


How advertising campaigns can help to mitigate the negative effects of voter ID laws on turnout.

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A majority of American states have instituted some form of voter ID law, laws which have been found to reduce turnout for poor and minority populations. In new research [Michael S. Lynch](#) and [Chelsie L.M. Bright](#) examine the introduction of Kansas' recent voter ID law. They find that in one county, the distribution of materials reassuring voters about provisional ballot procedures and efforts to make voter ID easier to obtain, meant an increase in turnout compared to other precincts.

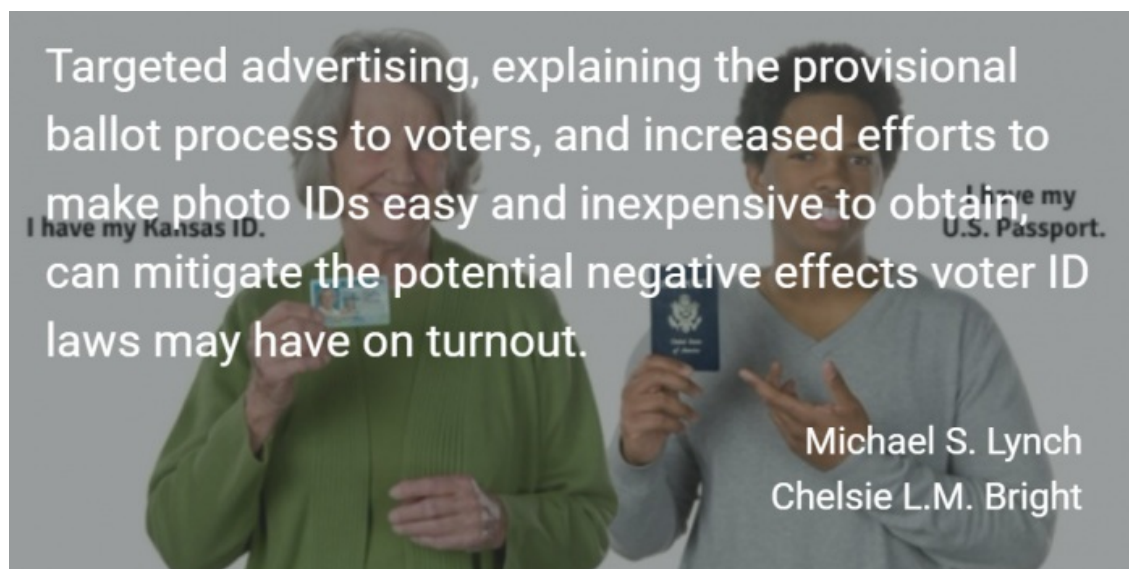


[Thirty-four states](#) in the United States currently require voters to show identification to vote. Advocates of photo ID laws argue that such laws are necessary to protect elections from voter fraud. By requiring all voters to show a photo ID, photo ID laws make it more difficult for ineligible voters, such as noncitizens, felons, and individuals who have already voted, to illegally vote. Most recently, President Donald Trump has made [unsubstantiated claims](#) that he lost the popular vote due to millions of fraudulent votes.



Despite concerns about voter fraud, documented cases of voter fraud are [extremely rare](#). Those who oppose voter ID laws argue that any efforts to prevent voter fraud through photo ID laws are not worth the risks of reduced voter turnout and disenfranchisement. Researchers have reported that [underrepresented populations, such as minorities and the poor, are less likely than their white counterparts to have photo IDs](#). Critics of voter ID laws frequently point to the historic use of voting laws to prevent women and racial minorities from participating in elections, and question the true motives of photo ID law proponents.

Kansas enacted [a strict photo ID law](#) in the spring of 2011. The new law required all Kansas voters to show photo-identification in order to vote. Prior to the 2012 election, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach's office developed an [awareness campaign](#) to advertise the new law. Kobach, a nationally recognized proponent of strong voter identification laws, developed an ad campaign featuring the slogan "Got Voter ID?" This campaign stressed the fact that voters must have an identification to be allowed to vote. In these advertising materials, no information is given on groups who are excluded from the legislation or how individuals could cast a provisional ballot even if they do not have the required photo ID.



The law gave county clerks discretion as to how they informed voters of the new law. We interviewed county clerks in all 105 counties and found that most of them either advertised the new voter ID law using materials provided by the Secretary of State's office or did no advertising at all. Douglas County Clerk Jamie Shew, however, [produced his own advertising materials](#). His materials assured voters that their votes would be counted, via the provisional balloting process, even if they did not have an approved photo-identification. His office also took the extraordinary step of issuing county photo IDs free of charge.

This variation in how county clerks advertised the new Kansas voter ID law provides a unique opportunity to test the impacts of local advertising on election turnout. All voters in the state were exposed to Kobach's "Got Voter ID" campaign, while Douglas County residents received an additional treatment via mailers and local advertising. In our new research, we assess the effects these differing advertising campaigns had on turnout during the 2012 election.

After the 2012 election, we collected data on over 2000 Kansas precincts and employed a quasi-experimental design and matching techniques to compare precinct-level turnout data in counties with both kinds of advertising. We find that Douglas County had higher turnout in the 2012 presidential election compared to precincts in other counties. Turnout in Douglas County was 2.3 percent higher than statistically similar precincts in the rest of the state. Targeted advertising, explaining the provisional ballot process to voters, and increased efforts to make photo IDs easy and inexpensive to obtain, can mitigate the potential negative effects voter ID laws may have on turnout.

Elections at the national level receive a lot of media attention. In an era where the national government seems increasingly interested in mitigating voter fraud and less concerned with the propensity for restrictive voting laws to negatively impact voter participation, our research provides some promising findings. Local governments and officials in states with strict voter ID laws may be able to mitigate their impact. While advertising campaigns won't be able to prevent all the potential negative effects that voter ID laws have, they can influence the public's perception of these laws to increase turnout.

This article is based on the paper, '[Kansas Voter ID Laws](#)' in Political Research Quarterly.

Featured image credit: <http://www.gotvoterid.com/main.html>.

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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.

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About the authors

Michael S. Lynch – *University of Georgia*

Michael S. Lynch is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Georgia. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Washington University in St. Louis and worked as an assistant professor for six years at the University of Kansas prior to moving to the University of Georgia in 2013.



Chelsie L.M. Bright – *Mills College*

Chelsie Bright is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Masters of Public Policy program at Mills College in Oakland, CA, and a Supervising Research Analyst at the Judicial Council of California. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Kansas and her research agenda focuses on the intersection between equity and policy.



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