

Did Democratic voters or Republican voters experience more difficulty voting in the 2020 election?

Datasci 203: Lab 1

1 Importance and Context

As US political party ideologies become increasingly polarized and margins of elections become narrower, the issue of impediments to voting become paramount in the democratic process. Although not all impediments can be viewed as voter suppression (i.e. the intentional disenfranchisement of a group through extralegal means), voter suppression can take on many forms, such as follows:

- voter registration problems
- voter purging
- increasing ballot requirements
- confusing process
- poll closures and long lines

To provide insight into potential voter suppression in the 2020 general election, our team addresses the following research question:

Did Democratic voters or Republican voters experience more difficulty voting in the 2020 election?

The answer to this question could provide insight into the severity of voter suppression problems and serve as a starting point for further research. To help us better understand the experience of voting in the 2020 election for members of each party we will ask following sub-questions:

- *Did wait time at the poll and travel time to the polling place differ for Democratic and Republican voters?*
- *Did Democrats or Republicans encounter more impediments to voting?*

2 Data and Methodology

Our analysis leverages data from the 2018 American National Election Studies (ANES). This is an observational dataset, based on a sample of respondents drawn from the YouGov platform. The Yougov panel is not nationally representative, and consists of participants who sign up to complete questionnaires in exchange for rewards. This dataset includes 8280 individuals. As we're only interested in comparing data for Democrats and Republicans, we're filtering out Independents and N/A values leaving 5810 respondents.

The survey includes questions about problems that respondents experienced while voting during 2020 election including: registration problems, long wait lines etc. Data is reported on binary scale (1: problem mentioned, 0: not mentioned), and the same question is asked to each respondent that voted. Similar set of questions asked to each respondent about the reasons that prevented them from voting. Another useful set of data directly related to difficulty voting is the wait time at the polling place and travel time to the polling place. Both of those variables recorded in a range format: 0-15 minutes, 16-30 minutes etc.

It's important to note that ANES includes information on self-reported difficulty voting in 2020 elections. As the difficulty of voting is subjective and can mean different things for each respondent we're not going to use it in this analysis. Another issue worth noting is that the "difficulty voting" data was gathered only for people who ended up voting so it's subject to "survivorship bias" which is another form of selection bias.

Table 1: Main reasons not voting

	Democrat	Republican
Bad weather	0.00	0.31
Could not find polls	0.93	0.62
Did not like the candidates	8.98	7.74
I am not registered	7.12	11.76
I forgot	1.55	0.93
I'm not interested	4.33	4.02
Incorrect identification	3.41	1.24
Line too long	2.48	3.41
Missing absentee ballot	1.24	1.55
Not allowed to vote	0.62	0.31
Out of town	3.41	3.41
Sick or disabled	5.26	7.43
Too busy	6.81	8.98
Transportation	0.93	1.24

Table 2: Problems encountered while voting

	Democrat	Republican
Bad weather	0.15	0.06
Confusing ballot or machine	0.42	0.45
ID concern	0.23	0.23
Issue mailing ballot	0.53	0.26
Long wait times	3.08	2.99
No problems at all	46.57	38.86
Obtaining absentee ballot	0.83	0.36
Other problem	1.44	0.96
Registration problem	0.57	0.26
Transportation	0.32	0.17
Work schedule	0.55	0.70

To operationalize the concept of voter difficulty, we will analyse 2 categories of data separately. First we will compare wait times at the polls and travel times to the polling place between Democrats and Republicans. Then we will identify individuals in the dataset who experienced problems related to the democratic process: problems with registration, identification problems, problems obtaining absentee ballot. We will make Bonferroni adjustment to the rejection criteria to account for multiple tests.

Above tables represent voting problems split by whether respondent successfully voted or did not vote. To improve accuracy and remove selection bias we will pool results together from both groups of people.

Both experiencing of potential impediment to voting and our grouping variable are measured at the binary level. In these circumstances, common tests could include a two-sample proportion test and Fischer's exact test. We proceed with a two-sample t-test to demonstrate tools used in Datasci 203. Given the large sample sizes, the loss of accuracy from the t-test will be negligible. The null hypotheses for the t-test can be expressed as follows:

Null Hypotheses 1: *The probability that a member of democratic party experienced difficulty registering\providing correct identification\obtaining absentee ballot and other impediments to voting in 2020 election is the same that of republican party.*

The left panel of Figure 1 plots amounts of respondents who reported waiting time within a given bracket. The right panel of Figure 1 shows similar data for travel time.

To test differences in waiting and travel times we will use the beginning of the time bracket as the data point. Since it's metric data and due to large sample size we can ignore the distribution shape and apply two-sample t-test with following Null Hypothesis:

Null Hypothesis 2: *A member of democratic party on average experiences the same waiting time\travel time to polls as a member of republican party.*

The t-test requires the following assumptions to be true:

1. **i.i.d. data** First, data must be generated via an iid process. The ANES 2018 pilot uses a panel of individuals from the YouGov platform. There is a possibility that this introduces dependencies. For example, participants may tell friends or family members about YouGov, resulting in a cluster of individuals that give similar responses. Nevertheless, YouGov claims to have millions of users, which suggests that links between individuals should be rare.
2. **Metric scale** A binary variable qualifies as metric as there is only a single interval, which goes from

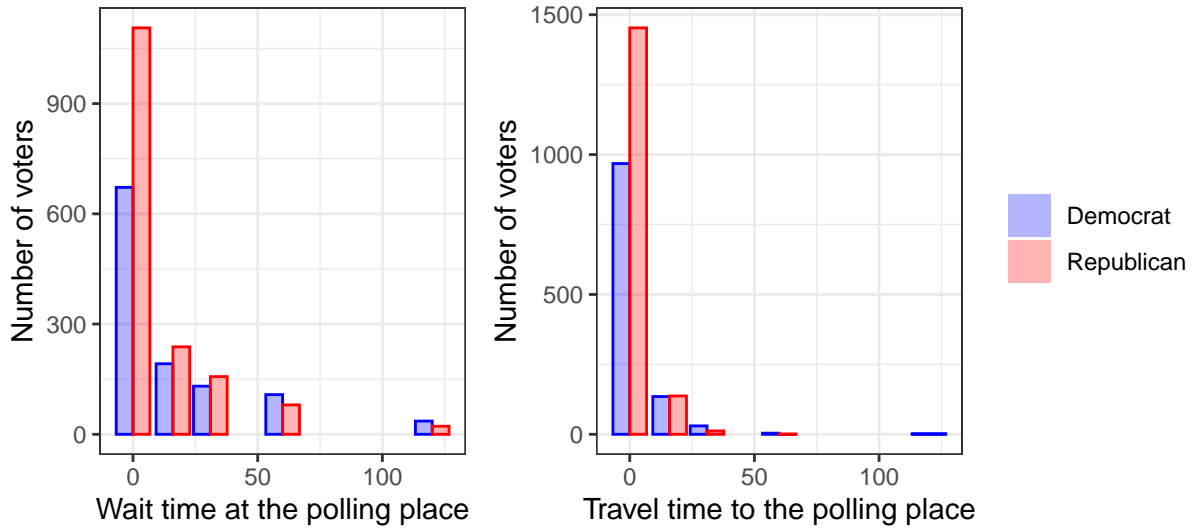


Figure 1: Waiting and travel times per political party

zero to 1. Travel and wait times are also metric.

3. **Sufficient normality** The wait and travel times don't have normal distribution. Nevertheless, the large sample size suggests that the sampling distribution of the statistic should be approximately normal via the Central Limit Theorem. Sample sizes for individual voting problems are also large enough to apply CLT.

3 Results

```
wait_time_test <- t.test(wait_time_min ~ political_party, data = anes)

travel_time_test <- t.test(travel_time_min ~ political_party, data = anes)

had_problems_test <- t.test(had_problems ~ political_party, data = anes)
```

The test yield evidence that Democrats experience longer wait times (Democrats = 15.74, Republicans = 10.05, $t = 6.09$, $p = 1.3078579 \times 10^{-9}$) and travel times (Democrats = 3.13, Republicans = 1.64, $t = 4.95$, $p = 8.1283243 \times 10^{-7}$) than Republicans.

As for experiencing impediments to voting, the evidence was not enough to reject the Null Hypothesis: $t = -0.32$, $p = 0.75$

Several limitations of our test affect the conclusions that may be drawn from it. As mentioned above, we are only able to measure association between experienced difficulties and political party, not causation. Additionally, the ANES data is not nationally representative, suggesting that our results may not generalize to the US population.

4 Discussion

This study found evidence of longer times for waiting at the polling place and traveling to the polling place for democratic than republican voters. Nonetheless, from practical point of view the difference in wait and travel times is relatively small (less than 6 minutes) and, probably, doesn't produce much effect on the democratic process.

As for potential issues of voter suppression, we evaluated how many Democrats and Republicans experienced problems with registration, identification, problems requesting absentee ballots etc. and did not find sufficient evidence to claim any difference. Additionally, the ratio of people experiencing these problems is very small (around 1%, see tables above) and thus, the results suggest that impediments to voting were not widespread.

Our results may be of key interest to elected officials as they plan reforms in voting procedures. It's important to know that in our polarized time, Democrats and Republicans did not encounter significant voting difficulties.