

BROOKINGS

POLICY BRIEF

The Filer Voter Experiment: How Effective is Voter Registration at Tax Time?

Vanessa Williamson

July 15, 2019

The Filer Voter experiment, conducted in 2018, assessed the effectiveness of conducting voter registration drives at Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites for lower-income households in Cleveland and Dallas. The Filer Voter program doubled the likelihood of unregistered voters registering to vote. Replicated at all VITA sites nationally, this would lead to about 115,000 unregistered eligible voters to register to vote, including 63,000 people who would not otherwise register.

Introduction

The United States has comparatively low voter turnout. One barrier to voting is the registration process and unfortunately, states are not moving consistently toward policies that would increase the registered population. While some states have eased the voter registration process, or moved toward automatic voter registration, others have adopted policies that will likely remove a substantial number of eligible registered voters from the rolls.

Voter registration at tax time has the potential to not only increase the voter pool, but to make the voting population more closely mirror the citizenry as a whole. Lower-income Americans are substantially less likely to be registered to vote than higher-income Americans, and are also less likely to vote. In 2016, 74 percent of individuals making more than \$50,000 voted, compared to only 52 percent of voters making less than that. Unfortunately, some voter engagement efforts actually widen disparities in participation by mobilizing members of groups already likely to participate rather than underrepresented citizens.

Tax time may be an especially effective time to encourage lower-income citizens to register. The tenor of citizens' interactions with government, both positive and negative, influence their willingness to participate in civic life. Income tax filing is critical for many working families who rely on the earned income and child tax credits to supplement their incomes. For these households, the experience of tax filing provokes feelings of pride and inclusion, a comparatively positive government interaction. Voter registration at tax time could leverage this positive experience of government to increase civic participation.

Experimental Design

Filer Voter was conducted at local Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) centers. VITA tax preparers are IRS-certified volunteers, and VITA sites are coordinated by local or regional nonprofit community organizations. Nationally, VITA programs provide free tax preparation assistance to millions of low- to moderate-income households, generally those making less than \$55,000 a year.

The experiment was conducted from late January to mid-April 2018 via a randomized controlled trial at seven VITA locations in two major U.S. cities: Cleveland and Dallas. Tax filers visiting each of the participating sites were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study. The experimental pool included 4,353 tax filers.

The Filer Voter experiment randomly assigned half of participants to a “treatment” group that was given the opportunity to register to vote along with tax preparation assistance, and the other half of participants to a “control” group that received only tax preparation assistance. Comparing the pre- and post-experiment registration rates of the treatment and control groups, we can assess the effect of Filer Voter on registration and turnout.

Participants

Filer Voter participants contained more women than in the general voting-age citizenry; women made up 54 percent of the 2,588 participants in Texas, and 61 percent of the 1,793 participants in Ohio. As expected—given the targeting of VITA services—the participants were also predominantly low-income. In Ohio, the average income for Filer Voter participants was just over \$23,000 a year. While we did not have access to individual income data for those who consented to participate in Filer Voter in Texas, we do know that the average income for all VITA clients at those sites was slightly less than \$27,000.

Results

The Filer Voter program significantly increased registration rates among the initially unregistered. In the treatment group, 8.8 percent registered to vote compared to only 3.9 percent of the control group, a 4.9 percentage point increase. That is to say, the Filer Voter treatment more than doubled the likelihood of an unregistered person registering to vote.

The effects were largest for young people. Among unregistered 18- to 34-year-olds, the program resulted in a 10-percentage point increase in voter registration, as well as a 5.3-percentage point increase in re-registration. Those 35 to 49 saw a similar increase in re-registration rates. The Filer Voter program doubled the likelihood of unregistered tax filers registering to vote. Replicated at all VITA sites nationally, this would lead to about 115,000 unregistered eligible voters to register to vote, including 63,000 people who would not otherwise register.

Filer Voter’s success in new registrations carried over into increased voter turnout. In the 2018 Ohio primary election, 23 percent of those who newly registered to vote through the Filer Voter program actually voted, a rate slightly higher than the overall turnout for the state, 21 percent. Given that the Ohio VITA client population is low income and predominantly from traditionally underrepresented ethnic minority groups, the turnout rates are especially notable.

Discussion

Linking voter registration with free tax preparation services is an effective way to increase the civic engagement of lower income citizens. From a practical standpoint, the Filer Voter model offers several advantages as an approach to voter registration.

For VITA sites and tax preparers

The results of the Filer Voter program suggest that tax preparers could have a very substantial impact on voter registration rates if they offered voter registration to their clients. In addition, offering voter registration services could help nonprofit tax preparers attract volunteers from outside of their traditional volunteer pools.

For voter registration groups

A primary advantage of the Filer Voter program is its very low cost because it builds on an existing program. For organizations looking to increase voter registration in their communities without the outlay associated with standalone canvassing and tabling efforts, a Filer Voter program would likely be very efficient.

For public officials

Filer Voter also has implications for policymakers. As a supplement to automatic voter registration, policymakers should explore policies to incentivize or require tax preparers to offer clients the opportunity to register to vote. Many citizens who might fall through the cracks of an automatic voter registration program, particularly those who do not drive, might be reached via an annual appeal at tax time. States should also explore the feasibility of including the state tax authority among the agencies participating in automatic voter registration by including the option of registering to vote on the state income tax form.

Conclusion

The Filer Voter program increased voter registration and turnout. The program doubled the likelihood that a person not registered to vote would become registered. Put another way, fully half of the people newly registered to vote via the Filer Voter program would not otherwise have registered. The program largely avoids the costs associated with recruiting and training new volunteers to implement a voter registration program and did not slow the tax preparation process at the sites where voter registration was offered. The results offer a roadmap for nonprofit organizations, for-profit preparers, and state officials who wish to harness the tax filing process to substantially increase civic participation in their communities.