

INCREASING TIMELY REPORTING BY LOCAL GOVERNMENTS THROUGH TO-DO LISTS



Adding to-do lists to emails and calls to action to subject lines increased signup

Target a Priority Outcome

As part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP), the Department of the Treasury (“Treasury”) is administering the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds program (SLFRF), which provides \$350 billion in funding for eligible state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments to support their response to and recovery from the COVID-19 public health emergency. Approximately 27,000 small cities and towns – referred to as non-entitlement units (NEUs) of local government¹ – were allocated \$19.5 billion of this funding. Treasury seeks to support NEUs to meet their reporting requirements in order to promote transparency, responsibility, and equity in the use of funds.² In order to submit the required spending reports, recipients must first register (“sign up”) on Treasury’s American Rescue Plan (ARP) Reporting and Compliance Portal.

Translate Behavioral Insights

Administrative staff in small towns and cities may experience pandemic-related challenges such as staff shortages, overburden with new programs, plus stress due to health issues or lack of childcare experienced more broadly during the pandemic. In this context, Treasury communications should clearly and concisely lay out the steps NEUs need to take. The Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) and Treasury collaborated to redesign emails to encourage signing up on Treasury’s portal. OES made two changes to the email: 1) including step-by-step instructions at the beginning of the email (“to-do list”); and 2) including a “call to action” in the subject lines (“call to action”).

These additions quickly orient readers to the actions they need to undertake and the steps required.

Embed Evaluation

OES evaluated the effectiveness of including the to-do list and the call to action using a clustered, blocked, and cross-randomized design.³ NEUs were clustered based on shared email addresses and divided into one of four treatment groups within each block: the business-as-usual group, which received the control subject line and control email body (N=5,253 NEUs); the call to action and control body group (N=5,247 NEUs); the control subject line and to-do list group (N=5,238 NEUs); and the call to action and to-do list group (N=5,264 NEUs). Treasury sent the emails on February 10, 2022 and outcomes were measured one day and two weeks after sending, as specified in the [analysis plan](#).

Analyze Using Existing Data

The analysis uses data from Treasury’s ARP Reporting and Compliance Portal. The primary analyses focus on the proportion of NEUs who created an account by one day and two weeks after Treasury sent its email. We compare: 1) NEUs who received the to-do list emails to those who did not; and, 2) NEUs who received the call to action emails to those who did not.

¹ Non-entitlement units of local government (NEUs), defined in section 603(g)(5) of the Social Security Act, as added by section 9901 of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 are local governments typically serving populations of less than 50,000. NEUs include cities, villages, towns, townships, or other types of local governments.

² [U.S. Department of the Treasury, Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds](#).

³ The same email address might be included on carbon copy (cc’d) on emails to multiple NEUs. We clustered NEUs based on shared email addresses to avoid assigning the same address to multiple treatment conditions. Within states, we organized clusters into a block of singletons and a block of non-singleton networks. This blocking scheme mitigates bias from correlation between cluster size and treatment effects.

Figure 1: Number of NEUs that signed up on Treasury’s ARP Reporting and Compliance Portal

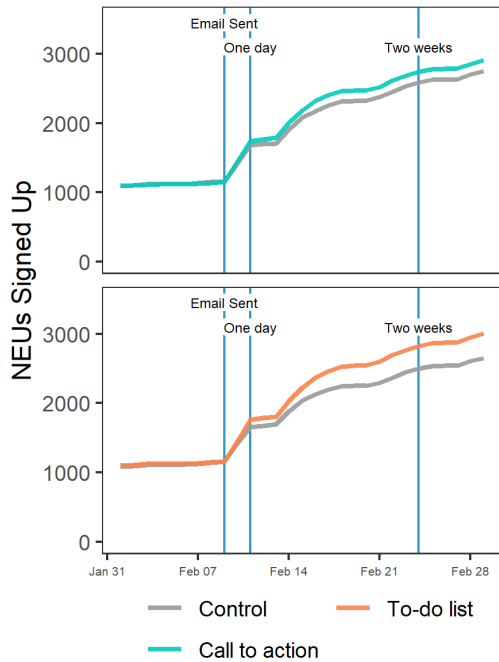
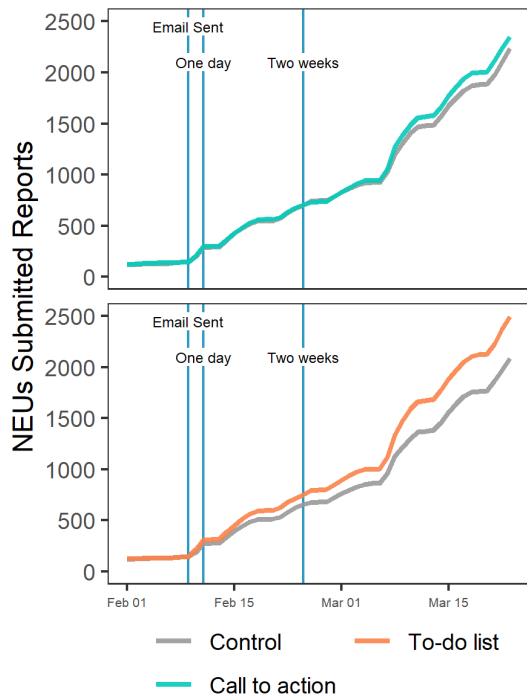


Figure 2: Number of NEUs that submitted spending reports on Treasury’s ARP Reporting and Compliance Portal



Results

We find statistically significant evidence that both the to-do list and call to action treatments increased portal signup. One day after the email was sent, the rate of signup was one percentage point higher for those who got the **to-do list treatment** compared to those who did not (0.010, $p = 0.047$; 95% CI [0.00, 0.02]).⁴ Two weeks later this difference was even larger. Portal signup was 26.9 percent among those who got the **to-do list treatment** and 23.8 percent among those who did not, a statistically significant increase of 3.1 percentage points (0.031, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [0.019, 0.042]). This represents a 13 percent increase in signups relative to the group that did not receive the to-do list email. These estimates imply that if Treasury were to have sent the to-do list email to all 26,794 NEUs in the sample, the number of online portal signups would have been 820 higher than if Treasury had not sent the to-do list in any emails.

The **call to action treatment** was less effective at increasing signup. One day following the email, the estimated effect is very close to zero, and is statistically insignificant (0.005, $p=0.278$; 95% CI [-0.004, 0.015]). After two weeks, portal signup was 26.1 percent among those who got the **call to action treatment** and 24.6 percent among those who did not, a statistically significant increase of 1.5 percentage points (0.015, $p=0.01$; 95% CI [0.004, 0.027]). This represents a six percent increase in signups relative to the group that did not receive the call to action email. These estimates imply that if Treasury were to have sent the call to action email to all the NEUs in the sample, the number of online portal signups would have been 409 higher than if Treasury had not sent the call to action in any emails.

In March, Treasury sent the same randomized email again to a larger set of NEUs ($N=23,911$). OES did not plan for this analysis in the pre-analysis plan, and so did not pre-specify this analysis prior to receiving the outcome data. As an exploratory analysis, OES estimated the impact of this email on NEUs’ submission of spending reports – the

⁴ Two-tailed p-values calculated using randomization inference with 10,000 replications of the treatment assignment.

downstream outcome that Treasury intended to influence by having NEUs sign up on the portal. Two weeks after the second email was sent, report submission was 18.4 percent among those who got the to-do list treatment and 15.4 percent among those who did not, a statistically significant increase of 3.0 percentage points (0.030, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [0.02, 0.04]). Report submission was 17.5 percent among those who got the call to action treatment and 16.3 percent among those who did not, a statistically significant increase of 1.2 percentage points (0.012, $p = 0.014$; 95% CI [0.002, 0.021]). This represents an increase in submission of 20 percent and seven percent relative to the groups that did not get the to-do list treatment and call to action treatment, respectively.

Build Evidence

This evaluation found that simplifying instructions through the use of a bulleted to-do list increased responsiveness to a set of actions requested by a federal agency. We estimate that this small change, which came at no additional cost to the agency, could have increased signup by hundreds of NEUs if included in all emails. Furthermore, while the estimated impact of a call to action in the subject line of the emails is weaker, it is nevertheless important to note that the subject line of an email can increase signup significantly as well.

OES and Treasury worked quickly to generate these insights during a critical period ahead of the April 30 deadline for spending report submissions by NEUs. The time from project initiation, to pre-registration on OES' website, analysis, and internal reanalysis of results to report back to Treasury was eight weeks. The speed with which OES was able to generate results meant that Treasury could incorporate the findings into its planned campaigns, and is now including to-do lists in its reporting emails to SLFRF recipients.