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TO: Interested Parties

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RE: Adding a few questions to federal surveys would significantly improve our understanding of electoral participation, including barriers & policy effects.

By expanding the number of federal surveys that include a few questions about voter registration and voting, the Administration could significantly improve what we know about voter registration and turnout, the effects of election policies on electoral engagement, and barriers that create persistent inequalities to participation.¹

Gathering this additional data would be of immense value to election officials, legislators, researchers, journalists, and the public. In particular, this data would improve the planning and design of future election policy and administrative reforms, and the evaluation of these changes. Also, as explained below, data from these surveys would substantially expand our knowledge about populations with low participation rates.

To understand disparities in registration and voting and the impact of state and federal policies, we largely depend on analyses of a few sources of information:

1. The Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS),
2. State voter files,
3. Surveys and experiments conducted by academics or nonprofit advocacy and research centers.

However, these sources have numerous limitations:

- Key demographic variables must be added to voter files through methods that vary in accuracy for some variables and for some demographic groups. Moreover, voter files can be expensive, and some important variables cannot be appended to voter files using these methods.
- While the CPS and some non-governmental surveys contain some demographic information, many other federal surveys have far richer data on individuals and households (see below).
- Surveys and experiments conducted by academics or nonprofit advocacy and research centers are often one-shot projects or have limited sample sizes.

Several large-scale federal surveys, such as the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the American Housing Survey (AHS), and the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the CPS (ASEC), offer the following benefits for research that could shed fresh light on disparities in registration and voting, among other important topics on the administration of US elections:

¹ Note that government asks respondents neither for their party affiliation nor for whom they voted. Instead, they ask respondents if they are registered, if they voted, if they voted in-person or by mail, reasons they did not vote, etc.

1. Many federal surveys collect far richer data than the November CPS. For instance, the income data in the CPS is relatively simple and inexact. The November CPS also lacks questions about health, car ownership, transit use, participation in government programs offering voter registration services, social isolation, and many other topics related to registration and turnout.
2. Some federal surveys are monthly or add new respondents each month. Monthly data would make it possible to understand how voter registration changes over time.
3. Some federal surveys sample populations not in the CPS or over-sample low-income respondents, potentially increasing the accuracy of what we know about these groups.
4. The timing of some surveys (or other months of the CPS) would allow for studying voter registration and voting in elections other than the federal general election.
5. Experimenting with the wording of questions for new federal surveys would allow for much-needed research on reducing non-response and over-reporting without altering the November CPS prematurely.

There are also opportunities to improve what is available from the CPS:

- The Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), conducted every March, is an extended version of the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). ASEC includes a larger sample and gathers far more data than the November CPS. If the CPS added the six questions from the November supplement, or similar questions, to ASEC, even if only for a few years, it would offer expanded research opportunities on essential questions, particularly about vulnerable populations.
- Another improvement to the CPS would be to have it conduct a verification of the statements by respondents on registration and voting. Currently, the CPS suffers due to non-responses to some registration and voting questions. Moreover, recent research suggests that the CPS overestimates registration and turnout of non-whites. If so, research may misstate the harm or benefits of various policies. Validation studies, even if infrequent, would help clarify concerns about over-reporting and improve our understanding of non-responses.

There are precedents for survey expansion. For instance, several years ago, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) dropped questions about access to grocery stores from the AHS. However, after First Lady Michelle Obama launched a campaign to address food deserts, HUD was able to quickly insert an updated version of these questions into the AHS. Second, disability rights advocates successfully urged the Census Bureau to permanently add six questions about disability to the CPS starting in 2008. Finally, academics successfully encouraged the Census Bureau to add a new CPS supplement on civic engagement and social capital, now included in one month every other year.

Additional and more detailed data, even if collected for only a few years, on electoral participation would be a real boon to vital elections research. If organizations are discussing these issues with the Administration or a federal agency, or if you wish to discuss this further, please reach me at doughrness@gmail.com. This month, I am contacting an acquaintance highly regarded in the federal survey community who could be a great sounding board regarding the feasibility of these ideas.