

3-2019

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Does My Vote Count?

Analyzing the Motivations of American Voters and the Obstacles They Face

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of

University Honors Program Requirements

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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BS in Biological Sciences

College of Arts and Sciences

March 11, 2018

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Abstract

One of the most indispensable rights Americans are promised is the opportunity to vote at the polls. After the women's suffrage and civil rights movements, all American citizens above 18 and who haven't committed a felony have the right to vote. The election process in America is viewed by many as egalitarian. However, upon a rudimentary examination into the election process, it becomes clear that this equality that America promotes is consistently at battle with classism and hierarchy. Every election, thousands of eligible voters do not vote because of inadequate information and support, barriers in the process, and other forms of suppression. In 2013, the Supreme Court overturned Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which stated that areas with a history discriminatory voting laws had to receive federal clearance before making new voting laws. As a result, it became easier for states enact laws that affect the ability of Americans to exercise their right. This thesis examines barriers Americans face in voting and factors affecting voter turnout and motivation. Additionally, factors affecting turnout amongst college students and voting amongst undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are examined.

Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful for the guidance of Dr. John Bender. His teaching style, wealth of knowledge, and care for his students has continuously inspired me since my first year of college.

I would also like to thank Dr. Linda Moody for showing me the true meaning of civic engagement and Linda Moody for guiding me in the genesis of this project.

The Voting Process

Voter Registration and Purging

Almost one in four eligible voters in the United States are not registered (Wright 2012). This is largely due to registration policies. In 33 states, eligible voters must register weeks before early voting and election day. However, 17 states allow same-day registration and voting with proof of residence and identification (NCSL 2019). Same-day registration makes voting more accessible because it does not put a time limit on registering and allows interest in political candidates to develop. As a consequence, turnout improves. For example, in 2008, 15.6% of Minnesota voters registered on the same day (Burden et. al 2009) Additionally, 12 states have automatic voter registration, in which eligible voters are automatically registered to vote unless they decline (Brennan Center for Justice). This practice eliminates the steps needed to vote and puts more eligible voters on electoral rolls. On the opposite side of this spectrum, some states employ voter purging practices.

Voter purging refers to removing registered voters from the voter rolls if they have not voted in recent elections. Federal law states that voters cannot be purged from the voting rolls for at least two general election cycles. However, the practice of voter purging has been criticized for being yet another barrier in the voting process. Ohio is one state that purges voters immediately after two years; in 2016, 144,000 people were removed from the voting rolls in Ohio's three largest counties. In the 2018 Supreme Court Case *Husted v. A. Philip Randolph Institute*, the 5-4 decision ruled that Ohio's system was not unconstitutional (Brennan Center for Justice). In her dissent, Justice Sotomayor criticized this decision by the citing the intentions of the 1993 National Voter Rights Act (NVRA). Sotomayor argues that the NVRA was enacted to

protect low-income and minority voters from barriers in the voting process, but voter purging is precisely what this law aims to prevent. At the crux of this system, eligible voters are being punished for not exercising their right to vote if they choose to not vote.

Caucusing

Lines and Equipment

Provisional and Absentee Ballots

When the 2000 presidential election was ultimately decided by a few hundred votes in Florida, Congress was motivated to reform federal elections and to facilitate a fair and straightforward voting process. Congress passed the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which provided states with funding for purchasing voting machines, required polling places to support non-English speaking voters and voters with disabilities, and encouraged states to train poll workers and to provide voter guides. HAVA also established the provisional ballot system to mitigate issues faced on election day.

If for some reason registered voters are not on electoral rolls or have their eligibility challenged, they are able to obtain a provisional ballot at the polls. In some cases, voters that are registered at a different precinct or do not have the required identification can also use a provisional ballot. The ballot will be counted if the voter's eligibility is later established, and voters can call a toll free number to confirm that their ballot was counted. The provisional ballot system was developed to protect voters from mistakes made on election day and ensure that their vote is counted. However, there are many issues with this system in various states, resulting in votes from eligible voters not being counted. For example, in the 2008 election in Ohio, 14,335

provisional ballots were not counted because they were cast in the incorrect precinct (Sherman 2011). Furthermore, 25 states do not count provisional ballots if they are cast in the wrong precinct (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018).

Unbeknownst to voters, precincts can change from election to election, or one polling location can hold many precincts. If poll workers are not able to clarify why voters are not on the electoral roll, they may end up submitting provisional ballots that are not counted. These laws unfairly punish registered voters; furthermore, valid provisional ballots may not be counted as well. In the 2018 Florida election, nearly 4,000 mail-in ballots and 93 provisional ballots were discarded because signatures did not match the signatures on voter registration rolls (Karn 2019). Challenging a rejected signature is often difficult for people with disabilities, people that change their names, and non-English speakers. These issues that people using absentee and provisional ballots face further deter people from using these services in the belief that their vote will end up not being counted.

Voter ID Laws

In addition, HAVA aimed to mitigate fears of voter fraud and preserve the integrity and fairness of elections. Voter fraud occurs when non-citizens, deceased, or ineligible people vote in a state or federal election. HAVA mandated that eligible voters must provide a driver's license number or a social security number to register. Voter identification laws were developed as a method to reduce voter fraud and require that people provide a form of official identification before voting in an election or registering to vote. Depending on the state, the ID can be nonphoto, such as a social security card, or photo, such as a driver's license. Photo identification has only been required to vote since 1997, starting in Indiana (Rocha & Matsubayashi 2013).

Over 21 million Americans, 11% of the population, do not have photo identification (Brennan Center for Justice 2006).

Many low-income people or racial or ethnic minorities do not have acceptable identification because they cannot afford it or they do not have the requirements, such as a birth certificate or proof of address, needed to obtain an ID. For example, nearly 25% of voting-eligible African Americans do not have a government-issued photo ID, compared to 8% of eligible white voters (Brennan Center for Justice 2006). There may also be physical difficulties in obtaining an ID, in the case of elderly people and people with disabilities. Voters also face disparity in obtaining the appropriate type of identification to vote. For example, Texas allows gun permits as identification but not student ID cards (Barreto et. al 2018).

So why do these laws prevail? Voter ID laws discourage political participation from groups that are already marginalized. In 2018, a federal judge ruled that Native Americans in North Dakota had to comply with a new voter ID requiring proof of address (Kimmelman 2018). Many Native Americans living on reservations utilize Post Office boxes but do not have home addresses, so they were negatively affected by this law. The passage of Alabama's voter ID law brought with it the closing of 31 of 67 Department of Motor Vehicles locations, most of them in majority black counties (Watson 2015). Voter ID laws are reminiscent of other hurdles certain voters have faced such as poll taxes and literacy tests.

Circuit Judge Richard Posner, who once supported Voter ID laws, explained in 2013 that Voter ID "a means of voter suppression rather than fraud prevention." Yet, President Trump and other conservatives continue to tout that voter ID fraud is a pressing and extensive issue. After the 2018 midterms, Trump said, "The Republicans don't win and that's because of potentially

illegal votes In contrast to this, only 31 instances of voter fraud have been found since 2000 (Levitt 2014).

Voter Disenfranchisement

Disenfranchisement refers to revokement of the right to vote. When one is disenfranchised, they do not have the ability to choose their representatives, consider legislation in their communities, and shape politics for generations to come. Some examples of disenfranchisement are in Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C . Residents of Puerto Rico pay federal taxes but do not have Congressional representation and cannot vote in federal elections. This means that 2.6 million Puerto Ricans of voting age are not allowed to participate in the political process (U.S. Census, 2016). In Washington, D.C, residents vote in presidential elections and pay federal taxes but have no Senate representation.

However, one of the largest instances of disenfranchisement in the United States is of those that have a felony conviction. In 2016, 6.1 million Americans were not able to vote because of their felony conviction (Uggen et. al 2016). As incarceration rates continue to climb in, minorities are disproportionately affected. In 2013, 37% of male prison inmates were African American and 22% were Latino; however, these groups only constitute 13.2% and 17.1% of the general population (Carson, 2014). Every state has different policies for disenfranchisement, falling into these categories: voting rights returned after full completion of sentence (including parole and probation), voting rights returned after discharge from parole, voting rights returned after release from prison, and permanent disenfranchisement (King and Erikson, 2016). Some states that allow voting after completion of a sentence also have a waiting period before one can

vote, such as Nebraska which has a 2 year waiting period. Maine and Vermont are the only states allowing all citizens with felonies to vote.

In states with permanent disenfranchisement, minority voices are silenced as minorities make up a disproportionate percentage of the incarcerated population. Minorities tend to vote Democratic, so felony disenfranchisement overwhelmingly benefits conservative politics. Under Florida's permanent disenfranchisement law, 20% of black males did not have the right to vote (Mak 2018). However, In the 2018 election, Florida residents voted to return the right to vote to approximately 1.4 million citizens with previous felony convictions, but people convicted of murder or sexual offenses did not have their rights restored.

The argument for felony disenfranchisement is that people who do not follow the law should not be able to participate in the political process. However, having the basic right to vote stripped can make former inmates feel like second-class citizens and further exclude them from society. In contrast, restoring this right can make rehabilitation easier and allow them to be involved in their communities. "It was an injustice not to be able to vote... I'm a totally different person now, just like a lot of other people who have come to register," said Clarence Office, a former felon in Florida (Mazzei 2019). By restoring voting rights to those with felony convictions, we empower them and encourage them to participate in civic life.

Political Alienation

Political alienation is a negative view of the government or political system characterized by a psychological feeling of separation. Individuals may feel as if they can have no meaningful impact on the government or policy-making. Therefore, this sense of powerlessness can cause

individuals to refrain from voting. In addition, potential voters can have a sentiment of cynicism, a feeling that lawmakers act in the interest of a select few and are ineffective or do not care about them.

Historically, individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to vote. This is because they may have a better understanding of issues and candidates, know how to register, and know where and how to vote. Political campaigns typically appeal to people who would vote regardless of whether this candidate was campaigning or not. “Non-voters” do not always receive information on how to go about casting a ballot or how certain candidates or legislature will impact them. In order to increase enthusiasm, campaigns need to appear as representative of the electorate it is trying to sway as possible. This involves appealing to a variety of age groups, socioeconomic groups, races and ethnicities, and other demographics.

Eligible voters may feel as if their vote in a federal election does not matter because of the electoral college system. People vote to make a difference, and if their opinion is overshadowed by the majority opinion in their state, they may be discouraged from going to the polls. For example, in 2008, voters in New Mexico, New Hampshire, and Colorado had 1 in 10 million chance of affecting the presidential election. However, the average American had a 1 in 60 million chance of being the deciding vote (Gelman et. al, 2012). Living in a polarized “red” or “blue” state as opposed to a swing state can feel like an echo chamber in which the minority point of view is never considered. Another issue is that states are not represented equally in terms of population. Electoral college votes are a sum of the number of representatives and senators in a state. So, Wyoming has 3 electoral votes for 579,315 residents while Florida has 29 votes for 21 million residents (United States Census Bureau). Therefore, votes by Wyoming

residents are roughly 3.75 times more influential than those of Floridians in a presidential election. In the most recent election, Hillary Clinton won the most popular votes but lost the election due to her electoral college votes, and Trump won Wisconsin by less than one percent. This result caused more skepticism about the election process, and diminished support for the electoral college.

Nebraska and Maine are the only states that stray from this rule, and split up their votes by district, giving two to the majority winner. This split rarely mattered as Nebraska is largely Republican, and Maine is largely Democrat. However, in 2008, Nebraska's Congressional District 2 voted for Obama. Shortly after this result, Nebraska like other states, was subject to gerrymandering. After the 2008 election, a suburban area of District 2 was replaced with rural area from another county, lessening the chance of another Democrat win. Gerrymandering occurs in many states and by both parties, as it affects the winning chances of potential members of the House of Representatives and state legislatures. In 2018, the Supreme Court considered the case *Gil v. Whitford*, in which the plaintiffs claimed the redistricting in Wisconsin rendered their votes wasted. Republicans won 48.6% of votes throughout the state but won 61% of the state senator seats (Rushe 2018). Though a District Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the plaintiffs did not have enough evidence and remanded the case back to District Court. As such, the Supreme Court has yet to rule against partisan gerrymandering. A similar situation occurred in North Carolina, where votes for Representatives were spread evenly, but Republicans won 9 of 13 seats (Astor & Lai, 2018).

Clearly, partisan redistricting affects the outcomes of an election and can make eligible voters feel as if their efforts are fruitless. One solution to this pressing issue is nonpartisan

redistricting or bipartisan redistricting, where the committee has members from both major parties. When Pennsylvania adopted a nonpartisan redistricting approach, the state went from thirteen Republican and five Democrats House seats to nine for each party. This result more accurately reflected the 55% Democratic votes across the state.

As the 2016 election has shown, it may be necessary to appeal to the electorate on a more personal level to increase their turnout. For example, Clinton lost Wisconsin, a state she did not visit once during the general election (Gilbert, Spangler, and Laitner), by only 27,000 votes. A visit to Milwaukee or some of the undecided counties could have swayed the close win in her favor. It is true that various methods such as media and advertising can reduce the mental cost of understanding the voting process, but in order to mobilize people to vote, giving them a reason to do so is crucial. Campaign outreach organizations should focus on not only encouraging citizens to exercise their civic duty but also showing them how doing so.

Voting Amongst College Students

Young voters are diverse and come from a multitude of backgrounds, and they are impacted by policies considering taxes, education, and the environment. Their votes are as important as ever. However, college students are yet another group of people that face barriers in voting. According to the Harvard Institute of Politics, only 11% of college students participate in student government, or political party student organizations. Even before students arrive at college, there are not many high school programs focused on helping students become more civically engaged. Typically social studies courses focus on memorizing facts instead of developing civic skills. "Whenever young people are surveyed, there is a significant lack of

knowledge about how exactly the government works, and, therefore, how their vote actually matters," said Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, director of The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). It is likely that politically minded college students are politically minded before coming to college or aim to pursue a career in politics or a related field. In the 2016 election, 53.2% of students across the United States studying social sciences turned out to vote, compared to 42.6% of students in science, technology, and math fields.

There are several reasons college students have consistently low rates of voter turnout and registration. A large issue is that college and university administrations are hesitant to engage in political matters, including electoral campaigns. A campus climate promoting political discourse, faculty-student relationships, and active enthusiasm during election season can influence students' decision to register or vote. Many students live in different place throughout the year at school, home, and internships or jobs. Therefore, they may not feel an attachment to a geographical location and have less motivation to vote. College campuses can be a unique and supportive place to help students confused about the mechanics of registration and voting. In a 2016 study, 25,256 students in colleges across the United States were exposed to presentations by both students and professors about voting. Registration of those that viewed the presentation increased by 6% (Bennion and Nickerson).

Even if a student is interested in voting, there are several barriers that can prevent them from doing so. One such barrier in voting for students across the country is registering to vote in a new location or securing an absentee ballot. Many young students may be perplexed about registering to vote because they don't have a permanent address or have never voted before. Voter registration deadlines and identification laws can further impede students from voting who

are not used to the process. In a 2012 survey by CIRCLE, only 21% of 18-29-year-olds knew the deadline for voter registration in their state. Furthermore, states with same-day registration had higher rates of young adult turnout, while states that did not accept student IDs as acceptable identification saw lower rates of turnout. Same day registration and less strict voter identification laws can dramatically increase turnout among young voters who are newly introduced to the election process.

Students and faculty, Republicans and Democrats, and the politically involved and detached were galvanized by the announcement that Senator Bernie Sanders was coming to the University of Nebraska- Lincoln (UNL) campus in the days leading up to the 2016 Democratic caucuses. Some professors canceled class encouraging students to attend the event. People lined up hours in advance of the event, each vying for a seat out of 2100 available. When the auditorium inevitably filled up, Sanders briefly came outside to address the hundreds waiting outside. Days after Sanders' event, he went on to win the Democratic caucuses. But whether or not his visit impacted his win, does not deter from the fact that it energized campus.

People are motivated to vote when they feel that candidates care about them. However, candidates do not often visit campus. During the 2016 and 2018 election seasons, the candidates for the House of Representative did not visit campus. Similarly, candidates for Senate and Governor did not visit campus in 2018. Similar to the rest of the country, UNL has had more participation in presidential elections than in midterms. In 2012, 52.6% of the student population voted, compared to 20.2% in the 2014 midterms. Typically there is less turnout in midterms because of less national media coverage and, therefore, less exposure to candidates. However, it is much easier to recruit candidates for school board, public service commission, state

legislature, and local elections to come to college campuses and meet students. State lawmakers enact legislation directly affecting the areas surrounding the university, so the impact of their work is prominent and likely affects students' daily lives. Considering that state lawmakers impact public universities, students may be more motivated to make an impact in their community.

Conclusion

The United States has much to mend before achieving equal opportunity at the polls. The 2018 elections showed high voter participation, with 49.3% of the voting eligible population turning out, compared to 36.7% in 2014 (United States Elections Project). Nonetheless, over 120 million Americans did not vote in 2018. Institutional racism, issues registering and at the polls, and other forms of disenfranchisement prevents thousands of Americans from having their voices heard every election. Facing these obstacles detracts many from participating in the electoral process. Alienation from elected officials and diminished faith in one's ability to impact an election further reduces any enthusiasm for voting.

The United States lags behind many countries in voter turnout. However, higher turnout can easily be improved with less strict Voter ID laws, same day and automatic voter registration, and restoration of voting rights to those with felony convictions. Lawmakers should work to make voting more accessible and convenient., Regulation of redistricting processes and election legislation should be adopted to prevent unfair partisanship. If America is a true democracy, then its citizens should not just be allowed, but encouraged to participate in it.

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