

Who votes, who doesn't, why and, what can be done?

A Report to the Federal Commission on Electoral Reform

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Introduction

There are a myriad of reasons why most Americans do not vote in national, state and local elections. Among these explanations is the cost and inconvenience associated with voting at a designated time and place. For many individuals the expected utility from balloting for their most preferred candidate or party does not exceed the costs in time and personal expense (or inconvenience) associated with going to the polls on Election day.¹ Although the costs and inconveniences of voting are neither the only nor the dominant explanation for non-voting,² reducing the costs of voting by making balloting more accessible is one way in which state governments have endeavored to increase voter participation.

The central focus of this report reviews several practices used by the states to increase voter participation: relaxed requirements for voter registration; relaxed requirements for absentee voting; in-person early voting and voting by mail.

Our report is divided into four sections. In Section One we review several reasons for why eligible voters do not vote in national elections. In addition to the explanations for non-voting mentioned above, we also consider how voters' psychological orientation toward government, political parties and candidates influence the decision to vote. We examine recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* on characteristics of voters in the 2004 Presidential election. Section two reviews current practices in the fifty states to increase voter turnout through relaxed voter registration, absentee voting and increased opportunities to ballot before Election Day, including voting by mail and in-person early voting. All of these voting procedures were adopted to increase voter participation by reducing the costs of voting on a single day and increasing the opportunities for individuals to vote. Section Three asks several questions about the efficacy these practices and reviews the extant research on these questions.

¹ Psychologists and economists explain this behavior in terms of rational expectations. The investment required to vote exceeds a person's rational expectation they will return a benefit from voting (including their candidate's election) in excess of the costs of voting.

² See Teixeria (1998) for a thorough discussion of the reasons for non-voting including: lack of psychological involvement in politics, lack of social ties to the community, and the lack of electoral competition

Section Four discusses several recommendations that might be considered by the commissions.

Section One: Who votes and Why?

Previous research has identified four major influences on individual decisions to participate – institutional rules, social and demographic traits, psychological resources, and the mobilization efforts of parties and their candidates (Leighley 1995). Explained more intuitively, “individuals may choose not to participate because they can’t, because they don’t want to or, because nobody asked” (Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1991:4). As several researchers have noted (Shaw et al. 2000; Leighley 2001), these explanations of individual turnout are not mutually exclusive. In developing an understanding of political participation among historically underrepresented voters, these explanations of voting are a useful place to start.

What are the institutional and administrative costs of voting and who can best bear these costs?

Some people may find that they legally cannot vote because they are not registered to vote. The legal restrictions states and localities place on access to the ballot include restrictive voter registration laws and the absence of opportunities to vote on and before Election Day (Powell 1986; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). It has been estimated that turnout would increase almost 9% with a relaxation of registration laws that constrain voting among mobile populations (Wolfinger, Glass and Squire 1987).

Relocating residentially requires an individual to invest new resources in registering to vote, and serves to reduce turnout among recent movers (Highton 2000; Squire et al. 1998). Consequently, long-term residents of an area are more likely to ballot because over time they may have the occasion to register or are not forced to continually reinvest in the costs of voter registration time and again.

Citizens with higher levels of formal education and more access to political information are also thought to be more likely to vote (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Some of the reasons overlap with the discussion of political efficacy, as individuals with more formal education are thought to have a greater sense of both internal and external efficacy, and are thus more likely to turnout. It is also thought that individuals with more education and information are more likely to be interested in politics and have greater desire to participate, as well as face fewer costs to gaining the information needed to make electoral choices. There could also be indirect effects of education on the likelihood of turnout, as more educated individuals are more likely to make more money, and might have more time or more access to transportation to get to the polls.

How does education and political information influence voting?

While there is not a single consistent explanation for why more educated and better informed individuals are more likely to vote than those less educated and informed, there does seem to be an empirically observable relationship (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995, Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004, Lassen 2005). Several other factors that scholars have looked at relating to turnout also have an effect on individuals' access to information. Social networks might provide a way of disseminating information so that more dense social networks help to spread information. Media coverage of campaigns and elections also is also an important source of information for potential voters, so that more coverage might lead to more turnout. Competitive races are also more likely to involve greater campaign advertising and more media coverage than noncompetitive races that also might increase the availability of information and voter turnout (Patterson and Caldera 1983, Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004).

In 2004 there was a strong positive relationship between voting and education, income and, age. Race and ethnicity are also significant correlates of the likelihood an individual will ballot, though some of this relationship reflects the strong negative relationship between non-Anglo racial group membership and education and income.

Is voting habit forming?

The strong positive relationship between age and voting probably reflects the habitual nature of voting over time. The argument is that voting is habit forming and the more that the behavior is reinforced the more likely it is to be repeated. Several studies have found a relationship between previous and contemporary voting behavior. In their analysis of survey data, Brody and Sniderman (1977) and several other researchers (Nownes 1992, Plutzer 2002, Green and Shachar 2000, Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003) find that previous voting behavior predicts current voting behavior.

That voting might be habitual raises several questions. One involves the factors that initially lead a voter to cast their first ballot, when there is no habit guiding their behavior. Several factors might be related to individuals casting a ballot apart from habit, including greater access to resources which lower information gathering, transportation, and time costs associated with voting. Parental socioeconomic status might also be related to initial electoral participation (Plutzer 2002). A second question about habitual voting behavior is the mechanism behind reinforcing behavior and whether or not habitual voting can account for aggregate levels of turnout observed in different elections. Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting (2003) demonstrate that behavioral reinforcement mechanisms can produce aggregate turnout levels that are generally consistent with observed patterns in US elections.

There is a demonstrable difference in the effect of age on voter participation among African-American males and females. At every age level up to 65 African-American women are significantly more likely to vote than their male counterparts. One important source of this variation is the high incarceration rates among African-American males.

African Americans make up just 12% of the U.S. population but comprise 47% of the country's prison population.³ Prison inmates are barred from voting and ex-felons are barred from voting in most states, further depressing voter participation among African-American males.

Are voters more trusting of government?

Greater psychological resources (efficacy, political trust, and social ties) along with socio-economic assets (i.e., money, education, and skills) facilitate an individual's political participation: "Because high status individuals are located in social environments which encourage and enforce positive attitudinal and participatory norms as well as civic skills, they are more likely to participate in politics than are low-status individuals" (Leighley 1995:103). These resources counter-balance the costs associated with participation, including voter registration, the collection of information about ballot choices, and travel to the polls.

Trust in government has been thought to be related to different forms of political engagement, including electoral participation. The explanation that has been offered is that individuals that have more trust in government institutions are more likely to participate in elections as they are more likely to view government institutions positively and perceive greater individual benefits from political participation. One reason that has been offered for declining voter turnout is a corresponding decline in trust in government.

While there is a hypothesized relationship between trust in government and voter turnout, previous studies have not found evidence of a valid causal relationship between trust in government and individuals' propensity to vote. Several studies have found no significant relationship between trust in government and the likelihood of voting, and one study suggests an indirect relationship (Citrin 1974, Shaffer 1981, Abramson and Aldrich 1982, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Miller, Goldenburg, and Erbing 1979). Looking at voting and registration in the 1980s, Timpone (1998) finds that lower trust in government seemed to mobilize voters, contrary to previous expectations. While it seems intuitive that less trust in government would lead to less participation, the balance of evidence regarding trust in government suggests that it does not have a clear effect on turnout.

Apart from trust in government, researchers have also looked at whether or not individuals' level of civic engagement affects the probability of turnout. Greater levels of civic engagement might help to disseminate political information through social networks leading to more informed and interested voters. Civic engagement might also encourage individuals to participate in politics by leading them to have a greater sense of social responsibility, and make electoral participation more important to potential voters. Several studies have found that civic engagement might lead to a higher probability of turnout (Campbell et al. 1960, Almond and Verba 1963, Verba and Nie 1972, Teixeira 1992).

³ *Incarceration Rates in US: The Sentencing Project, "Nation's Population Exceeds 2 Million."* (April, 2003). Available from URL: http://www.fdp.dk/act/03406_incarceration.php.

While there is some evidence that suggests that greater civic engagement increases the probability that an individual turns out to vote, others find that civic engagement is not related to turnout (Miller 1980, 1992). In their analysis, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) find evidence of a weak relationship between citizens' sense of civic duty and turnout. The available evidence regarding the relationship between civic engagement and voter turnout is mixed. Earlier studies found some indications of a relationship that have not been reproduced with more recent analyses, suggesting that civic engagement might have a moderate effect.

Political efficacy – the belief that one can influence the outcome of political decisions -- is another factor that might be related to voter turnout. Citizens with a greater sense of political efficacy might think that their participation has a greater effect on political outcomes, and are more likely to turn out on election day than citizens with a lower sense of political efficacy.⁴ There is some evidence of a positive relationship between an individual's sense of efficacy and their likelihood of turnout (Campbell et al. 1960, Almond and Verba 1963, Verba and Nie 1972). Studies have also found a general decline in the public's sense of efficacy at the aggregate level, which might be related to declining voter turnout (Abramson and Aldrich 1982, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Timpone (1998) finds evidence of a relationship between political efficacy and turnout, but at the level of voter registration. That is, Timpone argues that individuals with a lower sense of political efficacy are less likely to register to vote in the first place, but that variation in political efficacy among the subpopulation of registered voters seems to have no effect on their likelihood of voting.

While there is evidence of a relationship between efficacy and voter turnout, not all scholars have found such a relationship. Miller (1980, 1992) argues that differences in political efficacy cannot explain voter turnout. Furthermore, it seems difficult to define and measure an individual's sense of political efficacy, and there might be a need for further research on the relationship between efficacy and voting.

Do political parties and their candidates enhance voter turnout?

Political parties operate in several ways to enhance voter turnout. First, they cue voters as to how competitive the election is, and, therefore, allow individuals to more accurately predict their probability of being decisive. Second, they provide information as to the policy differences between candidates. Third, they might enhance individuals' psychological ties to elections or to their group identity (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Dawson 1994; Shingles 1991; Uhlaner 1989). And, fourth, they may serve to enhance social pressures to participate. (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Uhlaner 1989).

The benefits of voting are closely related to the mobilization activities of candidates and their campaigns. Gerber and Green (2000) and others (Adams and Smith 1980;

⁴ Some scholars make a distinction between two different types of efficacy, internal and external. Internal efficacy refers to the ability an individual has to understand political issues and make informed decisions while external efficacy refers to government responsiveness to citizens' participation.

Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Wielhouwer 1995; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994) demonstrate the efficacy of personal canvassing by parties and candidates on voter turnout. Individuals are often persuaded to vote because they were asked to vote by a candidate, political party, or a friend (Leighley 2001). These mobilization efforts may convey several types of information and, thus, increase the perceived benefits of voting.

Note that individuals' resources and psychological motivations are thus central to the mobilization explanation of voter turnout but occupy a different position than is portrayed in the standard socioeconomic status model. Mobilization effects (i.e., voter contacts with candidates, parties, the media, or other persons) interact with a voter's psychological predispositions and resources (i.e., socio-economic status) to influence the decision to vote. Consequently, mobilization factors might be thought of as mediating variables between an individual's social and demographic traits and voting (Shaw et al 2000).

Existing research, however, has portrayed these four factors—institutional rules, resources, psychological orientations and mobilization—as distinctive and independent influences on participation. The extent to which the effectiveness of institutional rules and mobilization efforts are contingent upon individuals' resources and psychological orientations has not been fully investigated. Nor has how candidates and political parties utilize election laws and procedures to mobilize target populations of supporters been considered.

To summarize, voter turnout in the United States is significantly influenced by three factors ---the institutional features of electoral administration, the socio-economic and psychological resources individuals have (or do not have) to bear the costs of voting. A majority of eligible American vote, but their rate of participation does not approach voter participation in most western democracies. Finally, it noteworthy the most frequently cited reasons for not voting in the 2004 Presidential election was "too busy, conflicting demands, and the inconvenience of polling place."

Section Two: Current practices in the fifty states

States regulate elections by enacting policies regarding voter registration requirements and the manner by which ballots can be cast. Table 1 provides a state-by-state summary of registration, (no excuse) absentee and (in-person) early voting requirements. States' primary policy decisions regarding registration are whether to require registration prior to Election Day (most do) and, if so, how many days prior (most require 25-30 days).

Twenty-seven states require residents to register to vote at least 25-30 days before an election (<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/elect/absentearly.htm>). Another 18 states set the deadline for voter registration between 10 and 21 days before an election. Several states including Maine, Wisconsin and Minnesota allow voters to register on Election Day. North Dakota and Wyoming have no voter registration requirements.

The Federal Election Commission defines "no excuse" absentee voting as "voting prior to election day which requires that the voter meet qualifications other than those generally

required to register to vote.” These states allow any registered voter to vote absentee without requiring that the voter state a reason for his/her desire to vote absentee. Several other states have absentee voting that requires voters to provide an appropriate reason or excuse to ballot before Election Day. Absentee voting differs from election day voting in that it is conducted by mail using paper ballots. Slightly more than half the states (N=26) states have “no-excuse” absentee voting.

Early voting is defined by Federal Election Commission “as any voting that occurs prior to election day for which there are no eligibility requirements beyond registration.” Early voting differs from absentee voting in that voters may visit an election official’s office or, in some states, other satellite voting locations, and cast a vote in person without offering an excuse for not being able to vote on Election Day. Satellite voting locations vary by state, and may include other county and state offices (besides the election official’s office), grocery stores, shopping malls, schools, libraries, and other locations. Early voting generally is conducted on the same voting equipment used in the regular election. The time period for early voting varies from state to state, but most often it is available during a period of 10-14 days before the election, generally ending on the Friday or Saturday immediately preceding the election.⁵ About half the states (23, to be exact) offer some sort of early voting.

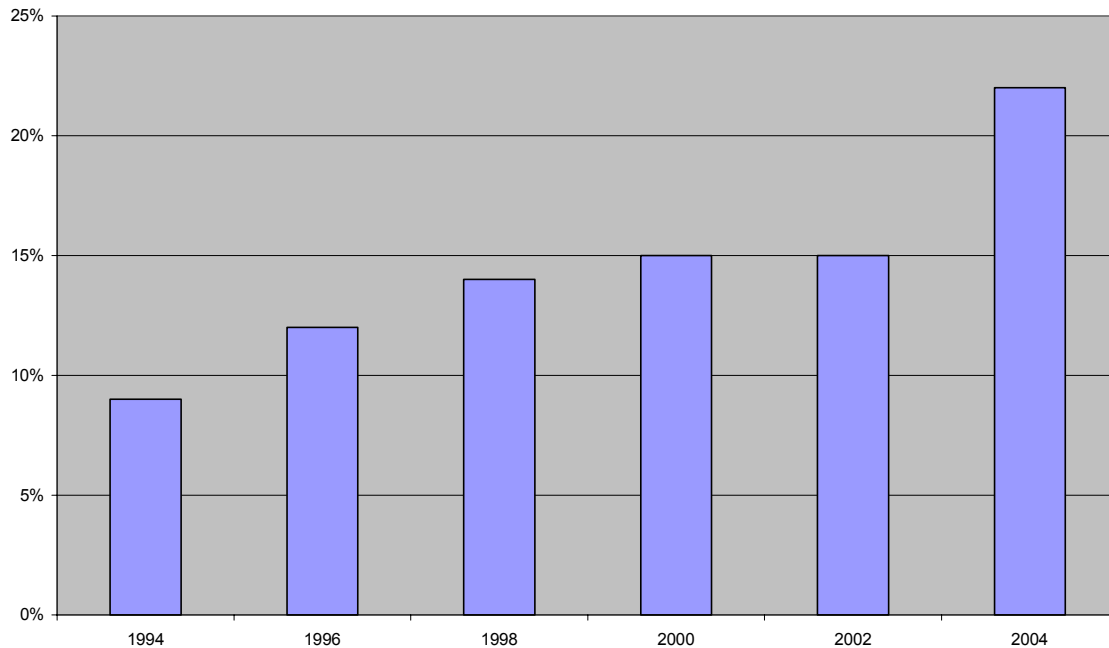
To summarize, most states require voters to register 25-30 days prior to the election. Eighteen states allow for both early voting and absentee voting, while 20 states allow neither. Twenty-five states allow only for absentee voting while twenty-three allow only for early voting. Five states allow early voting, but not absentee voting, while seven states allow for absentee voting but not early voting.

Section Three: Consequences of electoral reform

As early voting opportunities have increased over the past several decades and voters have become more aware and experienced at “voting early,” the number of voters casting their ballots before Election Day has increased significantly. Figure 1 describes this increase over the past ten years. Although in 1994 only about 8% percent of the ballots cast were done so before Election Day, by 2004 the percentage of ballots cast before Election Day had risen to 22%. Thus, in 2004 over 26 million of the 120 million ballots recorded were cast before the first Tuesday in November.

⁵ <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/elect/absentearly.htm>

Figure 1
% Votes Cast Before Election Day



Source: American National Election Surveys, 1994-2004

Importantly, this increase has been concentrated in those states with the least restrictive absentee and early voting provisions. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, almost all of the growth has occurred in states that allow no-excuse absentee voting and/or early voting. Those states that do not allow no-excuse absentee voting and/or early voting (Restrictive States: Figure 2) have had only about an 8% increase in the percentage of ballots cast prior to the election over the last 10 years. On the other hand, states that allow no-excuse absentee voting and/or early voting have observed a 30% increase in the percentage of ballots cast before Election Day.

Another important trend in figures 2 and 3 is that in states with relaxed absentee and early voting there is a decline in Election Day balloting. This raises the possibility that voters are substituting Election Day balloting for early voting, with no appreciable increase in new voters.

Figure 2
Restrictive Voting States

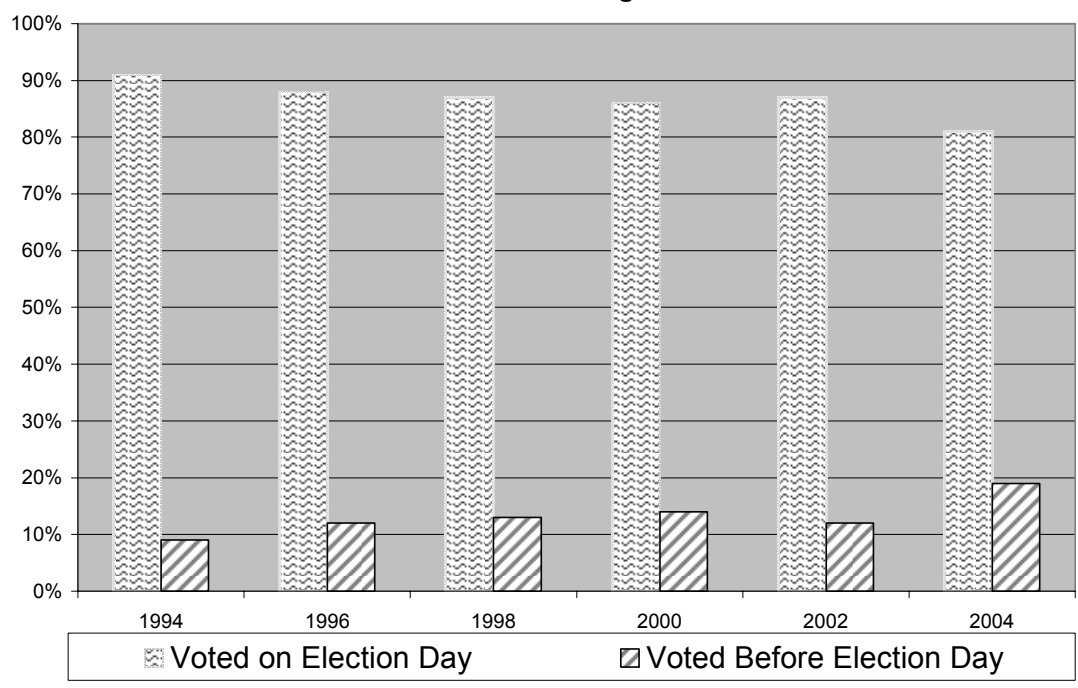
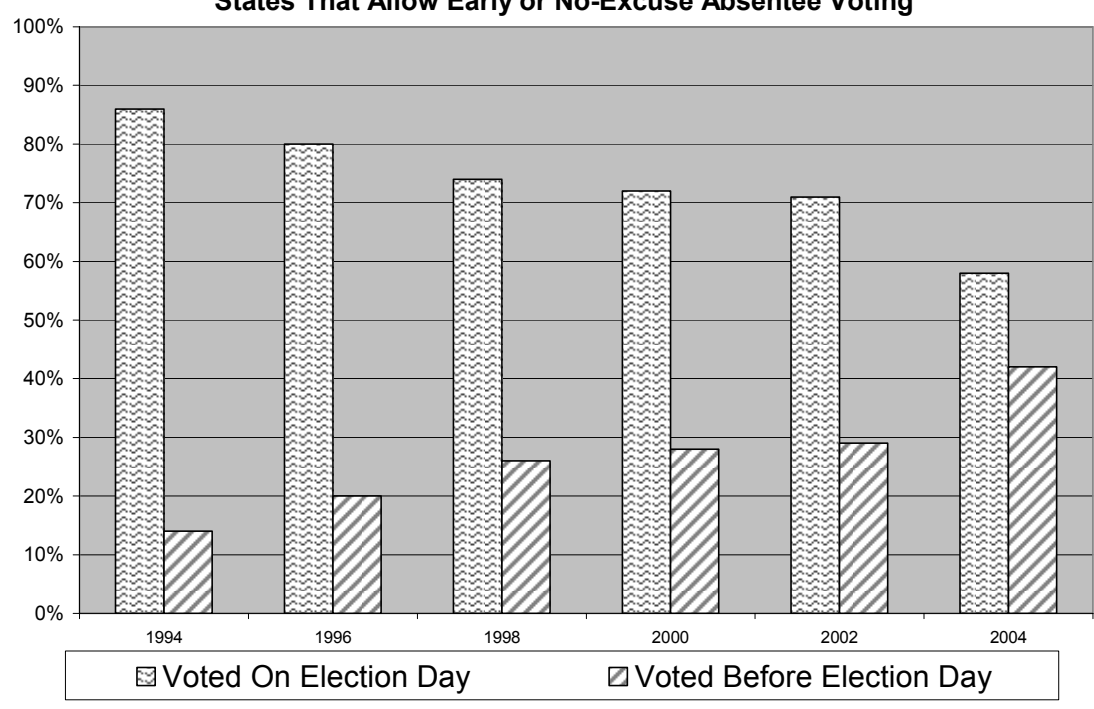


Figure 3
States That Allow Early or No-Excuse Absentee Voting



Section Three: what we know and don't know about electoral reform

To what extent does relaxed voter registration increase voter turnout and/or change the composition of the electorate?

Evidence regarding the effect of voter registration laws on overall voter turnout levels is mixed. Most studies suggest that the impact of relaxing registration laws is minimal. Studies of the effects of the impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and other state laws suggest that such reforms increase turnout about 2%-3% (Mitchell and Wlezien 1995; Franklin and Grier 1996; Knack 1995, 2001; Rhine 1995).

Studies of whether these electoral reforms diversify the electorate are also mixed. Nagler (1991) concludes that restrictive registration laws do not deter poorly-educated individuals from registering any more than the highly-educated. This implies that liberalizing these laws may increase registration overall, but will not equalize participation across classes or among historically underrepresented populations.

Another class of voters who may benefit from relaxed voter registration laws are the residentially mobile. Relocating residentially requires an individual to invest new resources in registering to vote, and serves to reduce turnout among recent movers (Highton 2000; Squire et al. 1998). Consequently, long-term residents of an area are more likely to ballot because over time they may have the occasion to register or are not forced to continually reinvest in the costs of voter registration time and again. It has been suggested that turnout would increase almost 9% with a relaxation of registration laws that constrain voting among mobile populations (Wolfinger, Glass and Squire 1987).

To what extent does relaxed absentee voting and increased opportunities to ballot in-person before Election Day increase voter turnout and/or change the composition of the electorate?

The empirical expectation is that voter turnout in states with relaxed absentee voting, in-person early voting, and balloting by mail (i.e., Oregon) *ceterius paribus*, will be higher than in states without these options for voting. As shown in figures 2 and 3 increasing the opportunities for individuals to cast a ballot before Election Day may not increase the total number of persons who vote.

Aggregate voter studies of early voting fail to show that turnout significantly increases in states that have adopted in-person early voting (Richardson and Neeley 1996; Stein and Garcia-Monet 1995). Southwell and Burchett offer a slight dissent, concluding that in 48 Oregon elections “all-mail elections increased registered voter turnout by 10% over the expected turnout in a traditional polling place elections (2000:76).”

Survey researchers have found that early voting does not significantly diversify the electorate. Berinsky, Burns and Traugott find that “contrary to the expectations of many reformers voting by mail advantages the resource-rich by keeping them in the electorate and VBM does little to change the behavior of the resource-poor (2001:178).” Stein

(1998) also reports that resource-poor voters did not benefit from the adoption of in-person early voting. To the contrary, early voters appear to be more partisan, ideological and interested in politics. More importantly early voters were disproportionately likely to have voted in the past. Karp and Banducci (2001; 2000) also find that early voters are more likely to have strong partisan and ideological preferences, to be more attentive and interested in politics, wealthier and older. Curiously, early voters are not significantly different than Election Day voters on most socio-demographic variables, including race/ethnicity and education (Stein 1998). Simply put, in-person early voting has been used by those who otherwise would have been most likely to vote on Election Day.

What are the consequences of relaxed absentee voting and in-person early voting on the conduct of political campaigns and how does these effects influence what type of voters are mobilized to vote?

We have no systematic evidence on the effects of electoral reforms on the conduct of political campaigns. There is research that is suggestive of what might transpire for political campaigns under relaxed absentee voting and in-person early voting. Examining absentee voting in California and Iowa, Patterson and Caldiera (1982) provide systematic evidence for the varying effects of electoral reforms on voter turnout. Consistent with other literature on electoral reforms, they find that the proportion of votes cast by mail is correlated with the demographic characteristics associated with Election Day balloting (e.g., age, income, and urban residence). The most striking finding, however, was that the correlates of absentee voting *varied across elections and between states*. More specifically, Patterson and Caldiera report that “the state in which one party mounted a substantial effort had a higher rate of absentee voting (1982:785).”

Do candidates and political parties spend more on their campaigns in states with relaxed absentee voting and in-person early voting? If voters have more than one day in which to cast their ballot, will candidates and their political parties engage in more frequent (expensive) voter turnout activities? What are the conditions under which candidates and political parties incorporate absentee and early voting into their campaign strategies (Nordlinger 2003)?

Caldiera and Patterson (1982) suggest that absentee voting and its impact on turnout and performance is sensitive to partisan efforts to mobilize mail-in ballots. Absentee voting increases when political parties identify likely absentee voters among their supporters and work to turnout these persons for absentee voting. Absent any effort on the part of political parties to mobilize absentee voting among their partisan supporters, the effect of mail-in balloting on voter turnout is expected to be negligible.

Oliver’s (1996) multi-state study of absentee voting directly tests Patterson and Caldiera partisan mobilization hypothesis of absentee voting. Oliver finds that in states where absentee voting requirements are most liberal and where political parties invest time and resources to mobilize absentee voters, “the levels of absentee voting rise and the characteristics of absentee voters change (1996:25).” The most important by-product of absentee voting and liberalized absentee voting is “the greater mobilizing campaigns of

the Republican party (1996:25).” Curiously, Democratic candidates do not benefit from increased liberalization of absentee voting and Democratic efforts to mobilize absentee voting.⁶

Electoral reforms intended to increase voter turnout are not self-actuating. That is, the implementation of these electoral reforms require agents – political parties and their candidates – to intervene between the eligible voter and the opportunities created by state election laws to vote e.g., early voting, mail-in ballots and low-cost voter registration. Stein, Leighley and Owens (2003) find strong evidence for this thesis. Without the efforts of political parties and their candidates, electoral reforms are likely to continue to have a marginal effect on voter turnout. Studying turnout in the Texas 2000 gubernatorial election the authors find that effectiveness of in-person is dependent on whether political elites choose to take advantage of such rules in developing their electoral strategies. Voter turnout increases when the political parties and their candidates incorporate early voting into their campaign strategies.

Do voters who ballot early (i.e., before Election Day) miss campaign information vital to their choice of candidates and political parties?

In Texas, voters who ballot early are significantly more likely to base their vote choices on partisan affiliation and ideology. Election Day voters are less likely to base their vote choices on partisan affiliation and ideology and rely more on candidate evaluations, issues positions and group affiliations (Stein, Leighley and Owens 2004). Moreover, the reliance of early voters on partisan affiliation in making their vote choices appears to have grown since the adoption of early voting in Texas. Curiously, the same study found that early voters were attentive and interested in politics and had higher levels of political information than Election Day voters. It may be that early voters are partisans for whom information, however late in the campaign, is not going to change their vote choices.

What is the public’s reaction to and support of relaxed absentee voting and in-person early voting?

Since 1987 a majority of Oregon voters have had the opportunity to ballot by mail. Oregonians are highly supportive of voting by mail. A 2003 survey of eligible voters in Oregon reported that 81% preferred voting by mail over Election Day balloting. Support for voting by mail is largely undifferentiated across demographic groups. “A majority of all subcategories favor vote by mail over more traditional polling place voting (Southwell 2002:217).” Moreover, there are no obvious differences in the preference for voting by mail between self-identified Democrats and Republicans.

⁶ Oliver does not speculate about the reason why Democrats do not benefit from liberalized absentee voting. His analysis, however, is suggestive of an explanation. Spending on voter mobilization by Democrats is considerably below outlays by Republicans. Hence, one plausible explanation is that in these state and elections it is likely that Democratic spending on voter mobilization does not achieve the threshold necessary to positively effect voter turnout among Democratic voters.

Nearly 22% of all ballots cast in the 2004 Presidential Election were cast before November 4. Moreover, the percent of votes cast before Election Day has increased steadily in those states that have adopted some form early voting. To what extent is this trend due to public support for and satisfaction with relaxed absentee voting and in-person voting? What, if any, public opposition might surface if states curtailed early voting? Is support for early voting experienced based? Do voters in states without early voting have less of an appetite for this form of balloting than those who have experienced early voting? Do Election Day voters perceive a benefit from early voting (i.e., shorter lines and less time waiting to vote)?

What are the economic costs of administering relaxed absentee voting and in-person voting?

All governments provide goods and services carry costs that are borne by all citizens. Elections are no exception. We should have an expectation that the cost of conducting elections will be efficient, that is, we should be able to maximize voter turnout at the lowest possible administrative cost per vote. Are the marginal costs of casting a relaxed absentee ballot or in-person early vote greater than, the same or less than cost per vote cast on Election Day? What is the trade-offs between the administrative costs of Election Day, absentee and in-person early voting and voter turnout?

There is no contemporary state level or multi-state analyses of the costs associated with early voting or relaxed absentee voting. The Federal Election Commission reported in 1994 that early voting probably increased the overall costs of conducting elections, but “counties do not generally isolate the costs of satellite voting or separate the costs of in-person early voting from mail absentee voting.” The same FEC study calculated the cost of early voting per voter for selected counties and elections. The 1994 the cost per early vote in selected Texas counties was more than twice the cost per Election Day. These inflated early voting costs might reflect the paucity of early voting in 1992 against the fixed costs of operating an early voting system.

Election centers and convenience voting on Election Day.

Is it possible that the administrative obstacle to voting is simply the cost and inconvenience voters experience when they go to the polls on Election Day? These obstacles or nuisances include:

- Waiting in long lines to vote.
- Inaccessible voting places (distance to travel, limited parking, etc.).
- Unfamiliar voting machines (the technology question).

Is the popularity of early voting, absentee voting and voting by mail driven by an avoidance of these nuisances? It is assumed, but not empirically proven, that voter dissatisfaction with election day balloting is due solely to the cost and inconvenience of waiting to ballot at places that voters have difficulty getting to on equipment that they are unfamiliar with and uncomfortable using. If this assessment is true could Election Day

balloting be organized and administered to eliminate these obstacles to voting and produce enhanced voter turnout?⁷

Election centers are non-precinct based locations for voting. The sites are fewer in number than precinct voting stations, centrally located to major population centers (rather than distributed among many residential locations), and rely on county-wide voter registration databases accessed by electronic voting machines. Voters in the voting jurisdiction (usually a county) are provided ballots appropriate to their voter registration address. It is thought that the use of voting centers on Election Day will increase voter turnout by reducing the cost and/or inconvenience associated with voting at traditional precinct locations.

To date Larimer County, Colorado is the only county to use election centers on Election Day. Larimer also conducts early voting at the election centers used on Election Day. Larimer County first adopted the use of election centers on Election Day for the 2003 Presidential election. Previously election centers were used only for early voting in Larimer County. Anecdotal evidence suggest that voters were highly receptive to Election Day voting centers, however, no systematic study has been undertaken to determine whether this administrative reform increased voter turnout.

Compulsory voting

Several European democracies and Australia have legally require their citizens to vote. The penalty for non-voting varies across countries but never exceeds a fine of modest amount. Australia, Belgium, and Luxembourg have maintained compulsory voting the longest among modern democracies. Recently, however, The Netherlands in 1970 and Austria in 1990 repealed compulsory voting requirements after they had been in force for decades. Mandatory voting is also used Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. In some countries voting has been made compulsory at the discretion of sub-national governments, or is applied only to certain types of elections.

There is mixed empirical evidence on the influence of compulsory voting on voter turnout. Rose (2005) reports that the repeal of compulsory voting laws in the Netherlands and Austria led to a decrease in turnout by an average of 12.8 percentage points for the Netherlands and 7.7 percentage points for Austria. Rose further finds that for European democracies there is 5.3% increase in voter turnout among countries with mandatory voting.

Hirczy de Mino (2002) writes that “the effectiveness of mandatory voting laws apparently does not depend on the law being actively enforced and penalties being imposed. Mandatory voting laws may support a social norm of voting that is enforced by society informally without requiring government action.”

⁷ For an affirmative answer to this question see: Moshe Haspel and H. Gibbs Knotts, “Location, Location, Location: Precinct Placement and the Costs of Voting, *Journal of Politics* 67:536:560; James Gimpel and Jason Schuknecht, “Political Participation and the Accessibility of the Ballot Box,” *Political Geography*22:471-88.

Objections to mandatory voting are both philosophical and practical. It citizenry carries with it the right to vote, does the right to vote extend to the NOT voting? Furthermore, if enforcement of mandatory voting is costly does it come at the expense of other more effective means of increasing voter turnout? Furthermore, there may be consequences of mandatory voting that are undesirable including the casting of invalid and spoiled ballots by reluctant voters.

Recommendations

The popularity of early voting and other forms of convenience voting (voting by mail) suggests that many voters prefer the convenience afforded by early voting i.e., accessible voting locations, short-lines and assistance in using new or unfamiliar voting technologies. There is some reason to believe that voter turnout might marginally increase if we imported these ‘conveniences’ to election day balloting. Almost a quarter of the voters who did not vote in the 2004 Presidential election cited the inconvenience of voting in inaccessible voting places as the major reason for not voting. To implement this type of voting on election the following recommendations would have to be implemented.

- All voters, regardless of their residential location in a state and/or election jurisdiction should be able to vote at any of a number of election centers on (or before) Election Day.
- The use of election centers would require the use of electronic voting machines able to access ballots specific to the voter’s residential location.

This assumes that:

- Statewide voter registration lists current to the day of the election are made available in the 50 states.
- Voter registration lists are electronically accessible to all voting places in a state on Election Day (as they are for in-person early voting before election day).
- Address verifiable voter identification.
- Voting centers should be located to maximize proximity to the electorate, ease of access (e.g., parking, traffic flows) and speed of voting.
- Voting centers should be accessible to the disabled.
- Election centers should be staffed with professionally trained non-partisan poll workers.