Economics Bulletin

Volume 43, Issue 4

Who should be behind the wheel? A study of Oregon's Measure 88

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Abstract

In 2014, Oregon voted on Measure 88, an initiative that could provide driver cards to state residents without proof of legal presence in the United States. Measure 88 was the source of considerable public debate. Proponents argued for the safety benefits of reducing the number of unlicensed and uninsured drivers. Opponents primarily argued that Measure 88 was bad for national security and would encourage illegal aliens to migrate to the state. Despite spending more money and having the support of numerous nonprofits, community groups, and the Governor, Measure 88 failed at the ballot box, obtaining only 34% of votes cast. We examine county-level voting on Measure 88 using a median voter model to better understand why this measure failed. Fatal crashes in the prior year were not associated with yes votes in a statistically significant manner. Employment in construction and average commute times were negatively associated with ``yes' votes. Counties with a higher average income, higher employment in agriculture, and more registered Democrats were more likely to vote ``yes.' While Oregon leans Democratic, over 34% of voters are not affiliated with any party. The failure to capture these decisive voters appears be the source of Measure 88's failure.

Citation: Kerianne Lawson and Joshua C. Hall, (2023) "Who should be behind the wheel? A study of Oregon's Measure 88", *Economics Bulletin*, Volume 43, Issue 4, pages 1797-1801
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Submitted: July 11, 2023. **Published:** December 30, 2023.

1 Introduction

In November of 2014, voters in Oregon went to the ballot box to vote on Measure 88. This was a veto referendum, asking the citizens of Oregon to affirm or reject State Bill 833. The referendum (like State Bill 833) proposed that Oregon issue four-year driver's cards to individuals without requiring them to prove that they are legally residing in the United States (Wogan, 2014). It was decisively voted down 66% to 34% (Oregon Secretary of State, 2014a).

This resounding defeat is puzzling for two reasons. First, the measure was a veto-referendum. State Bill 833 passed the Oregon House 38-20, Senate 20-7, and was signed into law by the Democratic governor. Even though the bill could have passed along partisan lines, it received bipartisan support. Five of 25 Republican House members and 6 of 13 Republican Senators supported the legislation. Second, Measure 88 had widespread policy-maker and special interest support. For example, the Democratic Governor John Kitzhaber, the Oregon AFL-CIO and numerous other labor unions, and business groups such as the Oregon Business Association publicly supported Measure 88. In the Oregon voters' pamphlet, political parties and individual groups give their stance on candidates and ballot measures. For Measure 88, there were 29 separate groups or individuals that submitted arguments in favor and only 8 in opposition (Oregon Secretary of State, 2014b). Of course, the number of supporting arguments may not be related with how many voters are in support of the measure. They can, however, provide clues for why Oregon's residents voted like they did (Oregon Secretary of State, 2014b).

We use an empirical median voter model – informed by arguments made in the public debate – to understand the defeat of a referendum that passed with bipartisan support. We proceed as follows. In Section 2 we discuss our empirical approach and data. Section 3 presents our empirical results, while Section 4 concludes.

2 Empirical approach and data

Holcombe (1989) explains the median voter model in theory and practice. Here we use the term median voter model as shorthand for a model that captures the preferences of the median voter in an area as well as special interests (Congleton and Bennett, 1995). A number of recent papers use an empirical median voter model to better understand the passage or failure of a policy change (Coates and Humphreys, 2006; Sobel, 2014). Typically, but not always, these are referenda. For example, Reed et al. (2019) use a median voter model to explain why Washington state voters vetoed Initiative 732, a statewide carbon tax. In an international context, Matti and Zhou (2017) analyze voting on Brexit to understand whether demographics or economics better explained the decision to exit the European Union. Other recent empirical median voter papers include Hall and Karadas (2018); Johnson and Hall (2019); Wadsworth (2020). Following the literature, we try to explain county-level vote totals in Oregon using median voter and interest-group variables.

on Measure 88. This data comes from the Oregon Secretary of State (2014a). Our explanatory demographic variables representing the demographics of the average voter in a county, such as

Our dependent variable is the percentage of votes in a county that were 'yes'
average individual income and average education levels (in years), come from the US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2019). We also use the arguments made for and against Measure 88 in Oregon Secretary of State (2014b) to inform our variable choice. For example, proponents claimed that requiring drivers to take exams and be insured regardless of their legal status in the country would make Oregon's roads safer and would help with identifying individuals involved in accidents. We capture concern over safety using the number of fatal crashes in 2013 in each county from National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (2019). The number of highway miles by county is from Road Inventory and Classification Services (2015).

Many proponents were business owners and agricultural employers. They argued that illegal immigrants often drive to work despite their status. Giving them a driver's license would allow for proper training and insurance. Opponents focused their concerns on the implications of giving undocumented residents of the state an official form of identification. For example, opponents argued that the card could be used for air travel, despite the bill saying otherwise. This argument turned out to be correct (Wogan, 2014). Similarly, opponents argued that it encouraged additional illegal immigration and would make the state a 'magnet' for undocumented individuals.

For our analysis, we used the American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2019) from 2014 and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System from 2013 (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2019). We gathered voter registration information and the voting results from Oregon's Oregon Secretary of State (2014a). Information about Oregon's roads and counties comes from Road Inventory and Classification Services (2015).

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	Min	Max
% Yes	23.89	12.30	55.41
% Democrat	44.49	25.74	78.21
% Hispanic	9.84	5.08	15.12
% Immigrant	6.56	3.62	15.89
% Agriculture	9.38	0.90	29.20
% Construction	12.85	5.60	24.90
Average Income	16386	11723	25811
Average Education (years)	15.50	14.91	16.37
Average Commute Time (in minutes)	19.49	12.40	31.90
Fatal Car Crashes	8.69	0.00	52.00
Highway miles	530.70	221.50	1144.20

Table 1 provides summary statistics of all variables used in our analysis. There are far more registered Democrats than Republicans in Oregon. However, Oregon has a large number of independent voters. It is important to note that only county that voted in favor of Measure 88, Multnomah, is also the only county that has over 50% of registered voters

being Democrats.

3 Empirical results

We estimate our model using Ordinary Least Squares. Our results are given in 2. In Column (1), we only include the percentage of registered Democrats in the county. The coefficient on % Democrat only gets larger in magnitude as additional covariates are introduced in columns 2-4. These results confirm that Democratic voters, like their representatives in the Statehouse and Governor's office, largely supported this measure.

Table 2: OLS Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
% Democrat	0.743***	0.801***	0.813***	0.814***
	(0.060)	(0.090)	(0.086)	(0.089)
% Hispanic		0.360	0.436	0.436
		(0.342)	(0.343)	(0.355)
% Immigrant		-0.800	-1.141	-1.139
		(0.734)	(0.771)	(0.806)
Average Income		0.000*	0.000*	0.000*
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Average Education		-0.024	-0.028	-0.028
		(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.034)
% Construction		-0.007**	-0.006**	-0.006**
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
% Agriculture		0.003*	0.003*	0.003*
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Average Commute Time		-0.005**	-0.005**	-0.005**
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Fatal Crashes			0.001	
			(0.001)	
Fatal Crashes/Highway miles				0.000
				(0.000)
R-squared	0.812	0.870	0.873	0.868
White Test p-value		0.203	0.291	0.479
Breusch-Pagan p-value		0.184	0.088	0.151
Durbin-Watson p-value		0.324	0.982	0.808

Note: Statistical significance denoted by '***' 0.01 '**' 0.05 '*' 0.1.

In column 2 we add all of our additional independent variables. Average income, is positively related to voting on Measure 88, while the percentage of workers employed in the construction industry and average commuting time are negatively associated with voting yes. These findings stay the same when we add fatal car crashes in column 3 and fatal car crashes divided by highway miles in the county in column 4. In columns 2-4 we conduct three tests related to the relationship between the covariates. In all of the cases, we do not

find any evidence of heteroskedasticity or serial correlation in our data.[1]

Our results suggest that concerns about road safety, at least as proxied by fatal crashes, did not influence voting patterns on Measure 88. Areas with longer average commute times were less likely to vote for Measure 88, but this could be interpreted as measuring suburban voters rather than individuals exposed to transportation risk. We do find support for areas with more agricultural workers supporting Measure 88. Unlike agriculture, construction employment in Oregon is largely unionized. Thus the negative sign on construction employment reflects that construction workers viewed Measure 88 as making it easier to work outside the formal market.

4 Conclusion

In an election with several other highly partisan issues that passed in favor of the Democratic party, like legalizing the recreational use of marijuana, Measure 88 failed even though its supporters were aligned with the Democratic and Progressive parties (Oregon Secretary of State, 2014b). While much of the percentage of the 'yes' votes for the measure can be explained by the presence of registered Democrats in a given county, the size of this core support was not enough to pass Measure 88. Other factors positively associated with a yes vote on Measure 88, like average income and the percentage of workers employed in agriculture, while statistically significant, are economically small. In addition, their support was apparently offset by the negative relationship between longer average commute times and the percentage employed in construction.

[1] We also compute the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each variable in the model. The "% Immigrant" and "Average Income" variables produce values greater than 5, which suggests that these variables are highly correlated with other covariates and calls the reliability of our estimates into question. However, our results are consistent when these variables are omitted from the specification, and when the VIF test is conducted with this specification, all values are under 5.

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