Is It the Message or the Person? Lessons from a Field Experiment About Who Converts to Permanent Vote by Mail

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ABSTRACT

In this article we use the results of a field experiment to investigate whether the choice to convert to permanent vote-by-mail (PVBM) status is driven primarily by individual voters’ characteristics—such as a registrant’s propensity to vote—or the messages elections administrators and advocates use to convince them to change their status. We find two significant outcomes. First, regardless of the message received, high-propensity voters are much more likely to convert than are low-propensity voters. Second, among low-propensity voters the convenience-based message was the least likely to cause conversion to PVBM status, and none of the messages had a significant effect among high-propensity and prior-PVBM registrants. Taken together, these results suggest that the current focus by scholars and practitioners on VBM’s impact on the costs of voting may be misplaced.

Since 1972, every state has allowed some voters to cast their ballots through the mail, a practice commonly called absentee voting, postal voting, and vote by mail (VBM). Historically, postal voting has taken the form of one-time, need-based absentee voting. Registrants who wished to cast their ballot through the mail had to request to do so and demonstrate a need (due to some form of disability or planned absence) on an election-by-election basis. Recent reforms throughout the states, though, have enabled more people to use postal voting. Twenty-seven states, plus the District of Columbia, now allow no-fault absentee voting—anyone who wants to cast their ballot through the mail can do so without having to demonstrate a need (National Conference of State Legislatures 2012). Seven of these states, as well as the District of Columbia, provide no-fault, permanent vote-by-mail (PVBM) status.1 A one-time sign-up—no excuse required—enables any registrant in these states to cast ballots by mail for all future elections until they explicitly opt out or fail to vote in a defined number of elections.2 An additional seven states currently make some allowance for qualified registrants (e.g., those with disabilities or living in remote areas) to gain PVBM status. Finally, two

1Although we will use the term permanent vote by mail to refer to any no-fault, ongoing postal voting system, no two states use the same term to describe their VBM systems. In Arizona, for example, such registrants are included in the Permanent Early Voter List; in Colorado, it is called permanent mail-in voting. Even within a state, different professions use different terms. In California, for example, even through Section 300(a) of the California Elections Code defines a vote-by-mail voter as “any voter casting a ballot in any way other than at the polling place,” campaign professionals and those who work with them refer to such voters as absentee voters and to PVBM as permanent absentee voting (PAV).

2In California, for example, voters who fail to vote in four successive general elections revert to polling-place voters (an eight-year period). They do not have to re-register to vote, however.

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states—Oregon and Washington—now administer all their elections through the mail.³

As VBM, and especially PVBM, has become available, its use has grown significantly and rapidly. Figure 1 illustrates this trend for California. Just 525,000 people (about six percent of all California voters) cast their ballot through the mail in 1980. This number grew steadily such that by the 2000 presidential election over 2.7 million people (about 24 percent of voters) were VBM voters. Following the adoption of PVBM in 2002, the use of postal voting accelerated appreciably,⁴ and by the 2012 presidential election over 6.7 million people (about 51 percent of voters) cast their ballot through the mail (California Secretary of State 2013). Other states have seen similar results. Following the adoption of PVBM in 2007, for example, Colorado voters’ use of postal voting increased from 37 percent of all voters in 2006 to 64 percent in 2008 (Mann and Sondheimer 2009, 1).

The choice to use postal voting on an ongoing basis, as with PVBM, is generally voluntary. While several states allow elections administrators (EAs) to compel postal voting in a limited number of cases,⁵ most registrants must actively request to use PVBM after (or at the same time as) they register to vote.⁶ The (mostly) voluntary nature of PVBM thus raises the question—why do some registrants choose to convert and vote by mail while others do not? This understudied choice is increas-ingly salient for EAs and voter mobilization groups (partisan or nonpartisan), who often view PVBM as a means to save money and increase turnout—and therefore seek to encourage its use.

Indeed, while much of the literature about VBM focuses on its impact on voter turnout (c.f., Bergman and Yates 2011; Berinsky et al. 2001; Kousser and Mullin 2007; Southwell and Burchett 2000), few studies have directly addressed the choice to become a VBM registrant in the first place. To the extent that the literature does seek to identify motivations for conversion it predominantly focuses on how VBM affects the cost of voting for voters. The common

³Another 19 states allow elections officials to administer entirely VBM elections. The circumstances for doing so vary considerably, however.
⁴A simple ARIMA(1,0,0) model predicting the percent of ballots cast through the mail using dummy variables for each reform returns a coefficient of 1.132 (p ≤ 0.624) for the no-fault absentee reform—meaning that it did not have a statistically significant effect on the rate of postal voting—and 2.965 (p ≤ 0.001) for the PVBM reform—meaning that it had a substantively and statistically significant effect. The model Wald chi² = 44.92 (p ≤ 0.001).
⁵California law, for example, allows county registrars to compel the use of vote by mail within a precinct if it contains fewer than 250 registered voters (called mail-ballot precincts). California is also currently considering legislation that would allow registrars to compel VBM usage within a precinct if the percentage of people registered PVBM is at least 75 percent.
⁶Doing so generally requires submitting an additional form to an elections official (Cemenska et al. 2009).
assertion is that registrants chose to vote by mail because polling-place voting is relatively costly by comparison (usually framed in terms of convenience). It is not clear, however, that cost is the only—or even primary—motivation for VBM usage or that cost considerations affect registrants equally.

In this article we examine the choice to convert to permanent vote-by-mail status. We use the results of a field experiment to investigate whether this choice is driven primarily by individual voters’ characteristics—such as a registrant’s propensity to vote—or the messages EAs and advocates use to convince them to change their status. Our experiment used four appeals encouraging registrants to switch to PVBM status: the integrity of the vote-by-mail process, its convenience relative to polling-place voting, the relative taxpayer cost savings from all-mail elections, and the social acceptance of VBM by voters. This experiment allows us to directly test the effect of conversion messages and see if the messages’ effects are different across subgroups of voters.

We find two significant outcomes. First, regardless of the message received, high-propensity voters are much more likely to convert than are low-propensity voters. Second, among low-propensity voters the convenience-based message was the least likely to cause conversion to PVBM status. None of the messages had a significant effect among high-propensity and prior-PVBM registrants. Taken together, these results suggest that the current focus by scholars and practitioners on VBM’s impact on the costs of voting may be misplaced.

This article proceeds in four parts. First, we review the literature about the causes and correlates of VBM use. Second, we describe the field experiment used to generate the data. Third, we present the results of our field experiment and a series of logistic regressions predicting the odds of conversion. Finally, we discuss what our findings tell us about the effort to increase participation by expanding the use of postal voting.

EXPLAINING THE CHOICE TO VOTE BY MAIL

Few studies directly address the question of why registrants chose to vote by mail or convert their registration status to permanent vote by mail. Given the paucity of work, conclusions drawn from the turnout literature serve as a useful starting point for understanding the decision to become a PVBM voter. While the two decisions (whether to register PVBM and whether to vote) are distinct, there are some similarities between them. Early work established bundles of individual-level factors that make registrants more likely to turn out with regularity, such as age and socioeconomic status (Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Verba et al. 1995). These findings are echoed for postal voters: compared to polling-place voters, postal voters tend to be older, better educated, and have higher incomes (Baretto et al. 2006; Berinsky et al. 2001; Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Karp and Banducci 2001; Oliver 1996; Patterson and Caldiera 1985).7

A common assumption is that the individual cost of voting is a significant influence on turnout (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). As such, many argue that electoral reforms aimed at improving the convenience of voting (including voting centers, early voting, and VBM) can improve turnout by lowering the individual “costs” or difficulties involved in traditional polling-place voting. Indeed, some work suggests that convenience-based reforms such as vote by mail (Southwell 2004) and early voting centers (Stein and Vonnahme 2008; Stein and Vonnahme 2011) could boost turnout.

Similarly, the common conclusion among studies that look specifically at the choice to vote by mail is that individual cost is a major influence. Baretto et al. (2006), for example, ask self-reported postal voters why they voted by mail instead of at a polling place. They conclude “the bulk of absentee voters reported that they prefer to vote early because it is easier and more convenient than voting at the polls on Election Day” (229). Monroe and Sylvester (2011) find that lowering the cost of converting to PVBM can be a significant motivator for doing so. In their field experiment, registrants who received a self-addressed, postage-paid card (making the choice essentially costless) were significantly more likely to change their status from polling-place to postal voting. Neither study explores the influence of other motivations for conversion.

Vote-by-mail advocates predominantly focus on the added convenience (i.e., personal benefits)
postal voting provides voters relative to polling-place voting. For example, the first four reasons to use VBM currently listed by the Vote by Mail Project, a group advocating for universal adoption of the policy, on its website are: “No waiting for hours in line,” “No polling place intimidation,” “No confusion about where to go to vote,” and “No need to make arrangements for childcare or time off from work.” Local registrars of voters likewise tend to emphasize the convenience of VBM when advocating the adoption of PVBM status by registrants (c.f., Mann and Sondheimer 2009; Benedetti 2012).

However, others question the consistently positive impact of postal voting and other convenience-based reforms on turnout (Gronke et al. 2007; Fitzgerald 2005). Berinsky, for example, has argued that VBM and other convenience-based reforms do not mobilize new registrants into the turnout pool so much as they retain registrants who are already predisposed to vote (Berinsky 2005; Berinsky et al. 2001). The primary factor behind voting for Berinsky is political engagement, not the direct cost of voting: “the true costs . . . lie not just in the expression of opinion but also in the formation of political opinions” (emphasis in original; 2005, 485). If individuals are already politically engaged, the relatively small reductions in the direct costs of voting created by convenience voting should increase the likelihood of them continuing to participate. Individuals who are not politically engaged, however, will not begin to participate as a result of the small reduction in the direct costs of voting. Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009) similarly argue that get-out-the-vote campaigns do not mobilize registrants equally. Those individuals who already have a high-propensity to vote—which for Arceneaux and Nickerson is also a function of political interest—are more likely to respond to get-out-the-vote campaigns than those who do not.

Registrants who voluntarily use postal voting tend to have a greater interest in politics (Berinsky et al. 2001; Stein 1998) and are more politically active (Karp and Banducci 2001) than polling-place voters. It may be this predisposition to vote that causes the conversion rather than anything else. Indeed, Kousser and Mullin (2007) and Bergman and Yates (2011) suggest that forcing registrants into postal voting may decrease turnout in some cases, especially in high salience elections when it is relatively easier for unengaged registrants to decide how to vote, because it is harder for unengaged registrants to VBM than it is to go to the traditional polling place.

Looking beyond the characteristics of individual voters, others have sought to analyze the impact of voters’ personal affinity groups and other socially oriented interests. For instance, early work by Uhlaner (1989) pointed to the important role of groups in the individual decision to vote. Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan (2007) argued that the choice to participate can result in benefits that accrue to the individual and to the broader society. Further underscoring the impact of social considerations, Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) demonstrated that increasing the social pressure to vote leads to significantly higher rates of turnout. Similarly, Gerber and Rogers (2009) found that emphasizing descriptive norms (patterns of socially expected behavior) in voting appeals—e.g., everyone else is voting, why not you—can increase voter turnout.

Considering the contributions of previous research, we believe that the decision to become a PVBM voter is likely mediated by two sets of factors, internal/individual and external/message-based. First, “habitual” or high-propensity voters are more likely to opt in to PVBM when explicitly given a low-cost opportunity to do so. Indeed, individuals who enjoy a higher socioeconomic status and array of resources are more predisposed to be active participants in civic life—and tend to do so consistently if not habitually (Fowler 2006; Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Green and Shachar 2000). Thus, we expect registrants with a high propensity to vote will be more likely to convert their registration status to PVBM when offered the chance to do so compared to their low-propensity counterparts. Second, messages encouraging conversion to PVBM status will affect high-propensity and low-propensity registrants differently. In the case of high-propensity voters, the particular message encouraging PVBM conversion should not matter much. Among low-propensity voters, however, convenience-based messages that emphasize the direct costs of voting should be less effective than appeals that are more socially focused.

INVITING CONVERSION TO PERMANENT VOTE-BY-MAIL STATUS

In 2009, working with the San Joaquin County Registrar of Voters, we conducted a field experiment...
to test different appeals for conversion to PVBM status. San Joaquin County presents a nice cross section of California. (Appendix A presents some comparative measures for San Joaquin and California.) Although San Joaquin is poorer, slightly less well educated, and more Republican than the state as a whole, the differences are not as great as in other counties. Moreover, San Joaquin County encompasses urban, suburban, and rural environments, and demographic changes over the last decade have made San Joaquin County competitive from a partisan perspective. For example, the one congressional district in California to change partisan hands between the 2001 and 2011 redistrictings, CD-11, is largely located in San Joaquin County.

In the experiment, all registered voters in the county who (a) were not already registered PVBM and (b) did not live in a mail-ballot precinct were randomly assigned to either a control group or one of four experimental groups \( (n = 145,728) \). All of the registrants were then sent a pre-addressed, postage-paid 6”×9” postcard by the Registrar informing them that they were not currently registered to vote by mail and inviting them to change their registration status. The postcards sent to the control group and each of the four experimental groups all contained a common text:

**An important message from Austin G. Erdman, San Joaquin Country Registrar of Voters**

Dear Voter,

You are not currently registered to vote by mail.

If you wish to become a permanent Vote-by-Mail voter, please sign and return the attached card. A ballot will automatically be sent to you for all future elections in which you are entitled to vote. Vote-by-Mail ballots may be hand-delivered to the Registrar of Voters Office (44N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95201) or any San Joaquin County polling place in addition to returned by mail. Failure to vote in two consecutive statewide general elections will cancel your permanent Vote-by-Mail voter status (but not your voter registration), and you will need to re-apply.

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\[8\] All voters, whether they want to or not, must vote by mail in a mail-ballot district.

\[9\] We do not have what many consider to be a “true” control group in this experiment as all of the registrants received a postcard inviting them to change their registration status. The Registrar, who paid for the project, used the mailing to update the county voter database and switch those voters whose cards were returned undeliverable to “inactive” status, meaning he would not have to prepare ballots for them in the next election. The registrants, however, were not purged from the database as a result of this mailing. If they appeared at a polling place in the next election, they would be given a provisional ballot. Provided the signatures on the ballot and the voter’s registration affidavit matched, the ballot would then be counted.

The control group received 29,148 postcards. Each of the experimental groups received 29,145 postcards. Chi-square tests of the distribution of messages across a variety of subgroups within the population—including cities (chi2(76) = 55.8, \( p = 0.961 \)), zip codes (chi2(160) = 117.8, \( p = 0.9950 \)), and identifiable ethnic groups (chi2(8) = 9.2, \( p = 0.329 \))—all fail to reject the null hypothesis of statistical independence.

\[10\] The total cost of the mailing was $40,636.72 ($13,108.70 for postage and $27,528.02 for the production of the cards). In all, 7,968 cards were returned. Each conversion to PVBM, then, cost $5.10.

\[11\] California has since changed this criterion to four consecutive general elections.
If you prefer to vote at the polls, please ignore this message. Your registration status will remain the same.

Questions? Contact the Registrar of Voters Office at (209) 468-2890 or email us at vbm@sjcrov.org.

If a registrant wished to change her registration status from polling-place voter to PVBM, she signed and returned the bottom half of the card. If she did not return the card, her registration status remained the same. (See Appendix B for example control and treatment postcards.) All of the postcards contained both an English language and a Spanish language version of the same text.

The cards sent to the experimental groups contained one of four additional messages, which are shown in Table 1. The first experimental message reflects the common focus on the added convenience PVBM provides relative to polling-place voting. The second and third messages are more socially focused. The second experimental message focuses on the social acceptance of PVBM by highlighting the extent to which others use VBM and the likelihood of knowing someone personally who uses it. The third experimental message points out the potential cost savings to taxpayers from VBM.\(^2\) We hoped to trigger the idea that switching to PVBM could create broader societal benefits with this message.

Our fourth experimental message responds to concerns frequently expressed about the integrity of the vote-by-mail process. In a 2008 survey of San Joaquin registrants, respondents were asked to list up to three disadvantages to using VBM. Table 2 compiles the most frequently mentioned disadvantages. Respondents worried about losing their ballots, expressed concern that their ballots would not be counted, and worried that VBM would make it easier for people to commit voter fraud. Other surveys have found similar concerns (Southwell 2004, Southwell and Burchett 2000). Informing registrants that mail ballots are individually verified and often the first to be tabulated, therefore, might make the method more attractive and cause people to switch their registration status to PVBM.

Expectations for results

We began this experiment with two sets of expectations about the kinds of responses we would see. First, for a variety of reasons, we expected a minimal response in terms of the number of registrants who would convert to PVBM status. To begin with, we could not be certain that voters would either notice or respond to the postcard from the Registrar. We ran the experiment during a period (December 2008–January 2009) when we could not assume anyone (especially hard to reach individuals) would be paying much attention to politics or political events. The winter holidays were in full swing, the 2008 presidential election was a distant memory, and the 2010 elections were not yet on the radar. Moreover, we were dealing with a relatively low-salience decision—how to vote in future elections—rather than the much more salient decision of whether to vote in a current election.

We also began this project with a relatively limited population of potentially hard-to-convert subjects who had already been exposed to considerable efforts to encourage them to switch to PVBM status. During the 2008 election cycle, the Registrar created and ran a series of television, radio, and Internet spot ads promoting the use of PVBM and sent

\(^2\)Southwell (2004, 92) reports that the cost to elections officials in Oregon of voting by mail is significantly less than polling-place voting—typically “1/3 to 1/2 of the amount required for polling place elections.” Others have found similar savings, though the amount varies considerably across jurisdictions and election types (see Cucitti and Wallis 2011, 29–30, for a summary of these findings). The San Joaquin Registrar estimates converting that converting a polling-place precinct to an all-mail precinct would save between $5,000 to $10,000 per election (personal communication). It should be noted, however, that these studies assume full conversion of the registrant pool to PVBM or postal voting. There are no studies of the marginal effects of conversion on the cost of administering an election (Gronke et al. 2008).

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### Table 2. Voter Identified Disadvantages of Voting by Mail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
<th>Percent of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too easy to lose/destroy the mail</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about confidentiality/privacy</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too easy to forget the deadline</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have to vote before the campaign is over</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like voting in person</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned vote won’t be counted</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned VBM makes fraud easier</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other specific disadvantage</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Column does not total to 100 as respondents could specify up to three disadvantages in their responses and not every respondent identified a disadvantage.

Source: Project Vote Smart, Survey of San Joaquin Registered Voters, 2008 cumulative data file.
a simple postcard to a sample of registered voters that, if signed and returned, would allow voters to change their registration status to PVBM (see Benedetti [2012] and Monroe and Sylvester [2011] for a description of these efforts).13

Second, we expected to see relatively small effects from the treatments. Our treatment relied exclusively on a single piece of mail, which prior experiments have demonstrated has a limited (if any) impact on voter behavior. For instance, Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008, Table 4) summarize the findings of several studies of the effects of mailings on voter turnout. The average reported effect of a single piece of mail is about a one-percentage point increase in turnout. In some cases, turnout falls among those who receive the piece of mail compared to the control group. Additional mailings had similarly small effects on voter turnout.

CONVERSION TO PVBM STATUS

Overall, of the roughly 146,000 registered voters in San Joaquin County who received a postcard, almost 8,000 people (5.47 percent) chose to convert to PVBM status. Just over 3,500 of the cards (2.41 percent) were returned undeliverable to the Registrar’s office. Given the expectations for low return rates discussed above, these results were in line with our prior expectations.

Table 3 presents three estimates of the effect of our four appeals on the conversion rates for the entire experimental population. Each set of estimated effects include all of the registrants, regardless of whether the postcard was delivered to a registrant. Column 1 is the intent-to-treat (ITT) effect. Column 2 is the estimated treatment effect, which allows for the fact that some households received more than one message and therefore some members of the control group may have been inadvertently treated.14 Column 3 further tries to control for the effect of inadvertent treatments from more than one experimental message by estimating a logistic regression model with an added series of dummy variables indicating if a registrant lived in a household where someone else received each of the possible messages.15 In each column, the effect presented is the percentage-point difference in conversion rates between someone who received the respective message versus someone who received the control card.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>ITT Effects</th>
<th>Estimated treatment</th>
<th>Logistic estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.340</td>
<td>0.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social acceptance</td>
<td>0.470 **</td>
<td>0.591 **</td>
<td>0.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost savings</td>
<td>0.611 **</td>
<td>0.763 **</td>
<td>0.473 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBM integrity</td>
<td>0.580 **</td>
<td>0.730 **</td>
<td>0.464 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ 0.10 (two-tailed), **p ≤ 0.05 (two-tailed).

Note: Effects are the percentage-point differences in the rates of conversion to permanent vote by mail (PVBM) between the experimental group (e.g., safety) and the control group (i.e., no conversion message on postcard). Intent-to-treat (ITT) effects are the raw percentage-point differences. Treatment effects include possible contamination effects from members of the control group being exposed to the experimental message. The logistic estimate is generated using a logistic regression to control for the effect of all additional messages sent to a household (i.e., dummy variables indicating specific additional messages, e.g., andsafety = 1 if a household received a safety card in addition to whatever specific message was sent to the registrant), a San Joaquin County address, an out-of-state address, and the total number of registrants at an address. Standard errors are clustered on the household. The predicted change was generated using the margins command in Stata 11. The ITT and treatment effects were estimated using Donald Green and Alan Gerber’s “Web Software for Analyzing Experimental Data.”

Three of the messages had a statistically significant impact on conversion to PVBM status across the entire population. We focus here on the logistic estimates as we believe they provide the most control for inadvertent treatment from other messages. An individual who received a postcard with the VBM integrity message was 0.464 percentage points more likely to convert to PVBM status than someone who received the control card. This difference represents an 8.4 percent increase in the conversion rate over the control group. The difference between those who received the cost savings

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13The postcard was the Monroe and Sylvester (2011) experiment referenced earlier. A reviewer of an earlier version of this project expressed concern about the possible effects of the message contained in this earlier postcard experiment (c.f., Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). That postcard message was very similar to common text on each of our postcards here. It did not attempt to persuade registrants to convert to PVBM status through an explicit appeal as with our experimental messages. Therefore, while the earlier experiment and related efforts likely converted many people who otherwise would have responded to our appeals, thus limiting their potential effects, we do not think that the effort biased the population for or against any particular one of the appeals used here.
14The results presented in these two columns were generated using Green and Gerber’s “Web Software for Analyzing Experimental Data” (<http://vote.research.yale.edu/statweb/>; accessed March 8, 2012).
15The full regression results are available from the authors by request. None of the additional-message dummy variables was statistically significant at conventional levels.
message and the control was 0.473 percentage points, or an 8.6 percent increase. Finally, those who received the social acceptance message were 0.358 percentage points more likely to convert, an increase of 6.4 percent.

Notably, the one message that did not have a demonstrable effect on PVBM conversion relative to the control is the one message that most advocates and EAs focus on—the convenience of PVBM relative to polling place voting. The observed difference in conversion rates is substantively small, just 0.123 percentage points (less than a third of the next smallest effect), and statistically insignificant at conventional levels.

In addition to the fact that convenience may not be a significant motivator for PVBM conversion as suggested by Berinksky and others, there are two other possible reasons for the lack of an effect from the convenience message, specific to this experiment, worth noting. First, as noted earlier, registrants in San Joaquin County had already been exposed to an extensive campaign advocating the use of vote by mail in 2008. Perhaps these efforts had already caused those registrants who could be motivated by a convenience-based appeal to switch their status. Second, the remaining three messages are relatively novel compared to the convenience message. Perhaps the registrants were responding to novelty rather than the particular message on the card.17

Conversion covariates

In the analysis that follows, we investigate the impact of individual-level covariates on the likelihood that a registrant converted to permanent vote-by-mail status. To do so, we make use of the Registrar’s voter database, which contains information about each registrant’s voting history, how long an individual has been registered to vote in the county, party registration and party ballot choice,18 and whether the individual requested information in a language other than English.19

Using the voter file we generated the following set of variables:

- **High-propensity voter:** Individuals are coded as high-propensity voters if they voted in two of the three elections prior to the experiment (1 = high propensity; 0 = low propensity). The three elections were the June 2008 direct primary (not the presidential primary, which was held in February), the November 2008 general election, and a May 2009 statewide special election.

- **Prior VBM user:** Individuals are coded as a prior VBM user if they voted by mail in any of the three elections before our experiment (1 = prior VBM use; 0 = no prior use).

- **Party registration:** Individuals are coded as Republican, Democrat, Decline to State (DTS), or other on the basis of their party registration and their ballot choice. In the period examined here, DTS registrants could vote in partisan primaries if they chose to. In the analysis that follows, we include as a partisan anyone who was registered DTS but voted on a party ballot in the June 2008 direct primary; if a DTS registrant requested a...
Table 4. Predicting Conversion to PVBM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Percentage converted</th>
<th>Increase over omitted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message (control omitted)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>5.462</td>
<td>0.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>5.708</td>
<td>0.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost savings</td>
<td>0.091 **</td>
<td>5.848</td>
<td>0.465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBM integrity</td>
<td>0.081 **</td>
<td>5.793</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-propensity voter</td>
<td>0.329 **</td>
<td>7.200</td>
<td>1.859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior VBM usage</td>
<td>1.503</td>
<td>18.276</td>
<td>13.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of registration</td>
<td>0.028 **</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party registration (Decline to State omitted)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>5.905</td>
<td>0.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-0.072 *</td>
<td>5.366</td>
<td>-0.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-0.134 *</td>
<td>5.068</td>
<td>-0.662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (other omitted)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.381</td>
<td>4.225</td>
<td>-1.776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>0.273</td>
<td>7.668</td>
<td>1.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>7.494</td>
<td>1.493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>-0.452</td>
<td>3.954</td>
<td>-2.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>-0.502 **</td>
<td>3.774</td>
<td>-2.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>5.866</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-0.378 **</td>
<td>4.239</td>
<td>-1.762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish speaking</td>
<td>0.619 **</td>
<td>9.719</td>
<td>4.106</td>
</tr>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>Clusters</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wald Chi2(26)</td>
<td>2,652.39 **</td>
<td>25,590</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>LL</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R2</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ 0.10 (two-tailed), **p ≤ 0.05 (two-tailed).

Note: The estimated model is a logistic regression and includes all registra- tions who were sent a postcard, regardless of whether the card was returned undeliverable and who could be matched in the Registrar’s database. The model includes controls for additional messages sent to a household, whether the address is in San Joaquin County, whether the address is out of state, and the total number of registrants at an address. Registrant ethnicity was generated using lists of common sur- names. Model standard errors (not reported here) are clustered on the household.

Republican ballot, for example, the individual is coded as a Republican.

Spanish speaking: Our primary point of compari- son here will be those who requested their information in Spanish versus those who requested information in English (1 = requested ballot in Spanish; 0 = all others). Five individuals requested information in Tagalog and four requested it in Viet- namese; none of the nine converted to PVBM status. Individuals are coded as Spanish speaking if they requested their election materials in Spanish.

Length of registration: The number of years that an individual has been registered to vote in San Joa- quin County.

Table 4 presents the results of logistic regression with the added covariates. Two of our experimental messages—VBM integrity and cost savings—remain significant predictors of conversion to PVBM status in the full analysis. The size of the effects is marginally reduced, however. The social acceptance message is no longer statistically significant once the additional covariates are added to the analysis. Of note, the convenience message continues to have the smallest effect on conversion.

The results in Table 4 generally accord with the conclusions from prior studies of VBM usage. High propensity voters, people with experience using VBM, and people with long registration records are all more likely to convert to PVBM status than those without these characteristics, all else held constant. Moreover, these effects dwarf those of the experimental messages. Every additional year someone was registered to vote increased the odds of conversion by about three percent. A high-propensity voter was 39 percent more likely to convert to PVBM status than a low-propensity voter. The substantive effect of prior VBM use is larger still, but the estimate is not statistically significant at conventional levels. On the basis of these results it appears that PVBM, as Berinsky et al. (2001) suggest about VBM more generally, retains those who are already likely to participate in the pool of voters rather than recruiting new registrants into it.

In contrast with prior studies that find no partisan differences related to VBM, however, we find a significant difference in the conversion rates between Republicans and Democrats. The omitted party reg- istration category in Table 4 is Decline to State. Re-estimating the model with Republican as the omitted category returns a coefficient for Demo- crats of 0.105 (p < 0.001). The predicted difference in PVBM conversion rates between Democratic and Republican registrants, holding all else constant, is 0.539 percentage points, or an almost ten percent increase in the conversion rate of Democrats over Republicans. We do not know if this difference continues in terms of voter turnout, however, so we cannot assess whether PVBM substantially changes electoral outcomes.

Figures 2 through 4 present the results of a series of logistic regression models interacting the experi- mental messages with the respective characteristics.

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20To construct this variable in Stata, we subtracted the original registration date from the date our postcards were mailed (Dec. 10, 2009) and then divided by 365.
using the same set of variables presented in Table 4. Figure 2 presents the estimated marginal effects (with error bars) of each experimental message relative to the control interacted with low-propensity and high-propensity voters. Figure 3 presents the estimated marginal effects for the messages interacted with previous use of postal voting. Figure 4 presents the marginal effects of the messages interacted with party registration. These estimates show the relative effect of each message within each subgroup of voters, holding all else constant.

At least three results in Figures 2 through 4 warrant highlighting. First, for groups that are already likely to vote, none of the messages have a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a registrant converting to PVBM status relative to the control. For both high-propensity voters (Figure 2) and those who have previously used VBM (Figure 3), the error bars for each message cross zero. In contrast, three of the messages have positive effects relative to the control for those groups that are not likely to vote. The VBM integrity, cost savings, and (in the case of those who have not previously used VBM) social acceptance messages all increase the likelihood of conversion relative to the control.

Second, when looking at partisan registrants, the experimental messages only had an effect among Democrats. (Given the correspondence between registering Democratic and being a low-propensity voter and not previously using VBM, this result is perhaps not surprising.) None of the messages had a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a Decline to State, Republican, or other party registrant converting to PVBM status. Moreover, each of the messages made Democratic registrants more likely to convert to PVBM relative to the control.

Finally, the marginal effect of the convenience message is frequently the smallest of the four messages across all of the subgroups and it is sometimes negative. In substantive terms, telling some registrants that postal voting was more convenient than going to the polling place made them less likely to convert to PVBM status than telling them nothing at all. High-propensity voters and registrants who had previously used VBM had especially large, negative effects, though the estimated effects are not statistically significant at conventional levels.

**DISCUSSION**

We began this field experiment with the question of why registrants switch their registration status voluntarily from the polling place to permanent vote by mail. Are registrants motivated to do so because of

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21 As the resulting regression output is overly long and not easily interpreted, we have chosen to present the figures instead. The full regression results are available from the authors by request.
specific appeals, or are personal characteristics, such as the propensity to vote, more important? To answer this question, we used four appeals in the experiment: VBM integrity, its convenience, cost savings accruing from the use of PVBM, and social acceptance for using VBM. Messages about the integrity of the VBM process, cost savings, and, to a lesser extent, the social acceptance of voting by mail all significantly increased the likelihood that someone would choose to switch their voting status compared to not receiving any conversion appeal.

As expected, the raw effects of the treatments are small. The largest difference between an experimental message and the control is only slightly less than half a percentage point. In terms of relative effects, though, the experimental messages have more significant impacts. Someone who received the VBM integrity or cost savings message was about 8.5 percent more likely to convert to PVBM status than someone who did not receive a message. The social message increased the likelihood of conversion by about 6.4 percent. These effects largely
remained after including additional covariates, though the predicted effect for the social message was no longer statistically significant in the expanded model. The only experimental message that did not produce a result significantly different from the control postcard was convenience.

Although we observe difference across the messages when compared to the control, the effects observed in this analysis do not allow us to claim that any one message is more effective than the others in converting registrants to PVBM status. (Figures 2 through 4 make this clear as the respective error bars all overlap.) In none of the models is there a statistically significant difference among the four experimental messages.\(^{22}\) Still, given that VBM and PVBM advocates focus predominantly on convenience in their arguments and appeals, the results here suggest the advocates should consider using other reasons besides or in addition to convenience when trying to convince registrants to use it. This evidence suggests that tapping directly into registrants’ perceived disadvantages about becoming PVBM voters is a more effective method than reiterating the notion that postal voting is convenient. For habitual voters, convenience is not the utmost concern, and for low-propensity voters, increasing convenience does not seem to be compelling enough to increase their probability of opting in to PVBM.

Our results support a broader hypothesis about who uses VBM. Berinsky and his colleagues argue that VBM, like many convenience-based reforms and electoral reforms more generally, makes it easier for high-propensity voters to continue to vote rather than increasing turnout among low-propensity voters as most reformers hope (Berinsky 2005; Highton 2004) point to a different possibility. Perhaps the two are not as distinct as is commonly assumed. Someone is more likely to convert to PVBM status if she is already likely to vote rather than if she is not likely to vote. PVBM may then make her more likely to vote after she has converted, but that is because the marginal effect is to make it easier for her to continue to vote rather than to change her underlying propensity to vote in the first place.

If someone is not likely to vote, it is probably not because the physical act of voting is costly or inconvenient. The person is unlikely to vote for a variety of other more fundamental reasons, among which are: her general interest in a given election; her interest in and engagement with politics; her level of external political efficacy; the mobilization efforts of interest groups, parties and candidates in her area; the likelihood that other people will know whether she votes and the extent to which she cares if they do; and her level of knowledge about the election. If a person falls flat in these areas, offering her an alternative method of voting that is less costly than going to the polling place will alone not cause her to vote. More importantly, telling the person it is cheaper and easier than going to the polling place is not going to cause her to use that method of voting. If someone is registrants who have not. Rather than making the electorate more representative of the population as a whole as reformers hope, offering PVBM as a choice to voters may only increase the socioeconomic biases already present as Berkinsky (2005) suggests.

These results also raise interesting questions about the relationship between the choice of how to vote and the choice of whether to vote. The choice of how to vote is usually seen as antecedent to the choice to vote. Thus, for example, most reformers think that offering a greater variety of voting methods and times—that is, making voting more convenient—can increase the level of turnout. If it is easier to vote, the argument goes, more people will vote. The results here, combined with the broader results in the mobilization literature (c.f., Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009) as well as the limited effects for voting reforms (c.f., Berinsky 2005; Highton 2004) point to a different possibility. Perhaps the two are not as distinct as is commonly assumed. Someone is more likely to convert to PVBM status if she is already likely to vote rather than if she is not likely to vote, PVBM may then make her more likely to vote after she has converted, but that is because the marginal effect is to make it easier for her to continue to vote rather than to change her underlying propensity to vote in the first place.

\(^{22}\)F-tests for differences between the coefficients for each pair of experimental messages all fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference.
not going to vote anyway, the added convenience of postal voting relative to the polling place is largely immaterial.

Indeed, individuals who are not already likely to vote may actually become less likely to vote if forced to use a convenience form of voting—i.e., mail ballots in small precincts—because it is different from what little they know about voting. What these voters (low information, low interest, low efficacy, unmobilized, and socially unengaged) know of voting is that they go to the polling place on Election Day. If that is not an option, then in elections when they might have been sufficiently motivated to vote, for whatever reason, they will not know how to do so. Extending this logic, in states where PVBM is a choice, EAs may be successful in converting lower-propensity traditional voters to PVBM if they appeal to issues more salient to that group, such as the integrity of PVBM and potential taxpayer cost savings achieved by postal voting.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table A. Comparing San Joaquin County and California</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
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<td>High school or GED</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income (household)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Per-capita income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poverty rate</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>White only</td>
</tr>
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<td>African American only</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voter registration (of eligible)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline to state</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Demographic data come from the 2010 American Community Survey’s one-year estimates accessed through the Census Bureau’s American Factfinder (<http://factfinder2.census.gov/>). Registration data come from the November 2010 15-day registration report from the California Secretary of State.
APPENDIX B
EXAMPLE POSTCARDS

An important message from Austin G. Erdman, San Joaquin County Registrar of Voters

Dear Voter,

You are not currently registered to vote by mail.

If you wish to become a permanent Vote-by-Mail voter, please sign and return the attached card. A ballot will automatically be sent to you for all future elections in which you are entitled to vote. Vote-by-Mail ballots may be hand-delivered to the Registrar of Voters Office (44 N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95202) or any San Joaquin County polling place on Election Day, in addition to returned by mail. Failure to vote in two consecutive statewide general elections will cancel your permanent Vote-by-Mail voter status (but not your voter registration), and you will need to re-apply.

If you prefer to vote at the polls, please ignore this message. Your registration status will remain the same.

Questions? Contact the Registrar of Voters Office at (209) 468-2890 or email us at vbm@sjgov.org.

Un mensaje importante de Austin G. Erdman, Registrador de los Votantes del Condado de San Joaquin

Estimado Votante:

Actualmente usted no está inscrito para votar por correo.

Si usted desea convertirse en votante con estatus permanente de Voto por Correo, por favor, firme y devuelva la tarjeta adjunta. Automáticamente se le enviará una boleta electoral para todas las elecciones futuras en las que usted tenga derecho a votar. Las boletas electorales con Voto por Correo pueden entregarse personalmente en el Departamento del Registro de Votantes (44 N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95202) o en cualquier centro electoral del Condado de San Joaquin el Día de las Elecciones, y también pueden ser entregadas por correo. El incumplimiento de votar en dos elecciones generales de todo el estado consecutivas cancelará su estatus permanente de votante con Voto por Correo (pero no su inscripción como votante), y deberá volver a solicitarlo.

Si usted prefiere votar en los centros electorales, por favor, ignore este mensaje. El estatus de su inscripción se mantendrá igual.

¿Tiene preguntas? Comuníquese con el Departamento del Registro de Votantes llamando al (209) 468-2890 o envíe un correo electrónico a vbm@sjgov.org.

FROM:

✓ Did you sign the reverse side of this form?

¿Firmó usted el lado de atrás de esta forma?

FIG. B1. Example control postcard, side 1.
Application for Permanent Vote-by-Mail Status
Solicitud para Estatus Permanente de Votante con Voto-por-Correo

[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[City, CA zip]

This application will not be accepted without the applicant's signature; if unable to sign make a mark with an "X" and have one witness sign below. I certify under penalty of perjury that the information on this application is true and correct.

Esta solicitud no será aceptada sin la firma del solicitante; si no puede firmar marque con una "X" y hágala firmar por un testigo debajo. Certifico bajo pena de perjurio que la información contenida en esta solicitud es correcta y verídica.

X
Signature or mark of applicant / Firma o marca del solicitante

Date / Fecha

Witness Signature / Firma del Testigo: ____________________________

FIG. B2.   Example control postcard, side 2.
An important message from Austin G. Erdman, San Joaquin County Registrar of Voters

Dear Voter,

You are not currently registered to vote by mail.

**Did you know?** Voting by mail is the most convenient way to vote—you can vote when and where you want. You can mail in your ballot or bring it to the Registrar's Office up to 29 days before Election Day. On Election Day you can drop it off at any San Joaquin County polling place before 8 PM.

**If you wish to become a permanent Vote-by-Mail voter, please sign and return the attached card.** A ballot will automatically be sent to you for all future elections in which you are entitled to vote. Vote-by-Mail ballots may be hand-delivered to the Registrar of Voters Office (44 N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95202) or any San Joaquin County Polling Place on Election Day, in addition to returned by mail. Failure to vote in two consecutive statewide general elections will cancel your permanent Vote-by-Mail voter status (but not your voter registration), and you will need to re-apply.

If you prefer to vote at the polls, please ignore this message. Your registration status will remain the same.

Questions? Contact the Registrar of Voters Office at (209) 468-2890 or email us at vbm@sjgov.org.

Un mensaje importante de Austin G. Erdman, Registrador de los Votantes del Condado de San Joaquin

Estimado Votante:

Actualmente usted no está inscrito para votar por correo.

¿Sabe usted? Votar por correo es la manera más conveniente de votar—usted puede votar donde y cuando quiera. Puede enviar su boleta electoral por correo o traerla al Departamento del Registro de Votantes hasta 29 días antes del Día de las Elecciones. El Día de las Elecciones usted puede entregarla en cualquier centro electoral del Condado de San Joaquin antes de las 8 PM.

Si usted desea convertirse en votante con estatus permanente de Voto-por-Correo, por favor, firme y devuelve la tarjeta adjunta. Automáticamente se le enviará una boleta electoral para todas las elecciones futuras, en las que usted tenga derecho a votar. Las boletas electorales con Voto-por-Correo pueden entregarlas personalmente en el Departamento del Registro de Votantes (44 N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95202) o en cualquier Centro Electoral del Condado de San Joaquin el Día de las Elecciones, y también pueden ser entregadas por correo. El incumplimiento de votar en dos elecciones generales de todas las elecciones consecutivas cancelará su estatus permanente de votante con Voto-por-Correo (pero no su inscripción como votante), y deberá volver a solicitarla.

Si usted prefiere votar en los centros electorales, por favor, ignore esta mensaje. El estatus de su inscripción se mantendrá igual.

¿Tiene preguntas? Comuníquese con el Departamento del Registro de Votantes llamando al (209) 468-2890 o envíe un correo electrónico a vbm@sjgov.org.

FROM: 

☐ Did you sign the reverse side of this form?

¿Firmó usted el lado de atrás de esta forma?

FIG. B3. Example convenience message postcard.
An important message from Austin G. Erdman, San Joaquin County Registrar of Voters

Dear Voter,
You are not currently registered to vote by mail.

Did you know? Voting by mail is safe. All Vote-by-Mail ballots are verified before they are counted to ensure one person, one vote and, if returned before Election Day, are among the first results posted once the polls close.

If you wish to become a permanent Vote-by-Mail voter, please sign and return the attached card. A ballot will automatically be sent to you for all future elections in which you are entitled to vote. Vote-by-Mail ballots may be hand-delivered to the Registrar of Voters Office (44 N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95202) or any San Joaquin County Polling Place on Election Day, in addition to being returned by mail. Failure to vote in two consecutive statewide general elections will cancel your permanent Vote-by-Mail voter status (but not your voter registration), and you will need to re-apply.

If you prefer to vote at the polls, please ignore this message. Your registration status will remain the same.

Questions? Contact the Registrar of Voters Office at (209) 485-2890 or email us at vbm@sjgov.org.

Un mensajio importante de Austin G. Erdman, Registrador de los Votantes del Condado de San Joaquin

Estimado Volante:
Actualmente usted no está inscrito para votar por correo.

¿Sabía usted? Votar por correo es seguro. Todas las boletas electorales con Voto-por-Correo son verificadas antes de ser contadas para asegurar un voto por persona y, si son entregadas antes del Día de las Elecciones, que estén entre los primeros resultados publicados una vez que cierran los centros electorales.

Si usted desea convertirse en votante con estatus permanente de Voto-por-Correo, por favor, firme y devuelva la tarjeta adjunta. Automáticamente se le enviará una boleta electoral para todas las elecciones futuras en las que usted tenga derecho a votar. Las boletas electorales con Voto-por-Correo pueden entregarse personalmente en el Departamento del Registro de Votantes (44 N. San Joaquin St., Ste. 350, Stockton, CA 95202) o en cualquier Centro Electoral del Condado de San Joaquin el Día de las Elecciones, y también pueden ser entregadas por correo. El incumplimiento de votar en dos elecciones generales de todo el estado consecutivas cancelará su estatus permanente de votante con Voto-por-Correo (pero no su inscripción como votante), y deberá volver a solicitarla.

Si usted prefiere votar en los centros electorales, por favor, ignore este mensaje. El estatus de su inscripción se mantendrá igual.

¿Tiene preguntas? Comúnilo con el Departamento del Registro de Votantes llamando al (209) 485-2890 o envíe un correo electrónico a vbm@sjgov.org.

FROM:

✓ Did you sign the reverse side of this form?

¿Firmó usted el lado de atrás de esta forma?

FIG. B4. Example VBM integrity message postcard.