The Effect of Blue Laws on Fatal Accidents

By Daniel Steefel

Blue laws have been enacted for hundreds of years to restrict commercial activities on Sundays. Although most states currently permit the on-site sale and consumption of alcohol on Sundays at locations such as football stadiums and bars, 14 states maintain blue laws prohibiting off-premise sales of distilled spirits. However, as a growing number of states have repealed or relaxed their blue laws over the last several years, this alcohol control policy has become a popular topic of debate. Supporters of these laws argue the importance of a uniform day of rest and the positive effects from decreased alcohol consumption, while opponents see the laws as unnecessary, religious-based restrictions of consumer choice and potential tax revenue. This paper adds to the policy debate by evaluating the effect of this alcohol control policy on a safety issue related to these blue laws: fatal car accidents.

In a study that garnered national media attention, Lapham and McMillan (2006) analyzed the effect of repealing a blue law in New Mexico in 1995. They found that repeal of this law increased fatal accidents on Sunday by 42 percent. Public officials subsequently have seized upon this figure to defend the bans by emphasizing the safety benefits of maintaining blue laws in their states.

This paper offers a more extensive examination of the purported connection between Sunday off-premise sales bans and fatal car crash-continued on inside...
es across all states between 1990 and 2007. Over the course of this sample period, 13 states repealed or relaxed their Sunday sales bans of distilled spirits, beginning with the state of New Mexico in 1995 and concluding with the state of Washington in 2005. The variation over time in the enactment of policy changes allows me to account for trends in fatal crashes that occur simultaneously, but are unrelated, to the repeal of blue laws. The study also examines other alcohol- and traffic-related laws, such as laws requiring seat belts or prohibiting driving with a blood alcohol content above 0.08.

The results of this analysis indicate that repealing a blue law during the study period increased fatal crashes occurring on Sunday relative to weekdays by 7.5 percent. While not as large an effect as in the New Mexico study, this result still implies a sizable increase in fatal accidents due to the repeal of blue laws. For example, in 2007, there were more than 1,800 Sunday fatal crashes in states that still maintained a blue law related to distilled spirits, meaning that even 75 percent fewer crashes represent at least 135 saved lives. In addition, I find that enforcing a seat belt law reduces fatal crashes by 5.1 percent. Overall, the policy implication of this study is that blue laws related to off-premise alcohol sales do lead to a non-negligible reduction in fatal crashes, but there may be other less controversial traffic-safety measures, such as seat belt laws, that yield similar effects.


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**Does College Athletics Affect Post-Secondary Education and Career Achievement of Athletes?**

*By Joseph Ayers*

The debate over “student athletes” in our society and the effects that athletics has on a person through high school, college, and beyond often becomes very polarizing. Negative outlooks center on the belief that there is too much emphasis on succeeding in athletics instead of academics and that athletes go through school below the normal development curve and ultimately emerge greatly disadvantaged from their peers.

The counter-arguments to these negative views describe athletics as a societal tool that teaches children the importance of dedication and hard work and allows those unable to afford college an opportunity to receive a free education. What is missing from this debate is any systematic evidence on what really is happening to student athletes as they progress through college and into the workforce. Are they making the most of their opportunity to attend college by graduating and becoming productive citizens or are they leaving school with less education than their non-athlete counterparts?

To answer these questions, I compared the academic preparedness, collegiate experiences, and labor force success of three distinct groups: high school graduates who did not attend college, non-athletes who attended college, and students who attended post-secondary education and competed in...
The right to vote is one of the most cherished features of American democracy, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) is heralded as a landmark in civil rights legislation. However, controversy consistently has surrounded Section 5 of the VRA, which mandates that a covered jurisdiction must obtain “preclearance” from the U.S. Attorney General by demonstrating that the change does not have the purpose, and will not have the effect, before any proposed voting change is legally enforceable.

How Effective Is Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act?: A California Case Study

By Jessica Lee

The right to vote is one of the most cherished features of American democracy, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) is heralded as a landmark in civil rights. However, controversy consistently has surrounded Section 5 of the VRA, which mandates that before any proposed voting change is legally enforceable, a covered jurisdiction must obtain “preclearance” from the U.S. Attorney General by demonstrating that the change does not have the purpose, and will not have the effect.
of discriminating based on
race or color.

The VRA and Section 5
have been renewed four times
since their inception. During
the most recent reauthorization
in 2006, heated debate arose
regarding the constitutionality,
effectiveness, and relevancy
of the preclearance standards.
The Supreme Court is now
reviewing the constitutionality
of Section 5 in Northwest Aus-
tin Municipal Utility District
Number One v. Eric Holder, Jr.,
Attorney General, et al. The
plaintiff asserts that Congress
no longer should be allowed
to impose Section 5 because
the “original emergency” of
voting discrimination has
passed. The validity of this
argument rests in part on
whether Section 5 increases
voter turnout and voter reg-
istration, but there currently
is little empirical evidence on
whether this is so.

My thesis adds to the
debate over Section 5 by
examining its effect on voter
turnout and voter registration
in California for the presiden-
tial elections between 1968
and 2000. Four counties in
California fall under Section
5 due, in part, to their large
Hispanic populations in
1970 or 1972: Kings, Merced,
Monterey, and Yuba. I col-
lected data on voter turnout,
voter registration, and percent
Hispanic for all 58 counties in
California. With these data, I
analyze whether the percent
of the voting-age popula-
tion that voted or registered
in Section 5 counties has
changed compared with
those counties not covered
by Section 5. By controlling
for the percent Hispanic in
each county, I am able to
isolate the effect of Section
5 on voter behavior that is
independent of the fact that
covered counties tend to
have larger Hispanic popula-
tions, which likely impacts
turnout and registration.

Furthermore, I also control
for changes in turnout and
registration that occur for
idiosyncratic reasons, such
as because an issue in the
election is especially impor-
tant to Latinos or because the
candidates in the election are
more “popular” than ones in
the previous election.

I find that being a Section
5 covered county in Califor-
nia increases voter turnout
by 6.7 percentage points and
increases voter registration
by 7.3 percentage points. I
also show the impact of Sec-
tion 5 on both turnout and
registration has increased
over time, such that by 2000,
the effects on voter turnout
and registration were 11.1
and 13.2 percentage points,
respectively.

This study demonstrates
that despite Section 5 being
continuously criticized as an
unnecessary provision, it has
had a significant impact on
voter registration and turnout
in California. Furthermore,
the large impact of Section 5
in recent elections suggests
that it is not irrelevant and
outdated, as many opponents
of the provision now assert.
While this analysis cannot
answer whether preclearance
is constitutional, it does show
that Section 5 continues to
positively affect voter registra-
tion and turnout.

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The Role of Communities in Solving California’s Recidivism Crisis

By Daniel Berring

As long as there have been prisons, societies have wrestled with the difficulties of reintegration. In 2007, California released more than 125,000 prisoners; of that number over 65 percent already have reoffended in some capacity. California’s recidivism rate regularly falls around 60 percent, making it one of the most recidivist states in the union.

The community into which an individual is released upon leaving prison is one among a variety of factors that can affect successful reintegration. A community focused on rehabilitation can help facilitate reentry with services and resources, while dysfunctional or antagonistic communities can isolate ex-offenders by scrutinizing their behavior and restricting resources (such as housing and employment) that often are considered critical for reintegration.

The goal of this paper is to estimate the effect of community-level factors in facilitating reintegration. One solution to this difficulty, institutions such as vocational training facilities, which reflect community engagement with ex-offenders, also may be important. The presence of these factors suggests a cohesive, welcoming, and rehabilitation-focused environment.

Using recidivism data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, local data from city records, and county data from the U.S. Census Bureau, I examine whether recidivism is lower in areas with stronger measures of community strength. My measures of community strength focus on the measurable aspects of communities and neighborhoods, such as educational institutions, housing assistance, rehabilitation clinics, vocational training centers, and places of worship. Because community factors are not randomly assigned across localities, I control for a variety of socioeconomic factors (population, unemployment and poverty rates, and homelessness) that allow me to measure the effect of community strength, per se, on recidivism.

I find little relationship between my community measures and recidivism. This result might indicate the minimal importance of community-level factors in reintegrating prisoners; strong communities may not compel behavior. Given the strong theoretical underpinnings connecting social networks and reintegration, however, that communities make no discernible difference in recidivism incidence is unlikely. The lack of significant findings in my study instead may demonstrate the difficulty of measuring community strength as it relates to recidivism. Categorizing neighborhood establishments gives a snapshot of a community but does not reveal its inner workings. Surveys do not unveil the psychology of interaction and the delicate functions of a community that still might affect successful reentry. The continued empirical uncertainty between recidivism and communities suggests a need for more research on this link and on assessing community strength. After determining what kind of impact local institutions can make and how they can exert that influence, public policy can focus on working with neighborhoods to facilitate change directly through communities.
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