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Do the Means Change the End? The Effect of All Mail Ballot Systems and Same-Day Voter Registration on Turnout

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Abstract

This research examines the effects of certain institutional mechanisms on voter turnout, in order to provide a possible policy prescription for the ever-decreasing voter turnout in the United States. The voter turnout of general elections from 1994-2012 was measured state by state, comparing those that have instituted same-day registration and/or all mail ballot systems to those that have not, using an ordinary least squares regression model. There was an additional control variable of the number of top-of-ticket races on the ballot in each year, in addition to the institutional variables. The results suggest that the use of same-day registration and all mail ballot systems increase voter turnout.

**DO THE MEANS CHANGE THE END?
THE EFFECT OF ALL MAIL BALLOT SYSTEMS AND SAME-DAY VOTER
REGISTRATION ON TURNOUT**

Annie Kehler

Abstract: *This research examines the effects of certain institutional mechanisms on voter turnout, in order to provide a possible policy prescription for the ever-decreasing voter turnout in the United States. The voter turnout of general elections from 1994-2012 was measured state by state, comparing those that have instituted same-day registration and/or all mail ballot systems to those that have not, using an ordinary least squares regression model. There was an additional control variable of the number of top-of-ticket races on the ballot in each year, in addition to the institutional variables. The results suggest that the use of same-day registration and all mail ballot systems increase voter turnout.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, the United States has seen a continual decrease in voter turnout rates. The highest turnout since the late-60s has been 61.6% in 2008, and the lowest was in 2014 with 36.4%.²⁴ The United States also lags behind other democracies worldwide, with their rates ranging from 75-95%.²⁵ Although some other democracies have compulsory voting, the United States also falls short against democracies that do not. The poor turnout in the United States has lead to an interest in possible changes that can be made to institutional factors that may make citizens more likely to vote. While there are many factors that contribute to voter turnout, such as demographic identifiers, institutional factors can be controlled, and therefore should be explored. Two factors in particular, same-day registration and all mail ballot systems, are of interest when looking at the possible effects of changing how the electorate votes.

Since the initial use of all mail ballot systems and same-day voter registration, an assumption has been made that their use increases voter turnout. There has not, however, been a substantial amount of research to support that assumption. This research will provide the data needed, and draw conclusions as to the effectiveness of all mail ballot systems and same-day voter registration as they pertain to voter turnout. It will seek to

²⁴ “Voter Turnout: National Turnout Rates, 1787-2012” 2012

²⁵ “Voter Turnout” 2014

answer the question: what is the effect of all mail ballot systems and same-day voter registration on voter turnout in general elections?

The general theory of my research is that if people have the ability to fill out their ballot at ease, and turn it in at a time and date they choose, they are more likely to vote. Additionally, if people are able to register to vote on Election Day, the electorate will be expanded past its initial registered citizens, thus increasing turnout.

The research on this question is limited, and most of it has been a case study style, rather than a broader empirical analysis of a large number of states. These theoretical research studies have also not controlled for other phenomena that may have increased voter turnout aside from the ballot system used, such as the unprecedented increase in voter turnout in 2008 across the United States. I am approaching this topic by comparing the differences between national voter turnout and individual states, and analyzing the differences between states with the electoral mechanisms of same-day voter registration and all mail ballot systems.

My hypothesis is that the use of all mail ballot systems and same-day voter registration in general elections will increase voter turnout. In order to measure this, data will be gathered from all states from 1994-2012. Voter turnout in each state will be compared to the national average, in order to measure changes that may occur when all mail ballots or same-day registration are introduced. This approach will provide a control for overall national shifts in voter behavior, and a control variable of competitiveness of the states' elections each year will be included as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand the usefulness of all mail ballot systems and same-day registration, we must first look at the previous research and define terms that need to be understood moving forward.

First, in regards to all mail ballot systems, we must address the difference between absentee voting, no excuse absentee voting, and all mail voting. General absentee voting describes the option of a voter to request an absentee ballot, citing some reason why they cannot vote in person on Election Day.²⁶ No excuse absentee voting allows voters to request an absentee ballot without having to document an excuse for

²⁶ "Your Ballot's In the Mail: Vote By Mail and Absentee Voting" 2007

doing so. Within this option, there are two subsets; one in which voters redo their requests for every election, and another in which voters can request to be put on a permanent list of absentee voters and receive every ballot by mail.²⁷ All mail ballot systems, the system which we will be most closely examining, applies to elections that provide mail in ballots to all voters of a given jurisdiction, with the option to then mail them in or drop them off at a designated location.²⁸

Absentee voting has been available in different cities across the country since the 1700s. First used for landowners whose homes were vulnerable to Native American attacks, absentee voting has also been used by some states for those serving in the military since the Civil War. Absentee voting expanded during World War I, with 24 of the 48 states allowing those serving in the military to vote with absentee ballots.²⁹

All mail ballot systems have been used for a relatively short time in American elections. Small, local elections in western states like California and Oregon were the first to use them. The first larger scale election held exclusively by mail was in April of 1977 in Monterey County, California; the trend continued in California to San Diego, 1981. The expected turnout doubled compared to a traditional polling place election.³⁰ As more communities and states have adopted all mail ballot systems, we have more information to look at in terms of voter turnout and party identification. In a study published in 1987, six of the seven cities that used the all mail ballot system between 1977 and 1987 saw an increase in voter turnout.³¹

The first state to hold all of its elections by mail was Oregon in 1977. The system was tested in 1981 and 1983 in local elections before the state legislature allowed for optional use of all mail ballot systems for local elections. In 1993, Oregon held the first ever statewide vote by mail election, reaching a turnout of 44%. Oregon also held the first mail in presidential primary election in 1996, before moving on to holding all of their elections by mail.³² Other states, mostly in the west, have followed Oregon,

²⁷ “Your Ballot's In the Mail: Vote By Mail and Absentee Voting” 2007

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Magleby 1987

³¹ Ibid., 88

³² “Your Ballot's In the Mail: Vote By Mail and Absentee Voting” 2007

including Alaska, California, Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Utah, and Washington.³³

In order to understand how implementing these mechanisms will affect or change the electorate, we must look at the necessary steps to reaching voters in this new system. As early as the 2000 presidential election, more than 40 of those over 80 in California voted by mail when it was optional. As age increases, so does the use of mail in ballots.³⁴ The biggest difference between reaching voters with mail in ballots versus traditional polling places is the timeline. Because most mail in ballots go out a month before Election Day,³⁵ candidates and parties have to increase advertising and get out the vote earlier than they do during traditional polling place elections.³⁶

In terms of the effect all mail ballots have, there are a variety of views and observations on both the pros and cons. Priscilla Southwell used Oregon elections from 1980 to 2008 to analyze the possible effects of mail ballots on a phenomenon called voter fatigue.³⁷ Voter fatigue refers to the act of voters not finishing the lower portion of their ballot, which is reserved for lower-level offices, while the part of the ballot that includes higher-level offices is completed.³⁸ Southwell's theory that mail ballots would increase participation for the lower portion of the ballot was found to be true.³⁹

In addition to the effect on voter fatigue, scholars including Southwell and Burchett have argued that all mail elections impact overall voter turnout as well. They delve into discovering what "vote-by-mail voters" are: someone that would not have otherwise participated in the electoral process if it were not for the use of mail in ballots.⁴⁰ These individuals tend to be younger urban dwellers that rely on the ease and flexibility that the all mail system provides. Southwell and Burchett's conclusion is that

³³ "Your Ballot's In the Mail: Vote By Mail and Absentee Voting" 2007

³⁴ Malchow 2004

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 41

³⁷ Southwell 2009

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 200

⁴⁰ Southwell and Burchett 2000, 837

the use of all mail elections increases the overall electorate that is likely to turnout to vote.⁴¹

These findings go against those of Kousser and Mullin, who looked at a district in California that allowed certain precincts to use mail in ballots, while others used traditional polling places.⁴² They found that precincts that used mail in ballots had lower turnout than those that used traditional polling places.⁴³

A study by Michael Hanmer and Michael Traugott looked in turn at the impact of all mail elections on voter behavior including the frequency of straight-ticket voting and roll-off on ballots in Oregon. They found that the use of all mail elections did not have an impact on either of these issues, although that was not their hypothesis.⁴⁴ Overall, they concluded that all mail elections do not have a direct impact on those specific behaviors.

Same-day registration has been in use by more states and for a longer period of time than all mail ballot systems. Same-day registration's first use was in 1973 in Maine, and 12 states plus the District of Columbia currently use it.⁴⁵ While it has been used for a longer period of time than all mail ballot systems, there is not as much literature to be found on it in comparison to voter turnout.

A study conducted by the California Institute of Technology and Massachusetts Institute of Technology Joint Voting Technology Project in 2002 found that the use of same-day registration could lead to a 3-6% increase in voter turnout.⁴⁶

One major opposition point to same-day registration is that it may increase voter fraud. However, according to a study by the National Civic League, Maine (the first state to implement same-day registration) had no instances of voter fraud tied to same-day registration from 1973-2007.⁴⁷

For the most part, previous research on this topic has been limited to one specific county or state. The goal of this study is to examine the overall impacts of all mail

⁴¹ Ibid., 844

⁴² Kousser and Mullin 2007

⁴³ Ibid., 441-443

⁴⁴ Hanmer and Traugott 2004

⁴⁵ "Turning Up Turnout" 2014

⁴⁶ Hernandez 2002

⁴⁷ Comstock-Gay 2007

elections and same-day registration on voter turnout, as the national trend moves more and more towards their use.⁴⁸

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to research the effect of all mail ballot systems and same-day voter registration on turnout, I propose a model using ordinary least squares regression that tests for changes that may have occurred in turnout percentages from 1994-2012. I use turnout data, reported as percent of eligible voters, from the midterm and presidential general elections of 1994 through 2012. I use the eligible voter turnout as a measure rather than the percent of registered voters or percent of likely voters. Percent of registered voters would not accurately represent the parameter of those who took part in same-day registration, and it is not possible to ensure that all Secretaries of State measure percent of likely voters the same way, which could affect the accuracy of the data.

I then take the difference between the national average of voter turnout in a given year, and each states' totals, in order to measure how much stronger a state's result was in comparison to the rest of the country. Each state is then coded on a 0-1 basis for each variable (same-day registration and all mail ballot system): 0 if the given mechanism isn't present, and 1 if it is.

I also look at a third control variable of how competitive or important the ballot was perceived in a given state. To do this, each election in every state is ranked on a 0-3 scale, based on the presence of any combination of Senate, Presidential, or Gubernatorial races on the ballot. I use this as a control, as the main focus of my research is if the use of institutional mechanisms increases turnout.

⁴⁸ See *Appendices 1 and 2* for tables showing which states have the mechanisms in place.

FINDINGS

Table 1: OLS Regression Results.

Independent Variables	Voter Turnout Coefficient (Std. Error)
All Mail Ballot System	9.688 (1.492)**
Same-Day Registration	8.820 (.737)**
(control) # of Upper-Ticket Races	1.276 (.398)**
N	500
Adjusted R Square	0.274

** = finding significant at the .001 level

The results found in the ordinary least squares regression used (Table 1) show that the use of all mail ballot systems increased voter turnout by 9.69% when it was used, and that same-day registration increased voter turnout by 8.82% when it was used. Both of these findings were significant at the .001 level and both had stronger beta weights compared to the number of upper-ticket races (see Table 2).

In the case of same-day registration, it is important to note that all of the states that have implemented it are non-south states with above-average turnout. However, this does not affect the results. With the way that the model is coded, the coefficient results show the increase that occurred only once same-day registration was implemented, not before.

Looking at the adjusted R square result in Table 1, it is important to note that this research is not intended to account for all changes that occur in voter turnout and what makes citizens exercise the right, but rather provide a case for or against the use of these mechanisms as a way to increase turnout.

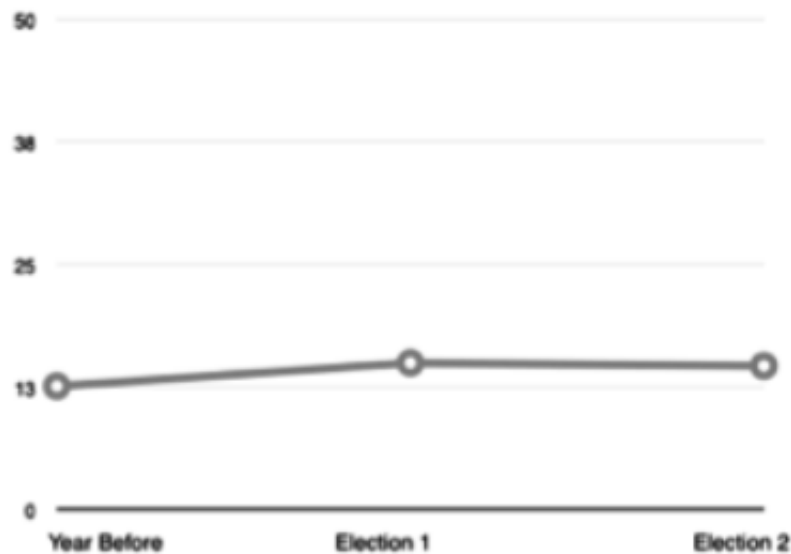
Table 2: Beta, t Test, and Significance Levels.

Variable	Beta	t Test	Sig.
All Mail Ballot System	0.248	6.494	0.000
Same-Day Registration	0.459	11.963	0.000
Contest	0.123	3.209	0.001

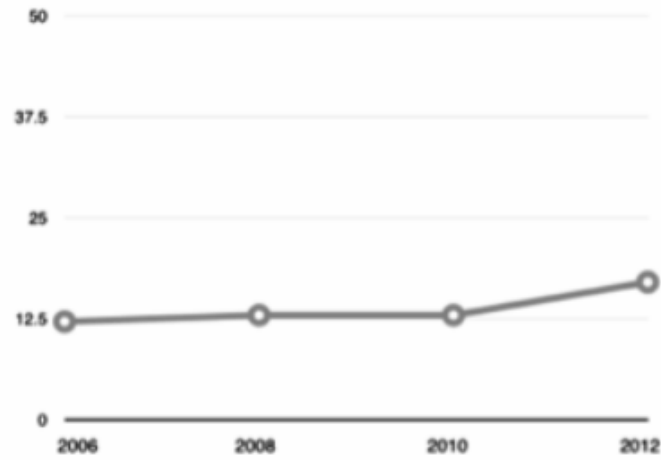
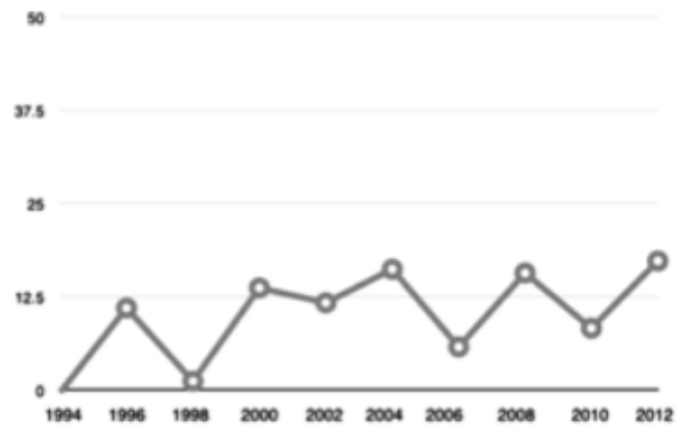
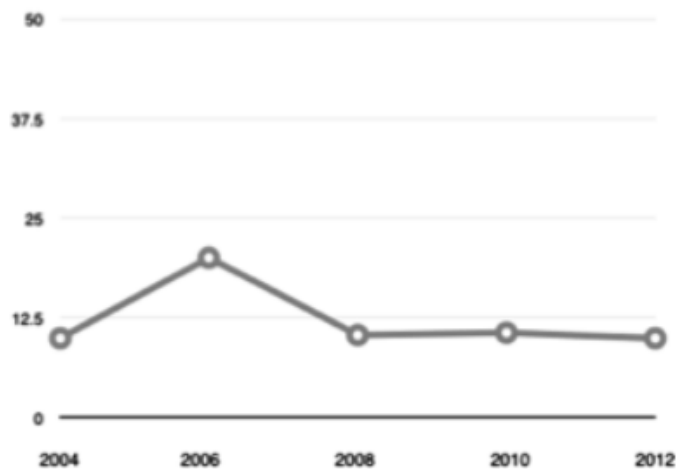
Looking at the beta weights and t tests in Table 2, the results show that top-of-ticket races do have an effect on turnout, but the mechanisms of same-day registration and all mail ballots account for turnout even more than top-of-ticket races do.

There is also some interest in the longitudinal effects of these mechanisms. The use of these mechanisms, particularly all mail ballot systems, is relatively new, so it is difficult to get a clear picture about their influences over time. However, it is possible to take a brief snapshot of what their effects look like so far.

Graph 1: *Longitudinal Effect of All Mail Ballot Systems.*



Graph 1 looks at the longitudinal effects of all mail ballot systems over their first two years of use. The graph measures the percent above the mean national turnout of the states that used all mail systems. The first point is the average above the mean of the three states that have implemented all mail systems. The second and third points illustrate the first two years of the mechanism's use. Unfortunately, this is all the data that can be gathered longitudinally, because two of the three states using an all mail system just introduced it in 2010. This graph shows a 2.37% increase in the first year, and a 2% increase in the second year. As time moves forward, we'll be able to get a clearer understanding of this system, and what its long-term effects might be.

Graph 2: *Longitudinal Effects of Same-Day Registration in Iowa.***Graph 3:** *Longitudinal Effects of Same-Day Registration in New Hampshire.***Graph 4:** *Longitudinal Effects of Same-Day Registration in Montana.*

Graphs 2-4 all show the longitudinal effects of same-day registration on individual states. The states chosen were based first on whether or not they began using same-day registration within the timeframe of the study, 1994-2012, and secondly on their geographic and demographic differences. While all three charts tell slightly different stories, it is important to note one trend that is shared by all: the initial jump in turnout in the first year of same-day registration being implemented, followed by either a slight or significant drop off in the election following. One theory that was briefly reviewed in the literature is the idea that there is a drop off after the ‘newness’ factor wears off, and the mechanism is considered normal. It is not possible to know for sure what is causing the longitudinal changes in these states as of now. As more years pass it will become easier to see what has caused these shifts, and whether or not these mechanisms are still viable options to increase voter turnout.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the tests aligned with the hypotheses that same-day registration and all mail ballot systems positively affect voter turnout in the states that use them. All findings of the model were significant and all beta weights supported the idea that the institutional mechanisms have a large impact, to the scale of 8-9%, on voter turnout.

Some further study is needed on this subject in order to expand on our understanding of voter turnout and what institutional barriers can be changed or removed to lead to increased turnout. Another mechanism worth studying would be early voting. While this research did not examine it due to time constraints and variances in its complexity from state to state, its use is continuing to grow. It would certainly be worth noting if early voting has similar impacts as the mechanisms measured in this study in the future. Additionally, there is a concern in the literature that these mechanisms may increase the likelihood of voter fraud. A future study of these allegations is warranted in order to fully understand all of the effects of these mechanisms.

While this research was able to take a brief look at the longitudinal effects of these mechanisms, it would also be worth looking at them more in depth as their use continues over time and expands to more states. Whether or not the reason for the observed increased turnout is due to the novelty of these mechanisms is still unsure, but an in depth longitudinal study would help unravel this possibility further.

Overall, there is more work to be done on the issue of institutional factors and their ties to voter turnout. This research was one of the first examinations of growing change in the views of how the United States votes, but more study and implementation of these programs should be done if we wish to increase voter turnout at a larger, national level.

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