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Voting Early, but Not So Often

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ELECTION Day is nearly upon us, but for many voters it has already come and gone. States have aggressively expanded the use of early voting, allowing people to submit their ballots before Election Day in person, by mail and in voting centers set up in shopping malls and other public places. More than 30 percent of votes cast in the 2008 presidential race arrived before Election Day itself, double the amount in 2000. In 10 states, more than half of all votes were cast early, with some coming in more than a month before the election. Election Day as we know it is quickly becoming an endangered species.

Early voting offers convenience and additional opportunities to cast a ballot. Common sense tells us that this should mean higher turnout. But [a thorough look at the data](#) shows that the opposite is true: early voting depresses turnout by several percentage points.

Our research, conducted with our colleagues David Canon and Donald Moynihan at the University of Wisconsin, is based on a three-part statistical analysis of the 2008 presidential election. First, we analyzed voting patterns in each of the nation's 3,100 counties to estimate the effect of early voting laws on turnout. We controlled for a wide range of demographic, geographic and political variables, like whether a county was in a battleground state.

Controlling for all of the other factors thought to shape voter participation, our model showed that the availability of early voting reduced turnout in the typical county by three percentage points. Consider, as an example, a county in Kentucky, which lacks early voting. If we compared this to a similar county in neighboring Tennessee, which permits early voting, we would observe, other things being equal, turnout that was 3 points lower.

Next, we studied the data on more than 70,000 voters and nonvoters from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, which asks respondents whether they voted. Once again, we employed a statistical model to control for demographic variables like education and race as well as geographic and political factors. The model showed that an individual living in a state with early voting had a probability of voting that was four points lower than a comparable voter in a state without early voting.

Third, we took advantage of a useful feature of the census survey, which asks individuals whether they voted early or on Election Day. We examined the characteristics of voters and nonvoters, and found that the profiles of early voters and election day voters were mostly similar.

With one big exception: our model forecast that early voters had profiles that made them two percentage points more likely to vote than Election Day voters, whether there was an early option or not. Early voters were more educated and older and had higher incomes, all traits associated with a higher probability of voting. A probability difference of 2 percentage points may seem like a trivial figure, but when applied to populations of millions, it can shift national and state elections.

Even with all of the added convenience and easier opportunities to cast ballots, turnout not only doesn't increase with early voting, it actually falls. How can this be? The answer lies in the nature of voter registration laws, and the impact of early voting on mobilization efforts conducted by parties and other groups on Election Day.

In most states, registration and voting take place in two separate steps. A voter must first register, sometimes a month before the election, and then return another time to cast a ballot. Early voting by itself does not eliminate this two-step requirement. For voters who missed their registration deadline, the convenience of early voting is irrelevant.

Early voting also dilutes the intensity of Election Day. When a large share of votes is cast well in advance of the first Tuesday in November, campaigns begin to scale back their late efforts. The parties run fewer ads and shift workers to more competitive states. Get-out-the-vote efforts in particular become much less efficient when so many people have already voted.

When Election Day is merely the end of a long voting period, it lacks the sort of civic stimulation that used to be provided by local news media coverage and discussion around the water cooler. Fewer co-workers will be sporting "I voted" stickers on their lapels on Election Day. Studies have shown that these informal interactions have a strong effect on turnout, as they generate social pressure. With significant early voting, Election Day can become a kind of afterthought, simply the last day of a drawn-out slog.

Fortunately, there is a way to improve turnout and keep the convenience of early voting. Our research shows that when early voting is combined with same-day registration — that is, you can register to vote and cast an early ballot on the same day — the depressive effect of early voting disappears. North Carolina and Vermont, two otherwise very different states that combined early voting with same-day registration, had turnout levels in 2008 that were much higher than the overall national figure of 58 percent of the voting-age population. Turnouts in Vermont and North Carolina were, respectively, 63 percent and 64 percent. Allowing Election-Day registration, in which voters can register at the polling place, has the same effect. Our models show that the simple presence of Election-Day registration in states like Minnesota and New Hampshire increases

turnout by more than six points.

By removing barriers that require potential voters to register weeks before a campaign reaches its height, less-engaged citizens can enter the voting process late — and political campaigns can respond by maintaining the intensity of their efforts through Election Day.

The implications for policymakers are obvious. Adopting a form of “one-stop shopping” facilitates a larger and more representative set of voters. Early voting may be the most popular reform sweeping across the states, but it alone is not the key to raising voter turnout.

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