Extending Voter Registration Deadlines Would Enfranchise Millions of Americans

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Abstract:
Electoral rules can affect the size and composition of the electorate, and thereby determine which candidates and policies succeed or fail. Research on the effects of electoral rules typically relies on comparisons across districts or time periods in which different rules applied, for instance comparing US states with different voter registration deadlines. However, such comparisons risk conflating the effects of electoral rules with the factors that explain the adoption of those rules. We present new evidence on the effects of early voter registration deadlines. We used web search data to measure interest in registering to vote, before and after registration deadlines for the recent US Presidential Election. In 2012, millions of Americans searched online for information on "voter registration" and related terms after the deadline for their state had already passed. Combining web search data with evidence on the timing of registration for 80 million Americans we show that, when registration was open, web search volume was highly correlated with the number of voters registering. We modeled the relationship between search and registration, and used the results to predict that an additional 3.6 million Americans would have registered in time for the 2012 presidential election, if deadlines had been extended to Election Day. Web search data are a valuable source of evidence on information-seeking behavior under varying social and political conditions.