

# **Early Voting and Turnout**

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Early or convenience voting--understood in this context to be relaxed administrative rules and procedures by which citizens can cast a ballot at a time and place other than the precinct on election day--are a popular candidate for election reformers. Typically, reformers argue that maximization of turnout is a primary goal, and reducing as many barriers in the way of the polls is an important tool to get there. Arguments made in favor of voting by mail, in-person early voting, and relaxed absentee requirements share this common characteristic. While there are good theoretical reasons, drawn primarily from the rational choice tradition, to believe that early voting reforms should increase turnout, the empirical literature has found decidedly mixed results. While one prominent study suggests that voting by mail is associated with a 10% increase in turnout, other studies find smaller--but still statistically significant--increases in turnout associated with other convenience voting methods.

This paper reexamines the impact of early voting reforms on turnout, extending earlier research in two ways. First, we examine a wider set of elections than one prominent study (Southwell and Burchett 2001), which estimated the impact of voting by mail on turnout in Oregon by looking at just the first year in which the reform was in place. Second, this study compares the turnout effect of a wider variety of convenience reforms and across a much longer time period than any previous work.

In the first section of this paper, we review terminology ("what is early voting?") and illustrate the breadth and popularity of these reforms. Next, we briefly review prior research on early voting, focusing on the political arguments being made in favor of reform and the social scientific findings of the impact of reform on turnout. Third, we replicate and extend Southwell and Burchett's study of voting by mail in Oregon, extending the period of time in their study from 1996 up to the present. Finally, we take an established model of turnout (Tolbert and Smith 2005, Tolbert Grummel and Smith 2001), and add convenience voting reforms to this model in order to estimate their impact across the widest possible set of jurisdictions and over a 25 year period.

In brief, our research indicates that only one combination of early voting reforms has a positive impact on turnout, and in that case only in midterm election years. In Oregon, we are unable to replicate Southwell and Burchett's results, either in the period they examined (1960-

1996) or in our extended dataset (1960-2006), except when we employ an inappropriate statistical estimator. When we examine the impact of early voting reforms since 1980, two interesting findings emerge. First, here we discover that only the combination of in-person early voting plus no-excuse absentee balloting, and then only in the midterm, has any discernible impact on turnout, and this is only evident in midterm contests. Second, we find that the impact of voting reforms can be badly misestimated if other ballot conditions—specifically the number of initiatives on the ballot—are not considered.

## **An Introduction to Early Voting**

### *What is Early Voting?*

For the purposes of this paper, *early voting* is a blanket term used to describe any system where voters can cast their ballot before the official election day. This covers a bewildering array of different electoral systems in the United States and, increasingly, abroad. Primarily, we will use the term to mean in-person early voting, no-excuse absentee balloting, and vote by mail (see Table 1 for a summary).

Some states allow *early in-person (EIP) voting*, whereby voters can cast early ballots just as they would do on Election Day, most commonly at the local elections office, but increasingly at satellite locations such as community centers, churches, or even grocery stores. The important distinction between EIP and other early voting systems is the requirement that individuals show up in-person to cast a ballot. If we believe 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 between systems, depending upon where voters can cast ballots (the elections office vs. the grocery store, for example).

*No-excuse absentee voting* allows voters to request an absentee ballot without providing any excuse, such as travel or hospitalization; in some states, notably California, a voter can also request "permanent" absentee status, essentially becoming a vote-by-mail voter. Thus, we do not discuss absentee balloting as we have traditionally understood it: 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. This form of absentee balloting has historically been quite

restrictive, and the proportion of ballots cast via this method very low. No-excuse absentee balloting, in contrast, has exploded in many states and localities.

<b>Table 1: Early Voting Systems</b>			
Early Voting System	AKA	Mechanics	Where Used
Vote by Mail	"Postal Voting"	Voters receive a ballot in the mail, approximately two weeks before the election. Ballots can be returned via mail or dropped off at satellite locations.	Oregon, United Kingdom (local elections), New Zealand
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; no prior notification is required.	Rapidly expanding list; Texas for the longest, Georgia, Tennessee, Iowa.
No excuse absentee	"Vote by mail", "absentee voting by mail"	Voters have to apply for an absentee ballot, but no excuse is required. Voters receive the ballot as early as 45 days before the election and must return by the date of the election. In some localities, only a ballot postmarked on or before the election counts as valid.	Many states and localities.
<p><u>Possible sources of confusion:</u> In an increasing number of localities, absentee balloting can be done in person (and is often referred to as early voting) or via mail (sometimes referred to as "vote by mail"). Many localities are not distinguishing between the two when reporting absentee ballot figures. In Sweden, "postal voting" is used to describe in-person voting at the post office.</p>			

Finally, *vote-by-mail (VBM)* is a system in which 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 election conducted in this manner was a 1996 special election); the United Kingdom uses VBM for local elections; VBM has been used in some local elections in California, and two counties in the state are VBM counties. Under VBM in Oregon, the voter receives a voter's guide approximately three weeks before election day, followed by the ballot, generally mailed 18 days before the election. The voter may return the ballot any time after it is received, usually 15 days or closer to election day. Voters may also return their ballots in-person *on Election Day*, thereby rendering many "VBM" voters de

facto Election-Day voters.

*Where are the reforms occurring and are voters responding?*

The first voting reforms aimed at the convenience of the voter took place in the 1980s, when familiar forms of exclusive voting (absentee and early in-person) were opened to the wider electorate. Rather than simply the “safety-net” for voters who were sick, elderly, disabled, college students, or travelers, as it was originally intended and developed, early voting became a method aimed at easing the burden of going to the polls on Election Day. Now, instead of requiring absentee voters to provide a “reasonable excuse” for requesting a non-precinct ballot in advance of the election, Florida, Kansas, Arizona, and the West Coast allowed anyone to do so. Similarly, many states allowed voters to cast a ballot at the county clerk’s office or elections office before Election Day if they were going to be out of town or needed assistance; in the 1980s, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Texas began allowing anyone to cast a ballot this way. A few states allowed both.

**Table 1: The Advance of Non-Precinct Voting Methods**

1980s	Traditional Absentee Voting	34 States
	No Excuse Absentee	AZ, CA, FL, OR, WA
	No Excuse Absentee and Permanent Absentee Status	(none)
	In Person Early Voting	CO, LA, NM, NC, TX
	No Excuse Absentee and In Person Early Voting	AL, AR, OK, VT, WY
1990s	Traditional Absentee Voting	33 States
	No Excuse Absentee	AZ, CA, FL, IA, OR, WA
	No Excuse Absentee and Permanent Absentee Status	CA, KS*, WA
	In Person Early Voting	AL, CO, LA, NM, NC, TN, TX
	No Excuse Absentee and In Person Early Voting	AL, AZ, AR, CO, HI, NV, OK, VT, WY
	Voting by Mail	OR
2000-2006	Traditional Absentee Voting	27 States
	No Excuse Absentee	FL, GA, IN, IA, NB, ND, OK, SD, WV, WI
	No Excuse Absentee and Permanent Absentee Status	CA, KS*, MT, WA
	In Person Early Voting	LA, NM, NC, TN, TX
	No Excuse Absentee and In Person Early Voting	AL, AZ, AR, CO, FL, HI, ID, ME, NV, NM, NC, OK, UT, VT, WY
	Voting by Mail	OR

Notes: Figures collected by the authors. Numbers do not add up to 50 per decade because states reformed their election laws and may have a value in two cells.

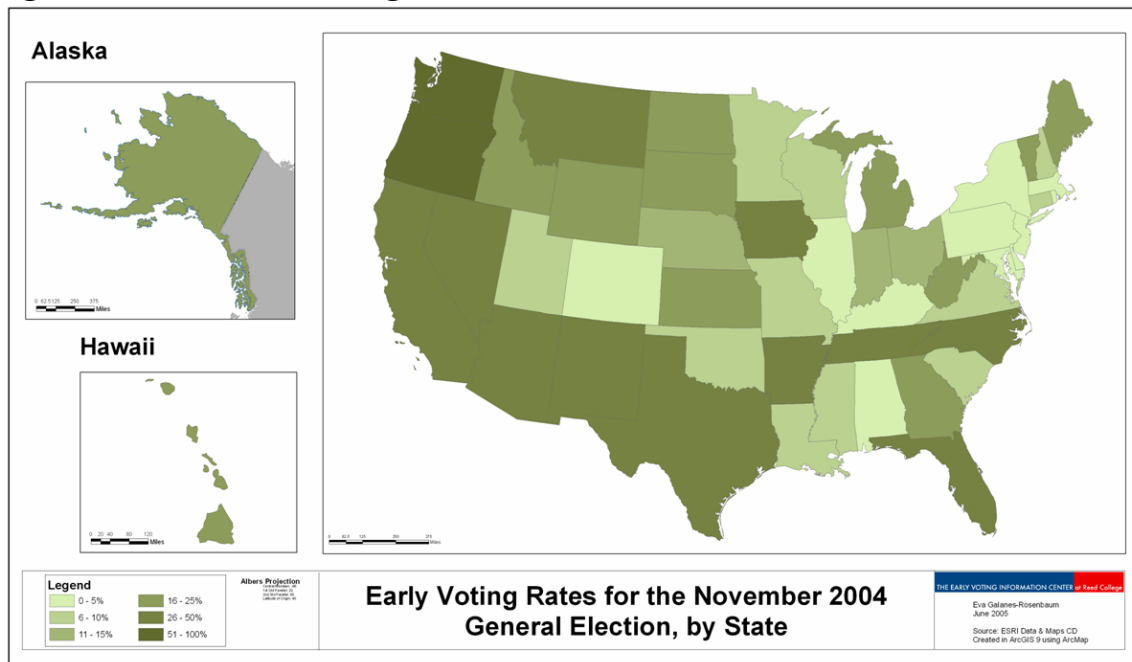
\* Kansas instituted an early voting period in 1998, during which voters could vote absentee "in person." At this time, they also instituted permanent absentee balloting.

As shown in Table 1, by the late 1990s, 19 states had at least one type of convenience voting on the books, and some had two: California, Kansas, and Washington allowed voters to apply for “permanent absentee” status, which operates exactly like vote-by-mail (ballots are automatically sent

to voters for each election); several states allowed both no-excuse absentee voting and in-person early (or absentee) voting. In 1998, Oregon had its first election under the vote-by-mail system, and has conducted all subsequent elections in the same way.

The 2000 presidential election's myriad scandals and debacles (mainly technological and clerical in nature) gave birth to a national movement toward overhauling the electoral system. In the wake of the election, many states expanded their election systems to include convenience options – some states even adopted additional early voting options (e.g. Florida, which added EIP to no-excuse absentee voting). The Help America Vote Act (HAVA, 2002) also spurred the growth of early voting. The administrative and technological benefits of early voting systems became particularly important in the period following 2000: a test-run of new voting machines, relief of Election Day crowds, lower staffing costs, and extra hands-on training opportunities for poll workers appeal to voters and election officials alike.

**Figure 1: Non Precinct Voting Rates in 2004**



Generally, the non-precinct voting reforms throughout the last twenty-five years have taken place outside the Northeast. The West Coast and Southwest, in particular, began instituting postal methods early (VBM, no-excuse absentee), and Texas has become the most prominent EIP state, with Southeastern neighbors Tennessee, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Florida following. This

trend is quite clear in the rates of early voting in the 2004 general election (see Figure 1).

While not uniformly the case, high numbers of early voters primarily appear in states with a high percentage of rural population and/or in those that are geographically large. The fifteen states with the highest early voting rates in 2004 nearly all fit these descriptions; those few Northeastern states with significant rates are precisely the largely rural states – Vermont (19%) and Maine (22.7%). It appears that voters in states with earlier adoption dates for non-precinct voting systems tend to take advantage of these systems in higher numbers: thirteen of the “Top 15” (see Table 2) had instituted some type of liberalized early voting by the 1990s—most in the 1980s. What is overwhelmingly apparent from Table 2, however, 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 on election day. In some states, this proportion seems to peak at approximately 30-40% of the electorate, but in some states, such as Washington, there seems to be no upper bound. Nearly 90% of Washington voters cast their ballots absentee in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 2: Changing Rates of Early Voting, Top 15 Early Voting States**

<b>State</b>	<b>2004 EarlyVote</b>	<b>2006 EarlyVote</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Oregon	85.00%		
Washington	70.00%	89.41%	27.73%
Nevada	52.28%	51.63%	-1.25%
Texas	32.56%	24.43%	-24.97%
Tennessee	47.30%		
Colorado	47.13%		
Arizona	40.77%		
Arkansas	36.92%		
California	32.61%	41.54%	27.39%
Montana	32.39%	31.63%	-2.35%
North Carolina	31.63%		
Florida	30.10%		
Iowa	30.01%	21.95%	-26.87%
New Mexico	30.00%		
South Dakota	23.96%	27.35%	14.17%

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<sup>1</sup> As an aside, at the time of this writing, two months after the election, we are unable to obtain early voting statistics for more than half of the top 15 states. Many states report to us that they are compiling this information for the EAC’s survey, to be completed in March 2006.

## Convenience Voting Reforms and Turnout: The State of the Literature

Election officials are strong advocates of early voting reforms. Oregon's Secretary of State, Bill Bradbury, for example, argues that voting by mail increases turnout and results in more citizens having a stake in their government; results in more thoughtful voting, enhancing the democratic process; offers greater procedural integrity; and finally, saves taxpayer dollars. Similar arguments have been made in favor of in-person early and relaxed absentee voting. The two primary national organizations that deal with election administration, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), both issued reports after the 2000 elections, and again after the passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) that urge states to consider reforms that would allow early voting (NCSL 2001; NASS 2003; 2001; Bradbury 2001). Early voting is less costly. Early voting reduces the administrative burden of holding elections. Early voting improves procedural integrity. Voters like early voting. Early voting increases turnout and improves the quality of voter decision-making by encouraging thoughtful reflection and deliberation. Ultimately, reformers hope that early voting may help reengage Americans in the electoral process (ACE Project 2003; NASS 2003, 2001; Nagourney 2002, NCSL 2001; Magleby 1987).

The empirical evidence to date supports election officials in their claims of procedural integrity. Early in-person voting (EIP), absentee balloting, and vote-by-mail (VBM) all do result in a more accurate count (Alvarez and Hall 2003, Traugott and Hanmer 2004, Traugott 2003). The verdict on cost-savings is less clear. The State of Oregon estimates that they saved nearly 17% of the costs of holding elections by adopting VBM, while EIP and liberalized absentee balloting do not clearly result in a cost saving (reported in Hansen 2001). However, improved procedural integrity and flat or slightly positive cost savings have led to widespread recommendations in favor of all varieties of early voting (particularly in response to HAVA requirements). Simultaneously, the use of postal voting is expanding worldwide (Hall 2003, Wintour and Carter 2002; Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance Postal Voting). There seems little question, then, that "(e)lection day in the United States is rapidly turning into an anachronism: waiting in line to cast our ballots will become the quaint notion of a bygone era" (Gronke 2003). Early voting and extended election periods are here to stay.

The empirical evidence on turnout is also positive, but less so. Early voting 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 (McDonald and Popkin 2001, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Teixeira 1992, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The empirical evidence supports this expectation. Liberalized absentee balloting leads to a small but significant growth in turnout (Oliver 1996, Dubin and Kalsow 1996). EIP also stimulates participation, again only slightly (Neeley and Richardson 2001, Stein 1998, Stein and Garcia-Monet 1997). Finally, VBM increases turnout (Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Karp and Banducci 2000), perhaps by as much as 10% (Southwell and Burchett 2000).<sup>2</sup> Initial boosts in turnout, however, may be due in part to a novelty effect, which fades over time as the new voting system(s) become less new.

Citizen support of early voting has been high as well. We know, for example, that Oregonians love vote by mail. They report a very high level of satisfaction with the system and claim that it makes them more likely to turn out to vote (Southwell 2004, 1998, 1996). In the State of Texas, roughly one-third of the ballots are cast early. In California in 1978, 4.41% of votes were absentee; by 2006, 40% cast absentee ballots (Alvarez and Hall 2003; Table 2). In Washington State, more than 65% of ballots were absentee in 2002, rising to 100% in some counties (essentially stealth vote by mail). Nationwide, the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project reported that non-precinct voting rates exceed 15% in more than 12 states in 2000. The Early Voting Information Center estimated an early voting rate of 21% in 2004 and 30% in 2006.

The performance of electoral reforms on changing who votes, however, is decidedly mixed. Berinsky (2004, 1) writes: ““(w)hat has not been widely recognized is that this wave of reforms has exacerbated the socioeconomic biases of the electorate.”” Berinsky’s claim is sustained in compositional studies of all three systems: EIP (Stein 1998), liberalized absentee balloting (Patterson and Caldeira 1985, Oliver 1996) and VBM (Karp and Banducci 2000, Berinsky et al. 2001, Southwell and Burchett 2000b).

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<sup>2</sup> Magleby (1986) estimates a 19% increase 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.

These systems are more commonly taken advantage of by politically activated segments of the population. VBM increases turnout more by retaining likely voters in less intense campaigns (e.g. midterm and local elections) than by recruiting new voters into the system (Berinsky et al. 2001, Southwell and Burchett 2000b, Southwell 1998). 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, and Republican candidates are more likely to harvest absentee voters (Patterson and Caldeira 1985, Oliver 1996). Stein's study of EIP in Harris County, Texas, showed that there were significantly larger numbers of Democrats and strong partisans among the "early voters" than Election Day voters (Stein 1998).

These past studies, while helpful, are hampered by limitations in research design and methodology that limit their applicability to the past decade of reforms. Most importantly for our purposes here, many of these studies are ancient history from the perspective of early voting. Karp and Banducci (2000) and Southwell and Burchett's (2000b) studies considered only the first three VBM contests. Magleby's (1986) pioneering work looked just at municipal election in three Western states in the early 1980s. Stein's study of in-person early voting is based on a single election (1994) in a state where rates of early voting have increased dramatically in the past decade (Stein 1998), and his results are contradicted by a more recent study (Lilliard and Richardson 2001). This latter is itself based in just one county in 1996, and relies on self-reports of turnout. Finally, the two studies of absentee balloting (Patterson and Caldeira 1985, Oliver 1996) rely on absentee ballot rates that are less than half what they are today.

Below, we consider two extensions to previous research. The results are part of a larger project that examines the impact of early voting reforms on campaigns, turnout, and voting behavior (see <http://earlyvoting.net> for more information). While these results are preliminary at this point, they both identify important analytical issues that have to be resolved before we can assert, with confidence, that early voting reforms increase turnout.

## Voting By Mail and Turnout: Replicating Southwell and Burchett

Priscilla Southwell has written a series of analyses of voting by mail in Oregon, after its arrival in late 1995 and subsequent adoption as the only way to cast a ballot after a successful 1998 initiative. Most prominently, her 2000 study estimated that voting by mail increased turnout in Oregon (already a high turnout state) by nearly 10% (Southwell and Burchett 2000b). This is obviously a significant increase, and one that recommends the system to states, and even other countries, who may be concerned about low levels of voter participation.

However, Southwell and Burchett's study covers only the first three elections held under vote by mail. The first two elections were special elections held to replace the Senate seat vacated by Senator Robert Packwood, who resigned under the cloud of a sexual harassment charges. The first two elections held under voting by mail were a primary (December 1995) then general election (January 1996). The third ballot held under these rules was a special presidential preference primary, held in March 1996.

In the first part of our analysis, we replicate Southwell and Burchett's analysis of voting by mail in Oregon, using a dataset that we constructed to correspond as closely as possible with their dataset.<sup>3</sup> We built the dataset by going to the Oregon Secretary of State's website for registration and turnout figures. We used the Oregon blue book for election results which were not available at the state website. Other indices were calculated following the description provided by Southwell and Burchett. Their model of turnout includes the type of election (primary, presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial, with "special" elections as the excluded category), and the type of election system (voting by mail for three elections, and "mixed" for the two subsequent elections in 1996—the regular primary and the general election—when Oregon had a relaxed absentee balloting system along with precinct place voting).

Because turnout is a time series displaying autoregressive properties, Southwell and Burchett employ feasible generalized least squares (FGLS), using the Beach-MacKinnon

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<sup>3</sup> We are not using the original data collected by Southwell and Burchett, but plan to do so in future versions of this paper.

estimation procedure. They do not specify a statistical software package.

Our replication varies from Southwell and Burchett in three important ways. First, we extended the data series to 2006, although we report estimates for the same time period (1960-1996) that they report. Second, for the purposes of controlling for autocorrelation while using ordinary least squares, we created a simple time counter based on the observation number.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we did not employ the Beach-MacKinnon estimation procedure, but used the Prais-Winsten, which is the conventional estimator used for AR(1) data (Greene 200x), and is available in Stata.

Our results are presented in Table 3 below. In the first column, we report the results from Southwell and Burchett's 2000 paper. Our attempts to replicate their findings are reported in the subsequent columns. Note that Southwell and Burchett coded all turnout figures on a 0-10 scale, while we used a 0-1 scale, so our estimates should correspond to their estimates divided by 100.

**Table 3: Turnout Effects of Voting by Mail (replicating Southwell and Burchett 2000)**

	1960-2006				1960-1996		
	Original Results (1960-1996)	Basic Regression with Counter	Prais-Winsten AR(1) with panels (election number)	Prais-Winsten AR(1) with Counter	Basic Regression with Counter	Prais-Winsten AR(1) with panels (election number)	Prais-Winsten AR(1) with Counter
Primary election	-21.887 (5.835)**	-0.218 (0.024)**	-0.187 (0.026)**	-0.213 (0.026)**	-0.201 (0.026)**	-0.178 (0.027)**	-0.203 (0.024)**
Presidential election	17.615 (4.521)**	0.291 (0.033)**	0.264 (0.033)**	0.286 (0.035)**	0.296 (0.038)**	0.276 (0.037)**	0.300 (0.039)**
Senatorial election	0.391 (2.214)	0.036 (-0.024)	0.052 (0.024)*	0.043 (-0.027)	0.040 (-0.027)	0.053 (0.026)*	0.050 (-0.029)
Gubernatorial election	7.108 (4.729)	0.184 (0.034)**	0.136 (0.033)**	0.163 (0.036)**	0.191 (0.040)**	0.165 (0.038)**	0.189 (0.040)**
Voting by Mail	10.169 (4.904)*	0.109 (0.039)**	0.014 -0.030	0.005 -0.028	0.118 (0.051)*	0.052 -0.050	0.034 (-0.050)
Election Competitiveness	0.178 (0.830)						
Mixed system	0.178 (2.390)	-0.080	-0.178 (0.072)*	-0.171 (0.070)*	-0.096 (-0.070)	-0.181 (0.068)*	-0.179 (0.072)*
Observation number		-0.003 (0.001)**			-0.003 (0.001)*		
Constant	61.356 (5.835)**	0.561 (0.032)**	0.501 (0.028)**	0.493 (0.027)**	0.541 (0.038)**	0.486 (0.030)**	0.478 (0.030)**
Rho	0.261		0.433	0.011		0.382	0.171
Durbin Watson	2.18		1.690	1.990		0.154	2.034
R-squared	0.784	0.720	0.830	0.670	0.740	0.850	0.730
N of Cases	48	68	68	68	51	51	51

Notes: Data collected by authors. For information on panel estimates, see text. Standard errors are in parentheses. \* significant at 5%; \*\* significant at 1%.

<sup>4</sup>We also used a time counter based on the month and year of the election, and it made no difference in the final estimates.

Overall, we were unsuccessful in our attempts to replicate Southwell and Burchett's results. We are encouraged to find that the overall pattern of coefficients all point in the same direction. However, we found sufficient anomalies between the results that we hesitate to rely too heavily on our replication, until we can compare our data with the original data collected by the authors.<sup>5</sup>

We note with some interest that the simplest model—OLS with a simple time counter—provides a vote by mail estimate that is very close to their figure (11.8% in the restricted dataset and 10.9% in the full series, vs. 10.2% for Southwell and Burchett). The estimate for the decline in turnout during primaries is also very close using this estimation method. However, once we control for autocorrelation in the series (columns 3, 4, 6, and 7), any impact of voting by mail disappears.

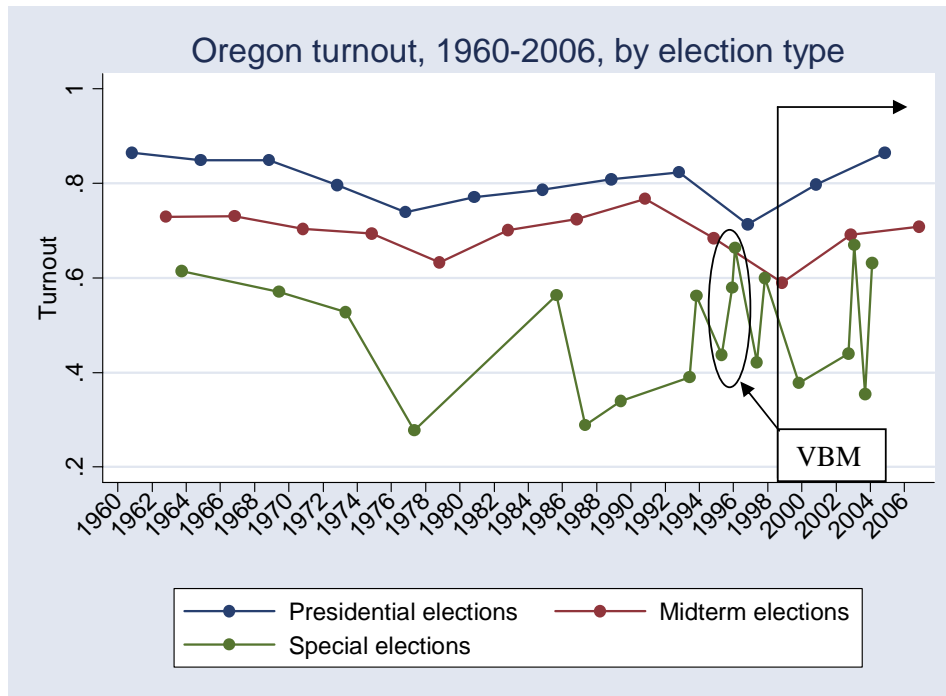
Assuming for the moment that the results are accurate, why might this have happened? One likely possibility is that Southwell and Burchett captured a “novelty” effect of voting by mail—higher initial turnout under the first few years of the new system. In addition, both of the special Senate elections were extremely high profile contests. Senate races are always among the most high-profile electoral contests (Kahn and Kenney DATE, Gronke 2000), and these elections followed the resignation of a sitting US Senator. It is also possible that these two elections, followed by a presidential preference primary (the first and only one conducted in Oregon), were particularly well-covered by the media, particularly hard fought by the candidates, and consequently displayed particularly high levels of turnout.

In fact, a visual inspection of turnout in Oregon prior to and following voting by mail indicates that at least two of these “special” elections (the three elections are circled in Figure 2, presented below), *did* show higher than average turnout when compared to other special elections. More importantly, when we examine trends in Oregon turnout in presidential and midterm contests pre- and post-voting by mail, there is little visual evidence of increasing turnout, certainly nothing on the magnitude of the 10% estimate provided by Southwell and Burchett or the 19% found by Magleby (1986) in municipal contests.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Southwell and Burchett report a case count of 48, while we count 51 elections during the same period.

**Figure Two: Oregon Turnout, 1960-2006, Before and After Voting by Mail**



What do we conclude from these results? First and most obviously, a full replication is necessary, comparing both the original data with our replication dataset. Second, however, the findings do support the suggestion of Magleby (1986) and echoed by analysts since: if voting reforms such as vote by mail are going to make a difference, we'll see it in state and local contests, where voter interest and enthusiasm are relatively low, and where the biggest turnout gains can be made.

## Early Voting and Turnout, 1980-2006

Our second replication effort expanded our focus beyond Oregon to the full fifty states, to see if we found effects of a similar magnitude across a wider variety of electoral and campaign contexts, over time, and across different kinds of voting reforms. We drew upon an established model of turnout from Caroline Tolbert and Daniel Smith (Tolbert Grummel and Smith 2001; Tolbert and Smith 2005).<sup>6</sup> In these papers, the authors argue that ballot initiatives, far from

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<sup>6</sup> Our thanks to Caroline Tolbert for sharing these data with us.

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 as we are in seeing whether early voting reforms similarly increase turnout, not by educating the electorate, but by lowering at least one barrier to ballot access. Second, we are fortunate to be able to use this dataset because, unlike the Oregon data used above, this dataset contains a rich set of other correlates of turnout, including region, election type, institutional provisions, and demographic characteristics of the state (racial diversity and per capita income).<sup>7</sup> To this dataset 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.<sup>8</sup> (As a reminder, Table 1 provides some guide to what states fall into these categories.)

Our replication and extension results are presented in Table 4 below. In the first column of Table 1, we estimate a modified version of the Tolbert-Smith model, removing the initiatives variable and add our dummy variables. Each of the voting reforms has a positive impact on turnout, ranging from 1% for no-excuse plus in person to 4.3% for voting by mail. These increases are statistically discernible for only three reforms: no-excuse absentee, in-person early voting, and voting by mail. To account for the possibility that the impact of voting reforms varies across presidential and non-presidential years, we estimated a model that allowed for differential impacts. The specifications we show below only include an interaction term for no excuse/permanent absentee status because this was the only statistically significant difference

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<sup>7</sup> We do not describe or justify the inclusion of these variables here. Interested readers should go to Tolbert and Smith (2005) for this information.

<sup>8</sup> We should note one important difference between our estimates and those of Tolbert and Smith (2001): 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.

between the two types of elections.

**Table 4: Turnout Effects of Early Voting Reforms**

	Model 1	Tolbert and Smith (2001)	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Number of Initiatives</b>		0.782 (0.092)**	0.737 (0.104)**	1.349 (0.166)**
<b>South</b>	-6.560 (0.933)**	-5.698 (0.865)**	-5.912 (0.900)**	-6.039 (0.884)**
<b>Senate</b>	1.189 (0.444)**	1.490 (0.454)**	1.419 (0.455)**	1.386 (0.457)**
<b>Governor</b>	0.955 (0.404)**	1.131 (0.441)*	0.855 (0.424)*	0.876 (0.417)**
<b>Percent HS Graduates</b>	0.064 (-0.095)	0.062 (-0.088)	0.051 (-0.095)	0.051 (-0.094)
<b>Racial Diversity</b>	-7.147 (2.151)**	-7.876 (1.927)**	-8.636 (2.112)**	-7.962 (2.136)**
<b>Per Capita Income (1997)</b>	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
<b>Closing date for registration</b>	-0.188 (0.020)**	-0.191 (0.020)**	-0.189 (0.020)**	-0.183 (0.020)**
<b>No Excuse Absentee</b>	1.700 (0.851)*		0.497 (-0.824)	0.840 (-0.830)
<b>No Excuse + Permanent Status</b>	0.234 (-0.953)		-0.524 (-0.873)	0.020 (-0.926)
<b>In Person Early Voting</b>	1.007 (0.819)		1.115 (-0.817)	1.320 (-0.824)
<b>No Excuse + In Person</b>	3.249 (1.077)**		2.565 (-0.972)**	2.664 (1.071)**
<b>Voting by mail</b>	4.229 (2.088)*		0.172 (-2.04)	1.558 (-1.982)
<b>Presidential Election Year</b>	16.279 (1.479)**	16.446 (1.432)**	16.75 (1.426)**	16.743 (1.419)**
<b>Presidential * Number of initiatives</b>		-0.553 (0.115)**	-0.497 (0.113)**	-0.429 (0.116)**
<b>Presidential * No Excuse/In Person</b>	-3.927 (1.292)**		-3.458 (1.304)**	-3.512 (1.286)**
<b>Western state</b>				-0.729 (0.187)**
<b>Constant</b>	42.005 (6.900)**	40.839 (6.600)**	41.494 (6.892)**	40.993 (6.859)**
<b>R-squared</b>	0.725	0.733	0.7372	0.741
<b>Observations</b>	645	645	645	645
<b>Number of stateid</b>	50	50	50	50

Notes: Dataset made available by Tolbert and Smith, with additional variables coded by the authors. All estimates are OLS with panel-corrected standard errors. Standard errors are in parentheses. \* significant at 5%; \*\* significant at 1%.

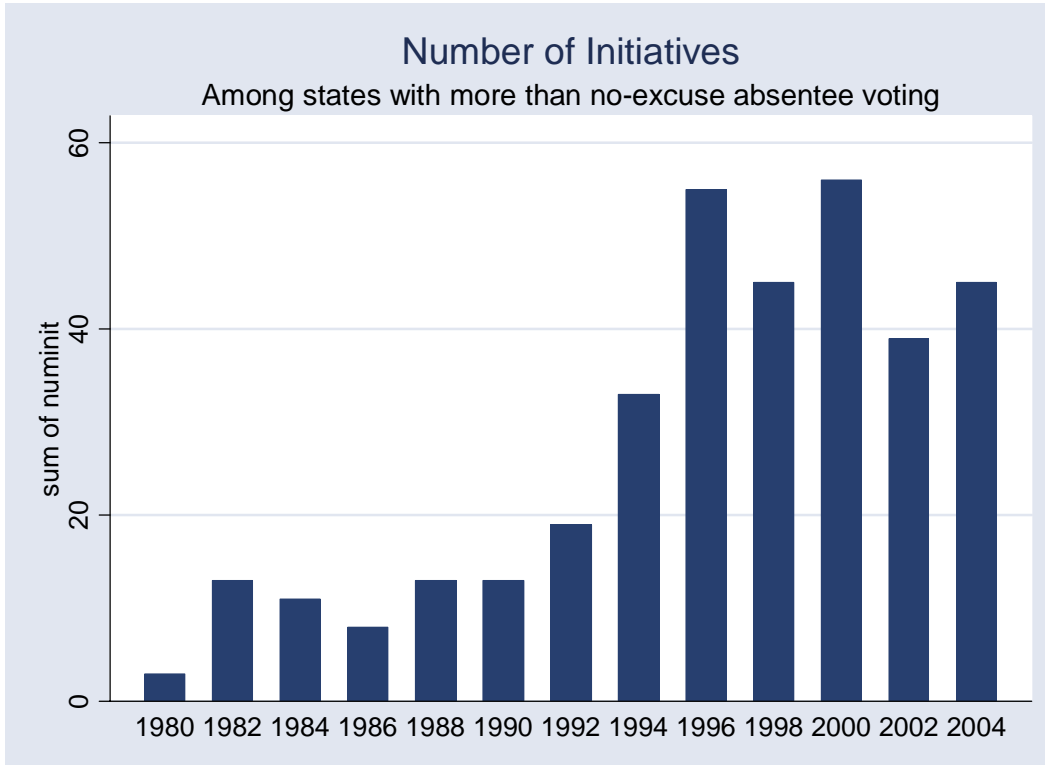
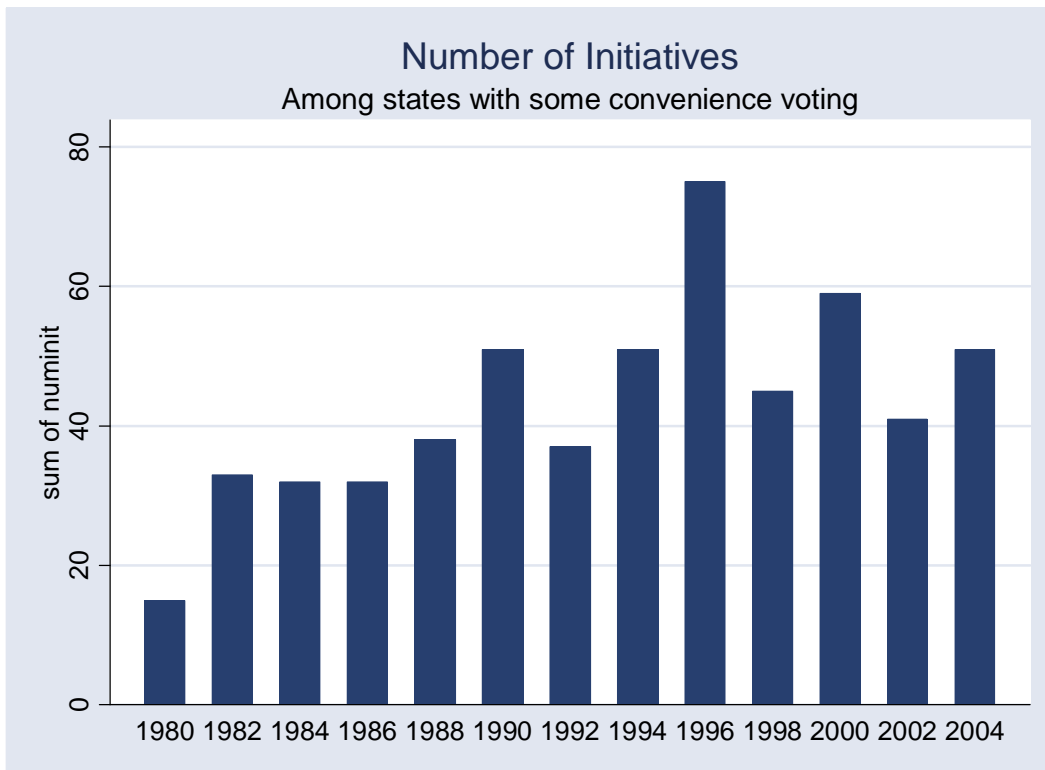
However, once we control for the number of initiatives on the ballot, a central part of the Tolbert/Smith model, as shown in column 3 (“model 2”) the impact of all reforms save in-person

early voting disappear. They decline in absolute magnitude (voting by mail most dramatically) and lose statistical significance.

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 Three. This figure contains two separate graphics. The top displays the number of initiatives in states, 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 same states which 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 the reason that states such as California, Oregon, and Washington have had to so dramatically expand early voting is that the ballot is so complex 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 Oregon’s was distributed in two volumes. It even took two stamps to return an absentee ballot in California, a requirement that was not expected by either election officials or voters.

**Figure Three: Trends in Initiatives among States with Convenience Voting**



In order to take a first pass at this phenomenon, we estimated one final equation, this time including a dummy variable for the western states (in addition to the “south” dummy recommended by Tolbert and Smith). This is reported in the final column of Table 4, labeled Model 3. Adding a control for western states makes two differences in the results. First, it increases the impact of the number of initiatives on turnout by 75%. Second, it results in a slightly lower (.8%) turnout in Western states, when compared to the Midwest and Northeast. The impact of voting reforms remains unaffected. In future research, we hope to examine the interaction of voting reforms and initiatives more in-depth.

## Conclusions

Our goals in this paper were threefold. First, we described the lay of the land with respect to early voting reforms, defining the institutional changes, illustrating their geographic dispersion, and reporting the number of early voters. The conclusions from this section are relatively obvious: early voting reforms are rapidly expanding nationwide, and will likely be available in almost every state in 2008. The number of early voters continues to increase rapidly in each election, and in some states, shows no signs of abating. It is no longer a question of whether early voting is a smart reform; the question now is what sort of early voting to allow and how to adjust to its impact.

Second, we examined the extant political science literature with respect to early voting. Previous scholarly work found a positive impact of early voting reforms on turnout, varying from small (3%) in the case of absentee balloting up to over 10% in the case of voting by mail. We pointed out, however, that many of these studies looked at a relatively limited historical period, when relaxed balloting requirements were only starting to be introduced and were a relative novelty. In addition, in-person early voting was very limited in scope prior to 1990, and has only increased in popularity following the 2000 election.

Finally, we provided two replications and extensions of prior work. First we examined Southwell and Burchett’s 2000 study of voting by mail in Oregon, the most commonly cited source for the claim that voting by mail will result in a dramatic increase in voter turnout. We were unable to replicate Southwell and Burchett. We differ with them on the number of

elections that we count from 1960-1996, a quite significant discrepancy. We are unable to reproduce their estimates using similarly statistical techniques. We hesitate to conclude much at this juncture without gaining access to their original dataset.

Second, we built upon an extant model of turnout, adding to it a series of variables representing early voting innovations. In these analyses, we did find a consistently positive impact of early voting reforms, but only for those states which instituted no-excuse absentee balloting and in-person early voting, and in these cases, only in midterm contests. The boost in turnout is modest (2.6%) but is statistically discernible across all specifications. Finding an impact only in lower intensity contests is consistent with much of the existing literature. It is also consistent with theoretical presentations of the turnout problem. John Aldrich (1993), in his summary of the rational choice literature on turnout, describes it as a decision made at the margins, and thus responsive to relatively small changes in costs or benefits. We view early voting as a relatively minor change in the costs of voting, making it more convenient to be sure, but paling in significance to such effects as feelings of citizen empowerment, interest in and concern about the election, and political mobilization efforts by parties, candidates, and other political organizations.

In conclusion, we find that early voting reforms have, at best, a modest effect on turnout. We believe, after additional testing, that this will prove to be a robust finding, since it is consistent with prior research as well as with political science theory. We are skeptical of those who continue to advocate in favor of early voting reform primarily on the basis of increased turnout. Our data simply don't support these claims. There are good reasons to adopt early voting—ballot counting is more accurate, it can save administrative costs and headaches, and voters express a high level of satisfaction with the system. If a jurisdiction adopts early voting in the hopes of boosting turnout, however, it is likely to be disappointed.

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