

Mobilising support when the stakes are high: Mass emails affect constituent-to-legislator lobbying*

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Abstract

Mass emails are frequently used by advocacy groups to mobilise supporters to lobby legislators. But how effective are they at inducing constituent-to-legislator lobbying when the stakes are high? We test the efficacy of a large-scale email campaign conducted by the UK’s main anti-Brexit organisation. In 2019, the group prominently displayed a “Write to your MP” tool on their website, and assigned 119,362 supporters represented by legislators with incongruent views to one of four email messages encouraging them to write to their MP or a control condition (no email). Messages varied across two factors: whether the MP’s incongruent position was highlighted, and if urgency was emphasised. We find that 3.4% of treatment subjects contacted their representative, compared to 0.1% of those in the control, representing an additional 3,344 emails sent to MPs. We show that there was no substitution away from the most frequently used online legislator contact platform in the UK. While, on average, position and urgency cues had no marginal effects above the standard email, the most engaged supporters were *more* mobilised when informed that their MP held incongruent views. This study shows that advocacy groups can use low-cost communication techniques to mobilise supporters to lobby representatives when the stakes are high.

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1 Introduction

Important elements of political campaigns can be characterised as two-stage processes (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992; Enos and Hersh, 2015; Neuenschwander and Foos, 2021), where organisations or parties first train or mobilise supporters and these supporters then convey messages to the target audience, be that the public, the media, or political decision-makers. In high-stakes situations, this process represents an important strategy for interest groups to signal mass support to decision-makers. For instance, in the United States, advocacy groups urged their supporters to send emails to legislators asking them to vote against the confirmation of Supreme Court Judge nominee Brett Kavanaugh¹ and to back the impeachment of President Trump.² In the UK, cross-partisan, issue-based campaign organisations such as the *People’s Vote* and *Best for Britain* relied on this strategy to garner support for a second referendum on Brexit. Beyond Brexit, issue-based campaign organisations have also attempted to mobilise supporters on other important issues, such as the environment. Carter and Childs (2018) claim, for example, that the *Friends of the Earth’s* campaign promoting voter-to-MP lobbying played a pivotal role in garnering parliamentary support for the UK’s 2008 Climate Change Act.

It is no coincidence that the examples enumerated here stem from the same side of the cosmopolitan-parochial political divide (De Vries, 2018). As Hersh (2020) attests, liberal-cosmopolitan groups and activists often rely on this type of expressive, digital advocacy. However, given the frequency with which email-based mass lobbying is deployed in high-stakes contexts, little research has been dedicated to this phenomenon.

In reality, two-stage processes are difficult to execute effectively. They can fail either because representatives are unresponsive to constituents with whom they disagree (Butler and Dynes, 2016), or because political organisations are ineffective at mobilising their supporters to exert pressure in the first place. This could happen because constituents feel less inclined to write to representatives of the opposing party (Broockman and Ryan, 2016). The ability of advocacy groups to break through the noise of a high-stakes political confrontation and mobilise mass support for a cause is hence a necessary condition for two-stage strategies to work. So far,

¹<https://actionnetwork.org/letters/tell-the-senate-stop-brett-kavanaugh-2?source=website>

²Need to Impeach for instance launched a high-profile “Email your Senator” campaign: <https://www.needtoimpeach.com/email-your-senators-real-trial/>

however, our understanding of whether and how advocacy groups can successfully mobilize supporters to lobby their representatives is limited.

In this paper, we assess whether a large issue-based, cross-party advocacy group was effective at activating their supporters to help achieve their overall aim in a high-stakes political situation. We present the results of a large-scale, pre-registered³ field experiment conducted by the major anti-Brexit advocacy group, the UK People’s Vote (PV). During a high-stakes political situation, the PV campaign encouraged supporters living in constituencies represented by Members of Parliament (MPs) who held views incongruent with their own to lobby their MP.

With this study we intend to contribute to three bodies of literature. First, we report the results from the first large-scale experimental test of email mobilisation efforts on constituent-to-legislator lobbying. While evidence suggests that constituent-to-legislator lobbying can lead to changes in legislative behaviour (Bergan, 2009; Bergan and Cole, 2015), as yet there is no evidence to show that on a high salience issue such as Brexit or impeachment, citizens can be mobilised *en masse* to lobby their representatives in the first place. Identifying whether advocacy groups are effective at mobilising supporters to write to their MP is difficult because a credible counter-factual is challenging to construct. What proportion of the control group would have contacted their MP had they received an email asking them to do so? We attempt to construct a credible counter-factual by recording how many individuals assigned to the control and treatment groups used the prominent online tool designed by the most important anti-Brexit campaign group to write to their MP. During July 2019, the People’s Vote campaign had a publicly available “Write to your MP” campaign tool placed prominently on their highly-frequented website. The tool was designed to provide supporters with an easy means of lobbying their local MP on a second Brexit referendum. We also provide auxiliary evidence, based on daily emails sent via the most popular MP contact platform *WriteToThem.com* that there were no substitution effects on other online lobbying tools. In different words, we do not find any evidence consistent with the assumption that subjects would have written to their MP via different means, absent the intervention.

Second, we contribute to the literature on digital campaign activism. The arena for political campaigning (Foos et al., 2020; Hager, 2019), supporter mobilisation (Coppock, Guess and

³<https://osf.io/wykg4>

Ternovski, 2016) and voter-to-representative communication (Blumenau, 2020) is increasingly moving towards the online information environment. Our experiment contributes to our understanding of the efficacy of a simple and easily scalable campaign communication tool - mass emails - in mobilising individuals to communicate their preferences and lobby their representatives on a highly-salient political issue.

Finally, we contribute to the literature on political campaigns and activism between elections (Han, 2016). Organisations, both political parties and non-partisan groups, remain influential vehicles for campaigning and activism outside of traditional election periods. This is especially so when an issue is salient or the stakes particularly high. On issues such as Brexit, for example, extra-electoral forms of participation remained common well beyond the official campaign period (Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017). This included rallies organised by campaigns such as the People’s Vote (Townsend, 2019), and the parliamentary e-petition calling for the UK to remain in the EU, which received a record six million signatories.⁴ We also speak to the literature on political participation, and specifically to Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995)’s model of participation. They theorise that participating in politics is a result of resources, motivation, and opportunity (i.e. because they ”were asked to”). We speak to the latter by showing that supporters wrote to their representatives because they were facilitated with an easy opportunity and prompted to do so.

In this paper we show that advocacy organisations can successfully activate supporters to exert pressure on legislators. During a high-profile legislative battle in summer 2019, we estimate that a randomly assigned email resulted in 3,344 emails sent to 346 MPs who were previously non-supportive of the PV’s aims. The volume of emails is far greater than the average level of per day emails sent to MPs using well established MP lobbying tools such as *WriteToThem.com*. Further, we find that supporters were no more or less likely to write to their MP if the email revealed that the MP did not support their position. Signalling urgency did not affect supporters’ likelihood of contacting their representative either. This result is driven by the majority of supporters who are not highly engaged. Previous donors to the campaign were more likely to email their MP if they were told that the MP did not support a People’s Vote.

⁴”Revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU” Available at: <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/241584>

2 Constituent-legislator lobbying

While elections allow constituents to signal their preferences, they tend to come at infrequent, albeit regular, time intervals. Voters who want to signal their (dis)content with their representative’s position between elections therefore often rely on alternative avenues such as protesting, signing petitions, and contacting elected officials (Olsson, 2014; Warren, 2002; Blumenau, 2020).

Contacting a local representative is indeed a common means of signalling preferences on issues, especially in plurality-based systems with single-member districts such as the UK’s House of Commons (Habel and Birch, 2019). According to European Social Survey data, between 2002 and 2018, an average of 17% of UK citizens reported that they contacted their MP within the previous twelve months (see appendix Table A1). Evidence also suggests that MPs are highly responsive to constituents’ emails - for example, in a UK-based field experiment, Habel and Birch find that 91% of emails sent to MPs received a reply (Habel and Birch, 2019).

Representatives, in turn, have reason to take note when their constituents lobby them on policy issues. Taking the time to contact a representative can signal that an issue is salient among the MP’s constituents. Indeed, encouraging voters to write to legislators to lobby them is a key tactic for interest groups (Kollman, 1998). Political representatives are both vote-seekers and vote-retainers (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1962; Strøm, 1990), and are therefore incentivised to advocate and vote for issues in Parliament that mirror the views of their constituents. Congruent with these theorised incentives, evidence shows that MPs, and would-be MPs (Trumm, Milazzo and Townsley, 2020), are indeed largely responsive to constituents’ policy preferences (Hanretty, Lauderdale and Vivyan, 2017; Blumenau, 2020; Butler and Nickerson, 2011).

While there is evidence that voter-MP lobbying is effective (Bergan, 2009; Bergan and Cole, 2015) and that MPs are responsive to their constituents’ policy preferences (Hanretty, Lauderdale and Vivyan, 2017), as far as we are aware, there is yet to be any empirical test of how individual voters can be persuaded to contact their political representatives. Hence one of the empirical contributions we provide is the first experimental test of advocacy-based mobilisation efforts on constituent-MP lobbying.

3 Mobilising supporters: hypotheses

3.1 Emails

Political campaigning has spread to the online realm (Aldrich et al., 2016; Foos et al., 2020; Hager, 2019; Coppock, Guess and Ternovski, 2016; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). Lower transaction costs incentivise political parties and non-partisan campaign organisations to utilise digital campaign tools such as email and social media as a means of reaching out to undecided voters as well as to their own supporters. When campaign organisations want to “rally the troops” they are inclined to do so in ways that allow them to reach the widest possible audience at the lowest possible cost. One of the most potentially cost-effective means of activating supporters in the digitised information environment is via email. Indeed, participation in politics - of which writing to a representative is a form - has been characterised theoretically as a function of *resources* (“can they participate?”), *motivation* (“do they want to participate?”), and *opportunity* (“have they been asked to participate?”) (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995). Writing to a representative might be considered a high cost form of participation.⁵ An email ask containing a pre-prepared “Write to your MP” tool lowers the cost of writing to a representative and thus presents a clear opportunity to the recipient to do so.

The empirical evidence suggests that emails are an ineffective means of voter mobilisation (Green and Gerber, 2019) and political persuasion (Foos et al., 2020). Nickerson (2007), for instance, presents evidence from thirteen field experiments across various US states and shows that email mobilisation efforts are ineffective with regards to voter registration and turnout.

However, beyond the literature focused on voter mobilisation, experimental evidence shows that emails *are* effective at mobilising other forms of supporter action. In a series of experiments run by nonpartisan groups in the United States, Han (2016) finds that different email messages increased petition-signing and peer-to-peer recruitment among the members of different organisations. Her studies show that emails can have a significant activating effect on supporters, especially when paired with relational cues.

In the case of the PV, our pre-registered hypothesis expected emails to have a mobilising

⁵Though as PV supporters had already registered as such on the group’s website, we might assume that they already fulfil the first and second of the three criteria for participation.

effect on constituent-to-legislator lobbying:

H1 Email contact from PV will mobilise PV supporters to lobby their MP.

3.2 Constituent-MP incongruence

Political representatives are encouraged to represent the political preferences of their constituents. When the political views of voters and those of their representative are congruent, political representation is viewed as working well and voter satisfaction is higher (Brandenburg and Johns, 2014; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017). Signalling to constituents that the position of their representative is *incongruent* with their own views, particularly on a policy issue that is highly salient at the time, might either have positive or negative effects on citizens' propensity to communicate with their legislators.

On the one hand, and this is our pre-registered hypothesis, informing citizens about their MP's unaligned position could fuel discontent and increase attempts to lobby an MP to change their position. On the issue of Brexit, there has been considerable tension between the views of MPs, their parties, and their constituents (Merrick, 2019; Trumm, Milazzo and Townsley, 2020). Of note is that Brexit had become the most salient political issue both among the main political parties and the wider electorate. This led to voters' preferences for political candidates being influenced by Brexit - even when accommodating for partisanship (Axe-Browne and Hansen, 2021). The importance of Brexit-based political identities (Remainers vs. Leavers) as a major predictor of vote choice (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2020; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020) suggests that positional second referendum cues can trigger affective responses, especially among strong Remain supporters. Given the remain-leaning sympathies of PV supporters, we hypothesised that revealing the MPs' lack of support for a second referendum to PV supporters will increase their incentives to contact their MP.

H2 The effect of email contact will be greater amongst those who are informed of their MP's incongruent position.

Broockman and Ryan (2016), however, find that citizens are more likely to contact legislators from the same party than legislators from the opposing party, and that constituent-to-legislator

contact hence often results in citizens “preaching to the choir”. This is because citizens might feel uncomfortable contacting a representative who disagrees with them (Mutz, 2006). They might anticipate that the MP would reply directly and challenge them on the issue. As a result, an alternative expectation to our pre-registered **H2** is that signals of incongruence might exhibit a demobilising effect. Moreover, if citizens are either more or less likely to contact legislators who agree with them, this could accentuate already existing biases in legislators’ perceptions of public opinion in their districts. As Broockman and Skovron (2018) show, US legislators systematically misperceive their constituents’ opinions on multiple political issues and those misperceptions are associated with loop-sided contact from citizens supporting one political party (in Broockman and Skovron (2018)’s case, the Republican Party).

Regardless of the direction of **H2**, we maintain that informing People’s Vote supporters of their MP’s position is important. Of note is that, despite the high stakes nature of Brexit and the identity-based nature of Brexit positions (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2020), constituents in 2019 were not knowledgeable about their representatives’ position on Brexit. Descriptive data from the British Election Study (see appendix Figure A1), for example, shows that 36% of respondents report that they don’t know what their MP’s position on Brexit is. Matching the perceived positions of those who believe they know what their MP’s position is with data on MP positions amongst conservative-held constituencies and MPs (Cygan and Whitaker, 2019), only 33% correctly identify their representative’s position. Moreover, second referendum supporters are *less* likely to accurately identify their MP’s position than opponents of a second referendum (Figure A1). Signalling MP congruence to PV supporters is, therefore, *not* likely to provide individuals with information that they were already aware of.

3.3 Urgency

Finally, we posit that cueing individuals to consider the high-stakes nature of the desired political activity will be more likely to activate those most pre-disposed to be mobilised. Whilst Mann and Bryant (2019) did not observe any incremental effect of urgency on voter registration, given that the initial engagement level of second referendum supporters and non-registered citizens differs substantially, this question still merits investigating. During the summer of 2019 the PV campaign increased parliamentary support for a second referendum, resulting in them

only requiring seven MPs to come on board in order to achieve their objective. We therefore hypothesised that informing individuals of the urgency of contacting their MP will increase the likelihood of them lobbying their representative:

H3 The effect of email contact will be greater amongst those cued on the urgency of lobbying their MP.

4 Data & analysis strategy

4.1 People’s Vote

Following the UK’s decision in a 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (EU), the PV campaign was set up in the early months of 2018 by a coalition of cross-party political actors. The organisation’s primary objective was to secure a second referendum on Brexit to allow the public a final say on the government’s proposed Brexit deal. Unsurprisingly, the organisation attracted supporters primarily of an anti-Brexit persuasion, who viewed a second referendum as the best way to prevent Brexit from happening.

To realise its objective, PV organised demonstrations and lobbied MPs. In 2019, to end the parliamentary impasse over Brexit, opposition MPs passed an amendment that required parliament to hold a series of simultaneous votes on ways to break the Brexit deadlock. Two rounds of “indicative votes” were held, both of which included the option of a second referendum. Support among MPs for a referendum increased between these two rounds of votes but never reached a majority, being defeated by a majority of 27 votes on March 27th, and 12 votes on April 1st. Nevertheless, parliamentary support for a second referendum increased during this period, and PV focused their campaigning efforts on lobbying MPs. It was in this context that the organisation carried out the field experiment in question.

The PV campaign fielded a randomised field experiment in the summer of 2019, and shared de-identified random assignment and outcome data with us. This study qualifies as a natural field experiment ([Humphreys, 2015](#)) in that we pre-registered the experiment before it took place, and the campaign shared the random assignment and de-identified outcome data with us.

4.2 Assignment and treatments

Relying on the de-identified, internal data from the PV campaign, we compiled a dataset comprising of 119,362 pre-identified supporters, who had a verified email address. The experimental sample was limited to those supporters who lived in constituencies with an MP who had not previously voted to support a bill on a second referendum in the months prior. In short, the sample was limited to supporters who were represented by MPs who had incongruent views on a second Brexit referendum. The PV campaign was actively engaged in lobbying MPs opposed to a second referendum on the issue of Brexit in order to achieve its *raison d'être*. Asking supporters represented by MPs who had already expressed support for a second referendum in parliament would not provide the organisation with any political gains.

The PV campaign used complete random assignment to assign the sample with equal probabilities (20%) to one of five experimental groups, which included one control group and four different treatment groups (see Table 1). Pre-treatment covariate data on previous donor status, volunteer status, and the party affiliation of the MP, shared with us, shows no significant differences between the individual supporters randomly assigned to each of the experimental groups (see Tables A2, A3 and A4 in the Online Appendix). In short this means that, with the exception of treatment assignment, the five experimental groups are symmetrical.

Table 1: Treatment allocation

Experimental Condition	Probability of assignment	N
Control: No Email	.2	23,873
T1: No Position, No Urgency	.2	23,871
T2: Position, No Urgency	.2	23,873
T3: No Position, Urgency	.2	23,871
T4: Position, Urgency	.2	23,872

This assignment procedure resulted in an untreated control group and a fully factorial 2x2 design, where the campaign varied the inclusion of the positional cue and the urgency cue as summarised in Table 2.⁶ The first treatment group (T1) received an email from the PV campaign encouraging them to contact their MP via an online form, which was publicly accessible and highly visible on the People’s Vote website. The second treatment group (T2) received the same

⁶Images of the treatment emails (Figures A4 - A7) and the ‘Write to your MP’ landing page (Figures A2 - A3) are in the Online Appendix.

email with the inclusion of a reminder that the recipient’s own MP did not support a second referendum. The third (T3) and fourth (T4) treatment groups received the same email as T1 and T2, respectively, with the addition of an urgency cue. The control group (C) received no email. The sample size of 119,362 provides us with sufficient N to identify ITTs of 1 percentage-point with 80% power.

Table 2: Treatment messages

Condition	Treatment message
	Dear XXXX,
T1: No position, no urgency	Earlier this year more than a million people marched for a People’s Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit. Make sure that your MP knows you want a final say . Will you email your MP today?
	Dear XXXX,
T2: Position, no urgency	Earlier this year more than a million people marched for a People’s Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit. Did you know that in the last parliamentary debate on a People’s Vote your local MP did not support putting Brexit back to the people. Make sure that your MP knows you want a final say . Will you email your MP today?
	Dear XXXX,
T3: No position, urgency	Earlier this year more than a million people marched for a People’s Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit. We don’t have much time left. Parliament will soon close for the summer, and when it returns at the beginning of September, there will only be 59 days left until the UK is due to leave the EU. Make sure that your MP knows you want a final say . Will you email your MP today?
	Dear XXXX,
T4: Position, urgency	Earlier this year more than a million people marched for a People’s Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit. Did you know that in the last parliamentary debate on a People’s Vote your local MP did not support putting Brexit back to the people. We don’t have much time left. Parliament will soon close for the summer, and when it returns at the beginning of September, there will only be 59 days left until the UK is due to leave the EU. Make sure that your MP knows you want a final say . Will you email your MP today?

Note: emphasis in original

4.3 Outcome measurement

For much of the period of Brexit negotiations, the People’s Vote campaign website prominently displayed a tool through which supporters could write to their local MP (Figures A2 - A3). The tool was available to anyone who visited the website, allowing them to lobby their representative on Brexit. Importantly, the tool was publicly accessible to supporters in the study control group and the wider public. To use the online tool, users had to insert their postcode to identify their corresponding constituency and enter their own email address to send their message to the MP. Those in the treatment group were directed to the website via a hyperlink included in the email messages whilst individuals in control or individuals outside the treatment sample could access the tool directly from the campaign’s website or other social media platforms associated with the campaign.

The People’s Vote Campaign maintained a record of all individuals who used their online tool to contact their MP, enabling the organisation and authors to match assignment to outcome data via a unique numeric identifier. The *NationBuilder* platform used by the People’s Vote campaign matched email addresses used in the MP contact form to those on their database. The campaign allowed users to have multiple associated email addresses. This is important as it reduces the possibility that individuals using the tool are not matched because they have various email accounts. The 119,362 individuals included in our sample were also those PV supporters who had not yet contacted their MP.

As pre-registered, PV shared outcome data with us three days after the treatment was administered, and again after seven days. During the 7-day period between treatment and our final date of data collection, 3,622 individuals used the online MP contact tool to send an email to their MP (see Table 3).

Table 3: Number (cumulative) of MP contacts via the People Vote platform

Treatment Group	t0	t+3	t+7
Control group	0	22	29
Treatment group 1	0	788	836
Treatment group 2	0	791	841
Treatment group 3	0	817	873
Treatment group 4	0	780	823
Unmatched users	0	203	220
Total	0	3401	3622

Of these 3,622 users of the online MP contact tool, 3,402 individuals were included in our experimental sample; 3,373 belonged to one of the four email conditions, 29 belonged to the control group, and 220 individuals could not be matched to our experimental sample.

Given that the tool was prominently placed on the campaign’s website, we can assume that these 220 observations are composed of individuals who happened to visit the website, and for instance lived in constituencies where their MP supported a second referendum (which ensured that they were excluded from the experimental sample). The results discussed below hence only include the 119,362 subjects randomly assigned to different treatment conditions at t_0 . As a very conservative robustness check reported in Table A5, we provide an extreme, lower bound on the treatment effect by allocating the 220 individuals, who could not be matched, to the control group under the unlikely assumption that matching of email addresses was more successful in

treatment than in control. Doing so does not alter our conclusions about the effectiveness of the emails.

5 Results

5.1 Did emails work?

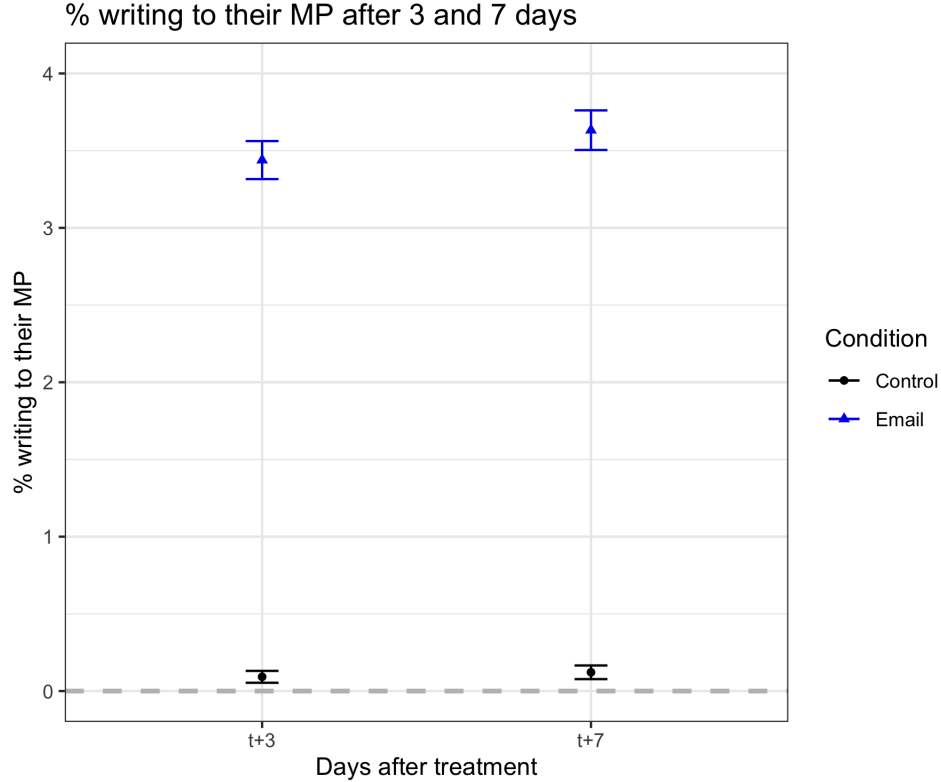


Figure 1: Percentage of subjects who contacted their MP 3 and 7 days after the treatment

The results of the field experiment are summarised in Figures 1 and 2. First, and as suggested by the raw numbers reported above, Figure 1 provides robust, empirical support for **H1**: emailing supporters encouraging them to contact their (non-supportive) MP is effective. Three days after the treatment 3.4% of subjects in the treatment groups had written to their MP using the online form, while only 0.09% in the control group had done the same. Seven days after the treatment, this had increased slightly to 3.6% in the treatment groups and 0.12% in the control group. That means that most subjects responded to the treatment within three days of receiving the email.

Figure 2 visualises the distribution of subjects that contacted their MP and those that did

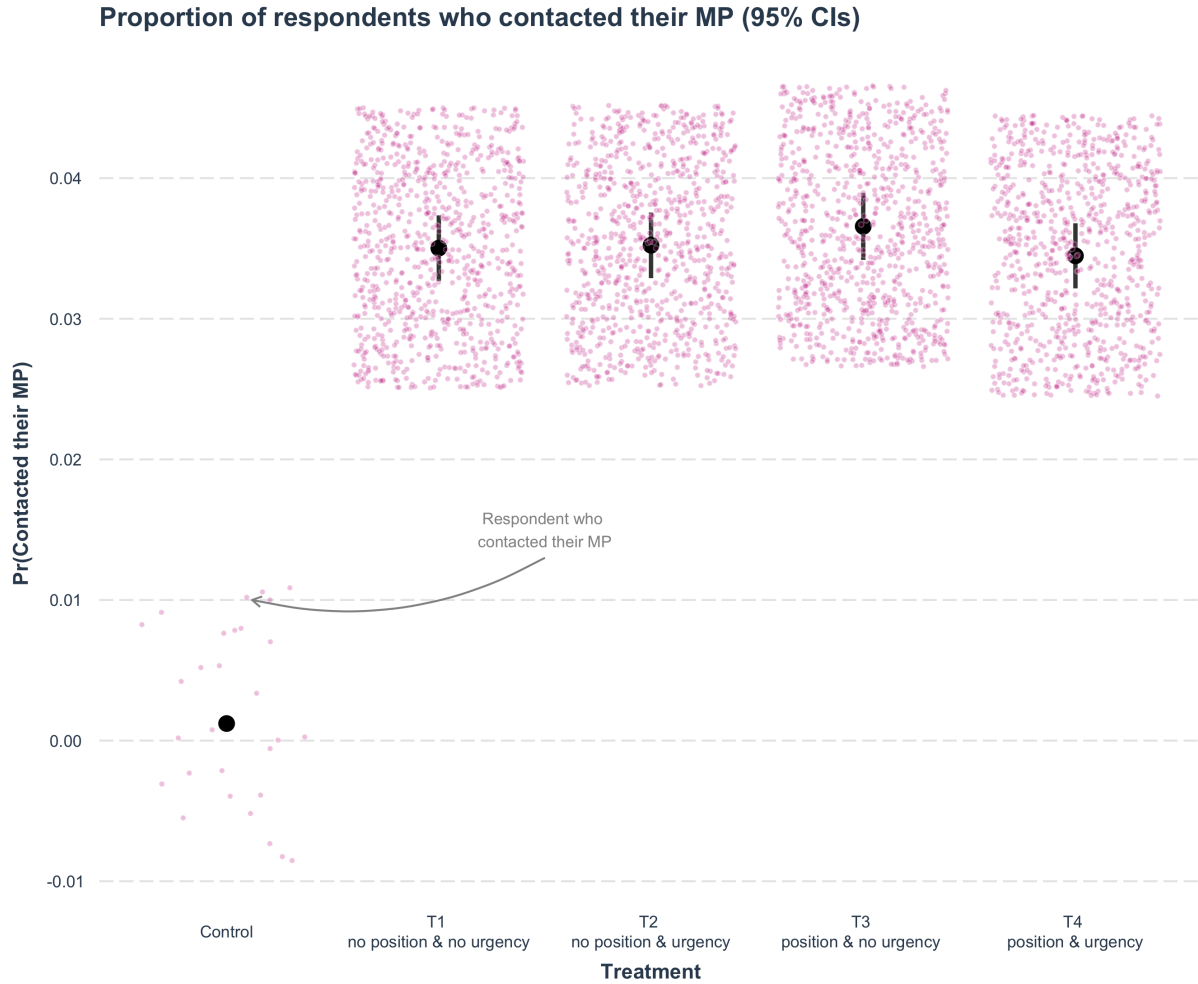


Figure 2: Conditional mean outcome values & distribution of outcomes by treatment condition not across each of the five treatment conditions (T1-T4 and control) alongside the group mean (with 95% confidence intervals). The figure clearly shows a number of individuals in control *did* use the PV tool although this number is dwarfed in comparison to those assigned to receive PV email contact: the proportions of the four groups exposed to treatment are significantly ($p < 0.0001$) different than that observed in control.

The Intent-to-treat (ITT) effects of 3.4 and 3.5 percentage-points (see also Figure A8) are significant and substantively large.⁷ Notably, an email-induced effect of this size is substantively larger than those found in GOTV experiments, which tend to show that emails have minimal

⁷In theory, it is possible to measure whether emails were opened in the software used to send the emails out. However, we were unable to obtain these compliance data from People's Vote. Since only compliers would respond to the treatment, if we assume - to give an illustrative example - a compliance (opening) rate of 50%, then an ITT of 3.4 percentage-points would translate into a CACE of 6.8 percentage-points.

effects on turnout behaviour (Green and Gerber, 2019). Bench-marking the magnitude of our effects against email-induced petition signing, which may better reflect the "costs" of our outcome rather than voter participation, we observe that the effects induced by the PV email are comparable to the 3.5 percentage-points observed in Han (2016)'s study on petition signing. In absolute terms, a 3.4%-point increase in emails sent via the "write to your MP" online mask translates to around 3344 individual emails to 346 MPs who were not on record as supporting a People's Vote, or around 9 emails per MP.

The effects for each of our four treatment groups displayed in Figure 2 also illustrate that while all four treatment variations exerted a large and significant effect on the probability of supporters contacting their MPs to lobby their support for a second referendum, position and urgency cues did not exhibit differential effects. The point estimates are nearly identical and there is a large overlap between the confidence intervals. In other words, the data does not provide support for H2 and H3. Note that given the very large N of the experimental population ($N = 119,362$), we can be confident that both the overall treatment effect and the null effects of our heterogeneous treatment effect models are precisely estimated and *not* the result of insufficient statistical power.

5.2 Robustness

Of course supporters can also contact their MP by other means and, as result, one might argue that the 3344 lobbying emails induced by the email treatments are simply substituting constituent-to-MP contact that might have occurred via alternative means of MP contact in the absence of our intervention. To test for the potential for substitution effects, we analyse the number of daily contacts made via the *WriteToThem.com* website (formerly, *FaxYourMP*) over the summer of 2019. *WriteToThem.com* is a long-standing platform for constituent-to-MP contact that was originally established in 2000 and is part of the *My Society*⁸ registered charity that is dedicated to facilitate electronic democratic tools for UK citizens.

The data facilitated by *WriteToThem.com*, as visualised in Figure 3, demonstrates that there is no recognizable shift in the mean level of contact to MPs over the temporal period

⁸In addition to *WriteToThem.com*, the charity is also the founder of *TheyWorkForYou.com* which records MP voting behaviour in order to maintain constituents informed on their representatives behaviour in Westminster

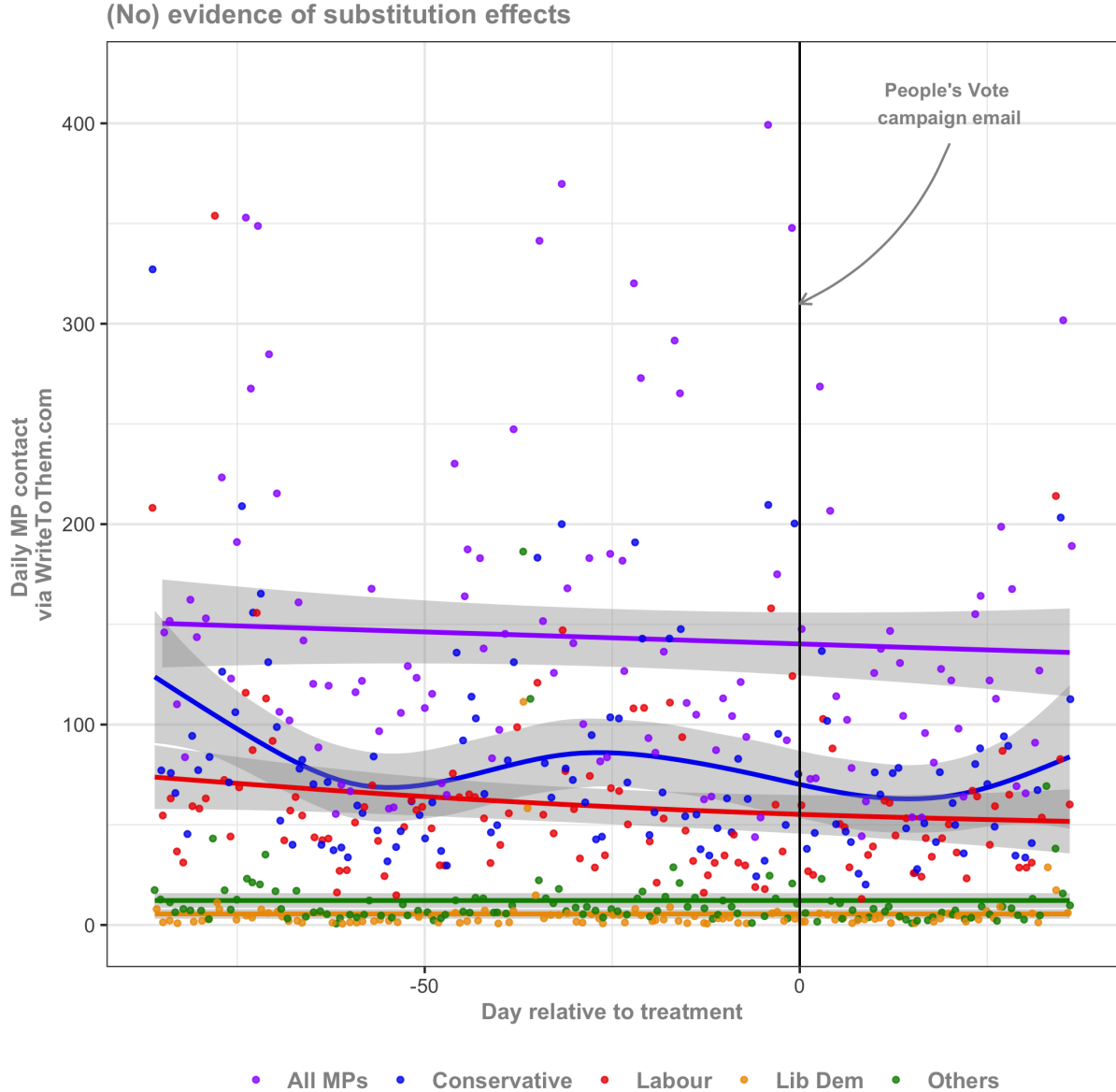


Figure 3: Daily MP contact June-August 2019 Test

during which our experiment was fielded. The 3198 individuals in our experimental sample who used the PV platform within the first three days (equal to an average daily figure of 1066) is substantively greater than the daily average figures reported by *WriteToThem.com*. Given the lack of differential MP contact via the *WriteToThem.com* as a function of PV emails, we are confident that the email-induced uptake of constituent-to-MP contact observed in our experiment consists mostly of new contacts as opposed to substitutions. Of course supporters can also contact their MP by other means (e.g. directly by email or by post), and we do not

observe if they do this. But given the prominence of *WriteToThem.com* as a facilitator of MP contact in the UK, we maintain that if substitution effects were to be driving our results, then the *WriteToThem.com* daily contact data represents a tough test where we would expect to observe substitution taking place. Table A6 in the Appendix shows two "worst case" scenarios: our results are still significantly different from zero if we assumed that twice as many emails as sent on the entire WTT platform over the same 7 day period would not be new emails, but substitutions.

In addition to considering the potential for substitution effects, we also carry out an additional sensitivity analysis. We demonstrate that the significant effects of email receipt on MP contact are robust to dropping 1% of the sample via the Approximate Maximum Influence Perturbation test detailed by Broderick, Giordano and Meager (2021) (see appendix Figure A10).

5.3 Exploratory analysis

There are two possible explanations for the surprising null finding for the heterogeneous treatment messages: either the cues did not have any informational value, or respondents might have differed in their response to the information provided. On the one hand, individuals self-select to be subscribed members of a campaign's mailing list. As more politically engaged citizens, they should be more aware of the position of their local MP regarding a second referendum than the general electorate. Supporters would also be more aware of the urgency of the situation. However, the PV campaign clearly thought that communicating the MP's position and emphasising urgency was a promising strategy. In fact, MPs' positions during that period were changing fast, and even parties had changed position over the course of the 2017-2019 period. Hence, the level of engagement required to keep up with MPs' positions over time is very high. On the other hand, highlighting an MP's opposition to the issue might have caused heterogeneous responses. The response of supporters to the cue might have differed by level of prior engagement with the cause. While ardent supporters might be fired up if they learn that a representative does not disagree with them, less engaged supporters might behave more like ordinary constituents who prefer contacting co-partisans (Broockman and Ryan, 2016). The position of the People's Vote Campaign as a catch-all campaign for a second referendum likely attracted a heterogeneous

supporter base. To investigate these two competing explanations, we conduct an exploratory analysis where we estimate the heterogeneous treatment effects of the position and the urgency cue conditional on donor status (those who previously donated to the campaign), which we take as a proxy for higher levels of engagement with the campaign. Figure 4 below shows the effect of revealing the MP’s anti-second referendum position on the outcome, first for the complete sample, and then conditional on the subject’s pre-treatment donor status.

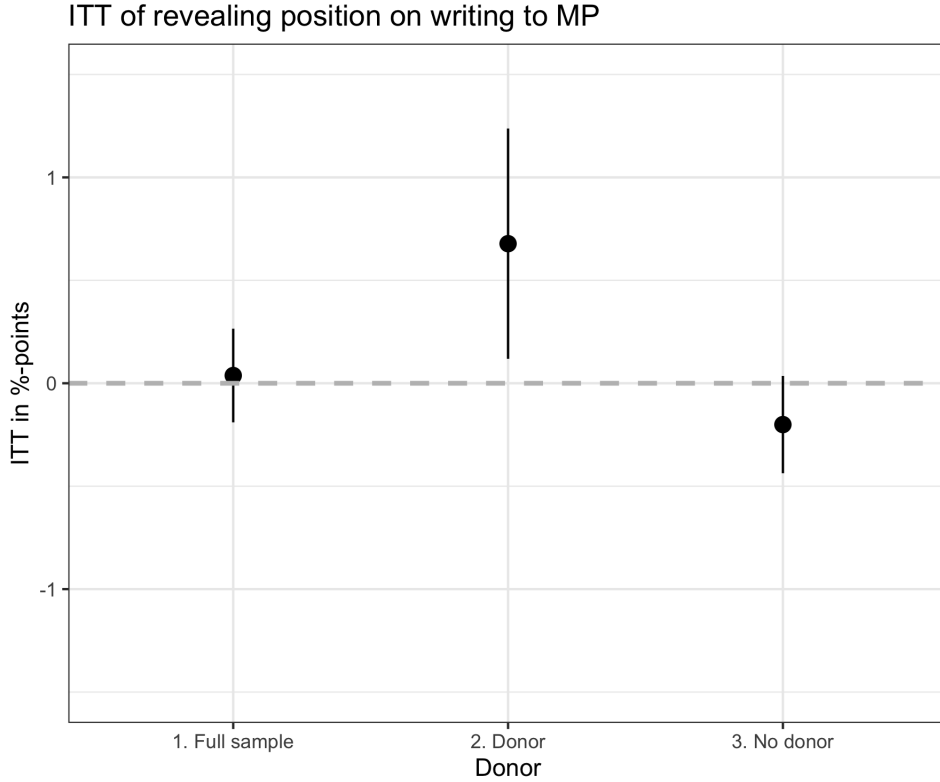


Figure 4: Effects of position cue, conditional on donor status, 95% CIs

Indeed, we find a significant difference between the response of donors and non-donors to the position cue ($t = 3.07$, $p = 0.002$). Donors respond positively ($t = 2.57$, $p = 0.01$), while the sign on non-donors is negative ($t = -1.81$, $p = 0.09$). The interaction effect and the positive effect of the position cue on writing to the MP for donors survives multiple comparison corrections.⁹ Hence, the most engaged subjects, previous donors to the PV campaign, appear to respond in line with our pre-registered **H2**, and are more likely to contact legislators who disagree with them if the campaign cued the MP’s anti-second referendum position. This analysis suggests

⁹Effect on donors: $p=0.04$ after adjusting for the 4 comparisons undertaken (position & donor, position & non-donor, urgency & donor, urgency & non-donor) using the Benjamin-Hochberg correction.

that the position cue provided valuable information to subjects, but that they differed in their response to this information.

We also assess whether constituency-level support for Brexit moderates the effect of the treatment. Theoretically, we might expect treated individuals in constituencies with large leave voting majorities to be more motivated to contact their MP in order to communicate their dissent from the majority local opinion. On the other hand, we might also expect that constituents to refrain from sharing their opinion if they know that they are in a minority (Foos et al., 2021).

Treatment effect moderated by constituency support for Brexit

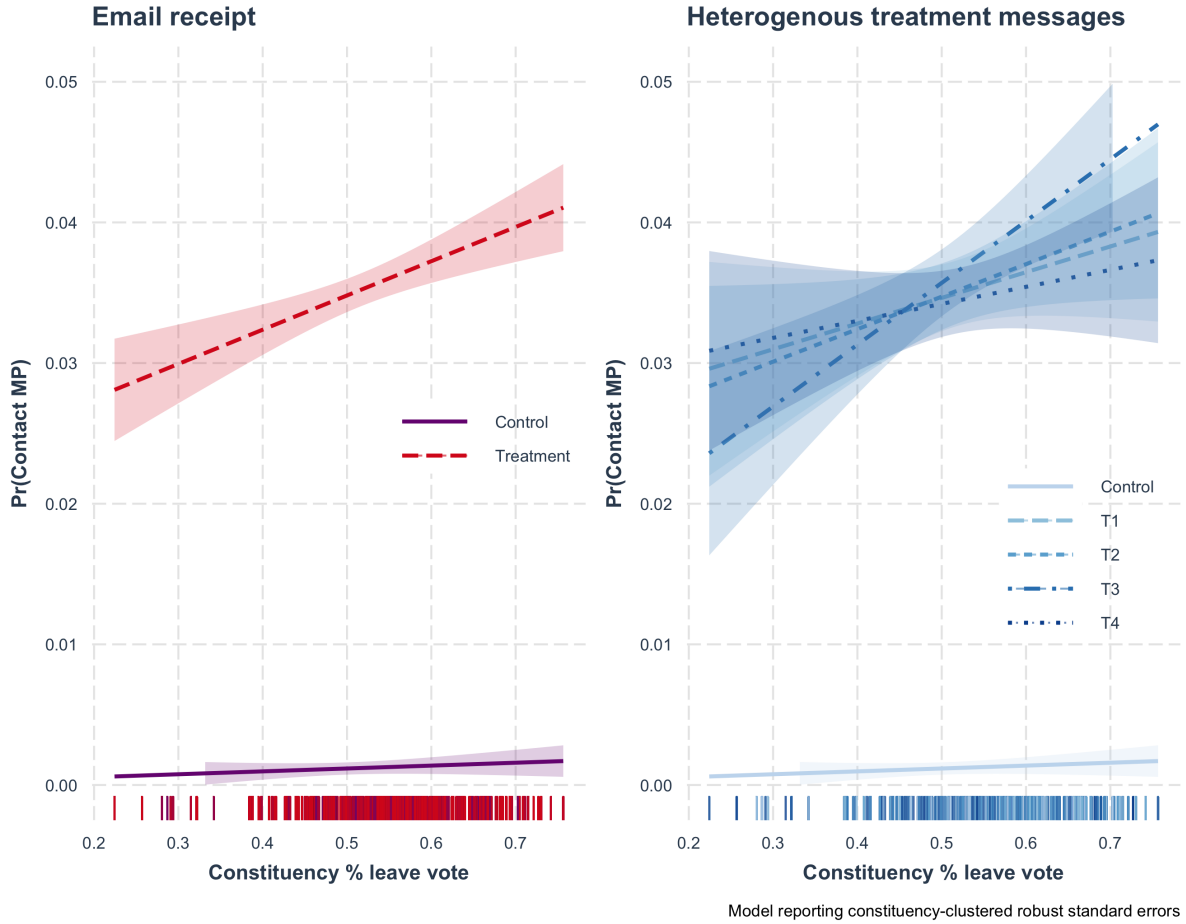


Figure 5: Moderating effect of constituency-level support

Figure 5 visualises the effect of treatment as conditioned by constituency-based (%) support for Brexit as estimated by Hanretty (2017). This exploratory test of subgroup variation demonstrates that individuals in receipt of the People’s Vote email were significantly more prone

to contact their MP when their MP represented a constituency with higher levels of localised support for Brexit. This interaction effect is robust to a test of the linearity assumption (Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu, 2019) (Figure A11). There are no differences in heterogeneous treatment effects between the email groups that received variations in treatment messages. Hence, while priming dealignment with a legislator’s view had differential effects on individuals’ contact behaviours, conditional on their prior engagement, dealignment with average constituency opinion appears to incentivize contact across the board. This result illustrates one way in which legislators might come to obtain an unrepresentative sample of constituents’ views on a given issue (Broockman and Skovron, 2018).

Figure A9 in the Online Appendix shows that the urgency cue was ineffective for both donors and non-donors. This implies that subjects were already aware of the urgency of the situation and did not need reminding.

6 Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we find that a political, cross-party advocacy group was effective at mobilising their supporters to lobby their political representatives via a mass email campaign. This finding is important because it shows that advocacy groups can generate expressions of mass public support on issues of high salience and do so at crucial political decision points. At the height of the Brexit battle in parliament, a simple email by an advocacy organisation was enough to generate an estimated 3344 emails to MPs. We show that there was no substitution away from the most frequently used online legislator contact platform in the UK. Our study hence extends Broockman and Ryan (2016)’s and Han (2016)’s work on petitions in two ways: to a high salience issue, which polarised the electorate, and to a different means of lobbying, email messages. What are the scope conditions under which we expect these results to generalize? Brexit was a high salience issue, which polarised British society. It divided society along the parochial - cosmopolitan dimension (De Vries, 2018), which encapsulates issues surrounding “European integration, migration and national control in international affairs”. This dimension of political conflict is present in many European countries, for instance in Switzerland and the Netherlands. There are liberal-cosmopolitan groups that campaign on this dimension in the

context of binary choices in referendums, for instance the Swiss "Operation Libero". A similar divide exists in the United States, where most examples cited in the introduction are taken from. We would expect our conclusions to generalize to liberal-cosmopolitan groups working in these contexts who use similar mobilization methods.

Would we expect these results to generalize to Brexit supporters or activists on the parochial side of this political divide? We cannot rule out that "leavers" would have responded differently to an email encouragement from a leave-based advocacy organisation since they differed in terms of their resources (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995). "Remainers", on average, were more highly educated and younger than "leavers" (Hobolt, 2016). Since "Brexit" was official government policy under Theresa May, at the time of the study, there was no comparable cross-party advocacy organisation working against a second referendum. The closest was probably Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, but in contrast to the People's Vote campaign, the Brexit Party was registered as an official political party, which participated in the 2019 European Elections and the 2019 General Election. The high stakes attached to the Brexit issue could both further and hinder a group's ability to mobilise supporters. On the one hand, high stakes might increase the perceived benefits of taking political action. On the other hand, high salience issues also tend to come with a saturated campaign environment, and many political actors already engaged in communication and overwhelming supporters with asks to engage. In this context, it is striking that the PV campaign managed to move supporters to take action.

Our study has implications for the literature on political campaigns and political activism beyond electoral participation. While previous experiments show that campaign emails have negligible effects on voter turnout (Green and Gerber, 2019; Nickerson, 2007), the positive and significant effect of emails on supporters' willingness to lobby their representative shows that email 'asks' can scale and contribute to mounting public pressure on representatives. As Han (2016) shows, there are many neglected areas of everyday campaigning, such as petition signing, but also asking for donations and urging supporters to engage in door-to-door campaigning, where emails could be powerful coordination and mobilisation tools. Beyond the window of opportunity that elections represent in shaping the policy direction of the legislature, constituent lobbying represents an important means for citizens to make their voices heard on high salience issues in-between elections. Our results show that when the stakes are high, campaigns can use

emails to increase supporters' propensity to engage in such activities.

The campaign also sought to test whether revealing representatives' anti-second referendum position in the email made supporters of a second referendum more likely to lobby their representative. But we find no evidence that revealing the position of the MP, on average, had a positive effect on supporters' willingness to lobby. This finding was against the campaign's expectations and required further analysis. Our explanatory analysis shows that previous donors to the campaign, the most committed supporters, were more likely to contact the MP once they received the cue, while less committed supporters, if at all, responded negatively (Broockman and Ryan, 2016). This points to the possibility that the cue had informational value, but that only the most ardent supporters of a cause are more motivated to write to representatives if they learn that the recipients of their lobbying efforts are opposed to it. Hence, future work should investigate whether level of prior engagement or strength of prior support moderates whether citizens are willing to communicate their position to opponents when asked to do so.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that, at the time the experiment was fielded, one of the authors - Denise Baron - worked in the campaigning team the *People's Vote*. Any professional association with the *People's Vote* has not influenced our empirical strategy to analysing the data - as detailed in our pre-registered analysis plan - nor has it influenced our interpretation of the results.

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Appendix

A MP contact in the UK

Table A1: MP constituent contact in the UK

Year	Contacted MP
2002	18.1%
2004	14.9%
2006	16.6%
2008	16.9%
2010	14.8%
2012	15.2%
2014	19.3%
2016	17.5%
2018	18.6%

B Electorate knowledge of MP positions

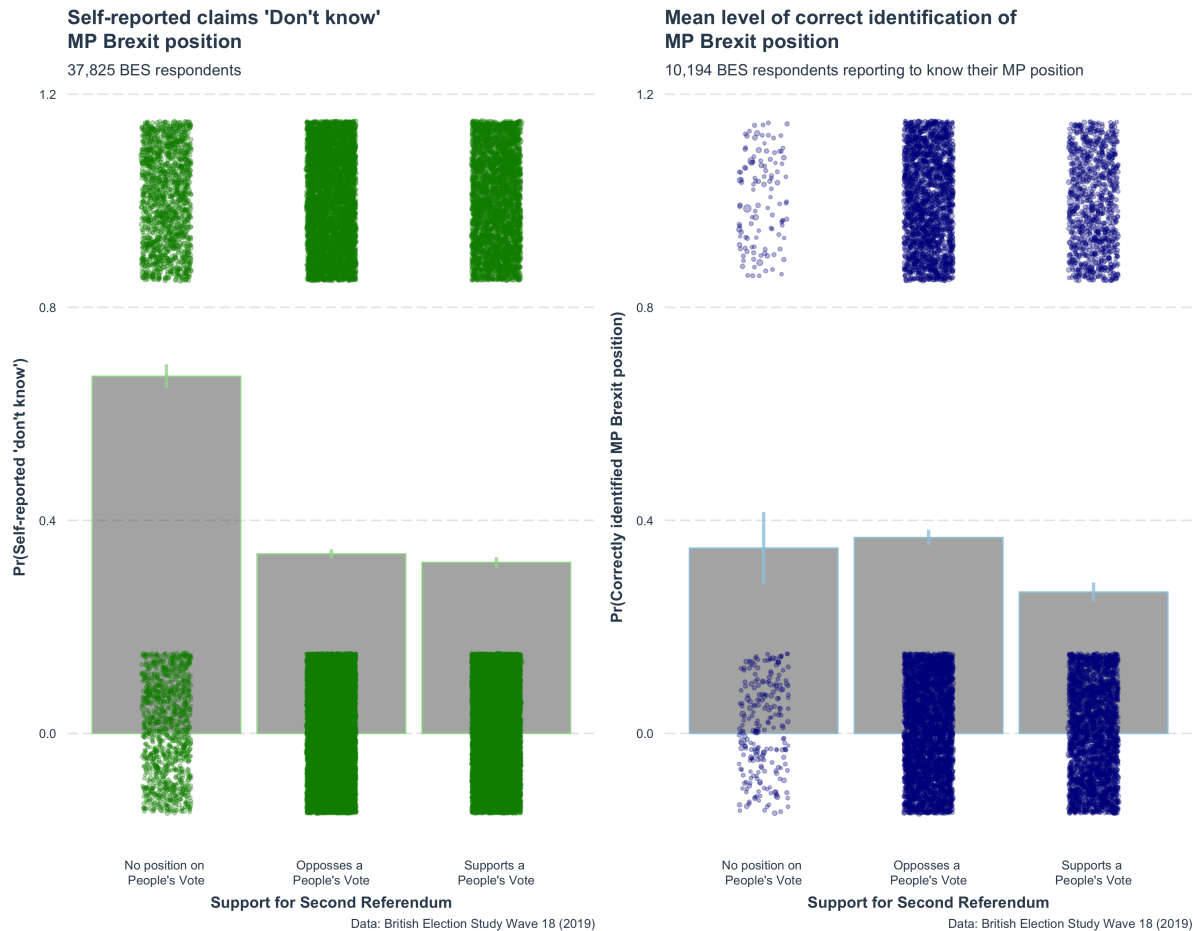
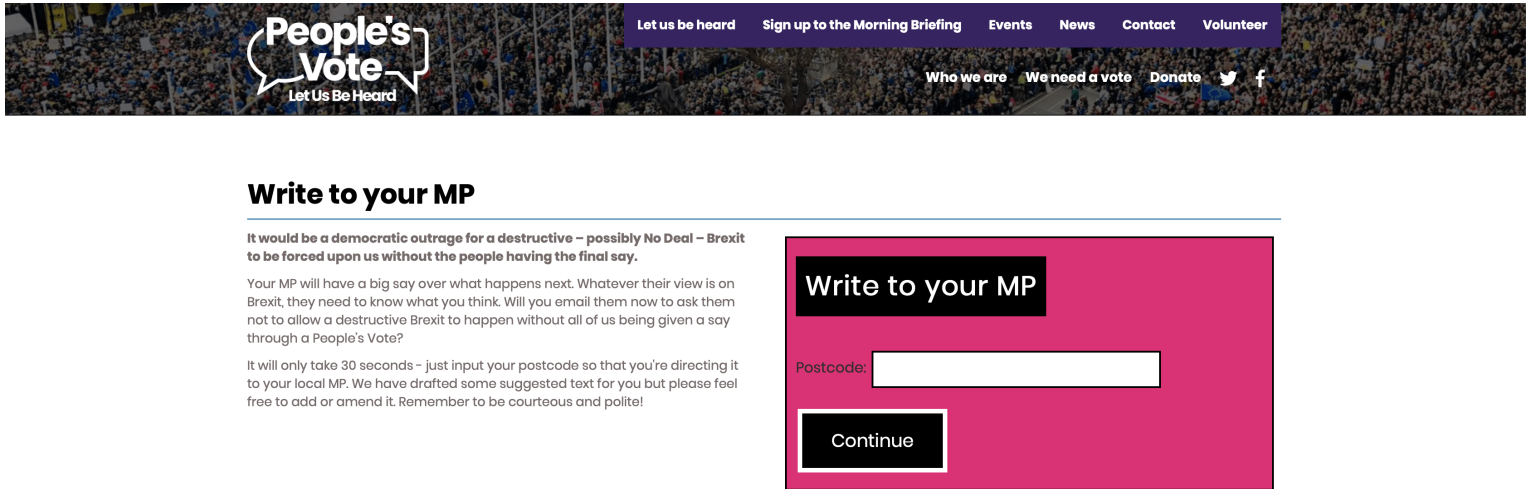


Figure A1: (Low) voter knowledge of representative's Brexit position

C Online Forms



The image shows the 'Write to your MP' landing page for the 'People's Vote' campaign. The header features the 'People's Vote' logo with the tagline 'Let Us Be Heard' on the left, and a navigation menu on the right with links: 'Let us be heard', 'Sign up to the Morning Briefing', 'Events', 'News', 'Contact', and 'Volunteer'. Below the navigation menu, there are social media links: 'Who we are', 'We need a vote', 'Donate', and icons for Twitter and Facebook. The main content area has a heading 'Write to your MP' followed by a paragraph: 'It would be a democratic outrage for a destructive – possibly No Deal – Brexit to be forced upon us without the people having the final say.' Below this is another paragraph: 'Your MP will have a big say over what happens next. Whatever their view is on Brexit, they need to know what you think. Will you email them now to ask them not to allow a destructive Brexit to happen without all of us being given a say through a People's Vote?' and a final paragraph: 'It will only take 30 seconds – just input your postcode so that you're directing it to your local MP. We have drafted some suggested text for you but please feel free to add or amend it. Remember to be courteous and polite!' To the right of the text is a pink box containing the heading 'Write to your MP', a 'Postcode:' label, a text input field, and a 'Continue' button.

People's Vote
Let Us Be Heard

Let us be heard Sign up to the Morning Briefing Events News Contact Volunteer

Who we are We need a vote Donate  

Write to your MP

It would be a democratic outrage for a destructive – possibly No Deal – Brexit to be forced upon us without the people having the final say.

Your MP will have a big say over what happens next. Whatever their view is on Brexit, they need to know what you think. Will you email them now to ask them not to allow a destructive Brexit to happen without all of us being given a say through a People's Vote?

It will only take 30 seconds – just input your postcode so that you're directing it to your local MP. We have drafted some suggested text for you but please feel free to add or amend it. Remember to be courteous and polite!

Write to your MP

Postcode:

Continue

Figure A2: Write your MP landing page

Write to your MP

It would be a democratic outrage for a destructive – possibly No Deal – Brexit to be forced upon us without the people having the final say.

Your MP will have a big say over what happens next. Whatever their view is on Brexit, they need to know what you think. Will you email them now to ask them not to allow a destructive Brexit to happen without all of us being given a say through a People's Vote?

It will only take 30 seconds – just input your postcode so that you're directing it to your local MP. We have drafted some suggested text for you but please feel free to add or amend it. Remember to be courteous and polite!

Tell your MP to prevent a No Deal

Your MP is Jo Churchill of the Conservative Party, representing Bury St Edmunds.

First name *	
Last name *	
Your email *	
Address	
Address 2	
Postcode *	IP32 6AD

Figure A3: Write your MP contact form

D Treatment Emails

Subject: Let your MP know you want a People's Vote



Dear Jo,
Earlier this year more than a **million people** marched for a People's Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit.
Make sure your MP knows that **you want a final say**.
Will you email your MP today?

YES I'LL EMAIL MY MP

Thank you for your support.
People's Vote campaign HQ

Figure A4: T1 (No position, no urgency)

Subject: Let your MP know you want a People's Vote



Dear Jo,

Earlier this year more than a **million people** marched for a People's Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit.

Did you know that in the last parliamentary debate on a People's Vote your local MP **did not support** putting Brexit back to the people? Make sure your MP knows that **you want a final say**.

Will you email your MP today?

YES I'LL EMAIL MY MP

Thank you for your support.

People's Vote campaign HQ

Figure A5: T2 (Position, no urgency)

Subject: Let your MP know you want a People's Vote



Dear Jo,

Earlier this year more than a **million people** marched for a People's Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit.

We don't have much time left. Parliament will soon close for the summer, and when it returns at the beginning of September, there will be only 59 days left until the UK is due to leave the EU.

Make sure your MP knows that **you want a final say**.

Will you email your MP today?

YES I'LL EMAIL MY MP

Thank you for your support.

People's Vote campaign HQ

Figure A6: T3 (No position, urgency)

Subject: Let your MP know you want a People's Vote



Dear Jo,

Earlier this year more than a **million people** marched for a People's Vote but both the government and parliament have blocked efforts to give the people a final say on Brexit.

Did you know that in the last parliamentary debate on a People's Vote your local MP **did not support** putting it back to the people? Make sure your MP knows you want a final say.

We don't have much time left. Parliament will soon close for the summer, and when it returns at the beginning of September, there will be only 59 days left until the UK is due to leave the EU.

Will you email your MP today?

YES I'LL EMAIL MY MP

Thank you for your support.

People's Vote campaign HQ

Figure A7: T4 (Position, urgency)

E Balance Tests

Table A2: Balance of pre-treatment covariates

Treatment Group	Past donation	Past volunteer
Control group	25.41%	9.43%
Treatment group 1	25.54%	9.68%
Treatment group 2	25.47%	10.03.%
Treatment group 3	26.13%	10.01%
Treatment group 4	25.80%	9.56%
Chi2 test	0.35	0.10

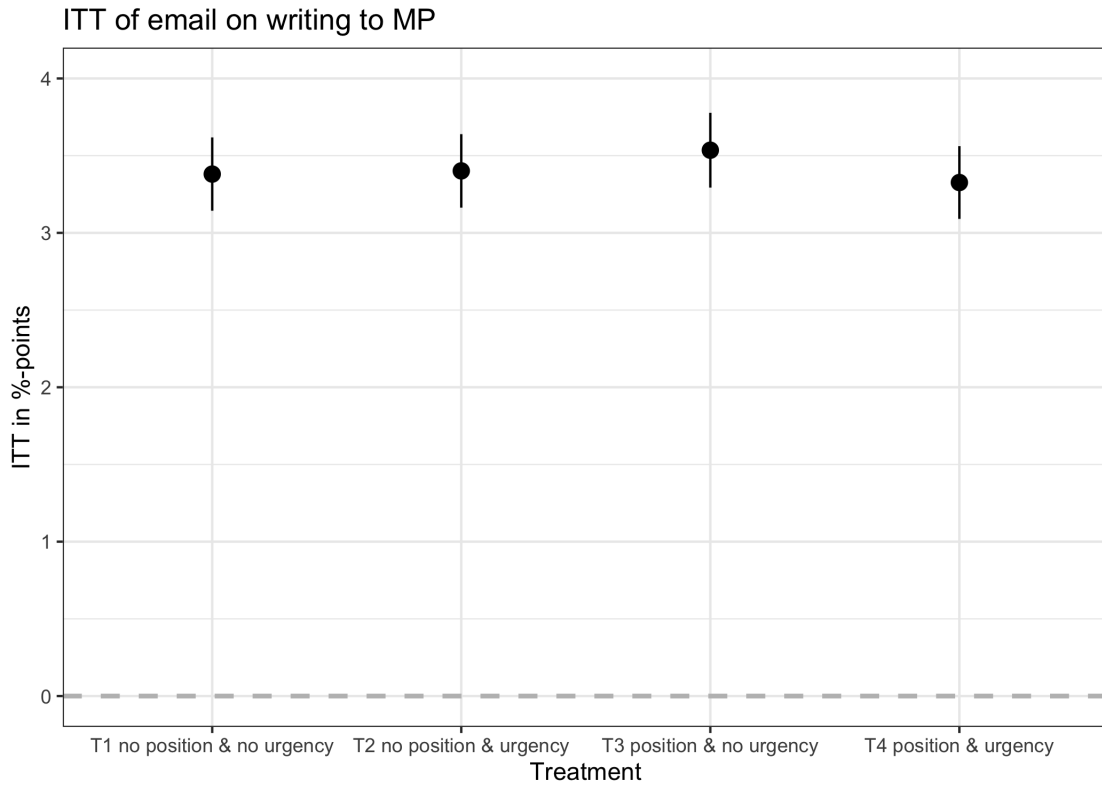


Figure A8: Intent-to-Treat Effects on writing to MP, 95% CIs

Table A3: Logistic regression modelling assignment to treatment vs control using past outcome data

	Treatment
Past donor	0.02 (0.02)
Past volunteer	0.01 (0.01)
Constant	1.35*** (0.03)
N	119,362

Table A4: Multinomial regression modelling assignment to five different treatment groups using past outcome data

	Control	T1	T2	T3	T4
Past donor		0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Past volunteer		0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Constant		-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)
N	119,3662	119,362	119,362	119,362	119,362

F Exploratory Analysis

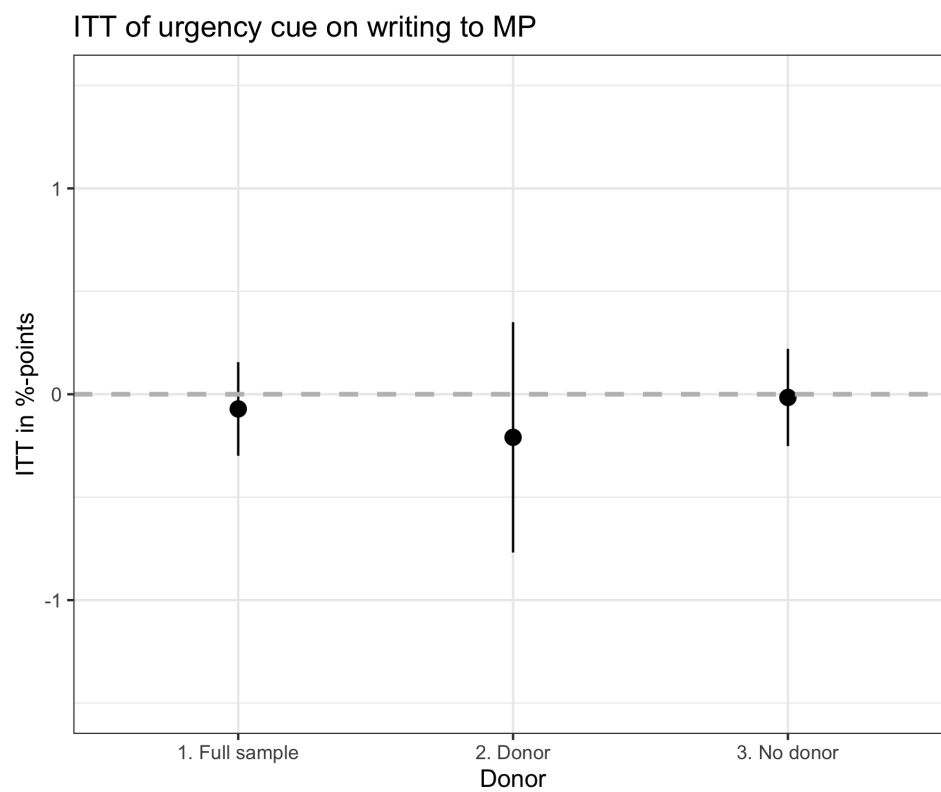


Figure A9: Effects of urgency cue, conditional on donor status

G Robustness checks

Table A5: Robustness test with new platform users

Treatment condition	(1) Main model	(2) including new users in control
No position & no urgency	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
No position & urgency	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Position & no urgency	0.04*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)
Position & urgency	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Constant	0.00*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Observations	119,362	119,582
R-squared	0.01	0.00

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A6: Robustness test assuming substitution rates equal to (twice) average daily contact on the *Write To Them* (WTT) platform

Treatment condition	(1) Observed outcomes	(2) Substitution: daily WTT	(3) Substitution: 2 x daily WTT
No position & no urgency	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
No position & urgency	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Position & no urgency	0.04*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Position & urgency	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Constant	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Observations	119,362	119,362	119,362
R-squared	0.01	0.00	0.00

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

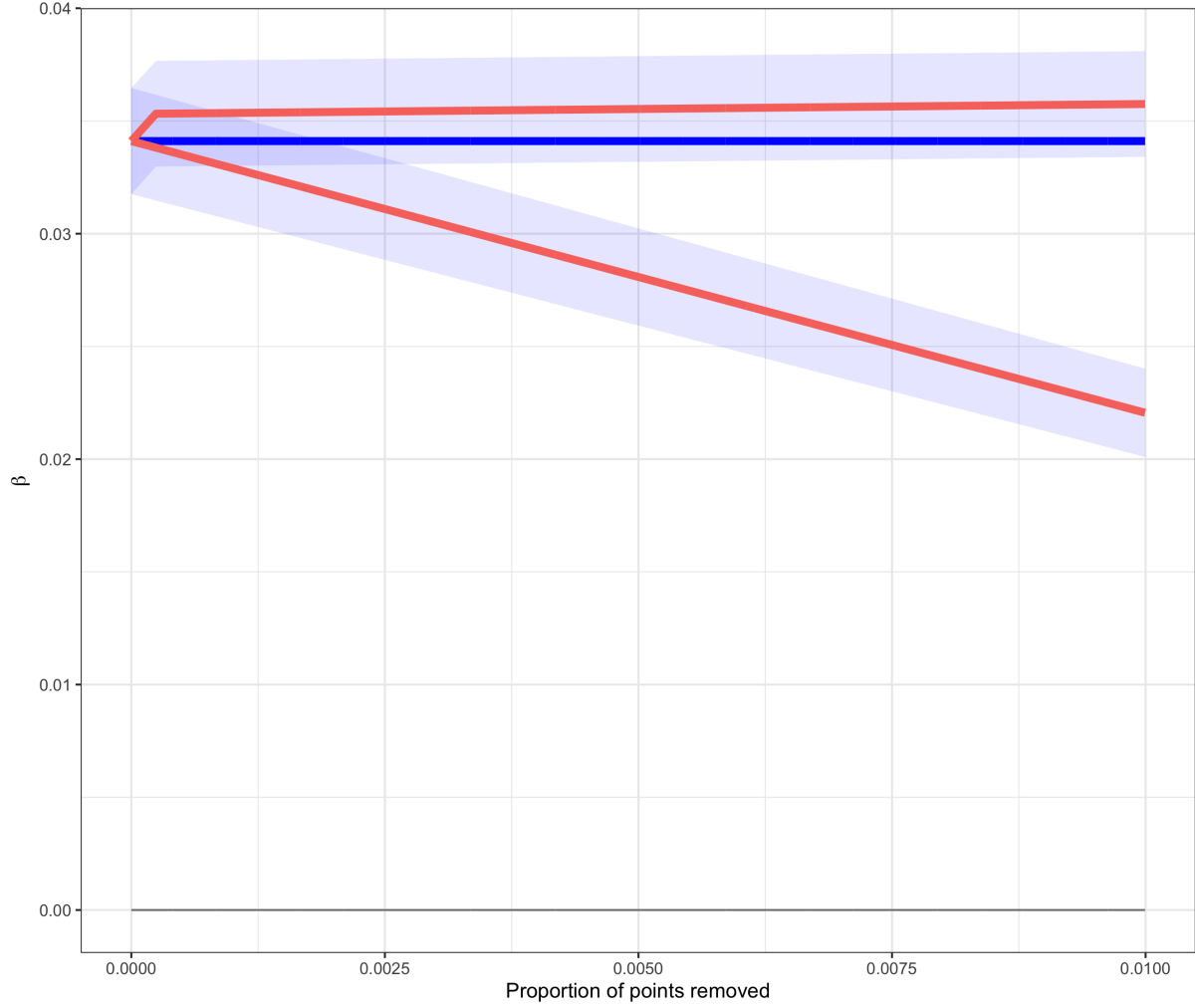


Figure A10: Approximate Maximum Influence Perturbation Test

In Figure A10 we evaluate the robustness of our conclusions regarding the effect of treatment on MP contact by testing the consistency of our modelled ITT when removing up to 1% of the experimental sample. Unlike other randomised control designs (Broderick, Giordano and Meager, 2021), our results are robust and not highly sensitive to losing influential observations from the sample. The solid blue line in Figure A10 illustrates our modelled ITT effect. The red line shows modelled ITT effects when different proportions of the sample are removed (x axis) up to 1%. The shaded areas surrounding the red line indicates the 95%CI of the permuted ITTs. In no instances does the sign of significance of our observed treatment effect change.

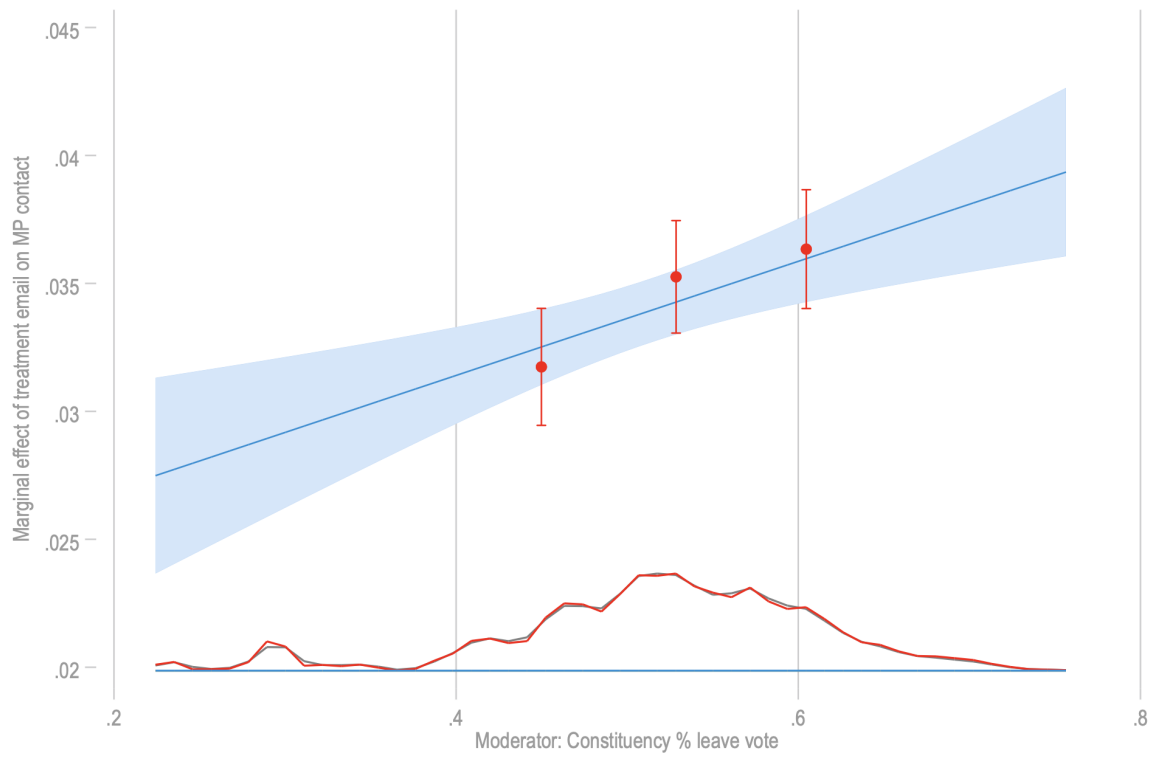


Figure A11: Moderation model with linearity test