Research Statement

Noah McKinnie Braun, University of Pittsburgh

I am an applied microeconomist who studies how the political institutions of the United States drive economic outcomes, with a particular focus on racial inequality. My research is motivated by my belief in the importance of the equitable distribution of public goods by all levels of government, and that a necessary condition for ensuring equitable treatment by the government for all citizens is equal access to the ballot box. With this motivation in mind, my current working papers focus on the impact of the Supreme Court's *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, which significantly weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by effectively removing the preclearance provision for states with a history of racially discriminatory election laws. The Voting Rights Act was a landmark piece of legislation that had widespread impacts on closing racial gaps in economic and political outcomes. Present day changes to election laws in the aftermath of the *Shelby* decision threaten to widen these persistent racial disparities, and my work documents the impact of these election changes on political participation. I also have an active research agenda in urban economics and the provision of public spending across fragmented levels of governance.

Impact of *Shelby County v. Holder*

In my job market paper, "Voter ID Laws Impact Turnout Through Registration", I analyze the effect of Virginia's 2014 voter ID law on turnout and registration rates. Voter ID laws are one of the most significant and widely adopted forms of voting restrictions since the Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelby*. Voter ID laws have been compared to poll taxes, struck down as racially discriminatory by multiple state supreme courts, and are currently on the books in some form in 36 states as of 2023. Previous research has found that the proliferation of voter ID laws across the US has had limited impact, despite fear from civil-rights advocates that these laws would suppress minority voters. I advance the literature on voter ID laws by studying how Virginia's 2014 law impacted overall turnout *and registration* rates, finding significant and durable declines in both measures. To do this, I gathered data on registered voters who lack DMV records and filed Freedom of Information Act Requests with each of Virginia's 133 counties and independent cities to track changes in voting precincts over time to identify areas of the state where more people are likely to be impacted by the voter ID law. My findings suggest that the decline in overall turnout rates in voting precincts with higher shares of voters likely to lack valid ID is driven by declines in registration rates. This deterrent effect, where individuals never register to vote in response to higher voting costs, is novel to the voter ID literature which largely uses voter roll data to measure the impact on turnout among already registered voters. I also consider the role of countermobilization against voting restrictions and find that the impact of the voter ID law was muted in more Democratic parts of the state, suggesting successful mobilization against the new voting requirement.

In, "Reduced Flexibility in Voting Differentially Impacts Black Voters", Daniel B. Jones and I study the impact of changes to the ease of voting in the aftermath of the *Shelby* decision on the racial turnout gap in North Carolina. First, using a spatial regression discontinuity design, we find that living closer to an early in-person voting site increases use of early in-person voting. This increases overall turnout of Black voters, but not white voters, as white voters close to an early voting site substitute away from election day voting. Second, we combine our regression discontinuity design with a difference-in-differences approach to assess the impacts of a 2013 North Carolina law reducing the early voting period from 17 to 10 days. We find that the law specifically reduced turnout of Black voters, while white voters again shifted to voting on election day. Black voters, who we show are significantly more likely to cite external personal reasons for being unable to vote (schedule conflicts with work, illness/disability of self or family member, or being out of town), are less likely to substitute to election day voting and see their turnout decline by 3 percentage points.

While the previously listed projects study individual election reforms, in "Disparate Impacts of *Shelby County v. Holder* on Turnout" (revision requested by the *Journal of Public Economics*), Stephen B. Billings,

Daniel B. Jones, Ying Shi, and I study whether the *Shelby* decision and the removal of the Voting Rights Act's preclearance provision disproportionately impacted ballot access for Black and Hispanic registered voters. We use a dataset with the universe of registered voters, combined with Census block-level sociodemographic attributes, to document a decrease in turnout for Black, relative to white, voters living in states previously covered by the preclearance provision of the VRA. These effects are concentrated in counties with larger Black and Hispanic populations, consistent with strategic targeting of voter suppression.

Urban Economics and Public Goods

Another strand of my research studies how local government contributions to individual migration decisions and the rise of partisan spatial sorting. It has been documented that Republicans and Democrats increasingly live in separate neighborhoods in a manner distinct from racial and ethnic segregation, which threatens our ability to adequately provide public goods and services. In, "Local Politics and Migration Choice", Jiangnan Zeng and I combine individual voter data from North Carolina with a dataset on local elections to measure how voters' migration decisions are impacted by the election of local officials of the opposite party. We employ a close elections regression discontinuity design and find that the close election of a Democratic mayor causes Democratic voters to stay in the municipality and Republicans to leave at higher rates, providing evidence that partisans are sorting in response to local politics.

Part of my motivation for studying the provision of public goods is my belief that academics have a responsibility to do work that is useful to the local community that we are a part of. With that goal in mind, "Improving Citizen-initiated Police Reform Efforts Through Interactive Design: A Case Study in Allegheny County" (*Equity and Access in Algorithms, Mechanisms, and Optimization, 2022*) was a project with Yongsu Ahn, Eliana Beigel, Collin Griffin, Sera Linardi, Blair Mickles, and Emmaline Rial that created tools for citizens and community organizers to more effectively advocate for police accountability and reform. We created an open collaborative network that works to overcome the issues of data inaccessibility, data complexity, and the fragmentation of data across different municipalities. This project again utilized the Freedom of Information Act process to gather union contracts and other data on over 100 police departments in Allegheny County. We used this data to create a web platform with a searchable database of police union contracts and visual aids to help users access important information without having to engage in complicated legal documents.

Future Work

Moving forward, I plan to continue working on my research agenda focusing on the ongoing wave of voter suppression bills across the country. An ongoing project of mine applies recent advances in estimating difference-in-difference models when policies have staggered rollout to the study of voter ID laws and the expansion/contraction of convenience voting. Building off of my current work, I plan on studying the relationship between the adoption of voter suppression bills, political participation, and government finance decisions. I will also continue working on projects related to public spending on education in California, where I find that access to regressive taxation policies to raise funds exacerbates inequality across districts. I have also created a dataset of school level education outcomes and spending to assess the provision of public education funds within and across racially segregated school districts.