

# Name Similarity Encourages Generosity

## A Field Experiment in Email Personalization

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### Introduction

- Names can attract attention<sup>1</sup>, and people tend to like and feel socially close to similar others<sup>2,3</sup>
- However, concerns over privacy can limit the effectiveness of using names to persuade<sup>4</sup>, and mass-personalization can sometimes be ineffective<sup>5,6</sup>
- Can overtly matching a potential donor to a person in need by name lead to increased charitable behavior?

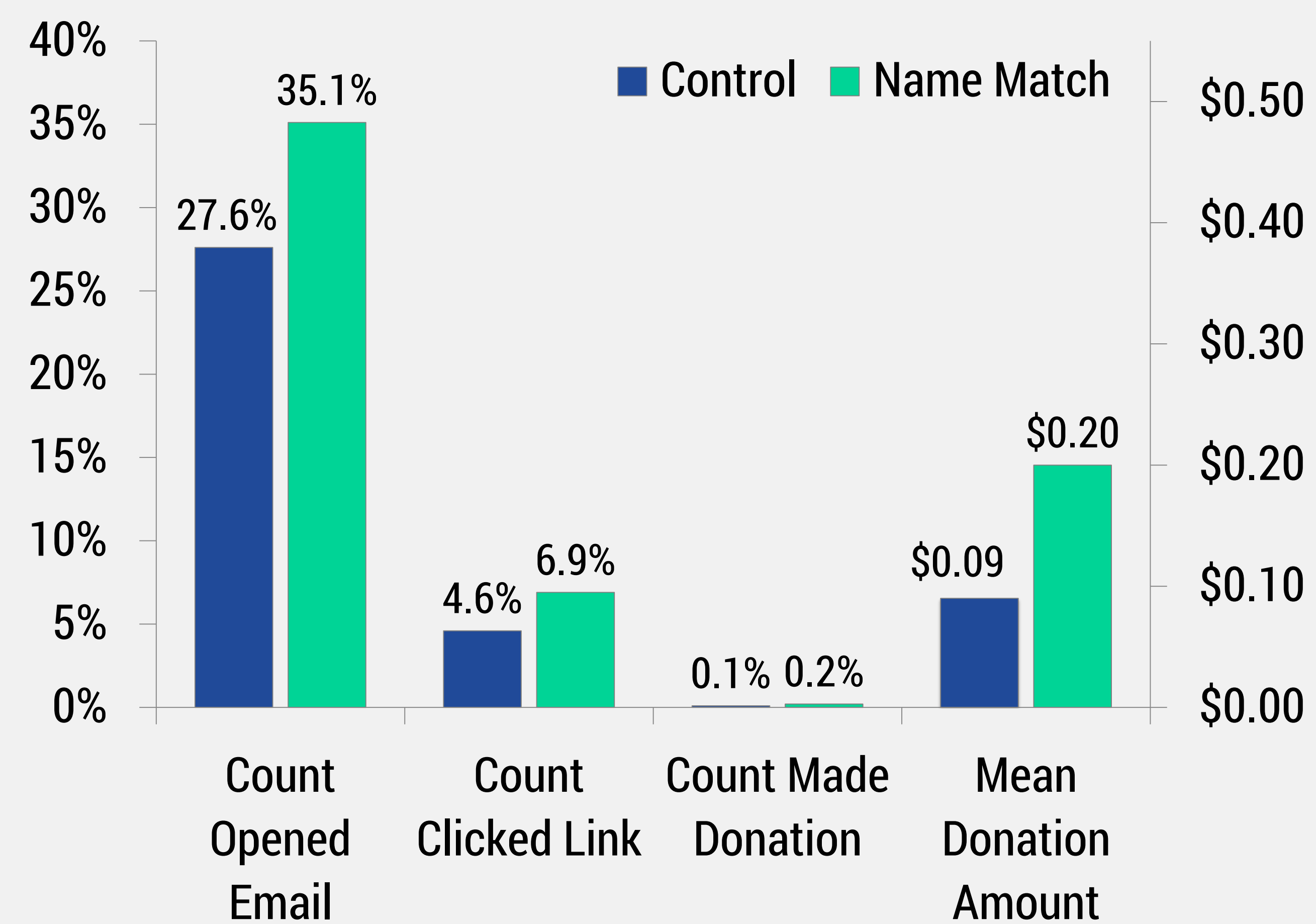
In a randomized email field experiment with DonorsChoose.org (N = 30,297), donors who shared a surname with a teacher were more likely to open, click, donate, and donated more to the teacher's classroom. Different-surname donors were also more generous when they shared a first-letter with the requesting teacher.

### Method

- Preregistered yoked design
  - Each teacher was matched with two same-surname donors
  - Donors randomly assigned to condition
  - Donor-teacher pairs in name-mismatch condition scrambled such that donor and teacher do not share a surname
- No deception; actual matches
- Participants received an email from DonorsChoose requesting funds for a project in the teacher's classroom

### Main Results

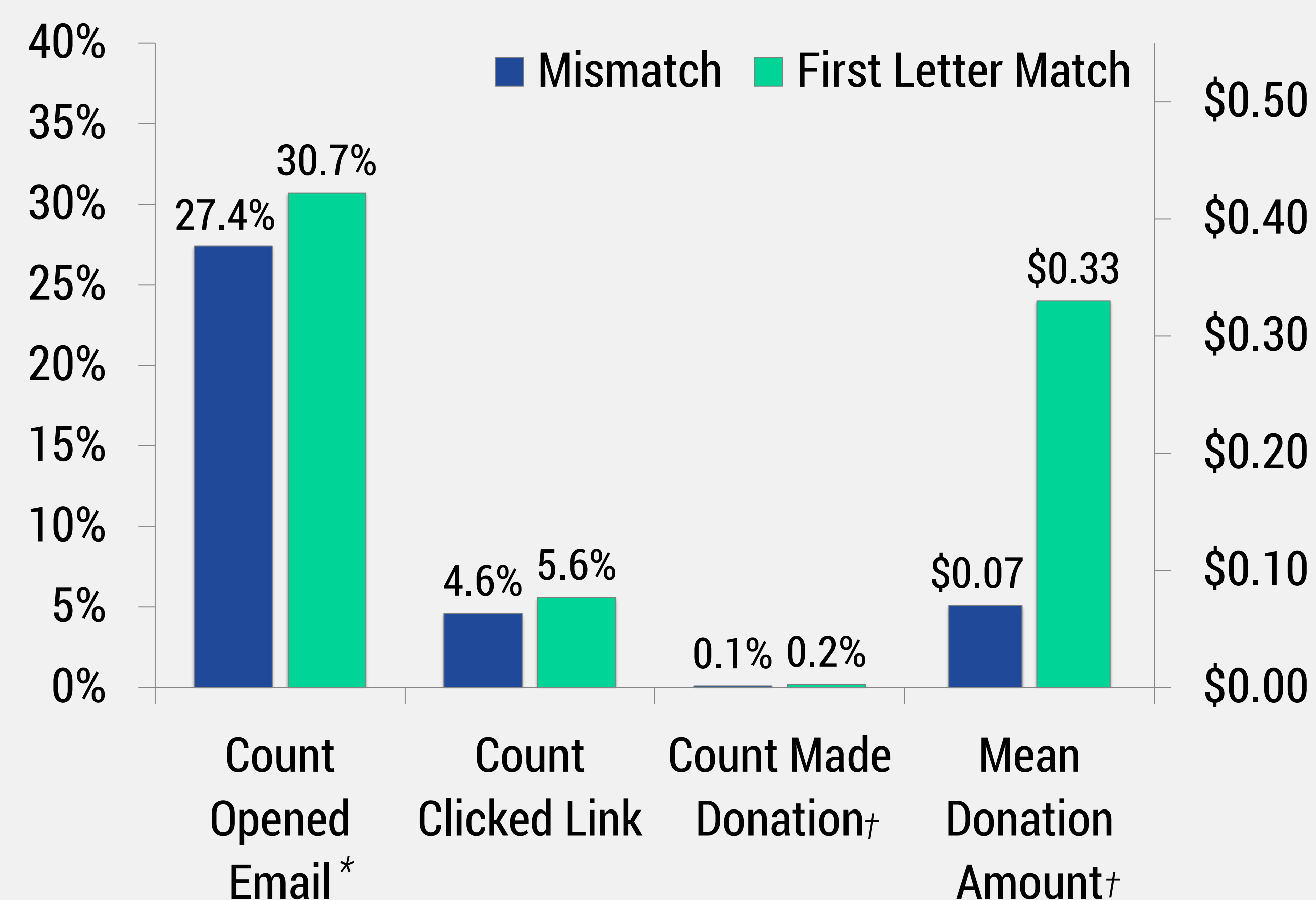
N = 30,297



All comparisons significant at  $p < .01$

### Name Letters

Surname first letter match among those in control condition (no full name matches). N = 15,142



†  $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$

### Inferring Gender, Ethnicity & Country

- In addition to matching on surname, donors could match on gender, ethnicity, or national origin
- To *quantify* and *control* these effects, we did the following

**Machine Learning Approach** - inferred donor characteristics from both given and surname, based on classifications from a machine learning algorithm trained on large data sets.

- Main results and name-letter results robust when controlling for gender, ethnicity, country
- Ethnicity was equally powerful a predictor of donations as name matching, but did not predict tendency to open the email

**Census Approach** - inferred ethnicity from most common ethnicity associated with a particular surname in the US census

- Examined a subset of data where donor and teacher match on ethnicity inferred in this manner
- All reported outcomes robust to this selection criterion

### Name Commonness

*Do people with less common names react more favorably?*

- No:** full surname-matches (exception: likelihood of clicking)
- Yes:** name-letter matches on donation likelihood and donation amount

### Conclusions

- Name-matching enhanced charitable behavior
- Robust when controlling for ethnicity, suggesting effects above-and-beyond in-group favoritism
- Small name-letter effect in a well-controlled real-world randomized setting<sup>7</sup>
- Suggestive evidence for two processes:
  - Attention
  - Enhancing feelings of social closeness

### References

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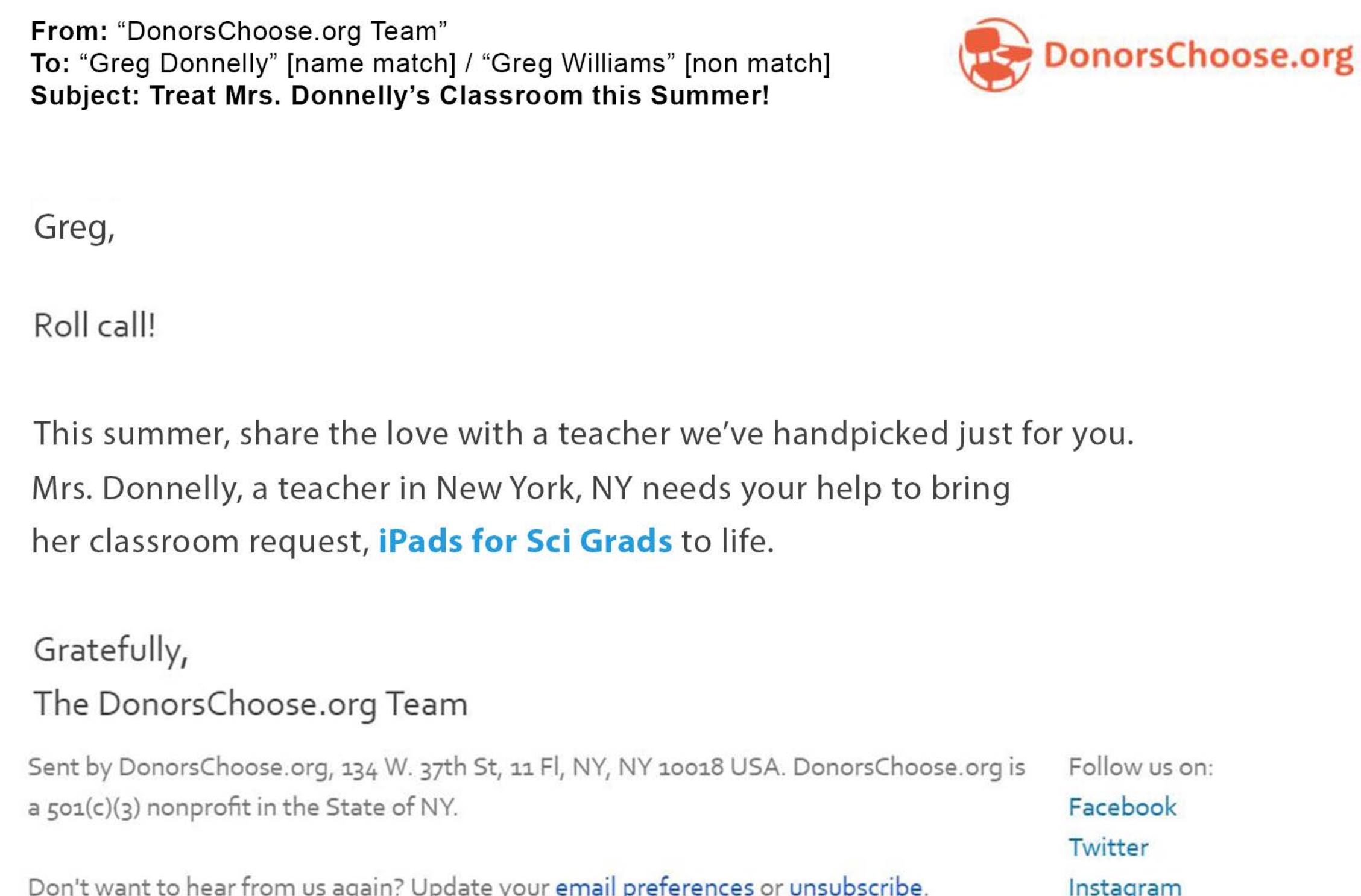


Figure 1 - Email sent to potential donors