Reducing the Costs of Participation:

Are States Getting a Return on Early Voting?

Joseph D. Giammo*

Department of Political Science

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock

2801 South University Avenue

Little Rock, AR 72204

jdgiammo@ualr.edu

Brian J. Brox*

Department of Political Science

Tulane University

316 Norman Mayer Building

New Orleans, LA 70118

bbrox@tulane.edu

Abstract

In recent decades, a majority of states have instituted some form of early or convenience voting, whether in person or through the mail. With the availability of these options, the cost to citizens of participating in elections has invariably declined while the cost to government of administering these options has invariably increased. With this reduction in the cost of participation, one would expect that turnout would increase. It is still not clear, however, whether the expansion of the opportunity to vote has actually increased participation, and if so, for whom. Using both individual and aggregate analyses, we examine whether the institution of these alternatives does in fact increase turnout. We also consider whether the impact of convenience voting is felt immediately after enactment or whether it takes multiple election cycles for any effect on turnout to be manifested. At the individual level, we find no main effect for the availability of any form of early or convenience voting on the probability that an individual will vote, nor do we find any interactive effect between efforts of the campaign and the availability of such voting alternatives. In the aggregate, convenience voting seems to produce a short-lived increase in turnout, one that disappears by the second presidential election in which it is available. These methods, then, would appear to offer additional convenience for those already likely to vote. If, however, the goal of these reforms was to get more people to show up at the polls, we argue that state governments are not seeing a return on their investment.

One of the most significant reforms to the American electoral system in the last thirty years has been the advent of several forms of convenience voting. From no-excuse absentee balloting to early voting and even all-mail elections, it has never been easier for a registered voter in the United States to participate in selecting government officials. In the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election, thirty states allowed some form of convenience voting[1] (National Association of Secretaries of State, 2004). These forms of early voting have become quite popular. For example, in the 2002 general election, more than a quarter of California voters voted with no-excuse absentee ballots (Berinsky, 2005) while more than a third of voters in Texas made use of in-person early voting (Stein et al., 2004). As a result, it seems unlikely that these innovations will be scaled back (Rosenfield, 1994).

The implications of these reforms are significant. For voters, the ability to cast a ballot early reduces the costs of participation, not only by making it more convenient to vote on one's own schedule, but also by reducing the amount of information one must consider when deciding for whom to vote[2]. For parties and candidates, early voting drastically changes the way they run campaigns. As Republican pollster Glen Bolger put it, "You need to divide the electorate into two groups. Run one campaign at early voters and another at Election Day voters," (quoted in Nordlinger, 2003, p. 27). And for society, early voting presumably advances democratic government, not only by making voting easier and more convenient, but also by bringing more potential voters to the polls, thus increasing legitimacy.

---

[1] Of the thirty, twenty-seven allow voters to cast ballots early in person, twenty states allow voters to cast ballots early by mail, and one state (Oregon) conducts its elections entirely by mail (National Association of Secretaries of State, 2004).
[2] By voting early, voters by definition truncate the campaign, thus making it unnecessary (and impossible) to consider any information raised by the campaigns between the date of early voting and Election Day.

But in making voting easier and more convenient, society does not reduce the costs of participation. Rather, early voting merely transfers certain costs from the individual to society – in this case, the counties who conduct elections. This transfer of costs begs the question: is it worth the cost? To the proponents of early voting, the answer is certainly yes. Proponents of early voting suggest that by making participation easier and more convenient, turnout will increase (Pennsylvania Election Reform Task Force, 2005; "Shop and Vote," 2005; Kenny, 2004). Kentucky Secretary of State Trey Grayson suggests that by expanding the use of no-excuse absentee ballots, turnout will increase by giving people additional opportunities to vote and by reducing lines on Election Day (Crowley, 2006). Following the implementation of early voting in Illinois, St. Clair County Clerk Bob Delaney said that, "The hope is that it will increase voter turnout," (McDermott, 2006, p. C2). And lawmakers in Maryland passed a law in 2005 that would allow for a week of early voting with the intention of increasing turnout in Maryland's elections (Mosk, 2006).

Policymakers clearly believe that implementing various forms of convenience voting will improve turnout. And if these efforts do lead to increased turnout, many would accept the added cost to society for the added legitimacy conferred by elections with greater turnout. But if, on the other hand, early voting does not increase turnout, then early voting is indeed simply a form of "convenience" voting, and the cost borne by society can be categorized as a "handout" to those individuals already predisposed to vote.

Previous research into early voting has revealed much about who votes early. Specifically, individuals with high interest, strong partisan attachments, and strong

ideological alignments are more likely to vote early (Berinsky et al., 2001; Karp and

Banducci, 2001; Stein, 1998). But people with those attributes are more likely to turnout

in general. In this paper, we take a different path by looking to see whether or not the

availability of early voting increases turnout at both the individual and aggregate levels.

We begin by reviewing what we already know about early voting, and then apply that

knowledge in the development of a model to test the impact of early voting on those

individuals with different propensities to vote. We then turn to an aggregate analysis to

see whether or not turnout increases following the implementation of early voting, and if

so, how long the effect persists. Based on these analyses, we provide our assessment of

the impact of early voting on overall turnout before discussing the implications of early

voting both as a public policy as well as a legitimizing factor in American elections.

What We Know About Early Voting

Early work in this area focused on the effects of expanding absentee ballot

programs. One such piece is Oliver's (1996) analysis of absentee voting. Oliver shows

that the liberalization of absentee voting requirements produces an increase in absentee

voting but does not, by itself, increase overall turnout. However, Oliver does find that

when liberalized absentee voting requirements are combined with efforts by political

parties to encourage the use of absentee ballots, overall turnout does increase. Karp and

Banducci (2001) have similar findings; they show that liberal absentee laws do not

expand the overall electorate, just allow those already likely to vote to do so by mail. In a

related piece, Dyck and Gimpel (2005) address the geography of convenience voting.

Though they do not specifically address the topic of overall turnout, Dyck and Gimpel

note that as the physical distance between a voter's home and his or her Election Day or early voting site increases, the likelihood of that voter casting an absentee ballot increases. Generally speaking, it appears that no-excuse absentee voting is less of a boon for turnout than it is a convenience for those who face relatively higher costs when voting in person.

A more recent development in the expansion of convenience voting is the advent of in-person early voting. Studies of this form of participation, though generally based on geographically limited data, provide insight into the profile of early voters and their electoral behavior. On the former count, Stein (1998) shows in his analysis of the 1994 general election in Texas that early voters are distinguished from Election Day voters by attitudinal (rather than demographic) characteristics. Specifically, early voters tend to be strong partisans, strong ideologues, and more interested in politics. These findings are corroborated by Berinsky et al. (2001) and Karp and Banducci (2001). On the topic of electoral behavior, many note the fact that early voting radically changes the electorate that parties and candidates must campaign toward (Dyck and Gimpel, 2005; Stein et al., 2004). Yet early voters are not all that different from Election Day voters in terms of voting behavior. Early voters tend to choose candidates based on their party identification (Stein et al., 2004; Stein, 1998) and ideology (Stein et al., 2004), though they consider group affiliations, issue preferences, and candidate evaluations less than Election Day voters do (Stein et al., 2004). And the evidence is mixed regarding the impact of early voting on overall turnout, with some saying early voting by itself produces a modest increase (Stein and Garcia-Monet, 1997), some saying early voting coupled with mobilization efforts can increase turnout (Stein et al., 2003; Stein and

Garcia-Monet, 1997), and some saying it has no effect on turnout (Neeley and

Richardson, 2001).

Voting by mail is the latest innovation in the expansion of convenience voting.

So far it has been implemented only in Oregon, but in that case it has entirely replaced in-

person voting. As with studies of early voting, research into voting by mail has sought to

explore the profile of the voting-by-mail electorate and the basis of their electoral

behavior. With respect to the profile of the electorate, Southwell and Burchett (2000a)

find that vote-by-mail voters are demographically similar to traditional Election Day

precinct voters as well registered nonvoters. They also note that vote-by-mail voters are

equally informed, educated, and involved when compared to traditional voters, but that

they are more educated, involved, politically aware, and residentially stable than are

registered nonvoters. This assessment is disputed by Berinsky et al. (2001), who find that

voting by mail is largely dependent on the availability of (civic) resources. They suggest

that the move to all-mail voting in Oregon has done little to assist those without

politically relevant resources while making it easier for those with greater civic skills to

remain in the electorate. Turning to electoral behavior, Southwell and Burchett (2000b)

address overall turnout in their analysis of primary and general elections in Oregon from

1960 to 1996. They find that all-mail elections increase turnout; they estimate that

turnout in all-mail elections is ten percent higher than the "expected turnout" in

traditional polling place elections. Berinsky et al. (2001) generally agree with this

finding, but they note that the increase in turnout is achieved by making it easier for

previous voters to remain in the electorate ("retention") rather than by mobilizing

previous nonvoters.

It appears that the consensus among previous research into convenience voting is that no-excuse absentee voting, early voting, and all-mail voting all reduce the costs of participation. Beyond that the consensus falls apart. Some argue that the reduction of costs is enough to increase turnout while others maintain that it requires concurrent efforts on the part of elites to mobilize individuals to produce higher turnout. At this point it is helpful to consider Berinsky's (2005) point that these forms of convenience voting merely reduce "tangible" barriers to voting, but that many "cognitive" barriers still exist. Perhaps most troubling, according to Berinsky, is the fact that cognitive skills and political engagement are unevenly distributed across the electorate. As a result, reducing the tangible costs of participation tend to benefit only the most engaged citizens, thus magnifying existing socioeconomic biases in the electorate. If Berinsky is correct, then convenience voting is more of handout to the resource-rich members of society rather than a worthy effort to improve democracy through expanding the electorate.

The Theory Behind Early Voting

The lack of consistent empirical evidence supporting the premise that expanding early voting increases turnout is puzzling. The theoretical basis of this research is that individuals are rational; when faced with the prospect of voting, they undertake a cost/benefit analysis and will choose to participate when the benefits outweigh the costs. We take as a given that voting is a low-benefit activity, and, of course, much previous research suggests that reducing the costs of participation increases turnout (Dyck and Gimpel, 2005; Brady and McNulty, 2004; Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003; Southwell and Burchett, 2000b; Stein and Garcia-Monet, 1997).

As a result it is easy to understand how the option to vote early should reduce the costs of participation, both through the reduction of barriers to voting as well as the mobilizing effect that it can have. On the latter count, if individuals have a few days or a few weeks before the election in which to vote, several things could happen which would mobilize them:

- They might stumble upon an early voting location. This happens more readily in states like Texas and Nevada where early voting locations show up in nontraditional sites like grocery stores, libraries, and shopping malls – places where people are going for other reasons.

- They might run across others who voted early. These other early voters are likely to tell people that they voted, or to wear the "I Voted" stickers, so that their families, friends, and co-workers will be reminded about the election and the chance to vote early.

- They might encounter news coverage of early voting. News media cover not only the beginning of early voting but also provide turnout estimates during the early voting period. These serve as a reminder about the election.

- They might be subject to candidate and party campaigns that encourage people to vote early. Candidates and parties have an incentive to "lock in" votes, and will use all of the traditional media – direct mail, television ads, speeches, canvassing – to reach potential early voters. If someone has already chosen to support a candidate, then from the perspective of that candidate, any additional information that comes out over the final days of the campaign will either have no effect or a negative impact on him or her. If a candidate or party can secure those votes

early, they avoid the risk that some last minute revelation will causes the voter to

change his or her mind.

In addition, the fact that some appreciable number of people vote early may also

shorten lines at the precincts on Election Day itself, thus reducing the costs to people who

do not themselves take advantage of the early voting option.

Therefore, the presence of an option to vote early should increase the chances that

any given individual will turn out to vote. We want to see whether or not that is true, and

if so for whom it is true. To that end, we will first look at the effect of early voting on

turnout for all voters, controlling for the chances that an individual was going to turn out

to vote anyway.

The Impact of Early Voting at the Individual Level

In order to generate an ex-ante probability of turnout for individuals, we first

estimated a turnout model on American National Election Studies data from 2000 (Burns

et al., 2001). Our model is based on the prevailing wisdom of the turnout literature and

includes measures of respondent demographic traits (age, income, education, race,

gender, religiosity), political traits (partisan intensity, political activity, interest in the

campaign, caring who wins, political knowledge, efficacy), and residency status as well

as measures of campaign efforts (being contacted by the parties and combined television

advertisements).[3] The dependent variable was coded '1' if the respondent turned out to

vote (in any fashion) in the 2000 election and '0' otherwise. The results of this logit

model are presented in Table A1 in the Appendix.

---

[3] See for example Rosenstone and Hansen (2003)

Given that the predictive model performed reasonably well (the pseudo-R^2 was

.420, no statistically significant coefficients showed unexpected signs), we used the

coefficient estimates from this model to generate turnout predictions for respondents in

the 2004 American National Election Studies dataset (National Election Studies, 2004).

Using a logit function with the coefficient estimates from 2000 and the 2004 respondents'

values on each of the variables, we produced a probability of turnout in 2004 that ranged

from .00 to .99 (mean = .84, standard deviation = .19). Finally, we divided the 2004

sample into three groups based on their likelihood of turning out to vote. The bottom

third of respondents were categorized as having the 'lowest likelihood' to turnout. The

middle third of respondents were categorized as having a 'moderate likelihood' to

turnout. The top third were categorized as having the 'highest likelihood' to turnout. By

dividing the 2004 sample into three groups by their expected probability of voting we can

assess whether the mere implementation of early voting increases turnout among those

for whom traditional voting is too costly.

In the 2004 ANES sample, overall turnout was 79 percent (798 voters out of 1008

respondents). When considering turnout among the three groups, we see that 97 percent

(297 out of 307) of the highest likelihood voters turned out in 2004, while 89 percent

(323 out of 363) of the moderate likelihood voters turned out and 53 percent (178 out of

338) of the lowest likelihood voters turned out. These figures are, of course, significantly

higher than the reported national turnout figure of roughly 60 percent (Faler, 2005). It is

important to note here that, as is always the case in the ANES, turnout in the sample

seems to be inflated. While some of the difference may be due to the mobilizing effect of

being interviewed, an effect long recognized by researchers (Clausen, 1968; Crespi,

1948), there is also, of course, likely to be an overreporting of actual turnout by

respondents who are embarrassed to admit to the interviewer that they did not vote.

While this makes precise estimates of turnout somewhat dubious, these estimates can still

be used to generate ordinal data. Thus, we cannot say with certainty that an individual in

our highest likelihood category actually had a 97 percent chance of voting, we are

confident, however, that those in the highest likelihood group were more likely to vote

than those in the moderate likelihood group.[4]

To see if the availability of early voting has an effect on overall turnout, we

estimated two separate models of turnout on the 2004 data. Both included all of the

measures used in the predictive model (demographic traits, political traits, residency

status, and campaign efforts). The first model included a dummy variable that was

coded '1' if the respondent's state had any form of early voting[5] and '0' otherwise, as

well as interaction terms between the early voting dummy and the measure of television

advertising.[6] This interaction term is justified by earlier findings that convenience voting

improves turnout only when coupled with mobilization efforts on the part of candidates

and parties (Stein et al., 2003; Stein and Garcia-Monet, 1997). We estimate this model

for the entire sample of 2004 ANES voters as well as the three groups of respondents

---

[4] In addition to looking at the descriptive characteristics of these groups, we also ran the predictive model
on the 2004 sample, presented in Table A2 in the Appendix. While there are a few differences from the
2000 sample, the sign and magnitude of almost all of the coefficients are very similar. Most importantly,
however, the self-reported turnout of the individuals in the groups we created using the 2000 models
certainly lends support to the validity of the predictive model.
[5] This could include in-person early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, or voting-by-mail (for respondents
from Oregon).
[6] In addition to looking at total advertising buys by both presidential campaigns and the parties in a state,
we also considered using the total number of candidate appearances in the state or the battleground ratings
of the states by the campaign, as well as various combinations of these variables. None of the substantive
results, however, were changed by the substitution of these other variables for advertising. While an
argument could be made for the inclusion of one of the other variables instead of advertising buys, this
variable was chosen because it most closely reflected direct efforts by the campaigns to reach voters.

divided by their likelihood of voting. Table 1 presents the results for this first model of

turnout.

Table 1
Turnout in 2004, Any Form of Early Voting

	Variable	All Respondents	Highest Likelihood	Moderate Likelihood	Lowest Likelihood
Demographics	Under 30	-0.052	16.849	0.288	-0.132
		(.236)	(10407.4)	(.710)	(.274)
	Over 65	-0.037	0.156	-0.604	0.189
		(.315)	(.859)	(.591)	(.432)
	Income	0.043*	-0.037	0.065	-0.039
		(.019)	(.105)	(.042)	(.024)
	Education	0.165*	0.137	0.276	0.191
		(.075)	(.290)	(.186)	(.113)
	White	0.001	0.034	0.576	-0.218
		(.209)	(.939)	(.451)	(.257)
	Male	-0.400*	0.382	-0.173	-0.463
		(.201)	(.749)	(.422)	(.259)
	Religiosity	0.093	-0.112	0.433**	-0.022
		(.064)	(.232)	(.143)	(.088)
Political Traits	Strength of Party Identification	0.449**	0.824	0.491	0.546*
		(.174)	(.653)	(.367)	(.245)
	Political Activity	0.683**	0.217	1.123**	0.522*
		(.199)	(.782)	(.409)	(.259)
	Interest	0.179*	-0.456	0.270	0.195
		(.079)	(.424)	(.190)	(.106)
	Cares Who Wins	0.843**	-18.173	2.632**	0.664*
		(.254)	(21013.4)	(.753)	(.288)
	Political Knowledge	0.469**	-0.366	1.037**	0.312*
		(.104)	(.595)	(.253)	(.137)
	Efficacy	0.169	0.751	0.645*	-0.052
		(.126)	(.497)	(.292)	(.159)
Residential Status	Residential Mobility	-0.003	-0.026	0.020	-0.003
		(.009)	(.029)	(.019)	(.012)
Campaign Efforts	Contacted by the Parties	1.041**	1.668	1.406*	0.876*
		(.229)	(.869)	(.550)	(.381)
	Combined Television Advertising (GRPs)	0.001	-0.058	0.011	0.009
		(.013)	(.045)	(.024)	(.019)
Early Voting	Any Early Voting	-0.158	-0.193	-0.074	-0.241
		(.222)	(.865)	(.454)	(.281)
	EV x Advertising	0.000	0.063	-0.014	-0.004
		(.017)	(.060)	(.031)	(.023)
	Constant	-4.062**	21.712	-11.468**	-2.943**
		(.503)	(21013.4)	(2.978)	(.813)
	Number of Cases	1008	307	363	338
	Pseudo R^2	.406	.163	.244	.207

** – p < .01
* – p < .05
Source: 2004 American National Election Studies

11

Among the demographic traits, conventional wisdom holds, as individuals with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to turnout. Among the political traits, all but efficacy exhibit coefficients that are positive and statistically significant, again confirming conventional wisdom that those more attached to politics are more likely to turnout. Also consistent with previous work (Wielhouwer and Lockerbie, 1994), those individuals who were contacted by the parties are more likely to turnout. However, neither the measure of early voting nor the interaction term produced statistically significant coefficients, either for the sample as a whole or for any of the subgroups individually. While disappointing, this is not entirely unexpected, as the dummy variable for early voting captures those states which employ any form of early voting. We believe, however, that not all forms of early voting are likely to have the same impact.

We argue that in-person early voting is more likely to generate an increase in turnout than mail-ballot early voting. Mail-ballot early voting requires an individual to be motivated to seek out the mail ballot, whereas in-person early voting (as discussed above) affords an individual numerous opportunities to 'accidentally' encounter a chance to participate as he or she goes about daily life. As a result, we argue that in-person early-voting is more likely to improve turnout among marginal participants than is mail-ballot early voting[7]. To that end, we estimate the second model of turnout with the early voting dummy variable coded '1' if the respondent's state had in-person early voting and '0' otherwise, along with the interaction term. We again estimate this model for the entire sample of 2004 ANES voters as well as the three groups of respondents divided by their likelihood of voting. The results are presented in Table 2.

---

[7] An exception to this argument is the case of Oregon, where unsolicited mail ballots are sent to every registered voter, thus drastically reducing costs by making participation as easy as going to the mailbox.

Table 2
Turnout in 2004, In Person Early Voting

	Variable	All Respondents	Highest Likelihood	Moderate Likelihood	Lowest Likelihood
Demographics	Under 30	-0.154	16.936	0.351	-0.138
		(.237)	(10459.9)	(.715)	(.275)
	Over 65	-0.017	0.073	-0.623	0.212
		(.316)	(.835)	(.589)	(.432)
	Income	0.045*	-0.035	0.068	0.041
		(.019)	(.103)	(.042)	(.024)
	Education	0.162*	0.170	0.280	0.173
		(.075)	(.293)	(.187)	(.114)
	White	-0.014	-0.082	0.634	-0.247
		(.210)	(.909)	(.458)	(.259)
	Male	-0.392	0.334	-0.182	-0.475
		(.201)	(.744)	(.423)	(.259)
	Religiosity	0.096	-0.112	0.429**	-0.026
		(.064)	(.228)	(.143)	(.089)
Political Traits	Strength of Party Identification	0.453**	0.884	0.503	0.531*
		(.174)	(.639)	(.371)	(.243)
	Political Activity	0.684**	0.297	1.136**	0.523*
		(.200)	(.767)	(.409)	(.261)
	Interest	0.180*	-0.399	0.263	0.195
		(.079)	(.414)	(.190)	(.106)
	Cares Who Wins	0.848**	-18.055	2.721**	0.656*
		(.254)	(20809.8)	(.741)	(.288)
	Political Knowledge	0.477**	-0.255	1.062**	0.313*
		(.104)	(.573)	(.257)	(.137)
	Efficacy	0.165	0.677	0.638*	-0.058
		(.126)	(.482)	(.290)	(.160)
Residential Status	Residential Mobility	-0.004	-0.025	0.018	-0.005
		(.009)	(.027)	(.019)	(.013)
Campaign Efforts	Contacted by the Parties	1.026**	1.545	1.405*	0.838*
		(.230)	(.839)	(.556)	(.382)
	Combined Television Advertising (GRPs)	0.002	-0.022	0.021	0.000
		(.011)	(.037)	(.021)	(.014)
Early Voting	In Person Early Voting	-0.233	-0.267	0.034	-0.435
		(.224)	(.839)	(.462)	(.287)
	EV x Advertising	-0.003	0.008	-0.047	0.007
		(.017)	(.056)	(.031)	(.022)
	Constant	-4.059**	20.784	-11.713**	-2.760**
		(.503)	(20809.8)	(2.976)	(.814)
	Number of Cases	1008	307	363	338
	Pseudo R^2	.408	.147	.257	.211

** – p < .01
* – p < .05
Source: 2004 American National Election Studies

Unfortunately, limiting the analysis to states in which voters have the option to vote early in person does not change the results. There is still no significant impact of having the option to vote early, nor is there any interactive effect between campaign efforts and early voting on turnout, regardless of which group of potential voters is examined. Therefore, not only do our results suggest that early voting produces no overall boost in turnout, but they also suggest that that null finding is consistent across the most and least likely participants in presidential elections. Instead, the decision to vote is influenced by traditional variables, such as income, education, partisan intensity, political activity, political knowledge, and direct contact by the campaigns.

The Impact of Early Voting in the Aggregate

While the impact of allowing early voting on individual level participation is important, the real question for state and local governments who have either passed such measure or are considering them is whether or not they produce results, especially given that any additional voting options made available to their citizens are going to increase the costs of administering elections. The important issue here is not how many people make use of options to vote early, but rather whether their introduction actually stimulates turnout. After all, if the goal of such measures is to increase turnout by making voting more convenient, it does not actually matter which voters are taking advantage of them, as long as participation increases. If a large number of habitual voters decide to take advantage of the opportunity to vote early – resulting in shorter lines on Election Day itself, which in turn reduces the costs of waiting in line for more marginal voters – that would be a victory for these reforms. If, however, all that happens is that

some habitual voters shift their voting practices, without any overall increase in turnout, then state and local governments could very likely find better ways to spend their money.

In order to test for the aggregate effect of these policies on turnout, we randomly selected 500 counties across the United States. We then gathered information about the election laws in the relevant states, the timing of the introduction of any methods of convenience voting[8], and the turnout in the presidential race for each county over the past nine election cycles.[9] This information was then used to calculate the change in turnout from the previous election, giving us 4000 total cases to evaluate.[10] We then used ordinary least squares regression to estimate the impact of these additional methods of voting on turnout for each of the first three elections in which they were in use. In addition, we controlled for the change in national turnout from the previous presidential election, since changes at the national level would also show up at the local level. We also controlled for differences on the ballot from the previous election cycle, particularly the presence or absence of a Senate or gubernatorial election.[11] Since these tend to be the

---

[8] Information about the early voting and absentee ballot laws for each state was initially taken from a list compiled by The Election Reform Information Project and published on their website, www.electionline.org. Verification of this information, as well as information about the dates on which any such reforms were implemented, was made through phone calls or e-mails to the Secretary of State's Office or Elections Division of each state's government during the summer of 2006.

[9] Since turnout figures released by state and local governments are almost all calculated as a percentage of registered voters, rather than as a percentage of eligible voters or the adult population, turnout was calculated by taking the total number of votes cast for president in each county (Scammon, et al, 1973 – 2006) divided by the census estimate of the population over the age of 18 in that county (U.S. Census, 1972 – 2004). While this measure underestimates turnout, both by excluding undervotes and overvotes from the numerator, as well as by including ineligible voters in the denominator, it is hard to imagine how that the error in the measure would be correlated with the decision to introduce early voting or no-excuse absentee ballot provisions in a given location.

[10] Change in turnout, both at the national and county levels, was calculated by taking the turnout level for each case and subtracting the turnout for the same geographic unit in the previous presidential election.

[11] While Senate elections are obviously staggered in such a way that, barring a vacancy, there is no Senate race on the ballot in any given state in one out of every three presidential elections, the fact that Governors generally serve four year terms means that it is much less common for voters to vote in a gubernatorial election in one presidential election year and not have a chance to do so in the next, or vice versa. However, several states changed their constitutions to lengthen the Governor's term from two to four years

highest profile elections below the presidential level, the addition or subtraction of a

gubernatorial or Senate race on the ballot, when compared to the last presidential

election, might also stimulate or depress turnout. Additionally, the efforts by the

campaigns and parties to get their supporters to the polls, as well as the perceived benefits

of voting may be influenced by the competitiveness of a state, since the Electoral College

makes marginal gains in vote totals useless in uncompetitive states. Therefore, we also

controlled for the difference in the margin of victory at the state level for the winning

presidential candidate from the previous presidential election, expecting that a closer

election at the state level should produce higher turnout at the county level. The results

are presented in Table 3.

These results suggest that the gains in turnout that result from making voting

more convenient are short lived. Whether looking only at the introduction of early

voting, only at the introduction of no-excuse absentee balloting, or at the introduction of

either of these options or the vote-by-mail system now used in Oregon, we found very

consistent results. In all three cases, there was a positive and significant increase in

aggregate level turnout in the first presidential election after the rules were changed to

make voting more convenient, with an average gain of roughly one and a half percentage

points. This gain, however, was negated in the next election, with a statistically

significant average decrease in turnout of roughly two percentage points for all three

models. Turnout then stabilized by the third presidential election in which voters had

these options. This suggests that voters may react positively to the novelty of being able

---

during the time frame of the study, which in those cases may have created an instance in which there was a
difference from the previous presidential election year ballot.

to vote in the weeks leading up to the election or being able to mail in ballots at their own

convenience, but once that novelty wears off, they are no longer mobilized by the

Table 3
Convenience Voting and Aggregate Turnout at the County Level

Variable	Early Voting	No-Excuse Absentee Balloting	Any Convenience Voting Option
Change in National Turnout	0.010** (.000)	0.009** (.000)	0.009** (.000)
Change in Governor's Race	-0.003 (.004)	-0.003 (.004)	-0.003 (.004)
Change in Senate Race	-0.001 (.001)	0.000 (.001)	-0.001 (.001)
Change in Margin	0.001** (.000)	0.001** (.000)	0.001** (.000)
Early voting offered the first time	0.015** (.003)	-	-
Early voting offered the second time	-0.024** (.004)	-	-
Early voting offered the third time	-0.004 (.004)	-	-
Absentee balloting offered for the first time	-	0.012** (.004)	-
Absentee balloting offered for the second time	-	-0.019** (.004)	-
Absentee balloting offered for the third time	-	-0.028** (.005)	
Any option offered for the first time	-	-	0.015** (.002)
Any option offered for the second time	-	-	-0.022** (.003)
Any option offered for the third time	-	-	-0.005 (.003)
Constant	0.000 (.001)	0.001 (.001)	0.000 (.001)
Number of Cases	3977	3998	3998
R^2	.379	.374	.378

* p<.05
** p<.01
Source: See footnotes 8 and 9

convenience of these methods. It is likely that the unveiling of such options is

accompanied by a great deal of publicity, with an emphasis on the convenience to the

voter and the expected boost in participation that should accompany these new policies.

Such publicity, along with a desire to try these new methods, could easily account for the

statistically significant but substantively slight average gain in the first presidential

election in which voters get a chance to use them. However, with the novelty gone, and

likely far less emphasis by the media or government officials on the availability of such

options after the first election during which voters can opt for these methods, the stimulus

to use them seems to have disappeared. In fact, these results suggest that the impact of

these policies is to change potential voters' calculations about the inherent benefits of

voting, rather than the costs. The reduction of costs, after all, is constant. It is just as

convenient to vote early or to use an absentee ballot the second time as it was the first. If

anything, it should even be more convenient, since any problems from the first time they

are administered are likely to have been worked out and voters who made use of them in

the previous election have already paid the cost of figuring out how to use them. The

benefits, however – particularly the benefits of trying a novel method of voting – would

decrease after the first use.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our results point to several conclusions about early voting. First, implementing

early voting procedures does not, by itself, increase turnout. Our finding that overall

turnout does not increase with early voting is consistent with the previous literature.

Furthermore, by dividing the electorate into three groups by respondents' likelihood of

voting, we see that early voting does not mobilize any of them; high likelihood voters are

going to vote anyway, and those in the other two groups are not mobilized by the mere

availability of another voting option.

Surprisingly, we find that this is true regardless of the type of early voting that

voters have access to. We expected to find that in-person early voting would have a

stronger impact. It is fundamentally easier than no-excuse absentee balloting, as the

latter requires the same forethought and effort that prevents some from registering to vote

or turning out on Election Day itself, while in-person early voting is a form of

participation that many people are likely to encounter as they go about their daily lives,

especially those who live in states that place early voting locations in nontraditional sites

such as libraries, shopping malls, and grocery stores. However, individuals in states with

such an option were no more likely to vote than those with liberal absentee voting rules

or even those which require voters to show up on Election Day.

It would appear, then, that early voting is little more than a convenience afforded

by society to those already likely to turnout. Certainly, it was reasonable to expect that

the reduction in costs associated with presenting voters with greater flexibility in voting

would stimulate more participation in elections. Those expectations, however, do not

seem to have been met. Given these findings, it may be time to consider whether or not

providing this convenience is worth the costs associated with providing these options.

The financial impact on counties, as well as the time and efforts of parties and volunteers,

should be weighed against the gains (or evident lack of gains) produced by these

alternatives. If the goal is to get more citizens to participate, rather than simply to make

participating more convenient for those already likely to participate, those resources may

be better used elsewhere.

To be sure, these two analyses constitute the basis for a more comprehensive cost-

benefit analysis of early voting. We envision the next step in this line of research to be

an assessment of the effectiveness of early voting as a public policy. Using county

budget figures to calculate the relative cost of increasing turnout via early voting, it will

be possible to compare the cost per vote of early voting versus the cost per vote of

traditional Election Day precinct voting. Perhaps the answer to increasing turnout among

low likelihood voters is to end early voting and instead provide more Election Day voting

locations, thus reducing distance to polling locations as well as time spent waiting in lines

at the polls. Even if that is the case, early voting will likely remain a feature of the

American electoral process, since the individuals who are directly benefiting from these

participation subsidies are also, by definition, the individuals with the most influence

over government policy.

Appendix
Table A1
Predicting Turnout in 2000

	Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Demographics	Under 30	-0.481* (.193)
	Over 65	-0.199 (.240)
	Income	0.047 (.027)
	Education	0.285** (.059)
	White	-0.028 (.187)
	Male	0.012 (.157)
	Religiosity	0.115* (.049)
Political Traits	Strength of Party Identification	0.348** (.129)
	Political Activity	0.127 (.173)
	Interest	0.246** (.064)
	Cares Who Wins	0.967** (.179)
	Political Knowledge	0.284** (.083)
	Efficacy	0.315** (.102)
Residential Status	Residential Mobility	0.024** (.007)
Campaign Efforts	Contacted by the Parties	1.111** (.193)
	Combined Television Advertising (GRPs)	0.003 (.004)
	Constant	-4.157** (.380)
	Number of Cases	1498
	Pseudo R^2	.420

** – $p < .01$
* – $p < .05$
Source: 2000 American National Election Studies

Appendix
Table A2
Predictive Model in 2004

	Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Demographics	Under 30	-0.153 (.236)
	Over 65	-0.042 (.315)
	Income	0.043* (.019)
	Education	0.168* (.075)
	White	0.001 (.209)
	Male	-0.405* (.201)
	Religiosity	0.093 (.064)
Political Traits	Strength of Party Identification	0.447** (.173)
	Political Activity	0.679** (.199)
	Interest	0.178* (.079)
	Cares Who Wins	0.833** (.253)
	Political Knowledge	0.471** (.103)
	Efficacy	0.164 (.126)
Residential Status	Residential Mobility	-0.002 (.056)
Campaign Efforts	Contacted by the Parties	1.039** (.229)
	Combined Television Advertising (GRPs)	0.000 (.008)
	Constant	-4.130** (.494)
	Number of Cases	1008
	Pseudo R^2	.405

** – $p < .01$
* – $p < .05$
Source: 2004 American National Election Studies

Works Cited

Berinsky, Adam J. 2005. "The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the
          United States." *American Politics Research* 33 (4) : 471-491.
Berinsky, Adam J., Nancy Burns, and Michael W. Traugott. 2001. "Who Votes By
          Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-Level Consequences of Voting-By-
          Mail Systems." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65 (2) : 178-197.
Brady, Henry E. and John E. McNulty. 2004. "The Costs of Voting: Evidence from a
          Natural Experiment." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political
          Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 15-18.
Burns, Nancy, Donald R. Kinder, Steven J. Rosenstone, Virginia Sapiro, and the National
          Election Studies. 2001. "National Election Studies, 2000: Pre-/Post-Election
          Study," [dataset]. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political
          Studies [producer and distributor].
Clausen, Aage R. 1968. "Response Validity: Vote Report." *Public Opinion Quarterly*
          32 (4): 588-606.
Crespi, Leo P. 1948. "The Interview Effect in Polling." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12
          (1): 99-111.
Crowley, Patrick. 2006. "Grayson wants to expand absentee voting." *The Courier-
          Journal* (Lexington, KY), December 21.
Dyck, Joshua J. and James G. Gimpel. 2005. "Distance, Turnout, and the Convenience
          of Voting." *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (3) : 531-548.
"Early and Absentee Voting Laws."
          http://www.electionline.org/Default.aspx?tabid=474. Accessed February 12,
          2007.
Faler, Brian. 2005. "Election Turnout in 2004 Was Highest Since 1968." *Washington
          Post*, January 15, page A5.
Gimpel, James G. and Jason E. Schuknecht. 2003. "Political Participation and the
          accessibility of the ballot box." *Political Geography* 22 (5) : 471-488.
Karp, Jeffrey A. and Susan A. Banducci. 2001. "Absentee Voting, Mobilization, and
          Participation." *American Politics Research* 29 (2) : 183-195.
Kenny, Megan. 2004. "More early voting expected, Putnam officials say absentee votes
          hit record in 2000." *Charleston Daily Mail*, April 15, page 9A.
Leighley, Jan E. 2001. *Strength in Numbers? The Political Mobilization of Racial and
          Ethnic Minorities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
McDermott, Kevin. 2006. "Early-voting law in Illinois begins with March primary
          Legislators hope the new format will save the state money as well as increase
          voter turnout." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 29, page C2.
Mosk, Matthew. 2006. "Md. GOP Says Voting Law Gives Democrats an Edge;
          Democrats Seen To Have an Edge." *Washington Post*, April 5, p. A1.
National Association of Secretaries of State. 2004. "NASS Early Voting Survey."
          Available at http://www.nass.org/electioninfo/Early%20Voting%20Survey.pdf.
          Accessed February 5, 2007.
National Election Studies, The. 2004. "The 2004 National Election Study," [dataset].
          Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer
          and distributor].

Neeley, Grant W. and Lilliard E. Richardson, Jr. 2001. "Who is early voting? An individual level examination." *Social Science Journal* 38 (3) : 381-392.

Nordlinger, Gary. 2003. "Early Voting: How It's Changing Campaign Strategies, Timing and Costs." *Campaigns & Elections* 24 (7) : 27-29.

Oliver, J. Eric. 1996. "The Effects of Eligibility Restrictions and Party Activity on Absentee Voting and Overall Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (2) : 498-513.

Pennsylvania Election Reform Task Force. 2005. "Final Report on Executive Order 2004-11." Available at http://www.dos.state.pa.us/election_reform/lib/election_reform/PERTF_Final_Report_051705_Website.pdf. Accessed February 5, 2007.

Rosenfield, Margaret. 1994. *Early Voting*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, Federal Election Commission.

Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen. 2003. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York, NY: Pearson Longman.

Scammon, Richard M. 1973. *America Votes 10: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1972*. Washington, D.C.: Governmental Affairs Institute, Congressional Quarterly.

Scammon, Richard M. and Alice McGillvray. 1977. *America Votes 12: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1976*. Washington, D.C.: Elections Research Center, Congressional Quarterly.

Scammon, Richard M. and Alice McGillvray. 1981. *America Votes 14: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1980*. Washington, D.C.: Elections Research Center, Congressional Quarterly.

Scammon, Richard M. and Alice McGillvray. 1985. *America Votes 16: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1984*. Washington, D.C.: Elections Research Center, Congressional Quarterly.

Scammon, Richard M. and Alice McGillvray. 1989. *America Votes 18: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1988*. Washington, D.C.: Elections Research Center, Congressional Quarterly.

Scammon, Richard M. and Alice McGillvray. 1993. *America Votes 20: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1992*. Washington, D.C.: Elections Research Center, Congressional Quarterly.

Scammon, Richard M., Alice McGillvray, and Rhodes Cook. 1998. *America Votes 22: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 1996*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc.

Scammon, Richard M., Alice McGillvray, and Rhodes Cook. 2001. *America Votes 24: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 2000*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Scammon, Richard M., Alice McGillvray, and Rhodes Cook. 2006. *America Votes 26: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics, 2003-2004*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

"Shop and Vote." 2005. *Winston-Salem Journal*. December 13, page A20.

Southwell, Priscilla L. and Justin I. Burchett. 2000a. "Does Changing the Rules Change the Players? The Effect of All-Mail Elections on the Composition of the Electorate." *Social Science Quarterly* 81 (3) : 837-845.

_____. 2000b. "The Effect of All-Mail Elections on Voter Turnout." *American Politics Quarterly* 28 (1) : 72-79.

Stein, Robert M. 1998. "Early Voting." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62 (1) : 57-69.

Stein, Robert M. and Patricia A. Garcia-Monet. 1997. "Voting Early but Not Often." *Social Science Quarterly* 78 (3) : 657-671.

Stein, Robert M., Jan Leighley, and Christopher Owens. 2004. "Voting, Early Voting and the Determinants of Vote Choice: Is Timing Everything?" Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 15-18.

Stein, Robert M., Chris Owens, and Jan Leighley. 2003. "The Role of Candidates and Parties in Linking Electoral Reforms with Voter Participation." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 3-6.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Estimates of the Population of Counties in the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1972." Taken from: *Estimates of the Intercensal Population of Counties 1970-1979.* http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/pre-1980/co-asr-7079.html. Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Estimates of the Population of Counties in the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1976." Taken from: *Estimates of the Intercensal Population of Counties 1970-1979.* http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/pre-1980/co-asr-7079.html. Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Estimates of the Population of Counties in the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1980." Taken from: *Estimates of the Intercensal Population of Counties 1980-1989.* http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/1980s/PE-02.html. Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Estimates of the Population of Counties in the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1984." Taken from: *Estimates of the Intercensal Population of Counties 1980-1989.* http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/1980s/PE-02.html. Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Estimates of the Population of Counties in the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1988." Taken from: *Estimates of the Intercensal Population of Counties 1980-1989.* http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/1980s/PE-02.html. Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Population Estimates for Counties by Age Group: July 1, 1992." Taken from: *Estimates of the Population of Counties by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1990 to 1999.* http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/1990s/CO-99-13.html. Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Population Estimates for Counties by Age Group: July 1, 1996."
Taken from: *Estimates of the Population of Counties by Age, Sex, Race and
Hispanic Origin: 1990 to 1999.*
http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/1990s/CO-99-13.html. Accessed
February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Population Estimates for Counties by Age Group: July 1, 2000."
Taken from: Annual Estimates of the Population by Selected Age Groups and
Sex for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2004.
http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/asrh/CC-EST2004-agesex.html.
Accessed February 12, 2007.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Population Estimates for Counties by Age Group: July 1, 2004."
Taken from: Annual Estimates of the Population by Selected Age Groups and
Sex for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2004.
http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/asrh/CC-EST2004-agesex.html.
Accessed February 12, 2007.

Wielhouwer, Peter W. and Brad Lockerbie. 1994. "Party Contacting and Political
Participation, 1952-90." *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (1) : 211-229.