

RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 271

■ Military Service and Political Participation in the United States: Institutional Experience and the Vote

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ABSTRACT:

“This article tests whether military service is associated with subsequent electoral engagement by veterans. In particular, we are interested in how military service may help to overcome the costs of participation for those with relatively low levels of education. We thereby examine Current Population Survey (CPS) data from 1994 to 2014 to understand how veteran status is associated with participation for Anglos (non-Latino whites), African Americans, and Latinos. We find that prior military service generally increases the likelihood of voting, even after controlling for standard demographic determinants. Furthermore, the participatory boost is strongest for those with the lowest levels of formal education. Military service is also important to shaping participation in “off year” elections, which typically see lower levels of overall turnout. These findings suggest that serving in the military not only spurs participation but also helps to overcome the socioeconomic dynamics that often impede political participation in the United States.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Voter participation has long been linked to socioeconomic factors, including educational attainment, such that the information, skills, and experiences associated with greater educational attainment help overcome barriers to voting. It is hypothesized that the military, similar to other institutions that help members develop civic skills, may help explain political participation.
- Using data from the 1994 through 2014 Current Population Survey (CPS), this study finds that military service is associated with greater voter participation. Holding socioeconomic and demographic characteristics constant, veterans are more likely to vote than nonveterans. Non-Hispanic white and African-American veterans are more likely to vote than their nonveteran peers and Hispanic veterans with lower educational attainment are more likely to vote than Hispanic nonveterans but the effect of military service on the propensity to vote decreases as educational attainment increases. The effect of military service on increasing voter participation is strongest among those with less educational attainment and during midterm election years.
- These findings highlight the importance of the U.S. military in understanding voter turnout and the impact institutions may have on reducing the socioeconomic bias in voter participation.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Service members, military spouses, and veterans should remain up to date regarding their local voter registration deadlines. Findings from this study suggest that prior military service is positively associated with voter turnout among veterans with fewer years of secondary education. Further increases in political participation among veterans may help reduce the bias in those with higher socioeconomic status having comparatively greater voter turnout. Reducing this bias may help increase and more accurately represent the needs of voters with fewer years of higher education. VSOs should leverage their large memberships and encourage veterans to register to vote. These organizations should also provide their members with accurate and nonpartisan election information to help limit the spread and influence of misinformation as it pertains to elections.

FOR POLICY

Military service is an important predictor in understanding the propensity to vote. Policymakers should ensure that service members and their spouses have access to information regarding how to register to vote and how to cast absentee ballots. The DoD should include reminders and information for service members regarding how to make changes to their voter registration during their transition out of the military. Policymakers should emphatically refute attempts by state-level lawmakers seeking to limit absentee ballots among military service members.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research suggests that the U.S. military is an institution positively associated with voter turnout, especially among those who would otherwise be less likely to vote. Future studies should investigate which institutional aspects of the military foster political participation and identify barriers that service members and veterans may encounter when voting. The 2020 presidential election saw the highest voter turnout since 1900. Data used in this study investigated voter turnout from 1994 to 2014. Future research should examine political participation in recent elections and identify potential motivators for veteran voting.

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