Incentivizing Voter Participation with Regret Aversion

America's most recent election was one of the most critical in history—one that could potentially change the trajectory of western civilization altogether. Despite the consequential setting, the United States only saw 66.0% of voter turnout in November.[1] While this was a significant increase from previous elections, it remains a far cry from where voter participation should be in a prosperous democracy. In an investigation in recent nationwide elections globally, the United States ranked 30th out of 35 for voter turnout, trailing behind many third-world countries.[2]

These statistics are tragic, because the strength of a democracy is often correlated with high voter turnout. Having low participation often results in unequal turnout, where certain groups could be more underrepresented.[3] This results in bias, which elicits an asymmetric political influence from parties. Inequality of influence can lead a party to gain power through the suppression or lack of voting from the public, which directly harms the notion of democracy.[4] Furthermore, there are many instances where participation in an election could have had election altering results: consider the 2000 election where Bush won the election over Florida, which was decided by just five hundred votes.[5] As a result, obtaining every vote possible during an election is crucial to appointing the right candidate and strengthening the representative government.

What is causing low voter participation in the United States? In a recent study surveying nonvoters on their reasons for abstaining, twenty-five percent of participants cited that they didn't like/know the candidates, fifteen percent expressed the notion that their vote wouldn't make a difference, and fourteen percent were busy (as the three most common reasons).[6] All three of these reasons could be corrected with intervention. Furthermore, underrepresented communities are disproportionately contributing to the lower counts. In the 2016 election, while non-hispanic white individuals had nearly 65% participation, latino citizen's turnout was just shy of 45%. Similar trends are seen between education (favoring more years), income (favoring

[1] Kevin Schaul, Kate Rabinowitz. "2020 Turnout Is the Highest in over a Century." The Washington Post, WP Company, 12 Nov. 2020
[2] DeSilver, Drew. "In Past Elections, U.S. Trailed Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 13 Nov. 2020
[3] McElwee, Sean. "Why Voting Matters: Large disparities in turnout benefit the donor class." Demos, 16 Sept 2015
[4] Lijphart, Arend. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma." The American Political Science Review, vol. 91, no. 1, 1997, pp. 1–14. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2952255. Accessed 3 Dec. 2020.
[5] Rosenwald, Michael. "The Night the Supreme Court Settled a Presidential Election, Declaring George W. Bush the Winner." The Washington Post, WP Company, 6 Nov. 2020
[6] Gustavo López and Antonio Flores, "Dislike of candidates or campaign issues was most common reason for not voting in 2016," Pew Research Center, June 1, 2016

higher annual incomes), and age (favoring older citizens).[7] Reasons for these disparities could include lower polling presence in underrepresented communities, and barriers to voting such as labor hours.

While some of these issues are economically grounded, there are multiple behavioral factors that are driving low turnout. Foremost is present bias, which is the tendency for an individual to accept a smaller reward now than larger one in the future.[8] In the election context, finding time and transit to vote during the work week is a challenge, so individuals may find themselves forgoing the benefit of voting for the immediate ease. Another major behavioral player is the difficulty for individuals to perceive small differences in items of large quantity. In this manner, it is difficult for a citizen to comprehend the impact their single vote may have on the election. This bias may lead individuals to not vote as they don't think their voice would make a difference.

Many policy implementations have been made both in the United States and in other countries to improve voter participation rates. Looking outside of America, many countries have successfully improved turnout through policy. Australia has one of the highest voter turnouts—nearly 90%. This is because the government mandates all citizens register to vote and cast a ballot. Failure to do so results in a small penalty of 20 australian dollars.[9] Such a policy leverages loss aversion, whereby people have the tendency to prefer avoiding a loss over an equivalent gain (in this case, avoiding the cash penalty over the gain of time/transit saved from not voting).[10] While this policy is very effective in achieving high participation, a significant drawback, especially in early implementation, is the social lashback from citizens who feel they lost their freedoms to choose whether to vote, coupled with the additional burden on the system processing a ballot for every citizen (including ballots that were left blank because the resident chose not to vote) as well as processing all complaints and excuses.[11]

Within America, a successful policy for improving turnout has been the use of "I Voted" stickers. The sticker acts as a badge that displays their action of voting to their peers. This leverages social norms, where individuals are incentivized to act in line with the appropriate behavior as defined by the norms of a group in order to be perceived as good.[12] As voting is

[7] "Voter Turnout Demographics." United States Elections Project
[8] "Present Bias." BehavioralEconomics.com | The BE Hub, 28 Mar. 2019
[9] Rychter, Tacey. "How Compulsory Voting Works: Australians Explain." The New York Times, The New York Times, 22 Oct. 2018
[10] "Loss Aversion." BehavioralEconomics.com | The BE Hub, 28 Mar. 2019
[11] Pickering, Heath "Election Could Cost $227 Million." Election Watch - Australia 2016
[12] "Social Norm." BehavioralEconomics.com | The BE Hub, 29 Mar. 2019

considered important in the public lens, the "I Voted" sticker allows people to display their positive action, incentivizing participation. One study found that people are driven to vote if they know ahead of time they would need to discuss their voting behavior.[13] All this being said, the effects of the "I Voted" are not explicitly known, and while they are low cost, many counties express discontent at spending tens of thousands of tax paying dollars to print stickers.

The following intervention will take into consideration the cost analysis and impact of these policies coupled with the behavioral drivers behind low voter participation. The current intervention will modify a regret lottery, combined with enhanced active choice, to make citizens regret not voting. The first part of the policy, the lottery, will function as follows:

1. all persons qualifying to vote in the district would be entered into a lottery
2. the election would occur, and all citizens who voted will be recorded
3. individuals will be selected at random from the total pool and notified of their win, but only those who voted will receive the lottery prize.

The winnings, frequency of winnings, and scale at which this policy is implemented can vary (although performing at a community level may make it feel more attainable, and the first two are subject to budgetary restrictions). The objective of the lottery is to make citizens regret not voting in the election, by inducing feelings of remorse if they didn't vote and won the lottery. This leverages regret-aversion, a behavioral bias where individuals seek to avoid the potent, negative feeling of regret. Consequently, citizens will anticipate that negative feeling, and go out and vote (especially when coupled with the hope to win the lottery as individuals tend to overweight small probabilities).[14] The second part of the policy involves the framing of the when introduced to citizens of the district. When information about the lottery is sent in the mail to all qualifying citizens, the choice architecture of the lottery should be adjusted to the form of the gist: "Would you rather vote and protect democracy, or not vote and risk the opportunity to lose the lottery money you could win". This language builds on enhanced active choice, a method used to motivate behavioral changes by framing a decision to include information about potential losses.[15] This method serves to steer individuals in the direction of the desired option, in this case voting, by making the other course of action seem unfavorable.

The impact of this policy can be measured with a randomized control trial on voting

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[13] DellaVigna, Stephano, List, John, and Malmendier, Ulrike "Voting to Tell Others" Harvard University and NBER, May 13, 2016

[14] Kahneman, Daniel, and Amos Tversky. "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk." Econometrica, vol. 47, no. 2, 1979, pp. 263–291.

[15] Keller, Punam Anand, et al. "Enhanced Active Choice: A New Method to Motivate Behavior Change." Journal of Consumer Psychology, vol. 21, no. 4, 2011, pp. 376–383., doi:10.1016/j.jcps.2011.06.003.

districts in the United States. In the next election, for example, the 2022 midterms (which historically have lower participation but generally follow presidential election trends with regards to participation distribution across demographics), a random sample of the districts can be taken. This randomization will allow external generalizability to the overall U.S. population, accounting for differences in geographic location, socioeconomic status of the population, etc.[16] Within this sample, districts will then be randomly assigned to either a control or treatment condition, whereby those in the treatment condition implement the proposed intervention and those in the control remain as is. The use of random assignment will allow the study to extrapolate findings to determine a causal relationship between the policy and voter turnout.[16] The researchers will record the participation in the districts, and compare the data between the conditions to see if there are statistically significant effects.

While this policy could yield positive results, there are cost and feasibility issues to consider. The anticipated impact of this intervention is significant; I hypothesize it could raise participation up multiple percentage points (much more than the impact of the "I Voted" sticker, but less than that of Australia's mandated ballot casting). However, this incentive scheme will take a significant financial incentive to accomplish. The design is not too financially burdensome, as it could be matched to be similar in cost to the 90k that some counties spend on stickers (based on the number of people who would win the lottery and the prize value). Also included in the fiscal requirements would be the marketing campaign to spread awareness for the lottery, (i.e. send mail to every home). Aside from financials, further feasibility issues would stem from adoption, achieving awareness, and convincing districts to spend taxpayer dollars on "a lottery' when it is already challenging for stickers.

While this policy might be successful, traditional economic methods would also vastly improve if they were able to get approved. Research shows that amending policies for elections to be on weekends, having no excuse absentee voting, and including preregistration and same-day registration could significantly improve ease of voting, and subsequently, voting counts and equality.[17] Likewise, policies forcing voting, similar to what is implemented in Australia, should be concerned as they are effective ways of achieving near perfect participation with non-extreme costs.

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[16] Haynes, Laura, et al. "Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials." SSRN Electronic Journal, 2012, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2131581

[17] Kennedy, Danielle Root and Liz. "Increasing Voter Participation in America." Center for American Progress