

**Behavioral Themes**  
Mindfulness, endorsements

**Sector**  
Governance

**Project Type**  
Mobile-lab experiment

**Sample Size**  
754 participants



# Using behavioral informed communication to drive civic engagement



## How can communication drive individuals to engage with issues affecting their communities?

Active engagement in community issues is a critical driver of accountable political systems. Civic engagement can be measured through a number of ways: direct political participation such as voting, expressing political opinion through rallies and signing petitions, or attending community meetings and other venues of discussion.

This study builds on our previous work on understanding the psychological drivers of civic engagement to design a series of interventions that lead to measurable change in civic participation.

### A behavioral science approach

Based on our previous research, we saw that intrinsic self-efficacy was more effective than extrinsic motivation in driving civic engagement. In this study, we wanted to expand our set of interventions to include additional nudges that could improve participation. More specifically, we wanted to look at whether a descriptive norm prime could perform as effectively as a self-efficacy prompt in motivating civic participation. We compared these two interventions against no prompt (control), as well as a basic informational prompt employed by many activist groups.

# Design and Results

We deployed the following set of interventions through a mobile environment. After the mobile lab session, we measured how many respondents attend a follow-up community meeting as a measure of political participation.

## Condition

## Details

### Control

Participants listened to neutral information describing the features of a table.

### Placebo (Rights information)

A rights information intervention, whereby we used “business-as-usual” rhetoric that civil society organizations tend to use when communicating with their audiences.

### Self-efficacy intervention (Past success)

Participants were asked to actively reflect on a time where they felt capable of achieving a goal, especially if they managed to say something important to someone who is a leader in their community.

### Social norm intervention (Demonstrated engagement)

Participants were narrated a story of an ordinary citizen who successfully achieved change for the better in her community in Uganda.

We find **no intervention performed better than the control** (neutral information) and in fact, many of the standard practices (social norms, rights information) had a negative impact on participation.

Percentage of participants who attended the follow-up community meeting per treatment group

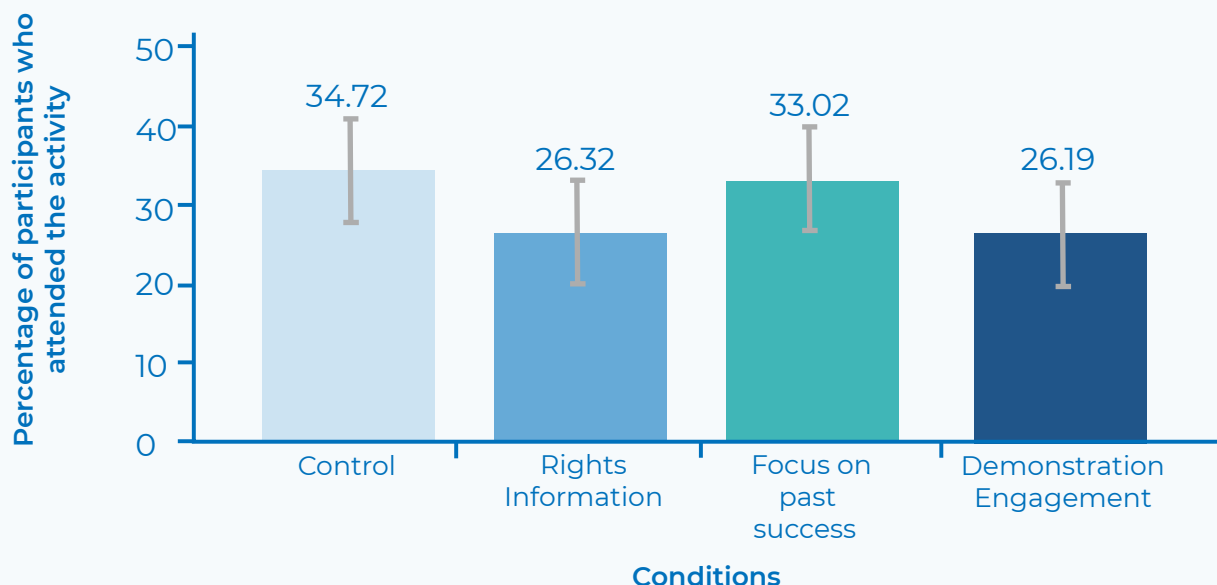






Photo credit: Annie Spratt

## Discussion

Our results suggest that:

### Intrinsic motivation matters in motivating openness to new information

Asking participants to reflect on previous personal and civic successes can enhance their receptiveness to information regarding social issues.

### Receptiveness does not always lead to engagement

Interventions based on targeting self-efficacy, providing relevant social norm messaging or providing information about rights do not seem to motivate attendance to community meetings. We are yet to understand what motivates attendance to community meetings.

### Stories are powerful

It is important to understand how to unleash their potential in the civic engagement space and to make sure that the provided stories target the specific behavior we want to encourage.