

The State of the Literature

In this chapter I will go through the existing literature on Vote-By-Mail (VBM). I will define what Vote-By-Mail is; I will then summarize the expectations that researchers have of the effects of VBM on turnout, based on existing theories of electoral participation. I will continue with a summary of previous quantitative research on the effects that VBM and similar policies have had on turnout. I will conclude with some more general comments on the available data, and literature concerning the most commonly used quantitative methods.

What is VBM?

Gronke (2007, 2008), RMStein (1998)

Vote-By-Mail is a process by which voters receive a ballot delivered by mail to their homes. Voters then have a variety of options on how to return these ballots, ranging from dropping them off at pre-designated locations, to mailing them in, to bringing them to a polling place and voting conventionally. This varies across states that have implemented VBM. Some common forms of the VBM policy are:

- *Postal Voting*: All voters receive a ballot by mail, which can then be returned to a pre-designated location or mailed in to be counted. This is the current system in Oregon, is an option in Colorado, and is implemented by a number of counties in California, Utah, and Montana.
- *No-Excuse Absentee*: Voters can choose to register as absentee voters without giving any reason related to disability, health, distance to polling place etc. This is the case in 27 states and the District of Columbia.
- *Permanent No-Excuse Absentee*: This is similar to the previous system, but allows voters to register as absentees indefinitely, without having to renew their registration each year; they become de facto all-mail voters. This is in place in Washington, Kansas, and New Jersey.
- *Hybrid or Transitional Systems*: In hybrid systems, voters receive a mail ballot but can choose to disregard it and vote conventionally. This is the case in Colorado. Transitional systems exist in states that have chosen to eventually conduct all elections by postal voting, but have given counties an adjustment period during which this shift is not mandatory, or mandatory only for certain elections. This is the case in California, Utah, and Montana.

Vote-By-Mail is also commonly considered a type of early voting, since voters receive their ballots around two weeks in advance of election day; they are also able to return that ballot whenever they wish within that timeframe. This means that Vote-By-Mail can be counted as a “convenience voting” reform. These are usually implemented by state and local governments with the argument that they either expand the democratic franchise by bringing in new voters, or by making it more likely that current registered voters participate in the electoral process.

The Calculus of Voting

Grimmer (2011), Burden (2013)

Why Turnout Matters

Geys (2006), Smets (2013) ++ book sources

Turnout is the most commonly used measure for electoral participation. It is important because it signifies the level of engagement of the population with the state, the level of incorporation of different subgroups of the population into democratic processes, and the legitimacy of elected officials. It is widely accepted that turnout should be maximized so that the democratic franchise represents the majority of citizens. Turnout

for an election can be calculated or predicted, the difference being that in the former case we use data post-election to measure its absolute value, while in the latter we use a series of individual and community covariates to infer the levels of turnout for a future or past election.

Calculating turnout, at its core, involves the following equation:

$$\% \text{ Turnout} = \frac{\text{Total Ballots Cast}}{\text{Measure of Total Voting Population}} \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

The choice of numerator is fairly obvious and universal; the denominator, however, is a different story. The two main statistics used are the total voting age population, and the raw number of registered voters in the geographical location we are examining. The total voting age population is used as a measure to incorporate the total amount of possible voters in a geographical area, and can be measured using data from the US Census. This causes some issues with voters that cross over to different districts; if someone lives in district A, it is still likely that they are registered to vote in district B. If this is not considered, the calculation of voting age population might be misrepresentative.

Using registered voters also brings with it two problems. First, the calculation necessarily occurs using voter registration files, which many times can include discrepancies, like deceased voters, voters included in multiple counties, or individual voters included multiple times. Furthermore, the total amount of actual voters among registered voters can be misrepresentative of democratic participation; consider that if a certain minority community has historically low registration rates, their lack of engagement will not be included in turnout rates, thus misrepresenting the level of inclusion in the district they reside in.

The punch line here is that how the turnout statistic is calculated is not a clear choice, and will have an impact on how studies are set up. To give one example, consider Oregon’s Motor Voter program, that automatically registers voters when they interact with government services, like the DMV. It is conceivable that this reform will *decrease* turnout when measured as a percentage of the total registered voter count, but *increase* turnout when measured against total population. I will specify how I calculate turnout in the next chapter.

Statistical models of turnout can be constructed at either the individual or community level. At the individual level, a model is built to predict the probability of voting for every member of a group, and then sum over the members to create an estimate for turnout. Probit or Logit models are preferred. At the community level, researchers first choose a geographical level at which to calculate, which then constitutes the individual observation in the data that is used to create the model.

Both these models include a standard set of societal variables—at the individual and aggregate level—, policy variables—whether the district does Postal Voting, whether Voter ID requirements are particularly strict—, and sometimes time-series data—previous levels of turnout—to make predictions on turnout levels. This type of analysis is not exclusively used to predict turnout but also to, as will be later shown, draw inferences on the effects that certain explanatory variables have on electoral participation.

Theories of Voting

Aldrich (1993), Berinsky (2001, 2005), Edin (2007), Bendor (2003), Gerber and Green (2015), Matsusaka (1997), Fowler (2006)

How they Apply to VBM

Berinsky (2005), Banducci (2000), Gronke and Toffey (2008), and several applications of sources in above sections.

Previous Study Results

General Results

Arcenaux (2012), Bergman (2011), Burden (2014), Edelman + Pantheon Analytics (2018), Gerber (2013), Rhine (1995), Neihelsen (2012), Keele (2018), Richey (2008), RMStein (1997, 2007), Gronke (2007, 2008, 2012, 2017)

The Gerber Piece

Gerber(2017)

Voter Registration Files

Inaccuracy of Survey Data

Ansolabehere and Hersch (2012), Burden (2000), Deufel (2010)

The Importance of VRF

Books, mentioned later

Common Methods Used and Problems Encountered

Methods

- *Synthetic Control Group*: Abadie (2010), McClelland (2017), Gronke (2017)
- *Record Linkage*: Ansolabehere and Hersch (2017), Harvey (1994, 97), Koudas (2013)
- *GLM (Probit/Logit/Poisson)*: Barreto (2004), Dow (2004)
- *DID*: Bertrand et al. (2002)
- *E.I.*: King (2013), Burden (1998), Calvo (2003), Chao (2004), RMStein (2002)
- *Mixed-Effects*: Gelman and Hill (2007)
- *General EDA and Models*: James et al. (2013), Chapman and Hall (2017)

Issues

Grimmer (2015) {Not always best to do inferential models}, Ansolabehere and Hersch (2010) {Problems with Voter Reg Files}, other sources from the previous section