

WHEN WE ALL VOTE

# THE YOUTH VOTE LIVES ONLINE:

The Impact of Online  
Influencers on Voter  
Engagement

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# ABSTRACT

Civic Nation’s Vote Lab, in collaboration with When We All Vote, set out to conduct a field experiment among Instagram influencers in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections. Our work adds to the growing interest and field of inquiry around using social media personalities to reach prospective voters and drive them to take action. This novel research confirmed that social media partnerships constitute an effective way to reach young voters and voters of color, as 100% of our new voter registrations fell into these demographics. Additionally, our evidence suggests that influencers with fewer than 30,000 followers generate more engagement-per-follower than influencers with larger followings. Finally, we find qualitative evidence supporting the idea that content which includes personal stories or relates the importance of voting to the interests of the communities are highly effective at generating engagement.

# INTRODUCTION

Partnering with social media influencers has become an increasingly common tactic among organizations who are attempting to reach new, typically younger, audiences and encourage voting behavior. This type of outreach relies on leveraging trusted members of online communities to increase the salience of voting among their followers. In many of these online communities, discussions about electoral engagement are not always central, and so influencers must take the additional step of connecting the importance of voting with their community’s interests—often relying on the shared values of the group to do so.

There is a growing body of research exploring the impact that social media influencers have on voter engagement. Civic Nation’s Vote Lab, in partnership with When We All Vote, set out to add to the existing literature by conducting a field experiment among Instagram influencers in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections. We recruited influencers using the Lionize platform and followed an A/B message testing design in which influencers were randomly assigned one of two messages to incorporate into an Instagram story. Both messages encouraged viewers to register to vote, but each identifies a separate reason for the importance of voting.

We set out to investigate two primary questions: 1) Does one of our messages elicit higher levels of engagement and voter registration, and 2) Does the effect on voter engagement differ between low-follower (micro) and high-follower (macro) influencers?

Despite a small sample size, this study illuminated insights into the efficacy of influencer encouragement on voter behavior that can help inform voter registration outreach, particularly among younger Americans, in upcoming elections.

# DATA

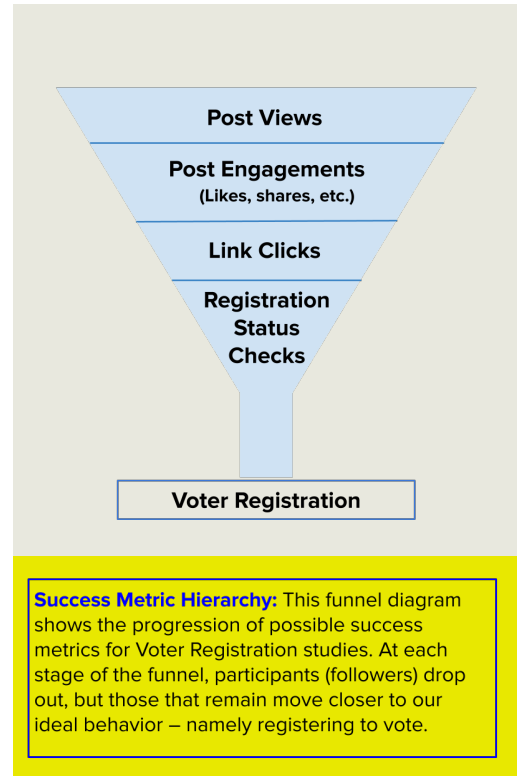
## Data Source

To streamline the influencer recruitment and data collection processes, we worked with Lionize, an online influencer management agency. The Lionize platform allowed us to collect accurate and up-to-date information about influencers, their content, the reach of their post, and other data relevant to our analysis.

## Success Metrics: Selecting a Response Variable

Each influencer received a unique hyperlink which allowed us to internally record the number of link clicks, voter registration status checks, and actual registrations that their followers engaged in after seeing their post. This allowed us to track information on who these posts were persuading.

At the outset of our research, our ideal success metric was new voter registrations. Unfortunately, only 33% of posts garnered more than one registration status check. So, we chose to use link clicks to measure engagement. The tradeoff here is that link clicks are a mid-funnel metric which do not necessarily correlate with the voting behavior that we are interested in measuring. However, it does suggest that the viewer had some interest in learning more or taking further action.



<sup>1</sup> We chose to only measure link clicks that occurred on the day of the original post or the day after. This was to reduce the risk of falsely including cases where influencers shared or used their links in their private circles. Additionally, all content was posted in the form of an Instagram “story” which disappears after 24 hours, further justifying our choice of the narrower time window.

In a few cases, influencers either independently chose to repost or they reposted to correct for an **invalid post**—meaning it did not include both 1) their hyperlink and 2) their assigned message. In the event of a repost, we elected to use link clicks in the 48 hour window that coincided with their first valid post.

# METHODOLOGY

## Selecting the Right Messages

In order to select the two messages that we would be testing with influencers, we used Grow Progress, a rapid message testing platform, to perform head-to-head testing between five potential messages. These messages spanned a range of themes (including the economy, climate change, and state/local election importance) and a number of different tones (including hopeful, neutral, and negative). Using Grow Progress, we conducted a nationwide test among 1,100 non-white, under-35-year-olds using 5 voter registration messages and a placebo. We then asked a series of questions about their propensity to vote and their sentiments around the importance of voting and we used the results to narrow to two messages.

### Civic Engagement

“Times are tough, and many of us feel like our vote doesn't matter, but that's not true. When we show up, make our voices heard and vote for our communities, we determine the future of our country. Make your voice count in these midterm elections. Check your voter registration status today - [weall.vote/votercheck](http://weall.vote/votercheck).”

### Climate Action

“The Inflation Reduction Act is the single largest climate investment in our nation's history. It wouldn't have been possible without the will of the people being heard - your voice did that! Let's continue demanding that our elected officials protect our future. Check your voter registration status today - [weall.vote/votercheck](http://weall.vote/votercheck).”

## Selecting the Right Messages

Our final dataset included 12 influencer posts, 5 with the Civic Engagement message and 7 with the Climate Action message. We recruited influencers by posting instructions on Lionize providing the language for both of our messages and explaining to prospective influencers that they would be randomly assigned a message. Each influencer was offered \$250 to post a single Instagram story. We received 21 offers from influencers who were interested in posting our content. After an initial round of vetting, we chose 14 influencers and declined the rest who did not meet our criteria (including those who were not U.S. citizens and some whose follower counts were not within our desired range of 20,000-150,000). These 14 influencers were then randomly divided into 2 equal groups, one for each message. Two of these influencers did not respond to our follow-up, leaving us with a 5-7 split between the two messages. We also had a 3-9 split between “micro” and “macro” influencers.<sup>2</sup>

	Civic Engagement	Climate Action
Macro	3	6
Micro	2	1

<sup>2</sup>We relied on Lionize's definition, which defines micro-influencers as those with fewer than 30,000 followers, though this definition is admittedly loose across the industry.



# RESULTS

Our analysis leverages click rate per 10,000 followers as the response variable so that engagement is expressed as a proportion of each influencer’s total follower count. This produced a heavily right-skewed distribution, largely attributable to the relative success of a handful of influencers over the rest of the group. So, this analysis takes the added step of log-transforming link clicks per 10,000 followers for our response variable. **We refer to this variable as log engagement-per-follower or log EPF.**

	Dependent variable:		
	Log Link Clicks per 10K Followers		
	Joint (1)	Micro-influencer (2)	Message (3)
Message Assigned: Climate	-1.437 (0.896)		-2.096* (1.060)
Micro-influencer	2.564** (1.020)	3.043** (1.049)	
Constant	0.171 (0.771)	-0.787 (0.525)	1.197 (0.810)
Observations	12	12	12
R <sup>2</sup>	0.578	0.457	0.281
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.484	0.403	0.209
Residual Std. Error	1.463 (df = 9)	1.574 (df = 10)	1.811 (df = 10)
F Statistic	6.152** (df = 2; 9)	8.412** (df = 1; 10)	3.907* (df = 1; 10)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Our **Joint Regression** includes indicators for message and micro-influencer and suggests that posts by micro-influencers are associated with higher average EPFs, holding message constant. Our data included a significant outlier<sup>3</sup>, and removing this point, along with our lowest-EPF point<sup>4</sup>, still supports the claim that micro-influencers have higher EPF rates on average.

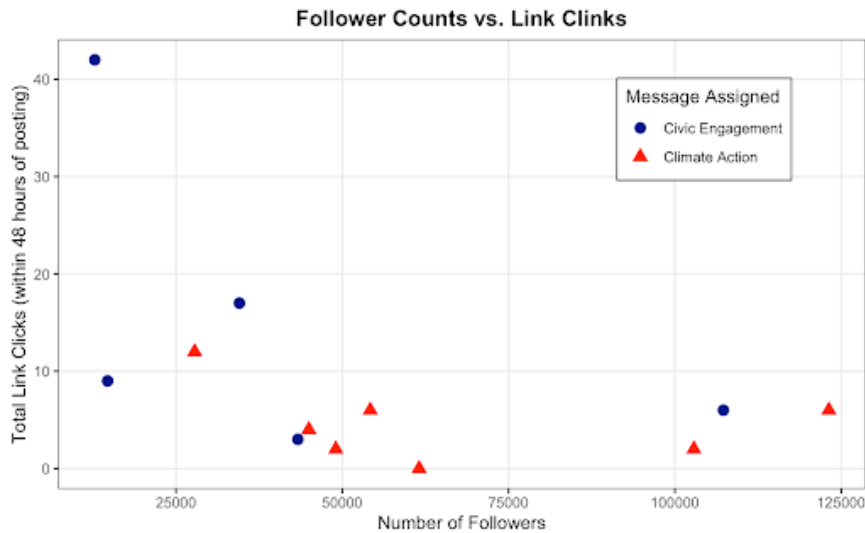
**Our Micro-influencer Regression further confirms our finding that having an audience with fewer than 30,000 followers remains a significant predictor of EPF at the 95%-threshold.**<sup>5</sup> The coefficient tells us that posts by micro-influencers garner a greater EPF rate, on average, than macro-influencers. We have two hypotheses for why this might be the case. First, for micro-influencers who seek to maintain and grow their audience, the job of directly engaging with individual followers is more manageable. **In turn, this makes the audience feel a stronger connection to the influencer which contributes to an online ecosystem in which followers take micro-influencers’ content seriously and are more inclined to follow their recommendations (e.g. click on the link, register to vote, etc.).** Second, our influencer recruitment involved a flat-rate payment of \$250, which is slightly higher than Lionize’s average payout for micro-influencers. This may have incentivized influencers to create higher-quality content as compared to macro-influencers who typically command larger paychecks.

<sup>3</sup>Graph below, at the point above 40 link clicks

<sup>4</sup>The only post to generate 0 link clicks

<sup>5</sup>The results in the Joint and Micro-Influencer Regressions are based on defining micro-influencers as those with under 30,000 followers. When we implement other definitions of micro-influencers (such as 50,000 or 100,000 followers, which are also important thresholds in the influencer industry), our results become insignificant (see Limitations section). Additionally, we had just 3 influencers in our experiment with fewer than 30,000 followers, which is a considerably small sample size which limits interpretation.

Our **Message Regression** represents our pure A/B test which, in spite of the insignificance that we saw in our Joint Regression, shows some evidence that message content may explain some of the variation in proportional link clicks. The estimated coefficient for our climate message indicator is significant at the 90% threshold and tells us that there is a negative association between post engagement and a post’s content using our “Climate Action” message (as compared to the “Civic Engagement” message). However, **we should be cautious when drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of our message given our small sample size**, which is evidenced by the fact that removing our highest and lowest performers from the sample eliminates the estimate’s significance at the 90% threshold.

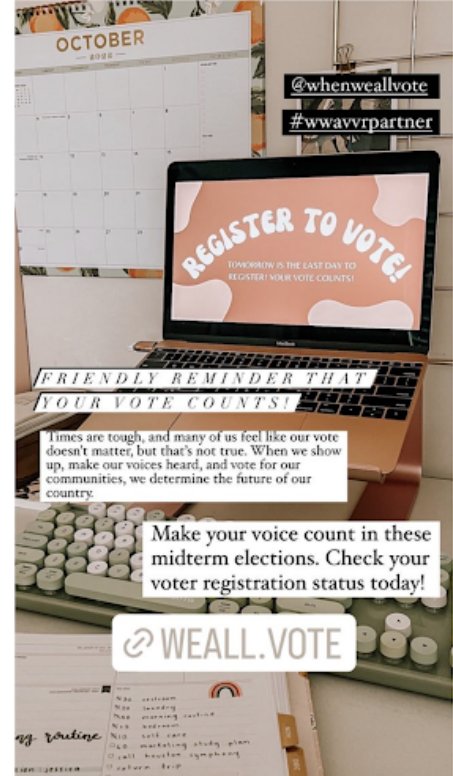


Given the limits of quantitative investigation with a small sample size, it is also important to highlight the top-performing posts to offer nuance and color to our discussion.

**The effectiveness of the highest performing influencer<sup>6</sup> may be attributable to their content’s direct, relatable format and use of personal stories.** Their post was a conversational, direct-to-camera video in which the influencer, in the process of reciting our message to their audience, included anecdotal improvisations about their own voting experiences. When talking about the millions of Americans who aren’t able to vote because of registration status, they interjected, “Like me. When I moved into this house, I forgot to update my registration. It happens to all of us.” We believe that the personal anecdotes, along with the conversational format, were compelling features of this post to which viewers could relate. In fact, 3 of the top 4 highest-EPF posts used similar direct-to-camera tactics. By contrast, some of the less successful posts used an automated voice-over that read our message from a text box.

<sup>6</sup> The influencer with the highest EPF had a click rate of nearly 33 per 10,000 followers. Their post is represented by the top-most circle in the plot. The EPF for this post was a clear outlier at over 3 standard deviations away from the mean EPF of the group.

The influencer with the second-highest EPF<sup>7</sup> found success in tying the interests of their community to the idea of voting. This influencer has crafted a community of followers around the art of journaling. They posted a still image of their desk with an open journal in the foreground and a custom-designed image on their laptop screen prominently featuring the phrase, “Register to Vote!” Our message is shown in a text box covering the keyboard. Here we see a markedly different approach from the previous one, but in a way that ties the interests of this online community to the message of voter engagement. This influencer also takes care to ensure that the small details of the post (e.g. a warm, orange filter) match the aesthetic of the overall account. This helps to situate the photo, and therefore the voting message’s importance, within the existing content on the page.



## Cost-per-Engagement

One other important measure of success in any type of voter engagement analysis is the cost-per-engagement, which we estimate here to be approximately \$40.73/click.

This is noticeably higher than other forms of voter outreach, which we attribute to several factors. First, we exclusively relied on Instagram stories which are only viewable for 24 hours. Permanent, in-feed posts would almost certainly have attracted more clicks and registrations. We have some data supporting this claim when we consider total link clicks as opposed to link clicks within the time window of the post, in which case the cost drops to \$24.13 per click<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, if we exclude our influencer agency subscription costs which account for 1/3 of the total cost, then our cost-per-engagement drops to \$27.52.

Overall, our limited sample size makes us reluctant to say definitively that this method of voter outreach is inefficient from a cost-benefit perspective. Further research would give us a better estimate of the true cost-per-engagement or even the cost-per-registration.



<sup>7</sup> The bottom-left circle in the plot. This influencer had 6.1 link clicks per 10,000 followers.

<sup>8</sup> Some influencers chose to post their content more than once, or they simply chose to share the link within their circles, therefore “total link clicks” is higher than the “link clicks” variable we use in our final analysis, which we designed to exclude all clicks outside of the 48 hour posting window.

## CONCLUSION

This study should be viewed as a first step towards ascertaining the effect that influencers have on voter engagement, and the learnings from this research can help to guide more rigorous iterations of this work. Our results show that **influencers have promising potential to persuade prospective voters within their online communities.** We see evidence that micro-influencers, or influencers with fewer than 30,000 followers, elicit significantly higher rates of engagement-per-follower than macro-influencers. We also saw that content involving personal stories or those that fuse voting encouragement into the interests of the community generated more engagement.

However, we also recognize the limitations of this work, including the small sample size, varying definitions of “micro-influencers,” and a lack of success metric data. More research is required to precisely estimate the difference in impact of micro-influencers and to begin identifying other effects, such as the differences between types of content or type of influencer.





# APPENDIX

## I. Dataset for Primary Analysis

Variable	Description
<b>Click Rate per 10,000 Followers</b>	<p>Number of link clicks in the 48 hour window surrounding the first “valid” post (containing both the assigned message and the correct hyperlink) per 10,000 followers.</p> <p>We chose to only measure link clicks that occurred on the day of the original post or the day after. This was to reduce the risk of falsely including cases where influencers shared or used their links in their private circles. Additionally, all content was posted in the form of an Instagram “story,” which disappears after 24 hours which further justifies our choice of the narrower time window.</p> <p>In a few cases, influencers either independently chose to repost or they reposted to correct for an <b>invalid post</b>—meaning it did not meet our criteria of including both 1) their hyperlink and 2) their assigned message. In the event of a repost, we elected to use link clicks in the 48 hour window that coincided with their first valid post.</p>
<b>Message Assigned</b>	2-factor categorical variable with the title of the message that the influencer was randomly assigned
<b>is_micro</b>	A dummy variable indicating whether an influencer has fewer than 30,000 followers (based on Lionize’s definition).

## II. Limitations

The results from this research should be understood alongside a number of limitations. This study represents a promising start of a larger inquiry of the effectiveness of influencers in registration and GOTV efforts. We have identified the following points of caution that should be considered when interpreting our results:

- 1. Sample size:** The most obvious limitation in interpreting our results is the small sample size. With an overall sample size of 12, and specific splits of 7-5 for message groups and 9-3 for micro-influencer designation, we should be cautious in our interpretation of significance. For example, we might worry that one or two of our influencers had previously cultivated a highly-engaged audience and so they bring up the average click rate of the group they belong to (either message or micro-influencer status) in a way that has nothing to do with their belonging to that group.

To check this, we reran our 3 regressions removing the posts with the highest and lowest engagement, and we found that while any potential significance having to do with message groups disappears, a significant difference remains between micro- and non-micro-influencers.

In future studies, it would be prudent to spend more time in the influencer recruitment phase of the experiment both to ensure a larger overall sample and to create clearer guidelines for influencers to avoid dropouts, invalid posts, and non-compliance.

**2. Success metric doesn't measure our desired behavior:** Ideally, the response variable in our analysis would have been completed voter registrations for each influencer's individualized registration portal. Unfortunately, only 33% of our portals had any completed registrations. Part of this is likely due to the limited timeframe of Instagram stories, which are only viewable by followers for 24 hours.

Future research may want to explore other types of content (Instagram posts, reels, etc.) or may do well to require influencers to post the same story multiple times over the course of a week.

**3. Selection into experiment:** It's worth noting that the process by which we recruited influencers may have introduced some bias into our results. In order to recruit influencers, it is almost always required that they know what content they are being asked to post. So, our compromise was to post our solicitation on Lionize and include both potential messages, with instructions explaining that influencers would randomly be assigned one message if they accepted. The selection bias comes from the fact that influencers who did not like one or both of our messages were able to opt out before experimentation began. So, for example, it's possible our sample self-selected into the experiment because they believed these messages would engage their audience and therefore our findings may not scale to all influencers.

To minimize this selection, future work may want to explore the feasibility of recruiting influencers with an agreement to post voter engagement content without providing specific message language. However, this still runs the risk of influencers dropping out if they do not wish to post the assigned message.

**4. Creative differences among influencers:** The creative diversity of influencers, which is perhaps the greatest strength in engaging prospective voters on social media platforms, also reduces our ability to understand what truly drives engagement with content. In the present study, all 12 influencers stuck to their assigned message, however they chose to present the content in a variety of ways including text boxes over artwork, direct-to-camera conversations, or automated voice-overs.

In future work, with a larger sample of influencers, we would like to be able to explore how differences in the influencer category (i.e. blogger, artist, digital creator) and differences in content format (i.e. direct to camera, narration over video content, etc.) affect EPF. We believe that these classifications would help explain some of the differences in creatives and provide insights as to which influencers and formats are most conducive to prospective voter engagement.

**5. Definition of “micro” influencer:** Another limitation lies in our decision of where to differentiate between “micro” and “macro” influencers, especially given our limited sample size which means groups are drastically different depending on the line we choose to draw. We chose to implement the definition of “micro” influencer to which Lionize adheres: influencers with fewer than 30,000 followers.

Future research might do well to explore other definitions of micro-influencer. In general it seems that the field has not yet come to a consensus on where to draw this line, and perhaps, for the purposes of voter engagement, future studies can help identify where that distinction should be drawn based on what maximizes engagement with future voters.