

## Evidence from the Vietnam War era draft shows that when government policies impact negatively on people, they are more likely to vote.

*When do government policies motivate people to vote? **Tiffany Davenport** uses the historical example of military draft policy in the United States to study the conditions under which public policies motivate political participation. Using the Vietnam War era draft policy as a case study, she finds that people who face potential loss as a result of government policies are more likely to respond; parents whose sons were at greater risk of being drafted voted at higher rates than parents of sons who were safe from the draft. She also finds that the effect of draft risk on voter turnout was much stronger among parents in towns that had experienced local casualties from the War.*



Some public policies have consequences that are substantially more imposing on citizens than others; perhaps there is no policy that is more potentially harmful than the military draft. Conscription threatens the lives of the men eligible for service and confronts parents and families of eligible men with the gravest of potential threats: the loss of a son, a brother, a father, or a husband to involuntary military service. Until its end in 1973, the military draft posed a significant imposition and grave threat to a selection of American men and their families, while others avoided the obligation of service. In new research I find that the parents of men who were at high risk of being drafted were more likely to vote, and that this effect was strengthened when their home towns had experienced casualties in the Vietnam War.

On November 26, 1969, President Richard M. Nixon signed Executive Order 11497 to radically alter the process through which American men were inducted for military service in the Vietnam War. As part of a series of reforms to the military draft administered by the Selective Service System, Nixon established a random lottery for determining induction priority for young men turning 19 years of age, replacing the oldest-man-first policy of draft induction order. In randomizing the order of induction priority, Nixon randomized the risk of military service, and in doing so, created one of America's most dramatic and important "natural experiments" of public policy.

On December 1, 1969, in supremely dramatic fashion, the first draft lottery was held. Millions of young men held their breath as blue capsules, each containing one possible birth date, were drawn out of a glass urn in front of a live national television and radio audience. The order in which a man's birthday was drawn determined his Random Sequence Number. In 1969, the first birth date selected was September 14, so young men born on that day between the years 1944 and 1950 were the first in line to be drafted in the case that they were deemed eligible and exempt from classifications that would prevent or delay their induction. Each year, a ceiling was determined, above which no numbers were called. For the 1969 lottery, the highest Random Sequence Number called was 195. For men subject to the 1970 lottery, it was 125. From the 1971 lottery, the highest number called was 95.

While having a low number did not guarantee induction into military service given the fact that men could obtain deferments, it did significantly increase the risk that a man would serve in the military. Throughout the draft lottery era, as troop levels were drawn down and U.S. involvement in Vietnam came to an end, numerous classes of deferments that enabled some men to avoid service were eliminated. The end of many deferments and the random assignment of draft risk were measures put in place by Nixon to confront popular sentiment that Selective Service procedures were inherently inequitable.



*Congressman Alexander Pirnie reaching into a container of draft numbers (center) as others look on, including retiring Selective Service Director Lt. General Lewis Blaine Hershey (left) and Deputy Director Col. Daniel O. Omer (right) at the Selective Service Headquarters during the nationwide draft lottery, 1969 MST.*

Because the lotteries randomized the risk of induction, they present what social scientists call a “[natural experiment](#).” In the absence of such a research design, it is difficult to measure the effect of policy-induced risk or responsive forms of participation because the very attributes that correlate with exposure to a policy like the draft are the same attributes that correlate with voting. For example, [voter turnout](#) and [serving in the military as a result of the draft](#) both systematically vary with education. Higher levels of education are associated with higher rates of participation in elections and lower likelihood of service during the Vietnam War. Research that failed to account for such a correlation between military service and attributes that determine political attitudes and behaviors frequently found [no relationship](#) between self-interest defined as having a friend or relative serve in the Vietnam War and related attitudes and behaviors.

Recent studies that utilize the near-random assignment of draft risk can better isolate the causal effect of policy exposure on political outcomes. When the draft lotteries are employed as an external, policy-induced source of draft risk, the conclusions about the effect of self-interest on political attitudes and partisanship, for example are different. Drawing a “losing number” made draft-eligible men more likely to [oppose the War](#), [affiliate with the Democratic Party](#), and [hold liberal political attitudes](#).

I measure the effect of exposure to policy-induced draft risk on the political behavior of a draft-eligible man’s parents. I assembled an original data set using information from archived administrative documents including town annual reports and voter checklists from 167 small towns in New Hampshire. In this “natural experiment” parents for whom at least one draft-eligible son was assigned a “losing” lottery number were considered to have been exposed to the “treatment condition” of military draft risk.

I estimated the average effect of a son’s lottery number assigned in 1969, 1970, or 1971 on his parents’ voter turnout in 1972. Among registered voters, parents of men who were at high risk of being drafted were, on average, more than four percentage points more likely to vote in the following presidential election. The effects of riskier draft lottery numbers on parents’ turnout were much stronger in towns from which there had been at least one casualty in the War prior to the lotteries; in towns with casualties, parents of sons facing high risk of being drafted voted at rates between seven and nine percentage points higher than parents of sons whose numbers rendered them safe from the draft.

These findings indicate that policy-induced risk of loss motivates responsive participation. A son’s losing the draft lottery caused parents to vote at higher rates in 1972; winning it did not. This supports the [general finding](#) that people are more likely to punish public officials for losses than to reward them for gains. Why were the effects so

strong in towns with previous war casualties? One possibility is that there were lower rates of deferments in these towns and therefore the actual risk of serving in Vietnam as a consequence of a low lottery number was higher. Further analysis does not tend to support this hypothesis. Another hypothesis is that local casualties intensified the effects of high draft risk on parents' responsive voting by making examples of the potential harm of draft [risk immediately accessible in their minds and rendering death as a consequence of being drafted a more probable outcome](#).

Though the exact manner in which policies exert influence on participation is unclear, the fact that the strength of the effects of draft risk on parents' voter turnout differed across towns suggests that individual self-interest *and* social and political context interact to determine mass political responses to government policies. When government policies result in some form of loss or negative imposition on people, they are more likely to vote. Where the consequences are clearest and the stakes appear to be the highest, policies will have stronger mobilizing effects on the public.

*This article is based on the paper, “Policy-Induced Risk and Responsive Participation: The Effect of a Son's Conscription Risk on the Voting Behavior of His Parents” in the American Journal of Political Science.*

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1qdtYNs>

---

## About the author

### **Tiffany Davenport** – *United States Naval Academy*

Tiffany Davenport is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. Her research interests span the subfields of American Politics, Political Behavior, and Political Methodology. Her recent research examines the ways in which government policies and programs affect civic engagement and the effect of priming social norms on political participation.



- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP