Climate Action Outreach by Democrats in an Online Network in the USA

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Environment & Energy

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Location: online Platform

Sample: 21,000 individuals

Initiative(s): King Climate Action Initiative (K-CAI)

Target group: Voters Youth Adults

Outcome of interest: Electoral participation Empowerment Attitudes and norms

Intervention type: Digital and mobile Social networks Intergroup/social contact

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0011250

Partner organization(s): George and Obie Shultz Fund, National Science Foundation (NSF)

Building bipartisan support for climate policy in the United States may depend on grassroots citizen lobbying. Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to study if Democratic climate advocates recruit others for climate advocacy and whether they reach out across party lines to increase bi-partisan support. While Democrats were motivated to mobilize others to email Congress on climate action, they were more likely to do so when they believed their efforts would influence like-minded, Democratic-leaning individuals.

Policy issue

Climate policy is considered a polarizing issue in the United States, and opinions about the urgency to act differ between Democrats and Republicans. However, a majority overall describes climate change as a threat to the country's well-being[1]. To build bipartisan support for climate policy in the United States, grassroots citizen lobbying may be necessary. Constituent lobbying is common and has influenced legislators' behavior. Since political and social movements spread through social networks, members of the mainstream liberal climate movement may influence how far bipartisan engagement spreads. While most climate activists lean Democratic, about 33 percent of Republicans believe Congress should do more on climate change. However, if lawmakers respond differently to their partisan base, the largely left-leaning climate movement may face limits in its reach. Do Democratic climate advocates recruit others for climate advocacy? If so, do they reach out across party lines, and is their outreach strategic or shaped by political biases, distrust, and dislike?

Context of the evaluation

The evaluation took place via an online social network, constructed for the purpose of the evaluation, in the United States. A total of 21,000 individuals were recruited to study whether and how Democrats tried to convince people across the political spectrum to email Congress about climate action.

The experiment had two waves of participants. Wave-1 consisted of Democratic "influencers" who believed climate change is human-caused. They were recruited via social media for a survey about climate change, and these participants were politically engaged (73 percent had contacted elected officials in the past two years), predominantly white, highly educated (80 percent held a 4-year degree or more), and relatively affluent (51 percent earned over US$100,000/year).

Wave-2 included "targets" from a more politically and demographically diverse group, all of whom believed in human-caused climate change. This group was less politically engaged and included both Democrats (5,683 individuals) and Republicans (3,002 individuals).

Participants were semi-anonymous and connected to each other only via basic demographic profiles. The researchers measured climate advocacy by whether participants emailed their national Senators and House Representatives about climate action via an embedded form in the online network.

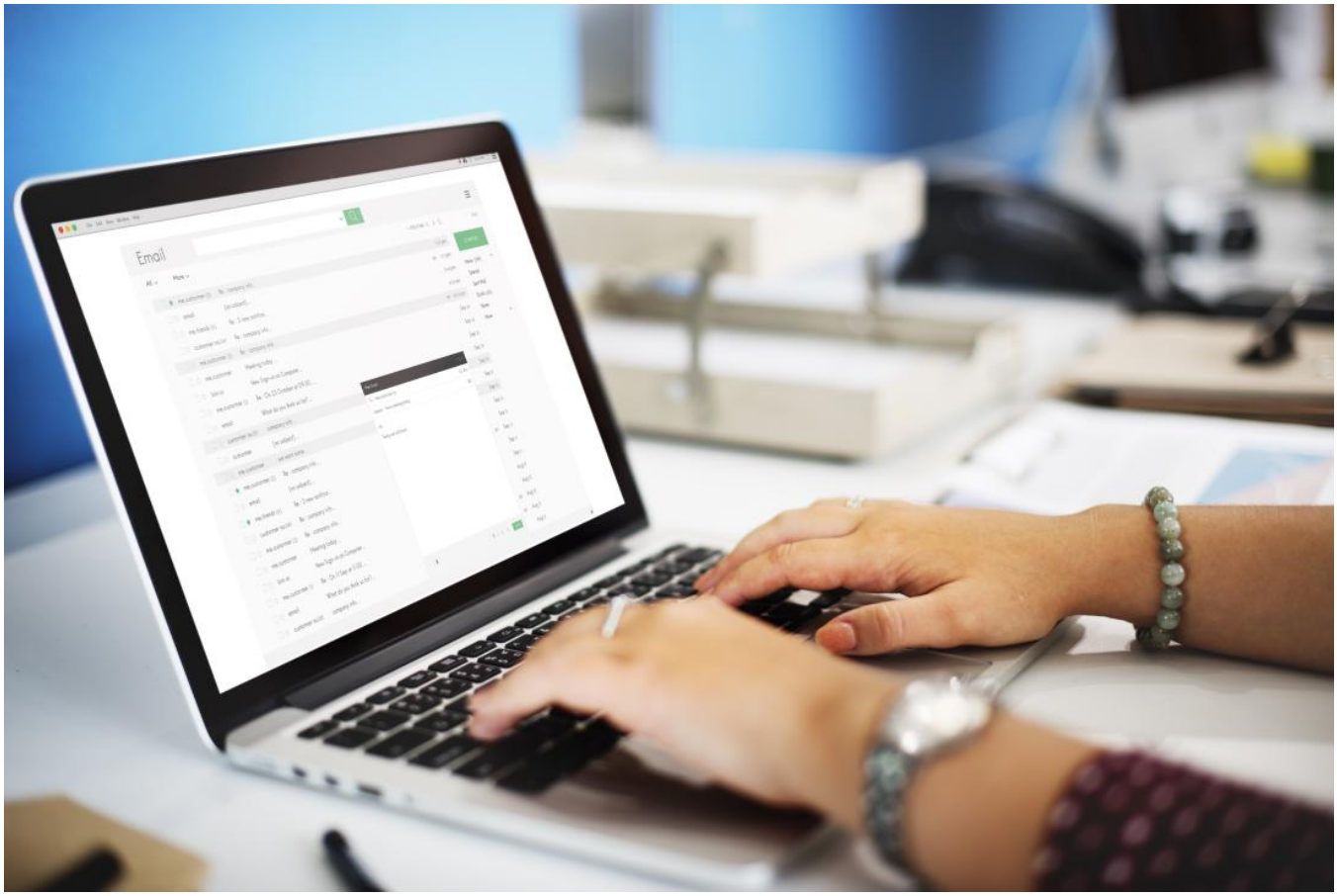


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Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to study how Democrats recruit other Americans for climate advocacy, in particular whether they reach out across party lines to increase bi-partisan support or prefer targeting other members of their party.

8,937 Wave-1 participants answered baseline questions and built a basic demographic profile including name, age, gender, education, political leaning, and state group. They were told that their profile would be shown to up to ten participants in a randomly-matched Wave-2 group and that they had the opportunity to email Congress via an embedded form. Before they made the decision to email Congress, they were randomized into one of three groups:

1. Invitation group (2675 individuals): Participants were told that if they email Congress, the online platform would show Wave-2 participants their profile, the information that they emailed Congress, and would invite them to do so as well. Wave-2 targets would see the invitation before deciding whether to email Congress.

2. Tell-after group (2646 individuals): Participants were told that if they email Congress, the online platform would show Wave-2 participants their profile, the information that they emailed Congress, and no invitation to join the action, i.e., Wave-2 participants would see the profile and choice of the Tell-after group, but only after deciding for themselves whether to email congress.

3. Comparison group (3616 individuals): Participants were told nothing about whether future participants would know if they emailed Congress.

In addition, researchers analyzed how much value participants placed on influencing others. Democrats in the comparison group who chose to email Congress were invited to complete an additional 15-minute survey. They made a series of binary choices: either invite another participant to email Congress and thereby reveal their own extended profile, including their action about emailing Congress, or make a fixed carbon-offset donation (US$3-6) while showing only the basic profile. Participants saw the demographic profiles of potential Wave-2 matches and could tailor their decisions accordingly.

Results and policy lessons

Researchers found that Democrats were motivated to mobilize others to email Congress on climate action, especially when they believed their efforts would influence like-minded, Democratic-leaning individuals. Overall, the study reveals that political polarization, both strategic and based on dislike of the other party, significantly limits cross-party outreach, posing a challenge to building bipartisan grassroots movements even among citizens who share concern about climate change.

Effect of inspiring others: Researchers found that 47 percent of participants in the invitation group emailed Congress, compared to 44 percent in the tell-after group and 31 percent in the comparison group, showing that Democrats were more likely to act when their efforts could inspire others. The only difference between the invitation and tell-after groups was whether participants' actions could influence others, suggesting that some motivation did come from trying to affect whether later participants emailed Congress. Participants were also more likely to choose inviting someone to email Congress over a carbon offset when their matches would see their profile in advance of deciding whether to email Congress.

Bipartisan outreach: Democrats strategically targeted fellow Democrats, expecting outreach to Republicans to be less effective, which was indeed the case. Being able to influence a fellow Democrat in Wave-2 made Democrats in Wave-1 five percentage points more likely to opt into the email process, whereas they were only 1.7 percentage points more likely to email when doing so allowed them to try to influence a Republican. When choosing whether to invite others or delegate funds to carbon offsets, the opportunity to invite a Republican increased selection of the extended profile by 42 percentage points—but the effect was 54 percentage points (a 27 percent larger effect) when the match was a Democrat. In addition, when Wave-1 invitations were actually passed to Wave-2 participants, they increased the likelihood of Wave-2 participants emailing Congress for both Democrats and Republicans but with a stronger influence on Democrats.

Mechanisms: In a second round of choices between sending invitations and delegating carbon offsets, participants could choose whether to show their own political leaning in their profile. Participants revealed their political leaning to 91 percent of Democratic matches. In contrast, they showed their political leanings to only 34 percent of Republicans who would see their profile before deciding and 44 percent if seen after. This suggested that Democrats believed their invitations were more persuasive to Republicans when their political identity was hidden. However, even when the effectiveness of outreach was equalized between Democrat and Republican recipients, Democrats were more likely to send their invitations to fellow Democrats. Combined with evidence that Democrats expected emails from Democrats and Republicans to have similar effects on their legislators, this suggested that Democrats are, in part, more likely to reach out to fellow Democrats due to dislike of

engaging with members of the opposite party.

Overall, there were large partisan outreach gaps even when Democrats are directly connected to potential allies that are Republican-leaning. The results suggest that a unified grassroot movement may not be very likely to form. Advancing climate protection therefore likely requires parallel efforts at the grassroots level, combined with bipartisan cooperation that addresses the underlying beliefs driving polarization and emphasizes shared values beyond politics.

Page, Lucy and Ruebeck, Hannah. “Reaching across the aisle: Polarization and Grassroots Climate Mobilization?”. Working Paper, September 2025. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5083051

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1. Funk, Cary, Brian Kennedy, and Alec Tyson. 2023: “What the data says about Americans’ views of climate change." Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/