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I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER: THE BALLOT INITIATIVE AND VOTER TURNOUT

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Abstract

“Know Thy Neighbor,” a public interest group established in 2005, has grabbed headlines in recent years for making public (or threatening to make public) the names of hundreds of thousands of registered voters who signed petitions qualifying anti-gay rights measures for state general election ballots in Massachusetts, Florida, Arkansas, Oregon, and Washington. These names, together with the mailing addresses, birthdates, and dates of signature for each signer, have long been public information in most states, but never before have they been put into a format (i.e., searchable, online databases) making them easy to access and analyze. In this pilot project, I perform multivariate analysis on a random sample of 500 registered Arkansas voters to determine the relative role of petition signing (versus vote history and age) in spurring voter turnout. This unique dataset allows an analysis, at the level of the individual voter, of the effectiveness of a relatively new tactic in American politics: using ballot measures to stimulate turnout for up-ticket candidate races. In the current study, while there was a correlation between petition signing and voter turnout, at the level of multivariate analysis, petition signing did not appear to be associated with voter turnout. However, individuals who signed petitions tended to have strong voting histories and were more likely than non-signers to cast ballots in the 2008 general election. The results of this research add to the already robust literature analyzing voter turnout in US political elections.

Introduction

Research on voter turnout has traditionally focused on factors such as sex, age, race, education, economic classification, and other demographic traits (Verba and Nie 1972; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The results of these studies demonstrate that higher levels of education and affluence correlate with increased levels of voter turnout and political interest. Further, older voters go to the voting booth on a more consistent basis than younger voters. Other research has looked at the effect of interaction with political institutions: voter mobilization strategies, party contact and identification, and previous voting history (Powell 1986; Blais and Carty 1990). Voters who have long histories of voting, strong connections to political institutions such as political parties or special interest groups, and high levels of contact in the months leading up to the election appear to vote in higher numbers. Some research has even looked at the role of initiatives in voter turnout, identifying which groups of voters are most influenced by the presence of a ballot initiative on a midterm or presidential ballot (Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2009). Little

research, however, has analyzed the effect of initiatives at the individual level.

Literature Review

Voter turnout in the United States is low. In fact, U.S. voter turnout, which is around 60% for presidential elections and 40% for midterm elections, is among the lowest in the industrialized world (Powell 1986). States have tried to address this problem with innovative voting techniques such as mail-in ballots, same-day voting registration, and Internet voting programs. While some of these tactics, such as mail-in ballots in Oregon, appear to be successful, many of them have had marginal effects or simply have not been implemented at all because of a fear of increased voter fraud (Southwell and Burchett 1997). As a result of low turnout rates, a considerable amount of research has been done to analyze voter mobilization and participation in the United States.

Green and Gerber (2005) point out that the study of voter turnout has progressed greatly in the past several decades. Early research measured the dependent variable (turnout itself) through voter surveys (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). These surveys were often inaccurate, with many respondents being less than truthful about their voting habits. The independent variables, usually registration laws and campaign mobilization activities, were incorrectly considered exogenous. Modern research has moved away from voter surveys and has begun using actual voting records to measure the dependent variable (voter turnout). In an effort to more accurately determine causal relationships, researchers have started recognizing that registration laws and campaign mobilization tactics are often spurious and unrelated to the level of turnout. An example of this would be situations in which registration laws are relaxed in areas with already high turnout. Thus, information on voting behavior has been added to the already large body of research on factors influencing voter turnout.

Voter Turnout and Mobilization

The likelihood of voters to actually cast ballots often relies principally on two overarching factors: socioeconomic conditions (and often intrinsically linked to this, demographics) and the presence of traditional campaign efforts targeting voter mobilization. Indeed, mobilization campaigns often target various voters differently based upon socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic status and race are often interlinked, especially when it comes to voting trends. In fact, race has long been an established factor in voter turnout. While the voting gap between black and white voters in the United States had nearly evaporated

in presidential elections by the end of the 20th century, the gap remains in other election cycles (Gaither and Newburger 2000).

Southwell and Pirch (2003) examined the differences in attitudes between black and white voters in the United States. Their study revealed that black voters respond to increased political cynicism and distrust with higher levels of voter turnout, while the opposite happens with white voters. Further, white voters are more highly affected by sentiments of decreased efficacy than are black voters. The results showed clear differences in voting behaviors along racial lines. Race as a factor in voting behavior is largely structural. One study found that precinct quality, including poll station accessibility and quantity, in low-income and minority communities was on average lower than precinct quality in more affluent and Caucasian communities. Further, the voting stations in minority communities suffered from lower visibility and other characteristics that generally coincide with lower levels of voter turnout (Barreto, Marks, and Woods 2004).

Along with race, a voter's level of education is one of the strongest characteristics contributing to voter participation.¹ A large body of research identifies education as a factor in voter turnout (Nie, Junn, and Sechlik-Barry 1996; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Individuals with higher levels of education tend to vote in larger numbers and self-identify as more interested in political issues than individuals with lower levels of education.²

Robert A. Jackson (1996) takes a much different approach to the issue of demographic variables, dealing with voter demographics and turnout separately. Jackson separates voter engagement into two stages: the initial obstacle of registration and the subsequent step of actual voting. According to Jackson, individual voter characteristics have a greater effect on the registration of voters, while campaign activity has more bearing on actually bringing them to the polls.

Lack of party identification, or at least a weak affiliation with a political party, has been shown to correlate with a lower propensity to vote (Campbell 1966). As voters increasingly disassociate with established political parties, or at least the two predominant Democrat and Republican American political parties, levels of voter disillusionment increase and voter turnout decreases (Patterson 2002; Belanger 2004). Candidates and interest groups are left trying to devise methods to reengage independent and dissatisfied voters. Studies suggest that independents respond positively, by turning out in higher numbers, to the increased presence of ballot initiatives during midterm and general elections. Further, independents are more engaged by the presence of ballot initiatives than

are voters with strong party identification (Magleby 1984; Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2009).

Lassen (2005) found that increased information resulted in higher voter turnout and demonstrated that voter information campaigns, especially at the district level, resulted in a higher likelihood of voter participation. For this reason, many states mail out flyers or pamphlets to registered voters before upcoming elections in order to inform them of issues that will appear on the ballot and to remind them to vote. In Denmark, where Lassen's study took place, the municipalities mail voter papers to every citizen before an election. The mailing serves as both a reminder to vote and as a form of authenticity that voters must bring to the polling sites.

Voter mobilization and contact have also been identified as factors in voter turnout. A study by Goldstein and Ridout (2002) reveals the relationship between voter contact and turnout but questions the trend of decreasing voter turnout over the past several decades. In this study, it was established that mobilization had not decreased over the years and voter contact targets had actually become more specific. If voter mobilization became less effective, it may have been because mobilization tactics tended to increasingly target those voters who were most likely to vote already, such as strong party supporters and activists (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992). The problem with mobilization, Goldstein claims, is not the volume of contact but the individuals being contacted. While political parties often reach out only to registered voters from their party because of a fear of mobilizing individuals from the opposing party, it would appear that a more effective technique would be to identify and target independents and undecided voters, as research shows that these are the individuals most affected by voter contact and mobilization strategies (Niven 2004; Parry, et al. 2008).

Another explanation for decreasing turnout despite an increasing volume of voter contact may be that mobilization tactics are becoming less personal in order to increase the number of voters that are contacted. For example, campaigns may use more robocalls and mailers and fewer door-to-door canvassing efforts or attempts to engage individuals in public places. According to Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2003), mounting evidence suggests that "the effectiveness of voter mobilization efforts depends on [a] personal touch."

Voter Turnout and Ballot Measures

Existing research shows a clear correlation between the presence of a ballot measure and higher voter turnout during elections (Smith 2001; Lacey 2005). The ballot initiative has a long history

¹It is important to note that levels of education often correlate with income and affluence, so these demographic characteristics have similar correlative effects with voter participation. This is not always the case, however. Some research has attempted to study the voting habits of cross-sectional voter subsets, such as highly educated low-income voters or high-income voters that have little education (Jackson 1993). Various factors, such as high-stimulus congressional races or amounts of funding may affect voters differently along more complex lines than just "rich/poor" and "educated/uneducated."

²Tenn (2005) draws upon a relative education model created by Nie, Junn, and Sechlik-Barry (1996) in order to explain why an increase in the absolute level of national education from decade to decade has not resulted in increases in absolute voter turnout. This study looks at education in relative terms, voter against voter, in order to reassert the existing positive correlation between levels of education and voter turnout.

but has consistently been an effective tool in mobilizing voters.³ This fact may be due to several reasons, such as higher issue saliency, increased campaign spending, and the so-called “educative” effect.

The ballot initiative is a Progressive Era tool of direct democracy. The Progressive movement was marked by an attempt to check the authority of political institutions by putting power in the hands of the people (Price 1975). Donovan and Bowler (1998) conclude that initiatives change the policy-making landscape by providing a conduit through which groups can influence policy making in an avenue other than the legislature.⁴ Further, early reformers recognized that the result of increased direct democracy was a more engaged citizenry (Key and Crouch 1939). A more engaged citizenry, the Progressives argued, was one that would hold political institutions more accountable. In fact, the very threat of an initiative might often be enough to move a legislature to action (Gerber 1998).

States that use the initiative process with more regularity appear to have higher voter turnout than states that do not often use the process of direct democracy or do not have initiatives available to voters (Smith 2001; Lacey 2005). The reason for this effect is that the presence of a ballot initiative results in higher campaign spending and more media coverage.⁵ Increased campaign spending and media coverage result in greater visibility for upcoming elections, as well as energized political bases. By definition, initiatives are usually voter initiated and thus typically include issues that are closer to the interest⁶ of the voters. This increase in policy salience, because of increased visibility and public interest, results in increased voter participation (Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000; Smith 2001; Bowler and Donovan 2002; Smith 2002; Matsusaka

2004).

Further, it is believed that direct democracy results in an “educative effect,” in which people learn about and become more highly involved in the political process (Smith and Tolbert 2004). The goal of the Progressive Era reformers who created the initiative in the early 20th century was to bring political control closer to the people.⁷ Recent research, however, has shown that some effects of direct democracy, specifically increased turnout due to voter contact, do not continue for long periods of time, as voters who are engaged in the direct democratic process of a single initiative or a single election do not appear to continue at the same levels of engagement in future elections (Yalch 1976). This finding is in contrast with those of other studies that show pre-election contact, such as phone surveys or interviews, do have a continuing effect, perhaps due to increased levels of voter self-awareness (Kraut and McConahay 1973). It would appear, then, that there is no consensus among researchers regarding whether the educative effect of initiatives lingers beyond a single election or simply has a short-term discrete effect on voter turnout.

Both major American political parties, Democrat and Republican, have relied on the assumption that ballot initiatives may have an effect on partisan voter turnout or candidate perception, which is one reason Democrats have pushed for minimum wage initiatives and Republicans have supported the inclusion of anti-gay marriage propositions on ballots. Research seems to support this assumption. For example, the presence of state marriage initiatives in the 2004 election coincided with higher levels of saliency for marriage as an issue in analyzing presidential candidates (Nicholson 2005; Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2009). Gay marriage bans have been attributed to the large evangelical turnout in the

³ Some political scientists hold a more critical view of direct democracy and the initiative process. Many, including Matsusaka (2004), feel that many ballot measures are decided by voters who simply are not prepared to make informed decisions at the ballot box. Bowler and Donovan (2004), although not necessarily opponents of the initiative, point out that voter knowledge regarding initiative issues often comes from limited sources, namely television media and campaign commercials. This lack of knowledge leaves voters open to deception and manipulation on the part of interest groups. Lack of voter competence, critics argue, raises concerns about the integrity of the direct legislation process (Magleby 1984).

⁴ Indeed, more than just the policy landscape may be changed by the presence of an initiative on a ballot. Research suggests that the use of the initiative by states results in an ideological shift in policy from policies made by states without the initiative. Specifically, initiative states tend to enact more conservative and socially restrictive policies than states without the initiative, especially on the issue of abortion (Gerber 1999; Bowler and Donovan 2004).

⁵ Money may be a more important part of this equation than previously realized. Studies show that there is a strong shift in influence towards wealthy individuals and groups who can raise the most campaign funds for their side of the initiative. David Broder (2000) asserts that the initiative process at the state level has been an experience of wealthy individuals and interest groups manipulating the process for their own purposes. It is interesting to note, though, that while wealthy individuals or interest groups are in the position to best enact policy by creating an initiative and heavily funding it, money actually has its largest effect when spent against an initiative (Gerber 1999).

⁶ Initiatives also tend to result in policies that are antagonistic towards the minority (Gamble 1997; Schrag 1998).

⁷ Contrary to the goal of progressivism, initiatives provide a rich opportunity for interest groups to influence the policy making process, a concept known as the group theory of government. An organized minority can gain favor and political power over the unorganized majority by using tools such as the initiative (Truman 1951; Posner 1974). Such actions might hinder majority outcomes in democracies.

2004 election that pushed George W. Bush over the edge in the presidential race.⁸ Because of empirical examples such as this, politicians hoping for higher turnout among supporters often connect their campaign platforms to state ballot initiatives in order to engage the citizenry (Chavez 1998; Kousser and McCubbins 2005).

Ultimately, research suggests that the presence of an initiative does result in higher voter turnout.⁹ In fact, according to a study by Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith (2001), during the 1990s the turnout rates in initiative states were 7% to 9% higher than the turnout rates in non-initiative states during midterm elections and 3% to 4.5% higher during presidential elections.

Gay and Lesbian Adoption in Arkansas

The issue of gay and lesbian adoption and foster care has had a storied history in Arkansas over the past decade. Conservatives in the state have been trying for years to address two related issues, gay adoption and gay foster parenting. From the late 1990s to 2008, there was a bureaucratic, judicial, and political struggle to remove homosexual individuals from these areas of parenting. In 1999, the Arkansas Child Welfare Agency Review Board decided to bar homosexuals from becoming foster parents in the State of Arkansas.¹⁰ Four homosexual Arkansans challenged the constitutionality of the policy in a lawsuit against the Review Board, arguing that it violated their rights to privacy and equal protection guaranteed by the Arkansas and US constitutions (Shurley 2002). The case was caught for years in pretrial procedures before eventually being heard by the Arkansas Supreme Court, which, seven years later, unanimously struck down the anti-gay foster care policy. According to Lambda Legal, the Court found that “the evidence overwhelmingly showed that there was no rational relationship between [the blanket exclusion of gay and lesbian foster parents] and the health, safety and welfare of foster children.”

In 2005, before the Arkansas Supreme Court’s ruling on the Review Board’s ban on homosexual foster parents, the Department of Human Services also adopted a ban on putting children in foster homes with a homosexual adult. The Department of Human Ser-

vices later lifted this administrative ban in 2008, shortly before gay adoption and foster care were outlawed through a ballot initiative.

On the legislative front, conservatives attempted in 2001 to pass legislation in the Arkansas General Assembly banning gay adoption in the state. House Bill 1026 narrowly failed to make it out of committee, with nine votes in favor of recommending the bill and 10 against it (Rowett 2001). Proponents cited a 1989 psychological study that claimed children in gay households were more likely to engage in incest with their parents and become gay themselves. Opponents pointed out that the psychologist who had conducted the research was later kicked out of the American Psychological Association for his research practices. In 2007, another attempt was made to ban gay adoption in the state legislature. Senator Shawn Womack (R- Mountain Home) was the sponsor of the bill in the Senate, where the bill passed 20-7. An interesting exchange occurred on the floor of the Senate between Womack and opposing senators. At one point, while questioning the extent to which the state would go to determine the sexuality of prospective foster and adoption parents, Senator Jim Argue (D- Little Rock) asked Womack, “Are you gay?” Senator Womack responded that he was a “proud heterosexual.” When asked if he could prove this assertion, Senator Womack said that he certainly could, but not in mixed company (Kellams 2007). Despite the colorful debate and the passage of the bill in the Senate, questions about the bill’s constitutionality by Governor Beebe resulted in the bill’s failure in the House.

As a result of these legislative and judicial failures, the conservative political action group, the Arkansas Family Council, filed a proposal to place an initiative banning gay adoption on the ballot.¹¹ Attorney General Dustin McDaniel denied the wording of the initiative because it included statements of value instead of statements of policy. An article in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette on October 5, 2007, explains that, after the wording was adjusted, the initiative was approved for the qualifying stage.

In accordance with Amendment 7 of the Arkansas Constitution, initiative sponsors had to collect signatures totaling 8% of the number of votes cast in the previous gubernatorial election, in this

⁸ Examples such as this have led critics to argue that initiatives open the policy-making process to uninformed voters who are easily influenced by deceptive campaign information and could even be convinced to cast a vote against their own interests. A great deal of research has analyzed the allocation of resources by interest groups and political parties in order to influence voters to cast a ballot in favor of a group’s agenda (Stigler 1971; Peltzman 1976; Becker 1983).

⁹ While turnout may be higher, there may be ballot dropoff (leaving ballot questions blank down ticket) due to voter fatigue. In one survey, one-third of California voters polled in 1989 indicated that the more measures that were listed on a ballot, the more discouraged voters felt about casting their vote (Darcy and McAllister 1990). In another study, Bowler, Donovan, and Happ (1992) recognized the existence of voter fatigue while also pointing out that initiatives raise the level of information in an election as the initiative process requires sustained attention on the part of activists.

¹⁰ In what would become an interesting precursor to the initiative collateral effect on the ability of some heterosexuals to adopt children as a result of the language of the anti-gay policy, the policy of the Review Board (Rule 200.3 Section 2) also “prohibits people with a homosexual adult member of their households from becoming foster parents (Shurley 2002).”

¹¹ The Arkansas Family Council is a conservative education and research group that performs advocacy work that “promotes family values.” The Council works closely with Focus on the Family, a national anti-gay Christian organization that has supported gay marriage bans and similar gay adoption bans across the United States.

case 61,974 signatures, in order to place the initiative on the ballot. The Unmarried Couple Adoption Ban faced heavy opposition from various groups, including Arkansas Families First and Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. The Arkansas Family Council originally submitted 65,899 signatures but fell short of the requirement after many signatures were thrown out during the validation process. Proponents of the initiative were given the standard 30 days to submit the needed signatures. On August 21, 2008, the group submitted additional signatures, now totaling approximately 84,000, easily meeting the requirement to place the initiative on the November ballot.

The Unmarried Couple Adoption Ban appeared on the November 2008 Arkansas state ballot as Initiative Act 1. The citizen-initiated state initiative passed with 57% of the vote (Arkansas Elections Division). The Arkansas News Bureau reported that the new statute banned all cohabitating couples who were not legally married from adopting or providing foster care for children. The proposed law was intended to apply specifically to same-sex couples but also affected all otherwise qualified couples who were cohabitating outside of marriage (Division for Children and Family Services).

After the passage of the initiative, an organization called Know Thy Neighbor (KTN) endeavored to expose the supporters of the Unmarried Couple Adoption Ban by publishing their names and signatures online. KnowThyNeighbor.org is a grassroots lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) advocacy website that uses the Internet to provide a publicly accessible database of every individual that signs an anti-gay initiative for state ballots. Started in 2005, KnowThyNeighbor.org has now added the names and personal information, all of which is already public information¹², of signatories to anti-gay initiatives in Arkansas, Florida, and Massachusetts.¹³ KTN intended to include the signatures of petition signers for an anti-gay initiative in Oregon as well. However, the initiative failed to collect enough signatures to qualify, so the names were not posted on the KTN website. KTN operates under the belief that “citizens who sponsor an amendment to take people’s rights should never be allowed to do so under the cover of darkness” (KnowThyNeighbor.org). As part of this mission, on April 28, 2009, KTN posted the names and addresses of the individuals who signed the Arkansas Initiative Act 1 Petition, which is public information in the State of Arkansas. Although many Arkansans decried KTN’s actions as “intimidation” aimed at stifling the democratic discourse, the Secretary of State maintained that KTN’s actions were within the parameters of petition and privacy laws (Wickline 2009).

For the first time, access to this data allows political scientists to study the voting behavior of initiative petition signers. Any attempt to do so in the past was clouded by the inherent limitations of self-reporting: individuals are more likely to be dishonest about controversial issues such as signing anti-gay petitions. The KTN website data allow an analysis of the relationships between peti-

tions, initiatives, and voter turnout in a more objective manner.

Methodology

Hypotheses

I expected to find that engagement in the initiative petition process, specifically the act of signing the Arkansas Initiative Act 1 petition, would have a strong relationship with voter turnout. In other words, registered voters who signed the initiative petition and were thus engaged in that electoral cycle would have been more likely to vote in the November 4, 2008, election than the general population of registered voters. This finding would have been in agreement with existing research that shows that exposure to ballot issues and candidates, as well as voter contact, has a positive effect on one’s propensity to vote (Goldstein and Ridout 2002; Lassen 2005). As voters are contacted and informed about an issue on the ballot, they are then engaged in the political process. This engagement includes a greater awareness and understanding of political coverage in the media and a sentiment of personal connection to a ballot issue. The initiative process takes citizens and makes them political actors who are involved in the process of the initiative’s passage.

Further, I expected to find that this relationship was similar in strength to the well-documented connection between demographic characteristics (in this study, age, gender, and vote history) and voter turnout (Barreto, Marks, and Woods 2004; Southwell and Pirch 2003). I proceeded to test the following hypotheses:

H₁ Petition signers will be more likely to vote in the 2008 general election than non-signers.

H₂ Petition signing will have a relative contribution to voter turnout that is similar to the major demographic characteristics studied in existing literature (age, gender, and vote history).

Variables and Data

The dependent variable for this study was voter turnout in the November 2008 election, in which Initiative Act 1 (the Unmarried Couple Adoption Ban) appeared. The source of data for the dependent variable was the list of voters who cast ballots in the November 4, 2008, presidential election in the State of Arkansas. This information can also be attained from the Secretary of State’s office. The unit of analysis for this study was the individual.

The independent variables considered were the traditional demographic variables including age and voting history, along with the central independent variable for the study, the act of having signed the petition for Arkansas Initiative Act 1. These variables were included in the voter registration lists held by the state. Unfortunately, other traditional demographic characteristics (race, income, education, etc.) were not known, as they were not recorded in the voter registration files. The list of registered voters in the State of Arkansas obtained from Secretary of State Charlie Daniels’s office is a dynamic list, updated continually as more voters register. This study required a static list, however, current as

¹² This information is public in the State of Arkansas according to the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), also known as Act 93 of 1967.

¹³ Yardley reports that KTN has also attempted to publish the information of voters who signed the unsuccessful anti-gay referendum in Washington State. A lower court ordered the Secretary of State not to disclose the sensitive private information of signers, though this decision was overturned by a Circuit court and then restored by the United States Supreme Court (Biskupic 2010).

of October 6, 2008 (the last day that voters could register in order to vote in the November 4, 2008, elections according to Arkansas state law). For this reason, the list of registered voters from the Secretary of State was manually reduced to only those voters registered by the requisite date.

This study took a small point of departure in dealing with vote history. I examined both a “blunt” and a “nuanced” measurement of previous voter participation. The “blunt” vote history variable was calculated based upon participation in the 2006 election. The “nuanced” vote history measurement was a summative index of participation in the 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006 elections. Participating in each election assigned a voter one point which, depending on the number of elections in which the voter participated, combined to designate the individual’s vote history strength as 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4.¹⁴ Age was calculated using the date of the 2008 election (November 4, 2008) and subtracting the date of birth of the registered voter. The central independent variable, the act of signing the petition, was derived from the KnowThyNeighbor.org database of individuals who had signed the petition to place Arkansas Initiative Act 1 on the 2008 general election ballot.

The Process

Using a random number generator, a random sample of 500 registered voters in 2008 was drawn from the list, provided by the Arkansas Secretary of State’s office, of 1,364,832 registered Arkansas voters in the fall of 2008.¹⁵ These names were then manually compared to the list of Initiative Act 1 petition signers on the KTN database. The KTN website allows users to type in the first and last names of any individual to see if he or she signed the petition.¹⁶ Individuals were then coded as either having signed the petition (1) or not having signed the petition (0). Finally, the names of the randomly drawn registered voters were compared to the state voting records for the November 4, 2008 election to identify whether the individual had (1) or had not (0) voted in the election. In addition, individual demographic characteristics of age and vote history, provided by the voter registration lists, were documented.

The final data set of 500 registered Arkansas voters was then analyzed using logistic regression. The relative strength of the relationship between petition signing and voter turnout was then compared with the relative strength of the relationship between the

available demographic variables and voter turnout.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Of the 500 randomly picked registered voters in Arkansas, 30 voters had signed the petition to place Initiative Act 1 on the 2008 ballot. One voter was coded as “unknown” due to an error in the Know Thy Neighbor database. This number represents 6% of the total sample. It is not considered low, as the threshold to qualify an initiative for the ballot is 8% of voters.

The sample was composed of 247 registered female voters and 236 registered male voters; the gender of 17 individuals was not coded. The sample of voters ranged in age from 18 to 95 years, with an average age of 49.5. Of this sample, 255 had voted in the 2000 election, 234 had voted in the 2002 election, 345 had voted in the 2004 election, and 280 had voted in the 2006 election.¹⁷ In addition, 390, or 78%, of the sampled voters had voted in the 2008 election. When the nuanced approach to vote history was calculated, the average voter received a vote history of 2.51, indicating that the average voter had taken part in just over two general elections since 2000.

Of the 30 petition signers, 22 of them (73.3%) were Sunday or Wednesday signers listing addresses with non-sequential house numbers, ruling out neighborhood canvassing as the technique that secured their signature. Three individuals were coded as “unknown” due to missing copies of their original signature and date of signing. While the issue of “Sunday and Wednesday signers” was not the focus of this study, it may be worth future exploration. It is clear, not just from the list of petition signers but also from the public statements of Initiative Act 1’s supporters, that proponents targeted Christian voters as their base of support in qualifying the initiative.¹⁸ This high proportion of Sunday and Wednesday signers in this study lends evidence to the claim that anti-gay initiatives are largely “Christian” initiatives and further suggests that faith communities continue to be strongly engaged in the political process, especially when it comes to issues of social significance.

There was a significant difference in voter turnout between signers and non-signers, with 93.3% of the signers voting in the election as contrasted with 77.7 of the non-signers ($X^2 = 4.31$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Viewed from another perspective, petition signers were

¹⁴ The handful of 2008 registered voters who were too young to have voted in 2006 was coded as ineligible. Additionally, county clerks in Arkansas do not operate uniformly in recording voters’ registration dates. For this reason, some individuals voted in elections predating their “registration date,” most likely because they re-registered to vote and the new date was not reported to the state.

¹⁵ There were 6,692 cases on the SOS-provided dataset in which voters had registered after the cut-off for the 2008 general election, making them ineligible to vote that year. These voters were removed from the pool before the 500 random voters were drawn for this study.

¹⁶ KTN links these names digitally to the original petition signatures.

¹⁷ Fifty-seven voters were declared “ineligible” to vote as of the 2006 election. Many of these individuals had been too young to vote in the 2006 and previous elections or had registered after the qualifying date. As the practice of declaring sampled individuals as “ineligible” was extended to the 2004, 2002, and 2000 elections, the data continued to shift. For the purpose of this study, and to maintain a sizeable sample, “ineligibility” was only calculated for the 2006 election.

¹⁸ Andrew DeMillo of the Associated Press reports on public comments by Jerry Cox, president of the Arkansas Family Council, which sponsored Initiative Act No. 1, in which he stated that churches would be a key canvassing ground for the necessary signatures to qualify the initiative.

15 times more likely to vote than not to vote, while non-signers were only three times more likely to take part in the election than to stay home.

Bivariate Analysis

Table 1 shows the strength of the correlation between each individual variable and voter participation in the 2008 general election. There were statistically significant positive correlations between signing and voting in the 2008 election and between vote history (both blunt and nuanced) and voting in the 2008 election. There were no significant correlations between either age or gender and voting in the 2008 election.

Both blunt and nuanced measurements of vote history were significantly correlated with signing (respectively, Kendall's tau_b = .122, $p = .005$; Kendall's tau_b = .103, $p = .015$). Thus voting history and petition signing were closely linked in the sampled voters.

Table 1. Correlation and significance of the correlation between the variables of the study and voting in the 2008 general election.

Variable		2008 General Election
Signed	Kendall's tau_b	.093*
	Significance	0.019
Vote History- Blunt	Kendall's tau_b	.368**
	Significance	0
Vote History- Nuanced	Kendall's tau_b	.322**
	Significance	0
Age	Kendall's tau_b	-0.042
	Significance	0.177
Male	Kendall's tau_b	-0.017
	Significance	0.354

N=500

** Correlation significant at 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* Correlation significant at 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Multivariate Analysis

Table 2 shows the logistic regression estimates for our model of voting behavior in the 2008 general election when using the blunt approach to vote history. Only two variables had a significant relationship (at a threshold of $\alpha = .05$) with voter turnout in the 2008 election: age and vote history. In line with existing literature, vote history was the strongest predictor of voting behavior in the 2008 general election. Petition signing did not appear to contribute significantly to voter turnout. While signing and turnout were correlated at the simple bivariate level, controlling for vote history in the multivariate analysis made clear that turnout and petition signing only appeared to be related because they were both strongly related to the same variable (vote history).

Table 3 also shows the same relationships using the nuanced approach to vote history as opposed to the blunt approach used in

Table 2. There are interesting differences between the two calculations. Petition signing moves closer to a level of statistical significance when vote history is measured in a more nuanced manner.

Table 2. Relative significance of variables in determining voter turnout in 2008 General Election in Arkansas, logistic regression estimates (blunt measure of vote history.)

Variable	Hypothesized Direction	Coefficient	Standard Error	Significance
Baseline Probability Signers				
Voter History				
Blunt	+	1.056	0.778	0.175
Age	+	1.97	0.271	0.000**
Male	+	-0.015	0.008	0.040*
	+	-0.054	0.248	0.829

** Significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* Significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

N= 427

In other words, when vote history is defined in more conservative terms with a wider sample (the previous four elections as opposed to only the 2006 election), the relationship between signing and voting begins to move toward a point of significance. This is, perhaps, a more accurate way of determining the actual strength of a voter's history of electoral participation, especially in Arkansas, where the 2006 election drew more voters than would normally participate in a non-presidential election year because, for the first time in decades, the gubernatorial race did not include an incumbent.¹⁹

Table 3. Relative significance of variables in determining voter turnout in 2008 General Election in Arkansas, logistic regression estimates (nuanced measure of vote history.)

Variable	Hypothesized Direction	Coefficient	Standard Error	Significance
Baseline Probability Signers				
Voter History Nuanced				
Age	+	1.253	0.777	0.107
Male	+	0.656	0.097	0.000**
	+	-0.018	0.007	0.016*
	+	0.053	0.245	0.829

** Significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* Significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

N= 427

The relationship between age and voter turnout in the 2008 general election is particularly interesting because of its direction. Of the voters sampled in this study, younger individuals were more likely to vote than older individuals, creating a negative relationship between age and voter participation. Generally, age tends to have a positive effect on voter turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Increased participation among older voters is explained as part of the "life-cycle" model, in which older voters are more integrated and invested in the community, while younger voters

¹⁹The 2006 election was the first in 28 years to have an open election for governor in Arkansas (Blomeley 2006). Our vote history data appear to validate this claim of inflated turnout, as 2006 had an unusually high number of voters for a midterm election, at least among the 500 sampled voters.

are more mobile and less integrated. The fact that the data do not support the general model of age and voter participation is clearly important.

Discussion

The data in this study suggest that there is not a significant relationship between petition signing and voter turnout. The implications of these findings are not game-changing but are nonetheless important. Previous studies have revealed that higher voter turnout is a result of an initiative's presence on the ballot during general elections (Smith 2001; Lacey 2005). Until now, no attempt has been made to determine which aspect of the initiative process (e.g., the qualifying stage, the increased media attention as a result of the initiative's presence, increased issue saliency, etc.) caused the increase in turnout. While this study does not identify the aspect of the initiative that mobilized voters, the initial results do encourage a conclusion that removes the qualifying stage (at least among signers) from the list of possibilities.

It is possible that more nuanced measures of voter history, coupled with additional demographic data, would provide different perspectives on the relationship between petition signing and voter turnout. Future studies should draw a larger sample of registered voters and carefully remove ineligible voters, election by election, in order to create a precise measure of vote history. The result may be the discovery of a relationship between the two variables, especially for those who vote intermittently or infrequently, as these voters are most likely to be affected by petition signing if it is indeed a viable method of voter engagement. Research shows that the majority of voter mobilization tactics are most successful among intermittent ("every two years" or "some elections") voters as opposed to regular ("every election") voters or traditional non-voters (Niven 2004; Parry, et al. 2008).

The findings of this study do not greatly affect the use of the initiative by political parties or interest groups in their efforts to turn out their ideological bases. This research does, however, indicate that the qualifying stage is perhaps less productive to any specific cause than other aspects of the initiative process (aside from the necessity of this stage in placing the initiative on the ballot). For this reason, parties should focus more on other aspects of the initiative process if they intend to make it a tool of mobilization.

The data, especially the strength of the correlation between vote history and petition signing, lend merit to a traditional maxim of political engagement: participants are participants. Individuals with strong histories of voting in elections tend to be the most engaged, not only in future elections but also in the process of qualifying initiatives. The dynamic of initiative petition signing and voter turnout do not appear to have the hypothesized effect. The conclusion is not that individuals who sign petitions are more likely to become better engaged as voting Americans but that voting Americans are more likely to sign petitions to qualify ballot initiatives that deal with issues on which they hold strong opinions.

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- Shayne Henry is among the most vibrant, sincere, and talented students with whom I have come into contact in 17 years of college-level instruction. You might imagine my delight when he emailed me from his study abroad program in Granada, Spain (where he was studying Islamophobia in southern Europe) last spring to ask if I would be interested in advising his honors research. He expressed a desire to focus, broadly, on the treatment of gay rights in the American states. Not only is this field of great interest to me and is there much to learn, but Shayne is the sort of student we hope will invite us to advise a thesis project. The proposal he developed was excellent and early to take form AND the work has both scholarly and practical value. Specifically, we took advantage of data recently made available by a public interest group known as "Know Thy Neighbor." The group has grabbed headlines in recent years for making available, through a searchable database posted online, the names of hundreds of thousands of registered voters who signed petitions qualifying anti-gay rights measures for state general election ballots in Massachusetts, Florida, Arkansas, and (perhaps ... see the Doe v. Reed pending before the U.S. Supreme Court at this writing) Washington. These names – together with the mailing addresses, birthdates, and dates of signature – have long been public information but never before have they been put into a format that made them easy to access ... and analyze. Our approach for Shayne's paper was to sample the 65,000 signatures collected in support of Initiated Act 1 (to prohibit fostering or adoption by cohabitating couples) in Arkansas. Then, by pulling in verified vote history and other variables from the Secretary of State's voter records, he was able to test empirically the effectiveness of a relatively new tactic in American politics: using ballot measures to stimulate turnout for up-ticket candidate races, like the U.S. presidency. What he discovered was that, although "hot" ballot measures have long been known to boost statewide participation rates by a few percentage points, it does not appear – at this point – to be the singular act of signing by individual voters that causes that aggregate boost. In terms of Shayne's contribution to this extraordinarily original project, it has been substantial. While I guided him to the dataset as we discussed possibilities for a subject related to gays and lesbians and American politics, he was central to formulating the research question (does the act of signing a petition make a person more likely to vote in the subsequent election) and the research design (sampling registered voters, at least those registered in advance of the 2008 general election). He also manually entered about 1500 data points in our spreadsheet and both discovered, and proposed valid remedies to, the usual data glitches revealed in that process. In addition, and I was most impressed by this, he came to the conclusion – based on his true understanding of the extant literature on voter mobilization and independently of my plans to do this very thing – that in future iterations of our project we should see if petition signing DID mobilize infrequent voters even if it did not mobilize regular participators. The leading scholar on this subject, the University of Florida's Dan Smith, and I are doing that very thing in a manuscript based on the same data (with Arkansas and two Florida datasets) and, in keeping with Shayne's informed hunch, it works beautifully. I'm very pleased indeed to see Shayne Henry's important and unique contribution to political science, and contemporary politics, included in this collection.*

Mentor Comments: Professor Janine Parry's enthusiasm for the work of her student is evident in this glowing commentary.