Vote by Mail: GOV2001 Project Proposal

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We propose to replicate "Universal vote-by-mail has no impact on partisan turnout or vote share" (Thompson et al., 2020).[1] This article was published just a few months ago and so has few citations, but it has generated a fair amount of activity among the academic community online and has been cited in over 80 news articles at the time of this writing.[2] We believe the article will continue to generate scholarly discussion, especially after the 2020 election, as subsequent papers come out updating the analysis with 2020 election returns as they become available.

A brief summary of the paper is as follows. The authors investigate whether universal vote-by-mail (VBM) has an impact on partisan vote share, partisan turnout rates, and overall turnout rates from 1996-2018 in California, Utah, and Washington state, where universal VBM was rolled out sequentially over the course of several election cycles by the county. Taking advantage of the staggered policy rollout, the authors employ a difference-in-differences design[3] to estimate causal effects of universal VBM on the quantities of interest.

We hope to build on this study by addressing at least two points for improvement. First, the authors studied universal VBM in states that are safely Democratic (Washington, California) or Republican (Utah). We hope to extend their analysis to states that are more purple, such as Michigan, Nevada, and Wisconsin, all of which were close in the 2016 election. Nevada and Wisconsin expanded vote by mail in response to the pandemic, which will allow us to estimate the treatment effect of expanded VBM plus the pandemic on partisan vote share, partisan turnout, and overall turnout. Second, we hope to extend their analysis to elections during the pandemic, which profoundly affects the demand for mail voting, and during which time the topic of mail voting has become highly politicized. As a side note, the authors examine the case of universal VBM, which only a few states employ - far more require applications, excuses, and a ballot request, some of which we hope to study.

The replication data are available on a public GitHub repository.[4] The authors are thorough and organized; we aren't worried about our ability to replicate the results. Our only minor reservation is that we will need to translate the code from Stata to R, though this should be very little trouble.

It is less clear, however, the state of the data for the extension portion of the project. We hope to get county-level primary election returns for several states that expanded VBM in response to the pandemic (not restricted to universal VBM). We have not yet done so for all the states in which we are interested (which is as many as possible), but we expect to be able to do so for at least a few states. By studying the 2020 primaries, we hope to get a sense of how VBM might affect the 2020 general election - something about which we believe Thompson et al. (2020) leave a little to be desired. Note that this is through no fault of their own - they conducted their study while the primaries were ongoing. Should the election be decided near November 3 and not subject to litigation beyond the time of this class, we plan to collect general election data in at least Michigan, Nevada, and Wisconsin.

[1] www.pnas.org/content/117/25/14052

[2] For all news articles, see here.

[3] $Y_{cst} = \beta VBM_{cst} + \gamma_{cs} + \delta_{st} + \epsilon_{cst}$ where Y_{cst} is an outcome in county c, state s, and year t, and γ_{cs} and δ_{st} are county and state-year fixed effects respectively.

[4] https://github.com/stanford-dpl/vbm/tree/master/code

References

Thompson, Daniel M, Jennifer A Wu, Jesse Yoder and Andrew B Hall. 2020. "Universal vote-by-mail has no impact on partisan turnout or vote share." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* .