

Why the Sky Didn't Fall: Mobilizing Anger in Reaction to Voter ID Laws

Nicholas A. Valentino
University of Michigan

Fabian G. Neuner
University of Michigan

Since 2002, 26 U.S. states have passed laws that enhance restrictions on voters who intend to register and vote. Most have been sponsored by Republican legislators and passed by states with large Republican majorities. Proponents of such identification requirements argue that they are necessary to ensure the integrity of the electoral system by reducing voter fraud. Many Democrats have cried foul, arguing these laws are motivated by crass partisanship at best, and racial bias at worst, because they disproportionately disenfranchise minorities. Surprisingly, empirical evidence for significant demobilization, either in the aggregate or among Democrats specifically, has thus far failed to materialize. We suspect strong emotional reactions to the public debate about these laws may mobilize Democrats, counterbalancing the disenfranchising effect. We find support for this conjecture in a nationally representative survey and an experiment where news frames about voter identification (ID) laws are carefully manipulated.

KEY WORDS: participation, emotion, voter ID, race, public opinion, civil rights

Over the last two decades, a large number of U.S. states have introduced restrictive voter identification (ID) laws. As of this writing, 32 states have voter identification laws of some kind on the books (see National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Standard theories of participation would predict that registration and voting restrictions increase the material costs of voting without increasing the benefit and will therefore tend to reduce participation (Downs, 1957). These general expectations have been borne out empirically in a variety of classic studies, with bureaucratic obstacles to voting and registration among the most reliable predictors of variation in participation across states and over time (Erikson, 1981; Highton, 2004; Leighley & Nagler, 1992; Nagler, 1991; Oliver, 1996; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Wolfinger, Highton, & Mullin, 2005; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Concern about whether these new laws disproportionately demobilize particular groups of voters, therefore, is warranted. Surprisingly, empirical evidence of voter demobilization tied to identification laws has been elusive.

We propose a fairly straightforward psychological explanation for the puzzling lack of evidence for demobilization in states with strict voter identification laws. A growing literature suggests that emotions play a powerful role in political information seeking and participation (Brader, 2006;

Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008). We suggest that popular media frames in the public debate about these laws make some voters very angry, and we suspect that anger is powerfully mobilizing. The laws target citizens who are perceived to be disadvantaged and Democratic: especially poor and Black voters. This “disenfranchisement frame” therefore emphasizes the partisan motivations of these laws. The anger this frame triggers should thus disproportionately mobilize Democratic voters. In addition, we suspect the frame most often used to justify the laws—protecting the electoral system from the damaging effects of voter fraud—is likely to make Democrats angry as well, since it may be seen as just another rationalization for the attack on Democratic voters, given that few have succeeded in documenting voter fraud. We posit that these strong reactions may have boosted Democratic turnout enough to compensate for the disenfranchising effect of the laws. Results from a nationally representative survey of U.S. opinion and an online experiment provide support for these expectations.

Background

Many worried that the door for new restrictions on registration and voting would open widely after the Supreme Court’s decision in June, 2013, to strike down a significant provision in the 1965 Voting Rights Act which forced certain jurisdictions with a history of racially biased election laws to gain prior federal approval for any changes in their voting statutes. Of course, voting and registration restrictions have deep roots, tied to the racial conflicts and partisan alignments of the post-Civil War period through the progressive movement of the early twentieth century (Keyssar, 2008; McGerr, 1988). For the conservative majority in a 5–4 decision on *Shelby County v. Holder*, Chief Justice Roberts argued that while the Section 5 “preclearance” provision for jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination was not unconstitutional, the particular formula identifying such offending counties needed updating by Congress. Immediately after the decision, several states—Texas, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina—that had been covered by the “preclearance” provision announced plans for new voting restrictions. Many states uncovered by preclearance had already passed similar restrictions, and several others have passed them since.

The partisan nature of these laws seems well established (Bentele & O’Brien, 2013; Rocha & Matsubayashi, 2014). Most have been sponsored by Republican legislators and passed by states with Republican governors (Biggers & Hanmer, 2011). They are more common in states with Republican legislative majorities (Rocha & Matsubayashi, 2014). Their passage into law is tied to partisan competition at the state level: Competitive states controlled by Republican legislatures are particularly likely to pass these laws, presumably to protect their slim electoral margins (Bentele & O’Brien, 2013; Hicks, McKee, Sellers, & Smith, 2014). In addition, these studies find that racial demographic change matters: Republican states where the non-White electorate is growing rapidly are also much more likely to see these laws proposed and passed. Of course, the fact that Republican legislatures are most likely to pass these laws is not, on its own, enough to establish a motivation to demobilize Democratic voters and African Americans in particular. After all, the proponents of strict voter identification requirements argue they are necessary to reduce voter fraud.

Most theories of participation would predict these laws will demobilize voters, at least marginally. Weaver (2015) formalizes the expectation drawn from Downs (1957) that the impact of these laws on the costs to participation should outweigh any reasonably sized psychological benefits due to perceptions that the system is free of voter fraud. In addition, there is no evidence that concerns about vote fraud are very large or that they vary systematically as a function of the stringency of the voter identification requirements at the state level (Ansolabehere & Persily, 2008). Moreover, there appears to be no relationship between mass perceptions of the frequency of voter fraud and propensity to turn out (Ansolabehere, 2009).

Opponents have therefore argued that these laws are simply intended to disenfranchise poorer and more transient voters, especially Blacks and other minorities. Civil rights leaders have rallied, loudly characterizing them as a Jim Crow style war on Black voter access to the ballot. For example, Moral Mondays, a grassroots movement in North Carolina, protests redistricting plans and voter identification restrictions. Organizers, many from southern Black churches and the NAACP, have staged demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. The reach of this movement has spread to several other states including Florida, Alabama, Wisconsin, South Carolina, Georgia, and New York.¹

Scholars have pointed out several ways in which voter ID laws might plausibly discriminate against poor and non-White citizens (Hershey, 2009; Sobel & Smith, 2009). A North Carolina statute entitled the Voter Information and Verification Act (VIVA), passed in the immediate aftermath of the demise of Shelby, carries requirements that would plausibly affect Black citizens in the state disproportionately (Herron & Smith, 2014). These include the requirement of two forms of identification, which Blacks are significantly less likely to hold, and providing a special dispensation for voters older than 70, who are disproportionately White. Barreto, Nuño, and Sanchez (2009) found that Indiana's voter identification statute posed a disproportionate burden, in both time and money, on the state's low-income, undereducated, and minority voters. They discovered significant racial differences in access to valid forms of identification.

Some evidence also suggests these laws are applied differently to different voters, such that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be forced to comply. Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn (2012) found that Black and Hispanic voters were more likely than Whites to be asked to show proof of identification in a case study in Boston. Similar research in New Mexico showed that Hispanics were more likely to be asked to produce identification than non-Hispanics (Atkeson, Bryant, Hall, Saunders, & Alvarez, 2010).

Despite all these reasons for concern, evidence of demobilization as a result of voter identification laws has been scant. First, exit polls suggest almost no voters have experienced difficulties getting access to the ballot after being asked to produce identification. In addition, survey results in 2004 found no overall differences in self-reported turnout between citizens in states with these laws compared to others, controlling for a host of demographics and other state-level characteristics (Vercellotti & Andersen, 2009). Mycoff, Wagner, and Wilson (2009) used individual-level data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to examine whether state-level ID requirements are negatively associated with turnout but found no such effect. Pastor, Santos, Prevost, and Stoilov (2010), in a survey of registered voters in Indiana, Maryland, and Mississippi, found that only 1.2% of registered voters lacked adequate identification, thereby suggesting these laws could not decrease turnout by very much.

In addition, Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz (2008) found no evidence in the aggregate that voter ID laws reduced turnout in both presidential and midterm elections from 2002 to 2006. At the individual level, they did find that very strict laws, such as presenting ID cards and matching signatures with those on file reduced turnout slightly, and did so more for the less-educated and lower-income citizens. However, the overall effects on turnout were surprisingly small. Erikson and Minnite (2009) also found little discernible negative impact of these laws, although they concluded that detecting such effects is statistically challenging due to the relatively small number of states with new restrictions in place. Finally, several recent Pew-sponsored Surveys on the Performance of American Elections (SPAEL) suggest that nearly all voters in 2008, 2012, and 2014 found the voting experience to be positive and were not discouraged by registration problems or issues at the polling place (Alvarez et al., 2008; Stewart, 2013, 2015).

In contrast, Hood and Bullock (2012), examining the effects of the 2007 Georgia Voter ID statute on turnout in 2008, found that those lacking appropriate identification were less likely to vote than

¹ Herbert Buchsbaum, "Budding Liberal Protest Movements Begin to Take Root in South," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/us/protest-disrupts-georgia-senate-session-on-bill-to-block-medicare-expansion.html>

those who were in possession of proper photo ID. However, they did not find any evidence that the law disproportionately affected ethnic or racial minorities. Finally, some work has detected a small *increase* in Democratic turnout in places with new voter ID laws (Milyo, 2007).

The possibility that strategic counter mobilization may have neutralized the negative impact of voter ID laws has received limited attention. A field experiment by Citrin, Green, and Levy (2014) finds no evidence that announcements about voter ID requirements depress turnout. While their experiment returns no significant evidence of it, the authors speculate that information about ID laws may produce a backlash among those who view the measures as an attempt to disenfranchise specific groups. We are interested in revisiting and more precisely testing the causal mechanisms underlying this backlash hypothesis.

Theory and Hypotheses

Our conjecture is that anger triggered by a discussion of voter ID laws can powerfully mobilize targeted groups. Democrats, in particular, may dismiss arguments about the need to reduce voter fraud and believe the laws are really just an unfair attempt to disenfranchise their group. These effects should be particularly strong among non-White Democrats because of the racialized nature of the debate. Unfortunately, samples available to us here do not contain enough non-White respondents to test our hypothesis for this group uniquely. If the psychological mechanism we posit is even stronger among African Americans, for example, then our results are conservative estimates of the countermobilizing effect of these media frames in the country at large.

To summarize, we suspect media frames describing these laws as partisan attempts to demobilize specific groups trigger anger in those groups, which then boosts participation. In addition, we already know that support for voter ID laws is strongest among Republicans, conservatives, and those high in racial resentment (Wilson & Brewer, 2013). The racialized nature of these laws seems to have registered with many citizens, and the more familiar Democrats and racial liberals are with this argument, the less they should support the law.

If our conjecture is correct, it would help explain why aggregate levels of participation have not much changed in the aftermath of dozens of new voter ID laws passed in the last decade. Our hunch is that a simple, emotionally driven process is taking place. The laws have been framed in the news media as highly partisan and politically divisive. We therefore would expect to observe a powerful linkage between partisan identification and both emotional reactions to these laws and general support for them.

Policy threats may stimulate political activism by targeted groups (Miller & Krosnick, 2004). In the domain of voter identification, some have speculated that these threats could lead to countermobilization among Democrats (Hasen, 2012). Still, the specific psychological mechanism operating is unspecified. We suspect that the group-based nature of these attacks will most powerfully trigger anger among Democrats compared to Republicans. We would expect the opposite relationship between partisanship and anger about voter fraud: Republicans should be angered by the notion that ineligible voters are finding their way into the voting booth and should thus be much more likely to support the laws compared to Democrats. As we have mentioned above, the media debate often invokes a racial dimension. If so, we would also expect racial attitudes to be strongly linked to emotional reactions to these laws and to overall support for them.

The literature on the political consequences of specific emotions has grown rapidly in recent decades, beginning with Marcus et al.'s (2000) work on Affective Intelligence. Their central idea was that negative emotions break people out of cognitive routines, prompting them to think more carefully about new information and readying them to act. Subsequent experimental work confirmed and expanded upon these expectations (Brader, 2006). Appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) argue that we may see distinct behavioral consequences of specific negative emotions. Anger, it is

posited, increases the willingness to take risks and expend scarce resources in order to address threats that are perceived to be under one's control (Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Finally, Intergroup Emotions Theory (Leonard, Mackie, Moons, & Smith, 2011) also predicts that group-based threats are particularly emotionally potent and lead to anger even when an individual does not feel personally targeted. Recent work confirms these findings in the political domain, discovering threats to group identity can powerfully trigger anger (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014), and anger can powerfully mobilize participation (Valentino et al., 2011).

If we are correct, then, Democrats exposed to either side of the elite debate about voter ID laws should also be the angriest, because both the demobilization and voter fraud frames remind them their group is under attack. Claibourn and Martin (2012) suggest that symbolic issues can lead to backlash and countermobilization among targeted groups. They find, for example, that appeals to morality (e.g., on gay rights) aimed to mobilize evangelicals boosted participation among gay rights groups even more powerfully. At the same time, we would predict that only exposure to the voter fraud frame should lead to anger among Republicans. This partisan distinction in emotional reactions emerges because the disenfranchisement frame has been highly salient in the news and constitutes a direct attack on Democratic identity, while the voter fraud claim has been both less salient and is not a direct attack on Republicans as a group.

Next, those most angered by the debate should be more likely to participate. This should be true even after controlling for factors that cause both anger and participation, such as socioeconomic status, news consumption, and the strength of partisan identification. We again suspect that anger about *both* sides of the debate may be mobilizing for Democrats, while only anger about fraud should powerfully mobilize Republicans. Our reasons for expecting such a partisan distinction are straightforward.

Among Democrats, political messages highlighting the laws' specific goal to disenfranchise copartisans should boost participation. Those messages may not mobilize Republicans, because their group is not portrayed as a direct target of these laws by either frame. Messages about voter fraud, for the reasons discussed above, might mobilize *both* Democrats and Republicans. The net effect of the entire debate, then, is a larger mobilizing effect among Democrats.

To examine the causal impact of these frames on emotional reactions and participation, we combine our cross-sectional survey evidence with an experiment. We expect exposure to either side of the debate about voter ID legislation to trigger powerful anger in many citizens on both sides of the aisle. Democrats, however, are expected to react most strongly in response to the debate, as a result of the logic we detailed above. Disenfranchisement frames should be most powerful, especially when they emphasize the racialized nature of these laws. We would expect Republicans and Independents to have more muted emotional reactions to this debate.

Finally, our theory suggests that messages about these laws will powerfully boost participation specifically via the anger they trigger. Anger, in other words, should mediate the relationship between exposure to these messages and participation in politics. This effect should be especially large among Democrats because they perceive their group to be under attack.

Study 1: Voter ID Survey

Sample and Methods

We test our hypotheses in two original studies. First, we fielded an online survey with GfK (formerly Knowledge Networks) in February, 2014. This sample consisted only of White, non-Hispanic Americans, and there were a total of 750 respondents. Focusing on White respondents makes for a conservative approach, given that we would expect anger reactions among African Americans to be even stronger since they are targeted both for their race and their party. Still, we would welcome

future studies that test these hypotheses among Blacks and other minorities. The key variables are measures of anger related to voter ID laws as well as fraud and measures of participation.

Respondents' anger toward voter identification laws and voter fraud are measured using two specific questions. First, respondents were asked how angry it would make them feel if voter identification laws actually prevented some eligible voters from casting a ballot. Second, respondents were asked how angry it would make them feel if someone who was ineligible to vote nonetheless attempted to cast a ballot. In both cases, response options ranged from "not at all angry" to "extremely angry" on a 5-point scale. The first variable captures anger about voter identification laws while the second captures anger about voter fraud. We also measure symbolic racism (SR) using the standard four items that compose a reliable scale (Henry & Sears, 2002; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). This also serves as an important control to isolate the impact of anger. All variables in these models were recoded to run from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating higher levels of anger. Question wordings can be found in the online supplementary information.

The first study relies on two participation measures that we combine into a scale. First, respondents were asked how likely they would be to volunteer time to raise awareness about voter ID laws in order to help voters satisfy the new requirements. Second, respondents were asked how likely it was that they would vote in the 2014 midterm election. In both cases, response options ranged from "not at all likely" to "extremely likely" on a 5-point scale. We combined these two questions into a 9-point scale. Models run separately on each question return very similar results. Throughout the analyses, we use the continuous 7-point party identification variable with higher values meaning more Democratic.

Results

First, we find that both arguments in the popular debate seem to enrage Democrats: They are angry *both* at the laws themselves and at claims made by Republicans that they are necessary in order to eliminate voter fraud. Strong Democrats score .73 out of 1 on anger about these laws, where 1 corresponds to feeling "extremely" angry about voter disenfranchisement and 0 would mean the respondent experienced that emotion not at all. Strong Republicans score only .37 on this scale. The midpoint of this scale represents a respondent who felt these emotions only somewhat. Strong Republicans score .77 out of 1 on anger about voter fraud, while strong Democrats score .59, which is above the midpoint. As expected, support for the laws is strongly conditioned by partisanship. The mean level of opposition for these laws is .69 among strong Democrats on the 0–1 scale (running from "strongly favor" at 0 to "strongly oppose" at 1, with neither favor nor oppose at .5) but only .11 among strong Republicans.

Next, we examine predictors of emotions toward, and general support for, voter identification laws in the multivariate context to see whether partisanship is standing in for some other demographic or attitudinal difference. In particular, we suspect that racial attitudes could powerfully influence attitudes about these laws. Education, strength of partisanship, and attention to news might also trigger strong emotional reactions to this debate. We also control for age and gender, due to demographic imbalances in partisanship that might explain at least some of the opinion variation we have discussed. Our expectation remains that partisanship will be linked to opinions about these laws, above and beyond these other factors. Table 1 displays results from three linear regression models consistent with these expectations.

As we expected, partisanship among American Whites remains a strong predictor of anger about both voter ID laws and about voter fraud but in opposite directions. Democrats are much angrier than Republicans about the laws themselves, as seen in the first row of the first column. Strong Democrats are .2 points higher than strong Republicans on the 0–1 anger scale. The relationship between partisanship and anger about voter fraud, in the second column, suggests smaller partisan differences. The coefficient is about half the size as for anger about the laws themselves, but with Republicans slightly

Table 1. Predictors of Anger About Voter ID Laws, Anger About Voter Fraud, and General Opposition to ID Laws

	Anger About Voter ID Laws	Anger About Voter Fraud	Opposition to Voter ID Laws
Party ID (Hi = Dem)	0.20*** (0.04)	-0.12*** (0.03)	0.36*** (0.03)
Symbolic Racism	-0.42*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.04)	-0.57*** (0.04)
Party ID Strength	0.05 (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)
Education	0.07 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Income	0.05 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
News Consumption	0.05 (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)
Female	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
Age	0.03 (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)
Constant	0.50*** (0.07)	0.36*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)
<i>N</i>	616	615	701
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.28	0.20	0.49

Source. Data are from Voter ID Survey, Knowledge Networks. All variables are coded 0–1.

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test).

angrier than Democrats. This difference is another indication that anger about the entire voter identification debate might be more potent among Democrats than it is for Republicans.

Our results confirm that symbolic racism is a powerful predictor of Whites' anger about these laws. Those at the highest levels of SR score more than .4 points lower on the 0–1 scale for anger about these laws compared to those lowest in SR. Anger about voter fraud is somewhat less powerfully linked to SR. Still, SR contributes more than any other variable in all three models. However, even after controlling for its impact, party identification still strongly predicts anger reactions to these news frames. Ours, therefore, is not just a story about race but also about the anger that can be generated by what are perceived to be strictly partisan attacks.

If our theory is correct, we would also expect Democrats who are most exposed to the debate to be the angriest because either frame is likely to remind Democrats that their group is being directly attacked. We predict milder affective reactions among Republicans regardless of exposure to the debate, both because the voter fraud frame has been relatively weak and because neither side presents Republicans as a direct target of discrimination. While we do not have precise measures of exposure to these frames, we assume that those highest in general news exposure will be more likely to see them. This prediction is consistent with Zaller (1992), who theorized that highly aware partisans would be polarized first and most strongly by messages like the ones we are discussing. Figure 1 presents a plot drawn from the model presented in the first column of Table 1A in the online supplementary information. Here we add an interaction between partisanship and general news exposure to the model presented in Table 1 above. The results are clearly in line with our expectations: As general news exposure increases among Democrats, so does

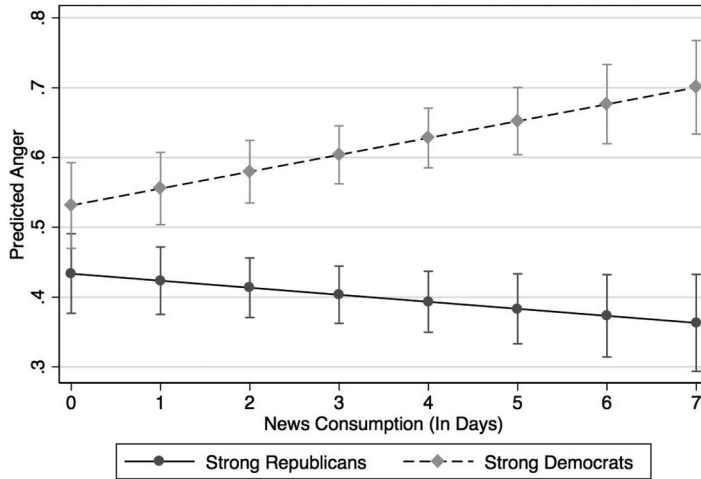


Figure 1. Relationship between party identification and anger about ID laws, by news consumption. The results are drawn from Table 1A in the online supporting information based on all partisans, but here we show only the strongest partisans for the sake of clarity. The slope of the effect of news consumption changes incrementally as we move from one end to the other on the party identification scale.

anger about these laws. News awareness has little effect on Republican anger about these laws. Table 1A also replicates the same interactive model for anger about voter fraud. Exposure to news is more weakly associated with anger about fraud among Republicans than it is with anger about ID laws among Democrats. Further, there is no statistically significant interaction between party identification and news consumption. Both highly exposed Democrats and Republicans are angrier about voter fraud than those who consumed less news.

We also expected to find a strong link between anger about these laws and intentions to participate. If our theory is correct, people angry about either side of the debate—the laws themselves or the voter fraud they are intended to eliminate—should also be more willing to participate in various ways. Our participation measures in the survey involved turning out to vote and volunteering to inform people about the new rules and requirements. Table 2 displays the results of multivariate OLS models that estimate the impact of anger about ID laws and voter fraud on the participation scale, controlling for several important causal antecedents of participation.

In the first column of Table 2, we see that both anger about ID laws and anger about voter fraud strongly predict participation, even after controlling for several important factors that could account for the relationship. Those most angry about the laws were nearly .15 points ($p < .001$, two-tailed) more likely to participate on the 0–1 scale than those who were the least angry. The association between anger about voter fraud and participation was over twice as large, at .32 points ($p < .001$, two-tailed). The link between anger about this debate and participation is not an artifact of partisan strength, socioeconomic status, news consumption, gender, or age.

In the second column of Table 2, we include interactions between partisanship and both anger at voter ID laws and at voter fraud in the 3rd and 5th rows, respectively. The interaction in row 3 suggests that anger about ID laws is far more powerfully linked to participation among Democrats than it is among Republicans, just as we predicted. The second row of the interactive model indicates the impact of anger about these laws is very nearly 0 among strong Republicans, who are coded “0” on the PID scale. The association is nearly .3 points for strong Democrats. Figure 2 displays the interaction of interest. We found a very substantial difference between strong Democrats and strong Republicans in the impact of anger on intentions to participate. Strong Democrats low in anger about these laws are significantly less likely than strong Republicans to vote or volunteer to help other citizens

Table 2. The Impact of Anger About Voter ID Laws and Voter Fraud on Participation

	Participation Likelihood	Participation Likelihood
Party Identification	0.01 (0.03)	0.08 (0.08)
Anger about ID Laws	0.15*** (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Anger about ID Laws × Party Identification		0.27*** (0.08)
Anger about Voter Fraud	0.32*** (0.03)	0.49*** (0.06)
Anger about Voter Fraud × Party Identification		-0.32*** (0.09)
Party ID Strength	0.08** (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Education	0.10*** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)
Income	0.02 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)
News Consumption	0.10*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
Female	-0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Age	0.15*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)
Constant	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.06)
<i>N</i>	612	612
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.35	0.37

Source. Data are from Voter ID Survey, Knowledge Networks.

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

overcome the obstacles to voting these laws put in place. Those very high in anger, however, are significantly more likely to do so.

On the other hand, anger about voter fraud is mobilizing among Republicans, as seen by the coefficient in row 4 of Table 2. The mobilizing effect of anger about fraud is smaller for Democrats, as is demonstrated by the negative interaction coefficient in row 5. Figure 3 displays the interaction between partisanship and anger about voter fraud drawn from the model in Table 2. Here we see that the impact of anger about fraud on participation is positive for both Democrats and Republicans, as predicted. Both sides of the debate anger Democrats, and that anger seems to be mobilizing, while only one argument is effective in this same way for Republicans. Again these relationships hold in the presence of a broad set of controls.

Study 2: Survey Experiment

The results from Study 1 provide observational evidence consistent with our expectations. However, these correlations cannot allow us to rule out causal explanations other than the one we believe is operating. For example, perhaps citizens most likely to participate are also most likely to say they

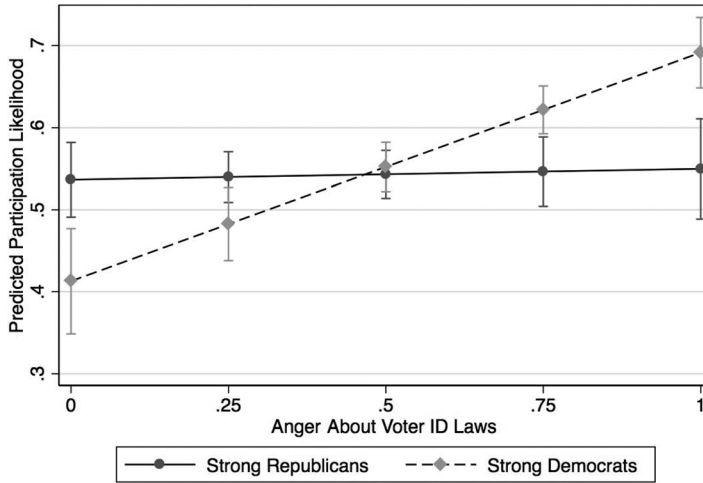


Figure 2. Relationship between anger about ID laws and participation likelihood, by PID. The figure is based on the results from the model in the second column of Table 2, above, with controls for strength of partisanship, education, income, age, gender, and media consumption. The lines depict results for strong Republicans versus Strong Democrats (1 and 7 on the 7-point party ID scale) with 95% confidence intervals.

are angry about a host of issues in order to rationalize their behavior. Our central hypothesis is that exposure to common media frames about this debate triggers disproportionately high levels of anger among Democrats and that this anger is also more powerfully mobilizing than it is among Republicans. Study 2 employs a simple experimental manipulation to test the causal mechanisms underlying our core hypotheses.

Sample

We conducted an online survey experiment in June 2014, for which respondents were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Samples recruited through MTurk are demographically diverse, if not statistically representative of the general U.S. population, especially compared to

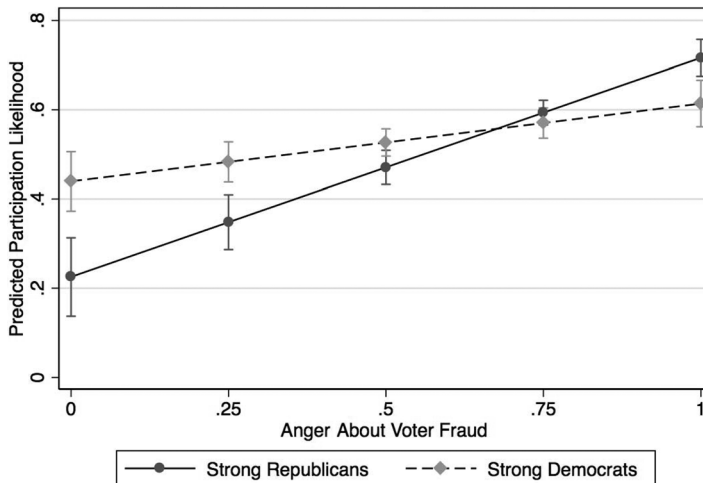


Figure 3. Relationship between anger about fraud and participation likelihood, by PID.

commonly used convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). We collected a total of 750 responses. The sample was restricted to U.S. residents, yielding a demographic breakdown that was 79% White, 41% Democrat, 44% Female, with a mean age of 33 years.

Experimental Design and Treatments

The survey experiment randomly assigned respondents to one of five news conditions focusing on the role of voter identification laws during the 2014 midterm election, and all these are available in the online supplementary information. Our intention was to mimic the actual debate about the motivations behind voter ID laws. We created several fictitious news articles that carefully manipulated cues about these laws, highlighting either the problem they were intended to solve or their potentially demobilizing effects among all voters or African Americans in particular.

Respondents in a control condition read an article about the upcoming midterm election that highlighted the importance of campaign finance and voter turnout. This article provides a baseline argument that heightens awareness of the upcoming election and primes the importance of participation and campaign spending but does not mention voter ID laws or their consequences in any way. This design choice is intentional and conservative: Respondents in the control group receive information about the election, and even some potentially emotion-inducing material about campaign fundraising by candidates from both parties. Had our control subjects read no article whatsoever, or one that was not about the election, one might be concerned that our effects were not driven by the discussion of voter ID laws per se but were simply a result of exposure to political information or increased salience of the election in general. We chose to mention campaign fundraising intentionally because it is an issue about which partisans on both sides of the aisle seem to agree. A recent CBS/*New York Times* poll found that more than three quarters of Americans are concerned about the unfair influence of money in politics, would like to increase public disclosure of contributions, and oppose the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010).² This helps ensure that differences in reaction to our experimental manipulation highlighting the demobilizing impact of voter ID laws are not due to divergent partisan reactions to the baseline information in these stories.

Three additional news conditions discuss voter ID laws and disenfranchisement with increasing intensity and specificity. These treatments were intended to achieve a "volume" manipulation for the salience of the demobilization argument that has become the centerpiece of opposition to these laws. We believe our design allows us to conservatively estimate the independent effect of the debate about voter ID laws on participation.

The first treatment, the "ID laws" condition, uses the same basic text as the control but suggests that turnout *and* voter ID laws will matter. The article simply states that new voting rules are in place and that voters will need to follow them in order to successfully vote. There is no discussion of potential *consequences* of the laws, nor is there any mention of the fact that they are ostensibly necessary to reduce voter fraud. The second treatment condition introduces the basic "disenfranchisement" argument, suggesting that voter ID laws might prevent some eligible voters from casting a ballot. The "loudest" version of the argument, the "Black disenfranchisement" condition, adds to the basic disenfranchisement frame the claim that legal African American voters will be hit hardest by these laws. This final treatment is, to our mind, both the loudest and clearest representation of the disenfranchisement frame in the media environment at the moment and therefore could serve to be the most powerful trigger of mobilizing emotions like anger among Democrats. An additional story condition presents respondents with the standard "voter fraud" argument, suggesting that these laws help

² Nicholas Confessore and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Poll Shows Americans Favor an Overhaul of Campaign Financing," *New York Times*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/03/us/politics/poll-shows-americans-favor-overhaul-of-campaign-financing.html>.

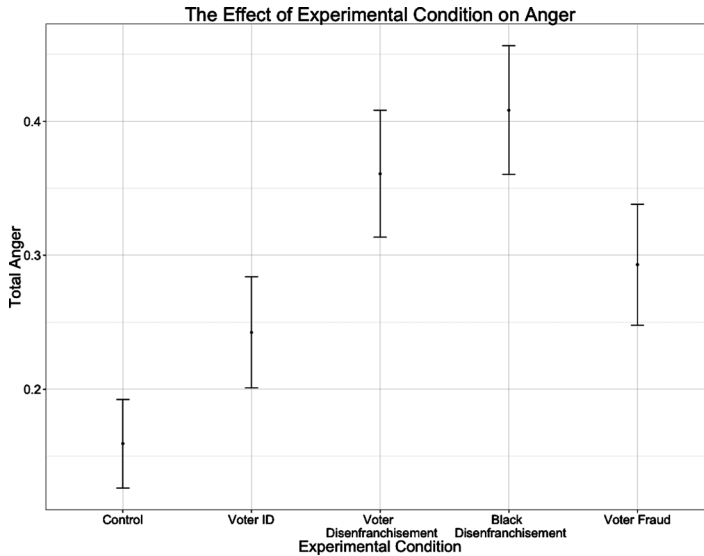


Figure 4. Anger and news framing of voter ID laws.

prevent illegal votes from being cast. This treatment thus justifies the existence of voter ID laws by claiming that the laws help prevent voter fraud. If our theory is correct, this condition should trigger anger among both Democrats and Republicans, but it does so more weakly than the quintessential disenfranchisement frame.³

Measures

After reading the stimulus article, respondents answered a set of questions tapping anger reactions and intentions to participate. Subjects were asked how strongly the story they read made them feel a list of positive and negative emotions. To measure anger reactions in this experiment, we combine responses for *angry*, *outraged*, *disgusted*, and *annoyed* into a measure of *total anger* which was recoded to run from 0 to 1. These items represent a highly reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.93).⁴ Further, it is worth noting that this measure differs from the one employed in the first study as the question does not ask whether *voter ID laws* or *voter fraud* cause anger, but instead it merely asks how the story made them feel. We used this measurement strategy intentionally, because stories about voter fraud could trigger anger among Democrats not because they believe voter fraud is a problem but because they believe the voter fraud argument is simply a crass partisan excuse for disenfranchising their group.

Our dependent variable is an additive index of five binary indicators of intention to participate, including voting turnout, attending political events, donating to a candidate, the amount the respondent is willing to donate, and volunteering to raise awareness of voter identification laws. Turnout was measured using the new American National Election Study (ANES) turnout item that attempts to minimize social desirability concerns by providing respondents with ample excuses for why they may not be able to vote. Attending political events was measured by asking respondents how likely they were

³ A manipulation check was performed at the very end of the survey, asking each respondent to select from a list of topics the one that best described the news story they read. More than 90% of respondents in each condition correctly identified the topic.

⁴ All question wordings are listed in the online supplementary information. We performed these analyses for each anger item separately, and the results were substantively equivalent.

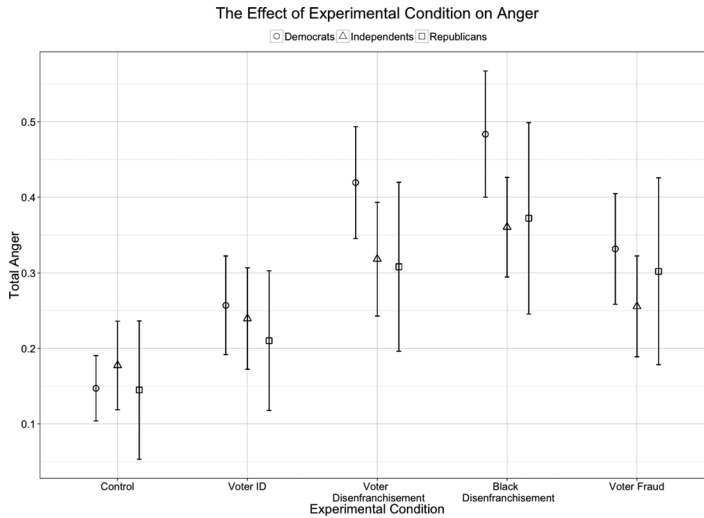


Figure 5. News frames and anger about voter ID laws, by partisanship. Here we combine “strong” and “weak” Democrats, “strong” and “weak” Republicans, and all others as Independent. Within both the Voter Disenfranchisement condition and the Black Disenfranchisement condition, we find statistically significant differences between Democrats and all others combined ($p < .05$, two-tailed).

to attend political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or other activities in support of a particular candidate. Donating to candidates and parties was assessed by, first, asking respondents how likely they were to donate to a candidate and, second, to ask the maximum dollar amount they would donate. The volunteering question is the same as the one used in Study 1. For each component of the index, respondents were coded as 1 if they were “extremely likely” or “very likely” to partake in that activity and 0 otherwise. For amount of dollars donated, respondents were coded 1 if the amount was a dollar or above and 0 otherwise. This produces a 5-point additive index of participation, which we recoded to run from 0 to 1.

Results

We first examine the effect of our news stories on anger among all respondents. The results in Figure 4 support our basic expectation about the emotional reaction to this debate. While total anger about voter ID laws is quite low (.16) in the control condition, it increases markedly and consistently in the three voter ID story conditions, from .24 in the basic *voter ID* condition, to .31 in the *disenfranchisement* condition, and finally to .41 in the *Black disenfranchisement* condition. Our respondents also reported significantly more anger in the fraud condition (.29) compared to the control, but the effect was smaller than all but the most basic voter ID story which does not mention the laws’ demobilizing potential.

Figure 5 breaks these results out by party identification. Once again consistent with our expectations, the impact of these frames is most pronounced for those who identify as Democrats. Democratic respondents report very low anger in the control condition (.15), while their anger rises to .26 in the basic ID frame, to .42 in the disenfranchisement frame, and to .48 in the Black disenfranchisement condition. For Democrats, the volume manipulation worked exactly as intended: Increasing the volume of the demobilization message led to significant increases in anger in every step in Figure 5 ($p < 0.01$) except for the difference between the disenfranchisement frame and the Black disenfranchisement frame. For Republicans, none of these differences between sequential conditions were significant. Therefore, the voter ID and disenfranchisement frames were a weaker trigger for anger

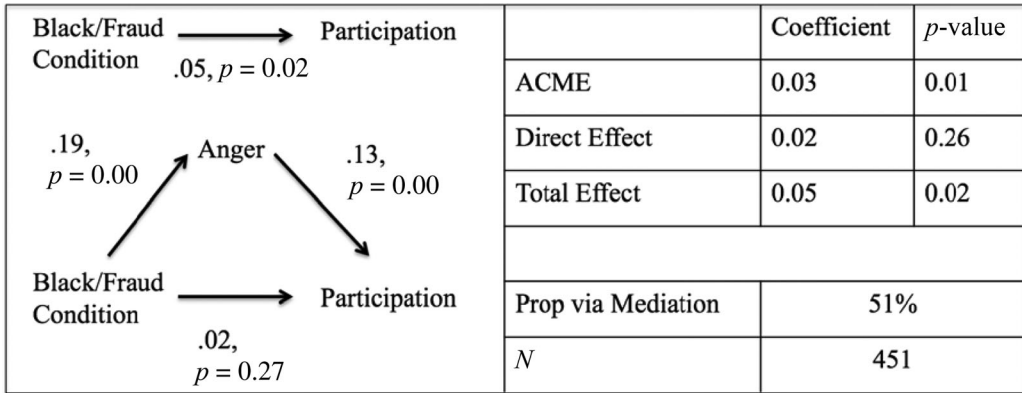


Figure 6. The mediating effect of anger on participation in reaction to Black Disenfranchisement and Voter Fraud frames.

among Republicans and Independents, as expected. Democrats expressed significantly more anger than non-Democrats in the disenfranchisement and Black disenfranchisement frames. Finally, in the voter fraud condition, we found that Democrats (.33) were even more angered than Republicans (.25) and Independents (.24), though these differences were not statistically significant. These results line up quite nicely with our expectations: The disenfranchisement frame, especially when it describes the impact on African American voters, triggers powerful anger among the Democrats in our sample. Voter fraud also triggers anger among Democrats, but the partisan distinctions in reactions to this frame are smaller. Next, we move to a full test of the causal chain we believe may be at work here: Anger triggered by these frames should mobilize participation primarily among Democrats.

We modeled the impact of anger as a mediator of the effect of exposure to media frames about voter ID on political participation using Imai, Keele, and Yamamoto’s (2010) mediation software which provides us with average causal mediation effects (ACME) allowing us to examine whether the effect of the treatment is mediated by anger.⁵ The results of these tests are presented in Figures 6–8.

We first estimate the mediating impact of anger for all respondents exposed to either of the most salient frames in the debate—the Black disenfranchisement and the voter fraud conditions. Our expectation was that the total effect of exposure to these frames would be mobilizing for all respondents and that is the case as is shown by the total effect described at the top of Figure 6 ($B = .05, p < .05$, two-tailed). The bottom half of the figure then displays the direct and indirect pathways by which exposure influences participation. Exposure to these frames significantly increases anger among all respondents ($B = .19, p < .001$), as we have shown before, and that anger is powerfully mobilizing ($B = .13, p < .001$). Once anger is included in the model, the direct effect of exposure is reduced by about half and is no longer statistically significant ($B = .02, p = .27$). This produces a highly significant ACME coefficient ($.03, p < .05$), and anger appears to explain about 51% of the total effect of the frame on participation.

We also expected that the Black disenfranchisement frame would be especially mobilizing for Democrats via the anger it triggers. Figure 7 breaks down the effect of that frame compared to the control condition for Democrats versus all other partisans. The left side of the figure shows a significant total effect of exposure to the Black disenfranchisement condition on turnout among Democratic respondents ($B = .08, p < .05$). In the bottom left of Figure 7, we see that 44% of the impact of this frame on

⁵ The key benefit of this approach is its ability to nonparametrically estimate effects. However, because both the mediator and outcome regressions are linear, this approach gives equivalent results to the standard product of coefficients approach.

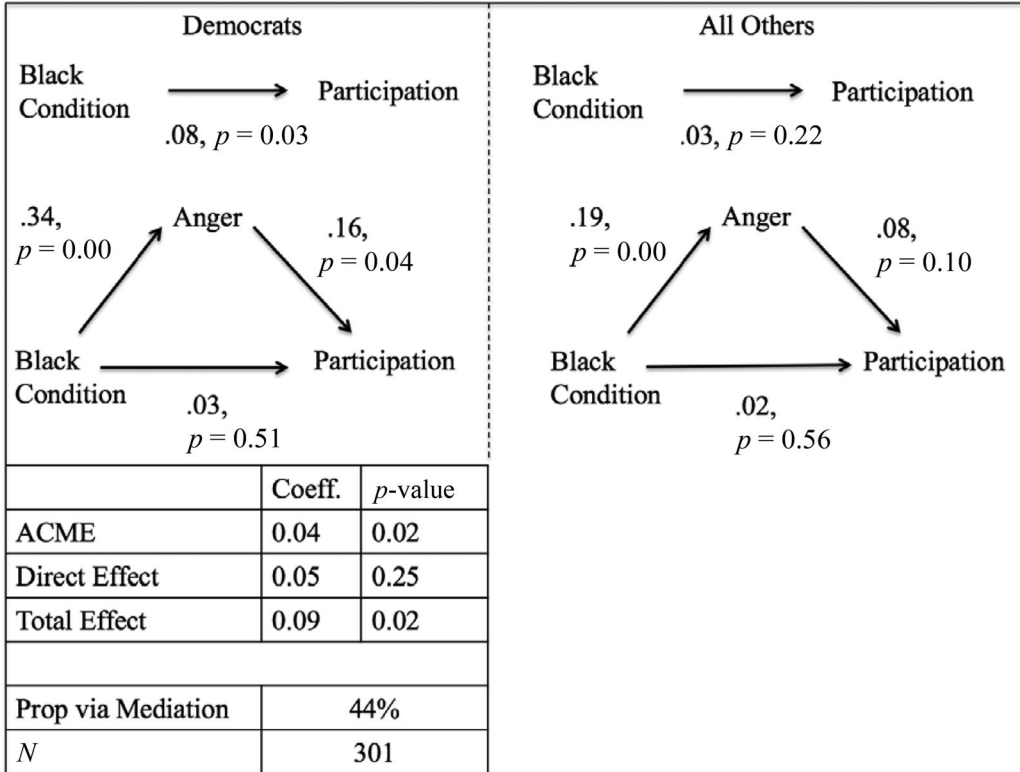


Figure 7. The anger-mediated impact of the Black Disenfranchisement frame, by partisanship.

participation is mediated by anger. On the right-hand side of the figure, we see that there is no significant positive effect of exposure to the Black disenfranchisement frame on participation, and therefore there is no relationship to be mediated. We are confident, then, that this pattern of results is consistent with our expectation that anger mediates the impact of this frame for Democrats but not for other partisans.

Next, we modeled the indirect effect of exposure to the voter fraud frame via anger for Republicans (the target audience) versus all others. Here we expected there would be no effect among Republicans but that this frame might actually boost turnout among other partisans, and Figure 8 displays a pattern consistent with that expectation. On the left, we see that the fraud frame does not significantly boost turnout among Republicans in our sample, and again there is no mediation via anger. On the right-hand side of the figure, however, there is a significant effect of the fraud frame on participation among non-Republicans, and 32% of that relationship is mediated by anger, as is demonstrated by the ACME coefficient.

Alternative Mechanisms

We have claimed that anger triggered by these frames is the important causal mechanism underlying their effect on participation. It is important, therefore, for us to explore and rule out other potential mediators of the effect. One is that these frames simply change people’s beliefs about the incidence of voter fraud, by convincing them the laws will reduce illegal ballots, and this boosts turnout. We asked people in the posttest how big a problem they believed voter fraud to be but found no direct effect of either the disenfranchisement or the voter fraud treatments on answers to this question.

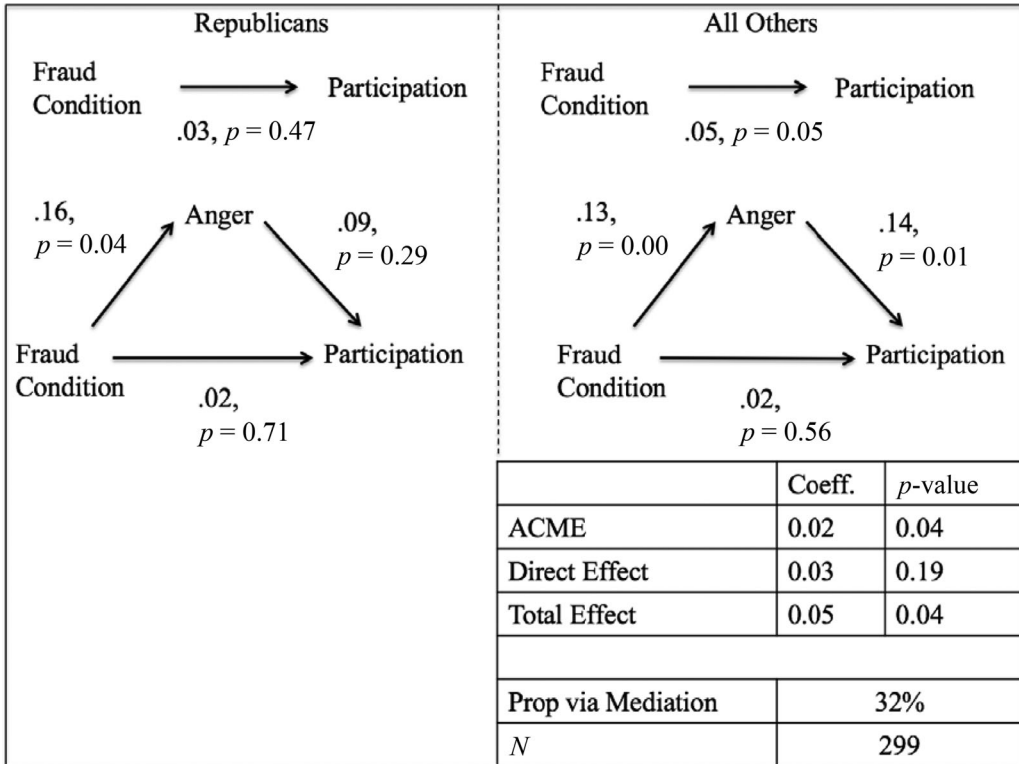


Figure 8. The impact of the Voter Fraud frame, mediated by anger, among Republicans versus other partisans.

Therefore, the perceived importance of the problem does not mediate the impact of the frames on intention to participate.

Another alternative is that these frames mobilize voters not by triggering anger but simply because they polarize opinions about the laws. Such an effect would not be causally incompatible with our explanation, but we would argue that attitude polarization is not necessary here. The emotional reaction to the partisan threat implicit in these laws should be sufficient to mobilize voters, especially Democrats, without fundamentally changing their support for the laws themselves. We asked respondents in the posttest to indicate how strongly they favored or opposed “laws requiring identification for an individual to obtain a ballot, even if such a law made it difficult for some eligible citizens to cast a ballot.” Exposure to any of these frames neither significantly changed mean support for the laws, nor did they polarize partisans into more extreme positions. The mobilizing effect of these frames is not therefore carried by any increase in strong opposition or support for the laws themselves.

A third alternative might be that any emotional arousal, not specifically anger, might produce results like the ones we display in these mediational analyses. If so, any emotional reaction should mediate the relationship between exposure and participation. We measured positive emotional reactions, such as hope, to the story in order to test whether *any* emotional arousal mediated the relationship between exposure and participation. We find first that, as with anger, hopefulness in general is positively related to participation. However, exposure to the Black disenfranchisement or voter fraud frames marginally reduces hope and therefore should reduce participation overall. Hope, therefore, cannot explain why the frames are associated with an increase in participation in our sample. Results for this and the other mediators are available in the online supplementary information. The general

pattern, we believe, suggests the mobilizing effect of these frames is primarily the result of the anger they trigger, not fundamental changes in perceptions of the size of the problem of voter fraud or other emotional reactions.

Conclusion

We have proposed an explanation for the surprising null impact on turnout, to date, of voter ID laws that have swept the country in the last 15 years. We find evidence for a political psychological explanation that implicates powerful emotional reactions in response to the dominant frames in the media environment regarding these laws.

Democrats seem especially reactive to the disenfranchisement frame or the voter fraud frames, presumably because either one reminds them of the argument that these laws are a partisan-motivated attack on their group. We found that Democrats and Republicans reacted differently to the dominant frames in the public discourse, with Republicans angry only about fraud, but Democrats angry about both frames. This anger was not simply a result of interest in the campaign or socioeconomic factors. Furthermore, anger about these laws was linked strongly to news consumption among Democrats but not Republicans. On the other hand, news consumption enhanced anger about voter fraud more weakly among Republicans and that linkage was statistically indistinguishable for Democrats. This anger that Democrats experienced about voter ID laws was also powerfully linked to participation among Democrats but not Republicans. Anger about fraud, on the other hand, was positively associated with participation among all partisans. Future work might further explore other moderators of these types of emotional mechanisms that could influence participation. Obvious candidates would be race and age, since younger voters could be mobilized into politics with these arguments for the first time.

These observational relationships were in line with our theoretical expectations, but we ran an experiment to more fully investigate the causal mechanisms of interest. We found that exposure to increasingly specific voter disenfranchisement frames triggered anger powerfully among all respondents, but especially among Democrats. The emotional effect of the voter fraud frame was weaker, and still stronger among Democrats than either Republicans or Independents. Finally, this anger significantly mediated the impact of exposure on participation for Democrats but not Republicans.

In sum, then, we have uncovered one possible explanation for the unexpected null findings in previous aggregate analyses of the impact of these voter ID laws. However, we do not think these findings should provide much comfort to those concerned about the impact of Shelby and/or the new voting and registration restrictions popping up all over the country. The countermobilization via these frames among Democrats that may be triggered by the debate may be short lived. In the long run, these restrictions would be expected to have their intended effect: demobilizing lower SES, non-White, and therefore predominantly Democratic voters. Perhaps the emotionally fueled countermobilization we have uncovered will dissipate over time. Given the power of habit in political participation (Green & Shachar, 2000; Plutzer, 2002), we suspect in fact that these emotional effects might have their largest mobilizing effects among younger, marginal voters. At the same time, these efforts might well establish stronger voting habits among young people that could offset the effect of voter ID laws, as is suggested by work demonstrating the powerful role of emotion in the establishment of participatory habits in the first place (Valentino, Gregorowicz, & Groenendyk, 2009). While only time will tell, we suspect the mobilizing frames used in get-out-the-vote campaigns in 2012 and 2014 may continue to resonate for some time. Future research might explore the frequency and potency of these emotional appeals on turnout in coming election cycles.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Table A1: News Consumption \times Party Identification on Anger about ID Laws and Voter Fraud Experimental Manipulations

Table A2: Changing Perceptions of the Problem of Voter Fraud

Table A3: Polarization of Attitudes on Voter ID Laws

Table A4: Hopefulness as a Mediator

Question Wordings