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Targeting voter registration with incentives: A randomized controlled trial of a lottery in a London borough☆

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ABSTRACT

Does an incentive—in the form of a lottery—increase voter registration, particularly among poorer members of society? In the summer of 2012, two groups of 20,000 randomly selected households from a London Borough were informed that they would be placed into a prize draw if they registered to vote by 28 September 2012. One group was offered £5000 and the other £1000 while the remaining households in the borough received the standard letter with the same deadline but no lottery offer. The registration rates after the deadline were 46.2 per cent in the £1000 group and 46.6 per cent in the £5000 group compared to 44.7 in the control. Levels of registration in the two treatment groups are statistically different to the control, but not from each other. Households in poorer locations are more receptive of the lottery offer whereas there is no effect in places where richer households live. After the face-to-face canvass of all remaining non-registered households, which took place after the experiment, there were no statistically significant differences between the treatment groups and the control. The study builds on the work of Raja and Schaffner (2012) and Panagopoulos (2013) by finding that incentives work in different ways depending on their level and who is targeted.

Can lotteries motivate pro-social behaviours like voter registration and if so for whom? Public authorities for some time now have deployed financial incentives to encourage citizens to change their behaviours, for example to give up smoking tobacco or to take up exercise. The rationale is that society can benefit by more than the cost of providing the incentive. Untried so far have been incentives to foster civic behaviours, such as voter registration. Normally, public authorities make appeals to civic duty or in the case of voter registration and voter turnout (in some countries) invoke the sanction of the law. But in certain circumstances it might be appropriate to consider incentives as a complement to existing approaches. Given the positive effects of Get Out The Vote (GOTV) interventions usually accrue to those who are already pre-disposed to participate (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009), they tend to bypass a hard-core of non-participants who have a low propensity to vote. An incentive, like a lottery, might appeal to those who are not reached by other forms of mobilization. A differential effect of lotteries with small rewards has already been identified in a survey experiment on intentions to vote (La Raja and Schaffner, 2012), but so far there has been no test of such an intervention carried out by a public authority in the field.

To test the claim that lotteries target poorer voters, two randomly selected groups of 20,000 households in a London Borough were entered into a lottery if they registered to vote by 28 September 2012. One group got an offer of £1000 and the other £5000 while the remaining households in the borough were placed into the control group. Both intervention groups were more likely to register to vote then those in the control but there is no statistical difference between the £1000 and £5000 offers suggesting the level of the incentive does not matter in this range. As expected the treatment effect is stronger in locations with low-income groups while there was no impact in high-income locations. The effect,

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however, did not last beyond a further reminder to register to vote: the differences between the treatment and control groups disappear after the remaining unregistered residents were canvassed. Overall, the lottery may have stimulated some residents to register on time.

The structure the paper is as follows. The first section is a review of the literature on incentives and pro-social behaviours. The second is an assessment of the literature on GOTV campaigns, which places incentives alongside other motivations to participate. Third, there is a short review of the literature on voter registration. Fourth is an account of voter registration in the UK. Fifth is a description of the study and its design. The penultimate section contains the report of the results. Finally, conclusions and implications are drawn.

1. Incentives and pro-social behaviours

An incentive is not the first tool of choice for policy-makers to encourage pro-social behaviours. But the menu of public actions is quite limited when compulsion or regulation is not an option. Education, persuasion, and mentoring are various interventions that can be deployed, but often information-based interventions do not influence groups that are habituated to certain kinds of non-desirable behaviours. With smoking the effects of providing incentives are quite modest and short-term (Cahill and Perera 2008), though there are strong effects from using incentives to ensure attendance at schools, which work for some students, such as for the PROGRESSA scheme in Mexico where the payments were quite large (Behrman et al., 2005). Gneezy et al.'s (2011) review of studies in education, contributions to public goods and changing lifestyles, such as stopping smoking and taking exercise, does not provide unqualified support for the use of incentives.

Incentives can also work in the opposite way. Most notably, Frey (1997) argues that they crowd out pro-social motivation. So the provision of an incentive may cause people to carry out a socially beneficial action less because it has been converted into monetary form, which may be compared to the costs of carrying out the action. This recalls Titmuss's (1970) who concluded that people donate blood because it is free rather than paid for. There may be psychological costs in responding to money (Bénabou and Tirole, 2003, 2006) because people do not want to be paid for activities that they provide freely. For example, Gneezy and Rusticchini (2000) find that children collect less money for charity when they are paid. Nonetheless, studies also point in opposite direction, for example showing that paying for blood donations can increase the total level donated (Lacetera et al., 2009; Lacetera and Macis, 2010). Small incentives can highlight the pro-social nature of the act being promulgated, encouraging citizens to carry out what they would ideally like to do. For example, charging for plastic bags in supermarkets can help people realise their aim of becoming environmental citizens (Disney et al., 2013).

2. Voter mobilization and incentives

There has been a large amount of research on voter mobilization in recent decades using experimental methods. Such research does go back to the 1920s (Gosnell, 1926; also see also Eldersveld, 1956). More recent studies use a variety of techniques from door-knocking, telephoning and leafleting, which obtain significant and consistent treatment effects depending on the mode of intervention (see Green and Gerber, 2008; Green et al., 2013). These interventions often remind citizens of their civic duty thus attracting those who already have a predisposition to vote.

Complementing these psychological mechanisms, it is possible to argue there is a cost-benefit element to voter mobilisation, which has to do with the provision of information that can reduce the costs (Downs, 1957). Similarly, it may be possible to increase participation by providing benefits (see Panagopoulos, 2013: 267, 270–271). Indeed, in the past political parties and other organisations gave benefits, such as cash, food, alcohol, health care and poverty relief, to voters to encourage them to turnout (see Stokes et al., 2012). There have been some recent interventions carried out by companies and charities. For example, Starbucks which wanted to give a free coffee to anyone who voted in the 2008 US elections (Davis, 2008). However, this scheme was believed to be against the law so the company decided to offer anyone a free tall cup to anyone who asked for one. However, there are relatively few tests of the use of incentives in the voter mobilisation field. One field study that affected the costs and benefits of voting was a turnout festival (Addonizio et al., 2007). In the election-day party, potential voters were encouraged to vote, receiving benefits such as free food. It is not possible to use this study as evidence for the effects of incentives because the festival probably activated a norm to encourage voting.

Closer to the intervention in this paper is the study by La Raja and Schaffner (2012) who test for the effect of a lottery using the 2011 Cooperative Congressional Election Study based on a survey of about 1000 adults. They argue that incentives are similar to a nudge in behavioural economics, and that even a small incentive can increase voter turnout (even as low as a dollar). Their survey experiment varied scenarios of different prizes in a lottery and sought to find out how likely they were to vote in the next election. Important for this current study, they suggest that low income voters are more attracted the stimulus and they find that those with incomes under $30,000 are more likely to respond to the treatment with no other significant variations.

The most important study examining incentives is by Panagopoulos (2013). He carried out a pilot in 2007 for the municipal elections in Gilroy, and a larger scale study in April 2010. Voters in each experiment were randomly assigned to receive a postcard mailing with either an encouragement to vote or, in addition, an offer to receive a financial reward of $2, $10, or $25 for voting, with a control group that did not receive a letter. He finds that nominal incentives have no effect on voting, but that higher amounts do, suggesting that incentives affect voter behaviour but need some threshold level to work. A further study of voter turnout is Shineman (2012) who included incentives alongside a mobilisation treatment as each subject was provided with a prepaid $25 Visa gift card. This produces a striking result: a 33.3 percentage point increase in turnout. But it is not possible to separate the effect of the incentive from other aspects of mobilisation in this study.

There is good reason to believe that incentive-style interventions target particular groups. Incentives might appeal to low-income groups as the incentive would be less trivial representing a high proportion of their total resources if obtained making a greater contribution to marginal utility than for those with high incomes. Analyses of UK data show that lower income groups play the state lottery more than other groups (Farrell and Walker, 1999). Yet it is hard to work out whether incentives alone stimulate interest in playing lotteries. This might be particularly the case where there are low odds of winning. Lower educated groups might be inclined to overweigh the probability of winning because of the difficulty of calculating the odds (though such mistakes are not confined to the poorly educated—see Kahneman, 2011). The benefit might come from participating in the draw rather the prize and its level. Lower income groups are more used to playing lotteries so are familiar with the request and meeting a deadline for entry. Peer groups among the poor reinforce this (Beckert and Luter, 2012). There may be some intrinsic benefits to playing a lottery that