The Impact of State Voter Registration Policies on State Registration Rates
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The question I answered

My goal was to look at all of the policies states have that could possibly impact that state's voter registration rate, and then create a model to predict which policies have the most significant impact. The lens through which I approached the thesis was Public Policy, and, more specifically, the work of Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler on *default bias*, which built on ideas established by the social psychologist Daniel Kahneman.

What are the mundane policies "on default" in peoples' lives that can impact the degree to which our democracy in theory becomes a democracy in practice? How can government set up default systems that are inclusive? These are the broader types of questions I was asking myself, but a more tactile question is necessary for a thesis in Quantitative Social Science. A question should be tight and clear. Mine was:

Which voter registration policies have the greatest impact on voter registration rates in a given state?

I sought to answer this question by observing US elections in the past two decades and noting when certain policies were implemented. This would allow me to create an array of models that tease out the effects of each policy implementation on the response variable, which was registration rate. The "what" of my analysis was a relatively simple excel spreadsheet that contained observations by state and election year of many variables, including, but not limited to: registration rate, same-day registration allowed, automatic voter registration implemented, inter-state data-sharing implemented, online voter registration allowed, etc.

I then ran a simple OLS regression as well as a LASSO regression estimating the impact of each variable. My finding was that, first of all, these policies, which target "reluctant voters" seem to only be effective during general election years, not showing much of an impact for midterm elections. Next, I found that automatic voter registration and online voter registration are effective tools for increasing registration rates in general election years (an unsurprising finding). Finally, the most delightfully surprising finding of my study was that being a part of ERIC – the Electronic Registration Information Center, which is an inter-state data-sharing consortium – also had a significant positive impact on registration rates in general election years.

Learnings & advice

First of all, feel free to email me at eitan@darwish.com if you'd like to chat. In terms of advice before you embark on your thesis journey, here's what I have to say:

Everything everyone else tells you is true: make a long-term plan, don't save everything until the last minute, etc. The most important piece of advice I can give you, however, is to ***find a question that you really want to answer***. If you can spark a passion for your project, everything else will fall into place, because rather than seeming like a chore, your work will feel purposeful.

I found my question interesting, and that interest rubbed off on my advisor, who suggested I turn the thesis into a PRS project for the Rockefeller Center, and present my findings to the Election Law Committee of the New Hampshire House of Representatives.