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FILER VOTER:
LINKING TAX FILING TO VOTER REGISTRATION

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WILLIAMSON: My name is Vanessa Williamson. I am a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution and a Senior Fellow at the Urban Brookings Tax Policy Center. And I am very excited to be here today to share the results of the filer voter program, which is a field experiment testing a very simple idea.

What if when people were filing their income tax returns we asked them if they would like to register to vote? And so I am thrilled to be able to share the results of that experiment today, and if it's actually possible, I'm even happier to invite our panel here, a superb panel that will follow that will be talking about tax policy and voting rights and how government can encourage active citizenship.

So thanks again to everyone here today and to everyone joining us on line. And before we get started, I want to thank a few of the people who made this possible. First of all, thanks to Darrell West, Emily Perkins, Leti Davalos, Louis Serino, and the Government Studies program, and the whole team at Brookings. Special thank to my former research assistant, who is now getting her Ph.D., Curtlyn Kramer, and my current research assistant, Jackson Gode, for their work. I would also like to thank Mark Mazur, Bill Gale, Lydia Austin, and everyone at Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center.

And I want to specifically mention the organizations in Texas and Ohio that actually implemented our experiment. In Dallas that was Foundation Communities and Faith in Texas, in Cleveland, Refund Ohio. And of course, just enormous gratitude to the hundreds of VITA site coordinators, intake specialists, voter registrars, and other tax preparation volunteers who made the project possible.

The Analyst Institute assisted on the experimental design and analysis. And, finally, a special thanks to the New Venture Fund's research collaborative fund project for their financial support. And thanks also to the Arnold Foundation for supporting my work

through the Tax Policy Center.

Okay. Now, I get to tell you what all of this work achieved. As I said, the idea was a really simple one. When you file your income taxes what if we asked you if you'd like to register to vote or update your voter registration. It seems like a very simple fix and there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about its impact.

So, first of all, 150 million households file their income tax returns every year. And it reaches an enormous number of citizens and it reaches them annually, which could be really valuable in a highly mobile society like the one that we live in. It could also reach people who do not regularly go to the DMV, which is one of the other major ways that people get registered to vote. So that means people in cities, young people and older people, are all in groups that could maybe be reached by a tax filing process more than going to the DMV.

Also, voter registration compared to tax filing is a very marginal amount of paperwork. So they always talk about making the income tax return on a postcard. The voter registration form is actually a postcard. So we add this tiny amount of additional paperwork and maybe we can make a real difference in terms of people getting registered.

And, finally, what actually brought me to this project was a lot of work, including some of my own work, suggesting that in America taxation and representation are really closely linked to ideas. So Americans see tax-paying as evidence of being a good citizen, and so whether you are happy to be getting a refund, or you are mad about what government does, or you're glad to be paying for public services, when you're filing your income tax return, you are aware that government matters for your daily life. So maybe that makes the idea of voting more appealing.

So this all sounds good, but obviously it's Brookings, so we would like there to be evidence. And so, you know, a lot of things sound good in principle. So what we did

was conduct a large scale field experiment in two states, in Texas and Ohio, testing how effective it would be to conduct voter registration at tax time. And we worked with nonprofit tax preparation sites that participate in a program called The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program. This is a program that's nationwide, it serves 3.5 million households a year, and it allows low- and moderate-income families to file their income taxes for free. So we worked with two of the largest networks of VITA sites in the country in Dallas and in Cleveland to offer voter registration at their sites.

So this approach, working with the VITA sites, has an added advantage in that it targets a community that tends to be underrepresented at the polls, low income people. So in 2016 about 74 percent of individuals making over $50,000 a year voted; only 52 percent of those making less than $50,000 a year voted. So there is an enormous divide in voter turnout by income. So we thought that partnering with VITA sites would be a really great way to sort of target the project to the people who might need the voter registration services the most.

And that worked, that targeting worked. The average income at our sites was $23,000 a year in Ohio and $27,000 a year in Texas. And because of the population of those two cities we reached a heavily minority community as well. So in Ohio 62 percent of participants were African American and in Texas 59 percent were Latinx. So working with VITA had the advantage of potentially reaching a much larger pool of unregistered potential voters, but it also may help make the voting population more representative of the public as a whole.

So people come to our seven VITA sites and are given the chance to get registered. But we didn't offer voter registration to everybody and we didn't offer it to all 4,000 of our participants. We offered it to about half because we followed a principle that sort of -- the basic principle of any sort of scientific experiment to test a new medicine, like a

doctor would do, where we randomized. So half the people who came into the VITA site were randomly sorted into a group that got the treatment, which was voter registration, and half the group became our control group that did not -- they just received tax prep services without the added component of voter registration.

And I just want to talk very briefly about why we did it that way. By randomly offering voter registration to half the population and creating this treatment and control group, it means that we can see not only how many people did we register, we can see that, but how many people did we register who probably wouldn't have gotten registered otherwise. Because in our control group the people who did not get registered through filer voter, some of them got registered to vote. They went to the DMV or they passed a table in front of a grocery store and they got registered to vote. So we want to know both, you know, how many people overall could you reach doing this, but how many people could you reach who are not otherwise going to get registered, because that is the sort of more stringent standard of an effective program. So that's how we conducted it.

And I've now delayed long enough. I'm going to tell you what happened. The results were really gratifying, honestly. Among people who were unregistered at the start of the experiment, we doubled the voter registration rate. Okay, I'm going to just say it again because it because it thrills me to say. (Laughter) We doubled the voter registration rate. Slightly under 4 percent of unregistered people in the control group registered to vote, almost 9 percent of the people who were unregistered at the start who went through filer vote registered to vote. There was a 5-percentage point increase. And our effects were largest for people under 34. As you might imagine, young people are less likely to be registered to vote. So among the young people in our experimental pool we increased voter registration rates by 10 percentage points.

So based on these effects, we actually thing that if you did voter registration

everywhere in the country at all the VITA sites, you would register about 115,000 people to vote, including 62,000 people who would not otherwise get registered. And that is quite a bit. But VITA sites only reach 3.5 million households. I mean that's a lot, but 150 million households actually file their taxes each year. So if you imagine what it would mean to add voter registration to the entire population, I think these effects could really be enormous.

All right. So they registered, but did the vote. So we looked in Ohio at that question. In Ohio the primary election was late enough that the people who registered through filer voter in the tax season were eligible to vote in that election, and we found that people who participated in filer voter voted at slightly higher rates than the state average, which is great. And it is especially great when you bear in mind that we're talking about a low-income population that typically turns out less.

So they voted. They registered, they voted. And the last piece is sort of an implementation piece, but actually might be the most crucial piece in terms of expanding the program beyond an experimental setting, we measured whether getting asked about voter registration slowed down tax preparation. And it didn't. And that's really valuable, because these nonprofit sites have more clients than they can possibly handle. They're always rushing to get as many people this incredibly important service, free tax preparation; they are trying to get everyone through the door. So if you slow them down from their primary mission that's really problematic. We did not find that that was a problem. And I think that could also be valuable for for-profit preparers who are also in the position of having to make money while filing people's taxes. And it's kind of obvious in a way because the voter registration form is very short. It takes a minute or two to fill out, right. So you can add that to the tax prep process without slowing down your other procedures and without moving energy away from your primary mission of tax preparation.

So I want to talk for just a minute about the policy implications of this. So

this was an experiment, it reached 4,000 people. What does it mean if we wanted this to be a much larger program? I think the first thing to remember is that nonprofits who are interested in voter registration need to think about tax filing as a time when they can do that. The voting community, I learned in the process of putting this research together, the voting community and the tax community do not overlap that much, and it really should for lots of reasons, but among them any voter registration group in the country that wants to do a project partnering with a VITA site in their area, this is a project that works. You will make an impact.

So I would be more than happy to talk to anyone who works in voter registration or on tax prep about how this project was run and the sort of nitty gritty details and try and make some of those connections so that this project can be in place much more broadly for 2020.

Second, for-profit tax preparers should consider adding voter registration to the services they provide. Not all of you may know this, but the big companies, like TurboTax or H&R Block, they do 20+ million returns a year. So they could singlehandedly vastly increase civic participation in this country by offering a service that takes only a minute or two. And a lot of big companies offer voter registration. Starbucks does that, so does Walmart. But I think the tax prep companies are in a really unusual position because they are actually helping you fill out forms that need to go to the government. So instead of at Walmart where there's a table and you're trying to go by it because you want to go get your TV, or what have you, this is a site where you would have people -- it's an unusual level of impact you could have I think by providing voter registration at tax prep.

And then the last piece is the policy piece, of course. Connecting tax filing with existing efforts to move towards automatic voter registration, which a bunch of states are doing, could be very valuable. The most obvious approach I think would be for states, or

even the federal government, to add an opt-in voter registration bucket on tax forms. So when you are filling out your income tax forms you've already got all your paperwork, you just check a few extra boxes and you could be registered to vote.

So that's my big picture hope for what this project could mean in the long-term.

And I want to talk to you just a little bit about why -- before I bring up our superb panel -- I think this project matters. Voting rights in this country are under enormous threat. We all know this. And I think they are under -- it's far from the first time in our country's history, but I think there's a renewed threat that's come in. Just in the last 10 years or 25 states have put in place new restrictions that make it harder for Americans to vote, and that's just since 2010. And Stacey Abrams was here at Brookings just a few weeks ago and what she said was that we're really at an inflection point on this issue. And I think that's right. I think we actually only have a few elections to make the decision of whether we are a country that considers the sanctity of a serious issue, who actually thinks that all of our citizens deserve and should participate in the political process, or we can make the choice to follow the past of the worst part of our nation's history and exclude people from the political process.

So we can either renew those politically exclusive traditions or we can move in the direction that I think we'd all like to imagine has been the long arc, right.

So filer voter is clearly not the silver bullet for all of these issues. I don't think any policy could be, any single policy could be. But I think it's a meaningful component of an agenda of political inclusion and of democratic revitalization.

Thank you guys. (Applause)

I'm going to welcome to the stage our panelists, Jessica Fulton, Chye-Ching Huang, and Jamila Michener, who are all experts on the intersection of public policy and

civic engagement. And I should introduce you to Jessica, who is going to be the moderator for the session. So come up here you guys.

Jessica is the economic policy director of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, where she engages in research and analysis to identify policies that advance the socioeconomic status of the black community. She also manages the Joint Center's policy incubator. Prior to joining the Joint Center she served as the external relations director of the Washington Center for Equitable Growth, and she also held positions in the DC Fiscal Policy Institute and the Chicago Urban League.

Thank you guys.

MS. FULTON: Thank you, Vanessa. I'm going to wait for folks to get mic'd up before I start. But can you all give Vanessa a round of applause for her presentation? (Applause)

I am really excited to be here today. I'm going to introduce the other panelists quickly and then tell you a little bit about why I was excited when I learned about this project. And then I have some questions for them, we're going to talk for a bit and kind of go back and forth, and then we're going to open up to audience questions. So start thinking about what you want to ask, questions not comments preferred.

So Chye-Ching Huang is the Director of Federal Fiscal Policy with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities federal fiscal team where she focuses on the fiscal and economic effects of federal tax and budget policy.

Jamila Michener is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at Cornell University. Her research focuses on poverty, racial inequality, and public policy in the United States. Her recent book, "Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics", examines how Medicaid, the nation's public health insurance program for people with low income, affects democratic citizenship.

So a tax expert, a policy person, and both. (Laughter)

So I am really excited to be here because Vanessa's work really helps me to think through how we think about who gets to be a citizen in this country, who gets to interact with our government. I think as a person who is a descendent of a community where we were literally written into the Constitution to not be full citizens in this nation, and as a person who interacts with the government very regularly and very intimately now, I think this is really interesting how we think about who gets to be an American.

In Vanessa's book, "Read My Lips", which you all should pick up, she talks about how tax paying matters quite a bit for how people think about belonging to society.

So I want to kind of turn to Chye-Ching for the first question, since she knows a lot about taxes and who pays them.

Over time, politicians have discounted lower income Americans. They assert that they don't pay taxes -- you think about Mitt Romney and the 47 percent -- and because of that maybe their voices don't matter as much as higher income folks. Can you talk a little bit about the reality? Do poor people pay taxes?

MS. HUANG: So I think there's a factual part of this claim and then there is a really moral judgment part of this claim, and I'll talk a little bit about the factual part. And really here I'm just repeating work by my friends I can see in the audience from the Tax Policy Center, that look at the fact that a few count both federal income and payroll taxes. Really, more than three-quarters of people pay federal taxes on net. And then of course you add in federal excise taxes, state and local taxes, fees that they may pay for other interactions with government. And on net most people in a given year are net tax payers. And then over time that number increases further. So it really becomes factually misleading to try to compartmentalize people into tax payers and non-tax payers, both in terms of the taxes people pay overtime and the fact that there are broader households that are outside

their tax filing units and their broader communities, that they may interact with grandparents who are using social security or other family members that they may be supporting outside the tax unit, it's really not possible to divide people up that way.

But of course I think the deeper sort of values question there is whether or not paying net federal income tax or net taxes overall is really something that should be something that determined whether or not your voice matters as a citizen, because of course many of the people who pay no federal income tax in a year, you know, they have a really front row seat into the ways in which the economy is working and in many ways failing. They may be out of the workforce for a couple of years because of medical issues or unemployment, a factor closure. And do you want to be saying that voice, that perspective on the economy is different or less valued? And that's something that obviously Vanessa has a lot to say about.

MS. WILLIAMSON: Yeah. I mean I think that that's a really critical question. One thing that I have been thinking about recently is that our tax system is decided by our laws, but the laws that govern our markets are also political decisions. So I think that sometimes we can privilege market outcomes that we actually know are fundamentally decided by laws that are not always ideal. And so we end up with enormous populations of people who are left with the impression, and I think are encouraged to feel, that their labor isn't valuable. And I think that it says it's often a short way of saying that we don't think those people are valuable. And that's not a very democratic, (inaudible) democratic way of thinking about the world.

Obviously, citizenship shouldn't come with a price tag. Like that just doesn't make any sense. We spent a really long time moving away from that model in this country, as has the rest of the world that involves itself in democratic practice. So that seems really clear to me.

But one thing, there's this phenomenon through American history of seeing tax paying as a way that you can contribute to your society. Because taxes are at the end of the day the part of your labor that you contribute to the public good. And I think it it's very reasonable to be proud of that.

And so given that Americans feel this sentiment that tax paying is one of the things you should do, it's part of your civil obligation, with remarkable regularity will tell you that it's like voting, which is very strange because voting is not mandatory and tax paying definitely is. But it's a sentiment that people hold that tax paying is like voting and something you have to do for your community.

We can tap into that sentiment. The problem is this misperception about who pays. But I think that encouraging people to see their civic responsibilities as something to be proud of is a fine sentiment.

MS. FULTON: So, Jamila, a lot of your work focuses on the interactions certain groups have with our government and with political institutions. Can you talk a little bit about why it's important to think about low income people, or other marginalized groups, and what do their lives look like, what is their interaction like day to day?

MS. MICHENER: So great question. One of the reasons why I have been excited about this project, that I know has -- you know, I've talked to Vanessa about in various ways over the years, is because it represents an opportunity to provide a different kind of interface and interaction with the government than most low-income people are in fact getting.

So there is no single story about the way that low income people interact with the government, but there are sort of modal experiences. And we can gauge these in a variety of ways. And my work really focuses on both quantitative ways of looking at this through large surveys where we can capture in a sort of broad way what's happening with

low income people. And then qualitative -- a lot of my time is spent just talking to people about their experiences.

And one of the things that is easy to forget unless you're thinking about people's lives and sort of the day to day experiences that they have, is that voting is probably one of the most distant and -- from some vantage points, right, the least impactful set of interactions that low income people have with the government and with the estate, right. What's much more sort of meaningful and much more impactful in their lives could be that bureaucrat who is at the public assistance office who controls whether you can get access to healthcare benefits, whether you can get access to food and nutritional supplements, whether you can get access to cash that you may need to be able to survive on a day to day basis, the police officer who is patrolling your block, who can decide literally whether or not you live or die, and all of the other -- you know, the child protective services person who can decide that you no longer deserve to have custody of your children, and all sorts of other figures who have control over where you live, what basic resources for survival you can have access over. And low-income people are not unaware that the kind of entity that the determines their access to a lot of those resources is the government.

And by and large, not in every single case -- and it's important to sort of think about differentiation -- but by and large, experiences with those different kinds of agencies and institutions are negative and they reinforce a sense of powerlessness, they reinforce a sense of worthlessness. I can't count the number of ways that people have expressed these sort of sentiments to me. And when there's a way that you interact with the government, which I think this is what sort of taxes represent, that reinforces your ability to make a contribution to the public good, and we can connect that way with your actual political engagement and participation, it is a kind of synergy and a bringing together of really important ways of thinking about your role in a polity.

And right now the state of affairs in the U.S. is that too many low income people don't understand themselves to have a role in our political community that matters and is meaningful. And so as many pathways as we have to changing that, I think it's for the better.

MS. FULTON: So, Vanessa, can you talk a little bit about the opportunity that you saw between like having this happen right at tax time?

MS. WILLIAMSON: So there has been some really interesting work done looking at what low income people experience at tax time. And the thing that startled me when I was reading some of this research was that it is one, as you say, one of the more inclusive experiences, one of the better experiences of government for low income people. And I think that says a lot about what the other experiences of low-income people have with the government.

And it struck me as -- because I had done these interviews where I would ask people, so explain what you think about the sort of tax paying and why do people pay taxes. And people would say something about the country or civic responsibility. Oh, what are other responsibilities like that. And I was expecting that people would either say a military draft or jury duty, which are the responsibilities that are actually like tax paying in that they are mandatory public service and take your time -- you know, they were blood and treasures. It's the commitment we make to our polity. No, they said voting. Every time they would say voting. And I just thought it was so striking.

So the idea that I had was if there is an opportunity, if there is a moment when low income people are having an experience of government that is comparatively positive, and one of the ways that it's positive is that it often involves the tax credit. So a refund at the end of the year is a very positive experience, especially for low income people who often rely on things like the earned income tax credit or the child tax credit to for

instance pay winter heating bills that have mounted up, or to pay off some debts, or to put money away for their kids' schooling, or purchase like a bigger ticket item, like replace a broken washer or dryer or get part of your car fixed, those sorts of things. The influx of money that comes in a refund is often one of the larger chunks of money that low-income people get to see during the year so they can put it towards these expenses that are otherwise I think very difficult to cover.

So at that moment I was like, why don't we use that moment to remind people and sort of actually encourage people and treat people with the sort of dignity that they deserve that, you know, you're citizens, this is one of the things you get to do, is vote. And so that was my initial sort of impetus for the project. And then it occurred to me that it just made sense bureaucratically, because tax filing is long and obnoxious. I'm in the Tax Policy Center and I still think tax filing is like a long obnoxious process. And why are we not taking that opportunity when you're already filling out paperwork to do one more thing.

MS. FULTON: So, Chye-Ching, I want to touch on something that Vanessa mentioned about tax time for a lot of working-class Americans being a time when they're able to get something back that will help them in their lives.

Can you talk a little bit about like what the tax experience is for people earning under $55,000, but like people who are going to these VITA sites?

MS. HUANG: So again, as Vanessa mentioned, many low-income working families are eligible for the earned income tax credit and/or the child tax credit, which are the tax subsidies in the tax code that are targeted toward working class Americans. And many of them often receive that amount as a refund together with amounts they've chosen to over withhold. So when you are talking about getting money back, they've actually paid more taxes deliberately often in order to maximize their refund. And it is really sort of very meaningful for day to day life. As Vanessa mentioned, a lot of the amounts we see going to

things like groceries, heating bills, sort of regular expenses, school supplies. But then we're also seeing through a lot of the research that people often spend quite a lot of this amount towards things that Kathy Edin and others have called opportunity building types of investments. So paying down debt, saving up for a bigger ticket item, such as a fridge so that they can buy groceries in bulk cheaper and save money across the year that way, a car repair, moving to a better apartment that has a better quality of -- either closer access to a job or just generally better hearing or other environmental issues.

So this is a really sort of important time of the year and people often have thought ahead to how they're going to use that refund amount. So it is a real sort of focusing time where many of these VITA sites do use sort of tax time as a way to engage people with other resources that might be useful for some of that thinking head. So things like financial literacy, the voting option as another sort of thinking ahead type piece that goes into that.

And what the research shows is that no matter how families use the refund and they use it for diverse needs. You know, low income people's lives and experiences are diverse and they have diverse needs. We're showing sort of growing amounts of research that shows that it really does make a difference, in particular for children and families that receive these income boosts. So from a range of things like low infant mortality, higher birth weight, better health during childhood, better test scores throughout schooling, and even things like increased college enrollment, because there is a really interesting study that shows having that lump sum amount at a salient time of year, if you have a senior in high school and you're thinking about whether or not you can afford that first year of fees for school and expenses, it actually increases college enrollment.

So there are a range of ways in which these refunds are really mattering. And I think again, interestingly, mattering in ways that are sort of forward looking for these families.

MS. FULTON: So, Jamila, there have been other ways that this country has tried to kind of increase participation. And I'm thinking particularly about the motor voter program.

Can you talk a little bit about what that is and who that works for, what are the challenges there?

MS. MICHENER: Yes. So the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, there are a number of different components to the National Registration Act, there are different sections. The kind of impetus behind the NVRA motor voter was to kind of expand the electorate. There were these moments in the '70s, and in particular in the '80s and toward the late '80s, early '90s when it became clear that, as Vanessa mentioned in her introduction, fewer and fewer Americans were voting to the point that folks were sort of motivated to do something about it. And the idea was to sort of remove as many barriers as possible to voter registration and to create as many pathways -- so not just removing barriers, but also create pathways to voter registration. And in particular, there was an awareness of who wasn't as likely to register to vote. And among that group were low income Americans.

So probably one of -- for me, for my work, one of the sections of the NVRA that stands out the most is Section 7. And Section 7 essentially said well, let's go to the places where we know low income people are. And they may not be as likely to register to vote at the DMV, but we know that they'll be at public agencies. So they'll be in various spaces where they sign up for public benefits. And in those agencies let's give them an opportunity to register to vote. One of the things that happened in the wake of the initial passage of the NVRA is that compliance with the law, especially with Section 7, especially with that piece, that component that was most focused on expanding the electorate to incorporate low income people, compliance just sort of dramatically dropped over time. And

the drop-in compliance varied a lot across states.

One of the things that I look at in a paper that I published a few years ago was well, what explains this, what's going on. And part of what explains the compliance, I find, is what looks to be like a form of institutional racism. So in states where a larger component of the population and of the electorate is African American, we see less compliance with the law. And there are all sorts of other things that explain the ebb and flow of compliance, but the general direction has been towards less rather than more compliance. And there has been sort of intermittent enforcement of the NVRA that varies, for example, depending on who is in office, like the presidential administration, and varies also on levels of enforcement at the state level.

And so we had this big moment where we kind of recommitted to expanding the electorate and creating more political equality. And it sort of culminated in this law that was supposed to change a lot and kind of the responsibility of the states to enforce and comply with this law really fell through the cracks, and fell through the cracks in ways that systemically undermined the incorporation of particular sets of groups of Americans.

And so our history isn't great. I think there are some things that -- there are some useful lessons here. One of the things that I find especially promising about voter filer is that I appreciate that Vanessa laid out some ways that states or the federal government can be a part of the process, but there are also these other options for nongovernmental entities to be involved.

And so even if a particular state, like Texas, for example, might not be super excited about getting people to register to vote, nongovernmental entities can still take sort of the reins and try to make things happen without relying on what might be an otherwise or recalcitrant state to take action. And so there are some more possibilities there for which actors can be players in making these things happen.

MS. FULTON: You mentioned that different states may have different levels of compliance with this law.

Vanessa, can you talk about the difference between Texas and Ohio? And were there any challenges? Like are there things that we could learn from this project? (Laughter)

MS. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, I could talk all day on this subject.

So, you know, I'm a political scientist and was, broadly speaking, familiar with the ways in which states had moved to make it harder for people to vote, but actually getting to experience them in the course of trying to run an experiment in two very different settings, was eye opening nonetheless.

So there have been a set of rules put in place in Texas, but not in -- and Ohio has its own voting issues. I'm not saying that Ohio has no voting issues -- but a set of rules were put in place in Texas that did not exist in Ohio that were -- their impact was to make it very hard to do a voter registration campaign. It was not especially hard to personally register to vote if you wanted to as an individual, but if what you wanted to do was register a lot of people to vote, it's really difficult.

And I'm just going to talk about a few of the rules that were put in place. And I should be clear that I actually had to put a fair amount of effort into learning these rules, I had to talk to county commissioners about it, I had to talk to the state board of -- you know, I had to speak to a lot of officials to actually even understand how I could within the law conduct a voter registration campaign. And I have enormous resources at my disposal in terms of understanding the law, of being able to reach out to experts on these issues. If you're just an average person who wanted to run a voter registration campaign in Texas, you do not have those things available to you.

But among the rules that we encountered were (1) if I wanted to collect a

voter registration form from one of you, well, first I can't because I'm not from Texas. (2) I would have to be an eligible voter. I don't technically have to have voted, but I have to myself be eligible to vote. So in an immigrant community, for instance, where there is a large population, particularly of older people who are perhaps not yet citizens but their kids are all about to become voting age citizens, it becomes harder to run a voter registration campaign, because if you aren't yourself eligible to vote you cannot collect a voter registration form from someone else. You have to cosign a special receipt for the voter registration form, which gives you the strong impression that you are validating the information, but you are a private citizen, so cannot in fact tell -- you cannot in fact judge whether someone in fact lives at that address. So there this sort of chilling effect that I think occurs because of that.' But even more important, in order to collect that voter registration form, it's not enough that I need to be an eligible voter in the State of Texas, I need to be deputized by the county. And that's a county by county deputation. And I believe there are 254 counties in Texas. So if I'm going to be sitting at a table collecting voter registration forms, like you see on every college campus every election year, I need to have gone to a special training at the country office. Now, in a county like Dallas the county office wants to help people get registered to vote. They cared a lot about it, you could get that training done I think every lunch hour and every day after work. Now, if you're in a county office and don't feel like encouraging voter registration campaigns, you could offer those trainings far less often. So you have to be deputized by the county and then you have five days to submit the voter registration form by hand to the county office. And it's five days, not five business days.

So there was a point at which I and my research assistant were sitting in my office looking at a calendar of the spring, because tax season is the spring, and figuring out if we collected a voter registration form after 5:00 p.m. on a Thursday, how could we arrange

a carpool situation to get those forms to the county office on Friday because Monday sometimes offices are closed. So we had to do -- and it was an enormously arduous process.

The other piece where I really saw the effect of voter suppression in the course of doing the experiment was we then matched the names to the voter file. And if you were here a few weeks ago and heard Stacey Abrams speak about this, or just followed the news, requiring an exact match of a name is a really good way to have names not match. And I was sitting there with the goal of getting every name to match. And so I got to see that, oh, apostrophes are a problem, oh, spaces are a problem, oh, alternate spellings of traditional name -- because obviously you fill out a form by hand, someone types it into a computer, if you have an unusual spelling of your name, it's going to be -- you're just going to be more likely to make errors. And so what I got to see firsthand is what we know in the aggregate, disenfranchises people of color and people from immigrant communities.

And so the extent to which it was more difficult to conduct this experiment in Texas was really -- I knew it going in, but I did not really know how much more difficult it was going to be. And it was actually one of the reasons I wanted to do it that way. I wanted us to do the experiment in a place where it would be hard because the point was not to make my experiment work, though that was great (laughter), the point was to test whether this would work in reality. So I can't just do voter registration in a place that voter registration is easy, where you have 10 days to submit a voter registration form my mail and you can collect voter registration forms without going to the county, and all those things, like Ohio. Yeah, sure, I could get my experiment to work there, but what I wanted to know was that my experiment -- you could take it to Texas, that you could take it to somewhere like Florida where they're making these rules more stringent, and actually expect to see a real effect in the real world.

But, yeah, Texas. (Laughter)

MS. FULTON: So, we're coming up on 2020, so things are happening in a couple of states. You talked about Stacey Abrams. Andrew Gillum I know is working on this in Florida. People are actively trying to make sure that more people are able to participate in our democracy.

I have a question I guess for everyone on the panel. What would change -- or why is this important -- like what would change if we allowed more folks, in particularly lower income folks, to participate more fully?

MS. MICHENER: You know, it's funny, I was giving a presentation recently and I was talking about expanding the electorate, and someone in the audience said, you know, I can think of some places where I don't necessarily want to expand the electorate. I can think of some places where if the electorate expanded those people would be wanting policies that I don't want. So what do you think about that, right.

And one of the things I said was, look, there is the kind of practical considerations that we all have based on our politics and maybe our partisanship, or what have you, there are outcomes that we would like to see happen in our political world, and there are folks that we know if those folks engage, those outcomes might be more likely to happen. And so that's one set of considerations.

I think another set of considerations that's important to me in addition is the kind of quality, the sustainability, and the veracity of our democracy, which sounds really cheesy. And often I put democracy in scare quotes, so it's not to say that I don't have my own cynicism around democracy in particular in the U.S. But it's what we have and it could get better or get worse. And I guess I suppose it could stay the same, but it seems like we're going to have to make a choice. Like it will be one or the other.

And so I think the best outcome is just that whatever the tangible material

outcomes are, that they are more reflective of more people's voices being involved in the process. And so that's the like top level most important outcome in my view.

I also think that like evidence suggests that when the electorate expands there are more voters who are democratic voters. So that's just the practical reality of what happens. Although that varies across place. So it's not the case necessarily that in Ohio or that in Wisconsin or that in rural areas across the country an expanded electorate is just going to be a boon for democrats, and so there's a way in which this has partisan overtones that are meaningful and we can't ignore, but there's also a way in which that's not fundamentally what it's about.

MS. WILLIAMSON: If I could follow up, I think that's exactly right. That it's certainly not the place that every place you put a filer vote program would be a boon for democrats. There's many places where that is certainly not the case. And I think that can get -- you know, in the national rhetoric, can get kind of washed away. Or I think that sometimes democrats imagine that just we'll make -- you know, it's a fine idea to make Election Day a holiday, that this would automatically just involve winning forever. You know, there a lot of people in this country and they have different opinions. You probably shouldn't put all your eggs in the basket.

So I think, yeah, there's real variation by area.

I mean the other thing that is more of a long-term consideration is what people think about politics now when they're not enfranchised and what they would think if they were actually asked to participate are different. Because you know like you have an opinion about something and then you actually have to make a decision and you look into it and you're like, oh, yeah, that knee jerk thing that was easy to say when I actually had no authority to make any choices, and what I actually will do now are different. And that's what it means to be asked to be part of the polity, I think. At least in the broad scope. That it's

not obvious to me that the sort of like political arrangement that exists now would simply be like expanded with more people on this end of the scale. I think it could work really very differently.

MS. FULTON: Chye-Ching?

MS. HUANG: I'm going to sort of answer that one by asking questions of the people that know better.

I think one thing that is sort of interesting that Jamila mentioned that I think sort of comes up in the connection with voting and tax filing is this idea that regardless of who you're expanding the polity too, whose preferences you're bringing, there is an aspect of voting that is somewhat like a public good and the fact that it increases overall trust that the political system is democratically reflective of the preferences of a broader set of people and that generates something about -- it says something about the policies that come out of that process if you have more participation at the start. You might want to pick up on that.

The second sort of question or issue that I'll throw back to you is that there's also a lot of research that suggests that even when you have voters preferences expressed, that they're not necessarily reflected on the outcomes of the political process because of a whole lot of other things. And I'm wondering whether you see sort of bringing more people into the process potentially likely to actually change some of that as well as what preferences are being expressed.

MS. MICHENER: That's a good one. The kind of running caveat that underlies everything I ever say is that I'm sort of deeply pessimistic, so just, you know, (laughter) with a grain of salt, however large you think the grain should be.

I do think there are representational issues that political scientists have like very adeptly identified, especially over the last -- I don't know -- many years, but in particular over the last decade or so of research that suggests that like even if everyone came out to

vote and we had a system that was equitable in terms of the franchised, that the actual sort of output, at least policy output of the system, wouldn't necessarily be representative of those folks' preferences, for a variety of reasons, including really compelling work that suggests that, for example, the political voice of the economically wealthy just carries more weight for a variety of reasons.

So it's not that sort of expanding the electorate is a silver bullet solution to our problems with democracy. There are a lot of other ways that we should think about this. But there is some interesting research I came across recently that suggests that people who vote are also more likely to do some other things. They're also more likely to just pay attention to politics in general, because now there's some buy in, or expected buy in in the future, so you're paying more attention. They are also more likely to sort of consume various forms of political information, and therefore to be knowledgeable about politics. And they're also more likely to participate in other forms of political engagement. And all of those things I think lend themselves to pushes that can help to ameliorate some of our representational issues. One of the reasons why it's possible for political elites to sort of not as much listen to middle class and lower-class voters and listen to wealthy voters is because wealthy voters are super aware, super knowledgeable, they're holding you accountable, and even if they don't have the numbers, they therefore have the power. But if voting gets more people to behave the way that wealthy people vote, then it can change some of those representational dynamics, right, without necessarily solving them, but change them in ways that are meaningful.

MS. FULTON: Vanessa?

MS. WILLIAMSON: I don't think I have anything to add. That was great. And I'm like the most optimistic. I am like a total Pollyanna of this. But I think that that's -- you know, one of the things that interests me in this work, and if I do more work along these

lines, is to figure out does reminding people to register to vote at tax time change their attitude about taxes? It could go the other way. I've been talking to you all about like okay the tax part -- you have our feelings about taxes and they'll influence your voting. It could easily be that now you've done your voter registration and now you're like where is this money going or what is the -- you could imagine that there could be an effect in the other direction. And so that's actually a piece of what interests me is thinking about those questions about how the experience of being asked to register to vote maybe changes your interest going forward.

The other piece that is like much more like on the ground practical is if we get people registered to vote in the spring it means that they will be newly registered voters throughout the campaign season, which means that they are more likely to be contacted and encouraged to actually turn out later in a way that can be -- you know, those repeated contacts can kind of be like oh, okay, now three or four people have asked me if I'm voting on election day. I should really get my act together kind of a thing.

So I think that that's a value of having an early in the year registration process.

MS. FULTON: More texts from various campaigns.

MS. WILLIAMSON: Everyone should suffer as we suffer. (Laughter)

MS. FULTON: Okay. I'm going to ask one final question. So if the audience has questions, please get ready.

And it's like basically just what else would you like to say? (Laughing) Have we not covered anything that you think is important for us to talk about today?

MS. MICHENER: I mean I'll just say one thing that really stands out to me from having read the report, and that came across in your comments, but I would just underscore is the kind of equity dimensions of this. Is that, you know, even in Texas, in a

place where there are lots of reasons to believe that there would be a chilling effect for a variety of reasons related to immigration, enforcement, et cetera, and where a lion's share of the people who are a part of the experiment were Latino, you still see increases. And in Ohio, where a disproportionate number of the experiment participants were African Americans, you see gains.

And so this is about equity, both along the lines of class and along the lines of race, and I think that's a really crucial component. And I think it's a component we can miss sometimes when we think about get out the vote. That's not to say that we don't want to get everyone out to vote, but it is to say that I think there are some representational bonuses to bringing out the folks who are otherwise easily marginalized in the broader political system.

MS. HUANG: Just picking up on that, I think the tax system, and particularly VITA sites, the EITC and CTC, are very well targeted to reach those groups at the moment. There are many ways in which they can be better at doing that. The EITC for so called childless workers who are not claiming dependents in the home -- for example, many of them are noncustodial parents, many of them have all the children, for example, but they receive so little earned income tax credit that many of them are taxed deeper into poverty by the federal tax code. So fixing that would be an additional reason for many of these workers who are outside the tax system to come into it.

The child tax credit at the moment, the changes -- you might have heard about the recent tax law doubling it. Well, in fact for the very lowest income working families, they get nothing close to that. About only the 11 million children are in families got $75 or less. So, again, expanding the child tax credit, eventually making it fully refundable, would be a much more inclusive way to target that credit and would have some benefits in bringing more filers into the tax system over time.

MS. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, I think just the last thing I would says is that a lot of Jamila's work and a lot of Chye-Ching's work, and this work relates to it as well, is sort of thinking about public policy in terms of creating a more active citizenry. And I think sometimes we forget that. We're like, okay, well we've transferred X dollars from here to here and what are the economic implications, and those sorts of things. But I think a way of thinking about our social safety net that I think is a valuable and sort of a non-condescending approach to think about our social safety net would be to think about what do we need to give people so that they can be the citizens that we want them to be. And that requires providing people with a certain independence.

And so this project -- on tax policy, maybe we can do this voting at tax time, but I think across economic policy certainly, and probably even more broadly than that, we can think about policies in terms of their political effects and in terms of a commitment to democratic practice in keeping with the ideals of the country.

MS. FULTON: Yes.

MS. REUBEN: Hi. I'm Kim Reuben from the Tax Policy Center. Long time VITA volunteer and probably a pessimist (laughter).

So I really like this in theory and the idea of it. What worries me, and I'd love to get some feedback on, do we think that given the political climate right now there could be unintended consequences that are negative to things like VITA programs?

Like, for example, if you think about the whole discussion over the census form and the fact that adding a question about citizenship would make it less likely for certain people to register. I'm just worried that if we start bringing up voting at VITA sites, especially by the sites in Texas, either non-citizens would start getting worried about government touching them there and not go to those VITA sites, or losing support for VITA programs from the government because it's suddenly seen as more political as it was

before.

MS. WILLIAMSON: Yeah. So I think there was two -- we actually spent a lot of time working on that in Texas because the last thing I wanted to do -- because undocumented in particular -- I mean people with green cards also pay taxes, but undocumented people file their income tax returns at the sites I was at. In Dallas there's a fairly large undocumented community and in particular some households have more than one citizenship status within the household. So you'll have one citizen and one undocumented person and they are on the same forms.

And so we were very concerned about the possibility that this would have a chilling effect on people filling out their income taxes, particularly at a time -- which was last spring -- of really heightened immigration enforcement or attention to immigration enforcement certainly, in addition to actually increased immigration enforcement. So I worked really closely with the VITA sites on this question, and there were a couple of approaches we took to ensure to sort of protect undocumented people. And I'd be happy to talk to the specifics of it, but the sites that are on the ground in those places felt they could do it. And that was to me the real standard, was making sure that people who were doing those day to day, face to face interactions with communities that are, particularly in this political context, especially challenged, felt that they could do voter registration and they could do it in a way that was safe for their clients.

More broadly, I mean I think that if suffrage becomes so politicized that we cannot encourage it, I think that we are in a place beyond repair. So I think that the value of that commitment to universal suffrage is something that we cannot protect by failing to try and achieve.

MS. FULTON: Up here.

QUESTIONER: As a member of a nonprofit, the League of Women Voters,

I wonder how you see a role we might have with tax preparers, and I'm curious what their objections might have been to registering voters. If you think there were viable ones or?

MS. WILLIAMSON: Oh, absolutely. So I think that people who work in VITA sites work really hard. Like you are doing people's taxes for free on a voluntary basis in your spare time. Truly this is selfless. No, but really, it -- and its huge financial benefit to low income people to do this work. So one of the reasons I was really concerned to make sure that voter registration itself did not lengthen the time it took to do tax prep was because the last thing that VITA volunteers need is another paperwork headache that they're dealing with, right. And I will tell you that doing an experiment is actually an enormous paperwork headache, and bless the people of the VITA sites in Dallas and Cleveland for being willing to do it, because there were consent forms and surveys and they had to send me copies of all these documents. I mean it was a lot of work. Actually, just doing voter registration outside of an experiment context would be a breeze for anyone who can do their taxes.

But there are specific ways that I suspect -- and it would really be about connecting the voter registration people who want to help with that piece to the VITA site and finding a way to make it work in their specific context. There are sites where it will be more valuable than others. Obviously, sites with larger citizen populations will find that they get more voter registrations. And so sites that are maybe on a college campus where the campus does voter registration anyway, wouldn't be a valuable service there.

So I think there are site specific aspects of implementation, but the goal -- and I would love to follow up with you about it -- would be to connect local voter registration groups with VITA sites -- and my experience of VITA sites across the country has been that a shortage of volunteers is the biggest problem -- and I know the voter registration groups in this country have a lot of volunteers, so maybe sort of ways that these groups can leverage one another to actually produce a really effective program locally.

QUESTIONER: Hi. I don't need a microphone. As an educator and a school administrator for over 40 years, I don't hear a lot about education. I know the registration is complex, and it's a very important, crucial issue, but people need to know why it's important for them to vote and feel that they're not disenfranchised when they go to a voting site once they are registered and feel comfortable with the process. And I think that's a big piece of it too. I mean we could make it available, and obviously it's complex, but if they don't have the interest and they're not advocating for themselves to actually do it and they're comfortable with the process, we could have it available, but people won't actually do it. Or they may register but not see the value in actually voting.

So what are we doing in terms of educating people?

MS. WILLIAMSON: I think I might throw that open to the group.

MS. MICHENER: Yeah, I think this is a great question. I think it's one of the reasons why there's no one single approach that solves everything. So there are different -- the nature of barriers to voting are varied. And so one barrier is really about like access. It's just I forgot to register, I didn't have the time to register, I don't know how to register. And given that opportunity, I will be registered and then I will vote. And there aren't any kind of like knowledge problems in terms of like understanding how the system works or even a lack of interest or efficacy, not really believing either that you have the ability to make a decision about your political choice that is sensible, or not believing that even if you make that choice it will have an effect.

And so this tackles like one aspect of a kind of structural barrier. The question of some of those other what I think of as like engagement level variables, like will people have interest, will they have efficacy, will they actually do this even once the institutional barriers are removed. I think that opens up a whole different kind of space.

I think education is a component of that space. There's a really interesting

study that was published late last year, in December of 2018, by a couple of political scientists who showed that experiences, for example, more so, for example, than civics courses, your actual experiences with authoritarian relations in school affect how and whether you engage politically over the long haul of your life. And so on a day to day basis within institutions like educational institutions, within institutions like political institutions of various sorts -- I'm working on a project now that looks at civil legal institutions, and people are having experiences in civil courts when they are being evicted or when their children are being taken away, or what have you, that are completely demobilizing. And so there are these other institutional spaces where the efficacy and engagement issues have to be addressed. And I think that we can think about ways to connect that to this, but I think that they're sort of different spaces, and I think we need to be able to have both in view at the same time because it's really a both-and and not an either-or, so it's important to ask this question and to think about the issue.

MS. FULTON: Right here.

QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm old retired guy. (Laughter) Thinking about all of us, so in today's world of big data and all of these things, everyone who was a citizen of the United States who was born here, there was a record of their birth. Anyone who immigrates to this country and becomes a citizen, there's a record of them becoming a citizen. So why do we have voters registration at all when we already know who all of the people are? And simply me showing up and saying I'm Dalton Williamson, I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and then a few clicks of a key stroke verifying that. Do we even worry about voter registration? And by doing away with that, do we make it easier for people to vote so we don't have this nonsense that went on in Georgia and these other places, this election? And everybody can vote. And then we really have a democracy.

MS. WILLIAMSON: Yeah, I think --

QUESTIONER: (off mic)

MS. WILLIAMSON: No, definitely. (Laughter) So we were actually talking about this beforehand. I don't think anyone from first principles would create our voter registration system, they would also not create our tax code. (Laughter) These are bubbled systems. And so this solution is a solution for this time and this political moment and this time in our history where a series of decisions have been made that we would have chosen differently otherwise.

Yeah, not, absolutely. I think that there are any number of simplifications and improvements, but given that we're -- particularly because I think we're at this inflection point in elections in this country, like we need to be able to protect our democratic institutions in the immediate few years, and then maybe we can do this approach and that would -- the long-term goal would certainly not be to combine two overly arcane processes into one slightly simpler process.

MS. MICHENER: I think it's worth sort of thinking both about how to address the immediate problem in front of our face, and also how to build and lay the groundwork for broader system level transformation. The system level transformation is really hard to think about right now, when it feels like even very simple things are hard to make happen on the large scale in many places throughout the country.

But I mean the appeal to logic is welcome. (Laughter)

MS. FULTON: Are there any more questions? Yeah, there and there.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Yes, picking up on that a little bit, I mean one of the issues is our federal system and even national elections are administered by states with all sorts of different rules. So getting to that logic is really, really hard.

Are there other sort of things happening at other states related to this that you're encouraged by? Or, alternatively, you're not so happy with?

MS. WILLIAMSON: So I think in broad strokes there are number of states that are moving towards an automatic voter registration system, which again, is veering in the direction of logic. And that's really encouraging. Illinois, Connecticut, Washington State, a bunch of states -- California -- have all sort of moved in that direction and I think that's extremely valuable. And I think that there could be a piece of this within that framework. That when government agencies are thinking about -- because you have to -- it's also where you live, so when you're encountering these different agencies and there's sort of an opt out rather than an opt in procedure to get people updated on the voter rolls, the tax bureaucracy is one of those agencies that I think should be a player in all of those discussions.

And sort of as Jamila was suggesting for the states that have, at least in recent years, committed to moving in the opposite direction, I think that there is a serious space for nonprofits and for-profit tax preparers both to maybe step into that breach and provide the services that we would prefer to see, you know, universally the case across all the states.

But I'd love to hear more from you.

MS. MICHENER: Yeah, so it's interesting. When I try to see if there's some sort of optimistic picture I can squeeze out of this somehow, maybe I'm biased, but one of the things that I think about is it connects back to what you said around big data. And big data really cuts in a number of ways. And one of the ways that it cuts is that even in the context of various forms of like electoral retrenchment, it provides us in the longer run for leverage for identifying the effects of some of the policies that strike us as more problematic. And so I think we're starting to see -- and we'll see more and more going forward -- more transparency and clarity around what the effects of policies that are undermining the electorate are. And I think that will just create additional barriers for implementing those kinds of policies, and it will also create additional sort of fodder for opposing them. And so

that's one way that I think big data can equip us with the kind of tools that we need to kind of at least I think erect an opposition to those who are inclined to continue to erode and undermine voting rights.

MS. HUANG: And I think in terms of using the tax filing apparatus with keeping in mind that of course this precedent for the line on the form asking whether you want to contribute to the presidential election fund, so it's not the only place on your tax filing forms that you encounter this idea of electoral process. So it's not necessarily a huge lift for states to sort of co-op some of that framework to do some of that work that you're talking about.

MS. FULTON: Vanessa, I'm curious, was there a way for you to identify if perhaps the people who were registering or doing these -- going to get their taxes done were returning citizens? So like how do we think about people who have actually had their rights taken away that may not be included in this universal right?

MS. WILLIAMSON: So this is something I looked into because I knew that the percentage of unregistered people in Texas who would register would be lower because many unregistered people in Texas can't register because they're non-citizens. But a second concern I had was this question of returning citizens. Ohio actually had less stringent rules on this as well, that is to say your voting rights are easier to re-obtain after incarceration. I couldn't see it in my data, but I think that it is a perfectly plausible avenue that could help -- particularly for states that re-expand voting right to formerly incarcerated people. Often the hurdle is that they have to re-register, so you have to put all of the sort of systems in place to make that occur, particularly for a population that has just been told about as firmly as possible that the state is no on your side.

So I think that it could be a part of those processes for sure.

MS. FULTON: There was a question back here.

QUESTIONER: So I was just wondering if there were any other like government functions that people associate like with a positive experience of their citizenship that like voter registration could also become a part of.

MS. HUANG: That's a hard one.

MR. MICHENER: A hard one of course from one my students at Cornell. (Laughter) In that class you take with me, I'm going to remember this. (Laughter) I'm only joking, that's not how I work.

So I've been thinking about this a lot lately. I've been working on a project together with a colleague of mine at Duke University, Carolyn Barnes, and we've been trying to think about whether there is any sort of -- or what heterogeneity looks like, because there is this overarching story of basically for poor people the government I creating a lot of demobilizing experiences. And we try to think about, like, but that's not always true. When is it true and when is it not true? And so we've really been thinking sort of program by program, policy by policy, where are these opportunities.

And there are a number of places that we have identified and a few that other political scientists have as well. So, for example, we have been doing some research looking into the WIC program, Women, Infant, and Children. And what we found is like unlike most other means tested programs, there is actually a boost in political participation for people who participate in WIC. One of the reasons that we suspect is the design of the program, it's very much about sort of actually engaging mothers, because the goal is to improve their nutrition and health and their children's nutrition and health, so there's an informational component. There's a way in which they are interacted with, with dignity as though they're people. And it turns out when the government does that, there's a lot of possibility for good happening.

Similarly, a lot of childcare programs, we've been finding that a variety of

after school programs -- my colleague, Carolyn Barnes, actually does this great work where she looks at these government subsidized after school programs and the possibilities that they hold for teaching both -- in particular the parents who rely on these programs in order for their children to have childcare -- teaching them political skills that they can then deploy in their lives, both on a kind of local level and more broadly.

So it's certainly the case there are sites of possibility. But those are fewer and farther between than we might otherwise like them to be.

MS. HUANG: I also think it's just important to remember the sort of potential for a virtuous cycle that we talked about before and to remember that these settings are policy choices. They settings of these experiences that have been designed to be negative and demobilizing, often intended to be that way. And potentially if we attack it at some point in this cycle of policy making and experience of the government, you know, create a process by which the policy outcomes are more reflective of preferences and are not being set up to be sort of deliberately punitive, we might end up in a better place.

So I think attacking this question from lots of different places in the cycle is a good answer to my previous question and to this one as well. And that also gets back to the heterogeneity across programs, across states. There are some states that are doing better than others in terms of your experience of signing up for healthcare, being able to access the care and affordable insurance that you're eligible for, your experience in doing that. And some states try not to make it easy.

MS. MICHENER: This is my chance to plug the fact that I have written an entire book about Medicaid (laughter) and federalism and political participation, how state variation in terms of the design and the administration of programs like Medicaid has implications that we can directly connect to various forms of political engagement.

MS. WILLIAMSON: If I can just build on it -- everyone should read the book

-- but --

MS. MICHENER: Yours too. (Laughter)

MS. WILLIAMSON: Read all the books. But I think that one of the things that feel counterintuitive is that when we're talking about different programs that direct economic resources, they don't have the same effect, like on a very basic level. And if we look at the programs that are available to middle class people, and historically, so things like social security or like the GI Bill, directed enormous amount of resources, help build and maintain the middle class in this country. And so it's certainly the case that government can do things that are extremely bureaucratic, but enormous government systems that have a direct impact on people's lives. And you have to go and get benefits, you have to fill out paperwork, and it has an enormous mobilizing effect. So we don't always -- we often fail to do that in means tested programs. But it's certainly the case that government can provide those kinds of benefits when they so choose.

MS. MICHENER: Absolutely.

MS. FULTON: Back here and then up here for two.

QUESTIONER: So I think it's Kathy Edin's work that shows that people who really depend on the EITC want to pay for their tax preparation because they really -- they think that the service they're getting is better or in some cases can get their refund faster.

And I was just wondering how you think we could incentivize those for-profit tax preparers to use this sort of registration system, this voter registration system so that we could amplify the impact?

MS. WILLIAMSON: Yes, this is the question I have, that I'm going to spend the next several months trying to answer. How do I convince a TurboTax or an H&R Block this is a good thing to do? It is obviously a very good thing to do, H&R Block and TurboTax. (Laughter)

Look, I think that if your entire -- I think there are a couple of things. One, if your entire business model is dealing with people when they're doing something that irritates them, why not add something that everyone sort of gets to feel a little bit good about? I mean, you know, like this is a thing that you're like -- I think it would be relatively easy to demonstrate, it makes your clients happy, it is not an enormous additional lift, it does not cost you extra money, which is a big point. And the reason I mentioned how long it took people to do taxes is, because, very reasonably, if you own a local H&R Block franchise and this is going to take an extra 10 minutes very every tax return you do, that's actually going to hurt your income.

So those were some of the considerations I have in mind. But I think that to some extent it's reasonable to think that major companies in the United States play such an enormous role in providing social benefits. That's how our healthcare system works, largely as an employer-based system. And if you're a company that wants to demonstrate your concern for the sort of dignity and respect that should be paid to your clients, then I think offering the opportunity to register to vote is a pretty good idea. It also doesn't take long and is very cheap. Please do it.

Thank you. (Laughter)

MS. FULTON: Right here.

QUESTIONER: We at League of Women Voters have had a little bit of success with some pilot programs in other areas, and I was wondering is there a pilot program available for this to maybe advocate for? I like the incrementalism of pilot programs.

MS. WILLIAMSON: So in a real sense, this was a pilot program. This experiment that I conducted was the first pilot of something that I would love to see taken up more broadly. I think, as with all experimental work, it is very worthwhile to do more than

once to replicate your findings. So, yes, I would be -- I am personally working on now making sure that we can do this again in 2020. So I would be very happy to talk to you about it individually.

And I think it also -- conducting the experiment again would be valuable for a lot of reasons. (1) Just because more people would experience it; (2) we could -- you know, experimental procedures are difficult and tax forms are difficult and tax filing is difficult. And we could make the process even more seamless.

So I think there is real room to try this again. And also each time you do it, you know, now I can -- the reason I did it was so that I could go up to people and say hey, it worked. And doing it again I think would just build that momentum.

So, yes, definitely.

QUESTIONER: One of the things that the League of Women Voters has definitely learned is that to register a voter is not necessarily to have that person vote. And so I know that wasn't part of your experiment, but I wonder if you came across anything coincidentally that you could suggest as to how to get registered voters to the polls?

MS. WILLIAMSON: So I did look at turnout for Ohio, where the primary election was late enough that the people who registered through my program could then vote and I would also be able to produce the results in a reasonable period of time. And it did work. So people in Ohio who registered to vote through filer voter voted at rates slightly higher than the state average. So I think that that is very promising. I think certainly much more could be done in that regard. There are an enormous number of political science experiments that have been conducted about how to forward registered voters, move them to turnout. And I think that like one of the sort of obvious things that I have considered if I did another pilot version would be to have people fill out a postcard that would be then mailed to them reminding them to vote. They just fill that out themselves and then the tax

prep nonprofit or for-profit holds on to those, drops them in the mail in October and you've got a personal reminder from yourself to get to the polls.

And apparently it's quite effective. And I'm sure that there are subtleties and more detailed ways of thinking about this work that could improve up on those kind of moves. But I think that it's a big component of what I would like to see in future iterations.

QUESTIONER: Just quickly going off of one of the earlier questions, as you're looking at expanding the program into other states, have you thought about dealing with the process of voter purging and how you interact with low income individuals that don't know that they're no longer registered to vote?

MS. WILLIAMSON: So this was a challenge we faced in Ohio, which has done some of those auto purges. And the way we dealt with it was to if you weren't sure, re-register. That's not a perfect solution (1) because you can annoy your county clerks quite a lot, and you don't want to do that. They're very hardworking people. And having them have to go through a bunch of basically unnecessary voter registration forms is like a mistake. But I think that, at least in this case, when it was not yet obvious -- and I don't know that it's obvious to anyone -- exactly what the impact of the purges in any given state are. You know, you sort of err on the side of caution with it.

But, yeah, I think that that's -- but I think there's also something you have to weigh, because there's probably -- you would know -- the more people know about the barriers to voting, I worry that at a certain point you could discourage people. So there's really like a narrow road to sort of walk on this question.

MS. MICHENER: Yeah. So I thought for a second like well you could just say to people, Ohio has done a whole bunch of voting purging, like you should probably really reregister just to be sure. But then there are two problems. One is that a lot of people having duplicate registrations, but also that the kind of potential for self-undermining, like

rhetoric where people care but the state is trying to stop you from voting. And then it's like, oh, I guess I'm not going to vote. So it's a little bit tricky.

MS. FULTON: Okay. We have time for one more question I think. Maybe two, we'll see.

QUESTIONER: I'm just curious about what you mentioned about filling out the voter registration form is very easy. And then you also mentioned that you could sort of move to a system where have just have an opt-in check box or an opt-out check box.

Did your research show maybe what additional effect it would have had if people wouldn't have to rewrite their name and address and date of birth and all those annoying things that they already put on their tax form?

MS. WILLIAMSON: So my research does not show that. And in fact because it was an experiment they had to fill out a consent form too, so (laughter) I think like the poor people. So I think there are many things about the experimental setting that actually like tamp down what would be the findings if it were a more natural process.

Canada actually does this. Canada does offer you an opt-in voter registration on their income tax forms. So it certainly can be done, as you pointed out. There's the federal contribution for elections that some states -- you can contribute to the wildlife fund, you can direct $3 of your thing to -- you know, all sorts of those sorts of things. So I think there's room for this.

The issue that I know to exist is the possibility that you need to have your residential address for voting purposes, and it's conceivable that you have a P.O. Box where you want your refund set, so it's possible that you'd need two lines no matter what.

But, yeah, maximizing the efficiency of that process would be a next step for sure.

MS. FULTON: And there was one more. No? Okay. Okay.

I think we can wrap up. Does anybody have any final thoughts that they would like to?

Okay. Well, thank you so much for having us all here. Thank you all for coming. (Applause)

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

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