

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
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Why raising incomes can boost youth voting rates
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CONTRIBUTORS

HOST

Fred Dews

RANDALL AKEE

David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Economic Studies

Center on Children and Families, Future of the Middle Class Initiative

DEWS: Welcome to a special midterm elections edition from the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts you have. I'm Fred Dews. When news broke recently that the Supreme Court upheld North Dakota's voter identification requirement, the issue of disenfranchisement of that state's Native American population came to the fore.

My guest today will address this issue and also discuss his research and how to get more young people to vote when they're adults. Randall Akee is a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Economic Studies at Brookings and is an assistant professor at the University of California Los Angeles in the Department of Public Policy and American Indian Studies. You can follow the Brookings podcast network on Twitter at @policypodcasts, to get the latest information about all of our shows. And visit us online at [Brookings.edu/podcasts](https://brookings.edu/podcasts). For more analysis from Brookings experts on the upcoming elections, go to [Brookings.edu/2018-midterms](https://brookings.edu/2018-midterms). And now on with the interview. Randy welcome back to the Brookings cafeteria.

AKEE: Thanks for having me.

DEWS: It's been a couple of months since I had you and fellow economists Marcus Kacie on the show to talk about your careers and economic policy. So good to see you again.

AKEE: Thanks.

DEWS: So let's start off by talking about this case the Supreme Court recently decided that has a huge impact on the vote in North Dakota which could impact the North Dakota Senate race there. Can you explain what happened in that decision and what the issue is?

AKEE: Well the way it appears to me is that the Supreme Court upheld the state's voter laws that require you to have not just an ID, but an ID with a street address. And that's particularly difficult for individuals who reside on reservations because many

reservations don't have street addresses and other scholars have said this before me, Professor Goldman at UCLA who is a colleague of mine, said reservations were intended to be prisons, so you don't have a need for street addresses in prisons. That's how they were set up historically, and to this day many reservations in the U.S. don't have street addresses, most of the residents have their mailing address or purely P.O. boxes and that's the situation here. And as a result of this requirement in North Dakota which is the first in the U.S., to my knowledge to require this, it may potentially disenfranchise thousands of Native American voters who reside in reservations.

DEWS: It seems like the legislators in North Dakota who came up with this law should have known that. I mean, I think the Native American population in North Dakota is pretty large compared to the state.

AKEE: I was looking at the data and there's something like 27,000 eligible voters in that state and the population of that state is relatively small compared to other states of course. So that's not a small amount, and particularly so in the Senate races for instance Heidi Heitkamp only won her Senate seat six years ago by a margin of 3,000 votes, so clearly the Native American population voting impact might actually be pivotal in these elections, specifically because American Indians, Native Americans tend to vote more heavily Democratic. So clearly this may have an impact there. On the other hand there's been a lot of outreach and a lot of efforts made at the local tribal government level and other community organizing to figure out ways to overcome this. And so I think there's you've seen a lot of ingenuity going on at the ground level to figure out how one may be able to potentially assign street addresses to individuals using various GPS type techniques and things like that so, it doesn't mean the problem has been completely erased but it looks like there has been some mobilization going on there.

DEWS: So I looked at data that comes from the National Congress of American Indians, and it shows that registration and voter turnout of Native Americans historically is

lower than many other populations. Why is that?

AKEE: I don't think we know exactly why that's the case, I don't think there's been a lot of research on this population in particular. I would hazard some hypotheses on this that much of it has to do with income and education on average which across ethnic, racial groups in the U.S., household income is a big determinant of people's voting and their participation rates. So I think that would probably be one of the primary rationales. There is a slightly different group, slightly different perhaps rationale as well. There are some American Indian Native American groups who also decide not to participate in the U.S. system and vote in their tribal elections alone and as a form of protest, as a form of sovereignty, do not participate in many of the U.S. federal government activities in general, so that's a possibility. I think that again we don't have too much data on understanding what the proportion is. I would think that the biggest deterrent is the same deterrent that it is for all other groups in the U.S. which is income and education levels.

DEWS: I want to let listeners know that you recently did a 5 on 45 podcast where you talked in more detail about this particular case, this issue is really interesting. People can find it on our website. One other question about Native Americans. Are there other voting rules besides the one we've just learned about in North Dakota that would tend to prevent Native Americans in particular from voting?

AKEE: I'm not aware of anything in particular. One of the surprising things people learn is that Native Americans didn't get the legal right to vote until 1924 with the Indian Citizenship Act. So you know all of that time up until then, American Indians were not considered citizens and were unable to vote in the relocation decisions and various things that happened. So you know, it hasn't even been a century since Americans have been able to vote. But I think there's not very many other things that probably exist.

DEWS: Besides the usual slew of things...

AKEE: The standards of things... exactly.

DEWS: Let's switch now to the research that you've done with co-authors on how to increase voter participation. We know that younger voters no matter their racial or ethnic background tend to vote at lower rates than older Americans. And in this new research you and your co-author show reasons why that is the case and how to counter this. Can you just briefly review what this research is all about?

AKEE: Sure, our motivation here was to really understand this relationship between income and voting, no matter the data set that you use in the US, and actually in Europe as well. You can see that there's this income gradient as income goes up at the household level, people are more likely to vote and that's as the saying goes, correlation is not causation. And one wonders well what impact does income have on people's voting probabilities in a causal sense, and that's where we really undertook this research and what we look at is one particular American Indian reservation in North Carolina, the Eastern Cherokee, and there they experienced an increase in household incomes across the income distribution. So the relatively poor households relatively, wealthy households, they all received the same amount of income, cash transfers which is a result of the expansion and the construction of casino operations on the reservation. So this is a revenue sharing program.

DEWS: So it was something that hadn't existed before. And then the casino revenue began. And so you have before that look at their income and after that look at that.

AKEE: Exactly. That's right. So you have this nice relatively big income intervention that occurs, and you can look at the impact across the income distribution on voting probability, what we looked at ultimately was the parents but also the children themselves when they became adults. The other comparison group began to make it clear is that there are non-Indians in and around the adjacent counties that are also included in the studies and they are completely unaffected by the increase in household income, they are not

eligible for these payments. And so you have a nice comparison across time. And what we find is that when this increase occurs, when the children who are essentially adolescence, they're between the ages of 13 and 17 when the household income increase begins by the time they turn 18, and for the next, I think it's about eight years we have into adulthood, we find that they vote on average more than their untreated counterparts. So they have a higher propensity to vote in all elections, and the number of elections, and it's statistically significantly different from their untreated counterparts. And so that was quite interesting.

But we also had another group that we can look at which were the parents. The parents themselves are treated in the sense of having more resources in their household and we could watch them before the casino payments happened and we could see them after with the children, there was really no before because they weren't 18 years old. But for the parents we found no change whatsoever. They voted in the same fashion the same propensity as prior to the cash income. What we took away from this was this fact that your temperament or your preferences for voting might be set when it's based on income in childhood and adolescence, but after that any changes to income, as I said your temperament your preferences have already been set. So you've gotten into your habit of voting, you've gotten into your rut, whatever that might be. So that's sort of a down side to income interventions with regard to an older population, but it might say a lot about antipoverty programs and how they might affect younger generations and their civic participation.

DEWS: So I mean just make sure I understand the part about the children aged 13 to 17. Then as the income transfers start happening and their families from this casino revenue, so you've compared them and their propensity to vote when they become adults to similar age cohorts of other people who live in that same area who aren't getting these cash transfer.

AKEE: That's right as well as, so we actually have two dimensions of difference

here. One is between American Indian children who are treated and non-Indian children who aren't treated to the additional household income. But we also have two age groups. We have a young group of American Indian children and an older group of American Indian children. The older group essentially doesn't get treated. They are about 18 years old. So they essentially don't live in a household with higher incomes. And so you can compare them within group. So it's really a difference in different here that allows us to really identify this causal effect of income on voting as adults.

DEWS: So do you think income itself is the driving factor in voter participation or are there some other factors at work there?

AKEE: That's a really important question. And what we looked at we tried to get at some of these mechanisms that happened and we have some measures of this. What we found that we thought was particularly interesting was that for the households that received this extra income, they were less likely to move away they were less likely to live in a different county or in a different state over time. So that said something to us about this idea of social capital, investing in your community, living in your community, and the civic pride that you have. So we think that might be one potential mechanism for whatever reason is your income allows you to stay in place not move away to find new employment. The parents anyway move away to find employment or something to that effect and give you some connectivity. The second thing that we find, which we found previously, is that these children also have higher levels of education as adults. So it does increase their educational attainment which we were talking about a little bit earlier, education is positively correlated with higher levels of education are positively correlated with a propensity to vote.

DEWS: Let me go back then to the phenomenon you discovered in terms of the parents, the adults, who are the adults in this. Again the cash transfers it didn't change their likelihood to vote or not. Do you have any theory as to why that may be?

AKEE: Again so in political science there's this well-known theory, it's called the resource model of voting. And the idea there is that the reason people don't vote is because they don't have a lot of resources they don't have a car, or they can't take off from work, or they can't find a babysitter to watch their kids. And so this kind of test some of that, so people have more resources. There's still not voting more so from an income perspective the income is pertinent or has a saliency effect when you're a child and when your preferences and your civic participation starts getting formed. So it might matter. So for adults, not to suggest that there are no ways to improve adult voter participation, that's what get out the voter campaigns. That's what knocking on doors does. That's what phone banks do. Right. There are ways of doing it. Our statement is essentially that interventions that are income based may not have an effect for adults who are already at some threshold or plateau level of voting based on income. But children might be most likely to be affected while in the household.

DEWS: I think I just want to make sure I'm clear. Whenever I am talking about economics with an economist, I just want to make sure that I'm understanding it. Well it's not the cash transfer or the infusion of income that is directly causing these children when they become adults to go vote. It's like they're not getting paid vote. This cash infusion is causing some other phenomena that themselves then increase the likelihood that they will vote when they become adults for the reasons that you've said.

AKEE: We know that there are these social economic determinants of lots of things in life and there might be some of these with regard to voting. And one of them is education. So we've seen these kids increase their educational attainment, but also there's social capital in their neighborhoods in their communities. So yeah that's right, it's sort of the money translates into better outcomes at the household level which then means more participation at a delayed response because again this is into adulthood.

DEWS: How do you explain or examine the phenomenon though where children as

they're growing up, like most children do take cues from their parents, they learned from their parents, they're aware of the world through their parents, and if their parents are in this situation not voting or voting either way, how is the intervention of the extra income counteracting the lessons children are learning from their parents about civic participation when their parents don't seem to be as affected by the intervention?

AKEE: That's right. We are able to control in our analysis parents' own preferences for voting because even prior to the cash intervention happening, we have at least three elections prior to that, so we have sort of this parental propensity to vote prior to the casino occurring and controlling for that, what we find is that there is a positive relationship so there's no doubt that there's an intergenerational transmission of preferences for voting across time. That appears to be positive and statistically significant and strong. So that connection from parent to child is there and there's no reason you would expect it not to be there.

What we're saying is that this extra household income allows for other changes at various levels again through educational attainment, perhaps the fact that you can remain in place and create these community viable networks and extracurricular activities that create this civic mindedness in these various communities that the children have that they possibly otherwise wouldn't have. Which allows them to be more of a participant over time. So that's sort of how we see it is that for sure there are absolutely these intergenerational connections between parent preferences that are being transmitted to their children.

But this extra income facilitates different engagements and interactions between the children, their community, their own educational experience, beyond that of just their parents potentially. I should note one last thing that I didn't really emphasize is that we find that all of the effects of this cash intervention happen for households below the median income in the community. So it's happening on the dimension where you think it would. It's those that are the most income constrained. It's not as if there are big effects for those that

are above median household income, it's really coming from those where the budget constraint might be the most constraining of all.

DEWS: So what does the research suggest that we do in terms of additional public policy?

AKEE: Well I think what comes immediately out of this is that antipoverty programs have direct benefits. We have all kinds of programs, EITC, we have TANF, we have SNAP. These are fantastic programs and they have direct impact on children's health worker productivity. A bunch of different things but I think what this suggests is that these are investments we have primary interest in. But there may be secondary interest that we aren't accounting for, that there may be more further civic participation down the line which as we've talked about from the very beginning, we know that the young tend to vote much lower rates than older population. I think what comes out from this is that there might be a lot of secondary benefits to antipoverty programs in the United States and maybe other developed countries as well.

DEWS: So does that suggest additional research is necessary will you and your co-authors be doing more research in this field?

AKEE: It's our hope it's a pretty difficult place to get data. This was a lot of work in and of itself, but it's actually quite difficult to do given the uniqueness of this income intervention. There aren't a lot of income interventions that are quite as nicely specified.

DEWS: I want to read a quote from the version of the paper that's on the NBER Working Papers, there's a new updated version on the Brookings website that readers can go find but I'll put links to both of them there because there's just a lot of good data. I just want to kind of read one of the quotes in the beginning it's a broad statement about civic participation. I just ask you to react to that with your thoughts about this as we think about the 2018 midterm elections which are almost upon us. And so a quote here from the paper "inequality in voter turnout is ubiquitous and perhaps even more troubling. Comparing

those who vote to those who do not reveals a particularly large inequality in citizen participation. Simply put, people who are more affluent are much more likely to prosper in politics than those who are less affluent.” Can you just comment on that?

AKEE: So I think that's correct and I think what is concerning about that is that if you don't vote your concerns aren't transmitted in the legislative process or in the executive branch. And that's the biggest concern clearly for why increasing voter participation and increasing voter participation along the income distribution, across race ethnic other minority groups is important because if you aren't voting, the politicians have relatively little need to be concerned with your issues and your particular desires and wants, and that's the key point is that there's a lot of research and political science on voting that shows that politicians are responsive to the needs and the concerns of their constituents and their constituents are the ones who vote for them and they tend to be from the upper end of the income distribution. By and large and that's what part of the issue and that's what we were talking about in the opening part of the research is that this is something that matters broadly for all kinds of groups. It's not just a purely academic piece of research. It's part of democracy.

DEWS: Randy I want to thank you for taking the time and sharing your expertise on this very important topic with us today.

AKEE: Thank you very much.

DEWS: You can find the research on our website [Brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu). You can find state of the Heartland fact but 2018 on our Web site. “The Brookings Cafeteria” podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Brennan Hoban and Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our interns this semester are Churon Bernier and Tim Madden. Finally, my thanks to Camilla

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