

Does Voting Eligibility Foster Interest in Electoral Issues and Candidates?



Age-based voting eligibility in Mexico's 2018 general election shows that the just-eligible score higher on several measures of low-cost political engagement compared to the just-ineligible.



Exposure to information that the youth vote will be pivotal in the election increases eligible respondents' interest in the presidential debate and in the election result.



Information about current policy outcomes affects eligible voters' future policy priorities in ways consistent with the incentives of eligible respondents to collect and process electorally relevant information on salient policy issues.

CONTEXT

Does the right to vote provide an intrinsic motivation to be engaged with electoral issues and candidates or, given incentives to free ride on others, do voters prefer to remain rationally disengaged? Most research in this area has focused on mature democracies, but these issues are particularly important in younger democracies where institutions are less developed. Possible links between eligibility and engagement are difficult to determine because engagement takes many possible forms and because voters have different perceptions of the value of their vote. Moreover, incentives to be engaged change over the electoral cycle.

PROJECT

The study investigates the effects of age-based voting eligibility on the political engagement of Mexican high school seniors. Students on 30 campuses located throughout Mexico were given an original in-class survey four to six weeks before the general election of 2018, when about 60 percent of students surveyed would be eligible to vote for the first time as they turned 18 before the election date. The survey timing was highly salient as two of the three presidential debates had already been televised. The study also leveraged informational experiments to examine the channels through which voting eligibility increases political engagement.

Key Concept



VOTING ELIGIBILITY

The legal right to register and vote in an election, usually based on a minimum age requirement.

RESULTS

The data reveal significant differences between eligible and non-eligible students with respect to the most salient and lowest cost forms of engagement: those who are just eligible to vote are significantly more interested in the results of the Mexican presidential election and in watching the third and final debate between the presidential candidates (see [Figure 1](#)). A follow-up email survey taken after the final televised debate confirms that students who had earlier expressed intentions to watch the debate were significantly more likely to have actually watched it. Differences in knowledge of the issues and candidates, on the other hand, did not appear to be significant.

How can eligible students' interest in elections be further increased? Eligible voters may have different perceptions about whether their vote can affect the results of an election. One randomized experiment included in the survey provided treated respondents with information that young people's votes are likely to be pivotal in the upcoming election. Treated respondents expressed greater interest in the election, an effect that was greatest among respondents who were eligible to vote.

Intrinsic incentives to acquire information about issues and candidates should be stronger for eligible voters. To test this hypothesis, the second survey experiment studies the incentives of voters to collect and process electorally relevant information in the weeks before the election. Treated respondents were given information about crime and education outcomes in Mexico, and asked how much attention the next president should give to these issues. They are, on average, more likely to indicate that the next president should give a higher priority to these two issues. However, the effect is smaller among eligible than non-eligible respondents. This is consistent with the greater incentives of politically engaged eligible voters to have collected or absorbed relevant information on their own about key policy outcomes.

Key Concept



POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Behaviors that indicate that a citizen is informed and actively participates in the democratic process.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

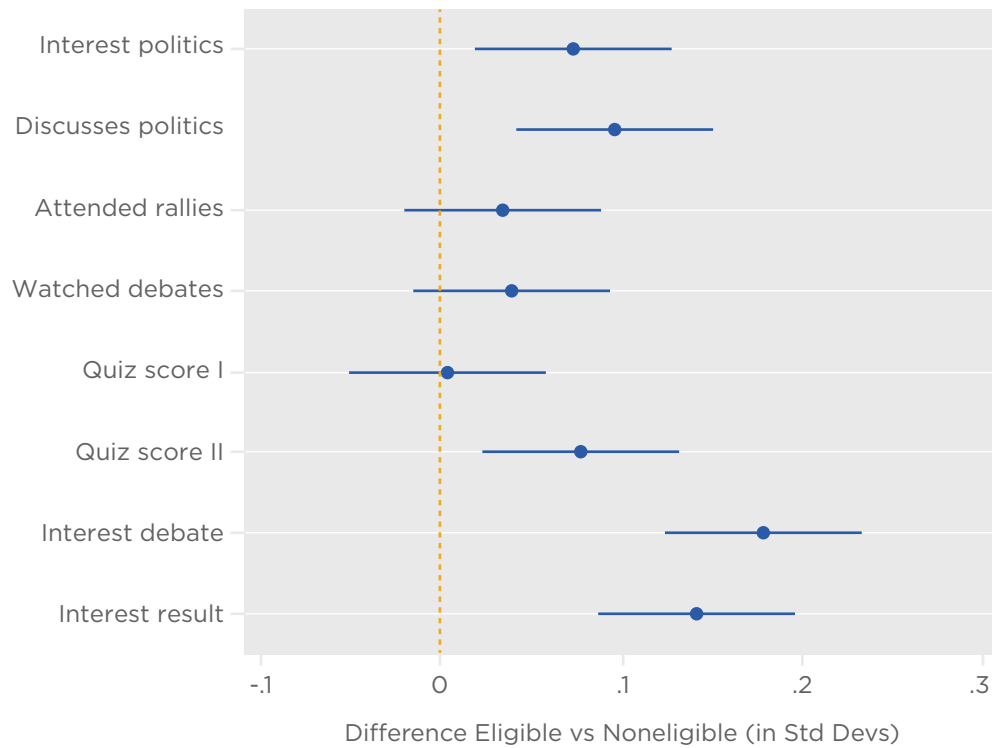
Prior research has shown that behavior in the first election is critical to establishing a habitual pattern of voting and political engagement. Thus, it is important to consider policies focused on this group. The evidence from the Mexican data suggests that new voters take advantage of their right to vote to engage politically. One way to further leverage this incentive is to ensure that most young citizens are aware of their newly acquired right to vote well in advance of their first election. Another is to reduce the costs of voting registration. In some advanced countries, for example, newly eligible voters receive a mailing from the electoral authorities that informs them of the logistics of registration. The public education system may also introduce elective civics courses in high schools, which are likely to be in demand with older students.

A possible threat to young voters' engagement is a declining trend in trust and satisfaction with democracy. A loss of trust in democratic institutions can undermine the behaviors identified in this study, as young voters become alienated and disconnected from political leaders or adopt extra-electoral modes of participation, such as protests and demonstrations. Elected officials can prevent these outcomes by strengthening democratic institutions, guaranteeing the freedom of the press, and protecting fundamental civic liberties. In Mexico voting is compulsory by law but not enforced. While all eligible Mexican citizens are required to obtain a voter identification card to be able to vote, voter turnout in the 2018 presidential election was only 63%. The research to date is mixed about the benefits of stronger enforcement of compulsory voting.

IDB RESEARCH ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

This research project is a collaboration between the IDB Research Department and Institutions for Development Department.

Figure 1. Engagement Levels among Eligible and Non-eligible Students



Note: The figure shows differences in eight measures of political engagement between eligible and non-eligible high-school seniors in Mexico ahead of the 2018 general election. All variables are standardized based on the mean and standard deviation in the full sample. Confidence intervals are at a 95% level.

Key Concept



RATIONAL IGNORANCE

A deliberate choice to remain uninformed about political matters, based on a rational assessment of the cost and benefits of becoming informed.



FULL STUDY

[Kefer, Philip, and Razvan Vlaicu. 2023. "Voting Age, Information Experiments, and Political Engagement: Evidence from a General Election." IDB Working Paper No. 1400. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.](#)

DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND CHIEF ECONOMIST

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