

CROSS-STATE VARIATION IN SELECTIVE SERVICE COMPLIANCE: A RESEARCH NOTE

Billy Hawkinson, Joshua C. Hall*

Abstract

In this short note, we discuss the economic, institutional, and political factors explaining cross-state variation in selective service compliance laws in the United States. We report empirical results showing that states that have driver's license laws are more compliant than those without.

JEL Classification: F52, H73

Introduction

In 1980 the United States reinstated the Selective Service System in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Selective Service System is the way that the United States government keeps track of those individuals eligible to be conscripted into military service should conscription be reinstated. Since then, all males between the ages of 18 and 25 have been required to register with the Selective Service within 30 days of turning 18. Despite the possibility of \$250,000 fines and prison time for failing to register, the national Selective Service compliance rate was only 91% in 2007, according to the Selective Service System (2011). The compliance rate in 2007 was measured as the percentage of males born in 1988 who registered at some point during calendar year 2007.

More interesting, however, is the fact that there exists tremendous variation in compliance rates across states. For example, the states of Hawaii and Nevada had the nation's worst compliance rates of 76%, while 21 states had compliance rates of 99%. Apparently \$250,000 fines and/or prison time are insufficient motivation — at least in some states — to get high compliance rates. This brief research note seeks to explore the determinants of this interstate variation in Selective Service registration and provide some perspective on how some states are able to achieve nearly 100% compliance while others cannot achieve a 90% compliance rate.

*Billy Hawkinson is at the Department of Economics, Beloit College, e-mail: billyhawkinson@gmail.com.

Joshua C. Hall is at the Department of Economics, West Virginia University, e-mail: joshua.c.hall@gmail.com.

Additional research into state laws regarding Selective Service reveals that some states have passed laws in an attempt to increase their compliance rate. These laws generally fall into three categories: (1) laws that restrict educational opportunities to men who have not registered, (2) laws that block non-compliant men from getting driver's licenses, and (3) laws that require selective service compliance as a condition of employment with the state government. Both educational laws and state employment laws mirror existing federal legislation. Driver's license laws are unique, however, in that they do not mirror any federal legislation given that there is no national driver's license. These driver's license laws require applicants to sign a form indicating that they will agree to have their information forwarded directly to the Selective Service so those that had not previously registered are automatically signed up. Many of the states with high rates of compliance, such as Florida, have these laws.

Results and Discussion

To examine more formally whether there was a relationship between these laws and Selective Service compliance across states we collected cross-sectional data on the fifty states in 2007. Our dependent variable was Selective Service compliance rate among men born in 1988. All three types of state laws were included in the regression as binary variables, with a value of one if the state had a law in place and zero otherwise. All four of these variables came from the Selective Service System (2014a; 2014b). In addition, four other control variables for each state were included: Department of Defense spending per capita (Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011), percentage of 18-24 year-olds enrolled in college or university (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems 2014), percentage of a state's population from a racial minority group (Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011), and the state's economic freedom in 2007 (Stansel and McMahon 2013).

Our regression results confirm that an important determinant of interstate variation in Selective Service compliance rates is a driver's license law. In addition to being statistically significant at the one percent level, the coefficient on the driver's license variable suggests that having the law adds over eight percentage points to a state's compliance rate, *ceteris paribus*. Both other state laws are not statistically significant at conventional levels, which is not surprising in that they already duplicate in many ways existing federal legislation. None of the control variables were statistically or economically significant, with the exception of the percentage of a state's population from a racial minority group, which was negatively related to Selective Service compliance. While this research suggests that driver's license laws are positively related to a state's Selective Service compliance rate, further research is

needed to better understand why some states have adopted these laws and others have not. The decision to adopt a driver's license law is not exogenous and perhaps other underlying factors are driving the higher compliance rates in states with driver's license laws.

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