

October 19, 2016

I write this letter to express my support for free public transportation on Election Day. I am a political scientist at UW-Green Bay and my expertise is in the area of elections, political participation, and voting behavior. I earned my Ph.D. in political science in 2013 and have written a book on U.S. elections, along with 17 academic journal articles on various aspects of elections and turnout in the United States. Thus, I feel like I have a unique ability to comment on methods that would expand access to the political process. There are a number of ideas that I would like you to consider as you think about free public transportation on Election Day. The views expressed here are my own; I am not speaking on behalf of the university for which I work.

1. I am not aware of any empirical studies from academic researchers that directly examine the effect of transit on turnout. As a social scientist, I can tell you that determining the extent to which free public transit increases voter turnout is actually a really difficult thing to assess empirically. Thus, I would be highly skeptical of any news article claiming to report the effects of free transit on voter turnout rates. Designing a study to assess the effects of free transit on turnout would be very difficult. You cannot simply look at aggregate turnout differences before and after implementing free transit to infer its effect, because increases or decreases in turnout may be due to a host of factors unrelated to the transit changes (e.g., changes in election type—local versus national, changes in levels of electoral competition, etc.). In order to isolate the effect of something like free Election Day transit, you would need to do an experiment—a methodology used by social scientists where there is a control and treatment group. In this case, it's hard to imagine randomly assigning people into different groups. It may be possible to conduct an experiment at some point in the future where you randomized *information* about free transit (e.g., send a random group of people a postcard notifying them of free bus rides on Election Day and then compare their turnout rate to the turnout rate among a group of citizens who were not informed of free bus rides), but I'm not aware of any studies that have done this.

2. It is important to note that it's not necessary to pursue just this one policy change (free Election Day transit) on its own. In the future, this change could be accompanied by other changes or initiatives (e.g., Get-Out-The-Vote campaigns sponsored by local governments and/or non-profits, information dissemination about importance of voting, local newspaper ads encouraging turnout, etc.). Free Election Day transit might be more impactful when combined with other interventions. Of course, it would be important to make sure that people know about free Election Day transit. People cannot take advantage of a service if they're unaware that it exists. I would note that I've done a fair amount of research on local elections and have found that some cities do a lot to encourage civic involvement while others do hardly anything. Since civic involvement is widely viewed as a positive, we (as a city) probably want to be on the side of encouraging involvement—even through small policies. A collection of small policies encouraging civic engagement might make an impact on turnout rates! It is also worth noting political scientist Alan Gerber's remark about the symbolic importance of policies that encourage political participation: "Making transportation free on Election Day is a clear statement that society values voting."

3. Many people seem pessimistic about the possibility of free transit leading to large increases in turnout. I agree that a one-time intervention is unlikely to lead to massive changes in voter turnout rates. *Very rarely does one intervention lead to large-scale behavior changes.* However, I would note that political scientists have been designing and testing interventions (using experimental designs) for at least 20 years now and even the most powerful techniques that political scientists have developed to mobilize voters yield fairly modest turnout rate increases. The most powerful GOTV message of which

I'm aware increased turnout by about 8% (Gerber, Green, and Larimer, 2008, *American Political Science Review*). Thus, we must be realistic about what we expect from policy changes. Perhaps this small change could lead to a broader community discussion about the importance of civic engagement and about the things that this community could do to encourage all forms of civic participation!

4. There may be concern that only a few people would take advantage of free transit to vote. However, consider this idea: Cities are often unsure of how many people use different public services (not all services—for many there are really good tracking systems—but some). Take parks and playgrounds for example. It's nearly impossible to know for sure how many people use public parks and playgrounds (to know that you'd have to put researchers in the parks to count all of the people who use them) in a year. There are likely some parks and playground sets in this area that rarely get used. It costs a lot to build and maintain a park or playground (plus the land could probably house a business or residences—which would bring in taxes). *Are parks and playgrounds worth their costs to a city?* Even if very few people use a park or playground, you'd probably not hear many people advocating that we do away with a city park or play set. There is value in these things beyond just pure economics. People can spend time with their families in a park or at the playground, community events can be held there, people can get exercise, kids can learn about nature, businesses can advertise all the great parks when recruiting employers from other areas, etc. *The same goes for civic engagement. There is value that cannot easily be measured in monetary terms.* How many voters would need to be mobilized in order for the cost of free Election Day transit to be worth it? 2? 5? 10? That's remarkably hard to answer because civic engagement has *non-monetary value*. I would also add that we (local schools, the state of WI, other places in the U.S.) spend all kinds of money on interventions that we know have virtually no impact on civic engagement. Study after study has revealed that civics classes in high school are not effective at promoting civic engagement in adulthood and yet some schools continue to require them. This is a very costly civic intervention that's ineffective. And yet no one has a problem funding it. The cost of funding free election day transit seems to me to be quite small (and not particularly risky) given the potential signal it sends to members of the community—especially those who do not have easy access to their own transit—about the importance of involving everyone in the political process.

5. Although Wisconsin has early and absentee voting, it is important to note that there are deadlines for each of these types of voting (between the early/absentee voting period and Election Day). Early voting, for example, ends the Friday before November 8th in Wisconsin. Studies have shown that some people decide to vote later in the election cycle than others—some even decide to vote on Election Day. There is often a flurry of GOTV activity, advertising, media coverage in the week prior to the election, which can mobilize people. In our system, it doesn't matter when you decide to vote. You are entitled to vote regardless of whether you decide to participate 5 months before Election Day or 5 hours before Election Day. Providing free transit on Election Day may therefore be important for those people who decide to participate in the political process late in the election (and haven't taken advantage of things like early voting).

6. Although many people do not find it difficult to walk or drive to the polls, there are people who have limited access to their own transportation, limited physical mobility, or both. Although the number of people in these situations may be small in number, it is important to recognize that not everyone is equally able to access a vehicle, find a friend or relative to carpool with, or walk to their neighborhood polling place. Take, for example, a member of the local homeless population. A person who is homeless may not have their own vehicle and may not have friends or relatives nearby who can provide a ride to their polling place. Even so, members of vulnerable populations are entitled to the same rights as others. As the Wisconsin Election Commission notes, "It is essential that all qualified Wisconsin electors

be provided with the opportunity to help choose the elected governmental representatives who develop and implement policies that affect them.” Free transit on Election Day, then, may provide an important opportunity for people who would normally find it difficult to make it to polling place on Election Day to get there.

7. In a recent interview (October 6, 2016) with Charlie Rose, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer had this to say about the importance of political participation in a democracy: “I hope that you will participate in public life. Now, that might be on the school board. It might be on a park commission. It can be anything. *Just go out and vote or persuade somebody else.* Why? Not because I’m trying to tell you what to do...it’s because if you don’t do that, this document [the Constitution] won’t work. The Constitution leaves vast space in between the boundaries for people themselves, through the ballot box, to decide what cities, towns, states...what kind of nation it wants. *If you don’t participate, it won’t work.*” I think that’s a statement we can all agree with. Civic participation is critical to the success of democracy. The word democracy literally means “rule by the people.” Thus, we should work as hard as possible to encourage *as many people as we can* to participate in democratic processes like voting. Why not strive to be a community that encourages participation—through initiatives that are large and small in scale?

Respectfully,

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