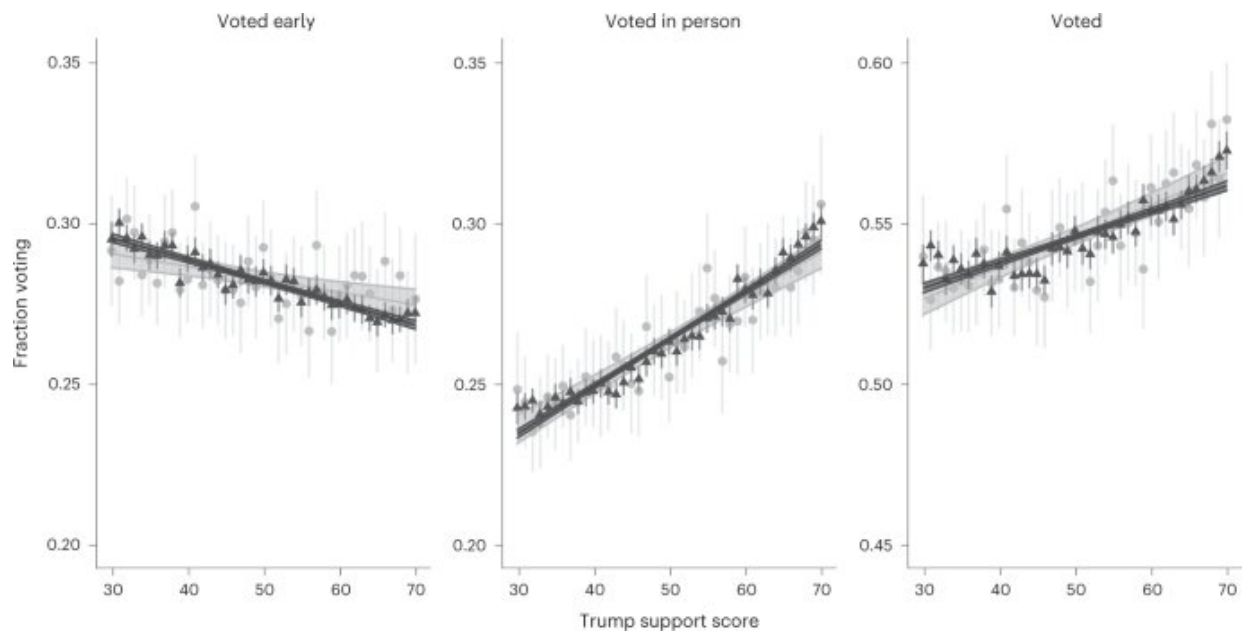


# Study of massive 2020 digital ad campaign to impact US presidential race shows it had little impact

January 20 2023, by Bob Yirka



2020 turnout rates by one-point bins of Trump support score and condition.  
 Credit: *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41562-022-01487-4

A team of researchers affiliated with a range of institutions in the U.S. and one in Kenya has conducted an analysis of the impact of a massive digital ad campaign run prior to the U.S. presidential election between Joe Biden and Donald Trump to learn more about how effective it might have been. In their paper published in the journal *Nature Human*

*Behavior*, the group describes how the campaign was carried out and how they measured its effectiveness.

The 2020 U.S. [presidential campaign](#) was—by any measure—one of the most divisive in U.S. history. After a difficult primary season, Joe Biden was named the Democratic nominee and Donald Trump the Republican nominee. In addition to the candidates and their staffs, large numbers of people and groups conducted campaigns designed to get voters to vote for their candidate.

In this new effort, the researchers wondered how much impact ad campaigns had on voters. To find out, they focused their efforts on one large campaign that involved expenditures of U.S. \$8.9 million and targeted approximately 2 million people living in a part of the country that was believed to be moderate. Moderate voters in the election were considered to be the most open to responding to ad campaigns because they did not have their hearts set on either candidate.

The ad campaign consisted of a single nonprofit entity creating ads and paying for prominent display on [social media sites](#) such as Facebook for the eight months leading up to the election. All of the ads were designed to convince people to vote for Joe Biden (or against Donald Trump).

The researchers found no evidence indicating that the ads from the campaign had any impact on the number of people that turned out to vote. They did find evidence, however, that the campaign had a small impact on voter choice—0.4% more people voted for Joe Biden compared to a control group. And 0.3% fewer people voted for Donald Trump.

The researchers suggest that large expenditures on ad campaigns are likely to have little impact regardless of the amount of money spent.

**More information:** Minali Aggarwal et al, A 2 million-person, campaign-wide field experiment shows how digital advertising affects voter turnout, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-022-01487-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01487-4)

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