

Can I Get a Coronavirus Test? An Audit Experiment of Politicized Constituent Request

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ABSTRACT: Does partisan polarization affect the responsiveness of the legislators to their constituents? Does the politicization of COVID-19 affect Republican legislators' responsiveness to COVID related constituent requests? I contact over 2,100 elected officials in 15 states by sending them five different inquiries and requests. I find that Republican elected officials are less likely than their Democratic counterparts to respond to coronavirus testing inquiries by 5.3 percent. Meanwhile, Asian American constituents are no less likely to receive assistance with coronavirus testing than white constituents. The findings raise concerns about the effect of partisan polarization on constituents' access to services provided by their representatives when the public health crisis or other issues, such as abortion and healthcare, are being politicized. The results suggest that representation of the constituents' interests may depend significantly on the ideology of their elected officials.

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Audit experiments have been used widely in the study of political representation in the past decade. Studies usually involve requesting services, such as help with voter registration (Butler and Broockman 2011), signing up for unemployment benefits (Broockman 2013), or requesting information, such as state budget (Gell-Redman et al. 2018). Although Butler and colleagues (2012) find that federal level Democrats prioritize service over policy more than Republicans, and the state legislators who have had a larger margin of victory in the previous election are more likely to prioritize service over policy, little is known about whether certain kind of requests are more likely to be prioritize by the legislators. Given that partisan polarization has been prominent in recent years, what impact does it have directly on political representation, such as providing daily services to the constituents, is unclear. In this study I seek to answer two questions: does partisan polarization affect the responsiveness of the legislators to their constituents; and does the politicization of COVID-19 lower Republic legislators' responsiveness to constituent requests on COVID testing compared to their Democratic counterparts?

The COVID-19 crisis is salient and politicized along the party line. Similar to the partisan divide on Ebola (Nyhan 2014), elite communication (Green et al. 2020; Zaller 1992) and affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2020) have resulted in political polarization of the pandemic and the associated public behavior and public opinion (Allcott et al. 2020; Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2020). Beliefs about the future severity of the pandemic are all divided by the party line in a growing trend (Clinton, Lapinski, and Trussler 2020). We are also clear that the elites are polarized on COVID – Donald Trump and many Republican members of Congress tried to underplay or question the deadliness of the virus, and even denied its existence. Republican members put a stronger emphasis on the costs on the economy in the pandemic. Meanwhile, Democrats advocated for more testing, social distancing measures, and even a lockdown to halt the spread of the virus. Little is known about whether the state legislators are similarly politically polarized on such matters and have translated that to their daily interactions with their constituents. Given the polarization and the stance of the

legislators, I hypothesize that Republican legislators will be less responsive to coronavirus testing inquiries.

I attempt to answer the question by delivering emails to state legislators with five different messages, including four non-politicized messages that are requests commonly made by the constituents, regardless of partisanship, and one politicized message that asks for information about coronavirus testing. I find supportive evidence: Republican elected officials are less likely than their Democratic counterparts to respond to coronavirus testing inquiries by 5.3 percent. In addition, although one might suspect that Asians will be more likely to be discriminated due to the xenophobic rhetoric, I find that Asians' likeliness to receive a response from the legislators is statistically indistinguishable from the whites.

The findings contribute to the field of audit experiment that when researchers are designing the experiments, certain politicized requests may confound the inferences that we draw. Researchers must pay attention to the type of inquires or requests that they employ, depending on the purpose of the study. Second, the findings inform us the partisan differences in representation. Aside from COVID, one can speculate that the responsiveness of the legislators may differ on other politicized issues, such as abortion, gun ownership, affirmative actions, or even religion. This is problematic in representation because legislators' interaction with their constituents or provision of services are conditional on their own ideology, meaning that certain population will be marginalized, and certain services will be less available. For example, a woman who inquire about abortion would be less likely to receive assistance from her representative if she lives in a Republican district in comparison with a Democratic district. Third, the findings show that partisan polarization has politicized public health issues and it has significant impact: constituents from the Republican districts likely have less access to COVID resources. This might have worsened the public health crisis that the country is going through.

Research Design

The sample includes 2528 state legislators located in fifteen states¹ and they are assigned to one of the five values – four Asian American subgroups and white.² Each value consists of three names to minimize the chances of being discovered by the staff who work in multiple offices (Butler and Crabtree n.d.). All names are with high prevalence in order to ensure that the identity of the constituents is easily recognizable. All last names are derived from the 2010 Census and the first names are derived from the local sources.³ The names are available in Appendix B. The aliases all indicate that the constituent is a female, to eliminate confounder due to gender discrimination (e.g., Butler 2014). Legislators are block randomized to one of the five values by state, district, party, the percentage of Asian American in the district, and whether the legislator is up for re-election.⁴ Although the overwhelming majority of the aliases are Asians, I will show that my results are robust across both white and Asian. The first four topics are common constituent requests because they are frequently featured in the Q&A sections of the website of the legislators. They are also used in previous studies (Butler and Broockman 2011; Brookman 2013; Gell-Redman et al. 2018). The last topic, *coronavirus*, is the only politicized topic. One of the five topics of emails are randomly assigned to each alias. The topics include: 1) *flag request*, where the individual requests a flag to honor parents' retirement; 2) *nomination*, where the individual inquires about military academy nomination and its competitiveness; 3) *registration*, where the individual seeks information for voter registration; 4) *unemployment*, where the

¹ Refer to Appendix A for the complete list. Districts with less than 0.5 percent of Asian Americans were not included in the study.

² I am using four Asian American subgroups to account for the heterogeneity of this ethnic group. I picked Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese due to their abundance of population in the United States as well as their representation of East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

³ https://www.census.gov/topics/population/genealogy/data/2010_surnames.html;
<https://news.joins.com/article/22067159>; <https://www.babycenter.in/a25036522/top-100-girl-names-in-india-in-2019>

⁴ I used the R package *blockTools* (Moore and Schnakenberg 2016).

individual requests for help with signing up for unemployment benefits; and 5) *coronavirus*, where the individual asks about the eligibility of getting a COVID test. In sum, the legislators are assigned to one of the seventy-five treatment conditions.⁵ Within the treatment conditions, I also randomize the valedictions. Those emails were sent out in mid-September over four waves.⁶ Each legislator only received one email with no follow-up.

Results

Flag request was eliminated after the second wave because, based on the responses received, it is not always a common request that state legislators have received, and they might forward the emails to more experienced legislative aides or elected officials for advice. Flag requests remains in the analysis. The final sample size is 2189.⁷ The overall response rate is 54.8 percent, which lies in the middle of the range observed in studies of this kind (Costa 2017). The first dependent variable, response, is coded 1 if the legislators responded within two weeks, as per previous study (Gell-Redman et al. 2018).⁸ It is coded zero otherwise. To examine the quality of the responses, I add the second dependent variable, friendliness. It is coded 1 if the official offered to be of future assistance (“Please let me know if you have other questions”) or sending good wishes (“Have a great day”), similar to the coding rules of White, Nathan, and Faller (2014). I also code the response as friendly if the official expressed excitement or sympathy. For example, one official congratulated the sender for voting for

⁵ Template of the email and wordings of each message can be referred to in Appendix C and D.

⁶ This time period was picked because it is prior to the voter registration deadline for the 2020 election. The deadline was in early October for many states. Also, COVID remains a salient issue to voters and politicians.

⁷ I eliminated 115 email addresses (4.6 percent of the sample) that were undeliverable or undelivered, as per common practice, and the proportion is roughly the same as previous studies (Butler and Broockman 2011; Gell-Redman et al. 2018).

⁸ The overwhelming majority of the legislators respond within the next day or two after the emails was sent. Further, the responses do not vary substantively.

the first time and another official was sorry to hear that the sender needed to get a COVID test. To avoid post-treatment bias (Coppock 2019), non-responses are coded zero.

Table 1 displays the response rate of each message. It shows that flag request has the lowest response rate among all messages. This has supported my speculation that it is not as common or as easy to respond to in comparison with other requests. The response rates to flag request, military nomination, and unemployment benefits do not have significant differentials along the party line, this aligns with my expectation that only politicized requests should we observe partisan differentials. Coronavirus testing is the only request that has a difference in response rates of more than 10 percent – Democratic legislators are 10 percent more likely to respond than their Republican counterparts ($p=.024$). The response rates to coronavirus testing, voter registration, and unemployment benefits may suggest that legislators are more likely to respond to important and timely issues than those that are not.

Table 1: Response Rate of Each Request

Requests:	Flag Request	Nomination	Registration	Unemployment	Coronavirus
Democrats	.431	.470	.635	.598	.625
Republicans	.436	.477	.677	.582	.519
Party Differential	-.005	-.007	-.042	.016	.106*
	<i>(p = .924)</i>	<i>(p = .877)</i>	<i>(p = .349)</i>	<i>(p = .73)</i>	<i>(p = .024)</i>

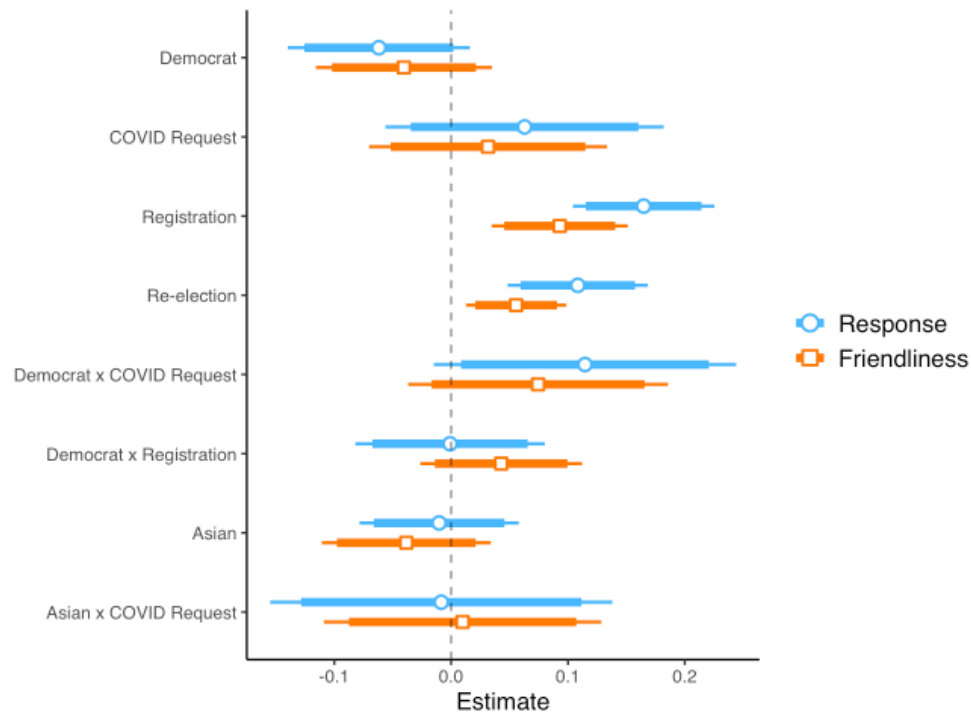
Notes: Party differential is difference between the response rates between Democratic legislators and Republican legislators. A positive value indicates that the response rate of Democratic legislators is higher than that of Republican legislators. The significance of party differential is computed by using ordinary least squares regression. I regressed reply on the partisan affiliation of the legislator. * $p < 0.05$.

I then estimate with two linear probability models (LPM) that control for upper chamber, and re-election.⁹ I also control for Asian population in the district because reasonably legislators in districts

⁹To account for heteroskedasticity, I use the HC2 robust standard errors that are clustered by states (Blair et al. 2020). The results are substantively similar if I use classic standard errors.

with more Asians are more likely to respond. To account for state-covariates, I include state fixed effects. Additionally, I control for *registration*.¹⁰ I report the two models in Figure 1.¹¹ The baseline is the response rate to non-politicized messages, which are *flag request*, *nomination*, and *unemployment*.

Figure 1: Estimates of Response Rate with Linear Probability Model



Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by states. The model controls for upper chamber, new COVID cases, battleground states, Asian population, and re-election. Outer interval represents 95 percent confidence interval, and the inner interval represents 90 percent confidence interval.

I examine my hypothesis that Republican legislators will be less likely to respond to coronavirus inquiries. I first look at the model with response as the dependent variable. The estimates show that Democratic legislators are approximately 5.3 percent ($p < .1$) more likely to respond to coronavirus

¹⁰ Arguments can be made about whether voter registration is politicized. Since the partisan gap is of decent size (but insignificant) and the experiment was conducted close to the polarized election, I have eliminated it from non-politicized issues. Voter registration is certainly not as politicized in September as in November. Moreover, regardless of partisanship, legislators and their staff should have incentive to help their constituent to register, because those who are requesting for help are their likely voters. This may account for the reason why there is not a large partisan gap.

¹¹ Appendix E presents the full models.

testing inquiries than their Republican counterparts. Since the overwhelming majority of the treatment conditions imply that the constituent is an Asian, one may worry that the effects I find are due to racial bias instead of the partisan polarization on COVID-19. Therefore, I interact Asian with COVID request in the models. I find no significant evidence to support the speculation. Re-election is statistically significant at the .05 level and the size of the coefficient is large, indicating that legislators who are up for re-election in November are 10.8 percent more likely to respond. Officials are also 16.5 percent more likely to respond to requests for help with voter registration ($p < .05$). Given that the experiment was conducted in mid-September in a presidential election year, the results illustrate the strategic emphasis on providing constituent service, particularly help with voter registration, when election is near and salient. The interaction term between Democrats and voter registration is not significant, meaning that legislators from both parties respond to *registration* at roughly the same rates. This is supportive of my expectation that the electoral prospect might have trumped politicization of voter registration, if there is any.

Next, I examine the second model which uses friendliness as the dependent variable. The estimate shows that, although Democratic legislators are more likely to respond to coronavirus testing inquiries in a friendly manner, than their Republican counterparts, it falls short of being statistically significant. Therefore, Republican legislators are as friendly as the Democratic legislators in the responses. Although the sizes of the coefficients of re-election and registration are smaller in this model, their directions are consistent with the findings in the first model. Legislators who are facing re-election and responses to *registration* are significantly friendlier than responses to the non-politicized messages. Moreover, it appears that Asians are not being discriminated against by the legislators, regardless of what kind of requests they send.

Discussion

My preferred way of interpreting the results is that there is a mixed evidence that the politicization and partisan polarization of COVID-19 has resulted in partisan gap in the way how legislators communicate with their constituents. Although Republican legislators are only marginally less likely to respond to coronavirus testing inquiries than their Democratic counterparts, legislators from both parties are not different in the friendliness of the response. The partisan gap does not exist for voter registration may have to do with the fact that voter registration was not as politicized as COVID. Also, although providing constituent service, such as answer questions regarding COVID test, can plausibly help with elections; only assisting with voter registration is directly related to gaining an extra vote. Therefore, it explains why we only see evidence on partisan differentials on *coronavirus* but not *registration*. The fact that we do not see the partisan differentials on the responsiveness to Asian Americans imply that coronavirus has not been significantly racialized.

Certainly, in contrast, the results could be interpreted in a way that the politicization and polarization of COVID-19 has no effect on the responsiveness of the legislators at all because the estimate was admittedly only significant at the .1 level, not the typical threshold of .05. If we believe in such interpretation, what would the results of this paper mean? First, even though COVID seems to be very polarized based on the media coverage and rhetoric we have seen, the reality is that only a very small group of legislators are polarized to the extent that they would not respond to their constituents and risked the loss of electoral prospect. Second, the seemingly ideologically extreme legislators may simply be position-taking (Mayhew 1974) for their own political gains, but in reality, they recognize the constituents' needs for COVID testing and that the pandemic is worrisome. Third, even if the legislators are polarized and the Republican legislators would not want to respond to coronavirus inquiries, recognizing the fact that the legislative aides are actually the ones responding to the emails, it implies the politicization and polarization of the matter does not affect the legislative

aides' provision of constituent service. My preferred way of interpreting the results and these three alternatives all seem plausible. This research has raised more questions to be answered.

As a caveat, this study is underpowered. The differentials that audit experiments typically observe are fairly small (Butler 2014; Gell-Redman et al. 2018; Mendez and Grose 2018) and it is common to find null results (Einstein and Glick 2017; Landgrave 2020). Landgrave (2020) has calculated that the minimum sample size per group to detect partisan differential in responsiveness to white and Hispanic should be 800. Meanwhile, this study only has slightly more than 400 samples for group. The 5.3 percent difference in response rate is on par with the differentials observed in other audit experiments, though on different topics. Given the theoretical motivation, such as how the legislators are conveying messages about COVID-19 (Green et al. 2020), and the fact that I do observe significance at the .1 level, I believe that there are good reasons to believe that politicization of coronavirus does have an impact on the legislators' responsiveness to such constituent requests.

Conclusion

These results highlight that the kind of messages scholars employ in correspondence study do matter – when the message is politicized in similar ways to the elites' stance, it will result in a partisan differential in responsiveness of the legislators. The COVID-19 pandemic, being arguably the most polarized public health issues in the United States, provides an opportunity to examine the extent to which the polarization at the elite level affects the way in which they interact with their constituents. Members of Congress are polarized along party lines in their communication regarding the crisis (Green et al. 2020). Donald Trump and Republican legislators have repeatedly downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic. Meanwhile, Democrats are more concerned about the pandemic and social distancing measures. In this study, I find that the partisan gap exists at the state-level as well. By sending COVID testing inquiries to the state legislators in fifteen states, I find that Democrats are

about 5.3 percent more likely to respond to those inquiries. The results suggest that not only do the legislators differ in how they actively convey messages to the constituents (Green et al. 2020), but they also differ in how they respond to the constituents. I find no evidence that Asians are being discriminated when they send COVID testing inquiries, suggesting that COVID-19 has not been racialized as much as politicized.

Admittedly, the study cannot confirm that the differential is solely the product of politicization of COVID-19. On one hand, Republican legislators may be less responsive because they think that the constituent who seek information on COVID-19 is a Democrat. This is purely an electoral reason. On the other hand, they may be reluctant to see high number of positive COVID-19 cases in their districts because it will result in lockdown and thus hurt the local economy. The two alternative explanations are nonetheless the products of polarization. Another limitation of the study is that my main finding is only significant at the .1 level. This likely has to do with the fact that the study is significantly underpowered compared to the other audit experiments. However, the size of the coefficient I have observed is nevertheless similar. Thus, I prefer to interpret that there is a significant difference in legislators' responsiveness to coronavirus inquiries.

If the partisan differential is true, then it is in and of itself important and worrisome. The politicization of public health issues has decreased the politicians' willingness to assist their constituents with access to health resources and they have a role in shaping how the public reacts to the epidemic or crisis. This worsens the crisis and hinders us from solving the coronavirus crisis. The results also imply that legislators are less likely to provide help to their constituents when the request is related to a politicized issue that the legislators do not agree with. Further research can investigate if partisan differential exists on other issues, such as abortion, religion, and police reform. Finally, the findings raise substantial concerns about representation in the time of partisan polarization.

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Appendix A: States included in the Study

The fifteen states are picked due to the dense population of Asian Americans. They include:

- California
- New York
- Texas
- New Jersey
- Illinois
- Washington
- Florida
- Virginia
- Hawaii
- Massachusetts
- Pennsylvania
- Maryland
- Georgia
- Michigan
- North Carolina

Appendix B: Name of Aliases by Nation of Origin

Racial/Ethnic Group	First Name	Last Name	Last Name Prevalence (rank)	Percentage of Asian
White	Mary,	Smith	1	.5
	Patricia	Miller	7	.54
	Jennifer	Anderson	15	.61
Chinese	Fang,	Chen	150	96.12
	Xiu Ying	Li	273	96.78
	Na	Yang	290	96.81
Indian	Arya	Patel	95	94.78
	Sannyi	Singh	260	82.77
	Maira	Khan	427	81.25
Korean	Ha-yoon	Kim	77	94.47
	Seo-yun	Park	289	72.98
	Seo-yeon	Choi	676	96.09
Vietnamese	Mai	Nguyen	38	96.45
	Tai	Le	277	95.59
	Linh	Pham	370	96.33

Notes: The 2010 census defines Asian as non-Hispanic Asian and native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander.

Appendix C: List of Messages

Subject Line	Messages
Flag Request	I would like to honor my parents for their retirements. How long does the flag request process take?
Request for Military Academy Nomination	I would like to serve in the military. May you please provide me with a nomination? How competitive is that?
Registering to Vote	When is the registration deadline for the upcoming election? Where can I register to vote?
Unemployment Benefits	I am not sure if I am qualified for the unemployment benefits. May you please provide me with the corresponding resources?
Coronavirus	I would like to get a coronavirus test, but I am still unsure about my eligibility. Who can help me out with this?

Appendix D: Template of an Email Sent to State Legislators

From: ***[Treatment Name]***

To: **[Legislator's Email Address]**

Subject: ***[Subject Line]***

Dear **[Representative/Senator]** **[Legislator's Last Name]**,

My name is ***[Treatment Name]*** and I live in your district. I have a couple of questions for you.

[Message]

I look forward to hearing from you.

[Valedictions]

[Treatment Name]

Notes: Bolded items were manipulated across emails. Items in italics were assigned randomly based on the treatment group.

Appendix E: Estimates for Response Rate with LPM
Models (Full)

	Response	Friendliness
Constant	0.196 *** (0.037)	0.104 ** (0.041)
Democrat	-0.062 (0.036)	-0.040 (0.035)
COVID Request	0.063 (0.055)	0.032 (0.047)
Registration	0.165 *** (0.028)	0.093 *** (0.027)
Upper Chamber	0.005 (0.034)	-0.040 (0.026)
Asian Population	0.289 ** (0.114)	0.223 (0.220)
Asian	-0.010 (0.032)	-0.038 (0.034)
Re-Election	0.108 *** (0.027)	0.056 ** (0.019)
Democrat x COVID Request	0.115 * (0.060)	0.074 (0.051)
Democrat x Registration	-0.001 (0.037)	0.043 (0.032)
Asian x COVID Request	-0.008 (0.068)	0.010 (0.055)
N	2189	2189
R2	0.088	0.053

Robust standard error. *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1.

Appendix F: Coding Rules

To examine the quality of the responses, I look at whether or not the responses were friendly. An email was coded as “friendly” when the official offer to be of future assistance (“Please let me know if you have other questions”) or sending good wishes (“Have a great day”), this is similar to the coding rules of White, Nathan, and Faller (2014). In addition, I coded “friendly” if the official expressed excitement, such as the use of exclamation mark. Non-responses are coded as zero to avoid post-treatment bias (Coppock 2019). Below, I present two examples to illustrate my coding rules. The first email is considered as friendly because of the last two sentences (“I hope this information is of use to you.” and “Thank you for participating in our Democracy.”). This demonstrated the official’s gratitude to the constituent for voting in the upcoming election. The second email is not considered as friendly because the official simply reply to the email with basic information without any salutations or any acts to convey friendliness.

Dear Mr. Fang,

I would also reach out to the Director of Administration for the Board of Elections in ~~NYC~~ ~~Georgia~~ ~~NYC~~ ~~for~~ ~~see~~ she will be able to give you up to the minute places both to register and to vote at. Below I have included some other information regarding the voting dates as well.

MAIL REGISTRATION (N.Y. Election Law Section 5-210(3))

Applications must be postmarked no later than **October 9, 2020** and received by a board of elections no later than **October 14, 2020** to be eligible to vote in the General Election.

IN PERSON REGISTRATION (N.Y. Election Law Sections 5-210, 5-211, 5-212)

You may register at your local board of elections or any state agency participating in the National Voter Registration Act, on any business day throughout the year but, to be eligible to vote in the General Election, your application must be received no later than **October 9, 2020**. If honorably discharged from the US Military or have become a naturalized US Citizen after October 9, 2020, you may register in person at the Board of Elections up until October 24, 2020.

I hope this information is of use to you. Thank you for participating in our Democracy.

information on filing an unemployment claim, details on how employers can file partial claims, and resources for other reemployment assistance can be found on the agency's webpage at dol.georgia.gov.

Appendix G: Description of Variables

- **Response (*Reply*):** If the legislator responded within two weeks, it is coded 1. No response or response that came after two weeks are coded zero. One email account has encountered technical difficulties and were not able to deliver a number of emails. These samples are coded 998. Emails that were not delivered due to wrong address or invalid address are coded 500. After the second wave, I noticed that placing a flag request is not always a common request that state legislators have received, and they might forward the emails to more experienced legislative aides or elected officials for advice. Clearly, legislators in certain states are more experienced in answering this question. This might have to do with the differences in the flag request process in different states or the constituent composition. From the responses, it seems that legislators who are new are more likely to seek help from their staff. Therefore, I dropped Flag Request from the study after the second wave. These samples are coded 999.
- **Legislative chambers (*Upper_Chamber*):** if the legislators belong to the upper chamber of the state legislature, they are coded 1. They are coded 0 otherwise.
- **Re-election (*Re_Election*):** if the legislators will be up for re-election in November 2020, they are coded 1. The information about whether or not the representative is running for re-election is derived from Ballotpedia. It has information about which legislators have participated in the primaries. Some candidates remained undecided during the data collection stage in August. These candidates and those who are not running for re-election are coded 0.
- **Asian American population (*Asian_population*):** The population of Asian American in the district. The data are derived from Statistical Atlas which provide data from the US Census Bureau (<https://statisticalatlas.com/United-States/Overview>).
- **Valedictions (*Valediction*):** one of the three valedictions are randomly assigned to the emails. 1 is “Sincerely”, 2 is “Thanks”, 3 is “Best Regards.”