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MEASURING CONFIDENCE AND SUPPORT FOR BALLOT HARVESTING

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MEASURING CONFIDENCE AND SUPPORT FOR BALLOT HARVESTING

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

Among the many hotly contested election laws in the country, one of the most contentious is ballot harvesting. This practice, ballot harvesting, entails that any designated person that a voter selects, or any political campaign official, can collect and submit an absentee ballot on their behalf to the voting polls. As of now, California does make ballot harvesting legal unlike in some states of the US where this practice was widely condemned and banned. This prompts further inspection because although there has been no evidence of ballot harvesting used for voter fraud, the practice bears ethical concerns among state lawmakers. To do so, I conducted a survey experiment on UCR undergraduates in the winter of 2024. Subjects were randomly assigned a vignette that described ballot harvesting, described ballot harvesting and included additional text about who uses ballot harvesting, or described ballot harvesting and included additional text on concerns about electoral integrity. Neither treatment message changed perceptions of the integrity of the process nor how subjects would interpret the outcome of the 2024 presidential election.

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THE INTRODUCTION

Ballot harvesting has been noticeable in many modern day general elections. The issue has only been brought to light in the wake of the 2020 general elections. At the time, the COVID-19 pandemic wrought the nation in innumerable ways at a time when the presidential election was underway in late 2020. At the time, many citizens were informed that they would have to vote by mail by completing a mail-in ballot and dropping their completed forms at a public mailbox. Though this ensured convenience and peace of mind, ballot harvesting brought a lot of uncertainty to many voters concerning the voting integrity and security for the election outcome.

The results of the 2020 election saw many skeptics doubt the legitimacy of the election handling process. Many conservatives believed that the current president, Joseph R. Biden, was not the legitimate winner since Republicans claimed there was evidence of voter fraud in several states. On the other hand, other Democrats did not see the issue the same way with the results. The magnitude of the political polarization with ballot harvesting for both parties signifies that there have been disagreements among the implications of the practice itself. Therefore, this issue is worth pursuing further to uncover the reasons on the underlying factors that affect support for ballot harvesting such that the issue can be mitigated.

This study focused on collecting data from students to analyze the confidence students have towards the practice of ballot harvesting and the integrity of the general election. The research is intended to shed light on a contemporary voting practice that has never been studied through the context of American politics and hopefully provide empirical evidence for public policy experts to utilize when formulating voting law reforms. Therefore, by looking at ballot

harvesting contextually, this allows governmental officials and public policy analysts to probe at the different factors that can contribute to beliefs about the integrity of the electoral process and confidence in that process.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

For this research, the study will set out to address the following: How does voter confidence in which people use ballot harvesting affect the perceptions of integrity? This research question will be important as perceptions of integrity can emphasize the purpose of ballot harvesting in different communities. Another question is presented as follows: To what extent does ballot harvesting impact perceptions of integrity regarding the support for the practice? On the other hand, addressing this question will allow the researcher to see the level of support that one may express towards the practice. Altogether, these research questions will help me to understand how beliefs about ballot harvesting are shaped by differing perspectives among ordinary citizens regarding its usage.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Ballot harvesting has been linked to many prior studies concerning voting practices and common issue areas in voting elections. As to date, many academic research articles do not explicitly discuss ballot harvesting in depth, which prompts political scientists to consider this issue more fully for research considerations. In order to get a better understanding of how ballot harvesting can be connected to other political science contributions, the overview of voting concerns and general background knowledge of the different types of voting practices are necessary for further explanation.

One of the key areas of ballot harvesting can be traced to voter confidence when voters are assured that by handing the ballots to any voting official, their vote will be safely dropped off at the polling location. Measuring perceptions of integrity will entail voter experience since this metric enables researchers to see how ballot harvesting can affect the level of confidence based on one's prior voting participation. As R. Michael Alvarez, Jian Cao, and Yimeng Li found, they conducted an online survey and concluded that those who had concerns about fraud or manipulation and had horrible voting experiences were more likely to have less confidence in the election (Alvarez et. al, 12). This finding presents the claim that additional factors may be at play such as election administration, outside external factors, and media information that in turn affects voter confidence about ballot harvesting. Therefore, these areas will be important when evaluating the level of support for ballot harvesting among voters and with government officials in each type of government.

There are different types of methods of voting such as voting in person, absentee voting, and voting by mail, but none is more contentious than voting by mail. More importantly, mail

balloting is associated with ballot harvesting because earlier written academic articles have noted that reduced voter confidence is evident with mail-in-voting- particularly when states impose lax regulations on mail-in voting for the first time. Vote by mail has also garnered criticism from skeptical citizens and governmental public officials due to integrity concerns: the lack of experience one may have with mail voting and the lower level of confidence that a person may have when casting their vote by mail could explain the wariness for the integrity and security of voting by mail (Biggers et. al, 2). In other words, ballot harvesting can be explained in that the systematic process of voting by mail makes this concept appropriate to place within the context of electoral integrity. For much of the prior research that was conducted, ballot harvesting is applicable to mail in voting due to the fact its simplicity yet insecure nature makes the practice more prone to concerns that are worth observing.

A noticeable feature that is not typically found with ballot harvesting is the use of voter ID. Though voter ID is numerous for in-person poll voting and absentee voting, vote by mail and voter ID have not been studied in the context of ballot harvesting, which does not mean that the correlation should be discounted based on its importance. John V. Kane conducted an online survey research experiment and found that Democrats tend to support voter ID in terms of partisan election strategy whereas Republicans' support for voter ID is mainly from concerns of voter fraud (Kane, 952-953). Given that the partisan divide exists with voter ID, this may help to explain the reason why Democrats support ballot harvesting more so than Republicans. Other research confirms this by conducting an experiment of the categorical application of voter ID laws onto public opinion within three areas- namely socio-political cues, mainstream media coverage, and framing in political issues amongst public debates in a telephone survey/interview

research experiment: the results showed that ideology and race could play a role in sowing racial resentment in elections regarding voter ID (Wilson and Brewer, 980). Thus, the current position on which many citizens see the use of voter ID reflects the views voters have with ballot harvesting and the underlying implications of its benefits and costs when set in a general election.

Studying ballot harvesting requires collecting information related to voting behavior and electoral voting issues that have been raised by previous published research. Overall, the potential for ballot harvesting research to be conducted could open new insights into the future for upcoming general elections among the public.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first hypothesis can be derived from the first research question as I propose that many students who have higher confidence with voting from ballot harvesting are likely to have a positive perception of the integrity of elections. Conversely, students who have a lower confidence rate with voting have a higher chance of expressing a negative perception of the integrity of elections. Given the fact that voting experiences can be created from voting in person (or in any form), this correlates with voter confidence and perceptions of integrity since previous elections outcomes may affect the perspectives of the ballot handling process. Further research, however, will be needed to confirm that various factors can in fact impact how ballot harvesting is either used or not by other members of the community as well as the underlying significance of voter confidence and integrity. Thus, voter confidence and perceptions of integrity can inform researchers about how the voter experience plays a role in how others perceive ballot harvesting.

Much of the second hypothesis also points to the fact that the purpose of ballot harvesting can influence the degree to which one can convey their support or disapproval of the practice. For example, the way in which one purposely uses ballot harvesting as a well-intended tool may also cause a positive view of the perceptions of integrity. However, using ballot harvesting for malicious purposes may cause one to express a negative perception of the integrity of the voting process. The potential relationship does allow for a causal linkage to be made between support for ballot harvesting and the perceptions of integrity for this research experiment. In light of this finding, a possible match between the hypotheses and the actual results of the experiment will help to affirm the support of this claim.

These two hypotheses will be critical in analyzing the perceptions of voting integrity under ballot harvesting. Attributable to ballot harvesting is the usage of different contextual scenarios where ballot harvesting may be present, which was integrated into the research design. In addition, prior conceptions towards electoral voting inquiries do support existing theories concerning voting practices. Absentee ballot and vote by mail are often scrutinized by lawmakers due to the belief that these practices are susceptible to fraud, waste, and abuse. Taken into consideration, these theories will help probe into further insights on how ballot harvesting can inform election laws and voting rules within California as well as with other states.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

My research design consisted of an experimental design in which surveys serve as the data instrument for which data will be collected. Quantitative data is collected where survey responses are used to explain whether or not there are circumstances that can affect the perceptions of voting through instances of ballot harvesting. Investigating the hypothesis and research question was done through a survey to explain the political phenomenon of ballot harvesting. The survey research that was conducted all the way to completion helped to reach a conclusion for the research.

The data was obtained from an online survey platform using Qualtrics, which was programmed by the student and reviewed by the faculty professor. Part of the methodological outline entailed the first step where I identified the population of interest for the research project. Specifically, surveying students was the route that I initially planned, and I had hoped to conduct the study on the entire undergraduate student body. However, there were obstacles that prevented me from extending the study further, which led me to use a sampling frame of the University Honors students for my research. In addition to using Qualtrics, I also used Stata, which was used to code the data, determine the demographic characteristics of the sample, and analyze the experiments I ran with the software.

THE ACTUAL RESEARCH

The first step in the research process was that we came up with the treatment groups and control groups for the variables that we wanted to test. There were two treatment groups - one was the inclusion of racial ethnic minorities and low-income communities and the other was a situation in which voting integrity was jeopardized. On the other hand, the control group represented the policy of ballot harvesting alone. The text of the control message that was used is the following:

As you may know, some states allow registered voters who request a mail or absentee ballot to have someone return their ballot on their behalf. This process is often referred to as “ballot harvesting.” States have different rules about who can return a ballot for someone, but in a number of states that voter can have anyone they want return the ballot for them. In those states, many people have come to rely on ballot harvesting regardless of political affiliation as a way to help voters who may be unable to return the ballot in person or get it to a postal facility in time for it to be counted.

Along with the three texts that were used, questions were accompanied such as “What do you think? What is your opinion of this policy?”. For this question, students were asked to choose the scale in which they stood on the issue ranging from strongly favor to strongly oppose.

The first treatment condition added the following text to the control condition language: “These groups include senior citizens, those with a physical disability, low income individuals, and racial and ethnic minorities. They rely much more heavily than other Americans on friends, family members, or representatives from political organizations to return ballots on their behalf in order to participate in elections.”

The second treatment condition added the following text to the control condition: “In those states, many people have come to rely on ballot harvesting regardless of political affiliation as a way to help voters who may be unable to return the ballot in person or get it to a postal facility in time for it to be counted. Some opponents of this process, however, are concerned about the integrity of this process. They worry about the possibility that those who collect ballots may not actually return the ballots, may return only ballots cast by registered members of their preferred party, or may tamper with the ballots in some way.”

Since students were randomly assigned to either one of the three text scenarios, they were also asked to answer these three questions “Suppose that the upcoming presidential election was held tomorrow. How confident would you be that the ballots of all the registered voters who used this process (ballot harvesting) would be returned and counted as intended?” ; “Suppose that the upcoming presidential election was held tomorrow. How confident would you be in the integrity of the election’s results in states that allow for ballot harvesting?”; and “Suppose that the upcoming presidential election was held tomorrow. How confident would you be in the integrity of the election’s results overall if there was a big increase in the use of ballot harvesting to return ballots?”. Specifically, they were asked to rate their confidence on a four point scale from very confident to not at all confident. They also answered a standard set of demographic and political questions.

Around the fall quarter, we started to set up the research experiment by getting in contact with organizations and clubs that might help sponsor the survey instrument by having undergraduate students take the survey. As noted, the University Honors organization agreed to advertise the survey to the students within the program. I also started to create the Qualtrics

survey while taking the items that we discussed into consideration. Throughout the quarter, I completed the remaining tasks that were necessary to carry out the survey experimental research such as with the incentives and getting in contact with the individuals that were a part of the survey research.

After securing confirmation from the contacts that did agree to publicize the survey, I distributed the survey to the undergraduate cohorts in the University Honors program. The survey was in the field for two weeks with the permission of the University Honors director.

I analyzed the data using OLS regression. In order to do this, the dependent variable was coded as not at all confident, not too confident, somewhat confident, and very confident for the DV (1-4) within each of the question measurements for confidence in election integrity. Models with binary indicators for treatment assignments were also run through with the software system in a way that codes the dependent variable as 1 equaling to yes and 0 equaling to no. This applies to all three of the question measures from Table 2. Though I collected the data I needed, there were some obstacles that I encountered from the research. ¹

¹ Due to an unexpected program error on Qualtrics, I was not able to ask the question for the general support for ballot harvesting that I intended to ask for this research.

THE RESULTS

As Table 1 shows, among the sample, forty-two point fifty two percent were second years, twenty-nine point thirteen percent were third years, twenty six point seventy-seven were fourth years, and one point fifty seven percent were fifth year students and beyond. In terms of other sample characteristics, sixty two point twenty percent were female and eighty-three point thirty two percent were non whites. Political interest is also used to assign value on a scale from zero to three based on their interaction with politics. Approximately sixteen point sixty seven percent of the population expressed interest most of the time, thirty five point seventy one percent were interested some of the time, thirty one point seventy five percent were interested only now and then, and fifteen point eighty seven percent were hardly at all interested. Another factor that was used is political affiliation in which most of the students were Democrats rather than either Republicans or Independents. Around sixty seven point seventy two percent were Democrats, ten point twenty four percent were Republicans, and twenty two point eighty three percent were Independents.

	A	B	C
1	Table 1. Sample Characteristics for Study		
2			
3	Female (Yes=1)	62.20%	
4			
5	Nonwhite (Yes=1)	83.32%	
6			
7	Political Interest (How Often Follow Gov't & Public Affairs?)		
8	Most of the Time (Yes=1)	16.67%	
9			
10	Some of the Time (Yes=1)	35.71%	
11			
12	Only Now and Then (Yes=1)	31.75%	
13			
14	Hardly at All (Yes=1)	15.87%	
15			
16	Democrat (Yes=1)	67.72%	
17			
18	Republican (No=0)	10.24%	
19			
20	Independent	22.83%	
21			
22	Year at UCR		
23	Second Year (Yes=1)	42.52%	
24			
25	Third Year (Yes=1)	29.13%	
26			
27	Fourth Year (Yes=1)	26.77%	
28			
29	Fifth Year or More (Yes=1)	1.57%	
30			
31			
32	Observations	126	

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1	Table 2. Confidence in Election Integrity									
2		Confidence All Ballot Counted			Confidence in Integrity of Results			Confidence in Integrity of Results if Big Increase in Ballot Harvesting		
3		DV Coded 1-4	DV Coded 0-1		DV Coded 1-4	DV Coded 0-1		DV Coded 1-4	DV Coded 0-1	
4	Groups Treatment (Yes=1)	0.040	-0.007		0.174	0.078		0.114	0.030	
5		[0.170]	[0.117]		[0.185]	[0.118]		[0.188]	[0.116]	
6	Integrity Treatment (Yes=1)	0.103	0.084		0.050	-0.007		0.319	0.163	
7		[0.162]	[0.112]		[0.177]	[0.113]		[0.180]	[0.111]	
8	Constant	2.531	0.531		2.469	0.468		2.218	0.375	
9		[0.128]	[0.088]		[0.139]	[0.089]		[0.142]	[0.088]	
10	Observations	126	126		126	126		126	126	
11	R-squared	0.004	0.008		0.008	0.006		0.027	0.022	
12	Note: OLS regression coefficients presented with robust standard errors in brackets. Dependent variable is level of confidence (1=not at all confident, 2=not too confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident) or confident (1=yes) vs. not (0=no). * p<0.05, two-tailed tests									

Table 2 shows the results of the experiment. Starting with column 1, we see that being assigned the group treatment compared to the control increases one's level of confidence that all votes were counted by 0.04 points. This relationship is not statistically significant. In contrast, those assigned to the integrity treatment were 0.10 points more confident that all ballots were counted compared to those in the control group. This relationship is also not statistically significant. Shifting to the dependent variable where we measure confidence vs. no confidence does not change the results. As such, being in the group treatment decreases confidence that all votes are counted by 0.007 points. In contrast, being in the integrity treatment increases confidence by 8.4 points. Again, neither of the relationships are statistically significant.

In column 3, I look at the confidence in the integrity of the results. Assignment to the groups treatment compared to the control increases one's level of confidence in the integrity of results by .174 points. Those that were in the integrity treatment were 0.05 points more confident in the integrity of results compared to those in the control group. On the other hand, the dichotomous variable (0-1) shows that being in the groups treatment increases confidence in the integrity of results by .078 points. Conversely, the integrity treatment is associated with a

decrease in confidence of 0.007 points. For all of these analyses, the relationships are not statistically significant.

In column 5, the data discusses the confidence in the integrity of the results if there was a big increase in ballot harvesting. For the dependent variable coded (1-4), being assigned the group treatments compared to the control increases one's confidence in the integrity of the results by .114 points. However, those that were assigned to the integrity treatments were .319 points more confident about the integrity of results with ballot harvesting compared to those in the control group. For the dichotomous dependent variables, being in the group treatment increases confidence about the integrity of results from ballot harvesting by .03 points. Additionally, the result in the integrity treatment is associated with an increase in confidence of .163 points. Overall, none of these relationships were statistically significant.

THE DISCUSSION

Neither of the treatments had statistically significant effects on any of the measures of confidence in electoral results and integrity. Furthermore, all of the estimated treatment effects are small in size. Thus, this shows that in the context of the research, the hypotheses tested do not support the conclusion that is expected to follow. Although most students have expressed low voter confidence in areas where voter fraud concerns and the special needs consideration group treatments were tested, this nonetheless contradicts the hypotheses (or preliminary predictions) that were formed at the beginning of the experiment. Since the data only considers measures of confidence and perceptions of integrity in relation to ballot harvesting, the findings cannot be generalized to include opinions or attitudes towards ballot harvesting for the study participants.

The study exhibited a number of limitations that may have prohibited the ability to identify effects of either of the treatments. For example, this research study did consider the use of attitudes towards ballot harvesting, but the implementation was never incorporated into the creation of the survey. A few of the challenges that I have faced such as low survey participation count from limited campus-wide communications and software errors on Qualtrics are also additional barriers that affected the results of the survey (given the difficulty of estimating statistically significant effects with small samples). While the shortcomings of the study were present, future work should be directed towards conducting the research on ballot harvesting at the local (or national) level to see if external and internal factors may affect attitudes toward ballot harvesting.

This research does lay the groundwork where future follow-up research studies can add on to the work. For instance, ballot harvesting can be studied in different geographical locations

of a state's region and be compared with a potential national study concerning ballot harvesting opinions within the United States. Then, the research can be extended to include other concepts such as voting integrity, voter fraud, and various key indicators in relation to voting provisions. Much of the importance of considering the different approaches to electoral voting research stems from the previous research to incorporate new aspects to study new voting tactics. The relevance of ballot harvesting has made the issue a much-needed discussion due to how ballot harvesting can be used appropriately and also perceptions that it can be mistreated at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Several key takeaways are worth noting throughout the entirety of the research study. The completed research has provided a learning opportunity in that a better research design could have been utilized to effectively capture the reasons behind the support for ballot harvesting and the perception of integrity. The survey research that was conducted was substantive to enlighten the research questions and hypotheses to a limited extent. As part of the culmination of the research, ballot harvesting is a voting practice that cannot be understood at a definitional basis. Rather, ballot harvesting can be better perceived if it is actually observed and recorded within the conduct of a study research in a natural setting.

Results from the survey research would have been improved if there was an increase in the survey participation from among the undergraduate population. In this circumstance, the small sample size limited the ability to gather a substantial amount of people to render a sound data collection outcome. Much of the research study yielded the resulting data that was anomalous to what I have expected the research to produce. The relationship between the measurement of the variables and the set control and group treatments were in line with the ideal set-up of the research for this particular topic field. In all, more research will be needed in order to affirm that ballot harvesting does affect not only voter confidence and perception of integrity but also the socio-demographics of the community that uses ballot harvesting.

Without a doubt, ballot harvesting has definitely affected the voting spectrum for future elections. Much of the reasons relate to the fact that ballot harvesting has become an electoral policy whose support is strongly divided along partisan lines. That divide is driven at least in part by the beliefs about which side benefits from the availability of this electoral reform and how its

usage might affect the outcomes of elections. Future speculation on voter fraud and legitimacy can either undermine or benefit the purpose of voting, which prompts academic researchers to tackle the issue head-on. Some common issues surrounding voter participation and the possible erosion of democratic principles have been impacted by ballot harvesting. All in all, ballot harvesting is a voting concept that can serve the intended function of providing an opportunity for others experiencing challenges to vote, but the concern about the potential for misuse is a matter that needs to be dealt with stringent care.

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