

Who Does Voter ID Legislation Keep From Voting?

Evidence from Texas

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Voter identification laws have expanded over the last decade, sparking concerns of vote suppression. However, existing evidence relies on state-level aggregate analyses or survey self-reports. In this paper we leverage a unique change in a state's voter identification statute to examine the impact of voter identification mandates. While Texas implemented a strict voter identification law in the 2014 election, an August 2016 federal court decision allowed Texans without qualifying identification to vote in the 2016 election. These voters were required to submit a paper declaration listing the reason they lacked ID. We link the information from these records to entries in the Texas voter file, extracting turnout data and address information that allows us to model individual race/ethnicity. Using this information, we are able to study the characteristics and geographic distribution of the more than 16,000 Texans who arrived at polling places without proper identification---and who would have been turned away under the previous strict identification policy. Thus, we move beyond studies relying on estimates of who could be deterred, aggregate turnout statistics, and survey self-reports.

Evaluating differences between the population voting with ID and the population voting without ID, we find significant differences that point to deleterious effects of voter identification laws for particular subsets of the population. Our pre-registered analyses document that registrants voting without ID in 2016 were 14 percentage points less likely to vote in the 2014 election, when a strict ID mandate was in place, and are significantly more likely to be Black and Latinx than the population voting with ID in 2016. Evaluating the mechanisms that produce these effects, we find that the most commonly cited reason for not providing identification is not related to socioeconomic hardships: instead, most voters who voted without ID possessed photo identification but did not have qualifying identification on election day. We also examine county-level factors predicting RID filing rates, determining that Democrats may be disproportionately likely to vote without ID but no evidence that racial disparities are a product of variation in incentives that encourage RID filing. Taken together, our analyses support the notion that strict voter identification laws prevent otherwise eligible individuals from voting, and that such laws have disproportionately negative impacts on minority citizens.
