

Proposal to the Center for Equitable Growth

Information and Pivotal Voting: Evidence from Field Experiments

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Voter participation is essential to democracy. When groups of people fail to vote, their views will be under-represented and government may lack legitimacy. Among wealthy countries, the United States has one of the lowest levels of voter turnout. Turnout in US congressional elections is usually between 40 and 60 percent, compared to over 80 or 90 percent in many European countries. In addition, turnout is unevenly distributed among socioeconomic and educational groups. Turnout among those with a graduate degree is often twice as high as that for high school dropouts (Linz et al., 2007), and there are also large racial disparities in turnout (Timpone, 1998). Better understanding why voters vote is an essential task both for students of American democracy and for policymakers interested in increasing turnout.

Pivotal voter models play a central role in political economy theory. In these models, voters preferences are assumed to be instrumental (they depend solely on the outcome of the election). These models have been deeply influential, and are the workhorse model that theorists use to analyze elections and political institutions. Empirically testing pivotal models, however, is a difficult task. Using observational data, researchers have analyzed, for example, whether individuals are more likely to vote when the electorate is smaller. However, electorate size is almost never randomly assigned (except in laboratory experiments), and electorates of different sizes may differ on various unobserved characteristics (for example, smaller communities may feel greater cohesion).

To break the identification problem and test pivotal voter models, we will conduct a large-scale field experiment using the 2010 congressional and gubernatorial elections. In the experiment, we will examine whether informing people about the closeness of the election affects turnout and voting patterns.

This research is of interest to the Center for Equitable Growth for several reasons. Turnout in federal elections exhibits significant racial disparities (Timpone, 1998). It is highly likely that such inequality in turnout becomes reflected into inequality in public policy. Naidu (2009) shows using quasi-experimental methods analyzing franchise restrictions in the US South that lack of minority political participation had strong impacts on the quality of predominantly Black student public schools. In electoral democracies, it is unlikely for growth to be equitable unless all voices can be heard and the large disparities in turnout patterns erased.

Get-out-the-vote organizations like the League of Women Voters and Rock the Vote work to encourage full participation by American voters. While get-out-the-vote organizations try many different methods to increase voting, sound scientific evidence on which methods are actually effective is only beginning to emerge (Green and Gerber, 2008). If we are able to show that voters vote more frequently when elections are close, then actively communicating to voters when elections are close may be an effective way to stimulate turnout. As discussed by Green and Gerber (2008), the dialogue between experimental research on voter turnout and real-world turnout drives has the potential to be quite fruitful.