

# **On the Limits of Officials' Ability to Change Citizens' Priorities: A Field Experiment in Local Politics\***

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## **Abstract**

We test whether politicians' communications shape their supporters' policy priorities by conducting a field experiment in collaboration with several local elected officials. In the experiment, the officials sent out email messages to the constituents on their distribution lists. Half the constituents received messages where the official advocated for the priority of a given issue, while the other half received a placebo email. We surveyed the constituents 1-2 months before the message went out and again the week after the official sent the message. The experiment shows that politicians did not change citizens' priorities in the desired direction. Moreover, citizens who received a message where the official indicated the issue was a priority were not more likely to act when invited to sign a petition on the issue. Elected officials' ability to shape the priorities of the politically active citizens with whom they regularly communicate is limited and can even be self-defeating.

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\* An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Urban Political Economy Conference at Vanderbilt University in March 2017. We thank Marc Meredith and other conference participants for comments.

Information is a tool that has the potential to affect opinion and mobilize citizens to action (Foos and de Rooij 2017a). We test whether local elected officials can change the political agendas and issue priorities of the people with whom they regularly communicate.

We study the ability of government officials to influence citizens' issue priorities because governments have limited resources. Governments cannot deal with all issues at the same time; they must identify which issues will receive the highest priority. The ability to affect citizens' priorities can thus have significant implications for the allocation of political power. As Schattschneider (1960) noted, the ability to define political priorities and the alternatives changes the nature of political conflict and is the "prime instrument of power" (73)<sup>1</sup> Changing citizen priorities and the agenda changes the political lines of division within society and can reallocate power among political actors.

Citizens' priorities and political agendas are especially important to understanding local politics (Oliver and Ha 2007; Rugh and Trounstein 2011; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). At the local level, many of the political questions are not whether an action should be taken, but whether certain issues should be prioritized (Erie, Kogan, and MacKenzie 2011; Franklin and

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<sup>1</sup> Schattschneider (1960) identifies two ways of changing the balance of power: first, by defining the political priorities and second, by enlarging or reducing the scope of conflict and the participants in that conflict. Sarah Anzia's (2014) and Justin de Benedictis-Kessner's (2018) work on changing the timing of elections to correspond with national elections are examples of the few studies we are aware of that examines the ability of local public officials to enlarge or reduce the scope of conflict. While we fully believe that more research is needed to understand the ability or inability of public officials to draw in new participants into the political conflict, in this paper we focus on their ability to change their constituents' political priorities.

Ebdon 2004; Guo and Neshkova 2013). For example, given a list of infrastructure projects, many constituents would support action on all the necessary improvements provided there were sufficient resources. However, given a limited budget, and limited time resources, constituents might prioritize certain action items over others.

Studies of agenda setting in other contexts have found that political elites can drive the political agenda and priorities of the general public. However, these studies have almost exclusively focused on the ability of non-elected political elites to change citizens' priorities and the effect that these changes have on politics (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder 1987; King, Schneer, and White 2017; McComb and Shaw 1972). Scholars have not studied elected officials' ability to shape their constituents' priorities.

There are both arguments that public officials can shape the political agenda through their communications with constituents and reasons to believe that they cannot. On one hand, there are reasons that communication by elected officials might shape citizens' priorities. Previous studies have found that other political elites such as the media and interest groups shape the general public's priorities (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; King, Schneer, and White 2017; McComb and Shaw 1972). What these actors talk about and highlight often become the general public's priorities and set the agenda for political debate. Likewise, communication by other political elites, particularly the media or interest groups, has a strong effect on citizens' priorities and can propel citizens to action (Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan 2009). There is also some evidence that elite communication can sometimes shape public opinion (e.g. Broockman and Butler 2016).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> However, changing a mind over a single issue (that is perhaps not well understood) is different than changing a citizen's issue priorities and their preferred political agenda.

On the other hand, there are also reasons to believe that public officials' communication with constituents may not change their priorities. Agenda setting by elected officials may work differently than agenda setting by other elites who are not necessarily in a position to directly affect policy and whose messages reach a different audience. One reason elite communication may not affect constituent priorities and action is that public officials communicate most often with constituents who likely already hold well formulated opinions. The citizens that public officials can most easily reach often have intentionally opted to receive updates and information from their representatives. They are likely to already be well-informed. People who have well formulated opinions and who traditionally follow politics are less likely to be affected by the messages they receive (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Krosnick 1990; Zaller 1992).<sup>3</sup> These individuals are also likely to be strong policy demanders whose principles and priorities are harder to change (Bawn et al. 2012; Fenno 1978; Krosnick 1990; Masket 2009). In short, previous research showing that politicians can change constituents' opinions may not extend to the influence of public officials on the coalitions to which they have the most direct access.

In addition, even if public officials can change the political agendas of those they communicate with, we also have reason to doubt that these changes have any meaningful influence on political actions.<sup>4</sup> Holding public opinions and using those public opinions in the ballot booth are not the only way that citizens influence political outcomes (Bergan 2009; Kam

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<sup>3</sup> These individuals may actually be more likely to have a negative reaction to persuasive information and to be more likely to engage in motivated reasoning (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Redlawsk 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, political outcomes, especially outcomes at the local level, are not determined solely on the basis of public opinion (Anzia and Meeks 2016; Oliver 2012; Peterson 1981).

and Zechmeister 2013). Politicians must often rely on the willingness of individuals or groups to become involved on a particular issue to achieve their policy goals (Schlozman 1984). Given the reliance of political elites on the involvement of other groups, can public officials' efforts to change priorities affect constituents' actions in support of a policy priority?

In some cases, public official's communication about their priorities may actually decrease the willingness of individuals to participate through self-undermining rhetoric (Levine 2015; Levine and Kline 2017). In general, actions motivated by purposive goals may actually be depressed by information about the actions that others have taken (Hassell and Wyler 2018; Mutz 1995). Information about officials' actions and priorities might be particularly impactful because officials are able to do something about the issue. If individuals recognize that a public official with political influence is interested in the agenda item, an individual may rationalize that his or her action is not necessary because the issue will be handled by the government. Thus, communication from public officials about their issue priorities may contain self-undermining components that reduce the participation that public officials want from constituents (Levine 2015).

We study how elected officials' messages influence constituents' priorities and actions by collaborating with elected officials in four different municipalities to conduct a field experiment. In the experiment, the partnering officials sent out email messages to constituents on their distribution lists. We had the partnering officials send messages to individuals who already supported the issue but who had indicated that the issue was lower on the political agenda. We surveyed these individuals 1-2 months before the message went out and again the week after the official sent the message to test how these citizens responded to the message from their city official.

The key aspect of the experiment is that half of the residents received messages where the official advocated that a given issue should be placed higher on the political agenda, while the other half received a placebo email (i.e., an email that did not advocate for the importance of an issue but was otherwise similar). We included the placebo email (as opposed to a control group that received nothing) in order to carry out a placebo design (Nickerson 2005). We could carry out a placebo design because we tracked who opened the emails that the official sent. This allows us to compare the people who were actually treated (because they opened up the email) to the individuals in the placebo control group who also opened up their email. To be clear, our sample is not representative of voters. We intentionally study the effect of officials' communication on those with whom they most frequently communicate.

Our experiment finds that public officials' messages did not, on average, change the political agenda and priorities of the citizens they contacted. If anything, the public officials' messaging decreased the likelihood that individuals thought the issue should be a priority and caused citizens to be less likely to act when invited to sign a petition on the issue.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Effects of Elected Official Communication on Political Agendas**

There are competing expectations about elected officials' ability to change their constituents' priorities. On one hand, many individuals' opinions appear to be malleable. Rather

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<sup>5</sup> While, as we note below, our study is slightly underpowered, it provides strong evidence against the idea that public officials can change their constituents' priorities. While the lack of power reduces our ability to draw stronger conclusions about the backlash, our findings are consistent with other research that has found a self-undermining effect of certain types of communication from political elites (Levine 2015).

than citizens using their policy opinions to influence representatives, many analyses conclude that politicians, especially those who share a party identity, shape voters' opinions (Broockman and Butler 2016; Bullock 2011). Previous research on politicians' ability to shape opinion has largely focused on the constituent's positions, yet the quality of representation also depends on how well constituents' priorities are reflected in government's priorities (Druckman and Jacobs 2015).

In addition, numerous studies have shown that non-elected political actors, specifically the media and interest groups, can affect citizens' priorities and increase the salience of issues on the public agenda (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; King et al. 2017; Kioussis and McCombs 2004; McComb and Shaw 1972)

On the other hand, prior studies have focused on political elites' ability to change the opinions of the general public, rather than the political active constituents that officials reach with their messaging. Although the general public is largely inattentive to political affairs, and thus susceptible to persuasion, politically involved constituents are more likely to be knowledgeable about politics and to have priorities that are harder to move (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Krosnick 1990; Zaller 1992). While previous studies have shown that even the most informed voters are still influenced by elite communication on single issues, the effect "is swamped by the average absolute effect of exposing subjects to details about...policy" (Bullock 2011, 500). The effect may be even further reduced when trying to change priorities (rather than opinions) that are often already informed by a wealth of knowledge. Thus, while there is evidence that political elites can change voters' opinions, these previous studies have not examined constituents' priorities and have not focused on those individuals that politicians typically reach with their messaging.

Moreover, there is evidence that attempts to persuade knowledgeable individuals with well-formed opinions may prompt a negative backlash (Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981).<sup>6</sup> This theory of psychological reactance holds that individuals react negatively to persuasive information when individuals perceive their self-determination about what priorities to hold and what actions to take being threatened. This perception of threat to self-determination is likely to be stronger among those with well formulated opinions and priorities. When others try to persuade these individuals, this theory holds that they often embrace the attitude threatened by the attempt at persuasion (Brehm 1966). As such, attempts by public officials to encourage constituents with higher levels of knowledge to place more priority on certain issues may cause effects on opinion and behavior that are opposite to what was intended (Dillard and Shen 2005; Ringold 2002).

### **Changing Priorities and Encouraging Political Action**

Changing the political agenda alone does not remove many of the barriers to policy outcomes. Achieving policy success often relies on individuals' willingness to take political action in support of the cause. Political leadership requires successfully encouraging others to act on a specific agenda. For these reasons, we also look at the effect of officials' communication on constituents' actions.

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<sup>6</sup> Recent work by Guess and Coppock (2016) finds that there is no backlash among the general public when they are presented with factual information about a topic. However, their experiments 1) look at a general population rather than a sample of politically knowledgeable and interested individuals and 2) present factual information rather than information from a source that may have ulterior motives (such as a publicly elected official).

A stated priority is not the same as a public action, and opinions often do not conform with actions taken either privately (Berinsky 2004) or publicly (LaPiere 1934). Studies have shown that individuals are willing to lie or decline to respond when they know their views are not perceived as socially acceptable (Berinsky 1999, 2004; Schuman and Presser 1980; Vogel and Ardoin 2008). It is possible that pressure from politicians may change publicly stated priorities without changing underlying motivations to participate and engage on an issue.

Furthermore, communication from public officials might be self-undermining by encouraging complacency as constituents perceive that the issue is already being handled (Levine 2015). There is some evidence that descriptions of others taking action or past success reduces participation relative to information that communicates a lack of action on the issue (Hassell and Wyler 2018; Levine and Kam 2017).<sup>7</sup>

## **Research Design**

We test local officials' ability to affect issue salience and to encourage participation on an issue by conducting embedded field experiments (Foos and John 2018; Foos and de Rooij

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<sup>7</sup> Levine and Kam (2017) find that messages that hint at future action, as opposed to retrospective action, are not self-undermining. However, the messages they test imply the need for support to accomplish those goals and they come from interest groups rather than elected officials. Elected officials, unlike interest groups, can directly take action to change policies. Because public officials are different from other political elites, we might expect constituents to react differently to communication from officials than to communication from other political actors.

2017b) in collaboration with city officials from four cities across the United States.<sup>8</sup> The officials who worked with us on the study had earlier expressed interest in helping with a research project after they had taken a survey administered by one of the authors.<sup>9</sup> Table 1 provides information about the officials and the cities they serve in. Two of the officials came from relatively small towns (with populations under 20,000), another from a mid-sized suburb with a population of about 30,000 and the last a city of over 100,000 that is a key part of a metropolitan area in the Midwest. The officials also were diverse in other ways (see Table 1). For example, two of the officials were women, while two were men. One official was the mayor, while the other three were city councilors.

**Table 1: Partnering Officials**

#	Location	Population	Position	Gender	Constituents in Study
1	Northeast	~ 15K	Councilor	Female	89
2	South	~ 7K	Mayor	Female	68
3	South	~ 30K	Councilor	Male	20
4	Midwest	~ 125K	Councilor	Male	67

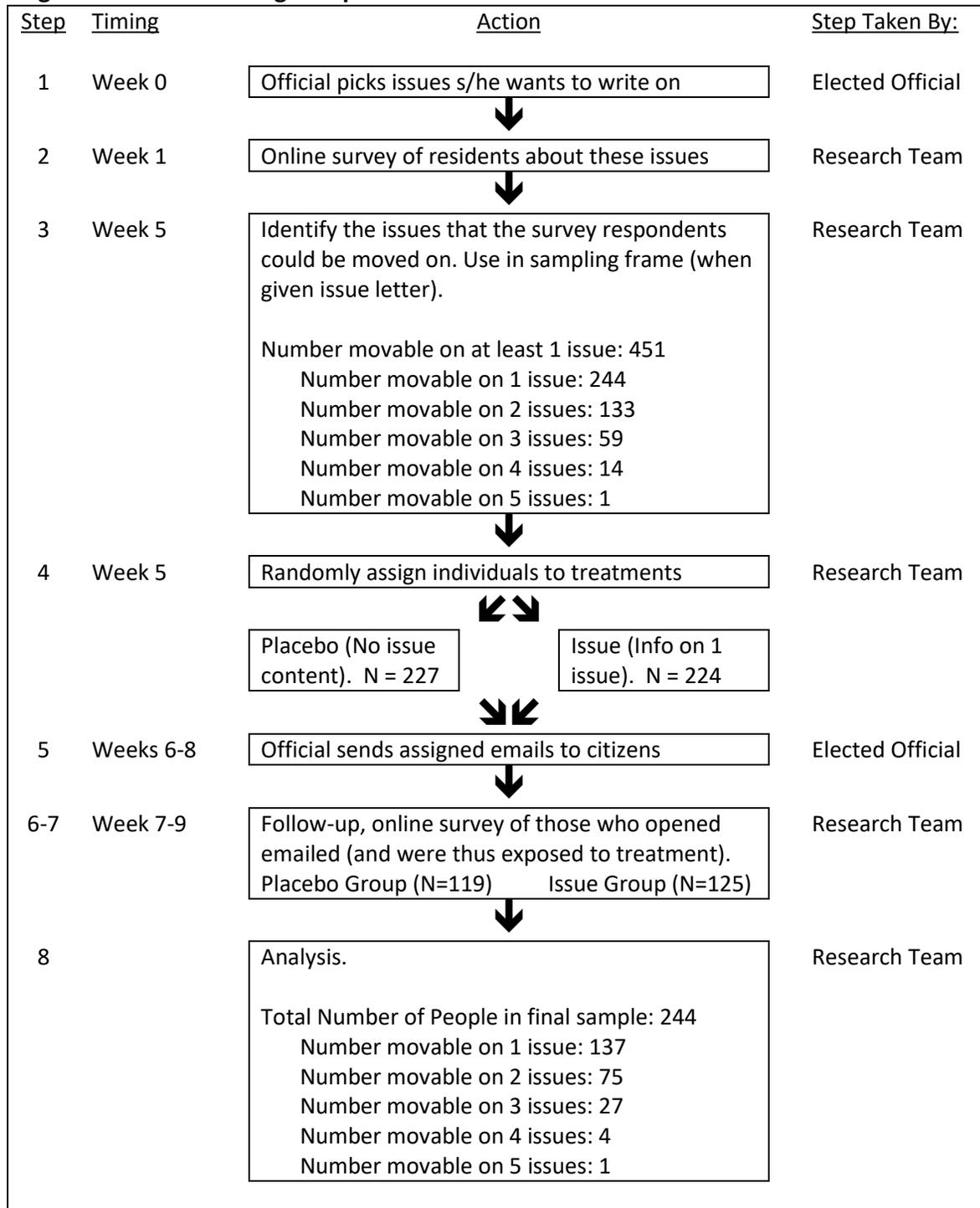
<sup>8</sup> The field experiments were approved by the IRB at Washington University in St. Louis.

<sup>9</sup> They were around 50 officials who had taken the earlier survey and expressed interest in helping with academic research generally (without expressing interest in a specific project). For this experiment, we invited all of them to collaborate with us. We first made the invitations via email and talked by phone with those who expressed some initial interest. Ultimately only these four officials could collaborate. A few others were no longer serving and the majority who responded said they were too busy to help at the time.

The collaborative experiments were carried out during the spring and summer of 2016. We designed and implemented these experiments to maximize external validity. For example, we had the officials decide what issues they would write about and we had them draft the text of the emails. We also had them contact the constituents using email because that is how they normally contacted the constituents in the study. We carried out the study by taking the following steps (which are summarized in Figure 1):

1. *Identify the issues.* We asked each partnering official to identify 4-6 issues for which they were interested in building support. We asked them to pick concrete goals that were relevant for their city and for which they were willing to write about in communications with citizens. Table 2 gives an overview of the issues that the officials chose for this study. The officials also drafted the text of the issue used in the email messages they sent. We had the officials choose the topics and draft the letter to increase the external validity of the study. Our study looks at the effect of the types of messages that elected officials would send.

**Figure 1. Research Design Steps**



**Table 2. Issues**

City 1	City 2	City 3	City 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water quality</li> <li>• Community center</li> <li>• Expand sewer system</li> <li>• Impact fees for development</li> <li>• Standards for private roads</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural trails</li> <li>• Rec facilities</li> <li>• More special events</li> <li>• Developing a common use area</li> <li>• Off-shore oil drilling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Term limits</li> <li>• Referenda</li> <li>• Benefits for city officials</li> <li>• City credit card use</li> <li>• Nepotism laws</li> <li>• Ethical guidelines for city officials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bike lanes</li> <li>• Cleaning up the city</li> <li>• Street repair</li> <li>• Economic development</li> </ul>

2. *Baseline Surveys.* We conducted online surveys of residents in each city that asked them about their positions on the issues that the official had identified. For each issue, citizens chose one of four responses:

- I do not support doing this and it should not be a priority for the city/town
- I believe the city should consider this but it should not be a priority for the city/town
- I believe the city should consider this and it should be a medium priority for the city/town
- I believe the city should consider this and it should be a high priority for the city/town

The text of the surveys is provided in section SI.2 of the Supporting Information. Because we are interested in the ability of officials to affect their supporters' priorities, we recruited citizens for the study from the participating officials' email distribution lists. The survey recruitment email came from us as researchers and explained that we were studying local policy priorities. The full text of the invitation to take the survey is provided in SI.1 of the Supporting Information.

3. *Identifying the Sampling Frame.* We used two criteria to determine which individuals would be included in the study. First, at the end of the survey we asked participants if they would be willing to take a follow up survey. Our study only includes the participants who answered that they would be willing to take a follow up survey. Second, we limited the sampling frame to those individuals who agreed with the official on an issue but did not think that the issue in question should be a high priority for the city.<sup>10</sup> For purposes of exposition we will say that a citizen is movable on an issue if in their response during the baseline survey they said that they “believe the city should consider” the issue but that it “should not be a priority the city” or said that the issue “should be a medium priority for

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<sup>10</sup> One concern might be that individuals who indicated that an issue should be a low or medium priority for the city were actually expressing weak opposition. This does not seem to be the case as a substantial portion of these individuals were willing to sign a petition on the issue. On the post-treatment survey 14 percent of those who expressed the issue should not be a priority for the city were willing to sign the petition. If we include those who expressed that it was a medium priority for the city that number rises to 28 percent. The willingness of these individuals to sign a petition on an issue that was not a high priority, or even a medium priority, suggests that this was not something they opposed. Moreover, rerunning the analyses below including only those who expressed that the issue was a medium priority for the city does not change the substantive results.

the city.” Thus, our sample only included people who were movable on at least one issue.<sup>11</sup>

For part of our analysis, the unit of observation is the individual-issue. This allows us to get more leverage because in some cases citizens were movable on multiple issues. When creating the sampling frame, we took steps to privilege working with people who thought the issue was not a priority. We wanted to focus on people who agreed with the legislator but thought it was “not a priority” because we felt that this was the population of greatest interest to officials trying to set the political agenda. Thus, when a citizen thought that at least one issue was not a priority for the city (but agreed the city should consider the issue), we only included the issues that they thought were not a priority in the sampling frame. If someone did not have any issues that they thought were “not a priority for the city”, then the sampling frame included all the issues for which they thought “should be a medium priority for the city.”

4. *Treatments and Randomization.* In our study, all citizens received an email message from his or her city official that highlighted the Internet sources where individuals could find out what the city was doing. All email messages included the same subject line (i.e., this did not vary with treatment condition). We used R to randomly assign individual citizens to receive either a treatment or placebo condition. Each citizen was randomly assigned with a 50 percent probability of being in either condition. The placebo condition did not include any additional information. However, in the treatment condition, the email

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<sup>11</sup> If someone either disagreed with the official on all the issues or agreed with the official *and* thought they were all high priority issues – or some combination of those two options – they were excluded from the sample prior to randomizing the treatments

included an additional paragraph where the official advocated for an issue that was important to them. Section SI.3 of the Supplementary Information provides the text of these emails. If a citizen assigned to the treatment condition was only movable on one issue (see step 3) then they received the information about that issue. If they were movable on more than one issue, then we used R to randomly choose which of those issues was provided in the treatment email message.<sup>12</sup> Finally, as a reminder, we had the officials draft the letter to increase the external validity of the study. Our study looks at the effect of the types of messages that *elected officials would send*.

5. *Message Delivery*. About 6-8 weeks after individuals took the baseline survey, the city official emailed them the message they were assigned to receive in step 4. Those who did not open the first email within 48 hours, were sent their assigned email a second time (to

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<sup>12</sup> For the analysis that looks at the issue-level attitude, the number of issues on which an individual was movable affected the probability that a given issue was treated (Aronow and Middleton 2013). For example, if an individual was movable on only one issue there was a 50 percent chance that they received a letter on that issue. However, if an individual was movable on two issues there was a 25 percent chance that they received a letter about one of those issues (because there was a  $\frac{1}{2}$  chance of receiving a letter, and – conditional on receiving a letter – a  $\frac{1}{2}$  chance that the letter was on the given issue and  $\frac{1}{2} * \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4} = 25$  percent). Table SI.1 provides the probability of treatment assignment based on the number of issues for which an individual was movable. We follow Angrist (1998) and account for the differences in probabilities of assignment by including fixed effects for the number of issues on which an individual was movable. Section SI.7 of the Appendix provides the R-code we used to implement the randomization.

increase the probability that they opened their email prior to taking the follow-up survey).<sup>13</sup>

6. *Tracking who Opened the Email.* The emails all used the same subject line: “Improving [NAME OF CITY]”. The emails were sent out using MailChimp, which tracks who opens emails by embedding a small image in the email. We use this information to carry out a placebo analysis (Nickerson 2005) by limiting our sample to those who opened their emails. We take this step because the treatment can only affect those who opened their emails (just like a door-to-door treatment in a GOTV campaign is only delivered to those who open their doors). We can do this without introducing bias because we tracked who in the placebo condition opened their emails (and thus represent the types of people who would have been exposed to the treatment had they been assigned to that condition). For the analysis, we restrict the sample to those who opened the email from the city official before taking the survey.
7. *Follow-up Survey.* Three days after the city official sent the email message we emailed citizens for the follow up survey to measure the impact of the treatment. Only citizens who took the baseline survey and agreed to the follow up survey were contacted. In addition to the initial invitation, we sent two reminder emails for those who had not taken the survey yet. The initial invitation and the reminder invitations were spaced 2-3 days

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<sup>13</sup> One concern is that people who received two emails may have been more annoyed and defensive and had an artificially negative reaction as a result. As a robustness check we reran the analysis only looking at those who opened up the first email (and therefore never received a second email). The results are presented in Table SI.3 and show that the coefficients all point in the same direction.

apart. Most people who took the follow up survey did so within a week of receiving the email from their city official. For our placebo design, we restrict the sample to those who opened the email from the official and who did so before taking the follow-up survey (Nickerson 2005).

### **Information about the Sample**

We achieved a high follow-up rate on the post-treatment survey (especially given that no incentives were provided), with 68 percent of respondents (310 out of 455) from the first round also taking the follow up survey. For the analysis we use the 80 percent of respondents from this subset (244 out of 310) who also opened the email sent from the official (as tracked by MailChimp) before taking our survey. We use this subsample in our analysis because they are the ones who were exposed to the intended message (either the treatment or placebo message). When we analyze the individual-level data we have 244 observations. When we look at individuals issue priorities, we have 415 observations (408 of whom answered all the pre-treatment demographic questions).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The sample size affects power. In section SI.6 of the Supplementary Information we present simulations to investigate how much power we have for our specific sample size at different treatment effect sizes (Coppock 2013). While not drastically underpowered, the results show that the power for the analyses are roughly between 0.6 and 0.65 for the treatment effects we find. The results of the simulation, along with the R-code to produce them, are given in SI.6 of the Supplementary Information.

**Table 3. Balance Tests**

	<u>Individual-level</u>	<u>Issue-level</u>
DV = Assigned to treatment email	(1)	(2)
Regression model:	Probit	Probit
<u>Independent variables</u>		
Female	-0.25 (0.17)	-0.13 (0.14)
Age (6 categories)	0.07 (0.07)	0.03 (0.06)
Education (6 categories)	0.02 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)
Political interest	0.06 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.13)
Follow local politics	-0.15 (0.18)	-0.09 (0.15)
Constant	-0.05 (0.84)	-0.43 (0.69)
Joint significance test (Likelihood ratio test)		
Chi-square	4.05	1.52
P-value	0.542	0.911
Observations	238	408

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

Attrition can be a problem if it leads to imbalance between the treatment and placebo groups. We test for balance by regressing the randomly assigned treatment (1 = treatment, 0 = placebo) on the demographics that were gathered in the first wave of the survey (and thus measured pre-treatment). The independent variables include gender, education (six-point scale), age (six-point scale), level of political interest (4-point scale) and how much they follow local politics (3-point scale). The wording for these questions is provided in the Section SI.2 of the Supplementary Information. Because we analyze the results at both the individual-level and at the issue-level, we present the balance tests for both levels of the data (column 1 for the individual-level and column 2 for the issue-level). These probit regressions test the significance of each variable individually and all the variables jointly (see the bottom of the table for the

results of the joint significance tests). The variables fail to achieve statistical significance both individually and jointly. We have balance on these pre-treatment characteristics.

**Table 4. Attrition Tests**

DV = Remained in sample Regression model:	<u>Individual-level</u>		<u>Issue-level</u>	
	(1) Probit	(2) Probit	(3) Probit	(4) Probit
<u>Independent variables</u>				
Treatment email	0.09 (0.12)		0.06 (0.09)	
Female		-0.15 (0.12)		-0.27 (0.09)
Age (6 categories)		0.07 (0.05)		0.10 (0.04)
Education (6 categories)		0.06 (0.05)		0.06 (0.04)
Political interest		0.02 (0.12)		-0.00 (0.09)
Follow local politics		-0.08 (0.14)		-0.12 (0.10)
Constant	0.06 (0.08)	-0.25 (0.62)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.34 (0.46)
Joint Significance Test (Likelihood Ratio Test)				
Chi-Square	0.52	5.17	0.47	19.49
P-value	0.471	0.395	0.491	0.002
Observations	451	442	852	839

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

Attrition can also be a concern if it is related to treatment assignment. In other words, if a given treatment is causing people to systematically drop out of the survey, this can introduce bias. Columns 1 and 3 of Table 4 test for whether treatment assignment is related to dropping out of the survey. We again look at the results both at the individual-level (column 1) and the issue-level (column 3). These probit regressions look at all the observations that were in the sampling frame when we randomized (i.e. because they completed the pre-treatment survey and were eligible for treatment). The dependent variable is simply whether the observation is in the final sample (i.e., because the respondent answered the question in the post-treatment survey).

The results show that the missing observations (missing because of attrition) are missing independent of treatment assignment. In other words, individuals (or the issues we asked about) that were assigned to the treatment group were not more or less likely to attrite from the study.

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample**

	<u>Individual-level</u>	<u>Issue-level</u>
Female	47%	46%
<u>Age</u>		
18-25	0%	0%
26-35	8%	8%
36-45	11%	11%
46-55	20%	17%
56-65	29%	30%
66+	31%	34%
<u>Education</u>		
Less than high school	0%	0%
High school graduate or equivalent (GED)	6%	6%
Some college, but no degree	22%	22%
Associate degree	13%	12%
Bachelor's degree	33%	37%
Graduate degree (Masters, Professional, or Doctorate)	26%	23%
<u>Follow local politics</u>		
Not at all	5%	5%
Somewhat	55%	55%
A lot	40%	39%
<u>Political interest</u>		
Not at all	45%	45%
Not very much	45%	45%
A fair amount	9%	9%
All the time	1%	1%
Observations	244	415

Finally, attrition can affect the population we learn about in the study. Columns 2 and 4 of Table 4 analyze whether certain types of people were more likely to drop out of the study. As Column 2 shows, there was no systematic attrition at the individual-level. There was some attrition at the issue-level, with older individuals and men being more likely to be in the final sample.

Table 5 provides a more general overview of our sample. Our study investigates the reactions of individuals who are reached by public officials. These individuals differ from the general population in systematic ways and this is reflected in our sample. Our sample is older, politically interested, and highly likely to follow local politics. These individuals may respond differently than the general public to messages from politicians. These differences, however, are intentional; we are interested in politicians' ability to influence the audience to whom they are regularly communicating.

## **Results**

Because we are interested in the ability of politicians to change their constituents' priorities and to encourage their constituents to take political action, we estimate the effect of the issue priority email treatment on two outcomes. First, we test whether the elected official's message increases the priority of the issue for the respondent. In the pre-treatment survey we asked individuals about their attitudes on the issue, using a four-point scale (that included the degree to which the issue is a priority). We include the same question on the post-treatment survey (for all the issues in that city) to analyze the impact of the official's message. The question wording is provided in SI.2 of the Supplementary Information. Because these questions included four categories, we use an ordered probit model to analyze this outcome.

As noted in the procedures above, when constituents were moveable on more than one issue, we randomized which issue the official would write about in his or her email message. For the analysis, we maximize our power by using the individual-issue as the unit of observation and including all of the individual-issue observations that were part of the sampling frame.

Correspondingly, we cluster our standard errors at the respondent level. We also follow Angrist's (1998) advice for studying situations where there are different strata at which the randomization is carried out by including fixed effects for these strata. In our case, the strata are represented by the number of issues on which the individual was moveable.<sup>15</sup> Angrist (1998) shows that, under some modest conditions, including fixed effects for these randomization strata recovers the causal effect. Finally, at the bottom of Table 6, we also present the results when using inverse-probability weights to adjust for differences in the probability of treatment assignment (Aronow and Middleton 2013).

We estimate the treatment effect with three models and present the results in Table 6. First, we estimate the effect when not including any controls (column 1). Second, we estimate the treatment effect when controlling for the respondent's lagged position on the issue (column 2). We present this model because our design closely follows Broockman and Butler (2016). Because those authors present the treatment effects when controlling for the lagged dependent variable we provide the same model for the sake of comparability. Third, we estimate the relationship while also controlling for the full range of pre-treatment covariates we have from the pre-treatment survey (column 3). Missing variables are imputed and an additional dummy

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote 12 for an explanation for why the probabilities differ. Table SI.1 provides the probability of treatment assignment based on the number of issues for which an individual was movable.

variable is included in the model to indicate that the observation included missing covariates to avoid the introduction of bias.

**Table 6. The Effect of Messaging on Issue Priorities**

DV = Priority of issue	(1)	(2)	(3)	
Regression model	Ordered probit	Ordered probit	Ordered probit	
<u>Independent variables</u>				
Treatment email	-0.29 (0.12)	-0.25 (0.13)	-0.23 (0.13)	
Lagged position: Low priority		-0.94 (0.12)	-0.96 (0.12)	
Female			0.25 (0.11)	
Age (6 categories)			-0.01 (0.04)	
Education (6 categories)			0.06 (0.05)	
Political interest			-0.07 (0.12)	
Follow local politics			-0.09 (0.14)	
Missing Covariate			0.25 (0.42)	
FE for strata?	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Observations	415	415	415	
Clusters (Individual)	235	235	235	
Log-likelihood	-505.5	-476.2	-472.0	
<u>Distribution of outcome (using inverse-probability weights)</u>				
	<u>Against</u> <u>Policy</u>	<u>Low</u> <u>Priority</u>	<u>Medium</u> <u>Priority</u>	<u>High</u> <u>Priority</u>
Issue letter treatment	14%	39%	35%	12%
Placebo condition	8%	33%	43%	16%

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

We find that public officials are not able to change these citizens' priorities. In fact, the treatment effect is negative. When the public officials wrote that an issue was important, the constituents who saw those messages were less likely to move *towards* saying that the issue should be a priority. The bottom of Table 6 compares distribution of treatment and placebo

groups across the different categories. The individuals in the treatment condition were 12 percentage points less likely to say that the issue was either a high or medium priority compared with the placebo condition (47 percent in the treatment condition versus 59 percent in the placebo condition). This suggests that the messages from the public officials may even cause a backlash among those to whom they are most easily able to communicate.

**Table 7. The Effect of Messaging on Signing a Petition**

DV = Signed petition	(1)	(2)	(3)
Regression model	Probit	Probit	Probit
<u>Independent variables</u>			
Treatment email	-0.36 (0.17)	-0.35 (0.17)	-0.33 (0.18)
Lagged position: Low priority		-0.20 (0.19)	-0.21 (0.19)
Female			0.22 (0.18)
Age (6 categories)			0.05 (0.08)
Education (6 categories)			0.07 (0.07)
Political interest			-0.07 (0.18)
Follow local politics			0.04 (0.19)
Missing Covariate			-0.22 (0.63)
Constant	-0.40 (0.12)	-0.26 (0.18)	-0.92 (0.91)
Observations	244	244	244
Log-likelihood	-143.1	-142.5	-140.9
<u>Distribution of outcome by treatment condition</u>			
		<u>Signed petition</u>	
Issue letter treatment		22%	
Placebo condition		34%	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

Second, we test the message's effect on the likelihood that the citizens would respond to an invitation to visit a page to sign a petition to take action on the issue. We included this item to measure whether respondents would take action (and not simply change their stated opinions). We measured citizens' willingness to sign a petition by including an item on the follow-up survey that asked if they wanted to be directed towards a page where they could sign a petition on the issue: "We wanted to make you aware about a petition that is circulating to encourage [Name of City]'s Town/City Council to...[issue specific language]... Would you want to sign this petition? If you want to sign this petition, click yes below and you will be provided a link to the petition." All citizens were only asked about one issue (the issue that had been randomly chosen prior to the official sending out messages). For those in the treatment group they were thus asked about the issue that the official wrote about. For those in the placebo group it was the issue that they would have received a message about had they been in the treatment group. The full texts the various questions are provided in SI.2 of the Supporting Information. We use a probit model to analyze this binary outcome in the analysis.<sup>16</sup> Finally, we again estimate the treatment effect in three ways: (1) with no control variables (column 1), when controlling only for the respondent's lagged position on the issue (column 2), and when controlling for the full range of pre-treatment covariates (column 3).

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<sup>16</sup> As a robustness check, we also created and analyzed a variable that took the time spent on the petition page into account. Following previous studies (Hassell and Visalvanich 2015) we coded this as a 1 if the participants took 20 seconds or more on the page with the link. Those who spent less than 20 seconds or who said they were not interested in signing the petition are coded as 0. The results of those analyses reach the same conclusions as those presented in the body the paper. The results are presented in the Appendix SI.4 (see Table SI.2).

The treated individuals were also *less likely* to be interested in signing the petition. Overall the individuals were highly interested in signing the petition, likely reflecting the fact that this was a group of individuals who were very interested in local politics and these were all issues that individuals agreed with (see Table 4). However, among this group of attentive citizens, the treatment effect was negative and statistically significant. The individuals sent the treatment email were 12 percentage points less likely to visit the webpage with the petition when offered the chance.

### **The Self-Undermining Rhetoric of Communication on Priorities**

There are at least two possible explanations for why these treated individuals are less likely to be willing to consider signing the petition on the issue. The first is that the treatment has an indirect effect on the action by lowering the priority of the issue in the mind of the constituent. The second is that the message from the elected official has a direct effect on the likelihood of acting because the nature of the communication may be a form of self-undermining rhetoric. In this latter case, the message communicated by local public officials already in a position to work on the issue might discourage participation because recipients of the message might believe that the local official is already working on the issue and thus does not necessitate their participation. While we believe that both factors are likely at work here, it is the latter that we believe warrants further exploration as it is not as well understood.

Recent work on political communication has found that some forms of communication are self-undermining (Levine 2015). These communications may have a reduced effect, or even the opposite effect desired because the rhetoric that seeks to mobilize individuals also provides them with information that makes them less likely to engage. Being contacted by an *official in*

*government*, may lead constituents to believe that local government is already likely to address the issue.

To better understand the potential for self-undermining rhetoric in public official communication, we recruited 2,012 subjects from Amazon Mechanical Turk (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Krupnikov and Levine 2014; Mullinix et al. 2016) to test whether communication from a local public official about a local issue causes individuals to believe that the government will act on the issue. Additional details on Mechanical Turk and the sample are available in section SI.5 of the Supporting Information.

In this study we choose to focus on the same issues that were covered in the field experiment. The MTurk respondents were thus asked their positions on four issues (with responses ranging from “I do not support doing this and it should not be a priority for the city/town” to “I believe the city should consider this and it should be a high priority for the city/town.”). The issues were drawn from the issues used by the officials in the original experiment (see Table 2), with one issue randomly selected from each city. Because we were interested in the perceptions of individuals who supported at least one issue but did not view that issue as a high priority, individuals who did not indicate that any issues were a medium or low priority were dropped from the sample.

Individuals were then shown the text of the message sent by the local official on an issue that the respondent had identified as a medium or low priority issue.<sup>17</sup> Respondents were

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<sup>17</sup> If individuals indicated that an issue was a medium or low priority for the town, they were then shown the text of the message sent in the field experiment about that issue. If respondents indicated that more than one of the issues was a medium or low priority, the issue persuasion text was randomly selected from those issues so that no individual saw more than one text.

randomly assigned to one of two groups. Half of the respondents were told that the persuasive message came from a local government official; the other half was told that the message came from a local community organization. Thus, our treatment is the source of the message (a local official or a local community organization) and not the message itself.

**Table 8. The Effect of Message Source on Beliefs about Local Government Action**

DV = Perceived Likelihood of Government Action	(1)
Regression Model:	Ordered Probit
<u>Independent Variable</u>	
Message from Public Official	0.23 (0.09)
Cut point 1	-2.98
Cut point 2	-1.00
Cut point 3	-0.04
Cut point 4	2.96
Observations	1,753
Log-likelihood	-2280.1

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

After reading the persuasive message, respondents were asked to indicate how likely it was “that this local government will take action on this issue.” As shown in Table 8, individuals who were told that the persuasive message came from a local official were significantly more likely to indicate that local government action was likely to occur. The source of the message has a significant influence on the beliefs of respondents about the actions of government. Knowing that an issue is a high priority to a local official makes the respondent more likely to believe that government will act on that the issue, perhaps thus negating the need for their own involvement and action.

## Discussion

There are three important scope conditions of our study. First, while previous studies have focused on political elites' ability to change constituents' issue positions, we focus on politicians' ability to change individuals' issue priorities. Our results may differ from previous studies because of our new focus.

Second, we intentionally focus on the sample of citizens that local officials are most likely to contact about the issues they care about: those on their email distribution list. The individuals who self-select to receive these communications are highly politically engaged with local issues. In our study, 95 percent of the citizens said they follow local politics at least somewhat (see Table 5). Our study does not indicate what effect politicians can have on the general public's priorities; they may (or may not) have the power to change the general public's priorities. However, our results are important because they show the effect that politicians can have on the priorities of the people they can typically reach (Zaller 1992).

Third, we only looked at how citizens in four cities responded to messages from their officials. This meant that our study was based on a relatively small sample and so was slightly underpowered.<sup>18</sup> For example, our study on changing constituents' priorities included 415 observations.

Even with these caveats, we can still draw some important conclusions. Most importantly, we show that politicians are not able to mold and change the policy priorities of the people they reach with their messages. We find that when the public officials wrote to a constituent communicating that an issue was important, the constituents who saw those messages

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<sup>18</sup> Section SI.6 of the Supplementary Information presents simulations showing that the power was around 0.60 and 0.65 for the treatment effects we find.

were *less likely to move towards* saying that the issue should be a priority than were those who did not receive a message about the importance of that issue. In other words, the treatment effect was statistically significant in the negative direction. Even with the smaller sample size, this is clear evidence that politicians are *not having a positive effect*. Perhaps because of their place in government and because of the type of individual with whom they are most likely to communicate, local officials do not have the ability to shape the political agenda among those with whom they communicate. While other political elites appear to have a strong effect on the political agenda (McComb and Shaw 1972; King, Schneer, and White 2017), elected public officials' direct influence is limited.

The officials were also not able to motivate citizens to act. We find that the citizens who received an email from their public official about an issue's importance were less likely to be willing to sign a petition in support of that issue. This finding highlights how politicians' communication about their priorities can be self-defeating. Communication about policy priorities may actually be self-undermining and decrease individuals' participation in support of an issue because it conveys the message that the public official is already working on that issue and as such, the citizen's action is unnecessary (Levine 2015; Levine and Kam 2017). We find that communication from public officials about issue priorities is self-undermining and reduces the participation that public officials want to encourage from their constituents. Part of this effect may be the result of the perception that local government is already likely to act. As we have shown, when constituents view a message about the importance of an issue from a local official, they are more likely to believe that government will act to address that issue than they will if a similar message is sent from an interest group. In short, public officials' ability to mold

constituents' behavior and to change constituents' issue priorities may be more limited than previously acknowledged (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Broockman and Butler 2016).

Further, our results show that, at least to a subset of voters, local politics is important (Oliver and Ha 2007; Rugh and Trounstone 2011; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). These citizens had real opinions and their priorities were not swayed by communication from officials.

Finally, our results provide insights into politicians' homestyles. Fenno (1978) describes a variety of different homestyles and highlighted two types: an issue-based homestyle focused on articulating issues and a service-oriented homestyle. Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope (2012) find that politicians are more likely to emphasize a service home style on average and Grimmer (2013) finds that variation in the tradeoff between these homestyles is correlated with the ideological congruence between politician and district. Politicians in district that are ideologically consistent with their own positions are more likely to adopt an issue-based approach than those in less ideologically congruent districts.

Our results suggest three reasons for why we might see these patterns in politicians' homestyle. First, if politicians are not able to move the citizens they can easily reach, then focusing on service overall (Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012) is a more effective use of resources for reelection-motivated officials. It is also the case that, if they cannot change constituents' opinions, then politicians should only speak about issues if they are speaking to constituents who they already agree with (Grimmer 2013).

Second, and related to the first point, politicians' own experiences with communication may cause them to underestimate their ability to shape citizens' opinions and priorities. Politicians may be able to shape *some* constituents' opinions. However, because politicians are typically communicating with the people they are not able to move, they are likely to conclude

that they cannot shape any constituents' opinions and priorities. In other words, the feedback that politicians receive is likely to cause them to update towards the belief that politicians cannot shape opinions and so they should only focus on talking about issues if the district already shares their views.

Third, politicians also have incentives to only use a more service-oriented homestyle because emphasizing their priorities has the potential to demobilize citizens. If focusing on issues causes supporters to relax under the belief that the issue is already taken care of, then politicians simply have incentives to direct their resources to service and other activities that are not self-undermining.

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