

DEMOCRACY
in the
STATES

EXPERIMENTS IN
ELECTION REFORM

BRUCE E. CAIN

TODD DONOVAN

CAROLINE J. TOLBERT

Editors

BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS
Washington, D.C.

Contents

ABOUT BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution is a private nonprofit organization devoted to research, education, and publication on important issues of domestic and foreign policy. Its principal purpose is to bring the highest quality independent research and analysis to bear on current and emerging policy problems. Interpretations or conclusions in Brookings publications should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

Copyright © 2008

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

www.brookings.edu

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Brookings Institution Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Democracy in the states : experiments in election reform / Bruce E. Cain, Todd Donovan, and Caroline J. Tolbert, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: "Offers a twenty-first-century agenda for election reform based on lessons learned in the fifty states. Examines the impact of reforms intended to increase the integrity, fairness, and responsiveness of the electoral system. Topics include the relationship between early voting and turnout, hurdles for third-party candidates, and strategies for redistricting reform"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-8157-1336-4 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8157-1337-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Elections—United States. 2. Voting—United States. 3. Democracy—United States. I. Cain, Bruce E. II. Donovan, Todd. III. Tolbert, Caroline J. IV. Title.

JK1976.D46 2008

324.60973—dc22

2008014076

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials: ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Typeset in Minion

Composition by Cynthia Stock
Silver Spring, Maryland

Printed by R. R. Donnelley
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Acknowledgments vii

I The Promise of Election Reform 1
Caroline Tolbert, Todd Donovan, and Bruce E. Cain

PART ONE

PROMOTING INTEGRITY

2 Election Administration and Voter Confidence 21
Lonna Rae Atkeson and Kyle L. Saunders

3 Poll Workers' Job Satisfaction and Confidence 35
Thad Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson

PART TWO

PROMOTING PARTICIPATION

4 Vote Centers and Voter Turnout 55
Eric Gonzalez Juenke and Julie Marie Shepherd

5 Early Voting and Voter Turnout 68
*Paul Gronke, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum,
and Peter A. Miller*

6 Election Day Registration, Competition,
and Voter Turnout 83
*Caroline Tolbert, Todd Donovan, Bridgett King,
and Shaun Bowler*

PAUL GRONKE, EVA GALANES-ROSENBAUM,
AND PETER A. MILLER

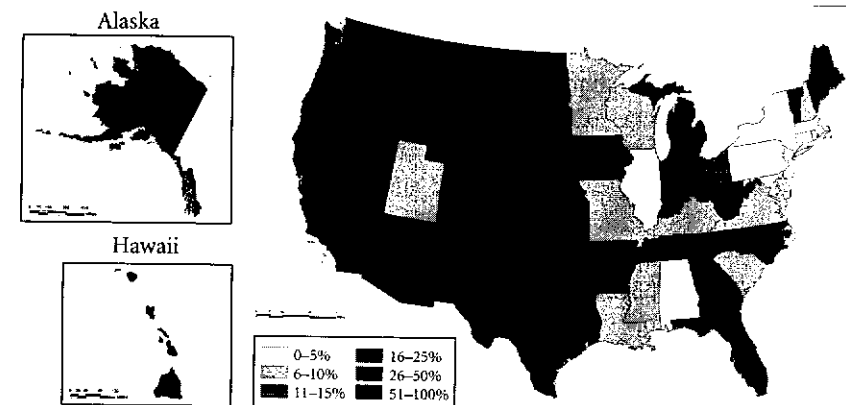
Early Voting and Voter Turnout

Early or convenience voting—understood in this context to be relaxed administrative rules and procedures through which citizens can cast a ballot at a time and place other than the precinct on election day—is a popular watchword among election reformers. Early voting is attractive because of claims that increased convenience reduces the costs of voting, resulting in higher turnout and higher-quality voter decisions. For this reason, states have experimented extensively with early voting laws. Yet the empirical literature finds mixed results, with some studies suggesting a turnout increase as large as 10 percent, while others find that voting convenience has little or no impact on turnout. The literature, to put it simply, is unsettled.

Our goals in this chapter are fourfold. First, we provide a map of the states in which early voting reforms have been adopted (figure 5-1); the figure also notes how frequently voters have taken advantage of these balloting methods. Second, we recapitulate the arguments supporting these types of reform. Third, we summarize previous scholarly research regarding the impact of convenience voting methods on voter turnout. Finally, we present our own findings regarding the impact of early voting on turnout.

Only one early voting reform—voting by mail—has had a positive impact on turnout, and that only in presidential elections. Most other reforms have a negligible, and in some cases negative, impact on turnout. Referenda and initiatives on the ballot interact with convenience voting methods, implying a complex interplay between these two types of ballot change, and these cannot be easily disentangled. The growing length of ballots as a consequence of an increasing use of initiatives and referenda may have led to the adoption of

Figure 5-1. Early Voting Rates, by State, November 2004 General Election



early voting as well as an increase in the educative function of elections. Our findings correspond with much of the literature, which argues that parties and campaign organizations, via the avenue of mobilization, are the primary engines that drive turnout in the United States.¹ Ballot reforms have, at best, a marginal effect and are unlikely to solve the challenge of low voter participation.

An Introduction to Early Voting

For the purposes of this chapter, *early voting*, *convenience voting*, and *non-precinct voting* are blanket terms we use to describe any system in which voters can cast their ballots before election day and at a place other than the polling station (although often it is a county office).² This definition covers a bewildering array of electoral systems. In some localities absentee balloting can be done in person and may be referred to as *early voting*; or it can be done by mail and may be referred to as *vote by mail*. In Sweden *postal voting* describes in-person voting in the post office. The following list summarizes the terms and their usage:

—*No-excuse absentee voting (vote by mail; absentee vote by mail)*: Voters apply for an absentee ballot without any requirement for a reason. They receive the ballots as early as forty-five days before the election and must return it by the date of the election. In some localities, it must bear a postmark dated on or before the election. This method is in wide use.

No-excuse absentee voting allows voters to request an absentee ballot without providing a reason, such as travel or hospitalization. In some states,

notably California, a voter can also request "permanent" absentee status, essentially becoming a regular vote-by-mail voter. Unrestricted access to an absentee ballot contrasts with the former norm of absentee eligibility: casting your ballot before election day because you are infirm, out of the country (in the military or living overseas), away at college, or otherwise unable to make it to the polls (nonetheless, restricted access to absentee ballots is still current law for sixteen states in the Northeast and South). This traditional form of absentee balloting has historically been quite restrictive, and the proportion of ballots cast via this method is very low. Use of no-excuse absentee balloting, in contrast, has increased dramatically over time in many states and localities.

—*In-person early voting (in-person absentee balloting)*: Voters have the option of casting a vote early at a satellite location or at the county elections office. In most localities the voter simply shows up. Texas adopted this method early, followed by Georgia, Tennessee, and Iowa. Many more states have now adopted it.

—*Vote by mail (postal voting)*: Voters receive ballots in the mail approximately two weeks before the election. Ballots can be returned by mail or dropped off at satellite locations. Oregon and New Zealand have adopted this method, as has the United Kingdom for local elections.

At the time of this writing, thirty-one states allowed early in-person voting—either alone or in conjunction with absentee by-mail voting—whereby voters can cast early ballots just as they would do on election day, commonly at the local elections office but increasingly at satellite locations such as community centers, churches, and even grocery stores. The important distinction between early in-person and other early voting systems is the requirement that individuals show up in person to cast a ballot. If we accept that getting to the polls imposes a significant barrier to participation, then in-person systems only partially relieve this burden; in addition, the convenience factor varies among systems, depending upon where voters can cast ballots.

Finally, in the vote-by-mail (VBM) system all voters receive and cast their ballots via regular mail. It has been used by the state of Oregon for all elections since 1998 (the first statewide election conducted in this manner was a 1993 special election, and vote by mail was used in two special Senate elections in 1995 and 1996 and in a 1996 presidential preference primary). VBM has been used in some local elections in California. During the 2006 general election, thirty-four of thirty-nine counties in Washington State conducted their elections entirely by mail; it is likely that VBM will become the statewide elections system for Washington in the next few years. Typically, the voter receives a

voter's guide approximately three weeks before election day, followed by the ballot, which is generally mailed eighteen days before the election. The voter may return the ballot any time after it is received, usually fifteen days or closer to election day, continuing up to and including election day.

The Where and How of Convenience Voting Reforms

The first voting reforms aimed squarely at convenience took place in the 1980s, when absentee and early in-person voting were opened to a wider electorate, rather than simply to voters who were sick, elderly, disabled, in college, or traveling. No-excuse absentee balloting, in particular, became a popular method for anyone inconvenienced by going to the polls, regardless of the reason. Currently, twenty-eight states have no-excuse absentee laws. In addition, many states allow voters to cast a ballot at the county clerk's office or elections office before election day if they are going to be out of town or need assistance (in-person early voting). By the late 1990s twenty states had at least one type of convenience voting on the books, and some had two: Washington and California allowed voters to apply for permanent absentee status; six states allowed both no-excuse absentee voting and early in-person and absentee voting.

The advance of nonprecinct voting methods began before the 1980s: by January 1980 forty-seven states had adopted traditional absentee voting. Although this number dropped to forty-five states by January 1990 and to twenty-seven by January 2000, several nontraditional nonprecinct voting methods had been adopted by 2008:

—No-excuse absentee voting had been adopted by twenty-eight states.

—No-excuse absentee voting and permanent absentee status had been adopted by four states.

—In-person early voting (but not no-excuse absentee balloting) had been adopted by six states.

—No-excuse absentee voting and in-person early voting has been adopted by twenty-five states.

—By-mail voting had been adopted by one state.³

The myriad scandals and debacles uncovered during the 2000 presidential election, even though mainly technological and clerical in nature, gave momentum to a national movement toward more widespread nonprecinct voting methods. In the wake of the election, many states expanded their election systems to include convenience options on the premise that reducing the administrative pressures on election day would reduce the likelihood of a

Table 5-1. *Early Voting as Percentage of Total Turnout in General Election, Top Fifteen States, 2004 and 2006*

State	2004	2006
Oregon	82.25	71.87
Washington	68.48	84.86
Nevada	52.28	49.86
New Mexico	50.61	61.11
Tennessee	47.30	46.25
Colorado	47.13	54.38
Arizona	40.77	46.97
Arkansas	36.93	22.66
Florida	36.19	27.73
California	32.61	26.15
Texas	32.56	24.43
Montana	31.56	29.03
North Carolina	31.17	20.67
Hawaii	30.92	27.15
Iowa	30.10	21.95

Source: Authors.

snafu, be it minor or major. After the adoption of the Help America Vote Act in 2002, additional pressures on election officials made the administrative and technological benefits of early voting systems much more appealing. Other motivations included cost and concerns that there would not be enough new machines to process all the ballots cast in person on election day. Finally, public and legislative calls for voting machines that provided voter-verifiable paper audit trails after 2004—necessitating, in some cases, costly repurchasing of election equipment—further ramped up the pressure to move voters out of the precincts. After all, the traditional pen and paper absentee ballot provides a familiar method to keep a paper record.

Geographically, nonprecinct voting reforms throughout the last twenty-five years have occurred outside the Northeast. The West Coast and Southwest, in particular, began instituting postal methods early. Texas has become the most prominent state using early, in-person (EIP) voting, with seven other states following Texas's lead. This trend is quite clear in the rates of early voting in the 2004 general election (see map). While not uniformly the case, high numbers of early voters primarily appear in states with a high percentage of rural population and in those that are geographically large. All but one of the fifteen states with the highest early voting rates in 2004 fit these descriptions (table 5-1). In

previous work, we found those individual voters who face long commutes or who live in rural areas were more likely to cast their ballots earlier rather than holding them until election day.⁴ State legislatures and election officials recognize the burdens that voting can place on some voters and, as a result, adopt reforms that make it easier for these voters to cast a ballot.

Those states that adopted nonprecinct voting systems early in the observed time period also have the highest current rates of early voters. Eleven of the top fifteen early voting states in 2004 had instituted some type of liberalized early voting by the 1990s. Only eight of the remaining twenty-five had liberalized by that point. What is apparent from figure 5-1 and table 5-1 is the rapid increase in early voting once states adopt these reforms. A significant proportion of voters clearly prefer to be able to vote other than at the precinct place and earlier than on election day. In some states, this proportion seems to peak at 30–40 percent of the electorate, but in other states there seems to be no upper bound. For example, 85 percent of Washington voters cast their ballots absentee in 2006, and Washington State will be nearly fully vote by mail in the 2008 election.⁵

Election officials are often strong advocates of early voting reforms. The Oregon secretary of state, Bill Bradbury, is a primary example. Bradbury argues that voting by mail has four positive effects on the election process: it increases turnout and results in more citizens having a stake in their government; it results in more thoughtful voting, enhancing the democratic process; it offers greater procedural integrity; and finally, it saves taxpayer dollars.⁶ Similar arguments have been made in favor of early in-person and relaxed absentee voting. The two primary national organizations that deal with election administration, the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Association of Secretaries of State, issued reports after the 2000 elections, and again after the passage of the Help America Vote Act, that urge states to consider reforms that would allow early voting.⁷ Many reformers hope that early voting may help reengage Americans in the electoral process.⁸ But do these claims stand up to empirical scrutiny?

Convenience Voting and Turnout: The Literature

The empirical evidence to date supports election officials in one respect—early voting is associated with higher quality election administration. Early in-person voting, absentee balloting, and vote by mail have all been found to result in a more accurate count.⁹ The verdict on cost savings, however, is less clear. The state of Oregon estimates savings of nearly 17 percent of the cost of

holding elections by adopting VBM, while EIP and liberalized absentee balloting do not clearly result in cost savings.¹⁰

The evidence regarding turnout is much weaker, although positive. Non-precinct methods should increase turnout, theoretically, by easing the resource demands of voting, primarily by eliminating the need to go to the polling booth or by providing more convenient times to vote.¹¹ Empirical evidence weakly supports this expectation. Liberalized absentee balloting leads to a small but significant growth in turnout.¹² Early in-person voting also slightly stimulates participation.¹³ Finally, most evidence suggests that VBM increases turnout, perhaps by as much as 10 percent.¹⁴ Recent work has questioned the generalizability of the 10 percent turnout effect. There is some evidence that this spike in turnout is due to a novelty effect and is not sustained beyond the first three elections using VBM. There is, however, a significant turnout effect by vote by mail of about 5 percent in Washington State over the 1960–2006 period.¹⁵ A turnout effect of about 4.1 percent is also found in Swiss elections from 1970 to 2005.¹⁶ Last, and contrary to theoretical expectations, one study finds a negative turnout effect associated with VBM.¹⁷

The performance of electoral reforms on changing who votes is more mixed. “What has not been widely recognized,” says one researcher, “is that this wave of reforms has exacerbated the socioeconomic biases of the electorate.”¹⁸ This claim is sustained in compositional studies of all three systems. Politically active segments of the population often take advantage of these liberalized voting systems. VBM increases turnout by retaining likely voters in less intense campaigns (for example, midterm and local elections) rather than by recruiting new voters into the system.¹⁹ The two studies of absentee balloting indicate that rates of absentee voting vary positively with levels of partisan mobilization: candidates harvest absentee voters in localities where party organizations are strong, benefiting Republican candidates.²⁰ A study of early in-person voting in Harris County, Texas, shows that there were significantly larger numbers of Democrats and strong partisans among the “early voters” than among election day voters.²¹ A pattern of partisan advantage is not clear from the literature on early voting, but it is clear that partisans on either end of the political spectrum vote early at a higher rate than moderate voters, in part due to party mobilization efforts.²²

These studies, while helpful, are hampered by limitations in research design and methodology that affect their applicability to the past decade of reforms. Some studies have considered only the first three VBM contests.²³ One pioneering work considered only municipal elections in three Western states in

the early 1980s.²⁴ Some studies of in-person early voting are based on single elections and in a state where rates of early voting have increased dramatically in the past fifteen years.²⁵ A 1996 study is based on one county and relies on self-reports of turnout.²⁶ Finally, the two studies of absentee balloting rely on absentee ballot rates that are less than half of what they are today.²⁷ In the next section of this chapter, we address these shortcomings by providing a new and comprehensive look at the turnout effects of convenience voting reforms.

Turnout and Convenience Voting Reforms

In this section, we estimate the impact of convenience voting on turnout over a longer period than in previous work, considering all varieties of such reforms and with a larger geographic scope.

We relied upon an established model to assess the effects of the presence and number of initiatives on turnout.²⁸ These authors argue that ballot initiatives, far from making the election too complicated and thereby discouraging turnout, do the opposite: they increase turnout, primarily by increasing the salience of the election. Here we are less interested in replicating their findings for the effects of initiatives than we are in seeing whether early voting similarly increases turnout not by educating the electorate but by lowering at least one barrier to ballot access.

The data set of the established model contains a rich set of other correlates of turnout, including region, election type, institutional provisions, and the demographic characteristics of the state (racial diversity, educational attainment, and per capita income).²⁹ To this data set we added a measure of early voting reforms collected from archival sources. We coded reforms into six categories: traditional absentee balloting, no-excuse absentee balloting, no-excuse absentee balloting with permanent absentee status, in-person early voting, no-excuse absentee plus in-person early voting, and voting by mail. These six categories were then collapsed into dummy variables, with traditional absentee balloting as the excluded category, and added to the turnout model.³⁰

A complete regression is included in the appendix to this chapter, but in the interests of clarity we focus here on the most salient results of the five models. The first model replicates the established model, following its lead with respect to methodology.³¹ Our model has, however, two important differences: first, we exclude the measure of the number of initiatives in order to test the impact of early voting reforms independent of any ballot modifications; and second, we do not estimate separate models for midterm and for presidential

contests. In the second model, we add the “number of initiatives” variable to see how it changes the estimated impact of convenience voting reforms. The third, fourth, and fifth columns essentially replicate the established model but add voting reform measures as well as a broader set of regional dummies to capture any remaining regional differences in balloting technology and turnout. The theoretical reasons behind these modeling decisions are elaborated below.

—Ballot initiatives are associated with an increase in turnout of about 0.476 percent in midterm elections.

—No-excuse absentee voting has no discernible effect on turnout.

—No-excuse absentee voting with permanent status is associated with about a 4 percent decrease in turnout in midterm elections.

—Early in-person voting has no discernible effect on turnout.

—Voting by mail is associated with an increase in turnout of about 6.8 percent in presidential elections.

—Turnout in the Northeast is 3.4 percent higher than that in the South across presidential and midterm elections.

—Turnout in the Midwest is 5.8 percent higher than that in the South across presidential and midterm elections.

—Turnout in the West is 5.6 percent than that in the South across presidential and midterm elections.

These results are puzzling: Why would convenience voting reforms reduce turnout? Our first intuition was to control for the number of initiatives on the ballot, under the assumption that there may be an interaction between the appearance of initiatives and voter turnout. Once we control for the number of initiatives on the ballot, the impact of all reforms save VBM disappear. The effect of VBM declines from about 6.1 percent to about 2.1 percent, and is no longer statistically significant. The sign of no-excuse absentee switches to a negative effect, though it and the other reforms remain insignificant.

In the next set of analyses, we consider two additional possibilities. First, we were intrigued by the finding that including initiatives in our turnout model altered so substantially the impact of voting reforms. One possibility, we speculate, is that states with high numbers of initiatives are much more likely to adopt convenience voting methods. After all, in states with long, complex ballots, the argument to provide voters more time to navigate the ballot and more leisure to consider complex initiatives is much more compelling. We took a first pass at controlling for these effects by adding additional regional dummy variables to our model.

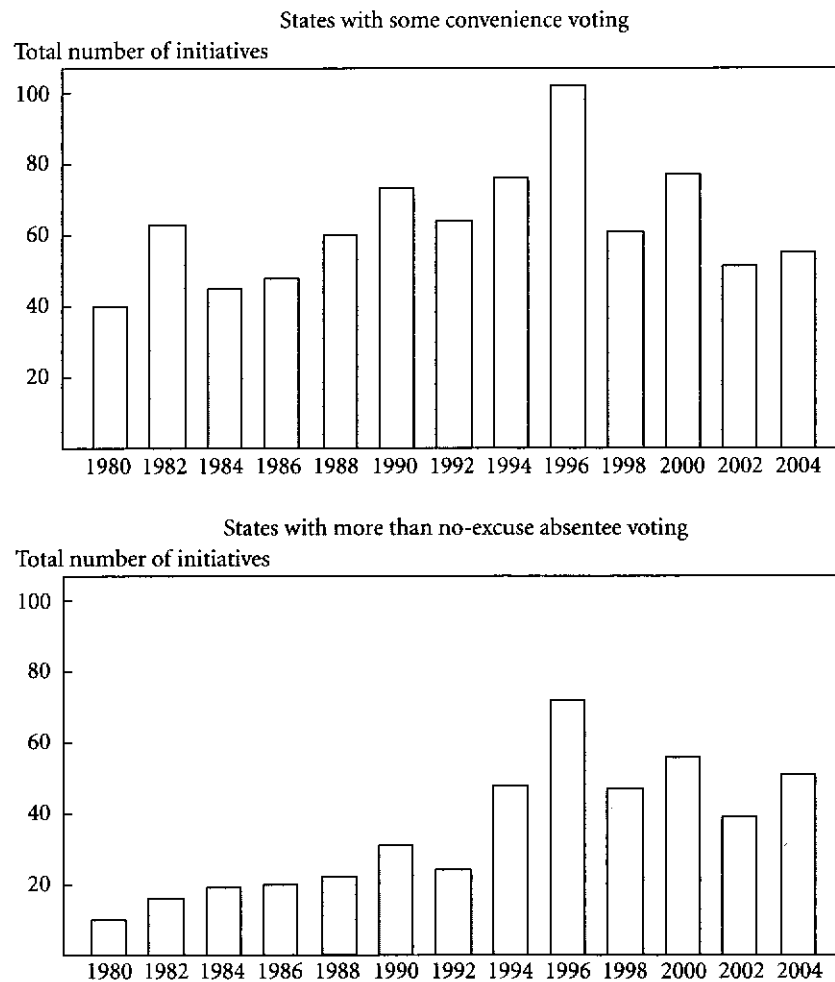
Second, we wanted to consider the argument that the impact of initiatives and referenda as “educative” mechanisms only operates in midterm contests, when voter information and interest are relatively lower.³² Thus we reestimated our model three ways: for presidential contests, midterm contests, and pooled (presidential and midterm contests together).

To turn to the second hypothesis—that there are important differences between presidential and midterm contests—we found additional support for our claim that voting reforms have no clear positive impact on turnout. First, the impact of voting by mail is now restricted solely to presidential contests; and second, no-excuse absentee voting with a permanent status option is associated with a decline in turnout. In the pooled model, only no-excuse absentee voting with permanent status retains explanatory power; the rest of the voting reforms show statistically insignificant relationships with voter turnout.

Is it possible that prior estimates of the impact of early voting reforms on turnout were all misspecified because they failed to take into account the number of initiatives and referenda on the ballot? We considered this possibility and present some intriguing graphics in figure 5-2. This figure contains two graphics. The top displays the number of initiatives, over time, in states that had some convenience voting (including no-excuse absentee balloting, the most common convenience voting method). There is little evidence of a trend in these data. However, the picture changes rather dramatically once we control for most liberal early voting provisions (eliminating those states that only allow no-excuse absentee balloting). Here we see a clear trend—the states that liberalized their voting laws after 1994 were the same states that experienced a rise in “citizen government” via the initiative process.

This seems to us a completely reasonable result, but it raises an important question of causality. Did states liberalize their voting provisions because they were experiencing an onslaught of initiatives? Some argue that states such as California, Oregon, and Washington have been forced to expand early voting because the ballot is long and complex to the point that precinct place voting is unrealistic. For example, the 2006 election in California was so long that the ballot guide was 192 pages long, while the Oregon Voter’s Pamphlet was distributed in two volumes, ranging from 196 to 228 pages, depending on particular county elections. It even took two stamps to return an absentee ballot in California, a requirement that was not expected by either election officials or voters. There may be state political culture accounts that help explain both initiatives and ballot reforms, but we have not considered these here. The empirical result is clear, however: the number of initiatives and early voting

Figure 5-2. Trends in Initiatives among States with Early Voting



Source: Authors' calculations; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith (2001); Tolbert and Smith (2005).

reforms are correlated, and when both are included in a regression, the impact of early voting reforms on turnout loses statistical significance.

Implications for Reform

Our findings support much of the literature that has found, at best, a modest impact of voting reforms on turnout. Our results are also consistent with

theoretical presentations of the paradox of turnout. John Aldrich, in his masterful challenge to those who describe turnout as the “major example of the failure of rational choice theory,” argues that turnout is a decision made at the margin, and thus is a decision that is responsive to very small changes in costs or benefits.³³ Voting, by this standard, is more an act of consumption than a complex bundle of costs and benefit calculations.

Early voting and convenience voting are just such minor changes, ones that make voting more convenient to be sure but that pale in significance to feelings of citizen empowerment, interest in and concern about the election, and political mobilization by parties, candidates, and other political organizations.³⁴ The impact of early voting, while measurable, is likely to be no larger than the modest changes in turnout that are popularly (and accurately) associated with bad weather.³⁵ And ironically, the compositional effects of these reforms seem to be quite analogous to the Republicanizing impact of rain.

These results lead us to be skeptical of those who advocate in favor of early voting reforms primarily on the basis of increased turnout. We are not arguing that these reforms are ineffective; much to the contrary, both previous research and our study find that reducing barriers to ballot access increases turnout. And there may be other good reasons to adopt such reforms. Ballot counting is more accurate; it leads to higher levels of public confidence in electoral outcomes, and it may ultimately lend greater legitimacy to our elective bodies. These reforms can save administrative costs and avoid headaches. In the post-2000 electoral environment, being an election official is a thankless task, and if such reforms improve our ability to recruit and retain high-quality election officials, then such reforms can be a useful bureaucratic tool. Finally, voters express a high level of satisfaction with the system. Perhaps these reforms will counter growing public unhappiness and skepticism about American electoral institutions.

However, if election officials and ballot reformers press for early voting in the interests of substantially boosting turnout and empowering traditionally disempowered groups, they are likely to be disappointed. The findings with respect to referenda and initiatives, in particular, point out the complex and interdependent nature of ballot reform. Changing one part of the ballot—such as reducing barriers to citizen initiatives—may create such a long and complex ballot that voter fatigue becomes a major issue, necessitating adjustments in other aspects of the balloting process.

There are no magic bullets for resolving long-standing inequities in American electoral politics. Early voting reforms, far from equalizing past inequities, instead show some signs of reinforcing them, encouraging turnout among habitual voters but failing to draw new voters into the system.

Table 5A-1. Full Model, Turnout Effects of Convenience Voting Reforms, 1980-2004

	Model without initiatives and regions	Model without regions	Full model		
			Presidential election	Midterm election	Pooled data set
Number of initiatives		0.415*** (0.104)	0.010 (0.115)	0.476*** (-0.108)	0.244*** (0.870)
Percent high school graduates	0.249** (1.025)	0.221** (0.101)	0.077 (0.183)	-0.005 (0.115)	0.050 (0.117)
Racial diversity	-20.445*** (2.348)	-20.925*** (2.345)	-17.564*** (3.362)	-17.234*** (2.473)	-17.223*** (2.294)
Per capita income	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Closing date for registration	-0.157*** (0.019)	-0.169*** (0.190)	-0.181*** (0.026)	-0.213*** (0.022)	-0.192*** (0.183)
No-excuse absentee by mail	1.023 (1.037)	-0.302 (1.054)	0.062 (0.937)	-1.818 (1.604)	-0.829 (0.945)
No-excuse absentee by mail with permanent status option	-0.059 (1.039)	-1.098 (1.157)	0.578 (1.227)	-3.985*** (1.394)	-1.994* (1.116)
In-person early voting	-3.323** (1.418)	-3.278** (1.399)	-2.226 (1.714)	-1.402 (1.80)	-1.814 (1.233)
In-person early voting and no-excuse absentee by mail	1.839 (1.339)	1.513 (1.309)	1.376 (1.560)	0.258 (0.769)	0.961 (1.146)
Voting by mail	6.137*** (2.20)	2.067 (2.692)	6.839** (2.734)	-1.862 (2.252)	2.147 (2.552)
Western states			2.093 (1.967)	9.925*** (1.918)	5.599*** (1.714)
Midwestern states			4.209*** (1.167)	7.686*** (1.181)	5.768*** (0.961)
Northeastern states			2.570* (1.362)	4.367*** (1.207)	3.404*** (0.999)
Presidential election	16.264*** (1.623)	16.227*** (1.624)			16.088*** (1.476)
Senatorial election	0.861** (0.397)	1.068** (0.417)	0.996 (0.666)	1.913** (0.862)	1.393*** (0.532)
Constant	27.213*** (7.095)	28.423*** (7.038)	50.822*** (11.137)	38.754*** (7.411)	35.687*** (7.417)
R ²	0.725	0.731	0.549	0.567	0.758
Number of observations	649	649	350	299	649
Number of states	50	50	50	50	50

a. Data set made available by Tolbert and Smith, with additional variables coded by the authors. Dependent variable is percent turnout, as a percentage of voting-eligible population, and runs from 0 to 100. All voting reform variables are dummy variables, with traditional absentee balloting as the excluded category. All estimates are pairwise OLS with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

* significant at 10 percent ** significant at 5 percent *** significant at 1 percent

Notes

- Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).
- In most of the methods considered here, the ballot must be cast before election day and is not cast at a precinct. For example, we do not consider voting centers in this chapter (Stein and Vonnahme 2006), even though they are arguably more convenient than many precinct places. Of the methods we examine, in a very few instances an "early" vote can be cast on election day. In Oregon, for example, as many as 25 percent of the ballots are hand delivered to the county office on election day (Gronke 2004).
- The one state is Oregon.
- Gronke (2004).
- King County and Pierce County have not yet gone fully vote by mail.
- Bill Bradbury, "The Voting Booth at the Kitchen Table," *New York Times*, August 21, 2001, p. A17.
- National Association of Secretaries of State, "Election Reform: State-by-State Best Practices," 2001, and "New Millennium Best Practices Survey," 2003 (www.nass.org); National Conference of State Legislatures, "Voting in America: Final Report of the NCSL Elections Reform Task Force," 2001 (www.nsl.org).
- Administration and Cost of Elections Project, Stockholm, 2004 (www.aceproject.org); Adam Nagourney, "Early Voting Puts Many Candidates in Early Overdrive," *New York Times*, October 14, 2002, p. A1; Magleby (1987).
- Alvarez and Hall (2003); Hanmer and Traugott (2004); Traugott (2003).
- Hansen (2001). According to most election officials to whom we've spoken, the reason is that mixed systems (those with large numbers of nonprecinct voters and election day voters) have to manage the costs of both systems.
- McDonald and Popkin (2001); Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).
- Oliver (1996); Dubin and Kaslow (1996).
- Neeley and Richardson (2001); Stein (1998); Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997).
- See Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott (2001); and Karp and Banducci (2000) for increased turnout. Southwell and Burchett (2000) and Magleby (1987) estimate a 19 percent increase among voters using voting by mail, based on a study of local elections in California, Oregon, and Washington. This figure is dramatically higher than that obtained in other studies. However, all studies find a pattern of increasing turnout effects in lower profile contests, so it may be that this figure is accurate.
- Gronke and Miller (2007).
- Luechinger, Rosinger, and Stutzer (2007).
- Thad Kousser and Megan Mullin find that VBM is associated with a 2.6-2.8 percent decline in turnout in California counties in the 2000 and 2002 general elections. See "Does Voting by Mail Increase Participation? Using Matching to Analyze a Natural Experiment," *Political Analysis*, July 13, 2007 (doi:10.1093/pan/mpm014).
- Berinsky (2004, p. 1).
- Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott (2001); Southwell and Burchett (2000); Southwell (1998).

20. Patterson and Caldeira (1985); Oliver (1996).
21. Stein (1998).
22. Stein, Owens, and Leighley (2003).
23. Karp and Banducci (2000); Southwell and Burchett (2000).
24. Magleby (1987).
25. Stein (1998).
26. Neeley and Richardson (2001).
27. Patterson and Caldeira (1985); Oliver (1996).
28. Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith (2001); Tolbert and Smith (2005).
29. Tolbert and Smith (2005). We do not describe or justify the inclusion of these variables here. Interested readers should go to Tolbert and Smith (2005) for this information.
30. We should note one important difference between our estimates and those of Tolbert and Smith (2005): rather than estimating separate models for presidential and midterm years, as they did, we choose to report a pooled model, which includes a dummy variable for the presidential election and an interaction term for the impact of initiatives during presidential contests. While we were able to replicate the tables presented in Tolbert and Smith exactly, we preferred this simpler specification. The bulk of the important results are the same.
31. Tolbert and Smith (2005).
32. Tolbert and Smith (2005).
33. Aldrich (1993, p. 246).
34. Stein, Owens, and Leighley (2003); Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).
35. Gomez, Hansford, and Krause (2007).

6

CAROLINE TOLBERT, TODD DONOVAN,
BRIDGETT KING, AND SHAUN BOWLER

*Election Day Registration,
Competition, and Voter Turnout*

The challenge of increasing voter participation can be met in a variety of ways. In this chapter, we compare the effects of convenience voting reforms such as early voting, voting by mail, election day registration, and absentee voting laws to another key factor known to affect voter participation: electoral competition. We assess how the competitiveness of presidential races at the state level, congressional races, governor's races, and ballot measures affect turnout. Uncompetitive elections result from a series of factors, including gerrymandered or incumbent-protected legislative districts (see chapter 10), lopsided campaign financing, and single-member district elections.¹ Although state laws governing the voting process *and* the competitiveness of a state's election environment matter in understanding overall turnout levels, few studies have compared the effects of these head to head. We ask whether reforms of the voting process or structural reforms aimed at increasing electoral competition are more important for political participation in the American states over the past quarter century.

A number of scholars have focused on the practical consequences of state election reforms, but most examine these laws in isolation rather than together. For example, the important effect of state voter registration laws on turnout is well known.² Election day registration boosts turnout, especially among the young and more mobile, but racial minorities and the economically disadvantaged may not turn out in greater numbers.³ State experimentation with motor voter registration, before the passage of the National Voter Registration Act, has been shown to increase overall turnout.⁴ Some research has found that voting by mail increases participation.⁵ Internet voting,