

## Background

Roughly 20 million Americans experience a police traffic stop each year. As this number makes clear, traffic stops serve as one of the more common ways in which the public interacts with not just law enforcement, but with any government actor. Past research suggests that these concrete experiences help shape people's attitudes and behavior toward the government; this includes their level of trust in government and even their decision to vote. If an individual believes they have not been listened to during a traffic stop, they may come to believe that no one in government will listen to them, making them less likely to participate in future elections.

## Research Question

How does being ticketed by the police shape people's likelihood of voting?

## Study Strategy

The authors used county administrative and turnout data for general elections between 2012 and 2020 in Hillsborough County, Florida, to identify the voting behavior of people subjected to receiving a ticket during a traffic stop. To isolate the effect of being ticketed, they compared the turnout of registered voters who were ticketed before an election to registered voters who were ticketed after an election. Aside from this difference in ticket timing, the compared individuals were nearly identical in terms of their race/ethnicity, gender, party affiliation, age, neighborhood characteristics, the number of times they had previously been ticketed, and their voting behavior in past elections. By comparing people who matched on these numerous characteristics and primarily differed in terms of whether they were ticketed before the election rather than after, the researchers could be more confident that any observed difference in turnout behavior was due to the impact of the traffic stop and ticket itself.

## Findings

The analysis revealed that people who were ticketed before an election had turnout rates that were 1.5% lower than people who were ticketed after an election on average. This impact was larger for midterm elections, pushing turnout down by over 3% in 2018 and 1.5% in 2014, as compared to roughly 0.5% in the 2016 presidential election.

The authors also found variation by race. Across all three elections, voter turnout declined by 1.8% among non-Black individuals on average, an impact that is nearly twice as large as the 1% drop seen among Black residents. Finally, the authors found that the influence of traffic stop tickets on turnout dissipated slightly over time, particularly for Black people. When a ticket occurred within a month of the election, turnout dropped by 3% among Black individuals, a larger decrease than the 2.4% for non-Black people. When tickets occurred a year or more before the election, the effect faded somewhat and the racial difference flipped, as turnout fell by roughly 1% among Black people and by 1.5% among non-Black individuals.

## Implications

While law enforcement's role in American society is primarily concerned with protecting public safety, the high level of police contact with the public also gives officers the capacity to influence the degree to which people participate in elections. This influence should be taken into account by police agencies and policymakers considering the utility of traffic stops and tickets and proposals to limit them. While this analysis focused only on the occurrence of a police stop and ticket, future research could examine how the treatment a person receives during a stop affects turnout. Answering that question could inform policy and practice, perhaps helping law enforcement manage traffic enforcement in ways that would not reduce engagement in our nation's democratic process.

"We find that traffic stops reduce turnout among non-Black voters, with a smaller negative effect for Black voters. We also find substantial temporal variation in the treatment effect for Black voters: in the short term, stops appear to be more demobilizing, but as time passes they become comparatively less demobilizing."

– Ben-Menachem & Morris (2023)

"Although we demonstrate that police stops are demobilizing, future work must further investigate how stops are interpreted by individuals and translated into political behavior."

– Ben-Menachem & Morris (2023)

## Article Citation

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