

Farm Service County Committee Elections

Improving voter participation in local USDA elections

Agency Objective. Increase voter participation in non-partisan County Committee Elections.

Background. The Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Farm Service Agency (FSA) operates programs—such as loans, disaster payments, and commodity and conservation programs—that impact the lives of farmers and ranchers, their income, and the economy. FSA interacts directly with farmers and ranchers through a network of local field offices, where farmers can inquire about or apply for programs. In addition to being a point of contact between FSA and farmers, important policy decisions are made at the local level, including setting payment rates. Each field office is administered by a County Executive Director who is responsible for the local implementation of FSA programs. The County Executive Director is in turn overseen by a County Committee (COC) whose members are elected by all farmers eligible to participate in FSA programs.

County Committees were first authorized by the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1935. Over time, participation in COC elections has declined, endangering the model of local representation that the Committees represent. In an effort to increase voter turnout, FSA partnered with ERS and the Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) to test changes to COC election ballots and outreach material.

Methods. The experiment was conducted during the 2015 COC elections, which took place by mail over an approximately one-month period in late 2015. FSA mailed a ballot to each eligible voter in early November; the deadline for voters to return a valid ballot was approximately one month later, in early December.

Two changes to voter outreach were tested in the experiment: (i) candidate information printed on the outside of ballots and (ii) postcards with candidate information sent to voters ($n = 1,399,307$).

First, because voters receive ballots by mail, one barrier to submitting a valid ballot may simply be the action of opening the ballot and evaluating candidate choices. We printed the names of candidates—which are otherwise included only on the inside of sealed ballots—on the outside of some ballots so that they would be readily apparent to eligible voters regardless of whether or not they opened the ballot.

Second, because voters may simply forget to vote by the deadline, even if they intend to, we tested the effect of informational postcards bearing the candidates' names and information about the election on voter turnout. A total of two postcards were sent to all eligible voters who were assigned to the relevant treatment condition, one designed to arrive approximately one week before the ballot arrived in the mail, and one designed to arrive approximately one week before the ballot submission deadline. The pre-ballot postcard included: (i) the names of all candidates running for election; (ii) a personalized message encouraging eligible voters to help make sure farmers in their county were represented; (iii) a reminder that the term of the Committee Member would be three years in length, implying that the next chance to vote for COC representation would be three years in the future; and (iv) a picture of the ballot that would be arriving in the mail soon. The picture provided a visual cue that the eligible voter would associate with the postcard and the election when they received the ballot in the mail. The post-ballot postcard included all the same information that the pre-ballot postcard did, and additionally provided text reminding the eligible voter that the deadline was approaching. Voters were also informed that if the ballot had been lost (or failed to arrive in the mail), the eligible voter could obtain a new ballot by visiting their local field office.

Results. The voter participation rate of households that received neither an enhanced ballot nor a postcard was 9.3 percent. The

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treatment effect of including information on the ballot and sending postcards is estimated to be 2.9 percent ($p < 0.01$, 95% CI [2.7, 3.0]), or a relative effect of nearly 24 percent. To put the estimated treatment effect into perspective, with a treatment effect of 2.9 percent and a postcard cost of approximately \$0.05 per unit, this translates to one extra ballot cast for every \$1.72 spent. FSA can use this information to encourage participation in future elections, and can build on the results here to create new low-cost outreach strategies.

Conclusions. Providing information to farmers, as well as reminders, can increase participation in the democratic process to elect local representation.

