

## Exit Polls: Every Vote Counts

Mary W. Gray<sup>1</sup> and Emmanuel Addo<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Students in an undergraduate Basic Statistics class at American University conducted an exit poll at a sample of precincts in the Northern Virginia counties of Arlington, Fairfax and Loudon and the city of Alexandria at the November 2013 Virginia statewide election. The precincts were selected by students in a graduate class in survey sampling to reflect the economic composition of the region. Voters leaving the polls were asked whether they encountered difficulty in voting, due to voter ID restrictions or for other reasons. Although less than 2% of the voters reported difficulties, the students were impressed by the importance of voter access since at the end of the day's balloting, the victor in one of the statewide contests (for Attorney General) was ahead by only 155 out of a total of 2.2 million votes, subsequently increased to approximately 700 in a recount. There were observable differences in the degree of difficulty reported in precincts having varying characteristics. Inspired by their venture in civic engagement, students are urging the repeat of the process in the 2014 elections in the DC-MD-VA region and are hoping to enlist the participation of statistics students elsewhere.

**Key Words:** statistics education, evidence-based policy, student projects, polls

### 1. The issue

In the past several years many states have enacted restrictive voter ID laws requiring that voters produce various forms of identification before being allowed to vote. The acceptable forms of identification have included such documents as drivers' licenses, passports, student identification, concealed handgun licenses, and utility bills showing name and address as well as specially issued voter ID cards. Recently the forms of ID permissible have been restricted in some states.

In general the laws require a government-issued picture ID that is unexpired (in particular, it must have an expiration date so that it can be determined that it is currently valid). In some cases the ID must have an address that matches the voter's registration address. In most states student IDs from colleges and universities will suffice if they have a validity date on them. Driver's licenses must be current and from the state in which the person seeks to vote. In some states an exact match of the names is required (if a name has been legally changed it is still the case that both names must match).

Proponents of voter ID laws claim that they are necessary to combat voter fraud such as

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<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Mathematics and Statistics, American University, Washington D.C. 20016

- Voting by non-citizens
- Voting by others using the name of registered voters (including those who may be deceased)
- Voting in the wrong precinct
- Multiple-voting by the same person

Asserting that voter fraud is not a significant problem as between 2000 and 2013, there has been only one reported case of voter fraud that could have been prevented by the voter ID laws, opponents believe that instead the laws are designed to disenfranchise segments of the population who may experience difficulty in obtaining an acceptable form of identification. These may include

- Young voters, particularly those who recently became eligible to vote
- Elderly voters who may have mobility issues or have expired identification documents
- Disabled voters
- Single parents who may have difficulty getting to ID-issuing agencies during restricted hours
- Low-income voters who are less likely to have drivers' licenses and who may have problems in accessing issuing offices
- Citizens of minority background who may have access difficulties or who are simply reluctant to engage in transactions with government agencies
- Segments of the population who are particularly mobile and thus likely to have lived in their precinct long enough to obtain appropriate ID even though eligible to vote
- Voters in districts where access to obtaining IDs is particularly difficult such as inner cities or rural areas where the population is thinly dispersed over a broad territory

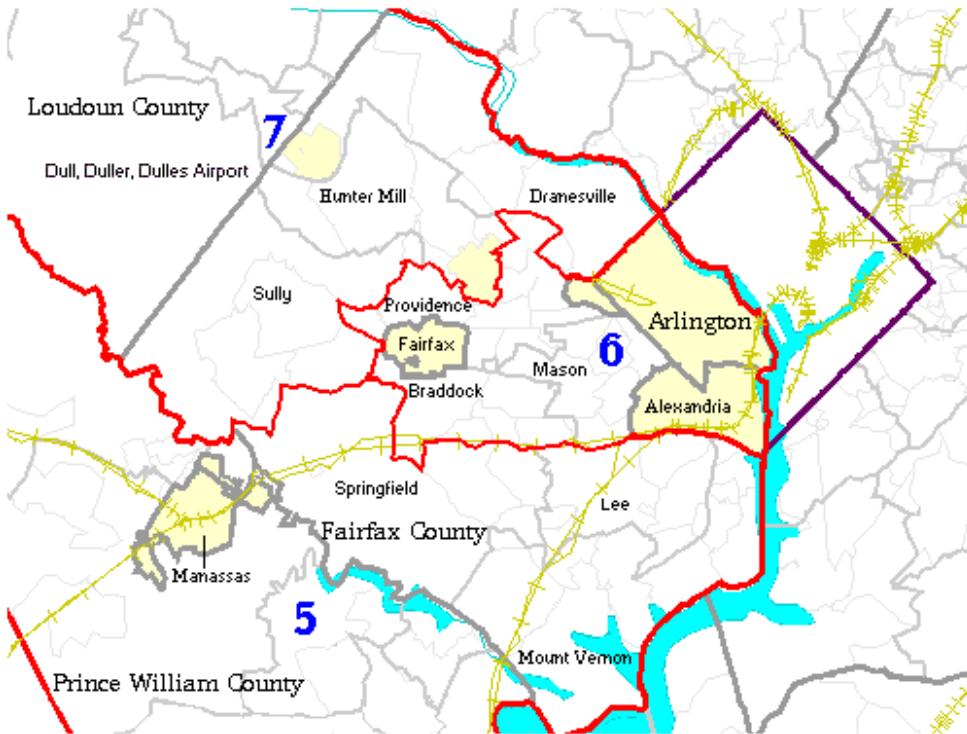
Obviously the difficulties of many such potential voters are based on the fact that places where ID might be obtained are not readily accessible, leading to speculation that the locations are designed to suppress the votes of certain groups.

As noted, while there is little evidence of voter fraud, there is also little evidence of whether or not voter ID laws suppress votes, and in particular whether certain groups are disproportionately affected. As voting is a right and responsibility, exploring the issue appeared an opportunity for civic engagement as well as practical experience for the students.

Thus we decided to conduct an exit poll in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington DC in the 2013 statewide Virginia election that included contests for governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general as well as for various local and county offices.



**Figure 1.** Location of exit poll area with respect to Washington DC, the location of American University



**Figure 2.** Parts of Congressional Districts 5, 6, and 7 were included in the exit poll

## 2. The procedure

At American University students from a variety of disciplines take a basic statistics course, with 20 to 25 sections per semester. In two sections the students engaged in the exit polls as a class project and individual students from other sections also took part. Students in a graduate course in survey sampling and selected a sample of precincts from the part of Northern Virginia reasonably accessible by public transportation, stratified by the mean income of the precincts based on publicly available information. With GIS help from a student assistant, twenty-two precincts were selected from Arlington, Fairfax, and Loudon counties and the cities of Fairfax and Alexandria.

Pairs, or occasionally triples, of students were assigned to each of the selected precincts. At each precinct, a systematic sample of those exiting from polls was interviewed for a total of approximately 400.



**Figure 3.** Polling place in Northern Virginia

Students were instructed in appropriate procedure, including to introduce themselves as American University students engaged in a class project exit poll and to assure the interviewees that they would not be asked for whom they had voted. Students were also engaged in discussion of the provisions of voter ID laws and the arguments for and against, but were cautioned not to get involved in discussions about the laws in conducting the exit poll. They were also warned to be certain that they stationed themselves outside of the no-campaigning area surrounding the polls even though they were in no way engaged in campaigning.



**Figure 4.** Outside of no-campaigning area of polling place

Some of the interviews were conducted early in the morning shortly after the polls opened and others in the late afternoon or early evening.

In 2013 the Virginia voter ID law permitted a wide range of ID documents:

- Valid Virginia driver's license
- Valid US passport
- Other valid photo ID issued by the US or Virginia
- Valid photo student ID issued by a Virginia college or university
- Valid employer photo ID issued in the ordinary course of business
- Social Security card
- Virginia voter registration card
- Bank statement, utility bill, paycheck or government check with a printed name and address.

However, under new legislation effective August 1, 2014, only the first five categories plus a specially created Virginia Voter Identification Card would be considered valid voter ID. Some misunderstanding about the effective date of the new law caused some confusion as to what was acceptable in the November 2013 election.



**Figure 5.** Virginia Voter Identification Card

As in most states, neither the former nor the new voter ID law specified how closely the name on the ID document must match the name on the ID being proffered as identification. For example, if the voter registration is in the name of

Elizabeth A. Jones

- is Elizabeth Jones
- or Elizabeth Ann Jones
- or Beth A. Jones
- or E. Ann Jones
- or Elizabeth A. G. Jones
- or Elizabeth A. Jones Smith

or any one of many other variations on the ID document adequate as voter identification.

The questions asked were

- Did you just attempt to vote? Were you successful?***
- Whether or not you were able to vote, were you asked for voter ID?***
- Did you have ID?***
- Did the poll worker accept the ID as adequate to allow you to vote?***
- If you were not allowed to vote, was it for some reason other than lack of an adequate ID?***
- Did you have any other problems in the polling place?***



In addition, the students indicated the age of the interviewee by visual inspection:

Young   under 25 (in most cases interviewees who looked like the  
          interviewers)  
Old       over 65 (looks like an older relative of the interviewer)  
Middle   everyone else

And the ethnic background (two categories – one “minority,” which, depending on the area could be Hispanic, African-American, or Asian-American - and “other”)

And the gender

The age and ethnic background are not precise, so the results are accompanied by disclaimers. However, asking questions can be considered intrusive, offensive, time-consuming, irritating, etc. and thus cause nonresponse – as well as subject to unreliability - so this alternative was selected.

### **3. The results**

The results from each precinct were submitted by email to the authors, who put them together and returned them to the participants for analysis. Overall less than two percent of those interviewed were not allowed to vote because of Voter ID problems. The response rate was 100%.

The difference among low income, middle income, and high income was not significant although the proportion of those encountering difficulty was higher in the low income districts. There was hardly any difference on the basis of gender or age or ethnic background – admittedly loosely defined categories in the last two cases.

### **4. Discussion**

Initially it appeared that the effect of the voter ID laws was minimal, although of course, it could not be determined how many voters were discouraged from attempting to vote. However, in the statewide contest for Attorney General the winning margin of victory at the end of the day of balloting was 155 votes out of more than two million. Although this margin increased to 700 in a recount, the importance of the question the exit polls sought to answer was clear.

Although there are many limitations in the sample design, the experience was instructional not only in learning about surveys but as a revelation that Every Vote Counts. The significance of all eligible voters being able to vote was apparent; the students themselves maintained that if nothing else they were convinced of the importance of their own votes.

Recognizing the limited nature of this study but its value as a student project, the authors decided to expand the project in the fall 2014 elections. With the participation of students from other area schools in the Washington area, suburban Maryland and the District of Columbia will be surveyed in addition to Northern Virginia. Participants in five other states, including those with especially restrictive requirements, have also been recruited to conduct studies in their own localities to produce more evidence as to the effect of the voter ID laws as well as to provide practical civic engagement.

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