ineligible.¹⁶ Hervis Rogers was arrested a year after he cast a ballot in the Democratic primary in March of 2020. He waited in line for six hours to vote, and even gave an interview to a cable news outlet. Ultimately, Rogers was also acquitted because there was no evidence that he voted with the knowledge that he was

ineligible.¹⁷

Despite the fact that both Mason and Rogers were ultimately acquitted, the lengthy legal battles they endured and the threat of having to return to prison took tolls on both individuals and cast a pall over our own voter education efforts. The actions themselves appeared designed to instill fear. Rogers was arrested one day before the start of a special legislative session to consider strict election reforms, and his arrest was accompanied by a tweet from Attorney General Ken Paxton which read: "Hervis is a felon rightly barred from voting under TX law ... I prosecute voter fraud everywhere we find it!" Likewise, while Mason was acquitted in May of 2024, the following August the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office requested that the Court of Criminal Appeals review the acquittal, and they obliged. The DA explained his request to reopen the case: "I want would-be illegal voters to know that we're watching."¹⁸

The office of the Attorney General took several other actions during the period leading up to the October 7, 2024 voter registration deadline that seemed designed to discourage voter registration efforts. In late August the homes of several Latino civic leaders were raided based on a wide-ranging warrant alleging voter fraud, ostensibly related to the registration of non-citizens, although the exact details of the investigation were never made clear.¹⁹ During the same month, Paxton announced investigations into whether civic organizations were illegally registering non-citizens to vote – a move that came at the end of a summer characterized

¹³<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/volunteer-deputy-registrars.shtml>

¹⁴<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/volunteer-deputy-registrars.shtml>

¹⁵<https://www.texastribune.org/2023/05/27/illegal-voting-felony-punishment/>

¹⁶<https://www.texastribune.org/2024/03/28/texas-illegal-voting-conviction-crystal-mason/>

¹⁷<https://www.texastribune.org/2021/07/11/texas-voter-arrested-parole/>

¹⁸<https://www.texastribune.org/2024/08/22/texas-crystal-mason-tarrant-county-voting-acquittal/>

¹⁹<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/house-raids-texas-democrats-ken-paxton-voting-rights-lulac-rcna168216>

by efforts to shut down multiple organizations serving migrant populations.²⁰ In early September, Paxton sued Bexar and Travis Counties, and threatened to sue Harris County, for sending unsolicited voter registration forms to unregistered voters to encourage them to register in advance of election day.²¹ None of these suits succeeded in court. Nevertheless, these actions from the State Attorney General characterized the atmosphere in which we operated. Efforts to educate justice-impacted people about their rights and encourage them to exercise their political voice met an undercurrent of fear, misinformation, and the explicit message from state officials that not only did their political voice not matter, it was criminally suspect.

The Partnership: Grassroots Leadership

Grassroots Leadership (**GRL**) is a community based organization headquartered in Austin, and with a chapter in Houston. GRL was founded in 1980 to facilitate social justice organizing across several chapters in the southern United States. Their work became focused on issues related to mass incarceration in the 1990s, as a product of efforts to organize against the increasing privatization of public resources, including detention. At present, GRL focuses its efforts on promoting civil and human rights through reducing reliance on criminalization in all forms through policy advocacy, research, public education and organizing. The organization's programming and campaigns span issues related to ending the use of local

²⁰<https://www.texastribune.org/2024/09/13/texas-voter-registration-investigation-paxton-lawsuit/>

²¹<https://www.texastribune.org/2024/09/06/texas-ken-paxton-travis-county-voter-registration/>;
<https://www.statesman.com/story/news/politics/state/2024/09/04/ken-paxton-texas-attorney-general-bexar-county-voter-registration-mailer-plan-lawsuit/75070495007/>



police to enforce federal immigration policy, reducing the use of incarceration, and supporting justice-impacted individuals as they navigate the criminal legal system.

GRL formed a partnership with a research team led by Hannah Walker at UT Austin (also including Ariel White at MIT and Allison Harris at Yale). GRL agreed to partner with the research team to conduct a project aligned with GRL's mission to empower justice-impacted people and to ensure that their voices are heard in the policy making process. The relational organizing aspect of the project also afforded an opportunity to build GRL's base and bring new people into their organizing process with techniques the organization already employed: engaging people through existing relationships and/or building new ones, and empowering them through education.

To facilitate the project, the research team obtained grant funding from Public Agenda's Democracy Renewal Project and Arnold Venture's Evidence and Evaluation Program. Funding was used to provide individuals who agreed to participate in the mobilization project with a stipend; to offset the costs incurred by GRL for facilitating all in-person trainings and GRL staff's time and expertise in the execution of the project; and to cover the costs associated with obtaining relevant data and implementing the mail-based experiment.

OVERVIEW OF RELATIONAL-- --ORGANIZING

Why a Relational Approach?

Millions of people have felony convictions, yet retain the right to vote. Nationally, the Sentencing Project estimates that six percent of the voting-age population has a felony conviction and is eligible to vote, but less than one third of that group is registered. Only about 30% of the one million eligible Texans with a conviction are registered.²²

Despite decades of research on get-out-the-vote (GOTV) strategies targeting already-registered voters, little is known about **engaging unregistered people** who rarely participate. Such “politically invisible” potential voters are often not in commercial databases, disproportionately come from race-class subjugated (RCS) communities, and face myriad barriers to engagement.²³ Even less is known about how to engage eligible voters with felony convictions – a particularly demobilized and hard-to-find group.

People with convictions do not vote for reasons broadly faced by marginalized communities: they lack the resources necessary to navigate the electoral process, distrust the state, and are skeptical about the efficacy of elections. Criminal justice contact exacerbates these factors. People with convictions often contend with multiple sources of disadvantage, including limited formal education, poverty, and homelessness; and they are subject to

multiple overlapping regulatory systems.²⁴ These features of everyday life teach people about their relationship to the state, socializing them into (or out of) political life.²⁵ Contact with the system erodes civic trust, the belief that one’s voice is politically valuable, and the belief that voting can promote change.²⁶

However, people who are impacted by the criminal justice system are not lost to political life. An experiment in North Carolina fielded during the 2020 election cycle demonstrates that it is possible to find unregistered people with convictions and send them information about voting eligibility. Sending individuals a basic, informational mailer explaining eligibility and how to register **increased participation by over 10%.**²⁷ Such mailers are even more effective when election-related information is delivered by someone who is themselves formerly incarcerated. We theorize this is because they are a trusted messenger, which may be especially important for a population that lacks trust in mainstream political institutions.²⁸ Research elsewhere finds that the

²²Uggen, Christopher, Ryan Larson, Sarah Shannon and Robert Stewart. 2022. “Locked Out 2022: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights.”

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/locked-out-2022-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights/>

²³Jackman, Simon and Bradley Spahn. 2021. “Politically invisible in America.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54(4):623–629.

²⁴Soss, Joe. 1999. “Lessons of welfare: Policy design, political learning, and political action.” *American Political Science Review* 93(2):363–380; Soss, Joe and Vesla Weaver. 2017. “Police are our government: Politics, political science, and the policing of race-class subjugated communities.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 20.

²⁵Justice, B. and Meares, T.L., 2014. How the criminal justice system educates citizens. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651(1), pp.159–177.

²⁶Weaver, Vesla, Gwen Prowse and Spencer Piston. 2020. “Withdrawing and drawing in: Political discourse in policed communities.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5(3):604– 647; Soss and Weaver, 2017.

²⁷Doleac, Jennifer L, Laurel Eckhouse, Eric Foster-Moore, Allison Harris, Hannah Walker and Ariel White. 2022. “Registering Returning Citizens to Vote.” Available at SSRN.

²⁸White, Ariel, Walker, Hannah L., Michelson, Melissa, and Roth, Sam. “No Longer a Number: Finding New Ways to Contact and Mobilize Newly Enfranchised Citizens in New Jersey.” Working paper

loved ones of incarcerated people are often politically mobilized by their vicarious carceral experience.²⁹ We suspect that politically active loved ones (social ties) are especially effective messengers for people with convictions. These individuals may be able to shift attitudes detrimental to turnout and enforce social norms that highlight the value of voting, both in its own right and as a strategy for collective action.³⁰ Social ties also bring knowledge and efficacy to their networks that are essential for navigating the electoral process.³¹

The relational organizing model leverages social ties' political engagement to encourage those in their social networks to vote. Scholars describe voting-focused relational organizing as a "super treatment" that deputizes a "network of captains... responsible for getting a specific batch of voters to the polls. The captains are supervised by organizers who recruited them to their GOTV charge, and captains in turn try to recruit other captains who will extend the GOTV work to new voters."³² These voters are known to the captains, are in their social networks, and are mobilized through peer-to-peer interactions. While previous relational organizing efforts have focused on getting already registered voters to turn out, they demonstrate that such focused organizing efforts can improve turnout by as much as 13

percentage points. We adopt this approach here to target unregistered but eligible voters with convictions, based on the theory that the peer-to-peer strategy is likely to be especially effective for this hard to reach and low-turnout group.

Grassroots Leadership and the Relational Organizing Strategy in Action

The intuition that politically active social ties are well-situated to help their loved ones with convictions engage in politics, and that bringing deeply alienated people into politics is best achieved through a community-centered process built on trust, reflects real-world organizing strategies. GRL's **Participatory Defense (PD)** and **Texas Advocates for Justice (TAJ)** programs are examples of how the relational organizing model operates, and Andre's lived experience with those programs is a testament to the possibilities the model holds for changing lives and communities. Andre served as the project's lead organizer in Houston, and is a Criminal Justice Organizer at GRL.

Andre became involved with GRL first as a beneficiary of the PD program – as he navigated charges that carried an incarceration sentence of more than 20 years. Recounting his experience, Andre described his case as stemming from an ongoing sentence associated with a previous felony conviction. The charges he faced developed from an incident to which he was a bystander, but because there were guns involved, it led to additional more serious charges, and as Andre put it, "I ended up going to jail fighting for my life."

Individuals usually get connected to GRL's PD program through referrals from loved ones and other trusted sources.

²⁹Walker, Hannah L. *Mobilized by injustice: Criminal justice contact, political participation, and race*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

³⁰Fieldhouse, Edward and David Cutts. 2018. "Shared partisanship, household norms and turnout: Testing a relational theory of electoral participation." *British Journal of Political Science* 48(3):807–823.

³¹Rolfe, Meredith. 2012. *Voter turnout: A social theory of political participation*. Cambridge University Press.

³²Green, Donald P. and Oliver A. McClellan. 2020. "Turnout Nation: A Pilot Experiment Evaluating a Get-Out-The-Vote 'Supertreatment'." Working paper. <https://www.turnoutnation.org/thereport>.

Andre was connected to the program through another organization in Houston with which he advocated for kids like himself, who had spent time in the child welfare system:

Andre Lead project organizer, GRL



"They told me [Grassroots Leadership] was out here helping people through the criminal justice system pro bono. And I was like, pro bono? That's unheard of, but I got over here, and **true enough...**"

When individuals receive assistance from the PD program, they join a community as a member, rather than obtaining a service as a client. Criminal Justice Organizers come alongside the individual and help them learn to navigate the criminal legal system with the goal of empowering them to become active agents in their own case. Much of the day-to-day work of PD is helping people gain everyday skills and legal literacy. This might include teaching the individual how to look up the details of their own case, so that they do not have to rely on other people to provide them the correct information; how to use email and communicate effectively and professionally with their lawyer; or how to dress appropriately for a courtroom appearance. Carl Nix, a Criminal Justice Organizer with GRL who also participated in the research project, describes the program in the following way:

It's really just about empowering individuals and sharing knowledge and uplifting their spirits. I'm empowering them to know that they do have rights to speak up to themselves.

Knowing that attorney works for them... They have the right to accept a plea deal or deny a plea deal. They got the right to a speedy trial. Just **informing them of what their rights are** and also standing in solidarity with them, to say **you're not alone**. You're not by yourself. When you go into that courtroom, I stand with you. The community stands with you. We support you.

In the words of Brother Rob, "When we step into someone's life... we extend to them a great act of kindness... not one time, but every time they go to court." In Andre's case, with the assistance of the GRL PD team his charges were dropped: "Time saved was **20 years, six months and 12 days.**"

Because the organizers at GRL are helping individuals navigate the criminal legal system, and supporting them through their cases, the PD model requires trust. They have to trust the organizers with their personal information and with their human dignity. That trust is built through consistency and through the empowerment that comes from developing skills and literacy.

The **deep relationships** that develop from this process **create community.**

Members who receive assistance through PD are invited to continue to work in this community with TAJ. TAJ members turn around and help new individuals become empowered to navigate their own cases, and they often become actively engaged in the broader organizing work undertaken by GRL. Describing TAJ, Chantal Pridgon, a Criminal Justice Organizer who participated in the research project, describes TAJ in the

following way:

Texas Advocates for Justice is a base-building program for individuals who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system.

*Directly impacted could look in **two ways**. As – **you were the one** who was incarcerated, whether it was prison or arrested for a low level crime... **or it could be indirectly**... you have a son or a child who was incarcerated or a friend or a loved one...*

*We come together as a community to empower those individuals to tell their story, because we believe that change happens when individuals use their personal experience... We want them to know that ... **your voice matters**, and that you have power in that.*

In sum, PD is designed to empower people to become active agents in their own cases, and TAJ integrates people into the GRL community and empowers them to become active agents in the policy world. In Andre's case, he used the second chance the PD program helped him receive to take on a leadership role with GRL as a full time Criminal Justice Organizer, helping individuals facing similar challenges navigate the criminal legal system.

This peer-support model, where loved ones refer individuals to the organization, which equips them with tools to succeed in their own cases and then engages them as active members of a political community, is the relational organizing model in action. Relational organizing as a means to bring eligible voters with convictions into the electoral process is a natural extension of the approach GRL already employs through PD

and TAJ. The goal is to equip people with knowledge about their right to vote and skills to navigate the electoral process so that they can become empowered to engage if they so choose. Crucial to the success of this model is the trust that exists between the organizer and target for mobilization efforts. The most straightforward version of this is when the organizer provides the mobilization target the requisite information to become activated. In the words of one GRL organizer: "Sharing knowledge IS organizing!"

Scholarly evaluations of how well relational organizing strategies work for encouraging political participation, especially when it comes to registering low-propensity voters, are limited.³³ The partnership with GRL provides an unprecedented opportunity to assess the efficacy of the relational organizing model in a real-world setting, using the strategies, tactics and networks already employed by organizers embedded in and serving the justice-impacted community in Texas.



Texas Advocates for Justice, circa 2019.

³³Green, Donald P. and Oliver A. McClellan. 2020. "Turnout Nation: A Pilot Experiment Evaluating a Get-Out-The-Vote 'Supertreatment'." Working paper. <https://www.turnoutnation.org/thereport>.

OVERVIEW ^{OF THE} RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to test the promise of the relational organizing strategy for getting voting-eligible people with felony convictions to engage in electoral politics, we adopted a two-pronged approach. First, we developed a novel mail-based experiment wherein we sent the already-registered social ties of eligible voters with felony records a mailer with information about eligibility and a voter registration form. We asked these social ties to help their eligible loved one with a conviction get registered. A mail-based approach allowed us to assess the feasibility of mobilizing voting-eligible people with who are felony impacted in a scenario where we had precise control over the treatment and in which we would be well-powered to detect even small effects from our mailer. Second, we implemented and tested a “Captains Model”, which followed an in-person relational organizing strategy but randomized organizers’ social ties into either a control group, which received no contact, or into a treatment group of individuals who would receive education/communication from the captain. This research design allowed us to measure the impact of a relational organizing strategy as it operates on the ground.

STUDY 1: Mailer Experiment

Design and Implementation

As noted above, we think active voters could help to mobilize their justice-impacted loved ones, providing information about eligibility and persuading people about the importance of voting. In the “captains model” section below, we will discuss our in-depth qualitative study of how these relational efforts work. But we also wanted to run a larger study that

would serve as a “proof of concept” that social-ties outreach could work for people with criminal records. To do this, we designed a study that would send out mailers targeting eligible voters with previous felony cases, either reaching out to those eligible voters directly, or instead reaching out to their loved ones to encourage them to get the person registered.

We began by building a list of **nearly 600,000 eligible post-felony voters**, most of them unregistered to vote, and then used public records to find close social ties of those people, like family members or nearby neighbors, who might be able to reach out to them to encourage them to vote. We describe the process of building the sample for the mail-based experiment in the methods appendix.

We then randomized these “focal individuals” into one of **four experimental conditions**:

1. a **no-contact control group**, to provide a baseline for comparison
2. a group that was directly sent a **mailer** signed by **leaders of GRL**
3. a group that was directly sent a **mailer** signed by a **formerly incarcerated organizer** with GRL
4. a group for whom the **mailer was sent to their registered-voter loved one**, asking the loved one to help the focal individual get registered

Treatment arms 2 and 3 (“individual mailers”) let us test whether directly giving information about eligibility and voting to people with previous felony cases can help them get registered and vote, and also allow us to see whether that information is more trusted when

it comes from someone with their own history of incarceration. Treatment arm 4 (the “social-ties” mailer) lets us test our core hypothesis, that already-active loved ones can help people with records get back into political life.

All the mailers included the same information about voting eligibility and how to get registered; a voter registration form; and a pre-stamped, pre-addressed return envelope for submitting the registration form. Only the message at the top encouraging people to register, included below, varied across letters.³⁴ Mailers were sent in early September, in time for people to receive the mailers and return voter registration forms before the October 7th registration deadline for the November 2024 general election. The overall goal of the mailer experiment was to assess whether the social ties messenger could work among a broad group of eligible voters to improve baseline levels of registration and turnout, and to assess whether a formerly incarcerated messenger was more effective than a more general messenger at achieving the same outcomes. In total, **we sent 166,400 mailers** to a sample that included the **whole state of Texas**.

Results

The results of the experiment are displayed in **Figures 4** and **5**. **Figure 4** shows the predicted values of our key outcomes by experimental condition. All three treatments significantly increased the likelihood of registering (or of updating one’s registration, if previously registered) relative to the uncontacted

³⁴After people were assigned to a treatment condition, we attempted to send out the appropriate mailer; if we could not find a mailing address for someone (or if we did not have a social tie to send the social-ties letter, in condition 4), no letter was sent.

grassroots leadership

helping people gain power

When I went to prison, I felt like I was cast out of society. Since I got out, I’ve been educating, advocating and organizing to improve my community. But unfortunately, I cannot vote. You see, I am on parole until 2050. I’ll be 81 years of age before I can cast a ballot. If you’ve finished your sentence, you **CAN** vote. Where my political voice has been silenced, you have a chance to make yours heard. **Can you join our community in voting this fall?**

Dylan Martin, Community Organizer
Grassroots Leadership

Figure 1: Treatment 1, individual mailer encouraging eligible individuals to register and vote.

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As an active voter, you do so much for your community! There may be people in your community who are eligible to vote but are not registered. For example, we think *(NAME INSERT)* may not be registered to vote. If you know them, can you share the information below and help them make their voice heard in the 2024 election? **Help them know their rights!**

Annette Price, Executive Director
Dianna Williams, Deputy Director
Grassroots Leadership

Figure 2: Treatment 2, individual mailer signed by a formerly incarcerated organizer encouraging individuals to register and vote.

grassroots leadership

helping people gain power

Do you or someone you know have a criminal record? You may still have the right to vote. Know your rights! The 2024 Election is coming up and you have the chance to make your voice heard. Citizens are eligible to vote as soon as they have completed the terms of their felony conviction, including any period of probation or parole. If you are off paper, you may be able to register and vote.

Annette Price, Executive Director
Dianna Williams, Deputy Director
Grassroots Leadership

Figure 3: Treatment 3, mailer sent to the already-registered loved one of the focal individual asking them to help their loved one register and vote.

control group. Participation in the control group, absent any mailer from GRL, is very low – only about one and a half percent of the control group newly registered/updated their registration. Thus, the substantive impact of receiving a mailer from GRL is large. Receiving a mailer signed by GRL leadership **improved new and updated registrations by 25.3%** and receiving one signed by a formerly incarcerated person by **17.9%**, relative to the uncontacted control group.

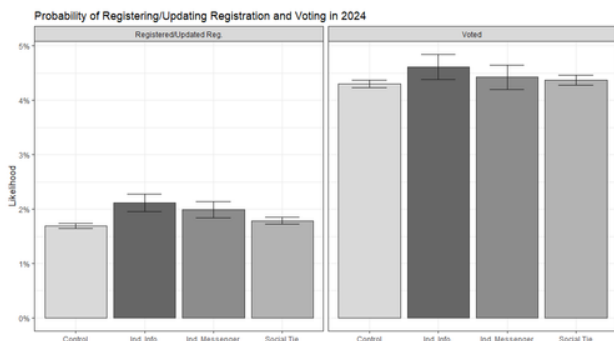


Figure 4: The impact of each treatment on the likelihood of newly registering or updating one's registration during the study period and on voting in the 2024 election.

While the size of the impact of the social ties mailer is smaller, improving new and updated registrations by six percent relative to the uncontacted control, the treatment itself is indirect. These results show that **we can reach individuals through their social ties**. Figure 5 asks when this social ties approach is most effective. It splits the sample into parts based on the type of social tie we were able to find: for some people, we couldn't link them to any active voters, while for others we could see a close family member who lived with them, a family member who lived elsewhere, or a neighbor or housemate who was a registered voter. The figure includes the predicted value of new or updated registrations by treatment type (control group, the two individual mailers, or the social-ties mailer) for the entire sample and then for these subsets.

Perhaps intuitively, the social ties mailer is especially effective (most different from control) when we contact a close family member who lives in the household. Among this set of individuals, the **appeal to the already registered family member improves registration by 18.8%** relative to

similarly situated individuals who did not receive a mailer. This confirms that close social ties can be an effective way to increase electoral engagement among justice-impacted individuals. Among people sent mailers, we see a total of **8,934 newly registered** (or updated) **voters with felony convictions**. An additional **922** return envelopes were used that couldn't be linked to anyone on our list, suggesting that GRL reached **even more unregistered people** than those specifically targeted by the experiment.

But the additional takeaway is that even for individuals who do not have an already-registered close social tie, direct outreach from other entities (like community organizations like GRL) **can help overcome barriers** to political engagement. The direct mailers sent by GRL reached individuals who **would not otherwise have been reached**, and improved engagement among this group of unlikely but still eligible voters.

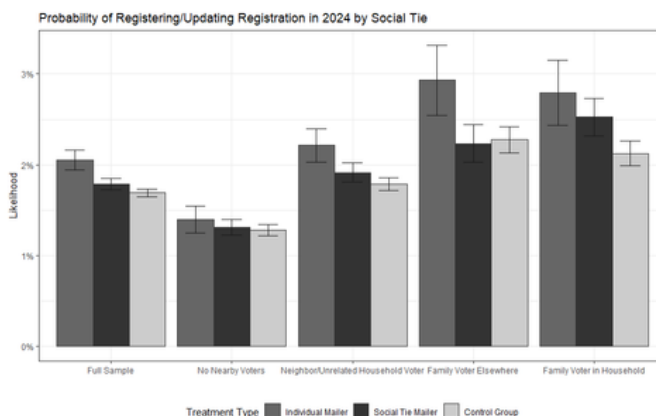


Figure 5: The impact of each treatment on the likelihood of newly registering or updating one's registration, by type of social tie.

STUDY 2: Captains Model

In partnership with organizers at GRL, we recruited **48 individuals to serve as mobilization "captains"** for our relational organizing study.

Captains were responsible for providing individuals in their social networks with information about registering and encouragement to register and participate in the upcoming election. We recruited 25 captains who primarily worked through the Houston location of Grassroots Leadership, and 23 who worked through the Austin location. In practice, however, captains were located in cities across the Central and East Texas regions, including in San Antonio, Dallas-Fort Worth and Texarkana. Captains received a \$500 stipend for their contribution to the project. From each captain, we solicited a list of the names and birthdays of 20 individuals in their networks who they thought were justice-impacted and unlikely to vote. Captains' lists sizes ranged from fewer than 20 to more than 20.

The research team used multiple sources of state data to vet the information the captains provided. Our goal was to ensure, to the best of our ability, that individuals included in the experiment were eligible voters. Individuals found to be ineligible were excluded from each captain's list. Half of the list of eligible voters provided by each captain was randomized into the treatment group, and half was randomized into the no-contact control group. In total, **621 individuals** were included in the experimental list for the Captain's Model study.

Overview of Project Timeline

The relational organizing project took place over the course of five months between late June and mid-November of 2024. We recruited the mobilization captains through a series of informational events between June and August. The lead organizers working with GRL were instrumental to this phase of the project. They identified and recruited the

individuals who would serve the project as mobilization captains. The first official meeting took place during the first week of September. During this meeting, we trained the captains and collected the first iteration of their contact lists.

After the first meeting, we used the lists of contacts captains provided to build the experimental list. We then randomly assigned half of each captain's list to the treatment group and half to the uncontacted control group. The second captains' meeting was held in the third week of September. The primary purpose of the second meeting was to provide further training. The mobilization effort was launched on September 20, and concluded on October 7 (the deadline to be registered such that one could vote in the 2024 general election). The captains were debriefed in the week following the conclusion of the mobilization effort. One-on-one exit interviews were conducted between mid-October and mid-November of 2024.

We designed the study so that captains were engaged with the research team for **a little over a month**. We were concerned about the implications for captain engagement for a longer period- requesting more of their time than would be appropriate, given the level of compensation they received (\$500, with \$100 distributed at each check-in and the final interview). Even so, **the captains reported that they would have liked more time** to identify people to include in their list, and to engage in multiple conversations with the people they targeted. They reported that the opportunity to have multiple conversations and engage in a more natural way would have led to greater success. The sections that follow provide a more detailed overview of the project implementation.

Implementation

(a) Recruiting the Mobilization Captains

In total, we recruited 48 mobilization captains. The lead GRL organizer at each project site used different strategies for recruiting captains. In Houston, lead GRL organizer Andre Taylor targeted individuals he thought were connected to the community, that came from the neighborhood where GRL is located, that were already interested in voting rights, and who he knew from other canvassing efforts. In Austin, lead organizer Brother Rob Lilly reached out to individuals working with membership organizations that were coalition partners with Grassroots Leadership. He asked those organizers to spread the word among their networks. From the Austin-based effort, a second organization called **All of Us or None** with close ties to Grassroots Leadership developed a cohort of mobilization captains in San Antonio. All of Us or None is specifically focused on organizing among justice-impacted people, and has deep experience educating this population about their right to vote.

The recruitment strategy produced a group of captains with a variety of relevant experience. Some were justice-impacted people interested in organizing their community. Others were not justice-impacted, but interested in doing voting rights work. Some captains were seasoned organizers, and some were new to politics and voter education efforts.

Diana, who worked with the Austin team, is an example of a justice-impacted organizer who was new to politics and voting. When asked why she wanted to participate, she said:

The reason that I wanted to do this mainly was because I am justice-

*impacted and I didn't have any education behind my [voting] rights and I didn't know. I've learned a lot for myself as well... on my reentry path, building my way back up after incarceration, a felony or two, **I have had to teach myself along this way about what I'm capable of doing** and within what means I have, you know, to do those things...*

I truly do have it in my heart to help people.** And so I really wanted to be able to speak for those that have been justice-impacted and **empower them with their voice and their rights.

Carl is an example of a Criminal Justice Organizer with a justice-impacted loved one, who worked with our Houston team. He has been involved in several voter education and mobilization campaigns in the past and is a career organizer. When asked why he had an interest in educating his community, he said:

*It's really just about **empowering individuals** and **sharing knowledge** and **uplifting their spirits.** I'm empowering them to know that they do have rights to speak up for themselves... Just informing them of what their rights are and also standing in solidarity with them to say **you're not alone. You're not by yourself.***

Because captain recruitment relied on the relationships of the GRL-affiliated lead organizers who are connected with organizers from other organizations, several individuals who became mobilization captains worked with or led other, related organizations.

Organizations that became involved in the project in a significant way include the following:

- **Stella's Way**, which serves Houston's Fifth Ward by empowering community members through mutual aid.
- **All of Us or None**, which is based in San Antonio and directly advocates for formerly incarcerated people and their families.
- **Big Homies Mentoring Program & Homies United Network**, which developed as an offshoot from All of Us or None and serves communities in San Antonio through mutual aid and mentoring at-risk youth.
- **The Ninth Legal Literacy**, which serves justice-impacted people in Houston through providing assistance navigating the legal system.

Other organizations represented among the mobilization captains, and who work in coalition with Grassroots Leadership include:

- **VOCAL Texas** works on a variety of issues afflicting marginalized communities in Texas, including addressing the housing crisis, drug addiction and mass incarceration.
- **Lioness Justice Impacted Women's Alliance**, which serves women who have experienced incarceration.
- **Restoring Justice**, which works on indigent defense in Houston.
- **Communities for Recovery**, which works on issues related to addiction.
- **Recovery ATX**, which works on issues related to addiction.

(b) Training

After recruitment, mobilization captains were required to check in with the UT-GRL research team five times throughout the project. The first two meetings were training sessions. The third meeting took place during the two-week registration effort. The teams met a fourth time to debrief after the registration effort.



Austin/San Antonio area captains pictured from left to right: Steve Huerta, Partina Clemmons, Stephen Fournoy, Rafael Palafos, Dwayne Williams, Brother Rob Lilly, Catina DeLoach, Diana Linares, Zebrina Robertson, Tina Acosta, Michelle Senquiz & Barbara Acosta. **Not pictured:** Denver Gonzalez, James Baily, Chantel Pridgon, Darwin Hamilton, Marci Simmons, Neyala Thomas, Justin Martinez, Stephanie Guerra, Ivan Garcia, Leslie Balderas, Tommy Acosta & Valerie Garza.



Houston area captains pictured from left to right: Rene Lawson, Janicia Busby, Latonia Busby, Sharon McCarter, Andrew Taylor, Andre Milton, Connie Boulware, Alicia Bain, Latricia St. Jules, Verdel Thomas, Yusulf Benson, Charles Johnson, Constance Dixon, Ronald Manning, Carl Nix, Lily Adebisi, Cyryn Myles and Bobby Foster. **Not pictured:** Deisal Jackson, Gaylin Johnson, Donna Smith, Inayah Rahsaan, Lashonda Jackson, Monique Joseph, Dias Kirkling, Lashena Harris, and Shiki Nation.

To conclude, each captain met one-on-one with the UT research team lead to complete a project exit interview.

Training I: The first training occurred three weeks in advance of implementing the peer-to-peer registration effort. **This training focused on research ethics and research design.** The mobilization captains were explicitly recruited to participate in a research project with the academic research team. Academic

institutional requirements and best practices for community-engaged research classify individuals engaged in implementing the treatment (as the mobilization captains were) as **project staff** who should be provided training around ethical research practices. As research project staff, it was necessary to brief the captains on the overall research design, their role in it, the nature of the research protocols we would ask them to follow, and the importance of those protocols.

The research ethics training emphasized the importance of treating research subjects with respect, as well as that research should be conducted in ways that are fair, just, and do no harm. The research team lead also identified how the project specifically attended to each ethical principle. Mobilization captains were encouraged to be as transparent as possible with the research team, and empowered to raise any ethical issues with the implementation of the project they encountered. With respect to the implementation of the research design itself, the training emphasized the importance of randomization into either the control group or the treatment group, and the importance of not contacting individuals in the control group for discussions about voter eligibility and eligibility and registration.³⁵

Lessons for organizers: Future relational organizing efforts that do not involve a research component are unlikely to have the need to train their mobilization captains on issues related to research design. They may, however, wish to dedicate time to explicitly discussing matters of ethics with their

This might include an emphasis on personal autonomy of individuals approached for political discussions, and general respect for persons who come to such discussions from a variety of different backgrounds.

Lessons for researchers: At this meeting, we also collected names and birthdays from mobilization captains' contacts to build the experimental list (more on this below). Individuals' lists included a variety of different kinds of social ties, some of whom fit the intended parameters of the study and some who did not. For example, some individuals didn't have an active relationship with the contact they provided (e.g. they grew up together and were mainly connected via Facebook); other individuals were very politically active and likely already registered voters. List construction could have been better supported by spending more time training the mobilization captains about the importance of sample construction. Clearly explicating the criteria of inclusion in the mobilization effort may increase the likelihood that the effort is successful at registering new voters.

Training 2: The second training occurred two weeks after the first training, and a little less than one week prior to the start of the peer-to-peer mobilization effort. The second training focused on the rules and regulations governing who is eligible to vote in Texas, how to get registered to vote, and who can register voters. After reviewing the law, the second half of the training was devoted to practicing strategies for engaging people in conversation about their right to vote. Importantly, this training explained how the law is implemented. This was especially important in Texas where people with felony convictions who voted while they were still on probation/parole (which is not legal) have been notoriously prosecuted. This has led to a great deal of fear and

³⁵There was some initial resistance to the idea that individuals would be randomized into a treatment group without their knowledge, and that organizers should not make their mobilization targets aware that they were part of the study. This was discussed at length during the portion of the training that dealt with ethics; it was explained that deception was permitted because of the benign nature of the intervention.

trepidation among the justice-impacted community around attempting to register and vote, and it made mobilization captains nervous about talking to their loved ones about their rights. This second training was, therefore, an opportunity to equip captains with clear information and resources to aid them in their efforts, and to help them act within the law while talking with their loved ones. Equally important was walking through conversational scenarios with captains, and providing them with suggested prompts to help them feel more confident when approaching their peers about registration and voting. Captains were also provided with printed handouts containing relevant information to assist their efforts.

Lessons for future organizers: This is perhaps the most important training component for organizers who wish to implement a peer-to-peer mobilization campaign. It may be less important to thoroughly cover the details of the law in states where voter fraud is not a commonly-prosecuted offense, and where the process of registering and voting is more open. Regardless of the state context, providing organizers with clear information about who is eligible and how to register is an essential part of successful program implementation. Mobilization captains were equally pleased to be given the opportunity to practice working through conversational scenarios in advance of implementing the program.

Lessons for future researchers: Working through conversational scenarios with mobilization captains is the moment at which the research team is able to provide instruction on how to implement the treatment in the way the team wants it to be implemented. By design, peer-to-peer strategies should be nuanced. Researchers should not provide organizers with scripts

they must follow, because the peer-to-peer strategy should be natural to the relationship between the organizer and the mobilization target. However, the provision of sample prompts, as well as working through conversational scenarios, allows the researcher the opportunity to take notes on how captains may implement the treatment in the field, and to offer general guidelines for the implementation of a treatment the researcher is ultimately unable to observe in the field.

Universal Lesson: Working through scenarios also offers both researchers and organizers the opportunity to help mobilization captains devise ways of talking about voting with their peers that adhere to the mission of rights education without veering into advocacy for one party/candidate over another, which is not legal for organizations with the 501c3 designation.

(c) Building the List

In most academic studies of voting behavior, scholars rely on state administrative records to build their lists of participants, as we did in our mail-based study. For our relational organizing study, we took the novel approach of **asking the mobilization captains to help us build the list** using their contacts. We asked them to submit a list of 20 people they knew who they thought were justice-impacted and unlikely to vote. Captains were tasked with providing both the names and the birthdays of these contacts. The combination of names and birthdays provides a reasonably unique identifier that allows us to find captains' contacts in state administrative records of people with convictions. We used these records to determine whether the individuals included on captains' lists were eligible to vote. While we were most interested in mobilizing people with felony convictions, the experimental list included a broader group of justice-impacted

people, including those who were convicted of misdemeanors and a small selection of individuals who were justice-impacted because they had a loved one who had experienced time in prison. Even justice-impacted people who do not lose the right to vote are often unlikely to register and vote, for reasons similar to individuals who have incurred a felony. The final list also included people who were already in the voter registration file, but we knew it was possible that these individuals might need to update their voter registration in order to vote in the 2024 election.

The **kinds of social ties** included in the experimental list varied. Many people included close friends and family members, the kinds of relationships we expected to be most effective at encouraging registration and voting. People who have a strong relationship with the justice-impacted eligible voter are thought to be most trustworthy when they provide information about eligibility and how to navigate the electoral process, and, therefore, best positioned to help their loved ones view voting as valuable.

Several captains worked with other organizations that address needs that are common among those who are justice-impacted, including peer-to-peer mentorship for people in recovery, working with people facing houselessness, and anti-poverty service provision. Some captains included individuals they served through this work on their lists. Other captains included individuals with whom their relationship was less personal or active. For example, some captains included people who they grew up with and stay connected to via social media, but do not speak with regularly. The strength of the relationship had implications for the implementation of the treatment, which we discuss below.

Assembling the list was difficult. We took great care to include, to the best of our ability, only eligible voters on our list. We allotted two weeks to collect names and birthdays from mobilization captains, and, then, use administrative records to find everyone included on captains' lists and ensure they were eligible for inclusion in the study (were justice-impacted) and eligible to vote (were not serving time in prison, on probation or on parole for a felony conviction).

Combing through administrative records is a labor-intensive practice, and **we would have benefited from more time**. The rush to compile the experimental list led to a list of lower quality than was ideal for the research design. For example, while we were focused on mobilizing justice-impacted people, we ultimately included people with proximal contact who had never incurred a conviction to help make sure the sample was large-enough for our study to be well-powered (i.e., for us to be able to determine differences in effects between the treatment and control groups). We also did not have face-to-face meetings with captains during that two-week period, which would have improved the process. Likewise, mobilization captains expressed that they wished they had more time to identify people to include in their list and to obtain the information requested by the researchers. Ultimately, many of these constraints were a direct result of the research process, and would not be an issue for a community-based organization that wanted to implement a relational strategy without a need to measure outcomes and treatment effects.

Once list creation was complete, prior to the September 20th start date, half of each captains' list was randomized into the treatment group. We shared captains' contact lists with them at the second training,

email, or via text. Captains were instructed not to initiate conversations with individuals in the no-contact control group about their rights, registration, or voting.

Lessons for organizers: Providing captains more time to identify who they will target for conversations will increase the quality of the outreach effort. Organizers should work with captains to help captains focus on identifying individuals with whom they have active relationships, meaning that they will have the opportunity to have a face-to-face conversation with the individual targeted for outreach.

Lessons for future researchers: Researchers interested in building an outreach list in this fashion for the purposes of a relational organizing experiment should build more time into the schedule to compile the list. They should allow for multiple in-person meetings with mobilization captains during the list building process. Many captains were very cooperative and forthcoming during face-to-face meetings, and harder to engage during the rest of the week when they were busy with their lives. We asked captains to bring their list to the first training session. It would have been better to make the ask for the list during the first meeting, and then use subsequent meetings (two to three) to follow up with the captains about their list, and ask questions about people on their list. The list cleaning process was time-intensive, and would have been more reasonably completed over a month rather than two weeks. However, it would be less important that every person on the list is vetted for voter eligibility for researchers implementing the design in a state with less stringent rules about who is eligible to vote and the consequences of voting when ineligible.

(d) Strategies to Ensure Treatment Implementation

The implementation period, during which captains were reaching out to individuals on their contact lists, lasted from September 20, 2024 through October 7, 2024 (the registration deadline to be eligible to vote in the November 5th general election). Throughout this period, the lead researcher remained in touch with captains to ensure they were implementing the treatment and to facilitate problem-solving should issues arise. The researcher followed up with organizers via email and text message to check in and discuss any problems they might be having. This included starting a group text with organizers who were less attentive to email but very responsive on text, which allowed group members to ask questions and share answers with one another. The lead researcher held one in-person meeting at each site during the implementation period.³⁶ The purpose of this meeting was to check in with the organizers, share stories, and problem solve. For the purposes of research, this meeting was treated like a focus group, and the lead researcher took notes about the kinds of challenges organizers were facing in their conversations and the strategies they viewed as successful. For the purposes of organizing, this check-in served as an opportunity for captains to compare notes, help one another work through issues, build community around their shared experiences, and consult the expertise of more seasoned organizers. From an organizing standpoint, this midway check-in was the space where genuine learning about organizing, engagement, and with the struggle of peer-to-peer outreach and education occurred.

Lessons for organizers: Regular, group-based check-ins with organizers facilitate the

³⁶After the initial training session, we began to offer a hybrid attendance option. This ensured that we were able to have enough captains to implement the design, and that they would have access to all the training and check-ins even at times when they were unable to make it to the GRL offices in person.

learning process and help solidify captains' identities as organizers. The opportunity to learn from other organizers, establish relationships, and engage in peer-to-peer mentoring are central aspects of building an effective strategy and maintaining motivation among captains.

Lessons for researchers: Providing captains with real-time support when questions arise and scheduling one-on-one and group-based check-ins help ensure treatment implementation. This structure also helps motivate captains to make repeated attempts to contact mobilization targets if their first attempts are unsuccessful. When captains successfully contact their mobilization targets, this process encourages them to have multiple conversations with the mobilization targets, a key feature of relational organizing that scholars theorize makes it effective.

(e) Organizers' Implementation Strategies

1. The Challenges and Successes of Making Contact

Reports from organizers suggest that the quality of their relationship with a mobilization target was related to the success of their efforts. Relationships that were relatively close, where the individuals spoke frequently, yielded more high quality conversations than more distant relationships. Close contacts were open to speaking about politics and comfortable talking about their experiences with the criminal justice system, which provided a pathway for captains to educate them about their right to vote. For example, Catina spoke with her children and her children's friends. Recounting a conversation where she thought the person was likely to register, she said:

[they said] 'You know, I can't vote. I'm a felon.' And I say, 'who told you that?' Because see, his girlfriend told him that. I say, 'Who told you that?' ... And then I explained to him everything else, like, 'Well, you know, just 'cause you a felon, and you already did your time...' He wasn't on parole or anything. So. And he's not on probation. I said, 'You're not on probation. So. **There's nothing stopping you, if you want to vote, all you got to do is go register.**'

These conversations were especially impactful when individuals had a shared carceral experience. For example, Marcie had at least one individual with whom she served time in prison on her contact list. In reflecting on the success of the conversation, she said:

I think, just getting out of prison... and the line of work that I do and having been to prison with her and being home for a while, like that's just... when we're looking at other formerly incarcerated folks that have been out a minute, their word is solid. **Because they know exactly what barriers we face.** They know - if they say, hey, that Kentucky Fried Chicken says they hire felons, but they aren't going to hire you if you have a theft case, like that's - we know. We - **you might not know, Hannah, but we know.**

In contrast, when organizers were not in regular contact with the individual they were targeting, even if they felt they had a strong relationship with that person, they often faced challenges contacting the target. Several organizers reported instances when they were only connected to individuals via social media, and they were never able to successfully have an exchange with the target of their efforts. Focus group conversations with organizers suggested that face-to-face contact was the best strategy for having a meaningful

conversation about the right to vote. Justin targeted an individual who was a friend-of-a-friend, but who he never had a conversation with:

So [name redacted] was the only one on my list that I could not get a hold of. He was also someone who was more of an acquaintance. But I did... I called him twice. I did email him once, and then I emailed him the second time, realizing it probably wasn't going to get much [of a response] and just sent him all the information that you all provided in an email. And just saying, "Hey, here's some information on voting." And again, just reiterated like, here's my number, here's my email address. You know, please reach out if you had any questions or whatever. **And I never got any response back.**

Similarly, Constance targeted someone who she grew up with, but with whom she did not have an active relationship and to whom she was only connected via social media:

I seen that she read my messages and then she gave me a thumbs up. But other than that, it wasn't like... **no direct dialogue**... I've been knowing Debra since she was like 10. And I used to be her babysitter. And me and her mom was good friends. And so I think that was maybe... the age difference. I don't know.

In some instances, organizers got creative and enlisted the help of other people in their networks to reach mobilization targets. This was successful when the organizer had already planted seeds about the value of voting. For example, Monique recounted an interaction with someone targeted for mobilization efforts who ultimately relied on their loved one to complete the process of registering:

He was very, very excited to know that he could vote. And he said the same thing. Kind of like, "**Can you help me figure out the process? Sign me up,**" and so we talked... I want to say maybe three times... I just followed up and said, okay, you know, you can register... his wife, I think, was helping him figure out the process or something. They were working through it.

When the relationship was not strong, and the seeds had not been planted in advance, following up with a face-to-face conversation was usually unsuccessful. For example, Constance targeted another individual with whom she grew up, but who was unresponsive on Facebook:

So, [name redacted], um, I contacted him twice through Facebook. We're not really close. We wasn't really close back in the day. We just had mutual friends. [name redacted] was real quiet. But he has a baby for my cousin. And you can tell - the first time that, I mean... each time that I interacted, **he really didn't want to have anything to talk about.**

This illustrates that organizing efforts are most effective when organizers reach out multiple times to the person who they are educating, and use multiple forms of communication. These repeated efforts, however, are most successful when the captain and the mobilization target have more than a casual relationship to provide the basis for their conversation.

Lessons for organizers: Social tie quality is closely related to the success of a relational organizing strategy. Organizers should ensure that captains are targeting people with whom they have an active relationship, such that there is a strong possibility for multiple in-person interactions. Both interactions that are

either face-to-face or over the phone and repeated conversations were important to the success of the strategy. Social media is not a successful mode of contact for relational organizing.

Lessons for researchers: Building a list characterized by high-quality ties is essential for the successful implementation of the treatment. Researchers should take steps to ensure that people included in the list for outreach efforts have an active and close relationship with the captain.

2. Messaging: Persuasion, Subversion and Education.

The biggest challenge captains who were able to contact the individuals on their contact list faced was convincing those individuals that their political voices mattered, convincing them that voting is valuable, and overcoming disaffection from the government. For example, Carl spoke with an individual with whom he had a strong relationship, and who had even expressed interest in voting in the past. But this individual was frustrated with politics, and Carl worried he was too alienated to be likely to vote this cycle:

The more of the killings and the shootings and the, you know, the abortion rights... you know, he is married, he has kids. And the fact that they trying to take out... the public school system and he's like, "okay, if our votes mean something, **why is this even an issue?** Like, just common sense of: we need to have the public school system, and common sense for women to have their rights. But is it truly that our vote is mattering? Or **is our vote just something to make us feel good, and they're making their own decisions?**" ... It's like, "well, you should

still vote just in case our rights matter. I think our rights matter." He's just like, **"Yeah, but if our rights matter, why does this keep happening over and over and over?"**

Constance similarly identified that some individuals she spoke with were not interested in talking with her about their rights because they were not interested in politics and did not value voting:

It wasn't really, like, hostile. It was like, uncomfortable. Because they didn't really- didn't know what to say, because **it wasn't, like, their everyday conversation or knowledge.** Like, they don't watch the news or anything like that. And that was, like, everybody damn near on my list.

Some captains reported that they were able to overcome a lack of interest in politics and disaffection towards the national political environment **when they engaged people about local political races and connected voting to issues they cared about.** Turning the attention to local races helped captains overcome contacts' beliefs that their vote didn't matter or couldn't make a difference. Connecting voting to issues that they care about helped motivate people to want to vote. Monique recounted a conversation she had with an individual who became more interested when she pointed out that the district attorney was up for reelection:

Monique: The third time we talked, it was all political. It wasn't necessarily about voting, but we did have some political conversations about our local election.

Hannah: May I ask which election?

Monique: The D.A. The district attorney. I

mean, I'm pretty optimistic that he's going to win. But it's important. I think it's one that motivates people who may have had contact with the system, because that's the person that decides what cases come in, and they know that. So, yeah, I think that was a thing that kind of made her [think] like, okay, let me get more information about this vote.

Likewise, Justin reflected on a conversation with an individual who started out skeptical of voting, but became more excited when the conversation pivoted to local elections:

[Name redacted] was the most interesting one from my list... [I] called him, left a voicemail, and he called me back and we had a conversation. And **he was not interested in voting at all** when I first talked to him, and his whole story was just- national politics doesn't really seem like it makes a lot of impact. [He] never really felt like he needed to get involved. And so that's when I kind of pivoted to, okay, so let's talk about the local elections, because he talked about impact. I'm like, well, maybe that could be [relevant]. And when I talked... about some of the local elections and how, like, that's also on the ballot. It was like- all of a sudden it was like, "oh, my God." He's like, "**I didn't think about that.** I didn't think that like, you know, **DAs and sheriffs and judges and, like, the local officials here are also on the ballot.** And it's not just sort of the national politics of it." And so that really, like... intrigued him.

Many individuals targeted for outreach were already interested in politics and held the norm that voting was valuable. In this instance, organizers were most positive about the conversations they had, because they were able to provide a valuable good to the person they were targeting - **information and civic literacy**.

So that first conversation was kind of like, dang, he said, "I had no idea. I can't believe nobody's told me." And he's very active in the community. He was a client that became a peer specialist, and now he's on his own and living a great life, [he's] got his own business. And he's like, "**Dang, I can't believe I didn't know this.**" And he was like, "sign me up."

- Monique

When people know, people make better decisions. So this was huge for somebody to reach that community and single out their community, know that... knowing what they've been through, knowing they're avoided for services like this... **every one of these people that become literate, they lead and guide their families to literacy** and to understand... and when helplessness and desperation leaves, because now we know- **we have some sense of where the solutions are**, or how we can become them... Everything is better. Life is better for everyone.

- Yusulf

These reflections from the mobilization captains highlight that information is empowering and valuable in its own right if the person targeted for outreach already believes that voting is a good thing to do. The value of information is the single most frequent theme to emerge from successful interviews. Information is most empowering when it is delivered by a trusted source who has a preexisting relationship and a shared background with the mobilization target. This is the basic premise of why relational organizing can be successful:

A lot of people don't know their rights. They don't know [...] what they're able to

do. They right away think, “I’ve been to jail, or I have a felony, or I have this or that. I can’t vote,” and they have that mindset. So I give them my experience... I let them know, you know, at one point, I was in trouble with the law... I had a background and I’m able to vote, you know, so **I’m able to, you’re able to.**

– Barbara

Lessons for organizers: Captains were the most successful at helping people view voting as valuable when they turned the focus to local elections in which partisan cues are less sharp and in which each vote has a higher chance of affecting the outcome. Likewise, many captains reported that the simple provision of information about eligibility and how to register was very meaningful for people who care about their communities. One thing organizers can do, then, is not only provide more information about people’s rights, but also about the local electoral context as a way of motivating people to register and vote.

Lessons for researchers: Interviews with captains suggest that there are at least two types of low propensity voters. Some voters already view voting as valuable, but they are confused about their own eligibility to vote, or they lack information about local politics and how it impacts their lives. Education helps overcome these barriers. The second type of low propensity voter does not view voting as valuable, an attitude which often develops from deep alienation from the state. This attitude is much harder to overcome, and requires repeated conversations with people designed to help them at least view community engagement as valuable even if they never trust the state.

(f) Recommendations for successful implementation

A summary of the recommendations for the successful implementation of the program are as follows:

- **Building a high quality list** is essential both for successful implementation of the voter education program and for measuring the impact of the treatment. We asked captains to provide a list of names and birthdays of 20 people who they thought were justice-impacted with whom they would be willing to discuss voting. We scheduled two weeks for building this list, which includes checking each entry’s eligibility both for inclusion in the study and to register to vote.
 - Future efforts should **allot more time** for this process, and should schedule multiple in-person meetings with organizers throughout the process.
 - This time should be used to ensure that everyone on a captain’s list is someone with whom the captain has a genuine, active relationship. This will improve the implementation and success of the organizing effort.
 - This time should also be used to ensure that everyone on each captain’s list is justice-impacted and unregistered. This will enhance precision of measurement for the research effort.
- **Providing organizers with adequate training** is necessary to ensure the treatment is implemented as intended, organizers are able to follow the law during implementation; and organizers have tools to be effective community educators.
 - Future efforts should provide **more training around the local electoral context and around the importance of sample construction.**
 - More training about the local electoral context would equip organizers with information necessary to engage mobilization targets about the importance of their vote, and how their vote can have an effect on their daily lives.
 - More training on research design, with an

- emphasis on why sample construction is important to measurement, would have enhanced the quality of the lists captains provided during the initial phase of the project. This would increase the precision of measurement of the treatment effect.

Findings

The results of the relational organizing experiment are displayed in **Figures 6, 7, and 8**. **Figure 6** displays the mean level of new and updated registrations in the no-contact control group and in the treatment group overall. The first panel presents these means for the full sample. The middle panel includes these results for captains based at the Austin location; the right-side panel, for captains who organized through the Houston location.

A little less than 4 percent of individuals newly registered or updated their registrations in the no-contact control group. By contrast, **5.4 percent** of individuals who **received the relational organizing treatment** newly registered or updated their registration. This means that the treatment improved registrations by **1.4 percentage points**, or **35%** relative to the uncontacted control group. Among Austin captains, the relational organizing treatment increased new and updated registrations by **1.2 percentage points**. Among Houston captains, the treatment increased new and updated registrations by **1.9 percentage points**. **The effect of the treatment is not statistically distinguishable from zero in the full sample or in either of the cities.** One possible reason for this is **control group contamination**, meaning members of the no-contact control group may have been contacted or received information about registration. Control group contamination may have come from several sources, suggesting potential flaws in the design. Many of the mobilization captains were engaged in other kinds of voter

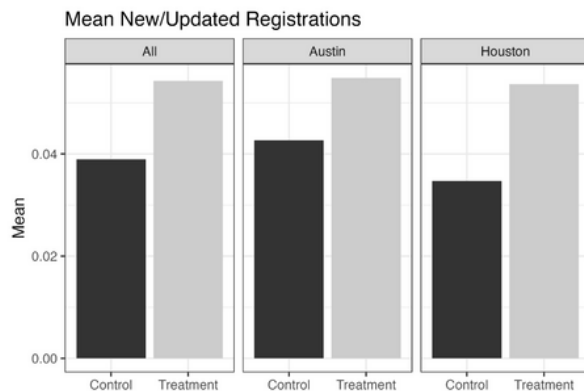


Figure 6: Mean levels of new and updated registrations by treatment group, among the full sample and by organizing site.

education efforts, and many of them advocate for voter engagement in their everyday lives and conversations. One captain, for example, indicated that she posted on Facebook the day before the registration deadline that everyone should register. Another captain mentioned that they had spoken to someone on their no-contact control list about their rights prior to the start of the research period, but not during. A third individual indicated that while she did not personally talk to the no-contact control group member, they were party to a group conversation where information about voting was shared:

We have a few other mutual friends. In conversation, she talked to [name redacted], who is also a mutual friend... and was either on my or [another captain's] list. I'm sure it was a conversation we all had where [name redacted] was saying we needed to make our vote count no matter what. **No direct prompting, but she was an eager listener.**

In other words, the no-contact control group member was likely motivated to get engaged because of a group conversation where friends shared information and promoted the importance of voting, though the mobilization captain did not speak to her directly. The

captain followed our instructions well. In fact, this particular captain was one of our model participants, who did everything just as instructed. We might take this scenario as evidence **the relational organizing strategy works as anticipated!** Examples like this suggest some control group contamination is a feature of the study as it was designed. Future research might consider alternative strategies for randomization to account for this kind of spillover.

It is further worth noting that, while we set out to target people who were unregistered, we did include some people in the list found in the voter registration files. This is because many people had old registrations that they needed to update in order to vote. When we initially built the list, we thought this affected about 25% of individuals. Ultimately, however, the process of verifying people’s eligibility both to vote and for the study revealed many alternative name spellings/expressions and slight variations on birthdays. When we accounted for these variations, we found that many more people than we originally anticipated were already registered to vote (**approximately 65% of the list overall had a voter registration record**). When we look at the impact **only on people who were not registered** prior to the experiment, we do find that the treatment improves registration by about **five percentage points** – an effect that **is** distinguishable from zero. **Figure 7** illustrates: like **Fig. 6**, it shows the mean registration levels by city for the treatment and control groups, but only among those not previously registered. This suggests that, had we started with a full list of people who were never registered, the treatment would have been statistically significant overall.

Figure 8 displays the effect of the relational organizing treatment on voter turnout. The treatment had no impact on voter turnout in

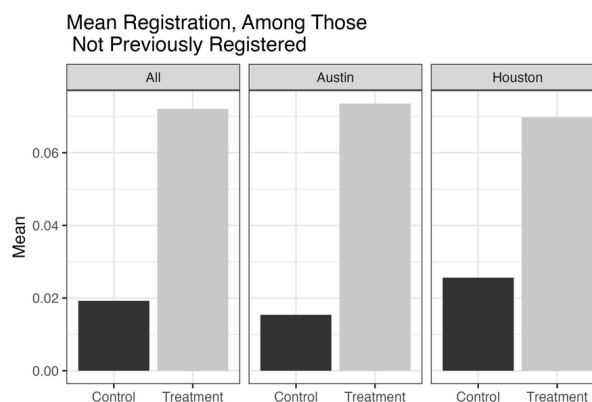


Figure 7: Mean levels of new and updated registrations among those not previously registered, by organizing site.

the full sample or in either location. This is likely because the treatment focused on educating people about their rights and encouraging them to register, but did not focus specifically on voting. One flaw of the list building process is that we chose to include people who were already registered in case they needed to update their registration. As discussed, the baseline registration rate in our sample was very high, with many individuals registered prior to the treatment. We concluded mobilization activities on the voter registration deadline, which is one month in advance of the election. Our treatments may have been more effective at encouraging voting if we continued mobilization activities through the general election.

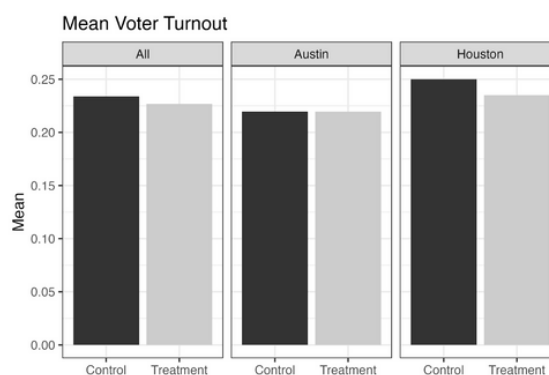


Figure 8: Mean levels of voting in the 2024 general election by treatment group, in the full sample and by organizing site.

CONCLUSION

We evaluated the power of relational organizing as a strategy to encourage justice-impacted voting-eligible people to engage in the electoral process with two related experiments. A large-scale mail-based experiment that reached eligible voters across Texas demonstrated that such appeals to social ties who are registered voters can be effective at reaching and engaging eligible voters with convictions. This experiment also demonstrated that appeals from trusted organizations like GRL can be effective even among people who are not connected to many registered voters. A second experiment implemented a relational organizing model as it would occur in the world. We evaluated the impact of having mobilization captains reach out to justice-impacted loved ones and share information about their right to vote. While we could not distinguish the overall treatment effect from zero, we did observe increases in new registrations and updated registrations in the treatment group.

Core to our relational organizing effort was providing education and literacy about how to engage in the political process. Organizers were instructed not to advocate for one party or candidate over another. GRL, however, is fundamentally a policy organization that advocates for policy outcomes that benefit justice-impacted people and their broader communities. Thus, an outstanding question is: what happens next? The fundamental lessons learned from this project are about how to get people engaged in the electoral process and politics more broadly. Thus, the policy recommendations that follow from this project regard how to reduce some of the barriers justice-impacted people face to engagement.

During the 2025 legislative session lawmakers considered three bills that would reduce barriers to participation for justice-impacted people. None of these bills succeeded, but advocacy to advance them in the next legislative session is ongoing.

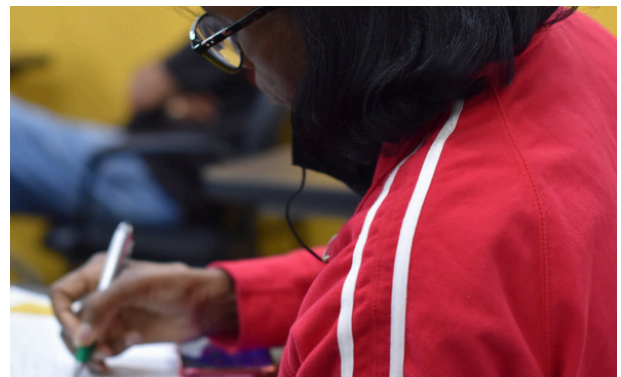
- **SB 2227** would require the state to send people with felony convictions who complete the terms of their sentence information about their eligibility. Our research suggests that the simple provision of information can help people who are already interested in voting become registered voters. However.
 - Findings from this project suggest that justice-impacted people do not always trust the state, and that the messenger matters; likewise, many people don't participate because they don't think voting is valuable. Advocacy for this kind of reform should be paired with ongoing efforts from organizations like GRL to inform people of their rights and convince people voting is worthwhile.
- Advocacy efforts should also focus on reforms that would reduce barriers to the ballot box for justice-impacted people:
 - **SB 631** would expand access to the franchise for people with felony convictions who are still serving time on probation and parole. This reform would bring Texas' law in line with more than half of US states.
 - **HB 311** would institute online voter registration in Texas. This bill has implications for low propensity voters who are not justice-impacted. Reducing the need to fill out a physical form and place it in the mail would also make voting more accessible for justice-

- impacted voters.
- One barrier faced by justice-impacted people is fear that develops from the possibility of incurring a felony conviction if one thinks they are eligible to vote but are wrong. The state of Texas reduced the penalty for voter fraud to a misdemeanor in 2021, but then increased it to a felony again in 2023. Reducing the penalty associated with voter fraud would make people who are eligible voters less fearful of engaging with the electoral process.

How can GRL marshal the power of their base, expanded through the relational organizing effort, to advance the kinds of policy proposals outlined above? This question is not so easily answered. Steve, a veteran organizer in San Antonio, mused: “What are we doing wrong? ... Why have we increased voter turnout of formerly incarcerated and impacted communities, but yet we’re still electing the same damn people and we’re still getting the same damn results? Nothing’s changed except the voter turnout.” He goes on to issue a challenge to organizers who too often focus myopically on the moment of the election, and getting people newly registered:

Are you [...] just showing me a list of people, or is that really political power? [...] **Whose power are you building when you register people to vote?** I tell them, you are registering power. Whose power are you registering? [...] **Please don’t just come up and show me your list.** I want to see your power... you show me your power by mobilizing your people, by your leadership... that’s the question we need to ask ourselves in the next phase... Building a community is understanding, well, **where is political leadership around the politically disenfranchised?**

GRL is well-positioned to take up this challenge. We hope the knowledge developed through this project will be of use to them and future organizers across the country who are already actively engaged in organizing justice-impacted communities and attempting to figure out how to convert votes at the ballot box into power to shape more just and equitable policies.



Methods Appendix

Building the Mailer Sample and Finding Ties

To build the sample for the mail-based experiment, we begin with the Texas convictions database, collected from the state, and clean it to omit people who do not appear to be eligible to vote due to active (or not clearly ended) sentences, known non-citizenship, or death while in custody or on supervision, as well as a few thousand people with incomplete name information. This process leaves us with a list of about one million people, which we then merge to the state voter file of Texas to determine which people on the list are already registered to vote and thus should be excluded from the study. Excluding everyone who appears to be registered, as well as (at this point) excluding people who were recorded as having died yields a list of about 740,000 people who appear to be eligible to vote in Texas after a previous felony conviction (if still living in the state).

We then sent this list to a commercial address vendor for matching. About four-fifths of the list matched to a recent address. We excluded just under 146,000 people who, based on address matches, appear to live out of state and thus to be ineligible to register and vote in Texas. This leaves us with a list of 596,120 people that we believed to be unregistered-but-eligible voters in Texas after past felony convictions. Throughout the course of the analysis, we found registrations for approximately one-fifth of this final list under other names than the one(s) listed in their DPS records. This leaves over 450,000 individuals whom all current evidence indicates were unregistered at the start of the experiment.

Focal individuals from our list of eligible voters are assigned to the four treatment arms. For each treatment arm, we then treat as many of the people assigned to that arm as possible. For each of the two individual-mailer arms, that means that we send out individual mailers to everyone with a valid mailing address (approximately 80% of the sample) who has been assigned to that treatment condition. For the social-ties arm, it means that we send out a mailer to a social tie for anyone with an available social tie. We prioritize closer social ties where available, so if someone lives with a family member who is a registered voter we send a mailer to that person. We identify familial relationships through other kinds of administrative records, such as birth and marriage records. If the individual does not have a family member who is registered, then we send a letter to another registered social tie, including those who live at the same address as the focal person, or a registered voter who lives nearby.

Our primary outcomes of interest were voter registration and voter turnout in the 2024 general election. To evaluate the impact of the treatments on the outcomes of interest, we collected voter registration and vote history files after the general election. We also account for previous registration, since some people in our sample were already registered, which significantly impacts the outcomes of interest.