

CHAPTER 11

EARLY, ABSENTEE,
AND MAIL-IN
VOTING

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WHEN do we vote and does it matter that we all don't vote together? As of 2007 voters in thirty-one states were able to vote in person up to three weeks before election day (*Electionline* 2007). In all fifty states mail-in absentee voting is available with few if any restrictions on who can exercise this electoral option. As a result, approximately one-fifth of all votes cast in the 2004 Presidential election were cast before election day (2004 Current Population Survey), and the proportion of votes cast before election day ranges from a low of less than 5 percent in ten states to over 40 percent in eight states (Gronke et al. 2007). These significant changes in how and when voters may cast their ballots raise critical questions regarding their consequences for democratic politics in the US. Does the opportunity to vote prior to election day increase voter turnout? Do individuals who cast their ballots before election day differ from individuals who vote on election day? Do the determinants of vote choice differ depending on when individuals cast their ballots? How have public officials, the public, and the press responded to these new opportunities to vote?

Our review of literature pertaining to these questions focuses on what we know and what we do not know about voting early. We refer to absentee voting, mail-in

voting, and in-person early voting generally as “early voting,” although these three types of voting early are procedurally distinctive. We do this in part because systematic studies of one type of voting early compared to others typically produce similar results. We conclude the essay by identifying what we believe might be a fruitful research agenda on early voting, as well as the methodological challenges that scholars will likely confront.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARLY VOTING

Opportunities to vote before election day are not new to the American electoral process. Voters have long had the opportunity to vote before election day by casting an absentee ballot, normally by mail (see Bensel 2004). In the past, states limited this form of early voting to individuals who were unable for reasons of travel or disability to vote on election day at a voting place in their voting jurisdiction. The significant rise in number of votes cast before election day begins with the adoption of in-person early voting in Texas in 1988.

In-person early voting differs from absentee voting in that voters may ballot at one or more satellite voting locations, and cast a vote in person without offering an excuse for not being able to vote on election day (Gronke and Toffey 2008; Stein and Garcia-Monet 1997). Satellite voting locations vary by state, and may include government facilities as well as non-traditional locations such as grocery stores, shopping malls, schools, libraries, and other locations. Early voting generally is conducted on the same voting equipment used on election day, as opposed to vote by mail, which is conducted on paper ballots. The time period for early voting varies from state to state, but most often it is available during a period of ten to fourteen days before the election, generally ending on the Friday or Saturday immediately preceding the election. More than half the states (thirty-one), offer some sort of in-person early voting including early in-person and mail-in absentee voting (*Electionline* 2007).

An important feature of in-person or satellite early voting is that a voter can ballot at any of a number of early voting places within the voting jurisdiction, usually a county. Because voters are not required to ballot at their residential precinct they are given a ballot appropriate to their residential location. This condition allows election administrators significant discretion in locating polling places at larger venues more centrally located to where voters work, shop, recreate, and travel. The larger venues also afford election administrators greater efficiencies in the use of their poll workers and polling equipment. These characteristics of

in-person early voting are thought to make voting more convenient and increase voter participation.

Absentee voting or “vote by mail” continues, with twenty-nine states allowing no-excuse absentee voting by mail. Another twenty-one states (and the District of Columbia) require an excuse to vote absentee by mail (*Electionline* 2007). Oregon conducts all of its election by mail.¹

Early voting is not limited to the US. Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller (2008) reports that 46 percent of the democratic nations allow voters to cast ballots before the designated national election day (see EPIC 2004). Alternative forms of voting seem to be popular with voters, as reported by Southwell and Burchett (1997) and as can be seen with the increasing number of individuals using alternative methods of voting (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007).

EARLY VOTING AND VOTER PARTICIPATION

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The empirical expectation is that voter turnout will be higher in states with relaxed absentee voting and in-person early voting, *ceteris paribus*, than in states without these options for early voting. Who is most advantaged by the increased opportunities to ballot before election day is not obvious. Presumably the costs of voting (e.g., time) are a greater obstacle to those who are least able to bear these costs, i.e., the poor, uneducated, and politically disinterested. Conversely, we might expect that those who are best able to bear the costs of voting are also best positioned to take advantage of the added convenience of early voting opportunities.

In this way, convenience voting reforms such as early voting, relaxed absentee voting, and mail-in ballots are thought to lower the costs of voting and thereby increase turnout. By expanding opportunities to vote, the link between voting reforms and the costs of voting seem clear. However, the link between the costs of voting and levels of participation as suggested by the Downs (1957) model of turnout might be more problematic as it under-predicts levels of turnout (Fiorina 1990). This is potentially problematic for research on election reforms that primarily rely on the connection between the costs of voting and levels of voter turnout.

However, recent refinements to the Downsian model of turnout suggest rates that are consistent with observed levels of turnout (Bendor, Collins, and Kumar

¹ Washington and Colorado allow all-mail balloting in non-federal elections as requested by county election officials.

2006; Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting 2003; Fowler 2006). Specifically, these models argue that while voters are responsive to the costs and benefits of voting they do not necessarily have full information about those costs. Rather, voters are argued to learn about the costs and benefits of voting over time such that they condition their present and future behavior on their past experiences. In that way, an individual who has had better past experiences voting is more likely to vote in future elections than an individual who has had less positive experiences.

Theoretical models that incorporate a learning mechanism have suggested rates of turnout that are consistent with observed aggregate levels of turnout (Bendor, Collins, and Kumar 2006; Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting 2003). Others have specified different learning mechanisms which also produce predictions that are consistent with observed levels of turnout at the individual and aggregate levels (Fowler 2006). Empirical work on how voting is habit-forming additionally seems to suggest that individuals may rely on a learning mechanism for determining the likely costs and benefits of voting when deciding whether or not to vote (Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Plutzer 2002).

These theoretical refinements to the Downsian model of turnout seem to have at least three important implications for the study of election reforms. The first is that it helps to establish a stronger theoretical rationale for the effects of election reforms on turnout. Second, it suggests that election reforms might have a greater long-term effect such that the full effect might not be immediately realized. And third, we might additionally expect voters to settle into a particular mode of voting. That is, theoretical models might suggest that voting is not only habit-forming generally, but voters might also stay with a particular mode of voting (e.g., early, absentee) across elections.

Liberalized voting by mail (Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001) and in-person early voting (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007; Karp and Banducci 2000, 2001; Kousser and Mullin 2007; Neeley and Richardson 2001; Stein 1998; Stein and Garcia-Monet 1997) were found to have an insignificant or marginal effect on increasing the likelihood an individual will vote. Neeley and Richardson report “that early voting merely conveniences those who would have voted anyway” (2001, 381). Stein (1998) reports that voter turnout among resource-poor voters does not benefit from the adoption of in-person early voting. More importantly, early voters are disproportionately likely to have voted in the past (Hanmer and Traugott 2004; Southwell and Burchett 2000). Southwell and Burchett offer a dissent from this finding, for voting by mail. Studying voter turnout in forty-eight Oregon elections, “all-mail elections increased registered voter turnout by 10% over the expected turnout in a traditional polling place election” (2000, 76)—although others have reported the effect of vote by mail in Oregon to be about 4.7 percent (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007).

The effects of vote-by-mail might also vary by the type of election. While studies have found that the effects of vote-by-mail are generally not substantial, Magleby

(1987) reports that mail ballots in local elections led to an increase in turnout of around 19 percent in San Diego, California and Portland, Oregon. Analyzing data from Oregon between 1986 and 2000, Karp and Banducci (2000) also report variation in the effects of mail-in ballots by the type of election as local elections show the greatest effect, with an increase of 26.5 percent, while midterm elections actually show a decrease of 2.9 percent. These findings suggest that vote-by-mail might have the greatest effect for the less salient and less publicized elections. That vote-by-mail might be particularly effective at increasing turnout in local elections is consistent with findings also reported by Hamilton (1988).

Others have also reported varying effects of vote-by-mail. Using a unique opportunity to study the effects of early voting, Kousser and Mullin (2007) also report that vote-by-mail seems to increase turnout in local elections but not national elections. Kousser and Mullin analyze data on California elections, wherein precincts with less than 250 people use mail-in ballots while larger precincts use traditional polling locations in the same election. This might provide greater control for potentially confounding variables and more reliable estimates of the causal effect of vote-by-mail on turnout.² Kousser and Mullin report that vote by mail seems to decrease turnout by around 2 percent in national general elections and increases turnout by about 7.6 percent in local elections.

Berinsky, Burns, and Michael Traugott find that “contrary to the expectations of many reformers VBM [voting by mail] advantages the resource-rich by keeping them in the electorate and VBM does little to change the behavior of the resource-poor” (2001, 178).” Simply put, electoral reforms have only been used by those who otherwise would have been most likely to vote without them. Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott (2001), Karp and Banducci (2000, 2001), Southwell (2000), Southwell and Burchett (2000), and Stein (1998) find that early voters are more likely to have strong partisan and ideological preferences, to be more attentive and interested in politics, wealthier, and older. Curiously, early voters are not significantly different than election-day voters on most socio-demographic variables, including race/ethnicity and education. Most importantly, scholars have failed to identify a significant partisan or candidate bias between early and election-day voters.

Convenience is more influential to the infrequent voter’s decision to vote. For the frequent voter convenience influences when they vote (election day or before). Since non-habitual voters are less likely to vote, early or on election day, convenience may have a significant and positive effect on their decision to vote, before or on election day. The extant literature provides supports for this position. As discussed, the literature (Berinsky 2005; Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Stein 1998) shows that early voters are significantly more partisan, ideological, interested in politics, and more likely to have voted in past elections. Most importantly, early

² Kousser and Mullin also use a matching procedure to further account for imbalances in the data.

voters are more likely than election-day voters to make their vote choice before election day. We suspect this is the reason why convenience voting before election day (i.e., in-person early voting, mail-in ballots, and mail-in absentee voting) does not entice infrequent voters to ballot before election day.

One reason why early voting has not significantly increased voter participation may be the absence of an effective means and agent for implementing early voting. Those who administer and conduct elections, county-level election administrators, have little incentive and fewer resources with which to harness early voting opportunities into increased voter participation. The more likely agents for converting early voting opportunities into voter turnout are political parties and their contesting candidates. Political parties and candidates have an incentive to employ early voting as part of their electoral campaigns if these actions enhance their chances of winning election. There is empirical evidence to support this hypothesis.

Examining absentee voting in California and Iowa, Patterson and Caldeira (1985) provide systematic evidence for the varying effects of electoral reforms on voter turnout. Consistent with other literature on electoral reforms, they find that the proportion of votes cast by mail is correlated with the demographic characteristics associated with election-day balloting (e.g., age, income, and urban residence). Similar relationships between absentee voting and demographic characteristics have been reported by others but age seems to be the most consistent, with conflicting findings for race, income, education, and partisanship (Barreto et al. 2006; Dubin and Kaslow 1996;). The most striking finding, however, was that the correlates of absentee voting *varied across elections and between states*. More specifically, Patterson and Caldeira report that “the state in which one party mounted a substantial effort had a higher rate of absentee voting” (1985, 785). This finding suggests that the effect early voting may have on voter turnout is dependent on a mediating condition, the campaign activities of political candidates and parties.

The cumulative evidence to date suggests that early voting has made voting more convenient for engaged and frequent voters while doing little to enhance the likelihood that infrequent voters will ballot before election day. There is, however, some evidence that several attributes of early voting, (e.g., being able to vote at any voting place in the jurisdiction, larger number of voting machines, parking, voting places that are centrally located to where voters work, shop, and recreate, and more qualified poll workers) are more stimulative of election-day voting among infrequent voters. This of course suggests that the turnout effect of early voting is wasted on early voters but has a significant and positive effect on the likelihood that infrequent voters will ballot on election day. We return to this finding and its implications for new research later in the chapter.

EARLY VOTING AND CONDUCT OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

There is both anecdotal and empirical evidence that early voting has significantly changed the way candidates and parties conduct their campaigns. One Republican pollster aptly described the effect: "You need to divide the electorate into two groups. Run one campaign at early voters and another at Election Day voters" (Nordlinger 2003). Supportive of this assessment is the rise in the number of votes cast before election day. Common to all campaigns are efforts to bring voters to the polls on election day. These get out the vote (GOTV) activities are expensive in terms of both labor and capital. Before the adoption of early voting GOTV activities were concentrated on the weekend before election day. Every day of early voting, however, is an occasion for GOTV activities, significantly increasing campaign costs. One Democratic consultant estimated that early voting has increased the cost of campaigns by 25 percent (Nordlinger 2003).

Surveying county party chairs in Texas, Leighley (2001) and Stein, Leighley, and Owens (2003) confirm that both parties took significant steps to mobilize their supporters through early voting opportunities in their respective counties. Moreover, the incidence with which leaders in each party have used early voting to mobilize their base has increased over time. Leighley's 1995 survey of county party chairs found that 42 percent of county party chairs reported using early voting as part of their campaign strategies to mobilize partisan supporters (i.e., provide voters with transportation to the polls during early voting). Democratic county chairs (55 percent) were significantly more likely to report using early voting as part of their campaign strategies than their Republican counterparts (32 percent).

Stein et al. (2003) find that when Democratic mobilization activities are matched with significant opportunities to vote early (i.e., a great number of sites and days of early voting) there is a significant increase in the likelihood that partisan supporters will ballot. Moreover, Texas Democrats were rewarded at the ballot box in 1992 when their mobilization efforts were matched with greater opportunities to vote at non-traditional voting places including convenience stores and shopping malls (Stein and Garcia-Monet 1997). These findings are consistent with and partially explain the weak relationship between early voting and voter turnout, especially among infrequent voters. In addition to significant opportunities to vote early at places where voters are likely to be located, there must also be a partisan effort to use early voting to mobilize likely party supporters before early voting will have a positive effect on turnout. Here, however, the beneficiaries of early voting are both strong partisans and likely voters.

As discussed earlier, Patterson and Calderia (1985) also suggest that absentee voting and its impact on turnout and performance are sensitive to partisan efforts

to mobilize mail-in ballots. Absentee voting increases when political parties identify likely absentee voters among their supporters and work to turn out these persons for absentee voting. Absent any effort on the part of political parties to mobilize absentee voting among their partisan supporters, the effect of mail-in balloting on voter turnout is expected to be negligible.

Oliver's (1996) multi-state study of absentee voting tests Patterson and Caldeira's partisan mobilization hypothesis of absentee voting. Oliver finds that in states where absentee voting requirements are most liberal and where political parties invest time and resources to mobilize absentee voters, "the levels of absentee voting rise and the characteristics of absentee voters change" (1996, 510). The most important by-product of absentee voting and liberalized absentee voting "has come from the greater mobilizing campaigns of the Republican party" (1996, 511). Curiously, Democratic candidates do not benefit from increased liberalization of absentee voting and Democratic efforts to mobilize absentee voting. This might suggest that Democratic candidates confront a different set of obstacles when mobilizing their supporters, leading Democrats to rely on early voting and other electoral reforms when mobilizing their partisans.

Together, the findings of Leighley, Stein et al., Patterson and Caldeira, and Oliver suggest that the relationship between electoral reform, social-demographic factors (i.e., target populations of voters), and electoral participation may be mediated by partisan campaign activity. Candidates and their parties are expected to know who their supporters are, the likelihood that they will ballot in an election, the costs of mobilizing these supporters, and the probable impact voter mobilization will have on the outcome of an election. These findings suggest that parties and candidates have an important role in catalyzing the effects of election reforms.

EARLY VOTING, DISTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL INFORMATION, AND THE DETERMINANTS OF VOTE CHOICE

To what extent do voters who ballot early miss late-breaking campaign activities that could be decisive to their candidate choices? To what extent are early voters simply individuals who have made their vote choices early; strong partisans uninfluenced by campaign messages and political news; inattentive to political news?

Using data on California similar to the Kousser and Mullin (2007) study, Meredith and Malhotra (2008) examine the effects of mail-in ballots on the information

that individuals have to make their vote choice. Specifically, they analyze votes cast for presidential candidates in California's primary election in 2008, focusing on John Edwards, Fred Thompson, and Rudy Guiliani. They focus on these candidates because they withdrew from the race prior to election day. Meredith and Malhotra (2008) report results which suggest that a number of voters missed important information by voting by mail. Specifically they estimate that between 40 and 50 percent of Edwards voters and 20–30 percent of Guiliani and Thompson voters would have voted differently had they not voted by mail (Meredith and Malhotra 2008, 18).

As discussed above, Stein (1998), Neeley and Richardson (2001), and Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott (2001) report that early voters are significantly more interested in and attentive to politics than election-day voters. This finding has led several researchers to hypothesize that the determinants of vote choice might significantly vary by when a voter casts their ballot. More specifically, Stein, Leighley, and Owens (2003) hypothesize that early voters will rely more on their partisan affiliation and ideological preferences than election-day voters when choosing among contending candidates. The candidate choices of early voters pre-date the active period of a political campaign. Though early voters are highly attentive to and knowledgeable about politics, candidate issue positions, and candidate traits, Stein et al. hypothesize that these factors are not as influential as partisanship in the choices of early voters. Like the strong partisans and ideologues they are, early voters believe their party's nominees share their own values and issue positions. The adage "I am Democrat (Republican) don't confuse me with the facts," is an apt description of how early voters choose their candidates.³

In contrast, Stein et al. reason that election-day voters rely more on candidate evaluations and less on partisan affiliation and ideology when choosing between contending candidates. Even among strong partisans, the expectation is that party affiliation of election-day voters will exert less influence on their vote choices than other attitudes and beliefs. Unlike early voters, election-day voters are less likely to rely only on their partisan affiliation in making their electoral choices. Election-day voters may also be less attentive and knowledgeable about politics than early voters, as indicated in previous research, and rely more on their limited information about the candidates and issues when making their vote decision. There is some evidence that practitioners of political campaigns believe in the veracity of these hypotheses. One Republican campaign consultant offered the following description of how early voting influences his campaign strategy. "By concentrating on solidifying the base early, I can bank these [early] voters and concentrate on debating issues of concern to swing voters at the end [of the election]" (Nordlinger 2003, 3).

³ This observation is not intended to be a disparaging comment on partisan voting. As Downs (1957) has demonstrated, a reliance on party identification as a cue for voting is rational, efficient, and highly effective (i.e., choosing a candidate closest to the voter's own preferences).

Stein et al. (2003) report modest but statistically significant support for their hypotheses. Studying the 2002 Texas gubernatorial and senatorial elections, the authors find that party identification and ideology have greater impacts on early voters than on election-day voters' choices among contesting gubernatorial candidates. The same finding, however, does not hold for voting in the 2002 Texas senatorial election. These findings are at best suggestive of what researchers might find as the number of ballots cast before election day increases. If campaigns influence how electoral rules are implemented, we might expect that in time candidates and their parties follow the advice of one consultant and differentiate their campaign messages between early and election-day voters. Given the recent adoption of early voting in many states, it may take longer than a few election cycles before we observe this effect.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM EARLY VOTING AND NEW ELECTION REFORMS

One of the most significant disappointments with these reforms is that the balance of evidence suggests a general failure to significantly increase voter participation, especially among those least likely to vote. In spite of this consensus finding, there are significant lessons from the experience of early voting that can inform how we organize and conduct elections in ways that may also stimulate participation among infrequent voters. New research suggests that effects of early voting may be related to the location of voting places as well as the number of days before election day voters are allowed to cast their ballot.

What would happen if infrequent voters were afforded the convenience of early voting on election day? Accessible parking, short waiting lines to vote, and an abundance of election-day workers to assist voters with balloting on electronic voting machines might be a strong incentive for infrequent voters to vote on election day. Again, there is supporting empirical evidence to suggest that the corresponding costs of voting have a significant negative impact on the likelihood of voting.

Gimpel and Schuknecht (2003) find that the geographic accessibility of polling places has a significant and independent effect on the likelihood that individuals will vote: "even after controlling for variables that account for the motivation, information and resource levels of local precinct populations, we find that accessibility does make a significant difference to turnout" (2003, 471). Dyck and Gimpel (2005) extend this same finding for election-day voting to the likelihood that

individuals will cast an absentee ballot by mail, or vote at an in-person early-voting polling place.

Haspel and Knotts (2005) report that voting is extremely sensitive to distance between the voter's residence and polling place. They find "small differences in distance from the polls can have a significant impact on voter turnout" (2005, 560). Moreover, Haspel and Knotts find that turnout increases after moving a voter's polling place closer to their residence. The authors explain that "it appears that the gain in turnout that accrues from splitting precincts outweigh the loss due to any confusion over the location of the polling place" (2005, 569), in part because distance from the new polling place was reduced.

Brady and McNulty's (2004) study of Los Angeles County's precinct consolidation in 2003 confirms Haspel and Knotts finding. "The change in polling place location has two effects: a transportation effect resulting from the change in distance to the polling place and a disruption effect resulting from the information required to find a new polling place" (Brady and McNulty 2004, 40). These two effects are roughly equal for the voter who had experienced an increase of one mile between their home and voting place.

Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997) similarly find that the incidence of early voting is sensitive to the location of early-voting polling places. The proportion of votes cast early was significantly greater at non-traditional locations (e.g., grocery and convenience stores, shopping malls, and mobile voting places) than traditional locations like government buildings and schools. The logic underlying this finding is simple; voters are more likely to frequent stores and other commercial locations than schools and government facilities.

Together these findings suggest that the convenience and accessibility of a voter's election-day voting place is a significant incentive to voting. If this assessment is true, could election-day balloting be organized and administered to enhance voter turnout especially among infrequent voters? The popularity of early voting (Southwell and Burchett 2000) and other forms of convenience voting (i.e., voting by mail) suggests that many voters prefer the ease afforded by early voting, i.e., accessible voting locations, short lines, and assistance in using new or unfamiliar voting technologies. There is some reason to believe that voter turnout might marginally increase if we imported these "conveniences" to election-day balloting, especially for infrequent voters.

A recent innovation adopted in Colorado, Indiana, and Texas involves replacing traditional precinct-based voting places with election-day vote centers. Election-day vote centers are non-precinct-based locations for voting on election day. The sites are fewer in number than precinct-based voting stations, centrally located to major population centers (rather than distributed among many residential locations), and rely on county-wide voter registration databases accessed by electronic voting machines. Voters in the county are provided ballots appropriate to their specific voting jurisdiction. Of course this mode of balloting is what early

voters are afforded before election day. It is thought (Stein and Vonnahme 2008) that the use of voting centers on election day will increase voter turnout by reducing the cost and/or inconvenience associated with voting at traditional precinct locations for election-day voters. Unlike those who vote early, election-day voters are less partisan, ideological, and interested in politics. Consequently they may be more susceptible to the convenience of election-day vote centers.

Conceptually, there are two features of vote centers that separate them from precinct-based polling locations that might also be useful in understanding how early voting affects voter turnout. The first characteristic is whether the polling sites are open to all voters in the county or exclusive to a certain precinct (or combined precincts). The second is centralization, where polling locations are larger and more centrally located. Previous research argues that there may be a number of theoretical connections between these characteristics and voter turnout. There is also some empirical evidence which suggests that vote centers might increase turnout, particularly among less engaged voters (Stein and Vonnahme 2008).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a number of possible directions for future research. As mentioned above, future research on election reforms might pick up from more basic research on models of voter turnout. Specifically, behavioral models of turnout that incorporate a learning mechanism into Downs's classical model of turnout not only provide a stronger theoretical basis for the immediate effect of election reforms on turnout but might also suggest other effects.

Specifically, if voters are thought to learn about the costs and benefits of voting over time, the full effect of election reforms might not be realized when the reform is first implemented. Rather, it might take several elections for voters to gain information about the ease of voting with convenience voting reforms. This raises at least two additional questions. The first is how long it would take to realize the full effect of reform, which would be affected by how many individuals initially consider alternative modes of voting. The second is how quickly the learning process is thought to take place.

Theoretical models of turnout might also suggest that voters will stick with a particular mode of voting. If a voter finds a particular mode of voting very convenient, the voter might tend to stay with it across elections. Previous empirical research suggests that voting is habit-forming (Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Plutzer 2002) but insofar as voting encompasses a number of specific modes of

voting we might further consider whether voters tend to stay with a particular method across elections.

At least two other areas of recent research might have interesting implications for the study of election reforms. We have seen how voters who cast their ballot on or before election day might differ. Research on how personality traits affect one's likelihood of voting might suggest additional differences between early and election-day voters. That is, previous research has found that an individual's willingness to delay benefits affects their likelihood of voting, such that individuals who are less likely to discount future benefits relative to current costs are more likely to vote (Fowler and Kam 2007). Temporal discounting of benefits might be magnified for early voting, which increases the gap between when a voter incurs the costs of voting (even if reduced) and when the benefits are realized. If early voters have especially low rates of discounting, they might also make their vote choices on the basis of different issues, or be more willing to tolerate short-term costs for better long-term policies.

There has also been research on the social influences of voting that might have important implications for the study of election reforms. Previous research suggests that individuals do not vote in isolation from one another, but rather influence one another in a positive way such that if one associates with voters, one is more likely to vote, while having associates that are non-voters makes one less likely to participate (Fowler 2005; Nickerson 2008). This has at least two important implications for the study of voter turnout. First, it might create methodological challenges for the study of election reforms which might implicitly assume that the reforms affect individuals separately (Rubin 2006). Second, social influence on voting suggests that we might experience turnout (or abstention) cascades (Fowler 2005). That is, certain contexts might be ripe for a turnout cascade such that if a small number of individuals can be converted into voters it could lead to a dramatic increase in turnout through social influence. Applied to election reforms, it suggests that an election reform with a relatively modest direct impact could have a larger indirect effect (Vonnaahme 2008). This raises the possibility that we might see a differentiated effect of election reforms, which might work well in a particular area but have less effect in another.⁴

The information voters obtain about candidates and their campaigns comes from the candidates via the news media. If, as suggested, early voting accelerates the pace and the duration of a campaign and varies the messages delivered to voters, this should be reflected in the news media's coverage of campaigns. We might expect that news coverage in states with early voting will differ, *ceteris paribus*, from news coverage in non-early-voting states. For example, if candidates in early-voting

⁴ As a conjecture, this type of process might plausibly help to explain the substantially larger effects of vote-by-mail in local elections than for national elections.

states initiate GOTV activities earlier than in non-early-voting states, we should observe a greater volume of political news coverage earlier in the campaign cycle in early-voting states than in non-early-voting states. The difference in news coverage might extend to the content of political reporting and reflect the earlier emphasis on partisan and ideological appeals candidates make in early-voting rather than non-early-voting states (Dunaway 2007).

One of the expected outcomes of early voting (Rosenfield 1994 report) was a significant saving in the administrative cost of conducting elections. Research on the costs of election administration is scant and even more so for alternative methods of voting. A 1994 study by the Federal Election Commission on the costs of early voting in Texas reported that early voting was substantially more expensive per vote than election-day voting. Vote-by-mail is also expected to reduce the costs of election administration and there is some evidence of cost reductions for local elections (Hamilton 1988). It would be interesting to know whether early voting in its various forms helps or hinders efforts to obtain efficiency gains in the operation of elections, particularly in the wake of the *Help America Vote Act*. Potential effects on the costs of election administration might also contribute to our understanding of how these reforms spread.

Conducting research on alternative modes of voting, especially their effect on voter participation, faces several methodological challenges and problems. First, there is a paucity of reliable survey data on how voters ballot. The standard sources for voter studies include the American National Election Study (ANES) and Current Population Survey (CPS). The ANES produces a sample of approximately 1,500 that is not representative of the states with different voting opportunities. Consequently the sample of voters who report voting early, absentee, or by mail is neither random nor sufficiently large enough to conduct analysis of early voting as either endogenous or exogenous variable. The sample of persons interviewed for the CPS is sufficiently large ($N=50,000$) to cover all fifty states and produce a sample representative of states with different methods of voting. Unfortunately, few other questions are asked of respondents that might be useful for the purposes of explaining voter participation, including partisan affiliation.

A significant limitation with survey data on voter participation is the tendency for respondents to over-report participation (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001; Cassel and Sigelman 2001; Katosh and Traugott 1981; Sigelman 1982; Silver, Abramson, and Anderson 1986). Though over-reporting may be less problematic for predicting vote choice (Cassel and Sigelman 2001) it seems to be problematic for researchers studying vote turnout and modes of balloting.

Ideally we would test our theories of early voting and its impact on voter turnout with reliable and valid measures of voter participation and mode of participation. Furthermore, tests of the efficacy of early voting and other modes

of balloting designed to increase voter turnout would be tested with longitudinal/panel designs in which the same voter can be observed over time and across different elections.

Annotated archival voting histories, available from county clerks and election officials, provide researchers with some of the needed precision for studying early voting and voter participation. Archival voting records provide precision on the key dependent variable: whether and when (how often) an individual voted. Of course, voter mobility may introduce significant obstacles to tracking a voter over time. This obstacle to maintaining longitudinal voting histories may be short-lived. The *Help America Vote Act* requires that all states have voter registration databases that are interoperable between jurisdictions within their states by 2008. Interoperability between states is under way, increasing the likelihood we can obtain reliable longitudinal voting histories in the near future.⁵

Recent methodological innovations in political science research might also improve research on the effects of early voting and related methods of voting. Matching methods (or data pre-processing) might allow us to better understand the effects of the reform by allowing for more reliable estimates of the causal effects of the reforms from observational data. Matching has been shown to be particularly useful for studies that attempt to establish a causal relationship between two factors, such as early voting and turnout (Morgan and Winship 2007). The advantages of matching are that the statistical results are less sensitive to model specification than are regression estimates alone and the results from matching analyses have been closer to experimental benchmarks (Ho et al. 2007). Matching methods have been useful in many areas of scientific research and have recently been used in political science studies (Rubin 2006).

While matching is a useful way of making adjustments for control variables, a persistent problem in studies of the effects of electoral reforms is control variables that we do not observe. Voting is a complex decision and it is difficult (or impossible) to control for every important factor. To supplement matching methods, which allow us to better account for observed variables, scholars can also use formal sensitivity analyses to assess how unobserved variables could affect the results (Gastwirth, Krieger, and Rosenbaum 1998; Imbens 2003; Rosenbaum 1989). While this approach has not been widely used in studies of electoral reforms it provides a useful way to assess the robustness of the results from a particular research design.

More generally, the future study of election reforms might benefit from additional research questions, advances in data collection, developments in the analysis of observational studies for causal inference, and basic theoretical and empirical

⁵ Four midwestern states have agreed to share voter registration data across their states. See <http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/2005-12-11_MO-KS-IA-NE-MemorandumOfUnderstanding.pdf>.

research on models of turnout. By building from these areas of research the study of election reforms might not only contribute to a larger body of research on voter turnout but also provide more and better information about the effects of election reforms in particular.

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