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Lillard E. Richardson Jr.
University of Missouri

Grant W. Neeley
University of Dayton, gneeley1@udayton.edu

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Implementation of Early Voting

We examine the early voting process in Tennessee during the election of 1994. By conducting a mail survey of all 95 county registrars, we ascertained the methods and costs of early voting implementation. Generally, the survey reveals a strong belief that early voting encourages greater participation by voters, with turnout data supporting this belief. We find that the ballot type and location of early voting sites play an important role in determining both the costs of early voting and the rate of voter participation.

by Lilliard E. Richardson Jr. and Grant W. Neeley

Introduction

Low voter turnout is a well documented and often lamented aspect of the American political system (Powell 1986; Piven and Cloward 1989). Although there are numerous explanations for declining participation (see Teixeira 1992), one important factor is the impact of structural barriers on voting turnout (Walker 1966; Rusk 1970; Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Erikson 1981; Fenster 1994). To improve turnout, several structural reforms have been proposed. Early voting is one such reform.

Adopted in 1991 by Texas and since implemented in limited form by several other states, early voting allows citizens a "no hassle" method of voting a couple of weeks prior to the election. Tennessee instituted early voting in 1994 when it conducted a primary and general election for Congressional, state and local elections. Because early voting may include weekend and evening hours of operation, it greatly reduces the structural impediments otherwise placed on a registrant who has an inflexible job or childcare situation. In addition, voting sites at churches, shopping centers and community centers may ameliorate some of the social factors that reduce turnout by making voting more accessible for low information registrants.

Despite the fact that many states have adopted early voting in the belief that it would increase voter turnout, very little research has been conducted on voter participation through absentee ballots or early voting. Magleby (1987) shows that elections handled by mail

ballot in California enjoyed higher than normal participation rates, and he demonstrates that education levels had an even greater effect on participation in mail ballot elections than normal elections. Dubin and Kalsow (1995), in their study of California's absentee balloting system, demonstrate that liberalized absentee voting may have increased turnout in primary elections but not general elections. They also found demographic differences between absentee voters and other voters. Garcia, Stein and Ward (1993), in their research on the Texas early voting system, show that ethnicity, the operating hours of voting sites, and the presence of a nongovernmental voting location affect early voting participation.

For both election officials and scholars there are several questions about the implementation of the program that remain unanswered. How are election officials conducting early voting? What are the costs associated with the implementation of the program? How does ballot type and the location of the early voting sites affect the cost of the program and turnout? Further, did early voting have a positive impact on turnout? To answer these questions, we examine the early voting experience in Tennessee for the 1994 primary and general elections. Our analysis is informed by a survey of all 95 county election officials in the state of Tennessee. In the next section we discuss the characteristics of early voting before we turn to the methods of implementation, the costs of implementation and turnout effects of early voting.

Early Voting

The definition of an "early voting" program requires a distinction beyond one of merely casting a ballot prior to the official election day. As Rosenfield (1994) points out, early voting is distinguished from absentee voting systems by six factors: who can vote early; whether or not an application to vote is necessary; whether the early voted ballot is individually identifiable; when the voting takes place; where the voting takes place; and the publicity about the early voting opportunity.

Early voting does not require any special qualification for a voter to cast her ballot, while many absentee systems require the voter to be unable to participate on election day for some approved reason. In addition, absentee voters must often complete a special form to vote, while early voting does not require such a procedure. Early voting ballots are not subject to the individual level scrutiny that can often accompany in-person absentee ballots that can be challenged on the eligibility of the voter. Early voting programs provide extended hours for voting, while absentee voting takes place during normal business hours. Early voting programs also utilize other voting sites besides the election office where absentee balloting takes place. Early voting is also distinguished from absentee voting based on the increased publicity about the availability of casting one's ballot prior to election day.

Although some states use various provisions of early voting, Tennessee is the only state besides Texas to mandate the program (State of Tennessee, 1994). While early voting in Tennessee fits many of the idealized criteria, the 1994 experience fell somewhat short of the ideal system in that it did not make extensive use of satellite locations in nontraditional sites. The lack of computerized voter records in many counties was the main reason why Tennessee counties could not use satellite voting sites in locations such as malls and grocery stores. It is important, however, to point out that Tennessee has placed no restrictions on the use of satellite locations, and recently at least one city held early voting in shopping malls for a municipal election.

Methods of Implementation

The 1994 Tennessee law mandated that all counties would allow a two week early voting

period 20 days prior to any election. The law set minimal restraints on the hours of operation and the location of early voting sites. Some weekend and evening hours were required, but county officials had considerable latitude in setting hours of operation, choosing voting sites and selecting ballot types. If early voting was going to affect turnout, much of the impact would depend on the implementation by these county election officials who received almost no assistance from the state.

The most common early voting site was the election commission office in the county courthouse (91% in the primary and 86% in the general election). Because the vast majority of counties did not use multiple voting sites in the primary (4%), very few other types of voting sites were used. A slightly higher percent of counties used multiple sites in the general election (7%). Because nearly a third of all counties did not have all of their voting records computerized, it would be extremely difficult for such counties to have multiple voting sites. Also, multiple voting sites would require additional workers, thereby driving up the cost of implementation.

Another major concern for the administration of the program was whether to use paper ballots, machines or some other ballot type. Almost half (48%) of the counties used paper ballots exclusively in the primary early voting period. Because all counties were also holding county general elections at the same time as the state primary election, the ballots were longer, included the opportunity for write-ins, and had to list all county offices for each precinct. Consequently, it was easier to use machines or punch cards in the state general election, and the results indicate that about half of the counties that used paper ballots in the primary switched to mechanized methods in the general election. In the general election 58% used machines, 23% used paper ballots only and 19% used a combination of paper ballots and machines.

Costs of Implementation

One of the greatest concerns that local election officials have about the early voting program is the cost of implementation. The General Assembly provided no funding for the counties and passed the legislation late in the session so there was little time for advance planning or setting aside a portion of the

county budget for expenses. Several indicated that early voting was "too expensive for the county" and that "the state should help with the costs of early voting." Several thought that it was "really a bad situation for all small counties," and many indicated that they had "never worked harder in our life." One went so far as to say "early voting was HELL."

As Table 1 shows, counties experienced a wide range of costs in implementing early voting. The minimal total number of hours that early voting was open for the public was 42 hours, and the maximum total was 178 in the primary and 166.5 in the general election. On average, the voting sites were open for 100 hours each time.

A major factor in implementing early voting is the work force needed to staff the polling place and to tabulate the results. While we must carefully interpret the survey results because some respondents viewed the question as the number of extra workers needed beyond the permanent, full-time staff, there was tremendous variation in the number of election workers needed. The number of poll

workers ranged as high as 100 for the primary and 70 for the general election. The median number of poll workers per county was 4 for the primary and 5 for the general election.

The counties, on average, also needed 100 person hours to tabulate the primary results and 60 person hours for the general election. The number of person hours ranged as high as 3240. Both the number of early voters participating and whether or not a paper ballot was used contributed to the number of person hours needed to tabulate the results. The difficulties some counties had in tabulating the results for the primary is readily seen in that 28% of the counties did not have the early voting results finished until after 11 p.m. The tremendous improvement in tabulation time from the primary to the general election reflects the complexity of the primary ballots (which included county general elections), the learning process of conducting the initial early voting process, and a transition from paper ballots to mechanized voting.

So how much did this process cost the counties? Costs ran as high as \$51,265 for the pri-

Table 1
Early Voting Costs

		<i>Primary</i>	<i>General</i>
Total Hours of Operation	range	42 - 178	42 - 166.5
	mean	95.7	97.4
	median	97	98
Number of Workers	range	0 - 100	0 - 70
	mean	7	6.9
	median	4	5
Person Hours to Tabulate	range	0 - 3240	0 - 3240
	mean	101.73	60.88
	median	17	10
Time Finished Tabulating	before 7 p.m.	6%	19%
	7 p.m. - 9 p.m.	43%	68%
	9 p.m. - 11 p.m.	23%	11%
	after 11 p.m.	28%	2%
Estimated Total Cost	range	\$0 - \$51,265	\$0 - \$71,365
	mean	\$6,367	\$6,317
	median	\$3,070	\$3,224
	sum	\$592,146	\$587,475
Cost Per Vote	range	\$0 - \$39.91	\$0 - \$52.89
	mean	\$4.55	\$3.73
	median	\$2.58	\$1.71

Table 2
Implementation Effects of Early Voting on Cost Per Vote

A — PRIMARY ELECTION

	<i>Ballot Type</i>		<i>Site / County</i>			<i>Hours</i>		
	<i>Paper Only</i>	<i>Machine</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>
Cost Per Vote								
low	18%	48%	26%	27%	50%	24%	32%	45%
med	32%	33%	26%	47%	23%	42%	23%	35%
high	50%	19%	48%	27%	27%	33%	45%	21%
P ² = 12.69*** P ² = 9.27* P ² = 6.58								

B — GENERAL ELECTION

	<i>Ballot Type</i>		<i>Site / County</i>			<i>Hours</i>		
	<i>Paper Only</i>	<i>Machine</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>
Cost Per Vote								
low	17%	39%	19%	33%	50%	16%	30%	55%
med	35%	33%	29%	33%	33%	36%	33%	31%
high	48%	28%	52%	33%	17%	48%	36%	14%
P ² = 4.61* P ² = 9.8** P ² = 12.6**								

* indicates that $p < .10$ ** indicates that $p < .05$ *** indicates that $p < .01$

mary and \$71,365 for the general election. The mean cost was about \$6300 for each election, and the median was closer to \$3000. Because many counties used only permanent, salaried staff and absentee ballots which had already been paid for and printed, the true cost of early voting was probably even higher. Even with this low estimate, early voting cost all the counties of Tennessee an aggregate amount of almost \$600,000 per election.

Because the total cost may be inflated by the more populous counties, the cost per voter may provide a more accurate picture. The mean cost per vote cast by early ballot was \$4.55 for the primary and \$3.73 for the general election, and the median cost was \$2.58 for the primary and \$1.71 for the general election. The reduction in average costs from the primary to the general election reflects the increased use of mechanized ballot systems, but these figures are still high. These figures are much higher than the costs estimated in a survey of seven Texas counties that used early voting. Rosenfield (1994, 46) shows that Harris County (which includes Houston) spent \$3.63 per early voter in 1992, and Dallas County spent \$2.10 per early voter. In addition,

five smaller Texas counties ranging from 200,000 to 600,000 in total population showed an average cost of \$1.32 per early voter. Of further interest, these Texas counties made extensive use of satellite voting sites, whereas most Tennessee counties did not have multiple sites.

Three factors could influence the cost of early voting: ballot type; the proximity of voters to the voting site; and the hours of operation. To operationalize these three concepts, we created three variables. First, *ballot type* refers to whether the county uses paper ballots only or some type of mechanized system. We expect that mechanized ballot systems would lower the personnel costs, speed up the voting process, reduce the lines voters in which would have to wait and generally make early voting less costly for the voter and the county. Second, to operationalize *site proximity*, we used the percent of the county population which resides in the city in which any voting site was held. Presumably, access to a voting site would be easier for the citizens who live in that city than for others in the county. Third, *hours of operation* was provided by the election officials. Increased hours of operation allows greater access for citizens who might other-

wise not have the time to cast a ballot, and reduces congestion at the voting site, but it may increase the costs for the county.

To test these ideas, we used bivariate crosstabular analysis. For all three dependent variables and the proximity and hours of operation independent variables, we divided the responses into three categories of low, medium and high. The ballot type variable was separated into two categories: paper ballot only or mechanical ballot.

As Table 2 shows, ballot type has a very strong effect on the cost per early vote. Half of all "paper only" counties were in the highest cost per vote category in both elections. Likewise, counties with a low percentage of the county population living in the voting site city are in the highest cost categories. Where proximity to the voting site is low, costs tend to be much higher. On the other hand, hours of operation does not appear to have a consistently significant effect on cost per vote. Clearly, the most important factor for lowering the costs of early voting is to use mechanized ballots.

The Impact on Turnout

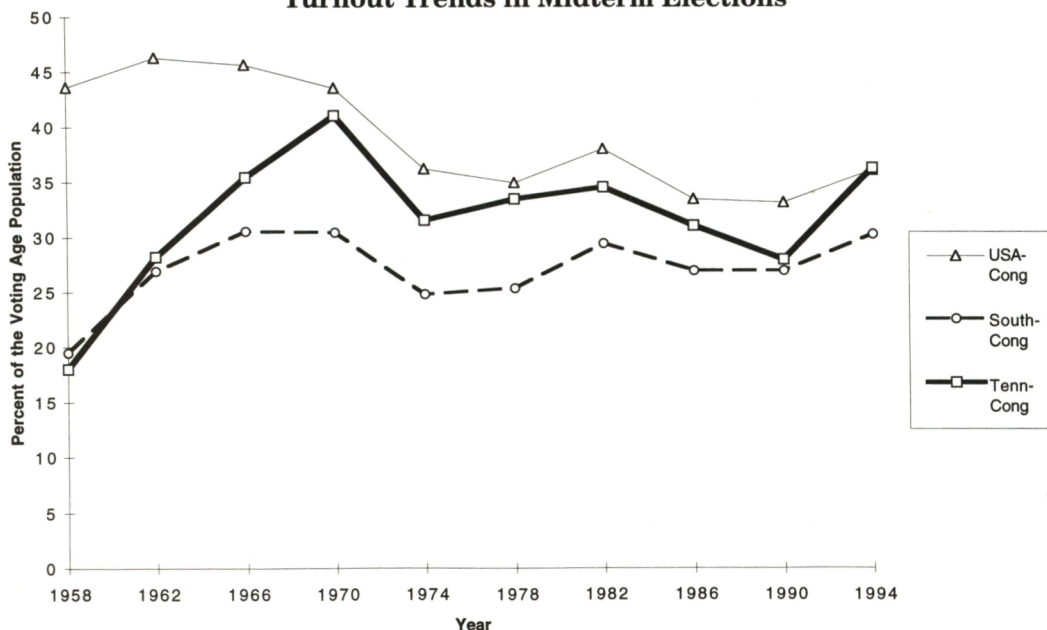
What can the Tennessee experience in 1994 tell us about the impact of early voting on turn-

out? Eight out of 10 county election officials in Tennessee believe that early voting increased participation, but did turnout increase? To assess the impact of early voting turnout, consider three ways of examining turnout. First, how did Tennessee turnout compare to the rest of the nation in 1994? Second, how did turnout in this election compare to other recent midterm elections in Tennessee? Third, were there any discernible effects at the county level?

One problem with assessing the impact of early voting is that the 1994 election was an extremely salient one for the state of Tennessee. There were two U.S. Senate seats and the gubernatorial election on the ballot. All three were hotly contested, and one of the Senate seats and the gubernatorial race did not include an incumbent. Because of the unique nature of this election, we are wary of making any grand claims about the effect of early voting on turnout. Clearly, more evidence is needed to fully assess the impact of early voting, but an early assessment may be useful for others considering such a program.

One way to evaluate Tennessee's early voting experience is to compare voter turnout in 1994 with turnout in other election years. While the 1994 election was extremely competitive in Tennessee, an examination of other

Figure 1
Turnout Trends in Midterm Elections



comparable elections proves useful in understanding the impact of early voting. Turnout in the 1994 election was remarkably high as Figure 1 indicates. With 36.2% of Tennessee's voting age population participating, turnout exceeded the average midterm rate by 5% and reached a level that is surpassed only by the 41% turnout in 1970. In fact, for the first time in modern electoral history, turnout in Tennessee surpassed the national turnout rate in a midterm election. Further, it far surpassed the southern turnout rate.

Does this relationship between early voting and turnout at the state level hold up at the county level in Tennessee? Examining the county level trend in turnout, we analyzed the change in turnout from the 1990 election to the 1994 election. The average change in turnout (based on registered voters) was 27% in the primary election and 25% in the general election. Further, only 3 of the 95 counties experienced a decrease in primary turnout from the 1990 election and 25 counties saw an increase of at least 40%. While the change in general election turnout rates is somewhat smaller, only 4 counties experienced a decline in turnout and 9 saw at least a 40% increase.

What impact did early voting have on turnout? To address this question, we examined the relationship between change in turnout and the percent of votes cast early. As Tables 3A and 3B show, early voting participation is positively related to medium and high turnout increases in the primary election. Turnout in the general election appears to be positively related to early voting, though at a reduced level of impact. While remaining cautious due to the limited nature of only studying one election year, early voting does appear to affect turnout.

If early voting affects turnout, then what implementation factors influence early voting participation? To discuss this at the county level it is necessary to be more precise about what we mean by early voting participation. It can be measured in two ways: as a percent of all registered voters and as a percent of all votes cast in the election. Turnout of registered voters may inform us about the mobilization of the electorate. This percent ranged from a low of 2% to 25% with the median being 9% in the primary. There was a slight increase in the general election with a low of 3%, a high of 23% and a median of 11%. On the other hand, the percent of all votes cast may indicate whether early voting was simply a substitute

Table 3
Impact of Early Voting on Change in Turnout (1990-1994)

A — PRIMARY ELECTION

	<i>Percent of Votes Cast Early</i>		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>
Change in Turnout			
low	63%	26%	9%
med	34%	23%	38%
high	3%	52%	53%

$P^2 = 30.12^{***}$

*** indicates that $p < .01$

B — GENERAL ELECTION

	<i>Percent of Votes Cast Early</i>		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>
Change in Turnout			
low	48%	31%	28%
med	29%	28%	38%
high	23%	41%	34%

$P^2 = 4.24$

for election day voting. Many election officials believed that "the people who [early] voted in our county were the people who would go to the polls to vote anyway." This percent ranged from a low of 5% to a high of 35%, with a median of 17% in the primary. For the general election, the minimum was 6%, the high was 42% and the median was 20%.

The results in Tables 4A and 4B use cross-tabular analysis to assess the impact of implementation factors on the two measures of early voting turnout. As both tables indicate, both proximity and ballot type affect early voting turnout as a percent of registered voters. Paper ballots significantly reduced turnout in both the primary and general election. Proximity appears to have been a greater factor in the general election. On the other hand, hours of operation did not have any effect in the primary, but it had a positive yet insignificant effect in the general election.

Surprisingly, ballot type had a much weaker effect on the percent of total votes cast early. "Paper only" counties did experience lower lev-

Table 4
Implementation Effects of Early Voting on Turnout

A — PRIMARY ELECTION

	<i>Ballot Type</i>		<i>Proximity</i>			<i>Hours of Operation</i>		
	<i>Paper Only</i>	<i>Machine</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>
Early Turnout of Registered Voters								
low	51%	19%	42%	37%	23%	27%	41%	37%
med	24%	40%	23%	30%	47%	38%	28%	30%
high	24%	40%	36%	33%	30%	35%	31%	33%
$P^2 = 10.35^{***}$ $P^2 = 4.58$ $P^2 = 1.72$								
Percent of Total Votes Cast Early								
low	44%	23%	39%	39%	20%	29%	34%	36%
med	31%	35%	32%	36%	33%	35%	38%	25%
high	24%	42%	29%	26%	47%	35%	28%	39%
$P^2 = 5.43^*$ $P^2 = 4.49$ $P^2 = 1.58$								

B — GENERAL ELECTION

	<i>Ballot Type</i>		<i>Proximity</i>			<i>Hours of Operation</i>		
	<i>Paper Only</i>	<i>Machine</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>High</i>
Early Turnout of Registered Voters								
low	46%	27%	58%	29%	10%	44%	32%	21%
med	42%	30%	29%	42%	29%	28%	41%	28%
high	13%	43%	13%	29%	61%	28%	27%	52%
$P^2 = 7.39^{**}$ $P^2 = 23.37^{***}$ $P^2 = 7.15$								
Percent of Total Votes Cast Early								
low	48%	28%	62%	29%	10%	29%	39%	31%
med	30%	35%	24%	42%	35%	36%	33%	31%
high	22%	38%	14%	29%	55%	36%	27%	38%
$P^2 = 3.58$ $P^2 = 21.99^{***}$ $P^2 = 1.26$								

* indicates that $p < .10$ ** indicates that $p < .05$ *** indicates that $p < .01$

els of turnout in both elections, but the variable is significant at only the .10 level for the primary and not at all in the general election. Proximity exhibits a pattern similar to what was found for the percent of registered voters: a weak effect in the primary, but a highly significant effect in the general election. Finally, hours of operation has no apparent relationship with the percent of total votes cast early in either type of election.

Conclusion

The early voting experience in Tennessee varied greatly both in terms of cost and par-

ticipation. While the requirements for early voting were minimal, many counties extended the early voting opportunity beyond the requirements of the state by offering satellite voting sites and extended hours of operation. However, the small number of satellite locations may not have provided for a full test of the early voting program's potential for increasing access to the ballot. Although we can assess the impact of early voting using only one year, it does appear that high levels of early voting are positively related to increases in turnout. The experience gained in the 1994 election should prove valuable to both the Tennessee election officials trying to improve the

system in the next election and for any other state officials considering the adoption of such a program.

Overall, we find that the decisions county election officials make about ballot type and the location of early voting sites are crucial elements in determining the cost of early voting and the participation rates of citizens. If the respondent who projected that early voting turnout will double in 1996 is correct, then county election officials must prepare by putting their records on computers and buying the equipment necessary to avoid paper ballots and the consequent delays. In addition, if increased participation is a goal, then the location of voting sites in population centers with easy access is a must. As more states adopt early voting and more elections occur using early voting, the subsequent impact on turnout should become more clearly defined. □

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