

Voting at Non-Precinct Polling Places: A Review and Research Agenda

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I. INTRODUCTION

WHERE, WHEN AND HOW we vote has garnered only modest scholarly attention. Moreover, until recently (Cemenska, Leighley, Nagler & Tokaji, 2009) little was known about the variety of places, times and procedures Americans use to cast their ballots. This brief essay is intended to serve as a primer on non-precinct voting and a guide for future research on this mode of voting.

II. NON-PRECINCT VOTING

Non-precinct voting includes in-person early voting and a variety of mail-in/absentee modes of voting (see Cemenska et al., 2009). In-person early voting allows voters to ballot at any number of locations days or weeks before Election Day. Mail-in voting allows voters to request or receive an unsolicited ballot in the mail that they can return on or before Election Day by mail. A newer mode of non-precinct voting is the Election Day vote center, which allows voters to cast their ballots at any number of voting places on Election Day. Common to all modes of non-precinct voting is either the opportunity to vote before Election Day and/or to vote at any number of locations rather than just one polling place proximate to the voter's residence. The latter feature of both in-person early voting and vote centers provides voters with places at which to vote that are more convenient and central to where they work, shop, attend school and travel. Similarly, in-person early and mail-in voting provides voters with the added convenience of voting days, or even weeks before Election Day.

The expectation, if not the promise, of non-precinct voting was greater voter participation par-

ticularly among traditionally under represented voters (i.e., the young, racial and ethnic minorities). To date the evidence to support this expectation has been scant and modest at best. Few researchers have found that any form of non-precinct voting has had a significant or large effect on voter turnout (Berinsky, 2005; Berinsky, Burns & Traugott, 2001; Stein & Garcia-Monet, 1997; Stein, 1998; Neeley & Richardson, 2001; Karp & Banducci, 2000; 2001; Gronke et al., 2007; Kousser & Mullin, 2007; Hanmer & Traugott, 2004; Southwell, 2000).

To say that turnout has not increased substantially does not mean that alternative methods of voting are wholly unutilized in favor of traditional precinct voting. Rather, these alternative methods of voting are primarily used by individuals who are already likely to vote. Between the 2000 and 2008 Presidential elections the proportion of votes cast outside of a precinct location rose from 20% to 30%, an astounding increase when we consider that only 31 of 50 states have either in-person early voting and/or Election Day vote centers. Non-precinct voting rates were even lower (under 10%) in 1992 (McDonald, 2008). This growth in the demand for non-precinct voting begs the question: why has this happened? If non-precinct voting has an insignificant or marginal effect on voter participation, what other effects, intended or unintended, has non-precinct voting had on the conduct of campaigns, elections, and on governance?

III. INTENDED AND UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF NON-PRECINCT VOTING PLACES

Several studies have found that the candidates and campaigns mediate the effect of non-precinct

voting (Nordlinger, 2003; Stein, Leighley & Owens, 2003). Patterson and Caldeira (1982) find evidence to support the hypothesis that non-precinct voting, specifically absentee mail-in voting, increases turnout when candidates adopt this mode of voting as part of their own efforts to mobilize supporters. Moreover, in a survey of county party chairs in Texas, Leighley (2001) documents that both political parties identify early voting as an important and effective means of mobilizing partisan supporters. Neither study directly tests whether those who voted would have voted independent of either candidate mobilization or candidate mobilization through absentee mail-in voting. Oliver (1996) 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 (p. 25).”

Several unintended and unanticipated effects from non-precinct voting have been detected, most notably its effect on vote choices. Meredith and Malhotra (2011) find that voters assigned to vote by mail in the 2008 California presidential primary skewed vote choices towards candidates who withdraw from the primary contest before Election Day and after start of mail-in voting. These voters, of course, did not have the benefit of knowing before they cast their ballots by mail that their most preferred candidate would withdraw from the primary contest after they balloted and before Election Day.

Voter support for and satisfaction with all modes of non-precinct voting is strong and persistent (Southwell, 2004; Southwell & Burchett, 1997). The most frequently mentioned reason for preferring vote-by-mail is the ease and convenience of this option for voting. Research on the costs of election administration is scant and even more so for early voting. A 1994 study on the costs of early voting in Texas by the Federal Election Commission reported that early voting was substantially more expensive per vote than Election Day voting. Of course this initial finding was to be expected as early voting represented in its early incarnation a small share of votes cast against a fixed cost of operation.

IV. A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR NON-PRECINCT VOTING

As noted in the introduction to this essay there is a very modest body of empirical research on the

impact of non-precinct voting beyond turnout. Moreover, the evidence does not support the expectations that non-precinct voting has had a strong effect on either voter participation or the diversification of the American electorate. Many of the stronger effects of non-precinct voting have tentatively pointed to either unintended and/or unanticipated effects on campaigns, vote choice and the costs of administering elections. Some of these findings, such as the impact of non-precinct voting on the conduct of campaigns are not well understood and therefore should be the subject of further inquiry. Below we identify questions about this mode of voting that might be the subject of future research.

A. Non-precinct voting and the conduct of political campaigns

Do campaigns in states with mail-in voting and/or in-person early voting start earlier, generate more activity, and cost more than elections in states without mail-in or in-person early voting? If voters are casting their ballots before Election Day, and doing so in some states as many as 30 days before Election Day, we might expect that campaigns will begin earlier and last longer. Consequently, one effect of non-precinct voting, especially mail-in and in-person early voting, should be that campaigns in early voting states are longer, generate more activity, and cost more. Is this true? Stein and McNeese (2010) offer tentative evidence that shows that per-vote spending in Congressional races is significantly greater in states with in-person early voting compared to states without this mode of voting, for some elections. Related to these questions, but currently unexplored, are the effects of early voting on timing of campaign activities and on the content of campaign messages (e.g., negative and positive toned campaign advertisements).

B. Non-precinct voting and the media environment

If campaigns begin earlier, news coverage of the campaign should as well. If this is true, what are the consequences for the content and total flow of coverage in states with pre-Election Day voting? Does differential coverage influence voter turnout and voter choice? Dunaway and Stein (2011) found that news coverage begins earlier in states with early voting. Moreover, in states with in-person early voting the content of campaign news coverage early in the campaign cycle (i.e., 90 days before

Election Day) is skewed toward candidate traits and issue positions rather than horse race stories.

Empirical studies confirm the positive effect of personal interactions on voter turnout (Nickerson 2008). Early voting may enhance turnout by stimulating higher levels of personal contact over a longer period of time. Relatedly, network models may suggest social conditions in which reforms will have the greatest effect (Fowler, 2005). Advances in media technology (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and campaign websites with related tools) provide additional means for individuals to directly engage one another in bilateral political communication. In his simulation of network models of turnout, Fowler (2005) estimates that, on average, adding one new voter leads to 3–4 additional people turning out to vote, and in some cases led to 25 additional voters. These simulation results raise the possibility that even a marginal overall effect of early voting systems on turnout (e.g., 1 additional voter) could have a larger impact, depending on the characteristics of local social networks. For example, past research shows that early voting can be increased if voting locations are more numerous and more accessible (Stein and Garcia-Money, 1997). Networks that are highly segmented (i.e. high bonding social capital) might limit the spread of turnout whereas others might experience a larger turnout effect through social networks.

On the other hand, it is possible that voter-to-voter interactions might be less frequent with vote by mail or early voting. Individuals might be less willing to try to persuade others if many have already voted. Additionally, if Burden et al.'s (2011) conjecture that early voting lessens the “civic activities of a traditional election day” (p. 10) is correct, then non-precinct methods of voting might weaken social norms of voting.

C. Voter information, competence and choice

Do voters who vote early miss information that would be influential or even decisive to their vote choice? Do these voters have regrets about voting early in the aftermath of new information about their candidate choices? Are the determinants of early voters' vote choices different than those of Election Day voters? There is persistent evidence that early voters are more partisan, ideological, informed about and interested in politics (Stein, 1998; Gronke et al., 2007; Berinsky et al., 2001), yet we do not know if

this is a consequence of the information that they are exposed to or a product of pre-existing political leanings. We know little about the quality of the early vote, for instance, whether early voters are more likely to “vote correctly” than those casting an election day ballot (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997). In short, some claim that early voting leads to more informed deliberation and choice while others claim quite the opposite; there is little scientific research to date on the question.

D. Sub-state implementation of non-precinct voting

The implementation of non-precinct voting varies significantly at the sub-state level. States provide significant local discretion in setting the number of in-person early voting sites, the hours of operation, and the location of voting places (e.g., government versus businesses). There is some evidence that inconvenient polling place locations can increase absentee balloting (Gimpel et al., 2006), that election day vote centers can increase turnout (Stein and Vonnahme, 2008), and even that the location of the polling place (e.g. churches and religious buildings) has an independent effect not only whether one votes but how one casts his or her ballot (Berger et al., 2007). However, the much richer variability in the number and placement of early voting centers has been largely unexplored, except for the previously cited work by Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997).

E. The administrative costs and savings from non-precinct voting

One expected outcome of early voting (Rosenfield 1994) is a significant saving in the administrative cost of conducting elections. Research on the costs of elections is scant. There is some evidence of cost reductions using vote by mail for local elections in Oregon (Hamilton, 1988). It would be interesting to know whether early voting in its various forms helps or hinders efforts to obtain efficiency gains in the operation of elections, particularly in the wake of the Help America Vote Act. Potential effects on the costs of election administration might also contribute to our understanding of how these reforms spread.

V. CONCLUSION

Figure 1 confirms a steep and upward trajectory for the incidence of non-precinct voting. This in

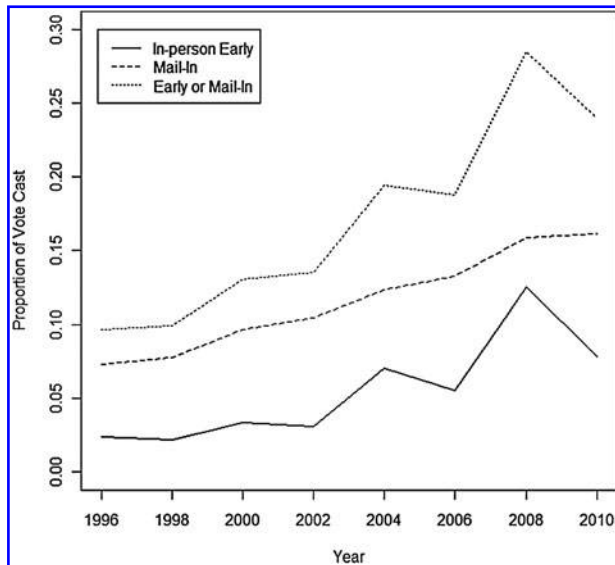


FIG. 1. Proportion of in-person early and mail-in voting from CPS, 1996-2004.

part reflects the popularity of this mode of voting among the electorate. Our expectation is for this trajectory to continue upward until a majority of voters cast ballots in all elections before Election Day. Electronic voting, which is still a nascent and problematic mode of voting (e.g., issues of security), will clearly become a strong impetus for extended non-precinct voting. Moreover, as new voters (i.e., 18 years of age) enter the electorate they bring a greater expectation for “convenience voting” including a strong preference and facility for electronic voting (Alvarez & Hall, 2008, p. 131). These trends place a greater urgency and need on answering the questions raised in this paper about non-precinct voting. The popularity of these alternative modes of pre-Election Day voting may lead to their widespread adoption before we can adjust and/or correct for several less desirable and unintended consequences. The academic community needs to pay much closer attention to the potentially unanticipated consequences of early voting on issues as varied as social capital, voter mobilization, campaign spending, and voter choice. The potential costs of an election system where candidates have to raise substantially more money than at present may outweigh other benefits of early voting (e.g., increased turnout). With the proper attention from the scholarly community, citizens and their representatives can make informed and intelligent choices about the mode of election administration they want to adopt.

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