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Voter Identification Laws and Electoral Behavior

“If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal.”

— Emma Goldman.

Mentored by Dr. Jennifer Jones, POLS 2100 - 02

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ABSTRACT - Since their surge in popularity after the 2000 presidential election, voter identification laws have been passed in state legislatures across the country. These laws and their effects have since become the center of a fierce national dialogue that has, unfortunately, not been coupled by comprehensive research. Previous work has failed to track multiple dependent variables over the course of multiple elections. I propose a cross-sectional, time-series research design based on surveys and state-level data to find the effect of voter ID laws on electoral behavior over time. In my research, I expect to find a disproportionate effect of these laws on different groups of the electorate and -- for those affected -- a negative effect on political efficacy. When completed, this work will be the most comprehensive analysis of these laws' effect on the electoral behavior of American voters.

I. Introduction

Literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses used to block large portions of the American population from participating in elections. Those forms of overt disenfranchisement have since been confined to history books by multiple constitutional amendments, but many today argue that groups of the electorate are still systematically blocked from voting. In the United States, voter identification (ID) laws have been passed in 33 state legislatures and are applicable to millions of eligible voters. ID laws require voters in the United States to present some form of personal, verifiable identification in order to cast a ballot in local and national elections. Critics of these laws argue that they disenfranchise certain groups of voters like the historical practices aforementioned, while proponents cast them as necessary protections for American democracy. Scholars have yet to fully capture how these laws affect the way American voters think of and act toward the political world around them. To discover if these laws are saving our democracy or suffocating it, I aim to synthesize the available academic literature and comprehensively investigate the effect of voter ID laws on electoral behavior over time.

II. What We know

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), there are 33 states where a voter must present some form of identification in order to vote. Some states require a photo on the ID while others accept forms of ID without a photo. Acceptable forms of photo ID may vary beyond passports and driver's licenses. In Tennessee, a photo ID state, one may use a firearm license. In a non-photo ID state like Arizona, one may use a utility bill or a bank statement.

State ID laws may also be strict or non-strict, a standard created by NCSL. A non-strict state requires no additional action by the voter after a ballot is cast to legitimize the vote. In a non-strict state a voter can cast a provisional ballot that is confirmed by an election official after the vote is cast. In a strict state the voter must revisit "the polling place, election board, or county election office and [provide] the required documentation either on Election Day or within a small number of days" after election day to authenticate the vote (Highton 2017).

III. Background / Related Works and Motivation

Voter ID laws gained popularity in state legislatures after the contested presidential election of 2000. From 2002 to 2006, twelve states strengthened voter their respective ID laws. Georgia and Missouri did not put into effect their laws in 2006 due to legal challenges (de Alth 2009). There are several avenues through which an ID law may decrease turnout, the first being timing. The greatest effect on voter turnout is when "requirements are new and even those who have the required identification, or could obtain it, are unaware" (Vercellotti & Anderson 2009). People must be aware of the laws in order to adapt, especially if the passage of these laws is recent (Highton 2017). These laws required voters to self-motivate and adapt quickly.

Secondly, voter ID laws create barriers for potential voters. If someone who plans to vote lacks a proper ID and is not sufficiently motivated to obtain it, the voter ID law will keep them from voting. The more an individual finds civic participation enjoyable, satisfying, or obligatory, the more they are likely they are to vote regardless of the law (Highton 2017; Gimpel JG, Schuknecht JE 2003). This suggests that voter ID laws affect groups of the electorate disproportionately and may separate those already politically disinclined. Forms of convenience voting, or “any mode of balloting other than precinct-place voting” like early-voting, absentee voting, online voting are typically associated with higher turnout (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, Miller, and Toffey 2008). Scholars suggest that Voter ID laws apply to forms of convenience voting as well, potentially cancelling this effect (Gimpel JG, Shuknecht JE 2003).

Third and last, scholars suggest that the most important benefits of voting to an individual are “expressive rather than instrumental” (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980). Casting a ballot invokes the feeling that “one has done one’s duty to society” and affirms “one’s... efficacy in the political system” (Aldrich JH. 1993). Based on Aldrich’s (1993) proposed link between voting and political efficacy, it is suggested that abstaining from voting can, over time, lower an individual’s efficacy and weaken one’s commitment to the political system.

IV. Method

I will first use a dummy variable to separate states without any form of voter ID law. States without voter ID laws will be used as a control. I understand that “electoral behavior” is broad. I am using this term to encapsulate concepts that explain how citizens think of and interact with the political world around them. Scholars have noted the effect political participation has on efficacy and the connection between barriers to voting and actual turnout

(Aldrich JH. 1993; Highton 2017). I am measuring these concepts as well as political enthusiasm to get a clearer picture of ID laws' effect on political attitudes and actions.

To track each of these concepts, I will administer a brief survey to stratified populations of eligible voters in each state, regardless of whether or not it has a voter ID law. Along with each survey is an attached presurvey asking demographic questions. This presurvey is designed to counter variables already identified by scholars (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Blais & Dobrzynska 1998; Franklin 1996; Blais 2000). I will also make note of the ID requirements of the state, whether or not the law is "strict," and whether or not forms of convenience voting are available.

To observe political action, I will find the percent of each states' voting age population registered to vote and the percent of registered voters who have voted in each election since 1996, four years before Highton (2017) suggests voter ID laws became popular nationally. To find these figures I will use data from each state government. Such a time span will make clear if adaption time is a confounding variable in ID laws' effect on registration (Highton 2017, de Alth 2009). Aside from this general data, I plan to investigate what percentage of registered voters have actually voted since 1996 and if the passage of a voter ID law has any clear effect on that figure.

To measure political enthusiasm, I will ask a series of questions designed to investigate feelings toward elections. Three ordinaly-scaled questions will address every election since 1996 and will be asked of every respondent. An example one question is *How likely are you to vote in the upcoming election?* I will also ask whether or not the respondent it registered. Three additional questions will be asked for respondents in states with voter ID laws. These additional

questions will probe whether or note the respondent has a proper ID and whether or not they plan to get one before election day if they do not. I will observe a history of past voting for each individual based on responses and registration status.

To track efficacy, I will borrow questions from the American National Election Studies (ANES) “Guide to Public Opinion” section 5.8. These questions are proven to be reliable and have been used in studies of the past to measure efficacy. An example of one question is *People like me don't have any say about what the government does*. These borrowed questions all have ordinally-scaled responses. The questions and ordinally-scaled responses will remain the same as those found at ANES.

To collect an appropriate sample size from each state, I will stratify the populations. The sample size will be different for each state. I will aim for a 95% confidence level with a three percent margin of error. My research will almost certainly run into limitations like response bias, which is a vulnerability created by my reliance on surveys. This should be incorporated into my margin of error and my population size. Another limitation are the previously-mentioned confounding variables, but those will be controlled through my presurvey. Variables not controlled revealed through the presurvey will be controlled in my model.

V. Conclusion and Expected Results

In short, I will carry out a cross-sectional study utilizing surveys to track the effect of voter ID laws on electoral behavior. I have two hypotheses. First, I expect that eligible voters excluded from an election will be less likely to vote in future elections. Secondly, I expect eligible voters with less commitment to the political system to be effected by ID laws more dramatically than those committed to the political system. As an American, the possibility that

other Americans are being disenfranchised is horrifying. It is necessary to find out if these laws are suffocating or saving our democracy, and it is time we find out.

VI. References

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VII. Budget

In order to carry out my proposal, I will require some minimal necessary funding. I do not need to travel, so my "ask" is low. I need funding for printing and funding for postage. This will come to around \$3,500.

