

Evaluating the Impact of Drop Boxes on Voter Turnout

William McGuire, University of Washington Tacoma

Benjamin Gonzalez O'Brien, San Diego State University

Katherine Baird, University of Washington Tacoma

Benjamin Corbett, Lawrence Livermore Lab

Loren Collingwood, University of California Riverside

Voter turnout in the United States lags behind most other developed democracies. A popular approach for increasing turnout is to improve the ease of voting. While evidence indicates that vote by mail (VBM) requirements increase voter turnout, there is little evidence of the impact ballot drop boxes have on voting, despite the fact that voters in VBM states often prefer these boxes to voting via the postal service. All VBM states (currently Washington, Colorado and Oregon) require some provision for voting by drop boxes.

This project examines the impact the installation of new ballot drop boxes had on voter turnout in Pierce County, the second largest county in Washington State. To identify the causal effects of these boxes on the decision to vote, we exploit the randomized placement of five new ballot drop boxes in Pierce prior to the 2017 general election. Voters selected to receive a new ballot drop box experienced an average reduction in distance to their nearest drop box of 1.31 miles. We estimate that this change in proximity to drop boxes increased voter turnout. Specifically, we find overall a 0.64 percentage point increase in voting per mile of distance to nearest drop box reduced. The effect, hence, is not a particularly large one. However, within the context of the very low turnout in Pierce County in 2017 and compared with alternative ways election officials have attempted to encourage more people to vote, this effect is not negligible. We also conclude that our estimation is more likely biased downward than upward.

Coupled with prior findings in nearby King County (Collingwood et al. 2018), this study adds to the evidence that the installation of additional drop boxes can increase voter turnout, though the effect appears to be small, and may depend on the election type. In this study, we find this effect is strongest among low-income voters. This study did not find that closer proximity to drop boxes had differential effects on voters based on their race or gender, however. Interventions meant to increase turnout, such as drop box expansions, will be moderated by the type of election, what is on the ballot, and specific characteristics of the residents within the county.
