

The effects of tailored messages

Campaign Lab Research Series





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Outline

1.  Project context
2.  Existing research
3.  Experiment: tailoring
4.  Experiment: sharing
5.  Conclusions

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Project context

Collaborative field experiment with a pressure group who were running a petition campaign.

Tested two tactics in emails sent to supporters:

- **Message tailoring:** Adapting messages based on information held about supporters' issue priorities
- **Relational recruitment:** Asking supporters to recruit their personal connections



Project context

Question:

How can campaigns use emails to mobilise petition signatures?



Project context

What can this project tell us about campaigning?

- How to get supporters to sign petitions:
 - Helpful for demonstrating electoral pressure ([Bergan and Cole 2015](#); [Blumenau 2021](#))
- How to get supporters to act, more generally:
 - findings apply to comparable behaviours campaigns want to mobilise ([Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2022](#); [Lawall et al. 2024](#))



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Definitions

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Message tailoring involves:

1. using known, or inferred, *information* about the recipient to...
2. ... *adapt* messages that are sent to different recipients

Tailoring: Example 1

Face-to-face canvassing ([Kalla, Levine, and Broockman 2023](#))

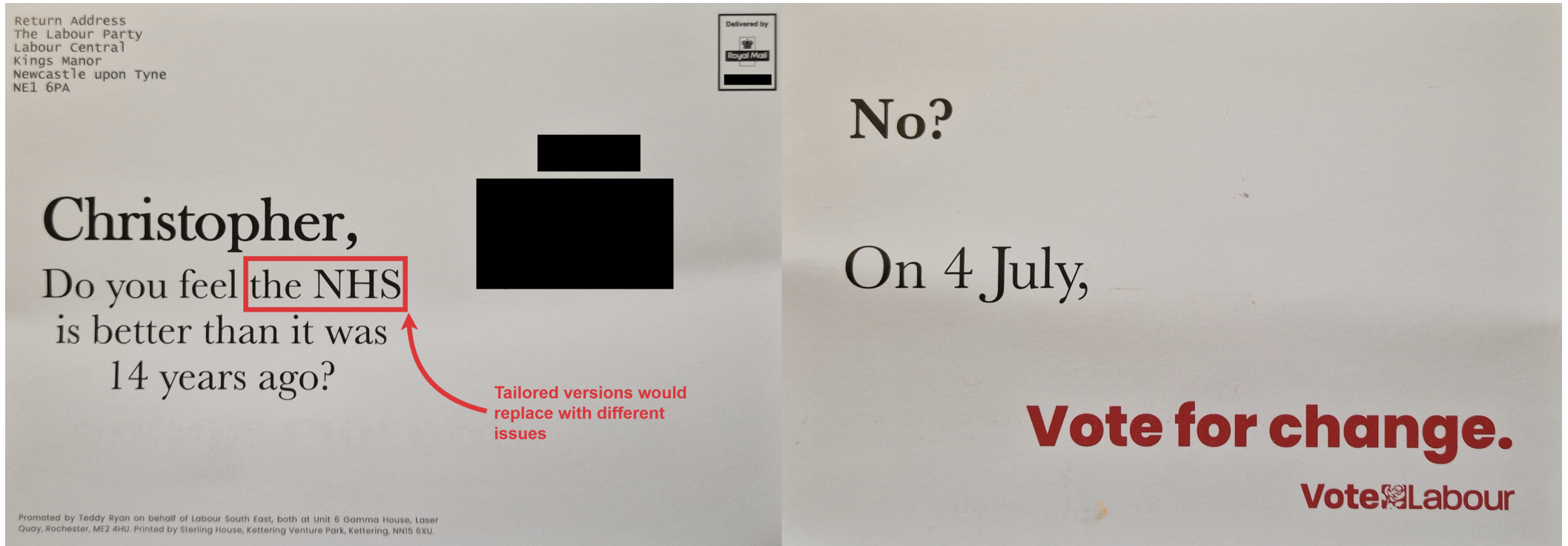
- Canvassers asked voters about their opinions & tried to identify a “moral foundation”¹
- Explicitly named the moral foundation in their argument:
“Just like you I value loyalty/fairness/etc...”
- Mixed findings: increased likelihood of taking action, but didn’t shift attitudes.

Tailoring: Example 2

Direct mail

Tailoring: Example 2

Direct mail



Note: leaflet selected to demonstrate how it could be tailored, I have no evidence to suggest it actually was! Source: electionleaflets.org/leaflets/20684

- If the candidate knew voters' issue priorities, they could adapt the message to emphasize different issues.

How does tailoring work?

- The **causal effect** of a message on an individual: difference between outcome if they get the message & outcome if they don't get the message
- We usually talk about the **average effect** of messages — but not everyone reacts the same → “**heterogeneity**”

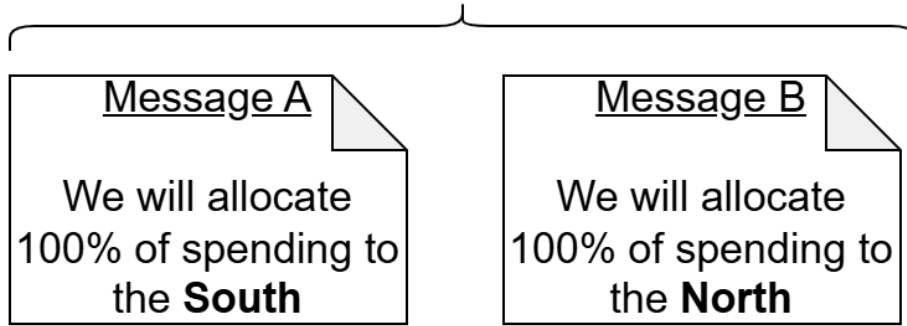


How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example



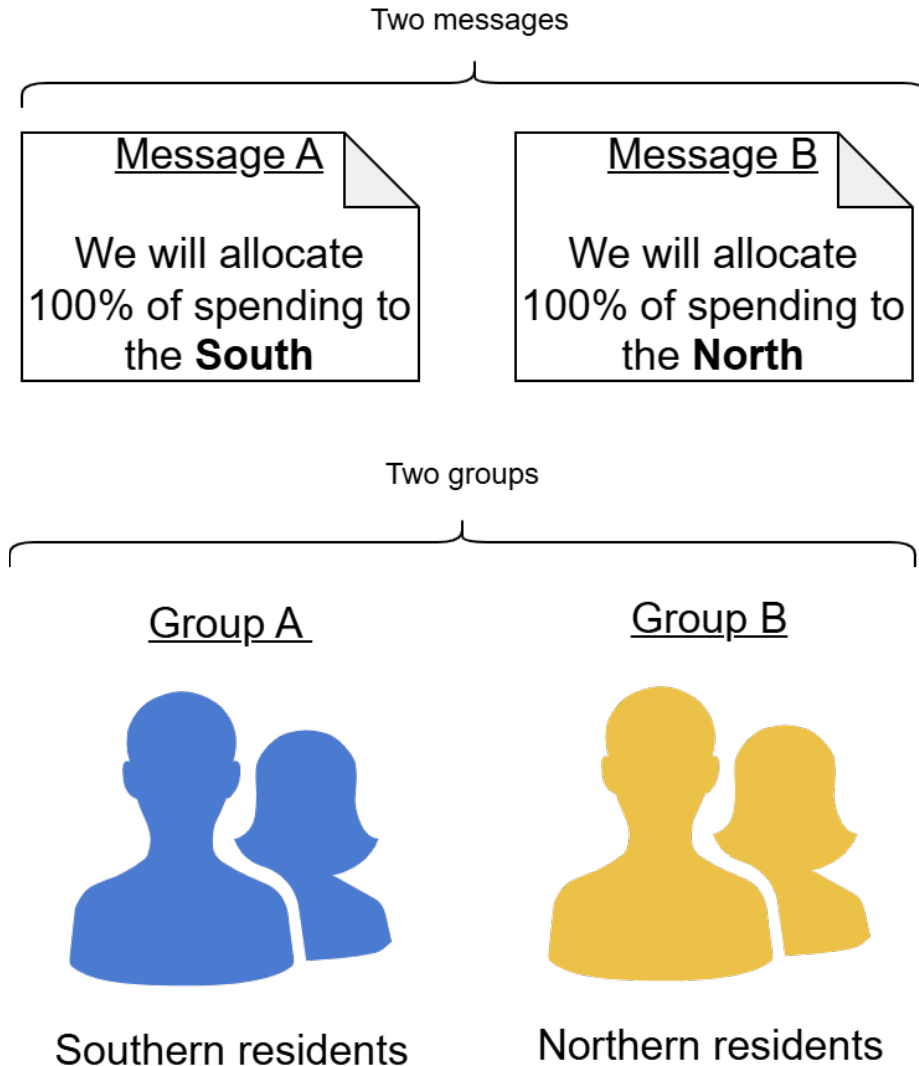
How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example

Two messages



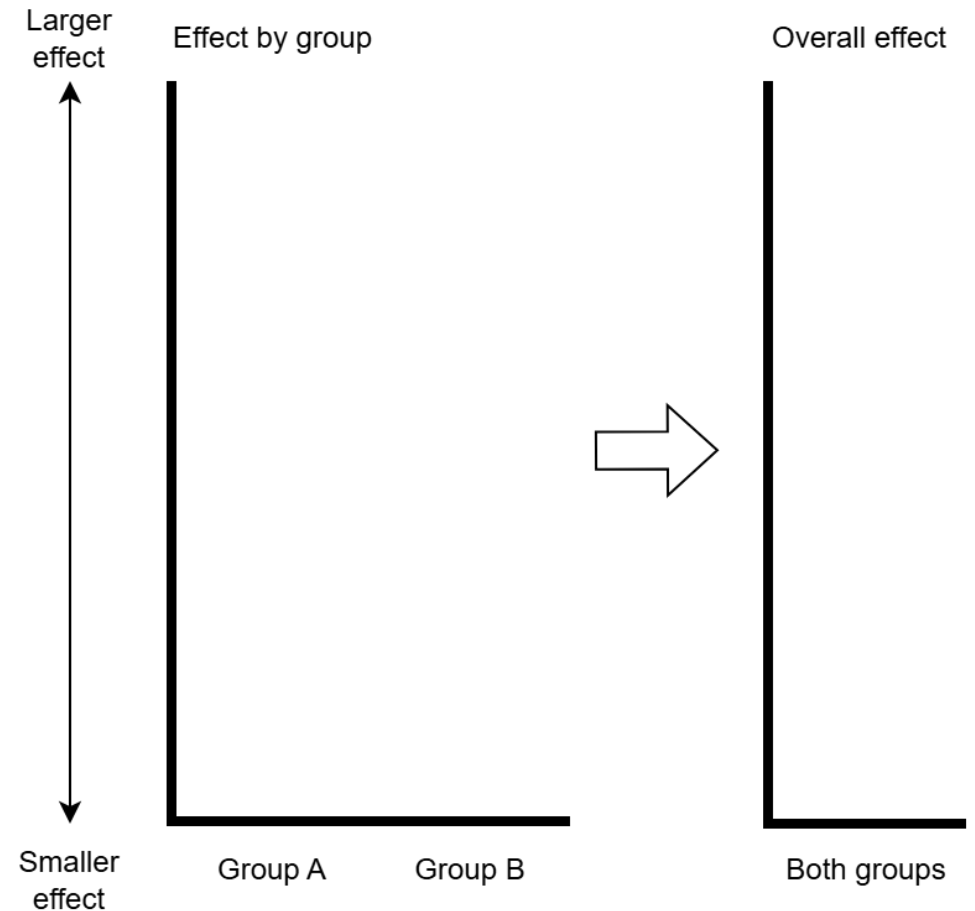
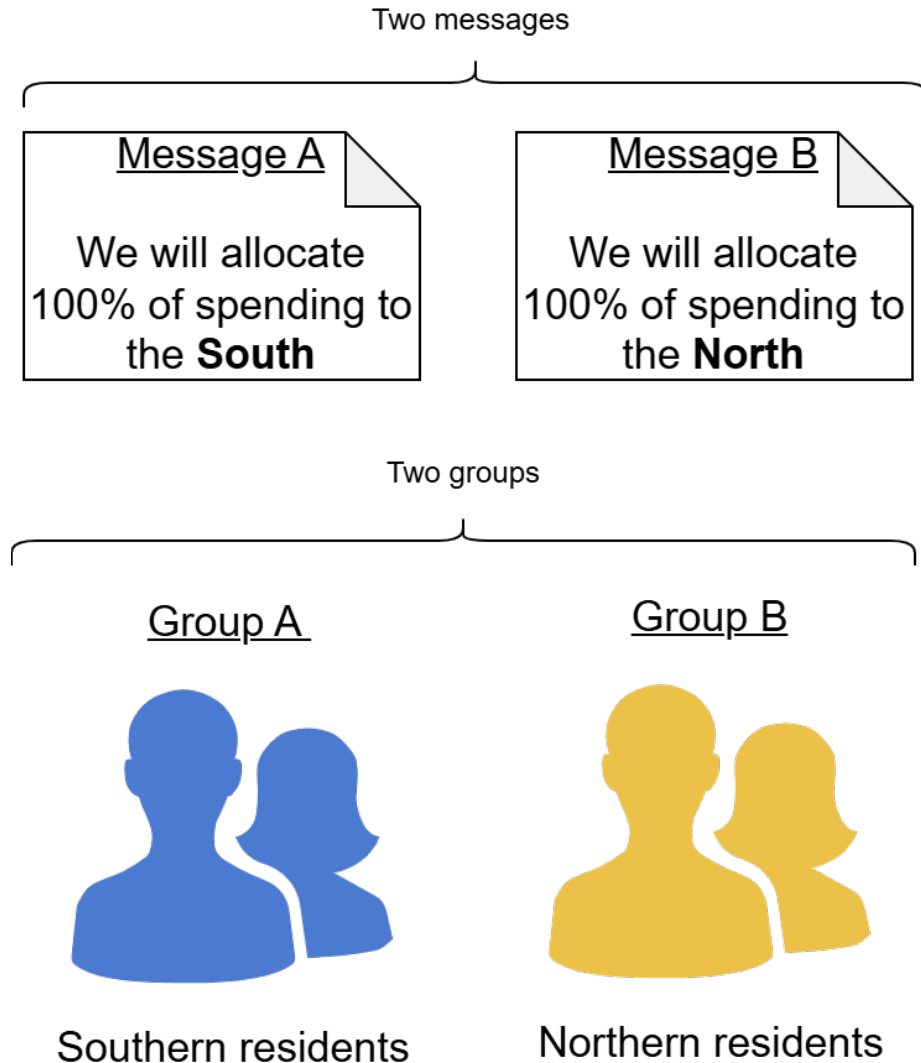


How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example



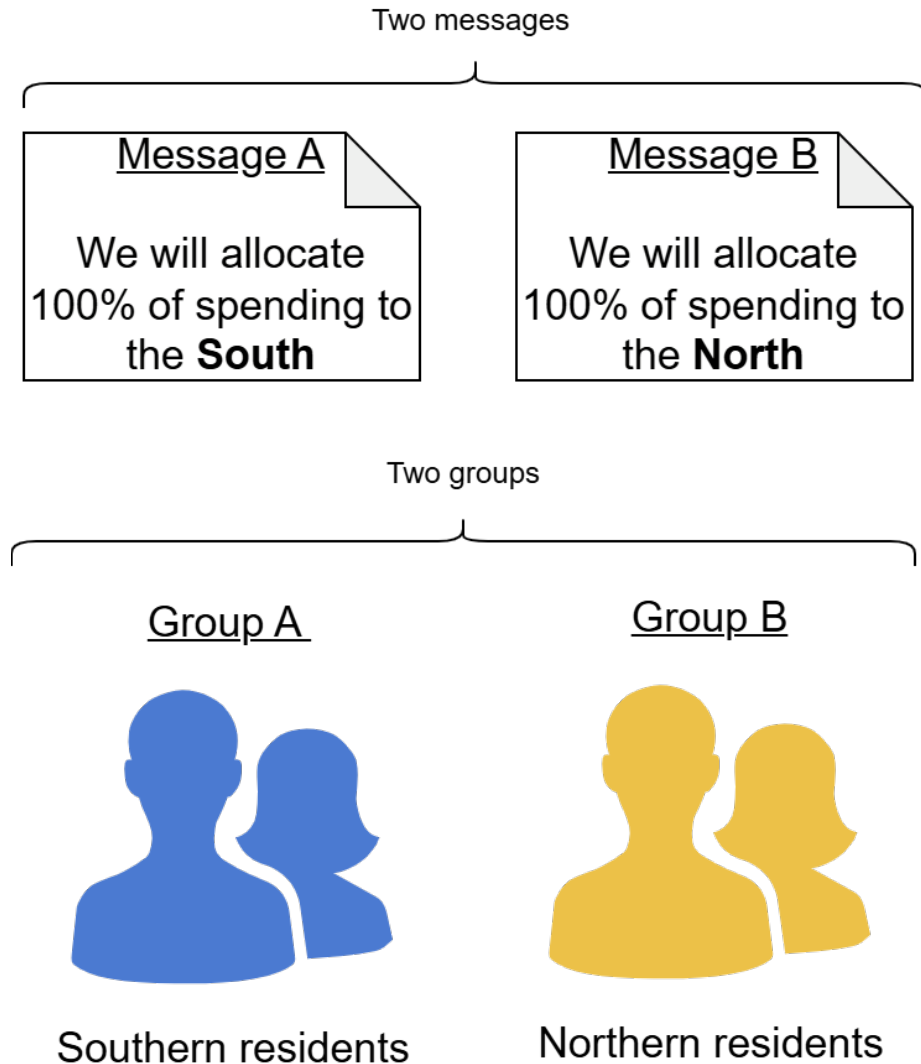


How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example

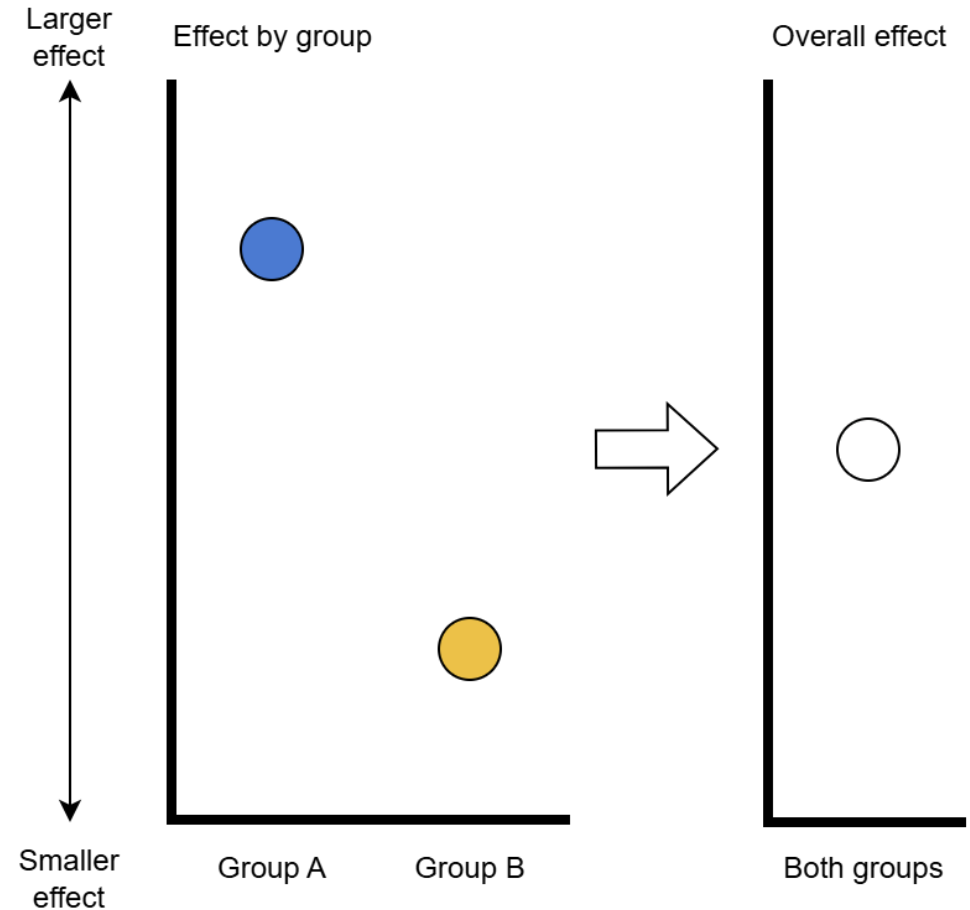




How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example

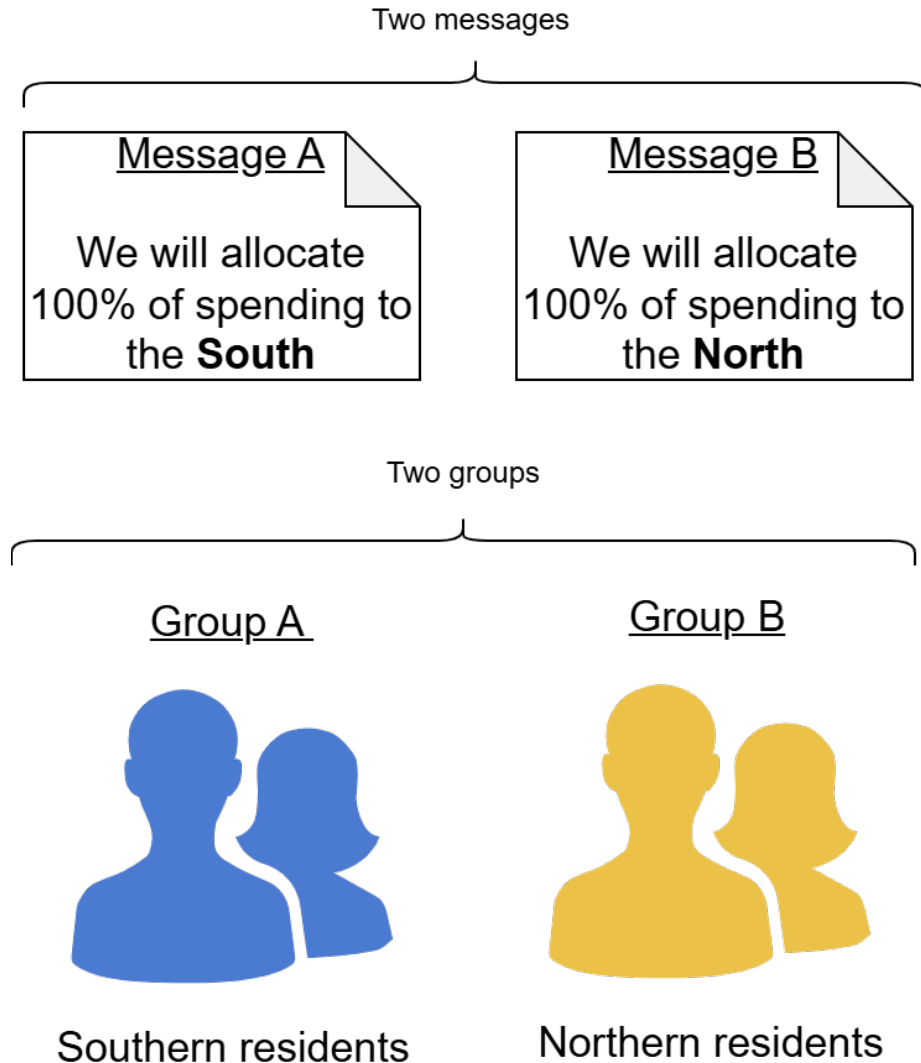


Send both groups Message A

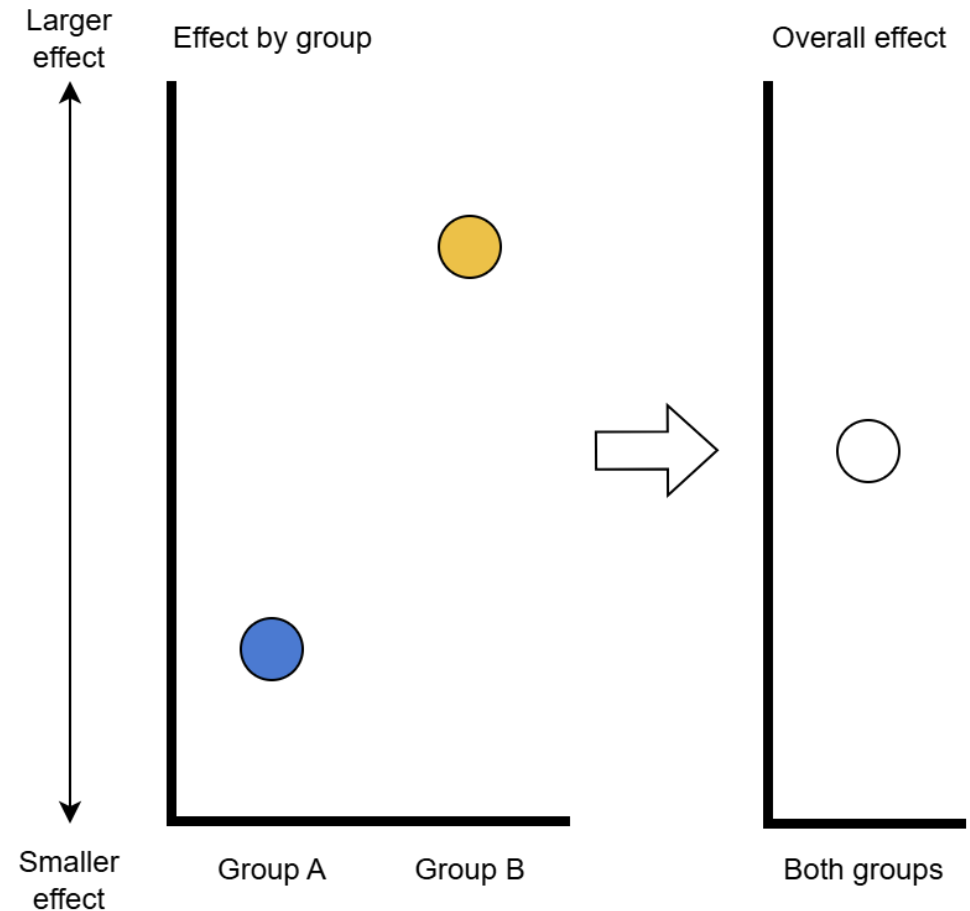




How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example

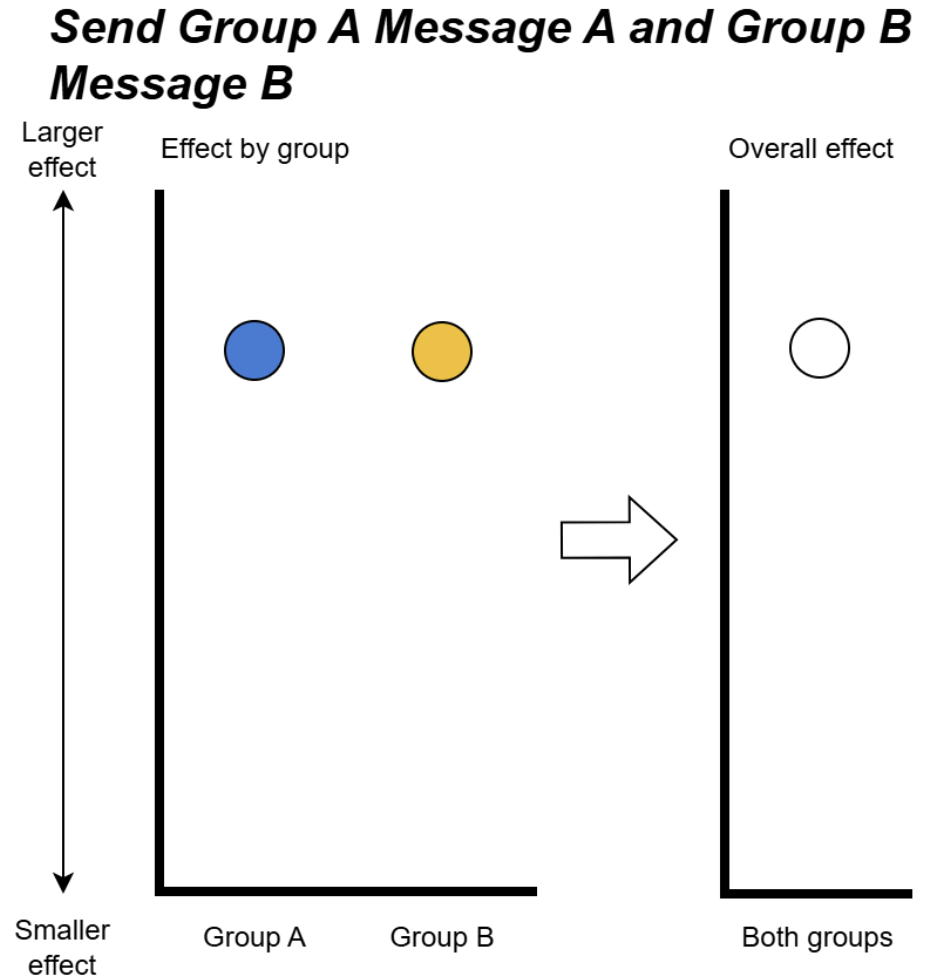
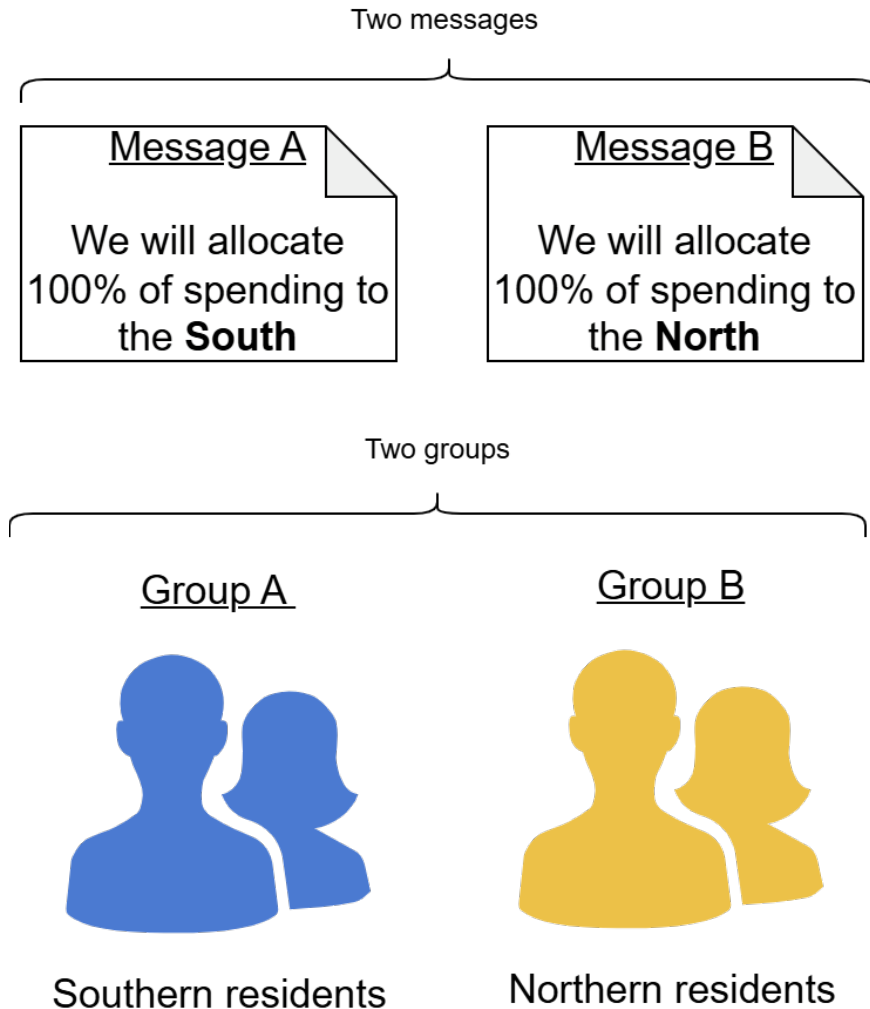


Send both groups Message B





How does tailoring work? an (extreme) example



When does tailoring not work?

When it is **over-tailored** ([Gahn 2024](#))

- makes voters feel manipulated
- not credible → “too good to be true”

Worse when messages are **mis-targeted** ([Hersh and Schaffner 2013](#))

- voters don't assume messages are mis-targeted →
 - like but ignore correctly tailored messages;
 - dislike and take seriously mis-targeted messages

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What we did

- Pressure group had recorded most-important issues for some supporters.
- Sample ($N = 11,743$): all subscribers who
 - ...were not recorded as having already signed the petition and
 - ...had a recorded most important issue

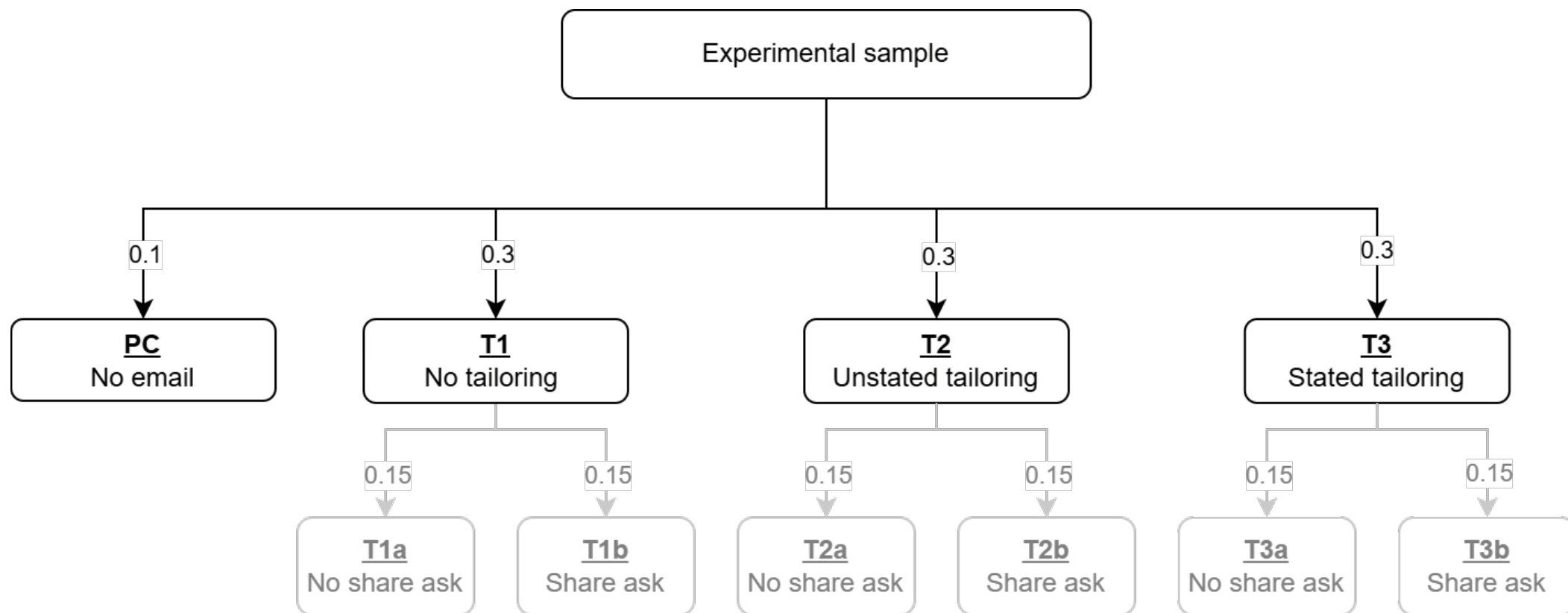


What we did

- Random assignment to different treatment conditions: no email; untailored baseline; or one of two tailoring strategies
- Randomisation → only difference between groups is the message they received → *causal effect* of a message.



What we did





What we did

Unstated tailored (T2)

By giving everyone an equal voice and vote, electoral reform ensures **urgent issues like [own_issue]** will remain at the top of parliament's agenda.

Stated tailored (T3)

When we asked you what matters most to you, you said **[own_issue]** was one of the most important issues facing the UK.
By giving everyone an equal voice and vote, electoral reform ensures **urgent issues like [own_issue]** will remain at the top of parliament's agenda.

Untailored (T1)

By giving everyone an equal voice and vote, electoral reform ensures **urgent issues like [rand_other_issue]** will remain at the top of parliament's agenda.

No email (PC)

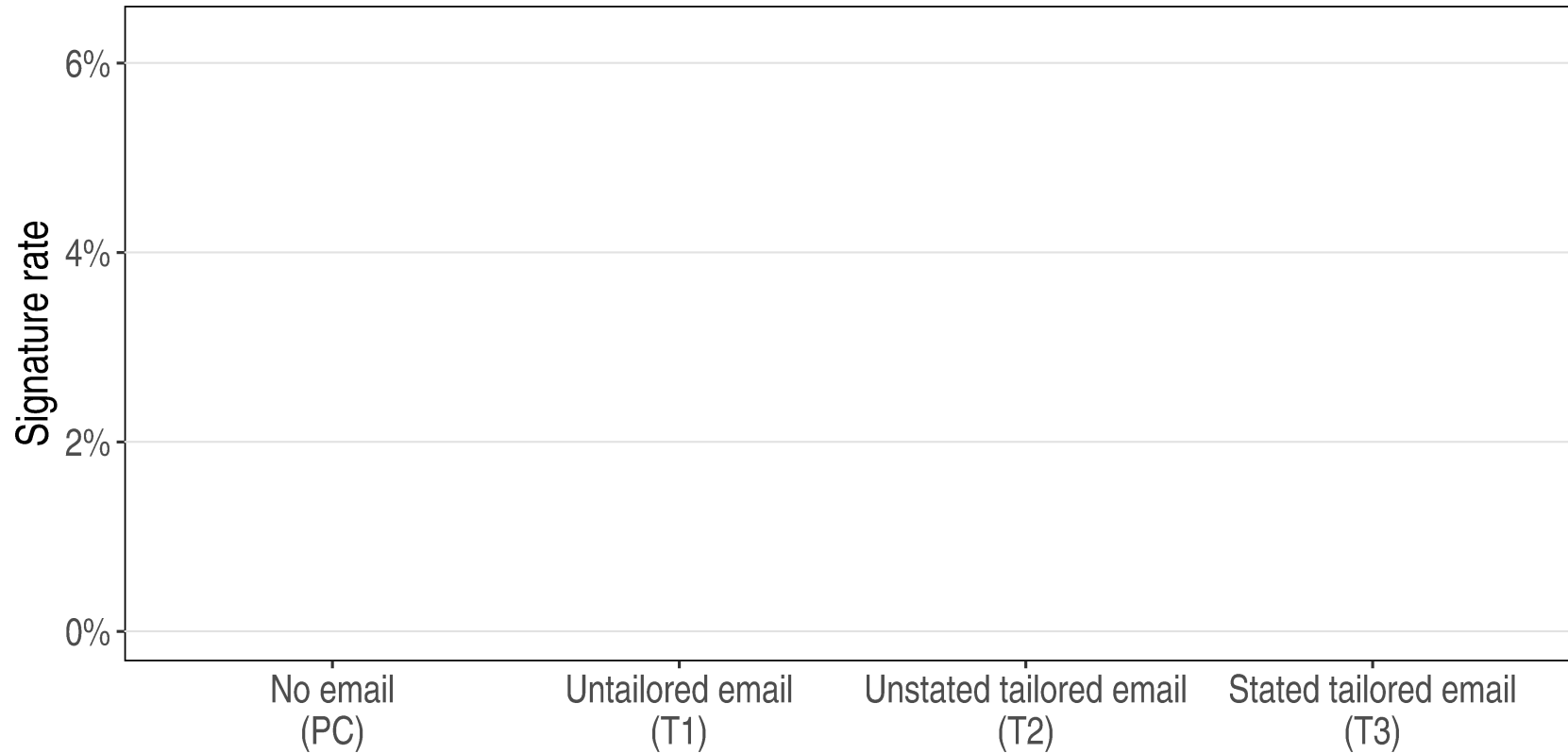


What we did

- Measured whether individuals had signed the petition at 2-days and 10-days
- The petition was publicly available (advertised, searchable, etc) → control group could have signed it too



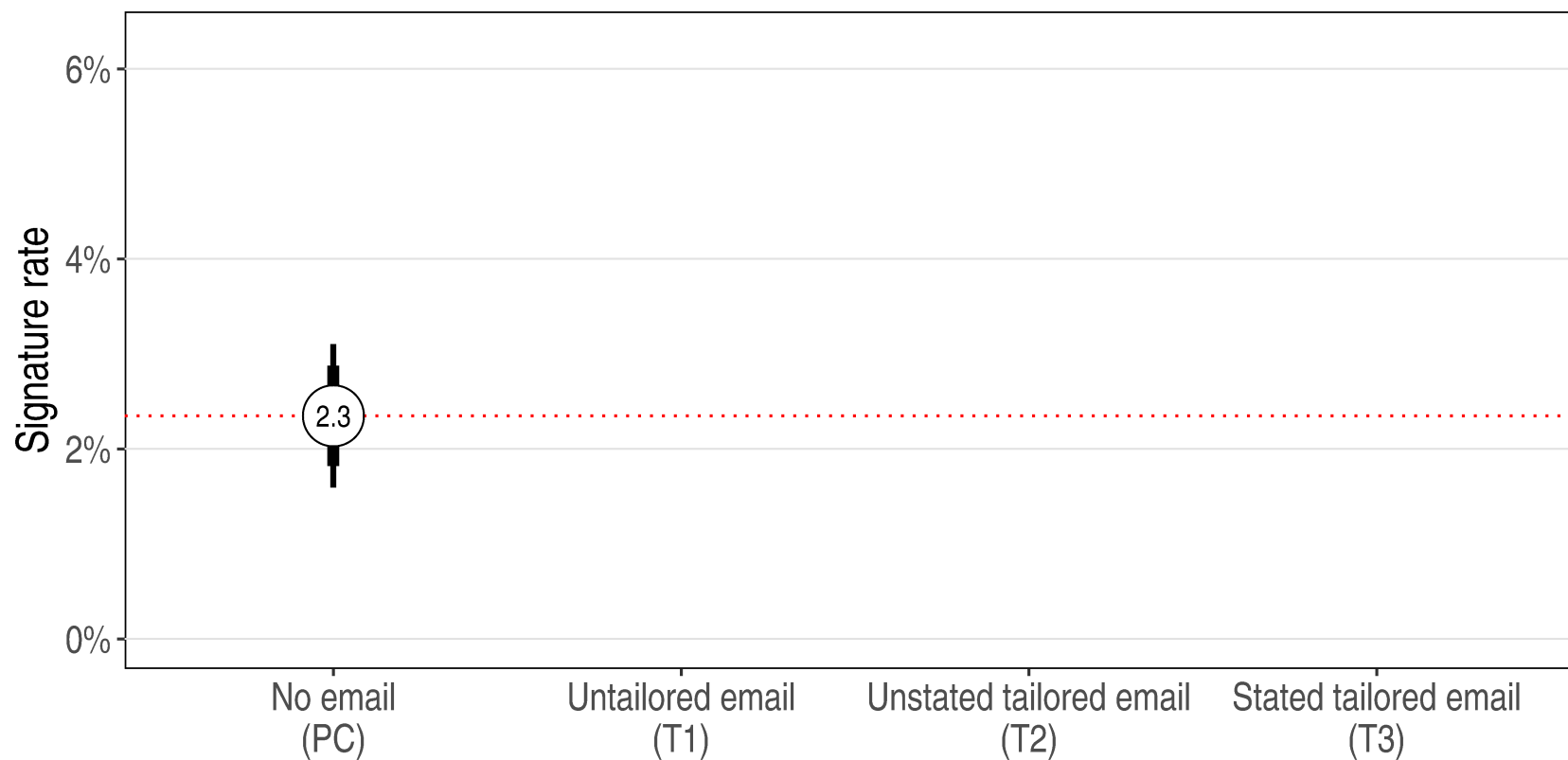
Results: tailoring



Source: Experimental Data. N=11,743
The plotted 95% (thin line) and 83% (thick line) confidence intervals were calculated parametrically.
p-values shown for between-arm comparisons were calculated using randomisation inference.
*** = $p < 0.001$, ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$, + = $p < 0.1$



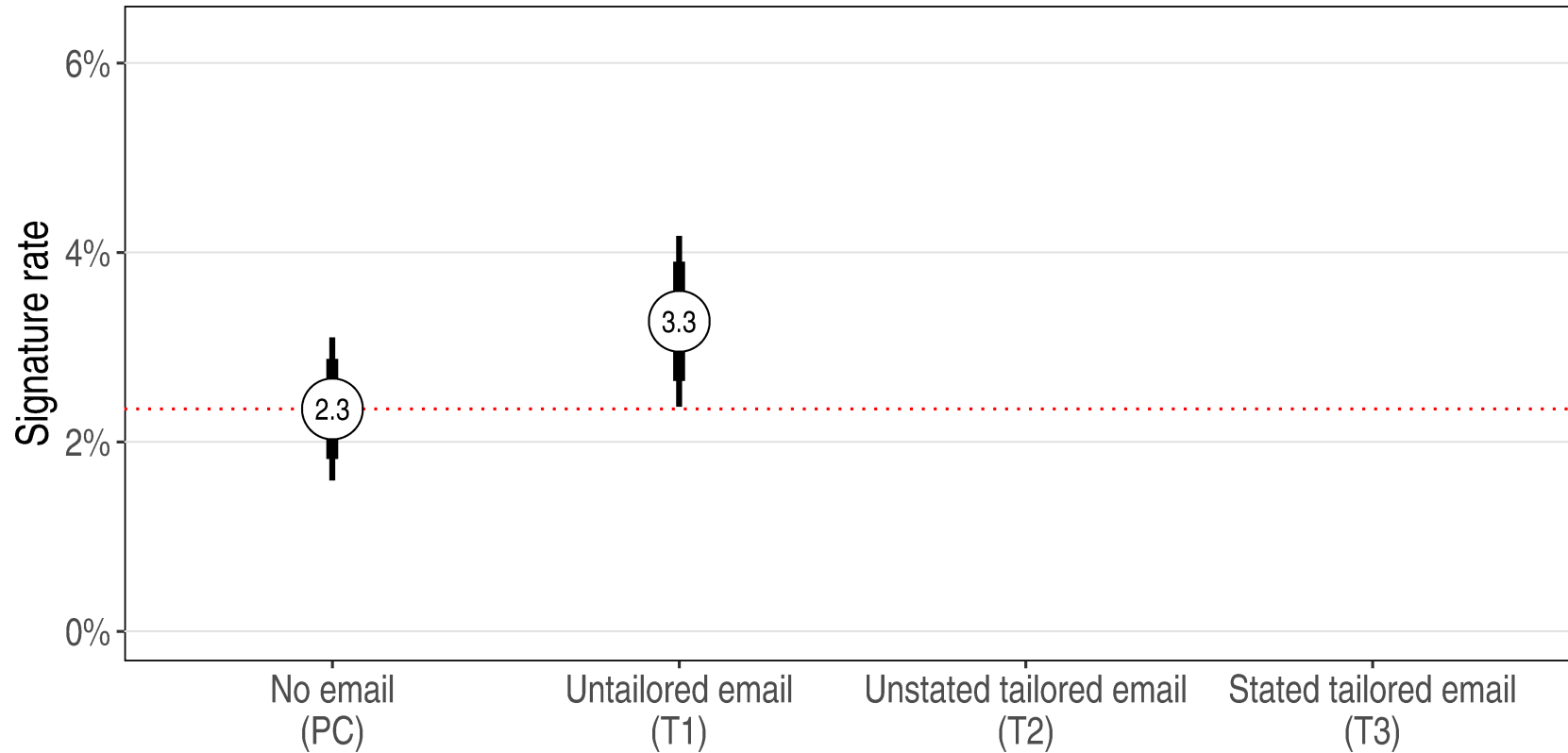
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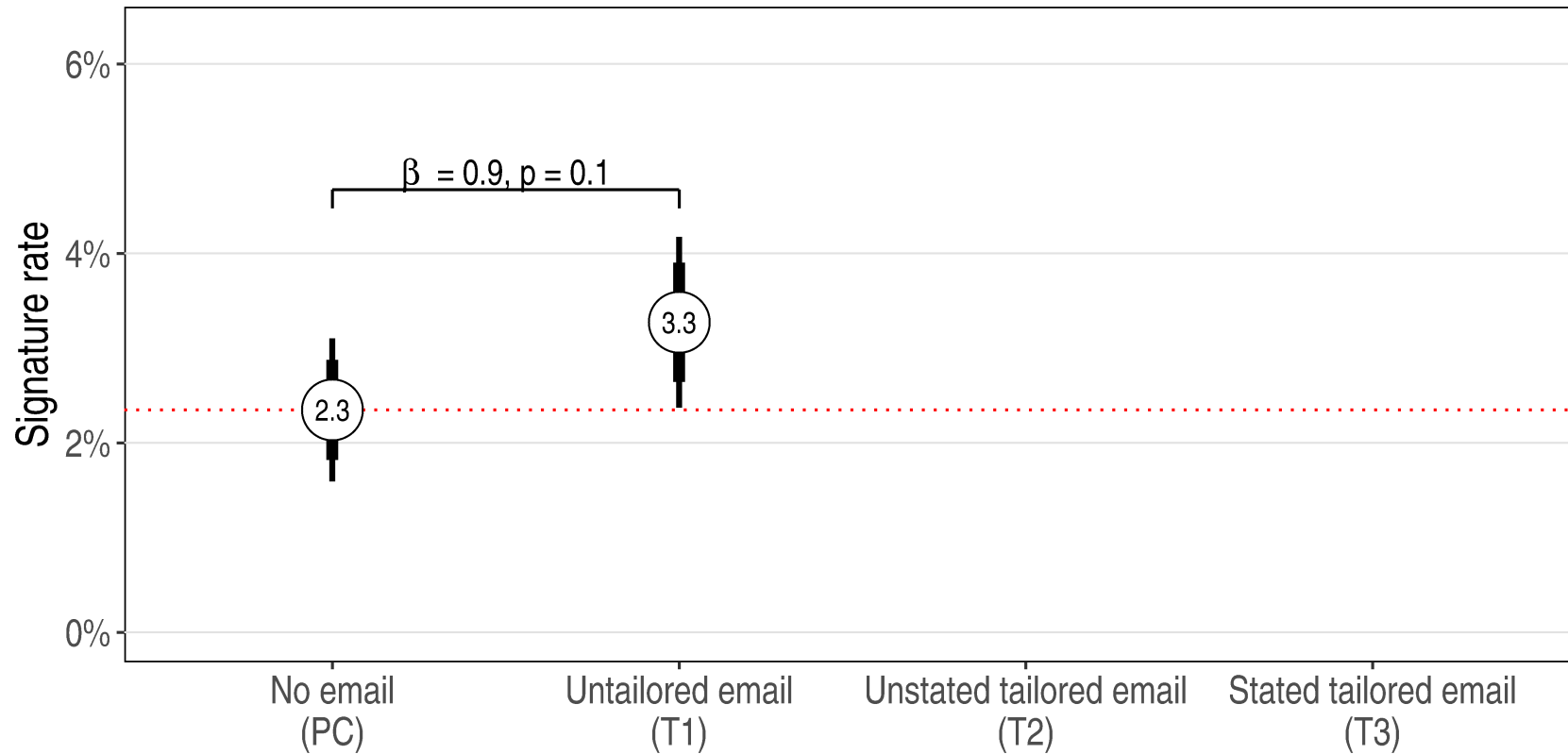
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Results: tailoring



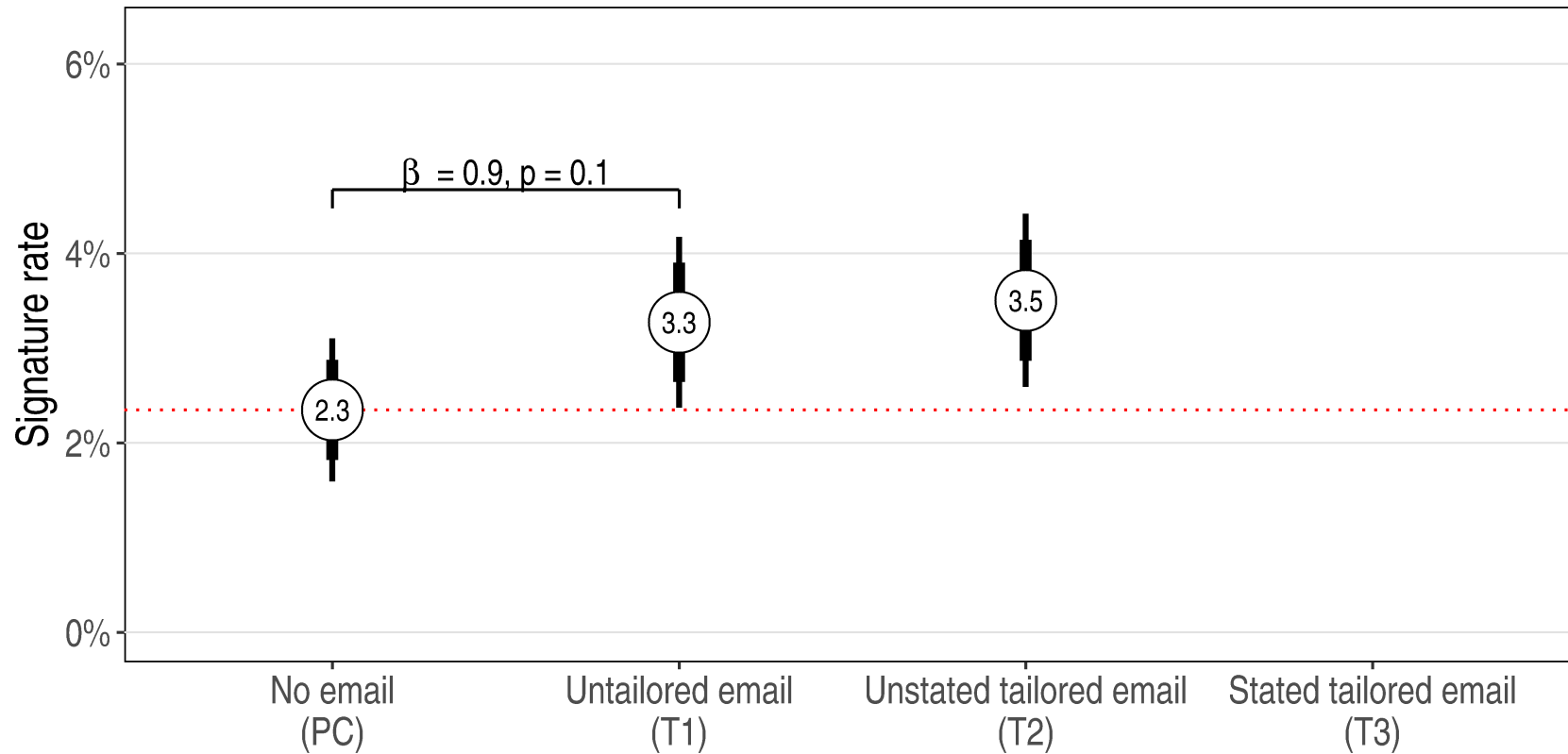
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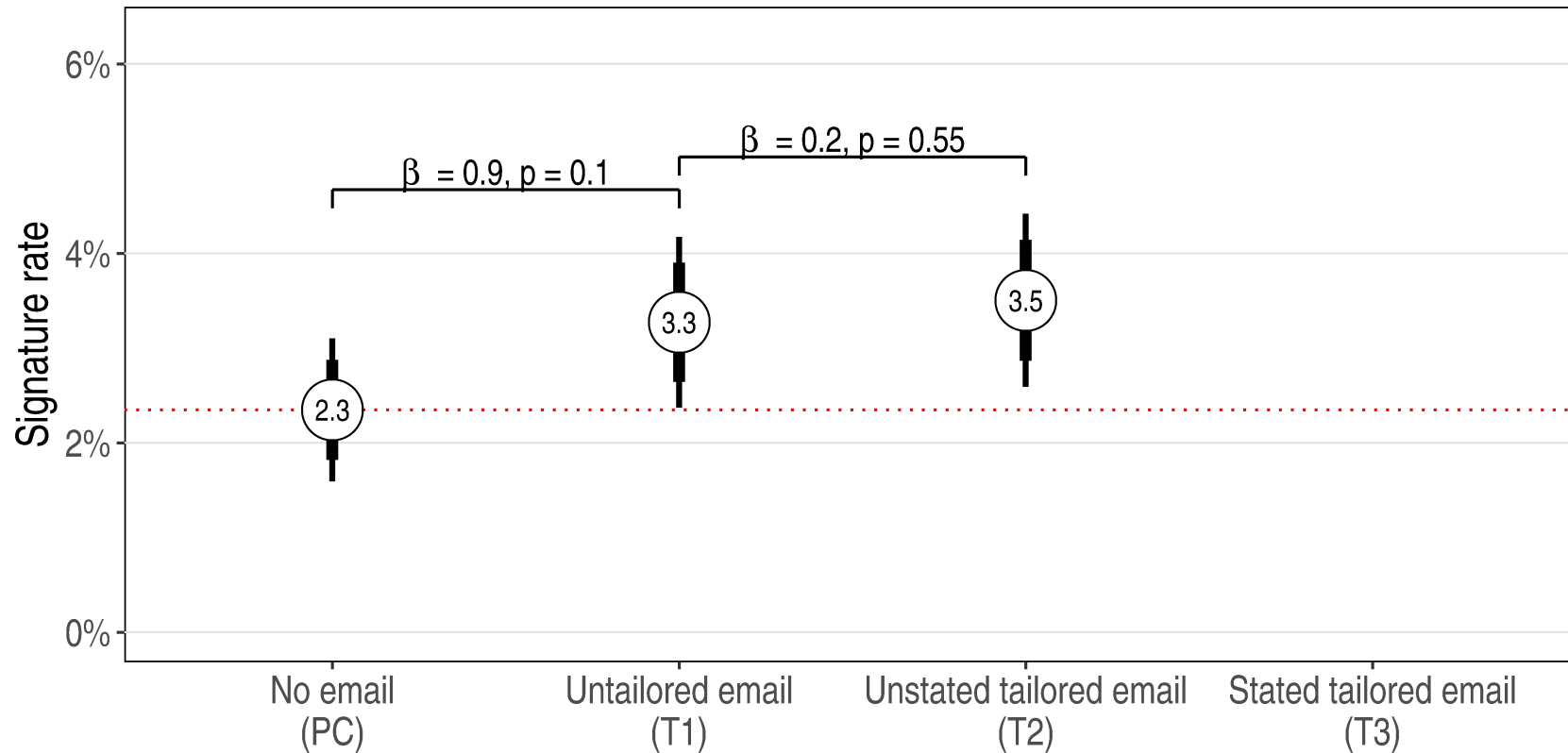
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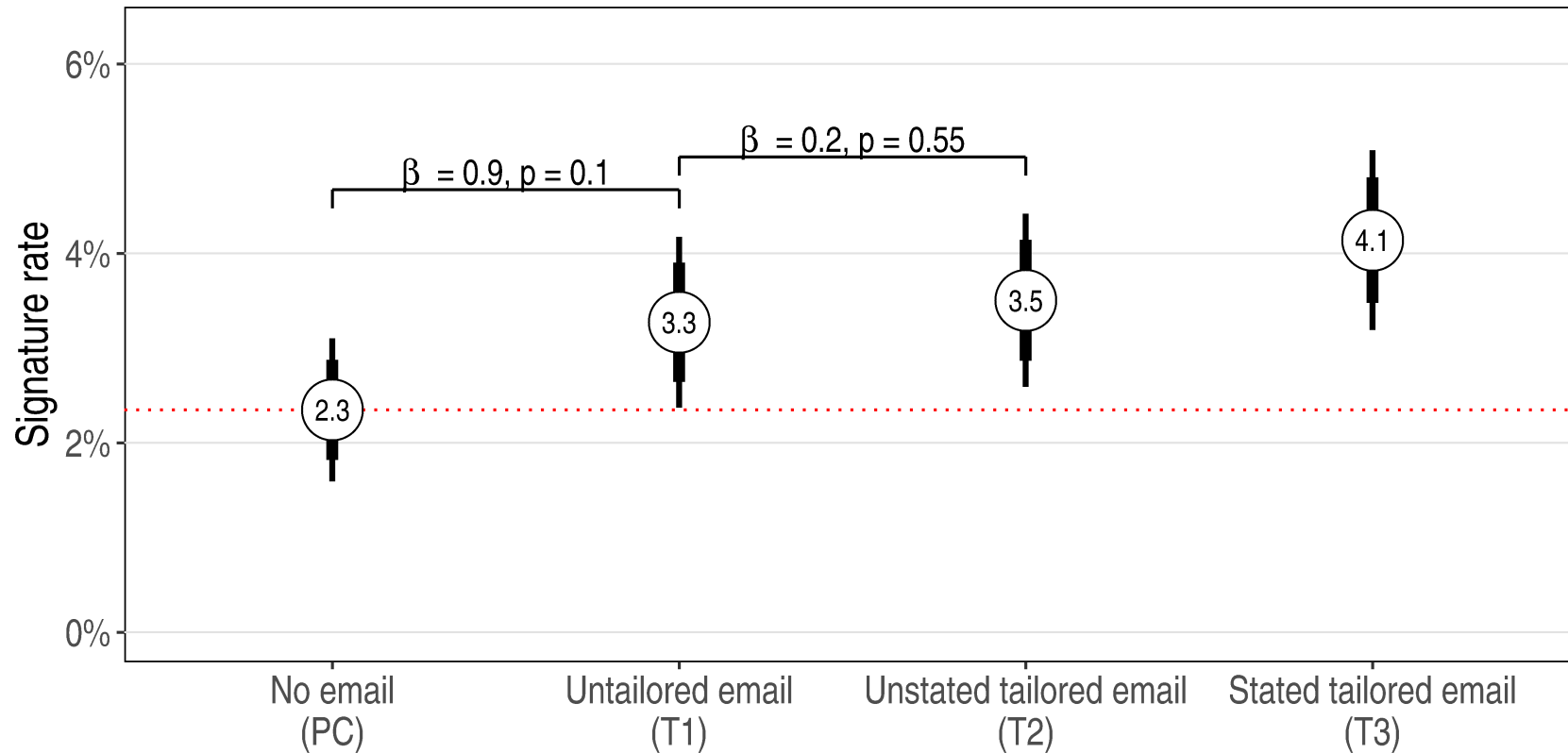
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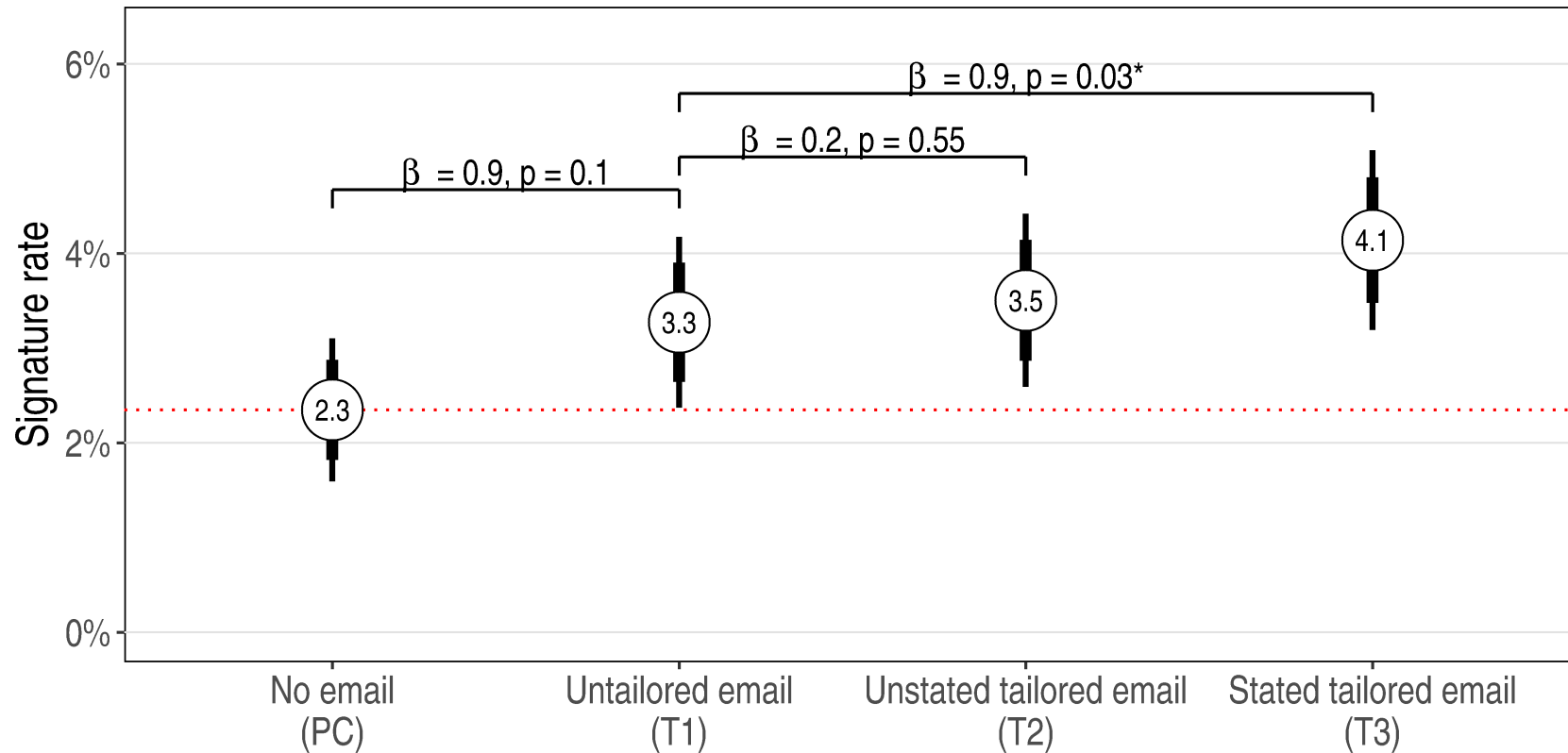
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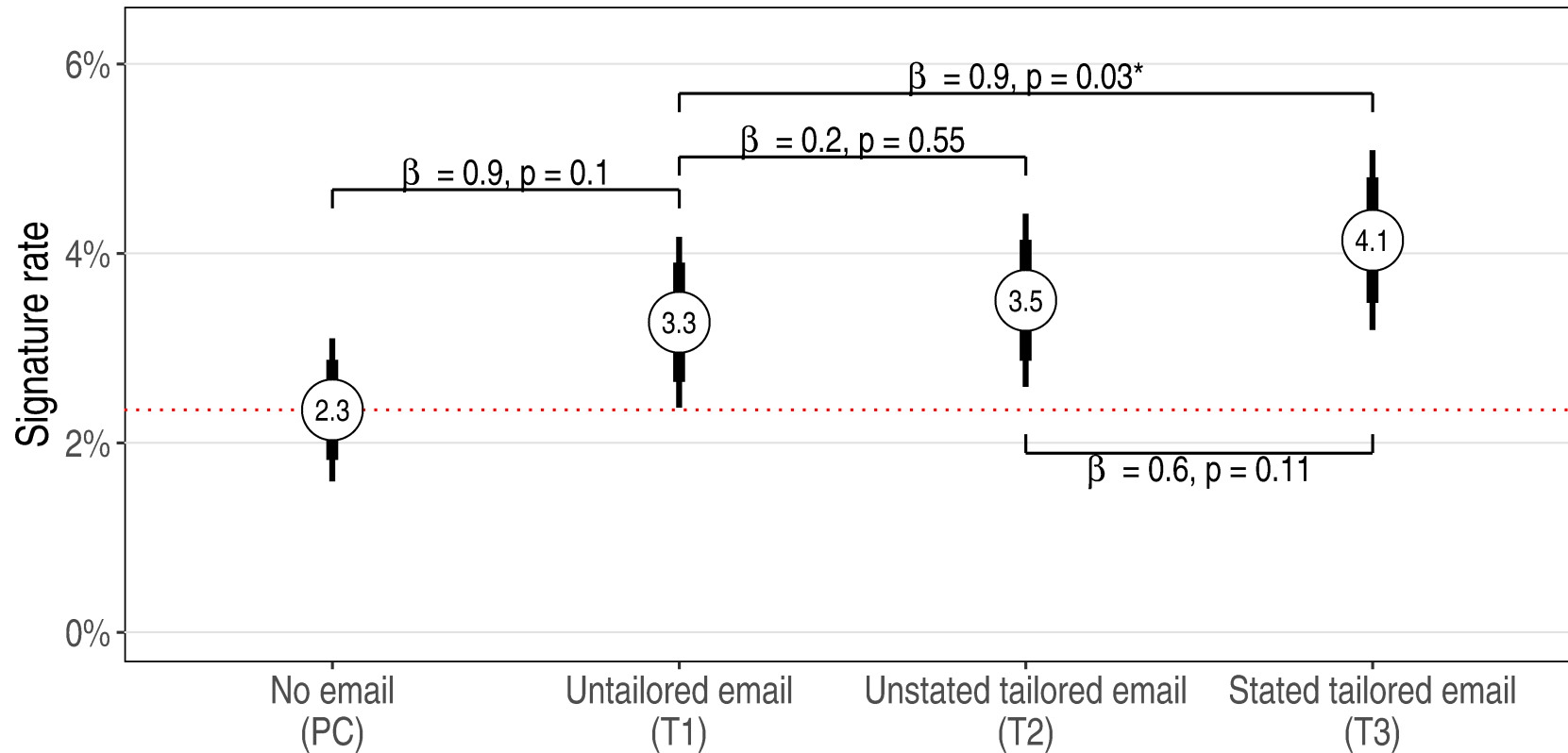
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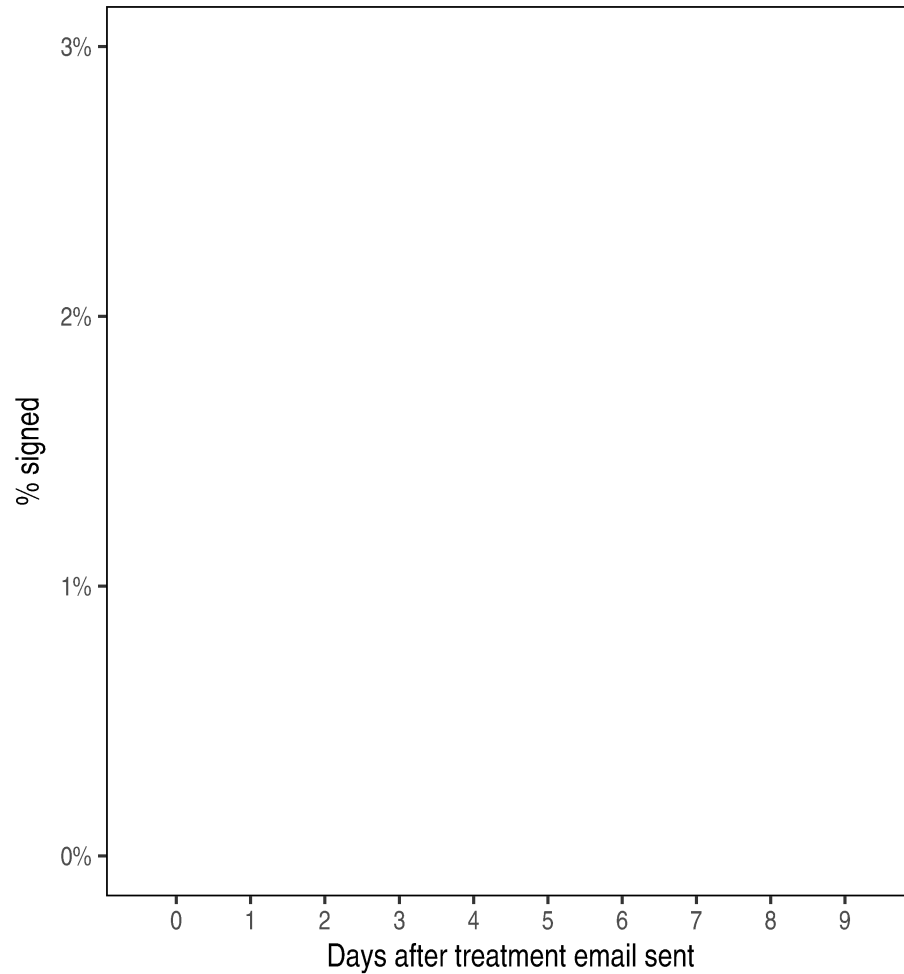
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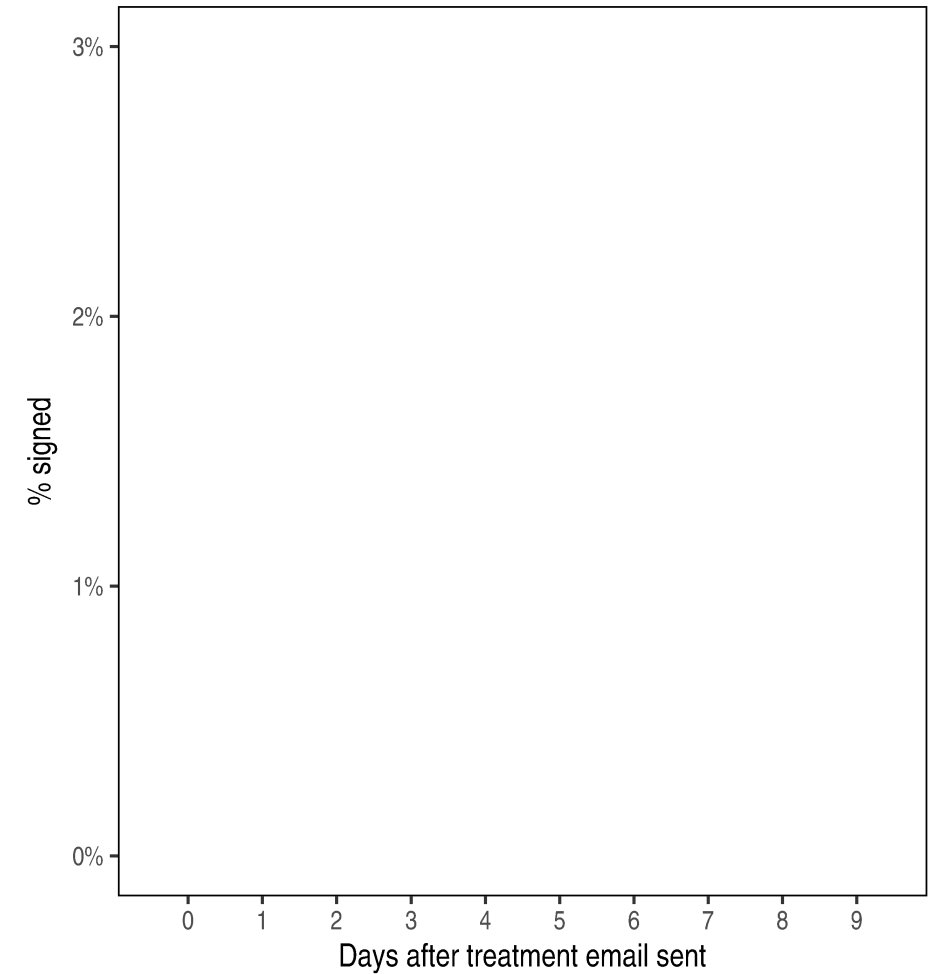


Results: timing

Treated (any email)



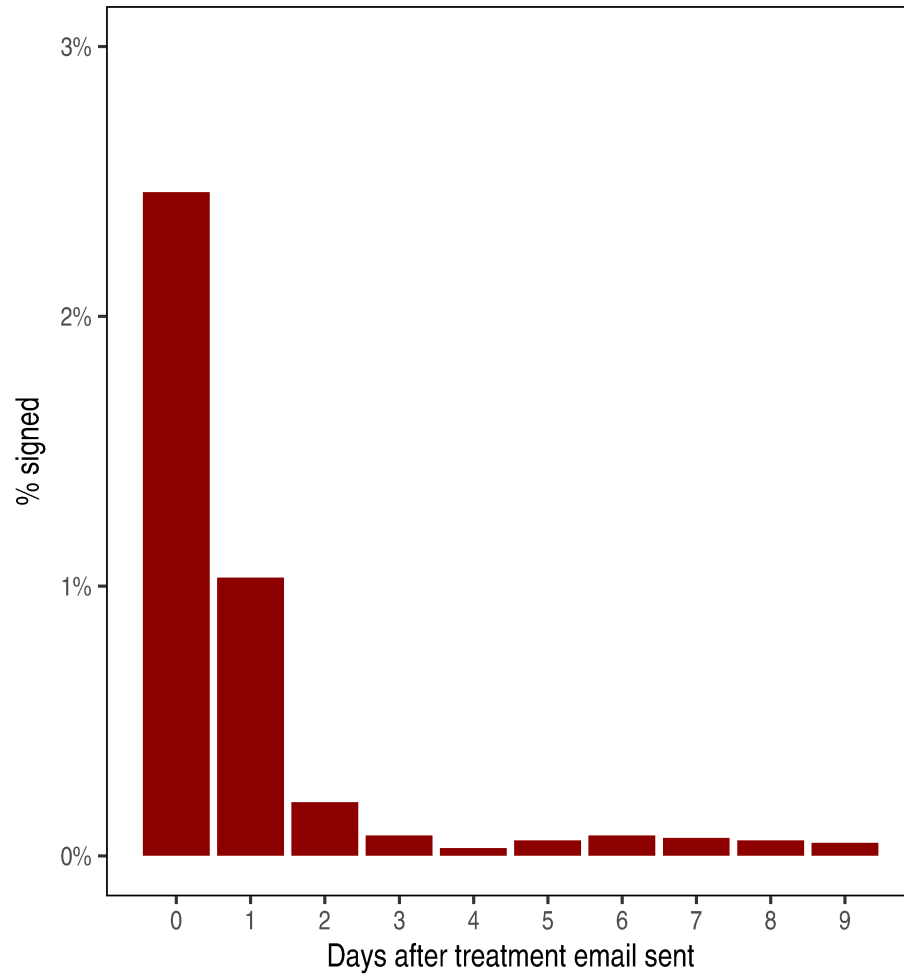
Pure Control (no email)



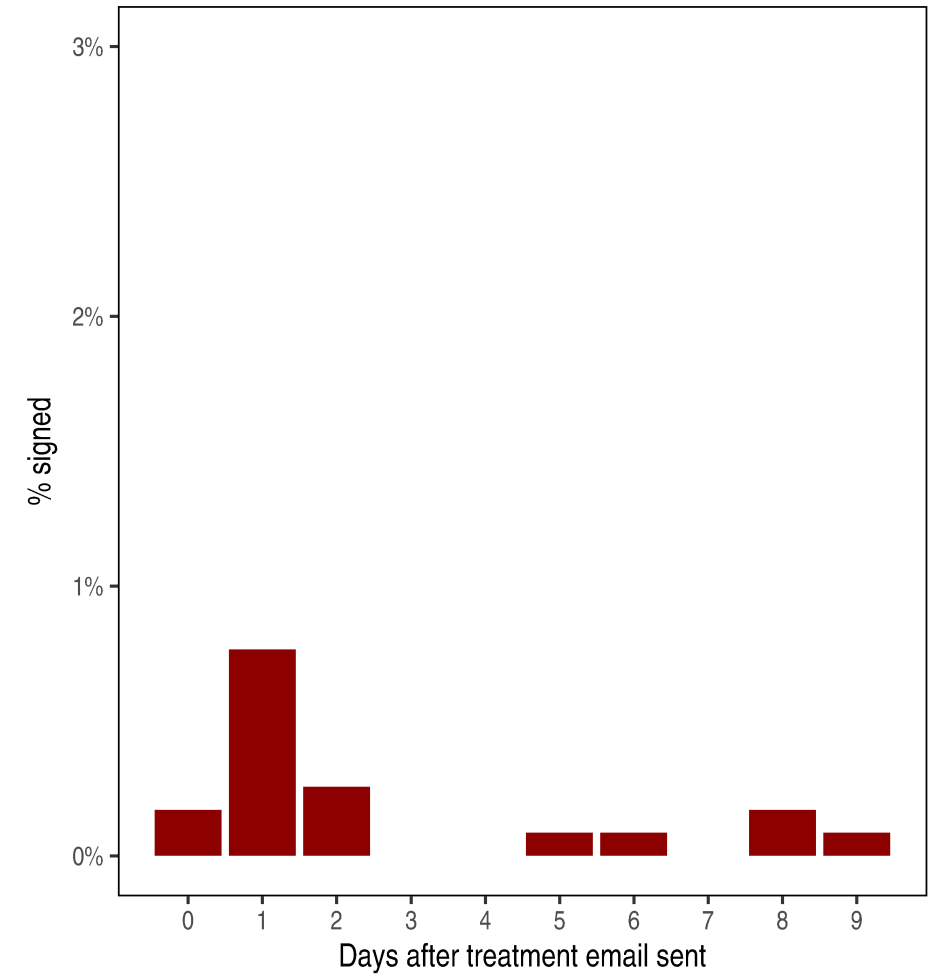


Results: timing

Treated (any email)



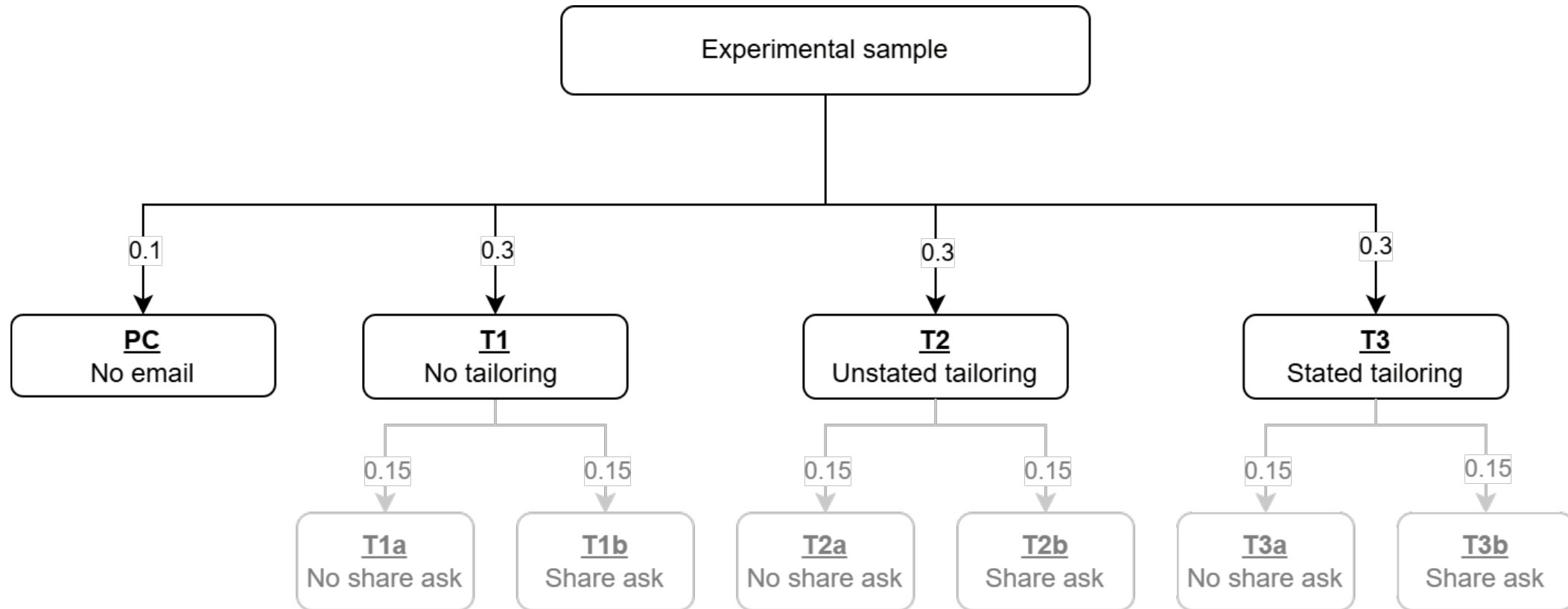
Pure Control (no email)



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Sharing





Sharing

T_b

Once you have signed, please take the time to share the petition with people you know.

Each friend, family member, or colleague you can recruit to sign the petition brings us one step closer to achieving PR. Sharing is the most powerful thing you can do to help our campaign.

Sharing

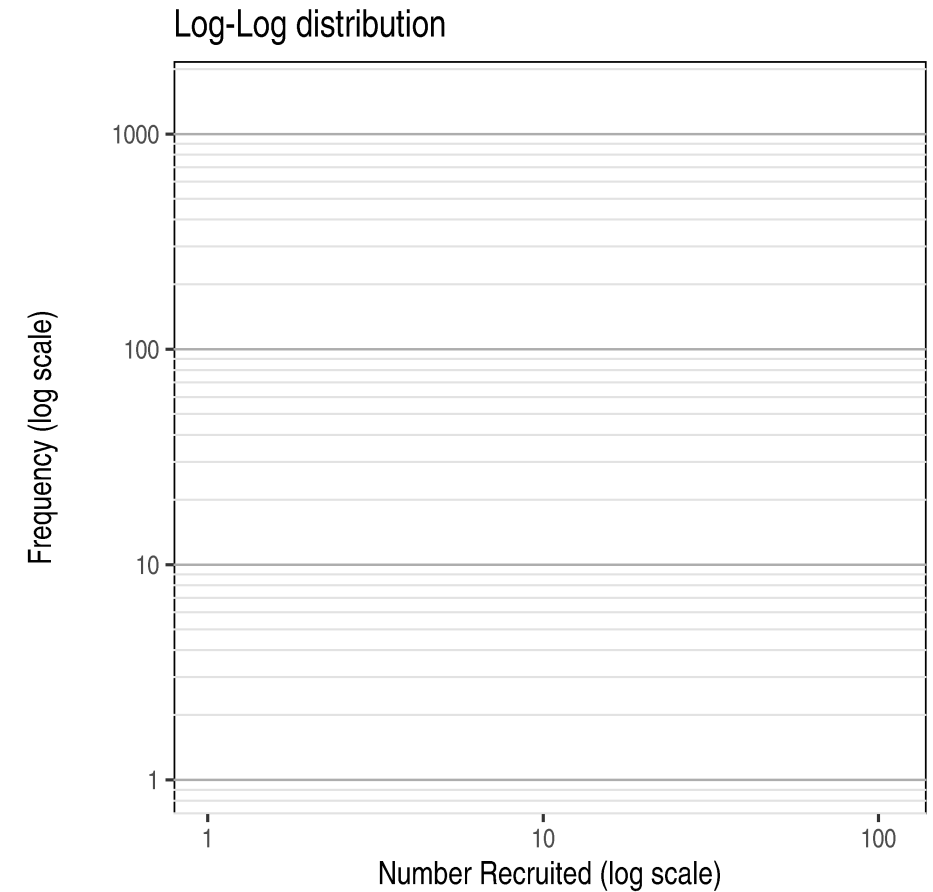
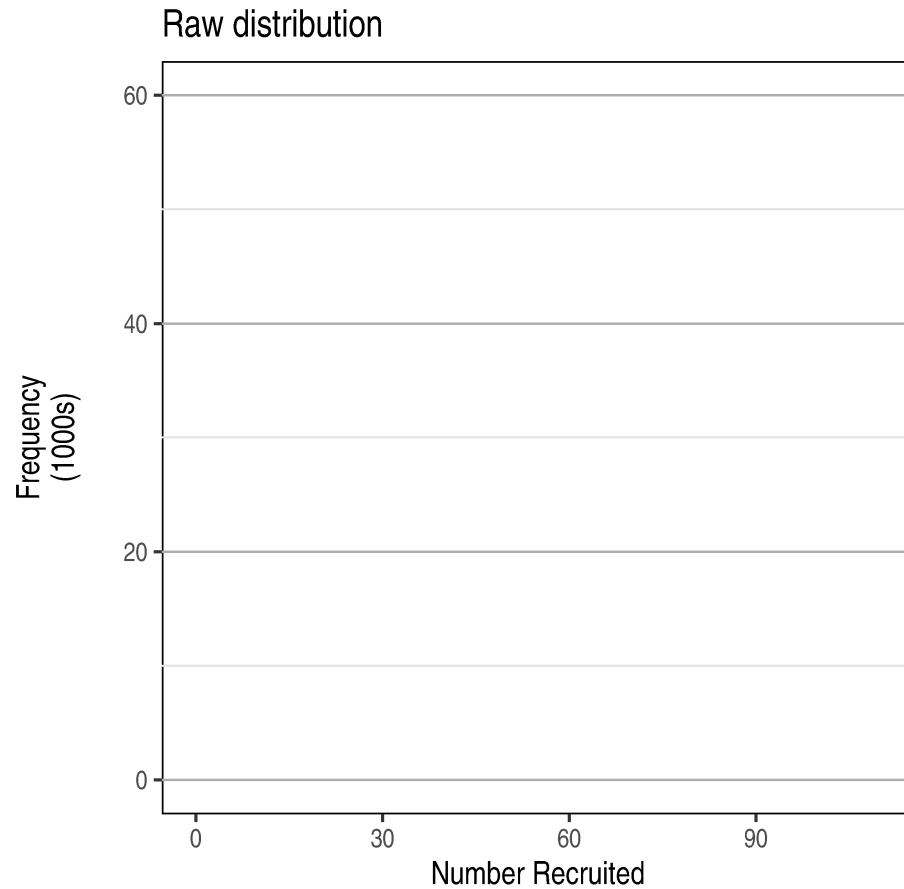
We found **no effect** of asking.

Why?

- People who recruit tend to do so anyway - whether they're asked or not.



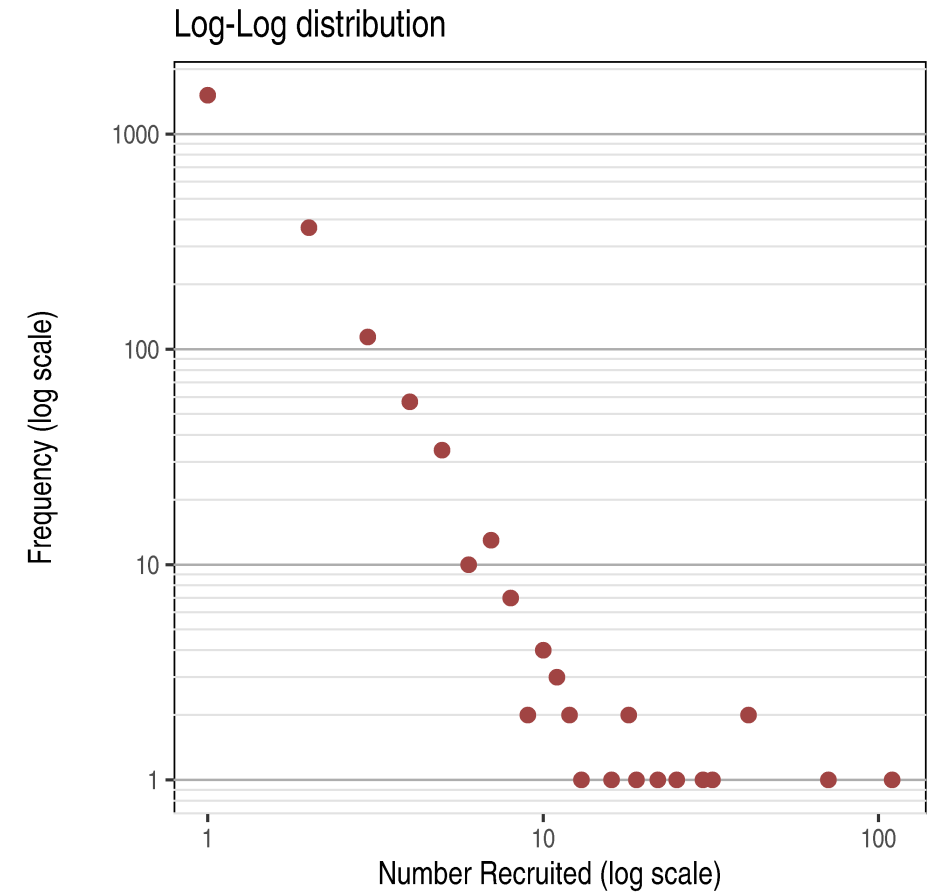
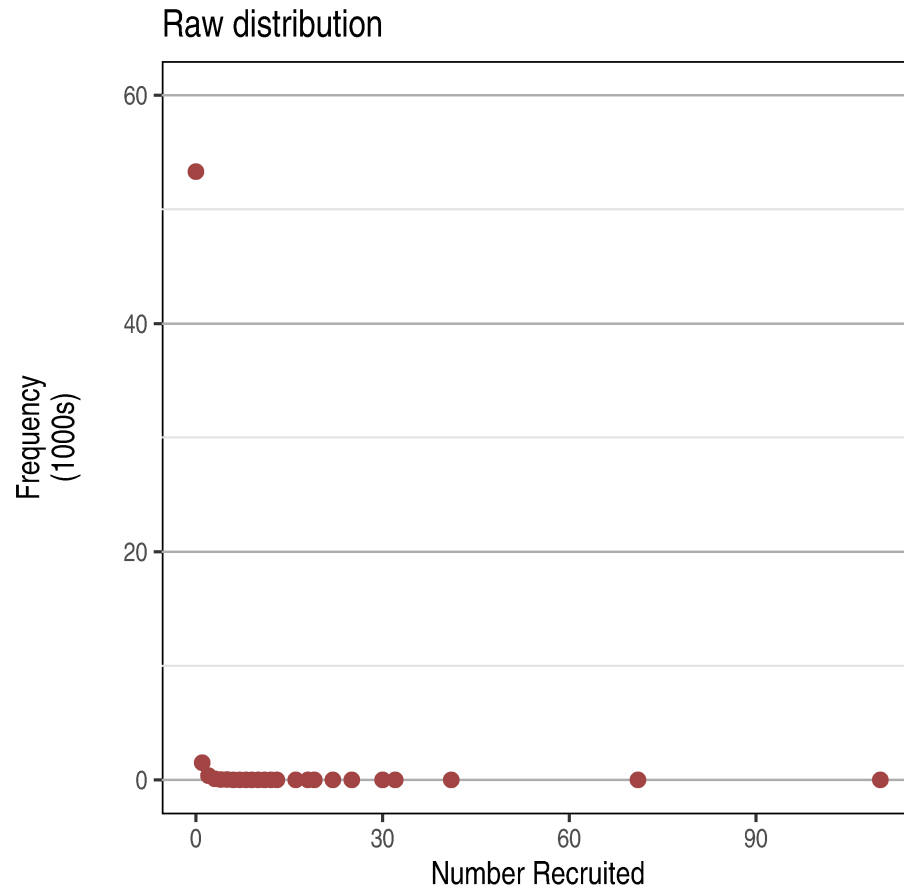
Sharing: who shares?



Source: Data from pressure group's petition platform. N = 55,456.



Sharing: who shares?



A handful of individuals recruit many people, most recruit none.

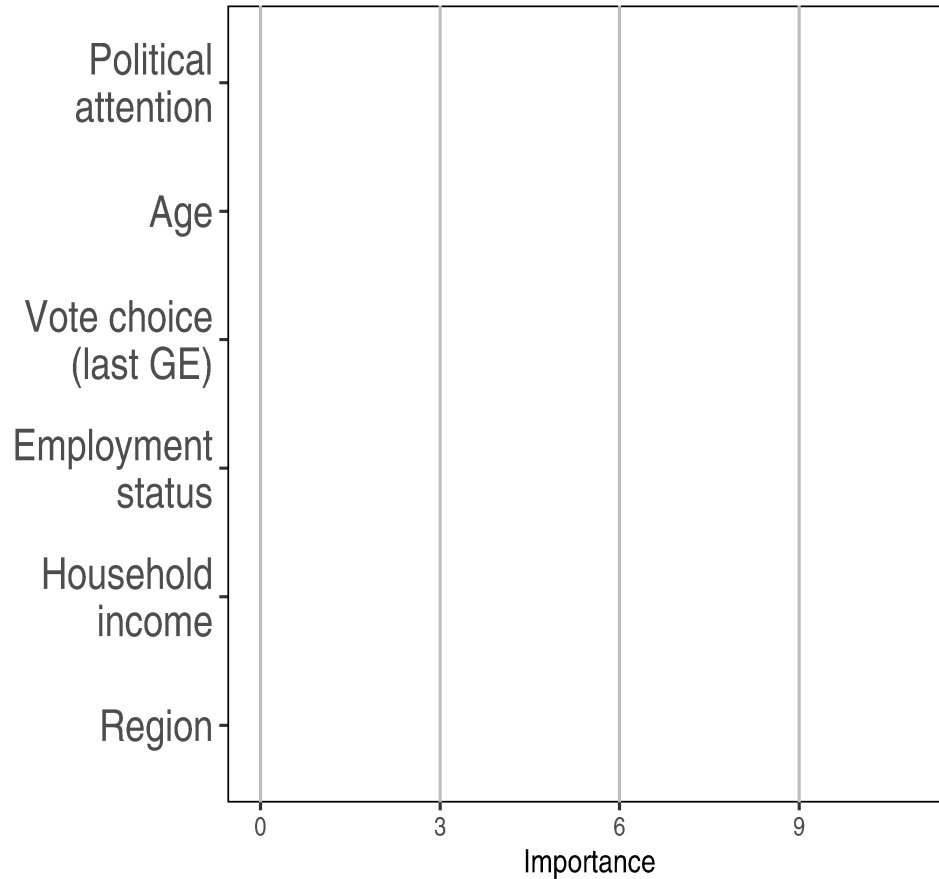
Source: Data from pressure group's petition platform. N = 55,456.



Sharing: who shares?

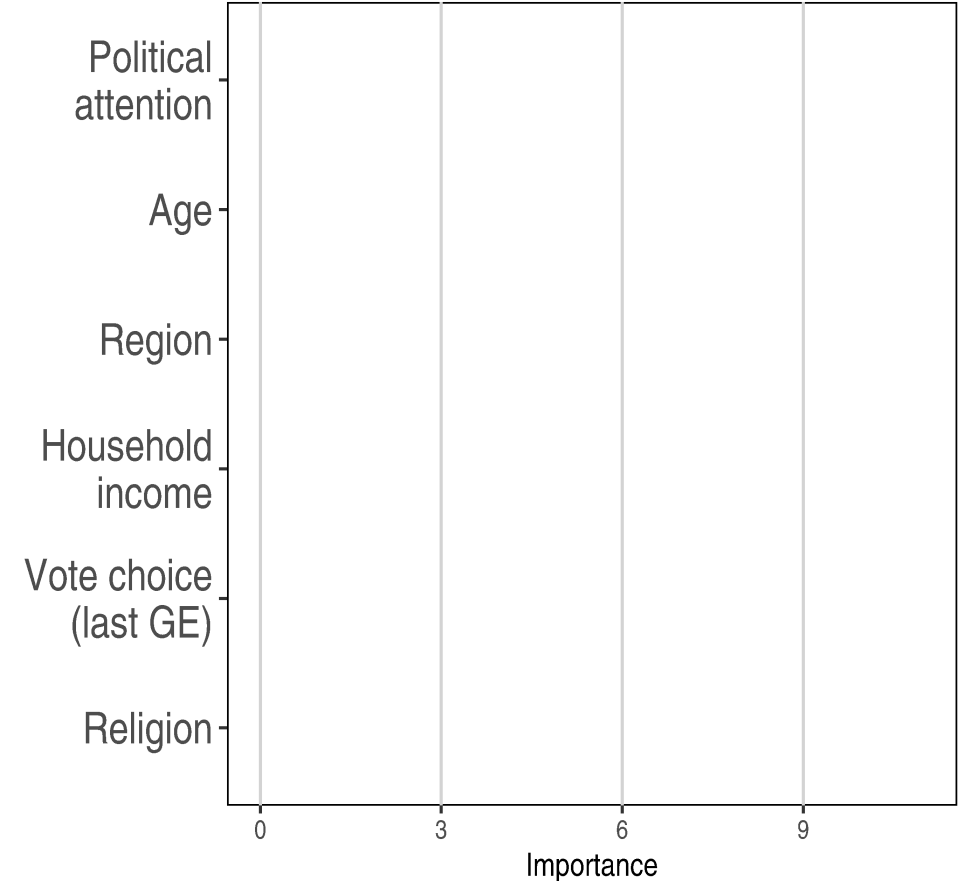
... turn out to vote

Model accuracy = 0.82



... vote for a specific candidate

Model accuracy = 0.88



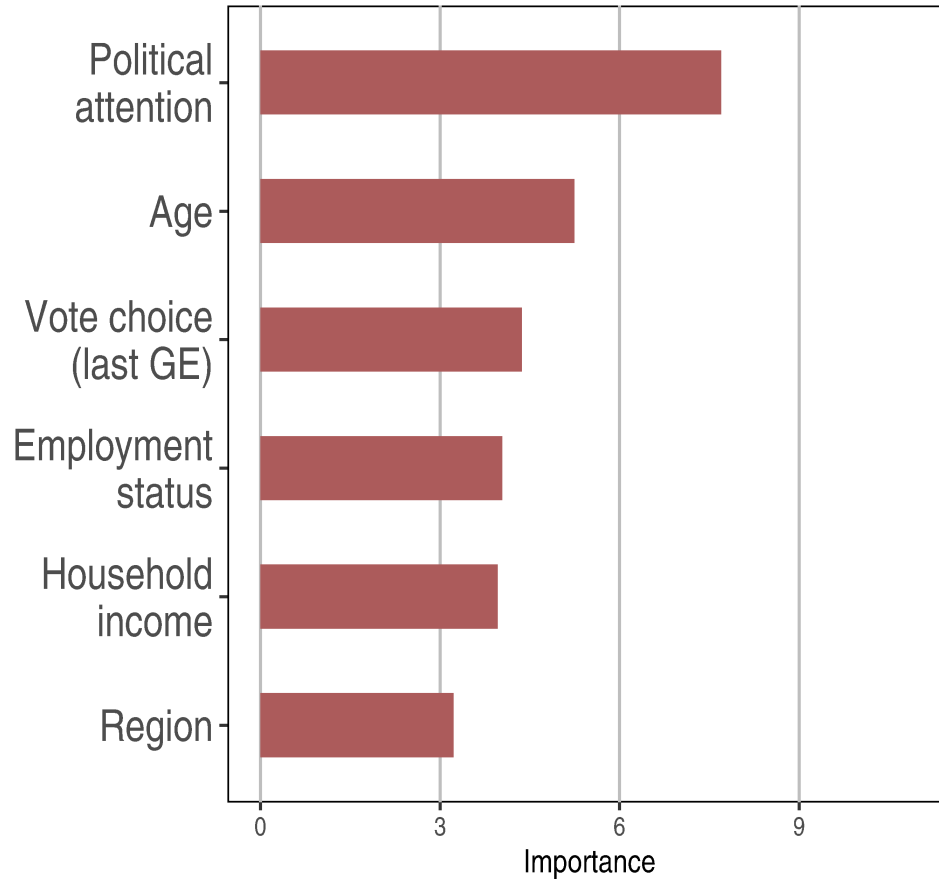
Source: Survey of YouGov panelists fielded in Oct 2023. N=2119.



Sharing: who shares?

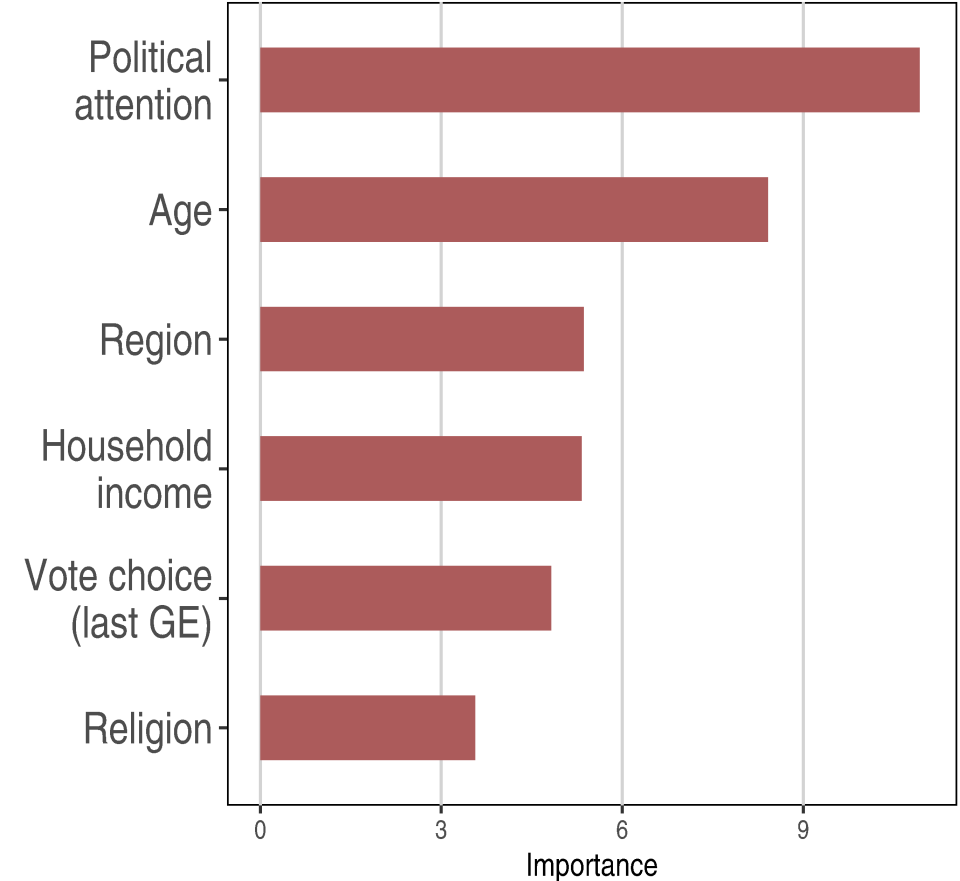
... turn out to vote

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... vote for a specific candidate

Model accuracy = 0.88



Source: Survey of YouGov panelists fielded in Oct 2023. N=2119.

Sharing: who shares?

- People who share spontaneously are highly engaged → likely know other already engaged people
- Supporters with more diverse personal networks can help the campaign reach **harder-to-reach** audiences
- More work needed to find out how to get a broader set of supporters to share

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Conclusions

Key findings

- Tailored emails were **only more effective** than untailored emails when they referenced the tailoring.
 - *When we asked you what matters most to you, you said `[own_issue]` was one of the most important issues facing the UK.*
- All emails were effective compared to no email, and most treated supporters who signed did within one day.
- **Just asking** doesn't appear to be enough to get people to recruit others to a campaign.



Conclusions

Implications

- Tailoring using disclosed-data works, but **be explicit** when you use it, and use it to **demonstrate responsiveness**
- Emails are effective, but possibly only when recipients can **act immediately** on the call to action.
- We need more work to understand **how to move people who wouldn't otherwise share**, to share

References

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