



## Easy Registration and Voter Turnout

Benjamin Highton

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# *Easy Registration and Voter Turnout*

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Registration requirements are often identified as factors that depress turnout in the United States. In addition, it is alleged that they contribute to the "socioeconomic skew" of the voting population because the costs of registration have greater impact on the less educated. In order to gain greater insight into the effects of registration, I analyze individual turnout in states which impose minimal or no registration costs on their residents, where turnout differences may not be reasonably attributed to registration requirements. Comparing turnout in these states with turnout in the rest of the country, I find that while registration does contribute to the upscale character of voters, there are substantial differences for which registration laws are not responsible.

**T**o what degree do the costs of voting deter some people from voting and not others? This question has received considerable attention and a variety of answers (Burnham 1982; Nagler 1991; Piven and Cloward 1988, 1989; Teixeira 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Because registration requirements are amenable to change and are often the most substantial barriers to voting (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978), analytical attention focuses on the ability of citizens to surmount these impediments. The individual demographic characteristic that best indicates the capacity to bear the costs of voting is educational attainment, which is also the strongest predictor of turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Consequently, questions regarding the effects of registration laws are intertwined with ones about the "socioeconomic skew" of the American electorate.

Some scholars have alleged that registration laws are the primary cause of socioeconomic differences in turnout among Americans. For example, Cunningham (1991) writes:

I argue that race and class disparities in rates of voter registration in this country are not inevitable. Rather, they are the product of historical and continuing racial and socioeconomic bias in the operation of our registration laws (372).

and

I thank Clem Brooks, Jeffrey Manza, J. Eric Oliver, Laura Stoker, and Raymond E. Wolfinger for their helpful suggestions. The data analyzed in this paper were originally collected by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and made available through UC DATA (University of California Data Archive and Technical Assistance). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, The New York Hilton, September 1-4, 1994.

The vestiges of discriminatory registration schemes, still in place in many parts of the country in the form of complex, restrictive, and confusing webs of personal voter registration requirements, contribute significantly to this [socioeconomic] disparity (385-6).

Piven and Cloward (1989) offer a similar observation: "True, poll taxes and literacy tests are gone. But administrative barriers remain much the same. . . . In practice, remote registration, together with complicated forms, are de facto income and literacy tests" (584-5). Powell (1986), too, in his comparative analysis of turnout in the United States locates the explanation for the large effect of education on turnout in the "difficulty of registration in America" (31).

No consensus exists, however, regarding the magnitude of the effects. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) attribute more modest effects to registration laws, estimating that liberalizing them would reduce the gap in turnout between the most and least educated from 40 to 30 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> Others allege even smaller effects (Bennett 1990b; Gans 1990a, 1990b). Recently, Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995) have implicitly suggested that registration requirements have no deterrent effect on the turnout of the less educated by arguing that "the impact of education on voting is funneled entirely through political interest" (283).

#### TURNOUT IN THE ABSENCE OF REGISTRATION COSTS

The evidence most commonly cited to bolster the contention that registration laws are the primary cause of turnout differences among socioeconomic groups comes from observing the turnout of people who are registered. Among those who present these sorts of data (Erikson 1981; Piven and Cloward 1988; Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987; Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1990), the findings are consistent. "Even unlikely registrants are relatively frequent voters when they do register" (Erikson 1981, 271). Indeed, when considering the turnout of the registered, the effect of education diminishes considerably. "The less educated act much more like the better educated, once they have crossed the crucial barrier of registration" (Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987, 47). For some, this is the crucial fact for understanding why Americans do not vote. "People vote if they are registered. Nonvoting is almost entirely concentrated among those who are not registered. This is *prima facie* evidence of the deterrent impact of registration procedures on voting" (Piven and Cloward 1988, 260).

There are grounds, however, to question the conclusions based on the high turnout of the registered. To the extent that people do not register because they are not particularly interested in voting, merely removing the obstacle of registration will have little impact on turnout. If important differences exist between the two groups, then observing the behavior of those who have decided on their own to register may not tell us much about what the behavior of those who are not registered would be if they were registered.

<sup>1</sup>Teixeira (1992) replicates their model and finds similar results.

A better way to assess the role of registration laws in producing socioeconomic differences in turnout would be to observe turnout in a context where the costs of registration are small or nonexistent. This is a powerful approach because under these circumstances, if turnout differences remain, then they may not reasonably be attributed to the effects of registration. On the other hand, if turnout differences are largely minimized in such a setting, then the inference that registration laws are the cause of disparate turnout rates has greater force.

One registration context where the individual costs of registering are small or nonexistent is in states that allow registration on election day and in North Dakota, which does not require registration. In 1992 three states—Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin—allowed eligible residents to register on election day, the latter two permitting individuals to register directly at the polls. These four states, then, provide an excellent setting to analyze the relationship between socioeconomic factors and turnout.

Two studies have attempted this sort of analysis. Erikson (1981) analyzed the turnout of respondents in the 1964 National Election Study who lived in counties without voter registration. Unfortunately, there were only 58 such respondents, too few to permit anything other than speculation. More recently, Calvert and Gilchrist (1993) analyzed county-level data in Minnesota and found that the percentage of election-day registrants is positively correlated with measures of county socioeconomic status. They are led to the improbable conclusion that difficult registration requirements impede voting by those most able to surmount the hurdle. "These ecological correlations are fully consistent with the notion that election-day registration, rather than goading the disadvantaged to the polls, appears to simply provide further convenience for those already inclined to vote by virtue of their social class position" (699). Aggregate correlations, though, can often be quite misleading about individual-level correlates as Achen and Shively (1995), for example, have recently explained.

The paucity of information about variations in turnout in states with easy or no registration provides the motivation for the following analysis. I analyze the turnout of over 12,000 individuals living either in North Dakota or in states with election-day registration. This large sample size allows precise estimation of the effect of a variety of demographic variables on turnout in these states. These estimates may then be compared to estimates for the rest of the country in order to consider the extent to which turnout differences between groups are minimized in the absence of significant registration barriers.

#### DATA

The 1980 and 1992 Voter Supplements of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) are my data source. These are the two most recent supplements from presidential election years which contain a complete set of socioeconomic and demographic variables.<sup>2</sup> Conducted monthly by the Census

<sup>2</sup> Respondents' residential mobility was not ascertained in the 1984 and 1988 surveys.

Bureau, primarily to obtain the data used in estimates of unemployment, the CPS has a wide range of demographic items and a changing "supplement" on a particular topic—child care, smoking, and so on. Every other November, the supplement inquires about citizenship status, registration, and voting.<sup>3</sup> Although the only political questions in the survey are on registration and turnout, the CPS is an extremely valuable dataset for studies of turnout because of its enormous sample size.<sup>4</sup> For example, the 1980 and 1992 Voter Supplements together contain data on over 200,000 individual respondents, including over 3,000 in North Dakota alone.<sup>5</sup> For the analysis, I pool the CPS data to yield more precise effect estimates along with minimizing idiosyncratic effects of particular elections.<sup>6</sup>

## RESULTS

I analyze the relationships between individual characteristics and turnout for three groups of people. The first consists of citizens living in North Dakota and states which permit election-day registration.<sup>7</sup> While North Dakota imposes no registration costs on its residents, the costs of registration are minimal in states with election-day registration.<sup>8</sup> The second group includes all eligible citizens in the rest of the country; the third group includes all registered citizens in the rest of the states, where people are required to register prior to election day.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1 displays relationships between six demographic variables and turnout for each of the three groups. The data are quite illuminating and several points should be noted. First, looking at overall levels, one finds that turnout is ten percentage points higher in North Dakota and states with election-day registration (77% to 67%). This is not a surprise and has been mentioned elsewhere (Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1990). More significantly, turnout in North Dakota and states with election-day registration does not approach the turnout of the

<sup>3</sup>The CPS measure of turnout is based on individuals' self-reports of having voted. Because the better educated are a bit more likely to report voting when they have not (Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986), the relationship between education and turnout will be somewhat exaggerated. However, this is not particularly problematic for this study because there is no reason to believe that the exaggeration will vary with registration context.

<sup>4</sup>A thorough description of the dataset may be found in Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, 4-6).

<sup>5</sup>This compares favorably to the 58 respondents living in counties without registration that Erikson (1981) analyzed using the 1964 National Election Study.

<sup>6</sup>Separate analyses of the 1980 and 1992 data yield comparable results.

<sup>7</sup>In 1980 Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, and Wisconsin had election day registration. By 1992, Oregon had repealed election day registration, leaving the other three as the only states that allowed citizens to register on election day.

<sup>8</sup>Initially I analyzed turnout in North Dakota separately from the states with election-day registration. Because the results were nearly identical, I combined the two into a single category.

<sup>9</sup>One could, of course, draw a number of distinctions based on the registration laws in the other states. However, for the purposes of this study, the key distinguishing feature of the other states is that they all require citizens to register prior to election day.

TABLE 1  
 TURNOUT BY REGISTRATION CONTEXT AND DEMOGRAPHIC  
 CHARACTERISTICS

	N. Dakota and Election-Day Registration (%)	Other States	
		Eligible Voters (%)	Registered Voters(%)
Age			
18-29	69	51	85
30-39	78	66	91
40-55	83	75	93
56-69	83	78	93
70-77	80	75	90
78+	67	64	83
Education			
0-8 years	63	49	81
9-11 years	59	49	84
12 years	75	63	90
Some college	83	75	92
College degree	93	86	96
Advanced degree	93	90	96
Family income (quintiles)			
Bottom	63	50	82
2d	72	60	88
3d	77	67	91
4th	84	75	93
Top	89	81	95
Years at current residence			
< 1 year	64	48	83
1-2 years	76	60	90
3+ years	82	73	92
Housing			
Rent	64	51	85
Own	82	73	92
Marital Status			
Single	68	58	87
Married	82	72	92
Overall	77	67	90
n	13,950	191,793	143,225

Source: 1980, 1992 Current Population Surveys.

registered in the rest of the country, which is 90%. This discrepancy implies that arguments predicated on the high turnout of the registered may be overstated.

The relationships between education and turnout in each of the three groups add to the picture. In North Dakota and states with election-day registration, the difference in turnout between the most and least educated is 30 percentage

points; the difference in the other states is even greater, 41 percentage points. Moreover, one observes the biggest differences between the two groups at the lowest levels of education. In North Dakota and states with election-day registration, 63% of those without any high school education reported voting compared to 49% in the rest of the states. Among those with an advanced degree the percentages are 93 and 90, respectively. Thus the greatest aggregate effects of more difficult registration laws are on those with the least amount of formal education. Where registration requirements are minimal or nonexistent, the effect of education is reduced because less educated citizens vote at higher rates while the turnout of the better educated is nearly unchanged.

Relying on turnout differences among the registered leads one to significantly overestimate the effect of registration barriers on producing socioeconomic differences in turnout. Consistent with previous work, the data for those who registered show relatively high turnout rates among usually low turnout groups. For example, having cleared the registration hurdle, fully 84% of high school dropouts reported voting. Does this imply that, absent registration barriers, the less educated will have turnout rates approaching those of the more educated? Probably not. The turnout rate for people with some high school in the states with easy or no registration is 59%, 25 percentage points lower than the turnout of the registered.

Given the close relationships among the demographic variables (education and age, for example)<sup>10</sup>, multivariate analysis is necessary in order to obtain accurate estimates of independent effects of the variables in each context. Table 2 presents the logit estimates of the multivariate turnout model in each of the contexts.

In order to understand substantively the estimated coefficients, I used a procedure developed by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, Appendix C) to calculate the effect on turnout of each of the variables in each context.<sup>11</sup> The cell entries in Table 3 report the estimated effect on turnout (in percentage points) of being in a particular category of a variable compared to the excluded category for that variable. For example, the turnout of those living at their current residence for three or more years in North Dakota and states with election-day registration is estimated to be eight percentage points higher than the turnout of those with less than one year of residential stability.

Although smaller than those for the eligible in the other states, the effects of education on turnout in North Dakota and states with election-day registration

<sup>10</sup>The full effect of education on turnout is concealed in a bivariate analysis because many of the elderly (who have relatively high turnout levels) are poorly educated. Consequently, when one controls for age, the observed effect of education increases (Bennett 1990a).

<sup>11</sup>For example, in order to calculate the effect of family income in North Dakota and states with election day registration, I used the following procedure. First, for each respondent the logit estimates were used to calculate a probability of voting. Then, a second probability was calculated by substituting each individual's reported family income with the value of the lowest family income category. The average difference in probabilities (multiplied by 100) for people in each of the income categories represents the effect on turnout (in percentage point terms) of being in each category, compared to the lowest category.

TABLE 2  
LOGIT ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES  
ON TURNOUT

Variables	N. Dakota and Election Day Registration		Other			
	Logit Estimate	Standard Error	Eligible Voters		Registered Voters	
			Logit Estimate	Standard Error	Logit Estimate	Standard Error
Age	.0377**	.0072	.0669**	.0018	.0709**	.0031
Age squared/100	-.0169*	.0073	-.0396**	.0019	-.0578**	.0030
Education	.3851**	.0231	.5484**	.0203	.4509**	.0332
Education squared	.0366**	.0137	.0074*	.0031	-.0062	.0050
Family income	.1899**	.0198	.1503**	.0048	.1561**	.0085
Years at current residence						
< 1 year	-.4914**	.0673	-.6551**	.0167	-.5313**	.0287
1-2 years	-.1543*	.0663	-.4126**	.0160	-.1407**	.0294
3+ years	—	—	—	—	—	—
Rent/own	.3473**	.0578	.3069**	.0138	.2111**	.0241
Single/married	.3729**	.0505	.1878**	.0127	.1575**	.0218
Constant	-2.5043**	.1759	-3.7174**	.0525	-1.5721**	.0886
<i>n</i>		13,149		179,098		133,217
-2 log likelihood		14,247		225,860		83,647
% correctly predicted		79		73		90
Null		77		67		90

Source: 1980, 1992 Current Population Surveys.

Note: See appendix for variable coding.

\*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

are quite substantial. The difference in turnout between the most and least educated is 48 and 38 percentage points, respectively. The estimated effect of education on turnout in states with minimal or no registration requirements is more than three times as large as Powell's estimate (1986) for countries with automatic registration. In the United States, registration barriers do not come close to completely accounting for turnout disparities between the most and least educated.

Another measure of socioeconomic status, family income, exhibits virtually identical effects in states with easy or no registration and in the rest of the country. In each group, the turnout difference between rich and poor is nine percentage points. Once one controls for their relatively low levels of education, poor people are no more likely than the financially secure to be affected by registration barriers.

The last main variable of interest is residential mobility. Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass (1987) argue that individuals who have recently moved have lower turnout because of the need to reregister at one's new address. Yet their data suggest that



TABLE 3  
THE EFFECT OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS ON TURNOUT  
(IN PERCENTAGE POINTS)

	N. Dakota and Election-Day Registration	Other States	
		Eligible	Registered
<b>Age</b>			
18-29	—	—	—
30-39	4	9	4
40-55	9	17	6
56-69	15	24	8
70-77	20	28	9
78+	24	30	8
<b>Education</b>			
0-8 years	—	—	—
9-11 years	11	12	6
12 years	22	25	10
Some college	32	36	15
College degree	38	44	15
Advanced degree	38	48	15
<b>Family income (quintiles)</b>			
Bottom	—	—	—
2d	4	3	2
3d	6	6	3
4th	8	8	4
Top	9	9	4
<b>Years at current residence</b>			
< 1 year	—	—	—
1-2 years	6	5	5
3+ years	8	12	5
<b>Housing</b>			
Rent	—	—	—
Own	5	6	2
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Single	—	—	—
Married	5	3	1

Source: 1980, 1992 Current Population Surveys.

Note: The entry in each cell is the logit estimate of the effect on turnout (in percent) of having the indicated characteristic, compared to the turnout of those in the excluded category.

the effect of mobility does not vary by registration context. The present analysis shows this finding to be a methodological artifact. In states that require registration but do not permit it on election day, the difference in turnout between those who have lived in their current residence for less than a year and the most residentially stable is twelve percentage points. In North Dakota and states with election-day registration, the difference is smaller, eight percentage points. It

appears, then, that registration laws do inhibit the turnout of the residentially mobile. At the same time, the effects of mobility in states which pose minimal or no registration barriers provides support also for the notion that mobility indicates lack of community integration and connectedness (Pomper and Sernekos 1991; Teixeira 1992).

The effect of housing status has also been explained in terms of community integration. With other variables controlled, owners have higher turnout than renters. Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass (1987) speculated that the reason was "perhaps because of weaker feelings of societal membership" (55) among renters. If this is true, then the effect of owning versus renting ought not to be determined by the difficulty of registration. The estimates in Table 3 support their hypothesis, showing similar effects in both groups of states. Turnout of owners is five and six percentage points higher than that of renters in the easy or no registration states and the rest of the country, respectively.

#### CONCLUSION

In his comparative analysis of American voter turnout, Powell (1986) found the large effects of education on turnout in the United States to be unique among the nine nations he studied. He concluded that "it seems very likely, although we cannot demonstrate it directly, that the difficulty of registration in America is . . . responsible for this remarkable distinctiveness of American voting processes" (31). Other scholars, too, have attributed the large differences in turnout between socioeconomic groups in the United States to their different capacities to bear the costs of registering to vote. In this paper, I was able to directly assess these claims by comparing individual-level turnout in states that impose minimal or no registration costs on their residents to turnout in the rest of the country. The findings show that the effect of education on turnout in states with election-day registration or no registration is substantial, although smaller than the effect in the rest of the country. The smaller effect is due to the higher turnout of the less educated in the states which impose minimal registration costs. Registration requirements, however, do not appear to be the main reason for the socioeconomic skew of American voters.

The data reported here suggest that policies like the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) will modestly increase overall turnout and diminish socioeconomic differences among voters. The key provision of the Act, which earned it the nickname "motor voter," requires that state departments of motor vehicles incorporate an application to register into the process of applying for or renewing driver's licenses. By linking registration to an activity that over 90% of all potential voters already engage in, registration costs for people throughout the country will be significantly reduced, creating a registration context that more closely resembles that in North Dakota, Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Therefore, although it seems likely that the poor and uneducated will benefit

most from the NVRA, their turnout will continue to fall short of the turnout of those with higher socioeconomic status.

## APPENDIX

## CODING OF VARIABLES USED FOR MULTIVARIATE ESTIMATION

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Age	Respondent's age in years (18–90)
Education	0–8 years (1) 9–11 years (2) 12 years (3) 1–3 years college (4) College degree (5) Advanced degree (6)
Family Income	Bottom quintile (1) 2d quintile (2) 3d quintile (3) 4th quintile (4) Top quintile (5)
Years at Current Residence	Two dummy variables were used to distinguish those who had lived at their current residence for less than one year and those with one to two years of residential stability from those who had lived at their current residence for three or more years.
Housing	Rent (0) Own (1)
Marital Status	Single (0) Married (1)

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