

Decreasing “Rolloff” in Down Ballot Races

Randomized Control Trial (with One Minus Beta)

Summary

GoodPower (formerly Climate Emergency Advocates, CEA) and One Minus Beta tested a digital and mail intervention aimed to reduce “rolloff” in the Montana Public Service Commissions race. Treatment precincts received three pieces of mail and layered digital programs about the PSC race but due to legal reasons did not include information on candidates. Rolloff was significantly lower (0.2 pp) in treatment precincts. There was no significant effect on Democratic vote margin.

Background

With most focused on top of ticket races, many voters leave down ballot races blank. This “rolloff” phenomenon is also disproportionately larger for Democratic candidates and past interventions have demonstrated how difficult it can be to successfully reduce rolloff. GoodPower and One Minus Beta tested the impact of a layered digital and mail intervention aimed to reduce rolloff in the Montana Public Service Commissions (PSC) race. PSCs are important governing bodies that determine energy rates for constituents and are often unknown by voters.

Research Questions:

- Did the mail and digital program decrease rolloff in the Montana Public Service Commissioner elections?
- Did the mail and digital program increase the Democratic vote margin in the Montana Public Service Commissioner elections?
- What was the cost per vote of the program?

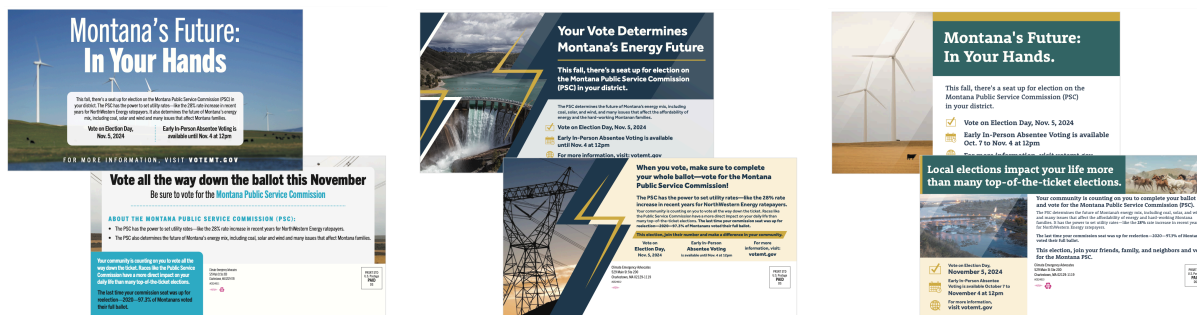
Method

Design

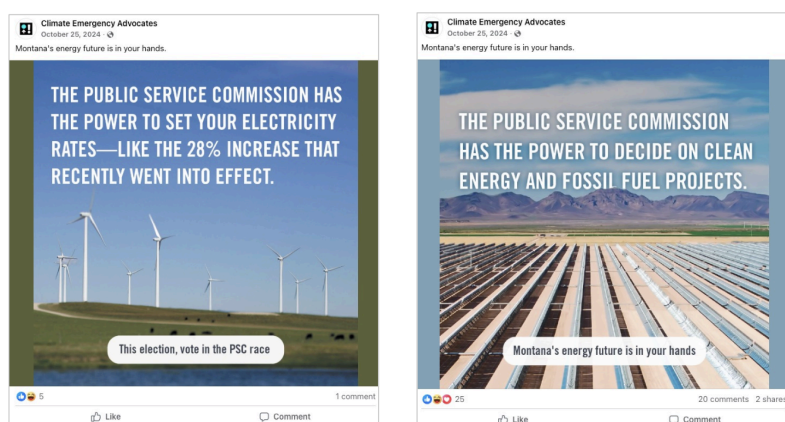
One Minus Beta identified a universe of 406 precincts in PSC Districts 2, 3, or 4 containing about 475,000 registered voters with an ideology score 40+ and created pairs of precincts that were as similar as possible across observable characteristics. One precinct in each pair was then randomized to Treatment ($n = 203$) or Control ($n = 203$). The treatment condition then received the intervention. Once the Montana Secretary of State released precinct-level election results, treatment and control conditions were compared.¹

Intervention

GoodPower deployed digital ads about the PSC race between October 24, 2024 and November 5, 2024. In collaboration with Deliver Strategies, three mail pieces were sent on October 22, October 25, and October 28, 2024. Digital and mail messages contained similar information such as that the PSC has the power to set utility rates and that the PSC determines the future of Montana’s energy mix. Each mail piece also included social normative language (“The last time your commission seat was up for reelection – 2020 – 97.3% of Montanans voted their full ballot.”) and highlighted the election date and early voting dates.



Digital ads:



Key Findings

The program decreased rolloff in the Montana PSC races.

- Rolloff was 4.5% in precincts in the control group and 4.3% in precincts in the treatment group ($p < .10$). The difference between experiment conditions is statistically significant, indicating that it is unlikely to be due to chance (one-tailed test due to directional hypothesis).
- The program decreased rolloff by 0.3 pp in precincts where at least 55% of households had a targeted voter ($p < 0.05$). Meanwhile, the program had no meaningful effect in precincts where fewer than 55% of households had a targeted voter.

The program did not increase the Democratic vote margin in PSC races.

- The Democratic vote margin was -16.6 pp in precincts in the control group and -17.0 pp in precincts in the treatment group ($p = .40$).

The cost per PSC vote was about \$540.

- The program generated 327 additional votes in PSC races at a total cost of about \$176,000 (\$150,870 for mail, \$25,231 for digital ads).

Looking Ahead

Given the historical difficulty of demonstrating an effect on downballot rolloff, these results are very promising for scaling work in 2026, especially for local elections like Public Service Commissions.

Layering Education and Persuasion

Previous rolloff studies have tested the effectiveness of ballot guides that highlight candidates or issues. Due to legal concerns, this program did not include information on the candidates and focused solely on the race itself. It is possible that focusing exclusively on the race may have contributed to intervention success, so future interventions should isolate and layer education vs. persuasion.

High Saturation Likely Improves Interventions

In the average treatment precinct, 67% of households received the program and the program was more effective when at least 55% of households had a targeted voter. The high saturation rate made it possible to detect smaller effects than in some previous studies. Additionally, any previous studies on rolloff have tested the effectiveness of one mail piece. This program included three mail pieces and digital ads, which may have contributed to its success.