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ELECTION-YEAR STIMULI AND THE TIMING OF VOTER REGISTRATION

James G. Gimpel, Joshua J. Dyck and Daron R. Shaw

ABSTRACT

Despite less stringent requirements and more convenient access, 24 percent of the age-eligible United States population remained unregistered in 2000. While this proportion dropped in 2004, a large share of registrants still failed to cast ballots in the Bush–Kerry contest. With the outcome of national elections hinging on a percentage point or two in recent years, attention has once again been focused on registration and mobilization activity. But while we know a great deal about turnout, there is little systematic knowledge about how election-related stimuli may influence voter registration. We examine the registration dates and official turnout records for individuals from counties in six states for the 2000 election. We find that a surprising number of voters register in the year of the election, and that key dates and campaign events frequently coincide with surges in registration. In addition, we demonstrate that later registrants are relatively more likely to vote.

KEY WORDS ■ party mobilization ■ political participation ■ presidential elections
■ voter registration ■ voting

Introduction

Scholarly research suggests that registration and mobilization drives can pay substantial dividends (Cain and McCue, 1985; Gerber and Green, 2000, 2001; Green et al., 2003). Much less is known, however, about the extent to which campaign events and other stimuli associated with partisan political activity result in new registrants and the expansion of the electorate. Here we are interested in the pattern, timing and effects of voter registration. More specifically, we are interested in (1) the number of new registrants during an election year, (2) the pattern of this new registration, (3) its coincidence with important political dates and occurrences, and (4) the effect of registration timing on turnout.

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Our theoretical perspective is that partisan campaigns and their constituent events stimulate interest in elections and that this activity informs and motivates people to overcome the impediments to voting. Previous research has established that campaigns are significant events – voters, and prospective voters, do learn from them (Lodge et al., 1995; Sears and Valentino, 1997; Valentino and Sears, 1998; Zhao and Chaffee, 1995). As political events, elections produce information flow. Implicit in this perspective is the notion that politics matters, and that elections help to lower the cost of acquiring political information. Consequently, our main expectation is that event-driven registration is more likely to occur relatively late in the election season, closer to registration deadlines and election day itself.

Our motivation in focusing on registration timing is similarly straightforward. As registration is the ultimate prerequisite for voting, it is both necessary and substantively consequential to understand the conditions under which election-year events may or may not stimulate registration activity. To what extent, then, do significant campaign events in the year prior to an election encourage citizens to add their names to the voter rolls? The existing literature offers no answer to this question. We aim to fill this gap and bring to the table detailed voter list data from the 2000 US presidential election, which allow us to address some of the limitations associated with survey-based studies of turnout and registration. Focusing on select counties from six states, these data yield unusually rich, individual-level information on the characteristics and behavior of registrants – including registration dates and precise turnout records – during the 52 weeks prior to the fall registration closing date. As such, they give us insight into the nature and effects of registration in a variety of settings.

Thinking about Party Registration

Many studies have pointed out that registering to vote is a critical step in the exercise of the franchise (Erikson, 1981; Kelley et al., 1967; Merriam and Gosnell, 1924; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Timpone, 1998). A consistent series of analyses argue that once someone is registered many traditional predictors of turnout diminish in importance (Erikson, 1981; Highton, 1997; Jackson, 1996; Squire et al., 1987; Wolfinger et al., 1990). Put another way, low-resource voters act more like high-resource voters once the registration threshold has been crossed (Squire et al., 1987). The extant literature also suggests that since non-voting is heavily concentrated among the unregistered (Highton, 1997: 566; Piven and Cloward, 1988), the act of registration indicates a citizen has reached some requisite level of political interest. In a recent study, Timpone (1998) expands the correlates of registration beyond attitudes, however, arguing that registration is driven by education and age (p. 150). Our view is that the constellation of interest, education and age factors creates a plausible understanding of the registration dynamic: above

some imaginary 'interest' cutoff point are the politically active and aware, aided by established voting habits wrought by age and longevity in the electorate, while below are the less aware and apathetic, hindered by youth and its corollary inexperience. Borrowing from Downs (1957) and Verba et al. (1995), it follows that those above the cutoff point will be much more likely to have the skills to overcome the physical and informational costs of registration.

This notion of costs merits elaboration. Clearly, a variety of costs are imposed on citizens who consider registration (Highton, 1997; Highton and Wolfinger, 1998; Kelley et al., 1967: 360; Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1978). While these are not monetary costs, as in the days of the poll tax, the inconvenience of updating one's registration or adding one's name to the rolls can be substantial. This is true in spite of the passage of the National Voter Registration Act in 1993, which makes it possible to register when receiving or updating a driver's license, and other reforms (e.g. same-day registration) intended to ease the burden of registration. For the legions who will not go to their drivers' licensing office, they must determine whether they are eligible to register and where they might do so (Kelley et al., 1967).¹

Election events could, of course, reduce the costs of registration and increase the perceived benefits in several ways. During the 2004 election cycle, the major parties were actively providing registration forms to potential supporters via mail, email and other means of contact. But parties tend not to spend money registering those who are unlikely to vote for their candidates. And their campaign contacting is further limited to those whose names appear on registered voter lists (Gold and March, 1998; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992: 72; Shea and Burton, 2001). At the very least, the focus of campaigns on registered voters reinforces the interest differences between the registered and unregistered. It also rules out the most obvious mechanism by which registration and other turnout impediments could be overcome.

Elections, however, involve much more than door-to-door canvasses, direct mail, telephone calls and other party-specific and candidate-specific activities. We are interested in election-year stimuli in a more general sense. For our purposes, there is the question of whether a wide class of election-related events stimulates increases in registration. The issue is important for three reasons. First, and most broadly, it speaks to whether the political stimulation associated with elections increases involvement and expands accountability. If events on the election calendar increase the level of information in the environment, these happenings could enable citizens with few resources and marginal political interest to get on the voter rolls with the intention of voting in the fall election. And anything that increases the number of citizens on the registration rolls can be construed as good for democratic governance inasmuch as it portends an increase in the size of the politically active electorate.

Second, probing the registration-events relationship speaks to whether there are specific effects associated with high-stimulus party events such as

primaries and conventions. Even if parties and candidates are not themselves out to enroll more voters, election-related stimuli could have the impact of generating surges in registration. We expect that events on the election calendar can serve as the kind of stimuli that increase the percentage of new registrants who are signing up with the explicit intention of voting in November. To be sure, some events on the election calendar may be more salient than others across diverse settings. For example, we expect that events occurring earlier in the campaign season, prior to the conventions, are likely to attract less attention and be less associated with registration activity than events closer to the election. This is because events late in the campaign tend to focus on the final contest – a broad field of candidates has been winnowed, and the nominating conventions, followed by the fall campaign, provide concrete information about the candidates vying for the big prize. The indifference of many low-information citizens gives way to the contrasts in issue positions and policies that become increasingly evident as media attention rises.

Third, we do not know if those who register very close to election day – when events are more likely to cluster – are more likely or less likely to actually vote. Knowledge on this matter sheds light on the bigger question of what citizens are thinking about on those few occasions when they are politically engaged. One might posit, for example, that people who register in April of an election year are more likely to vote than those registering in October, because ‘early’ registration indicates a higher level of engagement. That is, the April registrant is aware enough to register when most everyone else has trouble identifying the candidates. One might also argue the opposite, however; that ‘late’ registration, in the heat of the campaign, is more likely to be the result of familiarity with the issues and choices of the campaign and therefore more likely to be followed with an actual vote.

Our expectation, following Cain and McCue (1985), is that the second of these scenarios is the more plausible.² In light of this expectation, we also believe that an important distinction can be made between casual and purposive registration. Casual registration is done not in response to campaign- or election-related stimuli, but in response to opportunities to register that may be almost inadvertent. Since the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) was passed in 1993, all states must provide the opportunity for citizens to register at state drivers’ license bureau. But political strategists have already noted that many of these registrants are not consistent voters – precisely why studies of implementation of the motor voter law by the US Census Bureau, the Federal Election Commission and independent scholars have been mixed in their verdict on whether its implementation has increased turnout (Federal Election Commission, 1997; Franklin and Grier, 1997; Highton and Wolfinger, 1998; Knack, 1995; Martinez, 1999; US Census Bureau, 2000; Wolfinger and Hoffman, 2001). Registering in response to a reminder when one is renewing a driver’s license is rather different from registering in response

to the realization that election day is approaching and one wants to voice one's views through voting.

Purposive registration, then, is motivated by an explicit intention to vote. These registrants may go out of their way to put their name on the rolls, and are not merely signing up because they are presented with the opportunity at the state motor vehicle office, or wish to appease a parent or friend by sending in a registration card. Purposive registration is not the result of an inadvertent reminder, but a more explicit political stimulus that motivates voters to put aside their indifference and add their names to the rolls with the intent of registering support for a particular candidate (or political party).

Setting aside these general questions about events, timing and registration, there may also be partisan differences in the posited relationships. In states that have partisan registration, trends in registration can be disaggregated by party. Studying the party balance of new registrants and those who are re-registering provides a glimpse into local political competition for new recruits. Both scholars and practitioners can easily determine who is ahead in the race to register new voters and migrants.

Data

Lists of registered voters were drawn from Bernalillo County in New Mexico, Clark County in Nevada, Jefferson County in Kentucky, Mecklenburg County in North Carolina, Polk, Dallas and Story Counties in Iowa and Broward, Palm Beach, Orange, Brevard and Hillsborough Counties in Florida. The Florida, Iowa and New Mexico counties were selected because they were key locations in battleground states in 2000. The Kentucky, Nevada and North Carolina counties were added to increase variation in the sample, most notably with respect to competitiveness and campaign outreach, but also with respect to region and demography.³

Within these states we selected relatively large counties to maximize individual-level variation and because the larger counties tend to have more reliable voter list files. The availability of party enrollment information within the voter list files was also a factor in case selection, as many states – including Colorado, Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Washington and Ohio – do not record party affiliation when registering voters. Our goal in selecting states and counties was thus to take advantage of the availability of voter lists while simultaneously maximizing variance across all of our contextual and explanatory factors. Because our study does not rely on a representative sample of counties, we are cautious about generalizing our results to all potential settings. There is little a priori reason, however, to assume that our results are biased or even unrepresentative of similar sized jurisdictions elsewhere.

Voter lists from these locations are well suited to studying the timing of voter registration in election years because they identify the registration

dates of new voters and re-registrants. While some local elections boards bundle their new and updated registration cards by month, assigning a date at the beginning of each month to all new registrants from the previous 30 days, we chose to study locations where the practice was to assign voters a registration date within one or two days of when the completed registration card was actually received. In this way, we were able to accurately trace trends in registration activity on a week-to-week basis throughout the final year of the election cycle.⁴

Perhaps most importantly, voter lists also have the advantage of presenting actual validated vote histories for registrants, rather than the error-prone self-reports gleaned from surveys. From this information, it is relatively straightforward to determine whether those registering later in an election year participated at higher levels than those registering earlier. Voter lists also contain valuable information about the age, gender, past vote history and (in states with partisan registration) party affiliation of registrants. Taken together, these allow us to build a profile of late registrants for each of our counties.

Of course, one important factor in any study of registration and voting is the set of laws and deadlines governing the formal registration of voters in a given county. This is a particularly intriguing factor here, given our multi-county, cross-state design. There is, however, more consistency than one might have expected in registration practices across the sample. Appendix 1 presents the details, but the bottom line is that each of the states in this study has: (1) consistent requirements for US citizenship, state residency and age, (2) a registration deadline between 25 and 30 days prior to the election, and (3) afforded prospective registrants the opportunity to register in person or online at a variety of federal, state, county and other government venues. All states allow 'assistance' in the completion of voter registration applications, although some states (Iowa, in particular) have banned the practice of paying people for the number of partisan registrants they enlist. A further look at the registration laws and practices of the counties in our sample demonstrates that they each offered additional (and similar) venues for voter registration. In short, there is little variation in either the legal or functional practices of the sample counties with respect to voter registration.

A Profile of Late Registrants

Knowing something about new registrants is a first step toward understanding who registers in the 52 weeks prior to a general election closing date. A skeptic might expect that late registrants are randomly dispersed throughout the electorate and number too few to make a substantive difference in electoral contests. A cursory glance at the data tells us that such a position is untenable. The main characteristics that distinguish late registrants as a group from more established voters are their youth and high levels of geographic mobility (see Timpone, 1998). Table 1 shows that a plurality of

Table 1. Characteristics of late registrants in 10 battleground locations, 2000

	<i>Bernalillo, New Mexico</i>				<i>Brevard, Florida</i>		
	<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>		<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>
Age 18–19	8.1	7.3	8.9	Age 18–19	6.8	5.8	6.9
Age 18–29	33.3	37.7	48.9	Age 18–29	27.1	24.6	34.2
Age 30–39	21.4	18.7	19.9	Age 30–39	19.5	16.2	18.7
Age 40–49	17.7	17.8	13.7	Age 40–49	16.9	18.0	17.2
Age 50–59	12.7	12.7	10.6	Age 50–59	15.0	15.1	13.5
Age 60–64	4.5	4.2	2.1	Age 60–64	7.1	7.3	5.1
Age 65 up	10.3	8.9	4.8	Age 65 up	13.4	17.9	10.3
Men	50.5	41.9	47.9	Men	51.4	43.9	51.1
Women	49.5	58.1	52.1	Women	48.6	56.1	48.8
Voted in general	86.0	78.7	66.8	Voted in general	79.0	72.4	64.1
<i>Total N</i>	18,169			<i>Total N</i>	21,161		

	<i>Clark, Nevada</i>				<i>Broward, Florida</i>		
	<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>		<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>
Age 18–19	6.0	5.0	7.1	Age 18–19	5.6	6.2	5.8
Age 18–29	28.4	25.5	36.6	Age 18–29	23.2	24.7	28.1
Age 30–39	20.9	20.4	21.7	Age 30–39	25.8	22.2	24.6
Age 40–49	16.5	18.8	16.0	Age 40–49	18.9	19.9	19.9
Age 50–59	15.9	15.9	13.5	Age 50–59	13.6	13.6	13.0
Age 60–64	6.7	6.7	4.9	Age 60–64	5.1	5.0	4.3
Age 65 up	11.6	12.6	7.3	Age 65 up	12.1	13.0	8.6
Men	51.5	43.9	54.0	Men	51.4	43.0	48.5
Women	47.7	54.8	44.8	Women	48.5	56.8	51.1
Voted in general	76.0	69.5	60.9	Voted in general	75.6	76.5	67.3
<i>Total N</i>	60,351			<i>Total N</i>	68,688		

	<i>Polk, Dallas, Story, Iowa</i>				<i>Hillsborough, Florida</i>		
	<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>		<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>
Age 18–19	13.5	15.1	14.6	Age 18–19	6.7	6.2	9.6
Age 18–29	50.5	48.4	54.3	Age 18–29	31.9	33.0	43.3
Age 30–39	21.3	17.3	20.5	Age 30–39	25.3	21.7	21.3
Age 40–49	12.6	14.2	13.1	Age 40–49	17.4	18.4	15.2
Age 50–59	7.4	9.1	6.6	Age 50–59	11.9	11.8	9.8
Age 60–64	1.8	2.6	1.6	Age 60–64	3.8	4.1	2.8
Age 65 up	5.7	7.6	3.2	Age 65 up	8.6	9.8	5.3
Men	55.3	42.0	49.8	Men	51.8	43.7	49.2
Women	44.7	58.0	50.2	Women	48.1	56.1	50.5
Voted in general	84.7	78.5	69.8	Voted in general	77.7	70.7	60.8
<i>Total N</i>	23,259			<i>Total N</i>	47,955		

Table 1. *Continued*

	<i>Jefferson, Kentucky</i>				<i>Palm Beach, Florida</i>		
	<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>		<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>
Age 18–19	13.1	13.7	13.2	Age 18–19	4.9	4.9	6.2
Age 18–29	51.8	53.3	59.4	Age 18–29	21.4	20.5	27.4
Age 30–39	19.9	16.0	14.4	Age 30–39	20.8	17.0	19.3
Age 40–49	13.2	14.0	13.1	Age 40–49	17.3	17.1	16.9
Age 50–59	7.7	8.2	7.0	Age 50–59	15.7	15.5	14.5
Age 60–64	2.1	2.3	1.6	Age 60–64	7.4	7.3	6.4
Age 65 up	5.2	6.1	4.4	Age 65 up	16.9	22.0	14.8
Men	52.2	45.1	50.9	Men	51.2	41.9	47.7
Women	47.8	54.9	49.1	Women	48.7	57.8	51.9
Voted in general	78.7	70.4	65.6	Voted in general	79.3	79.3	72.3
<i>Total N</i>	21,090			<i>Total N</i>	79,978		

	<i>Mecklenburg, No Carolina</i>				<i>Orange, Florida</i>		
	<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>		<i>Rep</i>	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Ind/Unaf</i>
Age 18–19	6.1	7.1	7.4	Age 18–19	6.3	4.8	6.5
Age 18–29	38.8	42.9	46.0	Age 18–29	30.9	29.2	35.9
Age 30–39	28.1	24.7	25.1	Age 30–39	24.2	22.7	24.8
Age 40–49	16.2	16.2	15.1	Age 40–49	19.1	20.6	17.6
Age 50–59	9.5	8.7	8.8	Age 50–59	13.2	13.0	11.6
Age 60–64	2.3	2.2	1.8	Age 60–64	3.8	4.6	3.2
Age 65 up	5.0	5.2	3.1	Age 65 up	8.1	9.3	6.0
Men	49.8	39.6	49.3	Men	49.1	41.8	48.0
Women	50.2	60.2	50.5	Women	50.7	57.6	51.7
Voted in general	81.3	74.5	68.8	Voted in general	83.8	77.8	71.9
<i>Total N</i>	34,066			<i>Total N</i>	39,669		

Percents run down columns, relevant comparisons run across rows.

late registrants – whether Republican, Democratic or independent – is situated in the 18–29 age bracket. A majority is under age 40. The demographic and political characteristics of the baseline populations of registered voters show no such skew.⁵ Other tendencies are also fairly predictable. Even taking into account variation in the underlying county populations, we still find that a significant proportion of late-registering non-voters are independents, particularly within the younger age cohorts. Also, the elderly are an especially high proportion of late registrants in Florida, especially South Florida (again, even considering their relatively significant presence in these counties). It is worth pointing out that some within-party tendencies are quite significant. For example, more of the late-registering Republicans

are men. Perhaps more consequentially, Republican late registrants consistently vote at higher rates than either Democrats or the independent/unaffiliated group (Broward County, Florida, is the sole exception).

Registration patterns by age merit additional comment. Although over-65 registrants show no decisive tendency to favor one party over the other in the aggregate, this masks a few strong county-by-county tendencies. In Brevard, Florida, for example, the late-registering elderly strongly favored the Democrats, while in Bernalillo, New Mexico they went for the Republicans. In contrast, young, first-time voters tended to be less partisan. Most notably, Table 1 suggests that youthful voters are an especially high proportion of late registrants in Iowa and Kentucky, and that this group is about as likely to register as independent or unaffiliated as they are to register with one of the two major parties.

Of course, we cannot distinguish between late registrants who are completely new to the voter rolls and those who have simply adjusted their registration status after moving. It is a safe inference, though, that a solid majority of those over age 40 are re-registrants rather than first-timers, and that a majority of those in the 18–29 age bracket are first-timers (Plutzer, 2002).

A related query is whether these late registrants, summed together, amount to a significant proportion of the local electorate. They do. In Bernalillo, New Mexico, for instance, late registrants amounted to 18,169 voters, 78 percent of whom voted in the general election. In the Des Moines area, late registrants numbered just over 23,000, with 75 percent voting in the general election. In Broward, Florida, there were 69,000 new registrants, with 75 percent voting in the general election. Across our counties, those registering in the last 52 weeks prior to the election comprise anywhere from 5 to 12 percent of the entire voter population, making them a significant force whose absence would dramatically alter the electorate, particularly in the locations of highest mobility.

Trends in Late Registration

As for the events that stimulate late registration, we get some glimpses of the trends and relationships in Figures 1 through 4, which present over-time data for each of four example locations. Because some of our counties have more voters than others, the vertical (*y*) axis takes on a different scale depending on electoral population. The horizontal (*x*) axis runs from 0 to 52, with 0 indicating precisely one year prior to the general election closing date and 52 indicating the week of this date.

Without doing any further analysis, it is clear from Figures 1 through 4 that the closing date for the fall election is associated with a sharp rise in voter registration for both political parties. To be sure, the surge in registration associated with the closing date is more evident in some locations

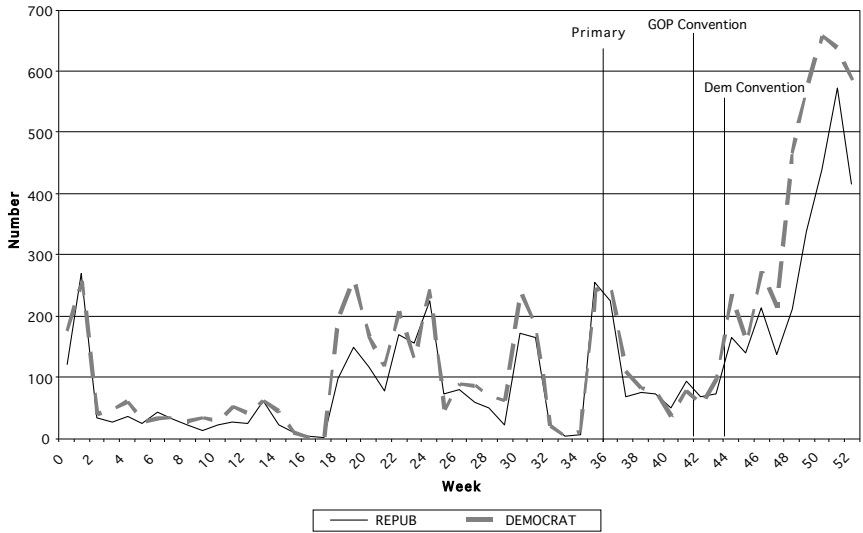


Figure 1. Trends in new party registration in Bernalillo County, New Mexico, election year 2000

than in others, but is present to some extent at all locations. It is also clear from these graphs that the weeks between the conventions and the fall closing date (weeks 44 through 52) are the most active time for new and updated registration activity. Across most of the urban locations we are examining it is evident by inspection that Democrats won the registration

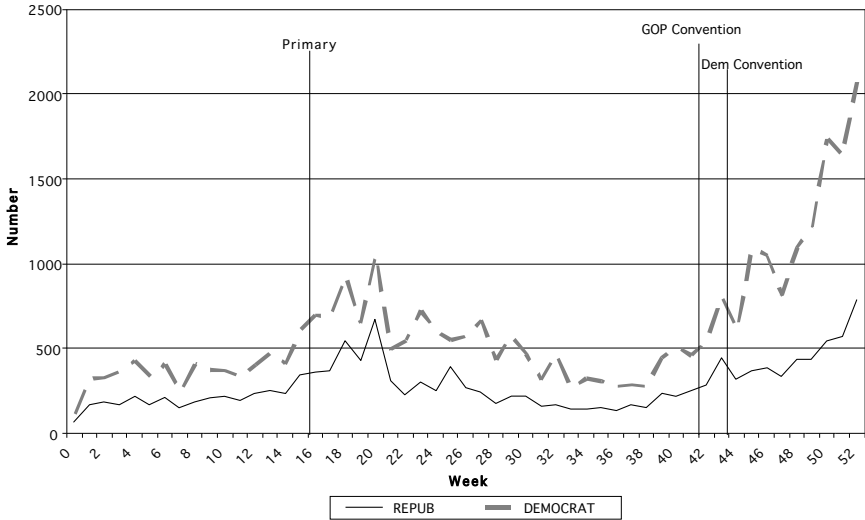


Figure 2. Trends in new party registration in Broward County, Florida, election year 2000

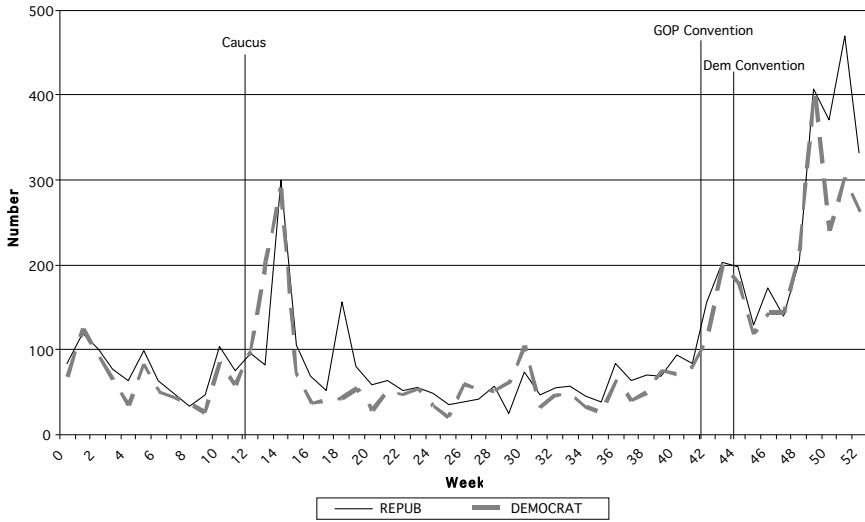


Figure 3. Trends in new party registration in Polk, Dallas and Story Counties, Iowa, election year 2000

battle. The Democratic trend typically exceeded the Republican trend, and sometimes by quite a large measure (as in Clark, Nevada and Broward, Florida). The Iowa locations (Figure 3) are the one notable exception, as the Republicans finished stronger than the Democrats in the closing weeks of the 2000 contest.

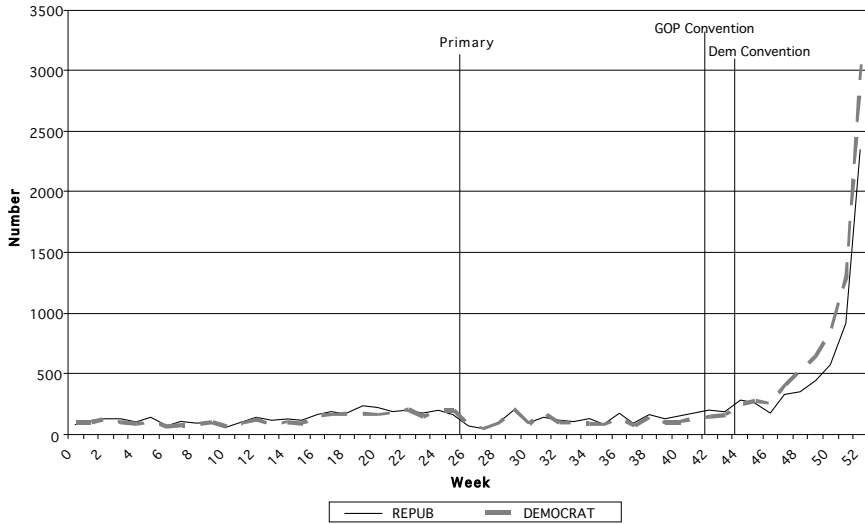


Figure 4. Trends in new party registration in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, election year 2000

Modeling Late Registration

Trends, of course, often mask the week-to-week effects and relationships we are interested in here. In particular, we want to know the extent to which event-related stimuli contribute to increases in registration activity. To explore this, we model the over-time data with cross-sectional time-series regression for count data. The statistical model we employ is an application and generalization of the Poisson distribution that accounts for the panel nature of the data by conditioning on the total sum of outcomes over the observed time period (Hausman et al., 1984). We implement the negative binomial model which allows for over-dispersion in our data. Over-dispersion is an indication that the variance of the dependent variable is greater than the mean, and this is certainly the case for the registration trends we are explaining.

In Table 2, we report the results from fixed effects negative binomial models. Along with the coefficients and standard errors, we report the incident rate ratios to simplify the interpretation of the effects. Helpfully, the incident rate ratios can be interpreted as the percentage change in the dependent variable (new registrants per week) given a one-unit change in an independent variable, with the remaining variables held constant. A ratio of 1 signifies no change. A ratio less than 1 indicates a negative relationship, and a ratio greater than 1 indicates a positive relationship.

Our independent variables capture the national political party convention dates, as well as the date of the state primary, and are coded '1' for the week before the event, of the event and after the event, and '0' for all other weeks. This coding suggests that each event's stimulus effect builds up the week before in anticipation of it, and then spills over into the week after. Similarly, the three weeks before registration ends are coded '1' for our closing date variable, as it is likely that many who intend to register wait until the last minute, and equally likely that parties and campaigns start their final push for registration about 20 days before the closing date itself. This allows them to take advantage of greater media coverage and the rising political interest that facilitates the conversion of new registrants into voters.

We also include control variables for the competitiveness of the county and state, measured using a common formula anchored in the two-party vote for the previous three presidential elections (1988–96).⁶ We hypothesize that citizens may be especially induced to register at locations where electorates are evenly divided and elections are hard-fought rather than lopsided. Finally, we control for the size of the *unregistered* voter population by subtracting the total number of registered voters from the total population of voting age at each location. This variable is primarily included to account for the fact that the counties in the dataset are unequal in the size of their populations yet to be registered and that larger counties can be expected to produce more new registrants as a function of (1) their sheer

Table 2. Cross-sectional panel estimates of weekly new voter registration count during the 2000 election at 10 locations

	All registrants	IRR	Republican	IRR	Democratic	IRR	Indep/Unaf	IRR
Fall closing date	.813* (.057)	2.25	.741* (.060)	2.10	.860* (.062)	2.36	.789* (.054)	2.20
Republican convention	.048 (.067)	1.05	.166* (.066)	1.18	.013 (.074)	1.01	-.024 (.065)	.98
Democratic convention	.252* (.064)	1.29	.268* (.065)	1.31	.288* (.069)	1.33	.183* (.062)	1.20
Primary week	.317* (.071)	1.37	.389* (.071)	1.47	.313* (.076)	1.37	.246* (.069)	1.28
Primary closing date	.105 (.078)	1.11	.139 (.078)	1.15	.116 (.084)	1.12	.064 (.077)	1.07
State electoral competitiveness	-.463* (.054)	.62	-.509* (.057)	.60	-.217* (.074)	.80	-.339* (.070)	.71
County electoral competitiveness	.066* (.028)	1.07	.088* (.027)	1.09	.085* (.024)	1.09	.080* (.025)	1.08
Unregistered voting age population (in thousands)	-.005* (.001)	.99	-.006* (.001)	.99	.005* (.003)	1.01	.002 (.002)	1.00
Time (in weeks)	.017* (.001)	1.02	.015* (.001)	1.01	.017* (.002)	1.02	.019* (.001)	1.02
Constant	39.382* (4.088)		41.977* (4.241)		11.912* (8.062)		24.699* (7.769)	
Total N	530		530		530		530	
Number of groups	10		10		10		10	
Time periods	52		52		52		52	
Wald χ^2	1,223.61*		968.5*		1,149.9*		1,394.9*	
Log-likelihood	-3,546.80		-2,967.5		-3,094.5		-2,820.3	

Negative binomial regression for panel data, fixed effects estimation.

Regression coefficients in parentheses (standard errors). Significance level: * $p \leq 0.05$.

IRR = Incident rate ratio; dummy variables for individual locations were included in the models, but are not reported here.

size and (2) the fact that they are more likely to be targeted as fertile ground for enrollment activity.⁷

Cross-Sectional Time-Series Estimates

Table 2 demonstrates an unmistakable and across-the-board surge in registration associated with the fall closing date.⁸ Across the counties, an average of 125 percent more registrants signed up in the three weeks prior to the closing date than in all previous weeks. There were, however, some notable partisan differences in the magnitude of this surge. More specifically, the Democrats won the late registration race over the Republicans by increasing their count of new registrants by 136 percent, compared with a 110 percent gain for the GOP and a 120 percent gain for independent/unaffiliated voters. In only a few counties did the Republicans outperform the Democrats.

In some locations, as was suggested by Figure 4, there are no significant increases in registration until the approach of the closing date. In other locations, the GOP and Democratic nominating conventions proved to be good times for registration activity. Table 2 shows that, all other things held constant, the Republicans increased their new registrant tally by 18 percent during the GOP convention period and by 31 percent during the Democratic convention. The Democrats, however, were only able to take advantage of their own convention, and did not add appreciably to their electorate during the GOP convention. On the other hand, we find that the 2000 Democratic convention was responsible for boosting Democratic enrollment activity by 33 percent and independent enrollment by 20 percent, in addition to the aforementioned GOP gains. Perhaps the later date of the Democratic convention meant that the stimulus of the fall campaign was much nearer for all would-be voters, making it a more productive time for registration for partisans of all stripes than the earlier Republican convention had been.

The presidential primary and the accompanying primary closing date heightened registration for the GOP, Democrats and independents. Specifically, new Republican registration jumped by 47 percent in the three-week period before, during and after the presidential primary.⁹ Incidents of new Democratic registration moved upward by 37 percent during primary season, and independents gained 28 percent over other weeks. While the attention generated by the primary produced significant registration activity, few voters rushed to the polls to register in the weeks before the spring closing date simply to have a voice in the semi-final. Compared to the registration activity in the second half of the year, however, most primary elections could hardly be considered major stimuli.

Our indicators for the competitiveness of presidential elections at the state and county level indicate that county electoral conditions drive registration, while state electoral competition does not. Indeed, state competition appears to drive down registration across the board once county partisan competition

is taken into account. This is of some consequence given that the Electoral College vote count is based on state, not county, outcomes. In spite of this, it would appear that registration trends are highly sensitive to local political conditions, not those prevailing at the state level. In addition, Democrats outperform Republicans at registration in the very largest of these counties. More specifically, we estimate that incidents of new Democratic registration were 65 percent higher for every standard deviation increase in the number of unregistered voters. Republicans actually experienced a lower incidence of new registration associated with increases in the size of the unregistered voter population, an indication that Republican registration gains were more robust in the medium-sized and smaller cities, not the very largest ones.

It is also worth noting that our control variable for time, simply the count of the number of weeks, suggests generally greater gains for the Democrats than for the Republicans. Moreover, a close look at the trends revealed that the Democratic weekly performance is more stable and consistently positive, whereas the Republican performance is punctuated by jagged peaks and troughs.

In summary, these data show that the fall closing date stimulates an impressive upsurge of activity at voter registration offices across the nation. We expected consistent peaks of activity at other times of the year, and for each group of party registrants, but these high-points are much less regular than we had anticipated. In some locations, and for Republicans, both nominating conventions mattered, but in other locations they did not. Overall, we found that the primary did generate new registrants, but almost nowhere do we see a surge in registration coincident with the primary closing date. The unmistakable suggestion is that whether registrants are added to the voter rolls prior to September is heavily dependent upon how major election-year stimuli play out locally, so as to bring new voters into the electorate, and residentially mobile voters back onto the rolls at their new locations.

Late Registration and Voting

The tabulations presented in Table 1 indicated that partisan registrants vote in higher proportions in the fall election than unaffiliated registrants. But do last-minute registrants, in general, vote in higher proportions than those who enrolled earlier in the year? To examine this question, we pooled the counties and used probit regression to evaluate the effect of registration timing on participation in the fall election, controlling for the party, age and gender of registrants, as well as the competitiveness of their state and county in the three previous presidential elections.

Because the individual cases are clustered by county, we have reason to believe that the errors are not distributed independently of each other and

that the standard errors of the coefficients will be incorrectly estimated unless this grouping is explicitly taken into account. We do this by using the Huber–White estimate of variance, which is robust to the fact that the cases are not independently distributed. As implemented here, we assume that the observations are independent across the specific locations (counties) we study, but not within them. The results of this estimation are reported in Table 3. We have calculated the change in probability of voting by moving each independent variable from its lowest to highest value in the second column of each set of results.

Table 3. Probit estimates of turnout by late registrants in the 2000 presidential election at 10 locations

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Coefficient (standard error)</i>	<i>Dif Prob*</i>
Week of registration	.009** (.0005)	16.3
Age 18–29	-.450** (.112)	-14.7
Age 30–39	-.111 (.117)	-3.5
Age 40–49	-.027 (.107)	-.8
Age 50–59	.089 (.089)	2.7
Age 60–64†	.210** (.054)	6.1
Female	.114** (.010)	3.5
Republican	.394** (.038)	11.5
Democrat	.205** (.022)	6.3
Competitiveness of county	.028** (.001)	13.9
Competitiveness of state	-.031** (.001)	-9.7
Constant	.636	
N	389,176	
Pseudo- <i>R</i> ²	.048	

Probit regression estimation with robust standard errors adjusted for spatial clustering within counties. Dummy variables for individual locations were included in the model, but are not reported here.

* Dif Prob refers to the difference in the probability of voting derived from moving each *x* variable from its lowest to highest value with all other variables set to their sample means. This probability has been converted into a percentage to facilitate interpretation.

† Age 65 and older is the excluded baseline category.

** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.01$.

To coin a phrase, what a difference a year makes! The change in the probability of voting between those registering a year out from the closing date and those registering the week of the closing date is 16 percent. This is a strong indication that registering during the heat of an election has a powerful impact on participation in the general election. These results are also consistent with Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), who contend that same-day registration would significantly increase turnout, and with the recent research on California reported by Bruce Cain and Ken McCue (1985), who find that later registrants voted in much higher percentages than earlier ones.

We also see predictable age cohort effects, with the very youngest voters (among the universe of late registrants) being 15 percent less likely to vote than older voters.¹⁰ There is also a significant and consistent gender gap, with women being slightly more likely to turn out than men overall.

As for party affiliation's effects on turnout, we see a GOP edge, consistent with the tabulations in Table 1 and previous research. Democrats and Republicans, to be sure, are always more likely to vote than independent and unaffiliated voters. But the GOP betters both of the other groups by a sizeable margin. This decisive Republican edge in the participation of late registrants should come as news to GOP strategists, who have a history of downplaying the ground game in favor of slick, persuasion-oriented media appeals. These results show that Republicans have significant incentives to find new registrants, even if in the process they wind up enrolling a few Democrats. Furthermore, while Figures 1–4 indicated that in most places the Democrats 'won' the registration race in 2000, they had to register many more people than the Republicans because the GOP's new registrants appear to vote at almost twice the rate of new Democratic registrants.

Finally, the control variables for past political competitiveness suggest that the turnout of late registrants was high in counties that had a history of being hard-fought, but significantly lower in states that were highly competitive. A couple of explanations could account for this seemingly strange result. First, it is likely that voters are more attuned to the local information environment than they are to what is happening statewide, or elsewhere. But these findings may also be indicative of the fact that party mobilization efforts retain an important component of local control and administration and that a national campaign's local impact is more sensitive to the relative scale and efficiency of these local efforts than it is to prevailing statewide political conditions. Campaigns may target entire states, but the lesson here is that resources directed toward winning states inevitably have a variable pay-off within them.

Conclusions

Our analysis of a number of large and mid-sized locations suggests that a significant proportion of the voter population registers within a year of the

official deadline before a presidential election. Moreover, this late registration was neither randomly nor uniformly dispersed throughout the election year; registration peaked in conjunction with a number of political events, including primaries, conventions, debates and even Independence Day in a few locales. In short, there is clear evidence from our selection of counties that voter registration coincided with the major political stimuli of a presidential election contest.

What is less clear is the extent to which these political events, in and of themselves, stimulated voter registration, or whether these events were accompanied by extensive party outreach efforts. Unfortunately, we do not have the data to test this important question. There is some evidence, however, that both the events (or dates and deadlines) and outreach are necessary. Shaw and Roberts (2000), for example, argue that event effects are greatly enhanced by corresponding news media coverage, hinting that it is paid advertising and free media coverage of campaign events that give an important boost to public knowledge of those activities. Campaigns often ratchet up their outreach efforts in response to predictable events and dates, creating a chicken-and-egg problem for researchers evaluating the causes of registration surges.

Perhaps even more interestingly, registration timing appears to be associated with turnout. Those who registered relatively late ended up voting at higher rates. In this sense, we have evidence that events associated with the waning months of the campaign encourage people not only to register but also to show up at the polls in November. Furthermore, the effects we observe may have long-term consequences for both democratic accountability and party competition given research by Plutzer (2002), Green and Schachar (2000) and Gerber et al. (2003) indicating that voting is habit-forming.

The normative lesson, then, is that elections may do a better job at making politics relevant and important to people than many are inclined to think. If the dynamic laid out here is accurate, election-related stimuli are critical to informing and motivating the 'peripheral' electorate. The practical lesson is that parties and candidates would do well to take advantage of predictably interesting events on the political calendar when planning outreach. And although practices such as early and absentee voting make it risky, they should also consider the efficacy of late registration drives.

Appendix 1: Registration Requirements and Provisions by State

All information comes from the Elections Divisions of the appropriate Secretaries of State.

Florida

To register, one must be a citizen of the United States, a resident of Florida, 18 years of age (one may pre-register if you are 17), not now be adjudicated mentally incapacitated with respect to voting in Florida or any other state, not have been convicted of a felony without your civil rights having been restored pursuant to law, not claim the right to vote in any other state. One must also submit one's valid Florida driver's license or Florida identification card number (if you do not do this, you must provide the last four digits of your Social Security number). First-time registrants are also required to submit a copy of one of the following forms of photographic identification: Florida driver's license, Florida identification card (issued by the Department of Highway Safety & Motor Vehicles), United States Passport, Military ID, Student ID, Employer-issued ID card, Neighborhood Association ID, Retirement Center ID, Debit/Credit cards (with photograph), Buyer's Club ID (such as Costco, Sam's Club or Price Club), Entertainment ID (such as theme park annual pass or bingo), Public Assistance ID, or a copy of a current and valid utility bill, bank statement, government paycheck, or other government document containing your name and current residence address.

All applicants must swear or affirm an oath and sign the voter registration application form.

Applications are available at county supervisor of elections offices, local financial institutions, public libraries, city offices, chambers of commerce, Florida Health and Rehabilitation Services offices, drivers' license bureaux, county property tax appraiser offices and county tag and titles offices.

The deadline to register to vote is the 29th day before each election. 'New registrations' will be dated based on the date of the postmark or when they are hand-delivered to the county supervisor of elections office.

Iowa

To register, one must be a citizen of the United States, a resident of Iowa, at least 17.5 years of age, not be convicted of a felony (unless your rights have been restored), not be judged 'incompetent' by a court, and give up your right to vote in any other place.

You can register at the Office of the County Auditor, drivers' license stations, public assistance agencies, state offices serving people with disabilities, some city clerks and school board secretaries.

You can request registration forms from the Office of the County Auditor, the Iowa Secretary of State, QwestDex telephone books, Yellow Book USA telephone books, Iowa Income Tax booklets (even-numbered years).

The deadline to register for most elections is 11 days before the date of the election. For statewide primary and general elections, the deadline is 10 days before the election.

Groups may pay people to help others to register to vote. Payment can only be for a worker's time. It is a crime to pay someone for the number of registration forms or the number of registrations by political party.

Kentucky

To register, one must be 18 years of age or older at the date of the election, a US citizen, and a resident of Kentucky. Any person declared by a court to be mentally incompetent is not eligible, nor are felons who have not had their civil rights restored.

You can register to vote in person or obtain a mail-in application from county election offices, division of motor vehicles, aid to families with dependent children (AFDC) offices, medicaid offices, food stamp offices, women, infants and children (WIC) benefits offices, agencies that provide services to people with disabilities, armed forces recruitment offices, and high schools.

The deadline to register is 28 days before the election.

Nevada

To register, one must be 18 years of age or older at the date of the election, a US citizen, and a resident of Nevada for 30 days preceding any election. Any person declared by a court to be mentally incompetent is not eligible, nor are felons who have not had their civil rights restored.

You can register to vote in person or obtain a mail-in application from county election offices (see county election office lists), division of motor vehicle offices, aid to families with dependent children (AFDC) offices, medicaid offices, food stamps offices, women, infants and children (WIC) benefits offices, and agencies that provide services to people with disabilities.

The deadline to register is 30 days before the election.

New Mexico

To register, one must be a citizen of the United States, a resident of New Mexico, 18 years of age at the time of the next election, not be convicted of a felony (unless your rights have been restored), not be judged 'incompetent' by a court, and give up your right to vote in any other place.

You can receive registration forms or register in person at the State Bureau of Elections, county election office, division of motor vehicles offices, aid to families with dependent children (AFDC) offices, medicaid offices, food stamps offices, women, infants and children (WIC) benefits offices, agencies that provide services to people with disabilities and public libraries, colleges and universities.

You may receive assistance in filling out your voter registration form.

The deadline to register to vote is 28 days before the next election.

North Carolina

To register, one must be 18 years of age or older at the date of the election, a US citizen and a resident of North Carolina. Any person declared by a court to be mentally incompetent is not eligible, nor are felons who have not had their civil rights restored.

You can register to vote in person or obtain a mail-in application from county election offices, division of motor vehicles offices, aid to families with dependent

children (AFDC) offices, medicaid offices, food stamps offices, women, infants and children (WIC) benefits offices, agencies that provide services to people with disabilities, public libraries and public high schools.

The deadline to register is 25 days before the election.

Notes

- 1 Official records indicate 24 percent of the voting age population (VAP) was unregistered in 2000. Furthermore, 32.5 percent of registered voters did not cast a ballot in the presidential election of that year.
- 2 Timpone (1998) found that the most influential force in bringing new registrants to the polls was the perceived differences between the candidates, a difference that does not become clear until late in the campaign: 'While this force also exerts an influence on the decision to register, it is central to the decision to vote' (p. 153).
- 3 Although Kentucky, Nevada and North Carolina were reasonably competitive in 2000, none received the attention lavished on true battleground states, such as Florida. It is also the case that voter list data were much less rich in one-sided states, such as Massachusetts and Utah. We wish to point out that even in the less competitive states both parties had incentives to try to add new names to the registration rolls, or update the registration information of voters who had moved. Our study should therefore reflect the extent to which voters responded to the combined stimulus of campaign events and party-building efforts in the year prior to the registration closing date for the 2000 general election.
- 4 It is possible, of course, that net estimates of registration are inflated by 'dead wood' registrants, who move away but are not purged from our voter lists. We hasten to point out, though, that these registrants are purged as soon as they re-register in their new counties. Moreover, these occurrences will have little impact on estimates of event effects on voter roll totals.
- 5 For presentation purposes, we do not include the baseline population figures for our counties in Table 1. These data are available from the authors upon request.
- 6 The formula for calculating competitiveness is $100 - (\text{abs}[50 - \text{Percent Democratic}])$ averaged across the 1988, 1992 and 1996 elections.
- 7 Despite including a control variable for county size, using a count variable complicates matters slightly because the effects of the other explanatory variables are assumed to be similar across counties despite population differences. One tack would be to allow county population to interact with all independent variables and re-estimate the models. The resultant models, however, are plagued by multicollinearity and interpretability issues. A second tack would be to specify an alternative dependent variable in which new registrants are normed against the available pool of eligible, unregistered voters (i.e. $[1000 * \text{new registrants}] / [\text{voting age population} - \text{existing registrants}]$). We re-estimated the models in this way and confirmed the relationships identified in the count model (even the unexpected, negative effect of state competitiveness on registration). We prefer the count models, however, because (properly construed) they offer clear and tangible evidence of the raw magnitude of event effects on registration increases across time.
- 8 We are sensitive to the possibility that the relationship between closing dates and registration may be non-linear. That is, registration dates that are closer to election

day may be especially highly correlated with surges in registration because interest peaks closer to election day. The problem is that our data are weekly, and our states tend to have their closing dates bunched in the category representing 4–5 weeks before the election. This may be why non-linear model specifications did not prove fruitful.

- 9 Of the states under study, four (Kentucky, Nevada, New Mexico and North Carolina) held their primary contests after the presidential nominations were decided in 2000. One other (Florida) held its primary a week after George W. Bush and Al Gore had effectively clinched. Perhaps more competitive primaries would have a greater effect on registration. On a related note, none of the states under scrutiny had a compelling or controversial initiative on the 2000 primary election ballot that might have driven up registration and turnout.
- 10 Although we emphasize life-cycle effects in our understanding of the influence of age on political participation, Miller (1992) points out that age effects can be generational, as well.

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