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PI: Achyuta Adhvaryu, Assistant Professor, Yale University
Project: Are Smarter Voters More Liberal? Evidence from Salt Iodization in the United States

This summer I worked with Professor Ach Adhvaryu and his co-authors as a research assistant for a project on the relationship between cognitive ability and political leaning. While some research has been done to date to explore this question, the mass iodization of salt in the mid-1920s in the US provides an innovative channel to attempt to more rigorously solve this research problem. The sudden and wide-spread iodization of salt, a public health intervention which has been heavily associated in the medical literature with reducing cognitive impairment in utero due to iodine deficiency, offers an opportunity to uncover the effects of cognitive enhancement across the country on political trends.

There are several intermediary steps to properly implementing this approach, many of which I was involved in this summer. First, I helped conduct a review of the literature to lay the foundation for the ensuing analysis of cognitive ability, the history of salt iodization in the US, historical intelligence testing and voting and political leaning classification. I then worked to assemble various supplemental data sets which would be instrumental in informing and enriching the ultimate findings. These included various measures of congressional vote classifications from different interest groups, historical IQ data from the World War I and World War II eras, as well as supplemental census data. This was followed by various data organization and data cleaning projects in Stata to coordinate the data sets and prepare them for further analysis. This entailed various data set merging, vote classification algorithms and variable classification and sorting. Finally, I helped write several subsections of the paper.

The SRO project was a valuable experience for me on a number of levels. Though I have worked as a research assistant before, this summer stands out as one where I gained a number of new skills, both quantitative and qualitative. With ongoing support and active mentorship, I became much more proficient in Stata, developed skills in literature compilation and analysis and gained a more comprehensive understanding of the economics research process as a whole.