

# Information and Identification:

A Field Experiment on Virginia's Photo Identification Requirements

*Kyle Endres and Costas Panagopoulos*

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Our study was designed to assess the effects of providing informational reminders to registered voters in the November 2017 general election in Virginia on turnout and views of the election. A random sample of registered voters in Virginia selected for the study. Each of the subjects was randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups or to a control condition. Subjects in the treatment groups were mailed a postcard prior to the election. The control group was not mailed a postcard.

We randomly varied the message content of the informational cues to reflect three broad themes. Individuals who were randomly assigned to the first treatment group were mailed an “informational” postcard that reminded subjects of the upcoming election, encouraged them to vote, provided basic details about the photo ID requirement, and listed acceptable forms of identification. We view this simply as an informational message. Our second treatment group received postcards that featured a message designed to emphasize voters’ rights; these postcards featured the same text as the informational message, but also included a blandishment “know your rights” in bold and provided details about casting provisional ballots if necessary. A third treatment group included all of the information featured in the “know your rights” version as well as a warning not to be “turned away” at the polls alongside a justification noting that voter ID laws are occasionally improperly implemented, effectively denying citizens their voting rights (exact wording follows).

**Don't be turned away:** Many voters are not aware that they are required to show ID at the polls, and some studies show voter ID requirements disproportionately affect women, young people, the elderly, and communities of color. In the November 2014 election in Virginia, 474 people cast provisional ballots because they didn't have proper photo ID. Unfortunately, voter ID laws are not always implemented properly, and many voters risk being turned away and denied their voting rights!

We find that most of the information mailers had negligible effects on turnout, overall, in the 2017 Virginia election. The postcard mailer that explicitly mentioned the possibility of the state’s photo identification laws disproportionately affecting demographic groups who generally support the Democratic Party in large numbers is the exception. It increased turnout among Democrats. This finding is consistent with arguments advanced in the Valentino and Neuner that Democrats have an emotional response (anger) to electoral reforms they perceive target Democrats and in turn express an intent to participate at greater rates (2017). We find that this “don’t be turned away” postcard had the strongest effect for black Democrats. The estimated effect of this postcard was a 2.40 percentage point ( $p=.054$ , two-tailed) increase in turnout for white Democrats and 3.43 percentage point ( $p=.048$ , two-tailed) increase for black Democrats.

The information campaign also influenced subjects’ views of the prevalence of voter fraud in the 2017 Virginia election. Our experimental findings appear to show that informing registered Virginia voters that state law now requires all individuals to show a valid photo identification decreased perceptions of fraud. This reduction in the perceived prevalence of voter fraud is largely driven by decreases among Republican registered voters who were significantly less likely to report that “many fraudulent votes” were cast.

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