

The Resurgent American Voter, 1988-2008

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Abstract

Sparked both by normative concerns and a classic empirical puzzle (Brody 1978), scholars developed and tested a variety of explanations for the turnout decline in the US between 1960 and 1988. Since turnout in presidential elections bottomed out at 51.7% in 1996, it has increased in three consecutive presidential elections, reaching an estimated 61.4% in 2008. In this paper, I use logit analysis of pooled cross-sectional data from the American National Election Studies to explore various explanations for the increase in turnout in the US from 1988 to 2008. Changes in basic demographics (most notably the increase in the population with at least some university education) and the increase in contacting over this period account for much of increase in turnout. Increased perceptions of partisan differences have also had a positive effect on turnout, but changes in electoral laws have not had a significant effect. These findings suggest that mobilization patterns best account for both the earlier decline and the more recent rise in turnout.

The titles on the bookshelf of a typical scholar of American political participation can be downright depressing: *The Disappearing American Voter*, *The Demobilization of American Voters*, *The Vanishing Voter*, *The Empty Polling Booth*, *Nonvoters*, and *Why Americans Don't Vote* all share shelf space with two different works whose common title asks *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Avey 1989; Doppelt and Shearer 1999; Hadley, Steeper, and Swayze 1978; Ladd 1982; Patterson 2002; Piven and Cloward 1988; Teixeira 1992; Wattenberg 2002) The precipitous decline in voter participation from the 1960s through the 1990s shown in Figure 1 sparked concern among public officials, media commentators, and public intellectuals, and was especially puzzling given that the combination of more open access to education and liberalized registration laws should have made it easier for people to acquire the information they needed to make a decision and act on it in the voting booth. (Brody 1978) Two decades of research eventually showed that the sources of the decline in turnout were multifaceted, stemming in various degrees from declines in partisanship (Cassel and Hill 1981; Shaffer 1981), political efficacy and newspaper reading (Teixeira 1992), mobilization (Gerber and Green 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), and changes in the age distribution in the electorate (Boyd 1981) with lower rates of participation in younger cohorts (Lyons and Alexander 2000; Miller 1992), though none of these explanations fully solved Brody's original puzzle. A recalibration that excluded growing numbers of ineligible noncitizens and disenfranchised felons from turnout calculations significantly reduced the amount of the decline that required explanation (McDonald and Popkin 2001), but did not eliminate it altogether. Turnout surges in the presidential elections of 1984 and 1992 provided temporary hope that the hemorrhaging had stopped, but they were followed by even more dramatic ebbs in participation in 1988 and 1996. Voters had not entirely

vanished, but commentators who regarded voter turnout as a thermometer measuring the health of American democracy were clearly worried.

Figure 1 about here

In a rather stunning turnaround, the participation of the eligible voter population has sharply increased over the last three U.S. presidential elections. Turnout went up 2.5% in the election of 2000, 5.9% in 2004, and another 1.6% in 2008 to reach 61.7% of the voter eligible population, the highest rate in forty years.¹ The increase between 2000 and 2004 was larger than any single decline between consecutive presidential elections since 1952, except for the 8.0% fall after the anomalous first “Perot” election of 1992. In just eight years, the turnout rate in presidential elections has “recovered” over four-fifths of the decline from the post-World War II high of 63.8% in 1960 to the nadir of 51.7% in President Clinton’s reelection of 1996. The American voter is resurgent, at least for now, but the question is “why?”

Understanding the sources of the recent increase in turnout is not only significant in its own right and in assessing whether the reversal of fortune can be sustained, but it will also offer a check on the robustness of explanations of the earlier turnout decline. If shifts in citizens’ attitudes (such as partisanship) really caused the fall of turnout, we should see a turnaround in those attitudes concomitant with the latest surge in voter participation. Or if the decline in turnout was mostly attributable to the decline in voter mobilization, we should see evidence of a resumption of contacting that accounts for the latest increase in voter participation. In short, a robust explanation of trends in voter participation should account for both the downturn and the rebound in turnout.

In the remainder of this paper, I outline an approach in determining the sources of the recent increase in voter participation, and discuss how applications of that approach help to provide insights into the role that changes in social composition the potential electorate, attitudes about parties, contact with parties and campaigns, and electoral laws have played in the resurgence of turnout in the United States. I conclude with observations about the compatibility between my explanation of the turnout surge with explanations of the previous turnout decline, and offer suggestions for future research.

Data

My analysis begins by recognizing two necessary conditions that must be met before we can conclude that some factor shares some of the credit for the recent surge in voter turnout. First, the factor must be correlated with voter turnout, and second, its distribution must have changed in the direction associated with greater voter turnout over the period of interest. The first condition suggests a fairly large number of demographic, attitudinal, and social and legal contextual variables that should be included in a comprehensive model of turnout, but as I will show, not all of those variables' distributions changed, or changed in the direction that would account for the observed higher levels of turnout.

The analysis also depends on the availability of a dataset that has longitudinal observations of both turnout and the possible explanatory variables. The Census Bureau's Voter Supplement Files are by far the largest survey samples that contain indicators of voter turnout and can provide very precise estimates of some demographic differences in turnout (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), but their suitability for this purpose is undermined by the lack of indicators of political attitudes and interactions with campaigns that

might account for the increase in turnout. Fortunately, the American National Election Studies series includes measures of many of those variables over time, a virtue that made it the source data for most of the scholarly analyses of turnout decline. Since 1948, ANES has asked large national samples of Americans about their participation and vote choices, as well as questions about their attitudes toward political campaigns, candidates, parties, and issues. In this study, I merged data from the ANES Cumulative File for the presidential election years between 1988 and 2004 (inclusive) with data from the 2008 American National Election Study.²

While the continuity of the time series makes ANES an invaluable resource for longitudinal analyses such as this one, it has some limitations that must be addressed. First, as in all surveys, the proportion of the population that reports voting is higher than the proportion of the eligible population that actually cast votes. This result occurs due to a combination of differences between voters and nonvoters in accessibility and agreeing to participate in the survey in the first place (Burden 2000), agreeing to be re-interviewed in the post-election survey (Bartels 2000a), and answering the turnout question truthfully (Abramson and Claggett 1984; Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2000; Cassel 2003), as well as the conditioning effect of the pre-election survey's stimulus on political interest and participation among some respondents who otherwise would have likely abstained (Bartels 2000a). Assuming that "over-reporters" are similar to voters, and that the nonvoters who participated in the ANES surveys are much like those who did not, I have calculated and applied a secondary weight that results in the reported turnout in each presidential election year being equal to the actual VEP turnout rate.³

Second, the ANES must continually balance the value of consistency in repeating the same questions year after year against the value of improvements in measurement, which has resulted in question wording changes in measures of some of the key concepts, including voter

participation itself. (Duff *et al.* 2007) In some cases, question wording changes can be accommodated by some careful recoding, such as with the change in the church attendance questions between 1988 and 1992 (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 139-143). But in other cases, significant changes in wording may preclude any possibility of comparability in measuring the effects of a given variable on turnout at two different points in time.

Finally, like most survey data, the ANES studies are replete with missing data due to varying numbers of respondents opting out of providing answers to particular questions. As an alternative to listwise deletion that can distort estimations in multivariate analyses (King *et al.* 2001), I used multiple imputation of missing data. (Van Buuren and Oudshoorn 1999)

Demographics and the Puzzle of Participation, 1960 - 1988

In posing the “puzzle of participation,” Brody (1978) observed that the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1976 had occurred precisely when changes in the legal context were making registration and voting substantially easier. A combination of various Supreme Court decisions, the 24th Amendment, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were successful in untangling the Southern web of intimidation, discriminatory administrative discretion, and state laws that had been designed to evade the 15th Amendment, as Southern turnout increased among both blacks and whites. (Stanley 1987) But apparently there were no spillover effects in other parts of the country, where voter participation declined precipitously. This trend was especially puzzling because rising levels of education would have been expected to increase most citizens’ capacities for understanding the political choices of the day, as well as in navigating the remaining administrative requirements for registration and casting a ballot. Older cohorts who had had more limited opportunities for higher education were being replaced by

younger cohorts who were taking advantage of the democratization of educational opportunity, but failing to translate those skills into votes. Brody surmised that “the demographic changes in the electorate, to the extent they relate to turnout, on balance would lead us to expect higher rather than lower rates of participation.” (1978, 299)

The passing of time exacerbated Brody’s puzzle. Two major works that analyzed ANES and Census data from 1960 to 1988 showed that the turnout decline persisted in the face of continuing changes in demography that should have been correlated with higher turnout. (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Teixeira 1992) Most importantly, the proportion of Americans who had at least tried college continued to grow, which, with the strong relationship between education and voting, would have been expected to result in a 1988 turnout rate about 2.8 points *higher* than the 1960 rate, *ceteris paribus*. (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 214-215; Teixeira 1992, 36) Moreover, family income increased and more women were electing to work outside the home (Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1999), which combined with changes in the distribution of education, should have resulted in a total SES adjusted turnout rate 3.9 points higher than the 1960 post-War peak. (Teixeira 1992, 36) There were some social trends in the population during this period that helped account for lower turnout; Americans were younger and fewer of them were married and regular church attenders in 1988 compared to 1960, but the net effect of those variables and SES in a comprehensive model would still have lead us to expect higher turnout at the end of this period. In short, demographics did not do a good job of explaining the decline in turnout from 1960-1988.

Demographics and Voter Turnout, 1988- 2008

By and large, these demographic trends have continued more or less unabated in the years following Teixeira's (1992) and Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) analyses. As shown in Table 1, rates of formal educational achievement continue to climb; the proportion of the potential electorate that has at least tried college increased from 38% in 1988 to 52% in 2008, and the proportion whose formal education stopped before high school dropped from 11% to 3% in this twenty year period. The other major social trend that might account for the observed increase in voter participation was the employment of women, as the proportion of stay-at-home housewives was cut in half between 1988 and 2008. Home ownership was also slightly higher at the end of this period than it was at the beginning, though perhaps not enough to account for much of the increase in voter participation. While increases in education, female workforce participation, and home ownership could partially account for higher levels of turnout, other continuing trends might be expected to mitigate against it. Church attendance, marriage rates, and union membership, all of which are usually associated with higher turnout, fell over this twenty year period.

Table 1 about here

My analysis begins with an estimate of how much of the recent increase in turnout can be attributed to these basic demographic shifts. Because Teixeira's (1992) and Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) analysis of turnout decline extended through 1988, I choose that year to serve as the baseline for this analysis of the sources of the turnout increase.

Table 2 shows three estimated logistic regression models of self-reported voter turnout in the presidential elections between 1988 and 2008, inclusive, based on multiple imputation of the pooled time-series data and weights that were readjusted to reflect the actual VEP turnout rates

in each election. In Model 2a, the independent variables are dummy variables for the elections after 1988, and the signs of their coefficients reflect the change in turnout in each year relative to the baseline year. Thus, the coefficient for 1996 is negative (reflecting the lower turnout in that year relative to 1988), the coefficients for all other years (when turnout was higher than 1988) are positive, and the magnitude of the 2004 and 2008 coefficients reflect the sharply higher turnout in the last two elections. Model 2b adds education as an independent variable, and not surprisingly, the pattern of coefficients indicates that each level of formal education (above grade-school dropout) is strongly associated with higher rates of voter participation. More importantly, including education in the second model significantly reduces the magnitudes of the coefficients of the 2000, 2004, and 2008 year dummies, suggesting that changes in the distribution of education accounts for a considerable amount of the increased participation over this period.

We can see how much of the turnout increase might be attributable to changes in the distribution of education by using the estimated coefficients in Model 2b to derive predicted probabilities of voting under hypothetical conditions. Specifically, using these estimated coefficients, I estimate what the 1988 turnout rate would have been if the actual distribution of education had been as it was later in the time series.⁴ Based on Model 2b, I estimate that if the population in 1988 had been as educated as it was in 2008, turnout in 1988 would have been 57.7%. As we have seen, the actual VEP turnout increased nine points, from 52.7% in 1988 to 61.7% in 2008, so the increase in education alone could plausibly account for a five point increase, leaving only four points left to explain.

Table 2 about here

Model 2c in Table 2 incorporates other demographic variables, and again, there are no surprises in the direction of their effects. Turnout is lower among homemakers, retired people, and the unemployed than it is among the active labor force, and it is higher among people who are older, attend church more frequently, own their home, have a spouse, and belong to unions or live with someone who does. But the net effects of the changes in the distributions of all these variables add very little to our understanding of turnout change over this time period, as the positive effects of slightly higher employment levels and home ownership are offset by lower rates of church attendance, marriage, and union membership. Thus, my estimate is that turnout in 1988 would have been 57.6% if all of the social conditions had been as they were in 2008, which is a tenth of a point *lower* than the estimated turnout based on education alone. As was true in earlier analyses of turnout decline, education remains the principal demographic factor shaping turnout, though the rising tide of education is now running *with* the current of higher rates of voter participation. Thus, while education was a key part of the complicated puzzle of falling turnout from 1960 to 1988, at first glance, its increase seems to account for a little more than half of the rise in turnout from 1988 to 2008. The changes in education should be accounted for when considering other factors that might have contributed to the increase in turnout.

Parties and Turnout, 1988-2008

Party identification was about to reach its nadir when Brody posed his puzzle (Wattenberg 1998), suggesting a possible link between the concomitant declines in turnout and partisanship. Early analyses found that the partisan dealignment could explain between 25% and 30% of the decline in turnout in presidential elections between 1960 and 1980 (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Shaffer 1981), though critics argued that the omission of consideration of covariates, especially education, inflated the estimate of the impact of changes in partisanship on

turnout in those models (Cassel and Luskin 1988). Later analyses based on more comprehensive models over a longer time span showed that changing attitudes about the two major parties did have an impact on the turnout decline, but the overall effect was rather modest due to a rather stable trend in the number of pure independents and an increase in the proportion of people who saw differences between the two major parties. (Teixeira 1992, 40-42)

Partisanship's increased effect on voters' choices in presidential elections since the 1970s suggests that conclusions about the decay of American parties are "badly outdated" (Bartels 2000b), and the resurgence of popular beliefs that the parties are again relevant could be related to the increase in turnout. While there has been no consistent trend in party identification strength since 1988, as shown in Table 3, there has been a rather striking increase in the proportion of Americans who believe that there are important differences between the Democrats and the Republicans. In the two presidential elections contested by George H.W. Bush (41), that belief was shared by a little more than half of the adult population, but by the end of George W. Bush's (43's) second term, three-fourths of Americans said that they could see a difference. Even if some people are still hesitant about psychologically attaching themselves too closely to one of the parties, an increasingly large majority apparently agree that it matters which party wins in U.S. elections.

Table 3 about here

The net effect of changes in partisan attitudes since 1998 has been to push turnout slightly upward. Table 4 shows the strong effect of party identification strength on the probability of voting, but the distribution of party identification has not changed enough over this period to make a significant contribution to our understanding of increased turnout. However, the

perception of party differences also has an independent effect on the likelihood of voting, and there were notable temporal changes in the distribution of that variable. The result is that the total effect of changes in partisan attitudes (identification and cognitive) on turnout is positive, controlling for changes in education. Based on the coefficients in Model 4a, I estimate that if the 1988 population had had the educational and partisan characteristics of the 2008 population, turnout would have been 59.4%, or 6.7% higher than the actual 1988 turnout rate, and 1.7% greater than the estimated rate attributable to the effects of education alone.

Table 4 about here

Perceptions of Closeness and Turnout, 1988-2000

People are slightly more likely to vote when they believe that an election is going to be close, which rational choice theorists ascribe to individuals' perceptions that they would have a greater probability of affecting the outcome of the election, the p term in the classic calculus of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Though it is conceivable that other mechanisms could drive this relationship,⁵ the question here is whether recent presidential elections have been perceived as closer, and, if so, whether changes in those perceptions have contributed substantially to the rise in turnout.

The answer to the first question is “yes, a little.” In 1996, when President Clinton had the largest margin of victory in the popular vote (8.5%) in this period, a bare majority of the public (54.6%) thought that the presidential election would be close. Four years later, 82.9% of the public anticipated that the election between Al Gore and George W. Bush would be close, though few could have imagined just how thin the margin between the two major party candidates would be both nationally and in a single pivotal state (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde

2002, 46-70). Perceptions of closeness remained relatively high in 2004 (81.5%) and in 2008 (77.9%), even though Barack Obama's actual margin of victory of 7.27% in the 2008 popular vote was not much less than George H.W. Bush's 7.72% margin in 1988.

However, changing perceptions of closeness have contributed very little to the rise in turnout. Model 4b confirms that NES respondents in this period who thought that the upcoming election was going to be close were significantly more likely to vote, controlling for the effects of education. But while the effect of perceived closeness on turnout is positive and statistically significant at conventional levels, its relatively narrow variation over the time period doesn't give it much leverage in explaining the increase in turnout. If the 1988 electorate had the same levels of education and perceptions about the election's closeness as was present in the 2008 electorate, I estimate that turnout would have been 57.9%, a scant 0.2% above the predicted turnout based on education alone.

Contacting and Turnout, 1988-2008

None of the usual demographic or attitudinal variables, or any combination of them, resolved Brody's puzzle of the decline in participation fully. Americans were somewhat less partisan and more "individualist" in the 1970s (Tom Wolfe's "me" decade) and in the 1980s than they had been in the 1960s, but the net effects of those variables explained less than half of the decline between 1960 and 1988 (Teixeira 1992, 46-50). Lower levels of political interest and efficacy added much to the explanation of turnout decline in a statistical sense, but in another sense, those variables are almost too close to the dependent variable (the "tip of the funnel") to be very interesting theoretically.

Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) analysis shifted the focus of responsibility for the decline in participation away from the individual and toward campaigns and linkage groups. As the increasing usage and costs of "air wars" (electronic media) and primary elections claimed more and more resources from political campaigns and interest groups, the resources available for "ground wars" (mobilization) in the general election dwindled. As a result, contacting by parties in presidential election years peaked in 1972 and then began to drop sharply over the next two decades. Moreover, partisan contacting was increasingly limited to the "right people," those who have characteristics that already predispose them to vote (strong partisans, people in strong social networks, well-educated, and wealthy). Rosenstone and Hansen's "Solving the Puzzle of Participation in Electoral Politics" chapter (1993, 211-227) attributed over half of the decline in turnout to the weakening efforts to mobilize citizens to vote.⁶ Moreover, this general explanation is supported by evidence from a growing number of field experiments that show significant effects of contacting on turnout in a variety of electoral contexts. (Gerber and Green 2000; Green and Gerber 2008; Middleton and Green 2008; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006)

Quite suddenly, changes in campaign technology helped to reverse the trend in voter contacting. As more political and social data about individuals became more readily accessible, parties and interested groups changed their campaign strategies to take advantage of the opportunities to "micro-target" potential supporters, with a particular focus on trying to peel off pieces of the opposition's potential coalition. (Hillygus and Shields 2008) While direct mail and other contacting is both more focused in content and increasingly targeted to "micro" groups, its sheer volume, as well as other forms of campaign activity, has led to a notable increase in the number of people reporting some contact over the course of the campaign. Table 5 shows that the proportion of the potential electorate reporting having been contacted by a party or someone

else over the course of the campaign increased from 24% in 1988 to nearly 44% in 2008. While the NES data tell us nothing about the means of the contacts or their messages, they do show that parties, campaigns, and groups are clearly reaching out to touch more and more people.

Table 5 about here

Table 6 shows the effects that contacting has had on turnout over this period. Model 6a includes both contact variables (party and other), as well as their interaction to account for the possibility of diminishing returns of multiple types of contact. As expected, both party contact and contact by others is associated with higher reported turnout, but the magnitude of the party contact coefficient is about twice that of the other contact coefficient. Moreover, those magnitudes are only slightly attenuated in Model 6b, which includes education as a control variable. Together, increases in educational achievement and contacting statistically account for *all* of the increase in turnout over this time period. I estimate that if the 1988 population had the same education and contacting levels as was reported by the 2008 population, turnout in 1988 would have been 62.6%, 4.9% higher than the rate predicted by educational changes alone, and slightly *higher* than the actual 2008 turnout of 61.7%.

Table 6 about here

Convenience Voting and Turnout, 1988-2008

The effects that registration laws and voting procedures can have on turnout have been well understood for at least three decades (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), so it is notable that the recent turnout increase has also coincided with an easing of voting procedures in a number of states. In 1988, only three states (Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) permitted people to register and vote on the same day. Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming followed suit shortly after the

passage of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (making them exempt from other provisions of the Act), and were joined by Iowa, Montana, and North Carolina in time for the 2008 election. Including North Dakota (which does not require voter registration), citizens in ten states (8.9% of the NES sample) could vote in the 2008 presidential election without registering at least a week to a month before Election Day. Moreover, in many locations, “Election Day” effectively has been extended by a week to a month due to statutes that permit “no excuse” absentee voting, in-person early voting, or both. Table 7 shows that the number of states providing unrestricted absentee voting increased from 16 to 28 between 1996 and 2008, increasing the proportion of NES respondents living in unrestricted absentee voting states from 20.6% to 48.2% over the same time period. The availability of in-person early voting also increased from 12 states (with 20.2% of the NES sample) in 1996 to 32 states (with 72.3% of the NES sample) in 2008.⁷ While the coincidence of increasingly convenient voting methods and higher levels of turnout suggests a possible connection between the two, most research has reported rather modest effects of voting reform (as distinct from registration reform) on turnout levels, from nil (Fitzgerald 2005) to small, usually in a range from 2% to 4% (as summarized by Gronke *et al.* 2008). Still, the sheer magnitude of the increase in early voting (via unrestricted absentee ballots or in-person) leads many to wonder how much basic changes in election administration have contributed to the rise in turnout. (McDonald 2008b)

Table 7 about here

Not much, in my estimation. Table 8 reports the analysis of the effects of unrestricted absentee voting, early voting, and election day registration (EDR) on reported turnout over the 1988-2008 time period. Consistent with previous findings (Fitzgerald 2005; Highton 1997; McDonald 2008a; Rhine 1995), the presence of EDR is strongly associated with higher reported

turnout, whether education is included as a control variable (as in Model 8a) or not (as in Model 8b). Unrestricted absentee voting has weaker but significantly positive effects, while the presence of early voting appears to be statistically unrelated to turnout. The overall effect of election administration changes on the turnout increase is tiny, owing to the facts that so few states have adopted EDR and the effects of unrestricted absentee balloting are so weak. I estimate that if the 1988 population had lived under the absentee voting, early voting, and election day registration procedures in place in 2008, turnout would have been less than three-fourths of one percent higher than it actually was (from 52.7% to 53.4%). Simulated turnout in 1988 with both the 2008 laws and distribution of education is only 0.1% higher than that with the 2008 distribution of education alone (57.8% to 57.7%).

Table 8 about here

Comprehensive Model, 1988-2008

The comprehensive model of turnout presented in Table 9 confirms the patterns discussed above. The estimated coefficients are all signed as they were in the previous analyses, and those that were significant at conventional levels remained so in the comprehensive model. As expected, the magnitudes of the coefficients were attenuated somewhat, but in most cases, not severely so. The major exceptions are the coefficients for the year dummies for 2004 and 2008, which were reduced to statistical insignificance, providing evidence that the explanatory variables in the model can account for the difference in turnout between 1988 and the later years in the time series. In short, if the social, partisan, contacting, and legal conditions in 1988 had matched those in place in 2008, I estimate that turnout would have been 62.2%, slightly higher than the actual turnout of 61.7% in 2008.

Table 9 about here

Discussion

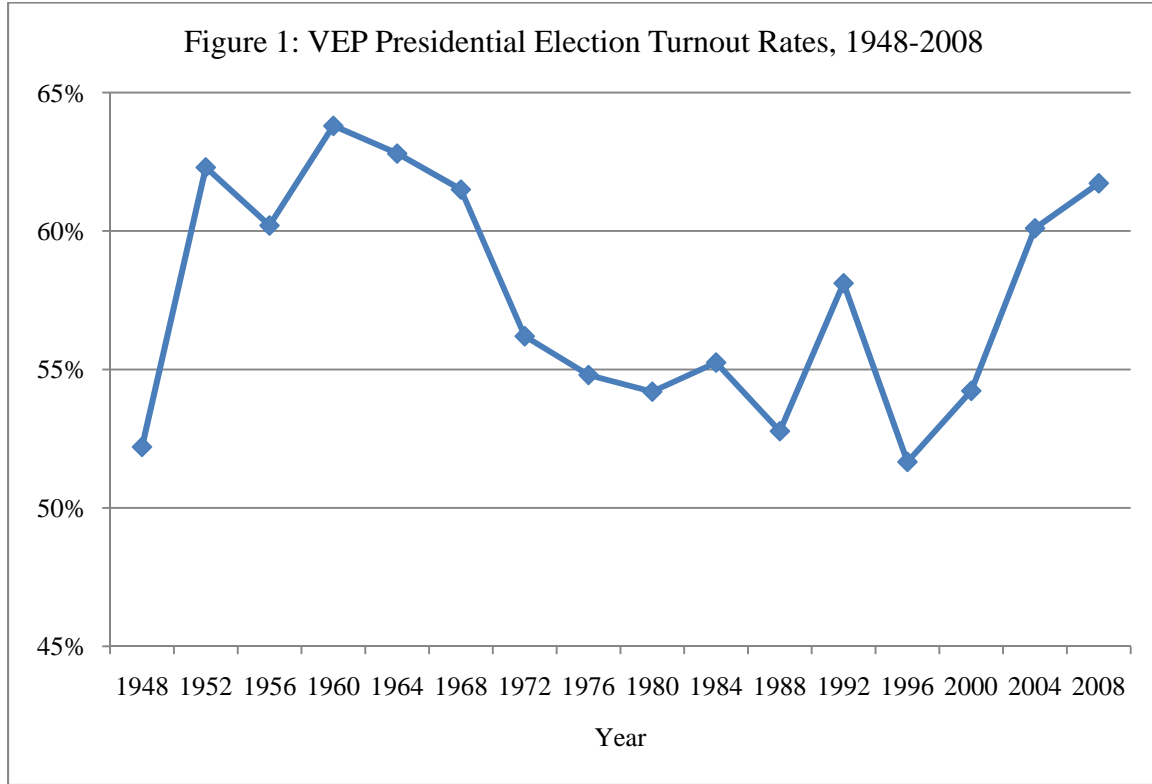
Following decades of turnout decline and volumes of scholarly attention to it, voter participation has surged in the last three U.S. presidential elections to levels last seen in the late 1960s. The proportion of eligible Americans who chose between Barack Obama and John McCain in 2008 was actually slightly higher than the proportion that chose between Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace in 1968. Turnout is by no means high in the United States in comparison to other democracies (Franklin and Weber 2009), but the trend has clearly shifted direction.

Fortunately, the tools that were available for previous scholars to decompose the sources of the turnout decline are still available for our use in analyzing the rebound. Pooled cross-sectional analyses of comparable survey data gathered over successive elections enabled Teixeira (1992), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), and others to assess which factors were most closely correlated with the fall in turnout from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. Using a similar design with some refinements in this paper, I have traced the sources of the increase in turnout that has occurred since the endpoint of their analyses. While many scholars in our field have grown accustomed to using American National Election Study data to answer questions like this one, we should not take the availability of those data for granted. ANES data are far from perfect, but they are vitally important for the analysis of longitudinal trends in public opinion and political behavior, and the absence of a midterm election study in 2006 should serve as a reminder of how much we depend on the continuity of the ANES data to answer questions about changes in behavior.

A little more than half of the recent increase in turnout can be attributed to the continuing growth of educational opportunities in the United States, with other demographic factors largely offsetting one another. But as we know from the previous “bear market”, longitudinal changes in education alone cannot fully account for concomitant changes in electoral participation. Most of the rest of the recent surge in turnout reflects the uptick in contacting by groups and especially by parties, as well as a greater ability on the part of the public to discern differences between the two major parties. These findings underscore the robustness of Rosenstone and Hansen’s explanation that mobilization was the key to understanding patterns of electoral participation, as contacting was a significant correlate of participation both as turnout declined and as it rebounded. While differences in individuals’ abilities, opportunities, and incentives explain much of the cross-sectional variation in turnout, changes in the level of campaigns’ direct interactions with potential voters drives much of the aggregate variation in turnout over time. Thus, the question of whether the relatively high levels of turnout are sustainable likely depends on the resources and incentives of parties and campaigns, as well as their ability to adapt to emerging campaign technologies.

Future research will undoubtedly reveal whether some of these findings are replicable with Current Population Survey data. Larger sample sizes in the Census Bureau’s Voter Supplement Files will permit more precise estimates of the impact of education and other demographic changes on turnout, as well as the effects of changes in electoral laws on particular segments of the population (especially young people). While Census Bureau data do not contain individual level measures of political attitudes (such as partisanship or perceptions of partisan differences) or interactions with campaigns (such as contacting by parties), using those data with contextual measures of campaign activity might also provide us better insight on just who is

being mobilized to participate. Moreover, we should also endeavor to understand the extent to which demographic, political, and institutional changes have also affected turnout in non-presidential elections, as well as how recent changes in mobilization and participation may have helped to shape recent election outcomes (Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003; Martinez and Gill 2005; Nagel and McNulty 2000), patterns of representation (Griffin and Newman 2005; Hajnal and Trounstine 2005), and public policy (Hill and Leighley 1992; Martin 2003).



Source: 1948-1976 (McDonald and Popkin 2001, 966); 1980-2008 (McDonald 2009)

Table 1: Distribution of Demographic Variables, 1988-2008

	<u>1988</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2008</u>
<u>Education</u>						
0-8 grades	11.4%	9.0%	6.0%	4.9%	5.4%	3.2%
9-12 grades	50.1%	50.1%	49.5%	47.8%	44.3%	44.9%
Some College	21.2%	21.5%	25.6%	27.2%	28.3%	28.1%
College	17.3%	19.4%	18.9%	20.1%	22.1%	23.9%
<u>Age</u>						
17-21	5.8%	5.5%	7.4%	8.4%	7.4%	6.5%
22-25	8.0%	7.6%	8.0%	7.9%	8.7%	8.2%
26-29	11.0%	9.5%	8.7%	8.0%	6.8%	9.6%
30s	24.3%	26.6%	23.7%	19.1%	18.0%	16.6%
40s	15.7%	16.1%	19.3%	20.9%	19.3%	19.4%
50s	11.9%	11.4%	12.7%	13.6%	16.3%	17.6%
60s	11.9%	10.3%	9.7%	10.0%	11.0%	11.2%
70-up	11.5%	13.0%	10.5%	12.1%	12.5%	10.9%
<u>Church Attendance</u>						
Every week	25.2%	25.2%	21.8%	23.6%	22.3%	21.8%
Almost every week	11.8%	10.3%	11.6%	9.7%	11.7%	9.7%
Once or twice a month	14.8%	14.0%	16.0%	15.0%	15.3%	13.8%
Never or few times a year	48.1%	50.5%	50.7%	51.6%	50.7%	54.7%
<u>Home ownership</u>						
Yes, own	61.3%	61.8%	64.6%	65.3%	64.9%	63.8%
<u>Marital Status</u>						
Married / partnered	55.0%	56.1%	56.4%	58.1%	56.9%	49.4%
<u>Employment Status</u>						
Employed	64.9%	61.7%	69.3%	64.6%	64.9%	65.5%
Homemaker	10.5%	10.4%	7.2%	8.5%	7.6%	5.2%
Retired	17.6%	18.1%	17.2%	19.5%	19.4%	20.9%
Student	1.4%	2.0%	2.7%	1.7%	2.7%	1.7%
Unemployed	5.6%	7.8%	3.5%	5.7%	5.3%	6.7%
<u>Union membership</u>						
Yes	18.5%	14.9%	16.8%	14.8%	17.4%	12.0%
Median N	1765	2250	1502	1535	1059	2095

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 2: Effects of Education and other Demographic Variables on Turnout, 1988-2008

	<u>Model 2a (Baseline)</u>			<u>Model 2b (Education)</u>			<u>Model 2c (Demographics)</u>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>
(Intercept)	0.109	0.048	0.022	-0.749	0.091	0.000	-3.307	0.138	0.000
Year 1992	0.219	0.064	0.001	0.192	0.068	0.005	0.211	0.072	0.003
Year 1996	-0.043	0.070	0.544	-0.144	0.075	0.054	-0.185	0.079	0.019
Year 2000	0.058	0.070	0.406	-0.072	0.075	0.331	-0.119	0.079	0.134
Year 2004	0.301	0.079	0.000	0.157	0.084	0.061	0.104	0.089	0.243
Year 2008	0.369	0.065	0.000	0.191	0.070	0.006	0.223	0.075	0.003
Education									
Grades 9-12				0.447	0.087	0.000	0.997	0.096	0.000
Some College				1.284	0.093	0.000	1.943	0.106	0.000
College				2.346	0.102	0.000	2.845	0.114	0.000
Age							0.029	0.002	0.000
Church Attend									
Every week							0.640	0.059	0.000
Almost every week							0.488	0.080	0.000
Once or twice a month							0.400	0.066	0.000
Home Owner							0.534	0.050	0.000
Married / partnered							0.303	0.048	0.000
Homemaker							-0.171	0.085	0.044
Retired							-0.238	0.078	0.002
Student							0.212	0.156	0.175
Unemployed							-0.302	0.098	0.002
Union household							0.362	0.065	0.000
Null deviance	14021.61	on 10286 df		14021.61	on 10286 df		14021.61	on 10286 df	
Residual deviance	13962.02	on 10281 df		12735.414	on 10278 df		11601.045	on 10267 df	
AIC	15556.484			14170.758			12833.477		
Year	Actual turnout			Simulated turnout			Simulated turnout		
1988	52.7%			52.7%			52.7%		
1992	58.1%			53.9%			54.0%		
1996	51.7%			54.8%			55.3%		
2000	54.2%			55.8%			56.5%		
2004	60.1%			56.7%			58.1%		
2008	61.7%			57.7%			57.6%		

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 3: Partisanship Variables, 1988-2008

	<u>1988</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2008</u>
<u>Party Identification Strength</u>						
Independent	12.0%	13.2%	11.1%	13.8%	11.9%	14.8%
Leaner	26.6%	28.2%	26.7%	29.9%	30.5%	30.1%
Weak	33.1%	31.9%	36.2%	27.8%	27.8%	27.5%
Strong	28.4%	26.8%	26.0%	28.5%	29.8%	27.6%
N	1739	2205	1477	1502	1040	2089
<u>Differences Between Parties</u>						
No	38.0%	38.1%	39.4%	37.5%	23.1%	24.3%
DK what	7.0%	6.4%	2.4%	3.5%	6.2%	0.0%
Yes	55.0%	55.5%	58.2%	59.0%	70.7%	75.7%
N	1773	2251	740	1541	1059	2052

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 4: Effects of Partisanship, Closeness, and Education on Turnout, 1988-2008

	<u>Model 4a (Partisanship)</u>			<u>Model 4b (Closeness)</u>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>
(Intercept)	-1.890	0.119	0.000	-0.930	0.097	0.000
Year 1992	0.251	0.072	0.000	0.175	0.068	0.010
Year 1996	-0.183	0.080	0.022	-0.095	0.076	0.209
Year 2000	-0.066	0.079	0.404	-0.095	0.075	0.204
Year 2004	0.108	0.089	0.226	0.139	0.084	0.097
Year 2008	0.123	0.074	0.098	0.184	0.070	0.009
Education						
Grades 9-12	0.481	0.094	0.000	0.433	0.087	0.000
Some College	1.252	0.102	0.000	1.261	0.094	0.000
College	2.201	0.110	0.000	2.320	0.102	0.000
Partisan strength						
Leaner	0.534	0.076	0.000			
Weak	0.790	0.077	0.000			
Strong	1.698	0.082	0.000			
Perceived differences						
DK what	-0.639	0.129	0.000			
Yes	0.586	0.051	0.000			
Expect close election				0.269	0.052	0.000
Null deviance	14021.61	on 10286 df		14021.61	on 10286 df	
Residual deviance	11730.455	on 10273 df		12706.266	on 10277 df	
AIC	13094.351			14139.387		
Year	Simulated turnout			Simulated turnout		
1988	52.7%			52.7%		
1992	53.2%			54.3%		
1996	55.3%			53.8%		
2000	55.5%			56.2%		
2004	58.0%			57.1%		
2008	59.4%			57.8%		

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 5: Contacting, 1988-2008

	<u>1988</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2008</u>
None	76.1%	78.0%	73.5%	66.2%	55.3%	56.3%
Party only	17.2%	13.3%	17.7%	24.6%	28.5%	27.9%
Other only	3.8%	4.9%	3.8%	3.7%	6.4%	5.1%
Both	3.0%	3.7%	5.0%	5.5%	9.7%	10.8%
N	1767	2249	1503	1542	1060	2099

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 6: Effects of Contacting and Education on Turnout, 1988-2008

	<u>Model 6a</u>			<u>Model 6b</u>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>
(Intercept)	-0.193	0.050	0.000	-0.994	0.095	0.000
Year 1992	0.268	0.066	0.000	0.240	0.070	0.001
Year 1996	-0.088	0.073	0.230	-0.186	0.077	0.016
Year 2000	-0.088	0.073	0.228	-0.200	0.078	0.010
Year 2004	0.028	0.083	0.734	-0.090	0.088	0.308
Year 2008	0.110	0.069	0.113	-0.047	0.073	0.524
Contact						
by Party	1.493	0.059	0.000	1.389	0.062	0.000
by Other	0.773	0.101	0.000	0.723	0.106	0.000
by Both (interaction)	-0.580	0.155	0.000	-0.532	0.162	0.001
Education						
Grades 9-12				0.436	0.090	0.000
Some College				1.234	0.097	0.000
College				2.233	0.105	0.000
Null deviance	14021.6	on 10286 df		14021.6	on 10286 df	
Residual deviance	13013.2	on 10278 df		12002.6	on 10275 df	
AIC	14489.4			13362.7		
Year	Simulated turnout			Simulated turnout		
1988	52.7%			52.7%		
1992	51.9%			53.2%		
1996	53.7%			55.5%		
2000	56.1%			58.2%		
2004	59.5%			61.8%		
2008	59.4%			62.6%		

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 7: Election Laws in the States

<u>State</u>	<u>Unrestricted Absentee</u>	<u>In-person Early Voting</u>	<u>Election Day Registration</u>
Alabama	---	---	---
Alaska	1996	2002	---
Arizona	1992	1993	---
Arkansas	1969	1996	---
California	1978	1998	---
Colorado	1992	1992	---
Connecticut	---	---	---
Delaware	---	---	---
DC	---	---	---
Florida	1998	2007	---
Georgia	2003	2007	---
Hawaii	1970	1970	---
Idaho	1973	1970	1994
Illinois	---	2007	---
Indiana	---	2007	---
Iowa	1991	1991	2007
Kansas	1996	2002	---
Kentucky	---	---	---
Louisiana	---	2007	---
Maine	2000	2007	1974
Maryland	---	---	---
Massachusetts	---	---	---
Michigan	---	2007	---
Minnesota	---	---	1974
Mississippi	---	---	---
Missouri	---	---	---
Montana	1997	2007	2006
Nebraska	1994	2007	---
Nevada	1960	1993	---
New Hampshire	---	---	1994
New Jersey	2007	2007	---
New Mexico	1994	1994	---
New York	---	---	---
North Carolina	2000	2007	2007
North Dakota	2000	2007	1974
Ohio	2007	2007	---
Oklahoma	1992	2007	---
Oregon	1983	---	1976

Pennsylvania	---	---	---
Rhode Island	---	---	---
South Carolina	---	---	---
South Dakota	2003	2007	---
Tennessee	---	1994	---
Texas	---	1991	---
Utah	2007	2007	---
Vermont	1993	1993	---
Virginia	---	---	---
Washington	1976	---	---
West Virginia	---	2007	---
Wisconsin	2007	2000	1976
Wyoming	1999	2007	1994

Source: Fitzgerald (2005, 847-848); Comstock-Gay, Carbo, and Eaton (2009); Gronke (2008); see note 7.

Table 8: Effects of State Laws and Education on Turnout, 1988-2008

	<u>Model 8a</u>			<u>Model 8b</u>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>
(Intercept)	0.025	0.049	0.606	-0.791	0.092	0.000
Year 1992	0.232	0.064	0.000	0.201	0.069	0.003
Year 1996	-0.040	0.071	0.575	-0.144	0.076	0.059
Year 2000	0.028	0.072	0.703	-0.094	0.077	0.220
Year 2004	0.286	0.081	0.000	0.142	0.086	0.098
Year 2008	0.346	0.076	0.000	0.187	0.082	0.022
Laws						
Unrestricted						
Absentee	0.263	0.049	0.000	0.154	0.052	0.003
Early Voting	-0.102	0.057	0.070	-0.080	0.060	0.184
Election Day Reg.	0.717	0.085	0.000	0.710	0.089	0.000
Education						
Grades 9-12				0.423	0.088	0.000
Some College				1.259	0.093	0.000
College				2.328	0.103	0.000
Null deviance	14021.6	on 10286 df		14021.6	on 10286 df	
Residual deviance	13861.1	on 10278 df		12650.9	on 10275 df	
AIC	15434.6			14071.3		
	<u>Simulated</u>			<u>Simulated</u>		
Year	turnout			turnout		
1988	52.7%			52.7%		
1992	52.4%			53.8%		
1996	52.6%			54.8%		
2000	53.5%			56.2%		
2004	53.1%			57.1%		
2008	53.4%			57.8%		

Source: ANES Cumulative File; 2008 ANES (reweighted to reflect VEP turnout rates)

Table 9: Comprehensive Model of Turnout, 1988-2008

	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>s.e.</u>	<u>p(z)</u>
(Intercept)	-4.037	0.170	0.000
Year 1992	0.287	0.077	0.000
Year 1996	-0.193	0.086	0.024
Year 2000	-0.230	0.088	0.009
Year 2004	-0.120	0.098	0.221
Year 2008	-0.028	0.094	0.765
Education			
Grades 9-12	0.786	0.105	0.000
Some College	1.594	0.114	0.000
College	2.346	0.122	0.000
Age	0.022	0.002	0.000
Church Attendance			
Every week	0.503	0.066	0.000
Almost every week	0.356	0.087	0.000
Once or twice a month	0.323	0.072	0.000
Home Owner	0.516	0.053	0.000
Married / partnered	0.263	0.051	0.000
Homemaker	-0.186	0.092	0.043
Retired	-0.277	0.083	0.001
Student	0.178	0.170	0.295
Unemployed	-0.286	0.104	0.006
Union household	0.275	0.069	0.000
Partisan Strength			
Leaner	0.529	0.081	0.000
Weak	0.664	0.080	0.000
Strong	1.495	0.087	0.000
Perceived differences			
DK what	-0.593	0.134	0.000
Yes	0.561	0.060	0.000
Expect close election	0.230	0.057	0.000
Contact			
by Party	0.992	0.068	0.000
by Other	0.544	0.115	0.000
by Both (interaction)	-0.438	0.173	0.011
Laws			
Unrestricted Absentee	0.121	0.059	0.041
Early Voting	-0.050	0.069	0.464
Election Day Reg.	0.416	0.099	0.000

Table 9 (continued)

Null deviance	14021.61	on 10286 df
Residual deviance	10503.235	on 10255 df
AIC	11662.959	

Year	Simulated turnout
1988	52.7%
1992	53.1%
1996	55.1%
2000	58.0%
2004	62.0%
2008	62.2%

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Endnotes

¹ I refer to “turnout” as the number of votes cast for President as a proportion of the estimated Voting Eligible Population, as reported by McDonald (2009). That denominator excludes estimates of the numbers of noncitizens and disenfranchised felons, and includes estimates of the numbers of overseas U.S. citizens of voting age. See McDonald and Popkin (2001) for an explanation of the ramifications of using the unadjusted Voting Age Population as the denominator.

² The ANES Cumulative Data File and the 2008 ANES data were made available to the author by the American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>). The 2008 ANES Principal Investigators were Jon A. Krosnick and Arthur Lupia, and Vincent Hutchings was Associate Principal Investigator. Neither the ANES Staff nor the principal investigators are responsible for my analyses or interpretations.

³ For example, using the supplied weights in the 2008 ANES, the reported turnout rate was 77.4%, while the actual VEP turnout rate was 61.7%. Thus, the reported abstention rate was 23.6%, while the actual VEP abstention rate was 38.3%. For each respondent who reported voting in 2008, I calculated a new weight variable equal to the NES weight variable multiplied by $(61.7/77.4)$. For each respondent who reported abstaining in 2008, the new weight variable was the product of the NES weight variable and $38.3/22.6$. I followed the same procedure for all respondents to produce weights that would result in the actual VEP turnout rates in each presidential election year.

⁴ Recall that in the multivariate analyses, the coefficients for each year dummy reflects the *unexplained* difference in the probability that a person would have voted in each year relative to 1988, controlling for other variables in the model. Thus, in order to obtain the estimated

hypothetical turnout in 1988 under the modeled conditions present in 2008, I first subtract the coefficient for the 2008 year dummy from the predicted (linear) value for each case in that year (XB). I then convert those values into probabilities using the logit function ($p = e^{XB} / (1 + e^{XB})$). The weighted sum of those probabilities is the estimated 1988 turnout under the conditions present in 2008.

⁵ For example, parties and campaigns might work harder to mobilize their supporters in potentially close elections. If mobilization was the key causal variable, the observed relationship between the perception of a close election and turnout would be spurious.

⁶ It should be noted that Teixeira (1992, 52-54) also considered the possibility that demobilization might have contributed to the turnout decline from 1960-1988, but did not reach a conclusion about its impact. Part of the problem was that the decline in contacting (as measured by NES) started after 1972, well after the turnout had started to drop. Nevertheless, Teixeira acknowledged that changes in the quality of contacting might not be picked up by the NES indicator, and that the indirect effects of mobilization might have been obscured by the inclusion of variables nearer to the tip of the funnel of causality.

⁷ Data on state laws regarding early voting and unrestricted absentee voting were taken from Fitzgerald (2005, 847-848) for years 1988-2004 and from Gronke (2008) for 2008. If Fitzgerald coded a state as not having a provision that Gronke coded as having, I assumed that the state adopted the provision in the interval between the 2004 and 2008 elections. There was one discrepancy between the two codings, as Fitzgerald reported Indiana as having adopted unrestricted absentee voting in 2003, while Gronke reported that unrestricted absentee voting was not permitted in Indiana. I adopted Gronke's coding in that case. Data on election day

registration were taken from Fitzgerald (2005, 847-848) for years 1988-2004 and from Comstock-Gay *et al.* (2009) for subsequent years.