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Implementation of Early Voting

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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.

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 |

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 turnout?

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

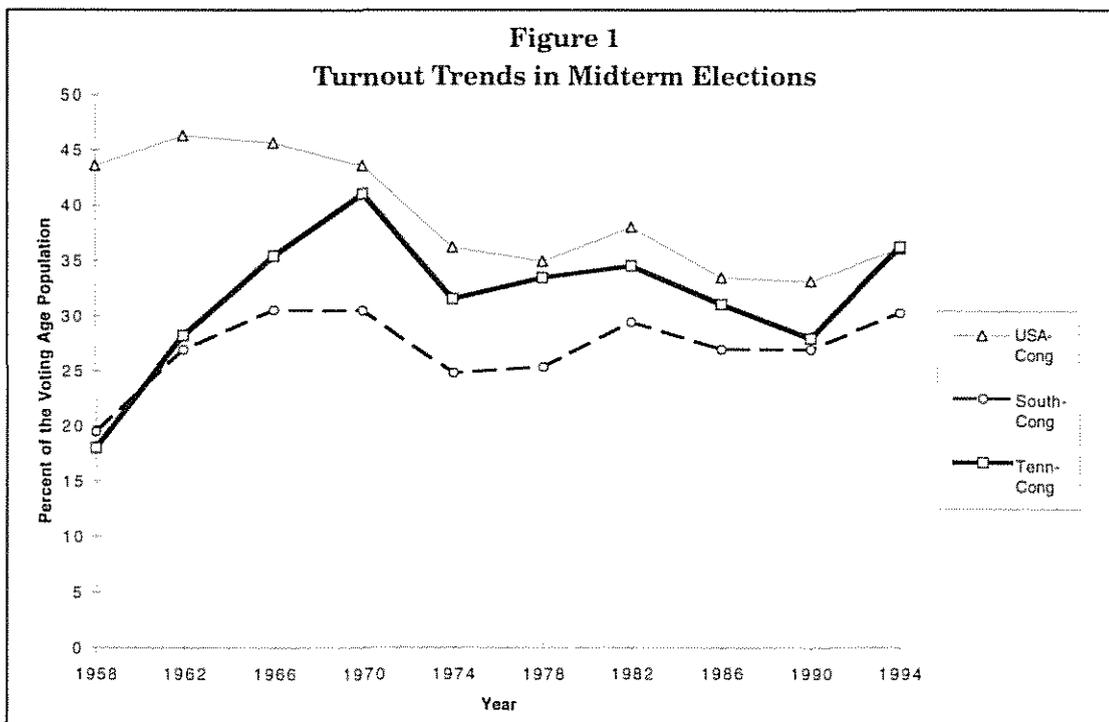


Table 4
Implementation Effects of Early Voting on Turnout

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