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Assessing (and fixing?) Election Day lines: Evidence from a survey of local election officials

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent studies that find few people face significant wait times when attempting to vote in U.S. elections, the 2012 election produced numerous anecdotal and journalistic accounts claiming otherwise. This study relies on a national survey of local election officials to systematically ascertain their views about the challenges and successes they had in administering the 2012 general election. Consistent with surveys of voters, most officials report that wait times and lines were minimal. Furthermore, the relative amount of money available to a jurisdiction for election administration was unrelated to the occurrence of these problems, while the presence of more poll workers—especially first-timers—may actually exacerbate them.

1. Introduction

Fifteen years after the infamous "butterfly ballot" and "hanging chads" of the 2000 presidential election raised questions about the efficiency and legitimacy of American elections, doubts about the efficacy of our voting processes persist (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007). Indeed, some reports suggest these doubts—and, by extension, the problems they presumably reflect—are greater than ever (Alvarez and Grofman, 2014). For example, according to many journalistic accounts, voting in the 2012 U.S. presidential election was a daunting and arduous task. Reports of voter suppression were common and even those who managed to make it to their polling place apparently faced all sorts of obstacles. The following description is representative of newspaper coverage more generally:

> "Americans overcame epic lines, confusion about new laws and even polling places crammed into tents in parts of the Northeast that were still without electricity to cast their ballots Tuesday. Even before lunchtime, a handful of those partisan disputes and Election Day glitches started spilling into courtrooms … Many problems — and certainly the most closely watched — came in battleground states widely expected to determine the outcome of the presidential election. Voters reported waiting in line for hours at some polling sites in Florida and Virginia and encountering malfunctioning voting machines in key Ohio precincts." (Heath, 2012).

But social scientific research suggests that long lines and hour-plus wait times are the exception rather than the rule (Ansolabehere and Stewart, 2013; Burden and Stewart, 2014). For example, survey data from the 2008 election indicate that the average wait time to vote was 16.7 min, and that while 6 percent waited more than an hour to vote, almost 37 percent did not have to wait at all and another 28 percent waited less than 10 min.[1] Preliminary data from the 2012 presidential contest show similar wait times, and there is almost no evidence that long lines are a problem in midterm or municipal elections (Ansolabehere and Stewart, 2013).

So while there is agreement that we ought to be attentive to the nature of the voting experience, there is disagreement about how

[1] 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. It is worth acknowledging that long lines and long wait times are not the same thing. One can move more or less quickly despite the length of a line. Still, we assume a correlation between these concepts and beg the reader's forgiveness for using them somewhat interchangeably.

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good (or bad) that experience has been in recent elections. But beyond this debate there is a gap in our understanding of election administration: what is the cause of long lines and wait times? For even if we find, as social science argues, that relatively few voters are forced to spend an hour or more in line waiting to vote, we don't have any true comprehension of why this is the case or how we can remedy these situations.[2]

This paper attempts to bolster our knowledge of how we might improve the election experience for American voters. Our focus, hinted at above, is on wait time and lines. We begin by reviewing recent surveys of voters and election officials, both of which indicate that wait time and lines are an issue for at least some voters. We then describe and analyze a comprehensive 2013 survey of all available local election officials throughout the U.S.[3]. Like previous surveys of local election administrators, this one asks them to assess wait times and other aspects of the voter experience. Unlike previous surveys, this one asks administrators about their budgets, poll workers, and training protocols. To these data, we have added localized information on voting behavior and race. In particular, we wish to explore the possibility that longer wait times might be more of an issue for Democrats than Republicans (or vice-versa). This possibility might be indicated by a correlation between party division of the vote in an area and line-length. Altogether, this evidence allows us to gauge how much these factors influence (among other things) wait times and lines. In addition, we asked local officials which election administration issues they think will require attention in the not-so-distant future, as well as what they would do to improve election administration in the U.S. The size and scope of the survey thus provide us with unparalleled data to ascertain how resources affect wait time and lines, and unique insight into what those closest to ground-zero think about current and future practices.

2. What we know about the U.S. voting experience

Let us begin with a simple, declarative statement: We know much more today about how elections are administered in the United States than we did fifteen years ago. In the aftermath of the controversial 2000 presidential election, popular and academic interest in the mechanics of American elections spiked (for example, see Lichtman, 2003; Marchland, 2014; Perera et al., 2000; Wise, 2001). Colorful stories about ballot impropriety had long been part of the folklore of U.S. political history, but the notion that widespread problems existed in contemporary elections was often dismissed as the product of conspiracy theorists or hyper-partisans. The Bush–Gore contest and the spotlight that shone on balloting in the state of Florida changed all that. Scores of studies documented issues as varied as long lines, uneven treatment of registration claims, and problems with overseas, military, and provisional ballots (see Alvarez and Grofman, 2014 or Burden and Stewart, 2014 for a comprehensive listing). And, for the first time, systematic efforts were undertaken to collect and analyze data on the administration of U.S. elections. By 2012, there were impressive national as well as state-by-state studies documenting the existence and magnitude of problems faced by American voters as they attempt to cast their ballots.[4]

Three major take-away points emerge from these studies. First, by most every measure (and certainly if one looks at lines and wait times) the quality of election administration in the United States is quite impressive.[5] This might surprise some people who focus on the negative stories derived from anecdotes and (to a lesser degree) some selective empirical data. But the existence of long lines or ballot confusion or other problems at the polls should not detract from the fact that these are rare.

Second, problems associated with wait times and long lines seem to be concentrated in a small set of jurisdictions. According to one study, the residence of the voter is the best predictor of differences in wait times; in particular, long lines depend on the state in which the voter lives (Ansolabehere and Stewart, 2013). In 2012, only five jurisdictions—Florida, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, and South Carolina—produced an average self-reported wait time of over 20 min, while more than half of the states had a wait time of 10 min or less. For those who might be skeptical about the substantive import of this fact, consider that voters in Florida (average time to vote of 39.2 min) reportedly waited 26 times as long to cast their ballots as voters in Vermont (average wait time to vote of 1.5 min).

Furthermore, there is substantial variance with respect to self-reported wait times within states, and even within counties. Florida is perhaps the paradigmatic example here, as voters in some counties reported experiencing minimal wait times in 2012 (e.g., an average of 5.7 min in Marion County) while voters in other counties experienced maximal wait times (e.g., an average of 136.6 min in Lee County).[6]

Third, despite a few instructive studies (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007; Burden and Milyo, 2015; Hall et al., 2007) we still do not know very much about how the resources and behavior of local election officials affects the quality of the balloting experience for the voter.[7] More generally, although we now know more about self-reported wait times and lines, we don't know much about how those who are actually administering the elections view the process. What do they think matters for running a better election? What could be done to improve the experience for the voter? What

[2] For a review of best practices, see "The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration." https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/.

[3] This 2013 survey project represents the most unique and innovative part of a wider effort on behalf of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration (PCEA), which also synthesized information across a range of voting areas. The President's Commission on Election Administration was established pursuant to Executive Order 13,639, and is described in detail on the website https://www.supportthevoter.gov/. Topics under direct consideration by the Commission and the senior research staff included absentee and early voting, ballot design, disability, limited English proficiency, long lines and wait times, military and overseas ballots, natural disasters, poll workers, polling places, provisional ballots, voter education, voter rolls and poll books, and voting technology.

[4] Perhaps the most impressive of these studies is the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). Since 2004, the EAVS has conducted a biennial survey of election administration officials from all fifty states plus the District of Columbia and U.S. territories about registered voters, ballots cast, and election procedures and equipment. The survey is conducted under the auspices of the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and helps the state and federal governments meet their requirements under the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA). In addition to the EAVS, we would also highlight the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE). Both are Internet surveys and both ask an identical question concerning the amount of time voters waited at the polls. In 2012, the CCES interviewed 54,535 adults, 39,675 of whom voted; the SPAE interviewed 10,200 registered voters, 9336 of whom voted. The CCES asks fewer questions about election administration, but has a larger sample size that is distributed across the nation in proportion to population. The SPAE focuses its questions entirely on election administration, with a smaller sample size distributed within states in proportion to population.

[5] This has been a consistent theme of comprehensive analyses since the Baker-Carter Report (see "Building Confidence in U.S. Elections." 2005. Report of the Commission on Federal Election Reform).

[6] For an overview, see Ansolabehere and Stewart, 2014.

[7] The EAC has amassed considerable and actionable survey data from election administrators on their Election Day and Early Voting experiences (see U.S. Election Assistance Commission Reports "Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections" (2007) and "Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements" (2007)), but relatively little has been learned about the relationship between budgets or poll workers and the Election Day experience for voters.