ASSESSING THE TREND TOWARD LIBERALIZATION: HAS NO-EXCUSE ABSENTEE VOTING INCREASED VOTER TURNOUT?

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ABSTRACT

Few researchers have attempted to investigate the apparent link between rates of absentee voting and voter turnout in U.S. elections. In an effort to sketch a more accurate portrait of this relationship, my own research expands upon an existing theoretical framework. “The Effects of Eligibility Restrictions and Party Activity on Absentee Voting and Overall Turnout,” by J. Eric Oliver appeared in the May 1996 issue of the American Journal of Political Science. Using data from the 1992 Current Population Survey – Voter Supplement File, Oliver employs logistic regressions with key variables of interest measuring state restrictions to absentee voting, the nature of each state’s primary elections, and the extent of party activity in each state.

I have updated and revised Oliver’s research using a more recent edition of the Current Population Survey (November 2004). Where appropriate, relevant changes to state absentee voting restrictions and party primaries over the past decade have been incorporated within modified versions of Oliver’s regression models. In contrast to the research conducted by Oliver more than a decade ago, I find no quantifiable association between access to absentee ballots and overall voter turnout. Moreover, I find no evidence to suggest that voter turnout varies between states with closed primaries and those holding open primary elections.
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INTRODUCTION

For more than three decades, voter turnout in Congressional and Presidential elections has steadily and conspicuously declined, and participation in virtually all state and local elections has followed a corresponding pattern. While turnout in the 2004 elections was the highest that had been recorded since 1992, rates of registration and voting were still below levels attained during the 1950s and 1960s.\(^1\) Since the late 1970s, many states have expanded eligibility for absentee voting to include students and other individuals incapable of voting in-person on Election Day; some states have even mandated the universal availability of absentee ballots.\(^2\) The liberalization of absentee voting eligibility represents an effort by states to reduce the perceived (or actual) inconvenience that may be associated with voting in-person, and thereby reverse the downward trend of electoral participation. Whether these efforts have resulted in a meaningful increase in voter turnout will be the overarching subject matter of the present inquiry.

The Voting and Registration Supplement of the November 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS), a comprehensive survey of potential voters, offers a strong preliminary indication of typical voting behavior. According to a summary report prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau:


Of the 142 million people who reported that they were registered to vote, 16 million (12 percent) did not vote in the 2004 presidential election. Of these registered nonvoters, 20 percent reported that they did not vote because they were too busy or had conflicting work or school schedules. Another 15 percent reported that they were ill, disabled, or had a family emergency. . . Some other specified reasons for not voting included out of town (9 percent), confusion or uncertainty about registration (7 percent), forgetting to vote (3 percent), and transportation problems (2 percent).³

Based upon these findings, it seems reasonable to presume that the majority of non-voters failed to cast a ballot due to personal commitments or costs; in other words, the choice of whether or not to vote may be a function of any inconvenience associated with voting. If this is the case, then state efforts to remove restrictions to absentee voting should increase the likelihood of participation by those who would not otherwise cast a ballot.

J. Eric Oliver (1996) asserts that state restrictions are not the sole determinant of absentee voting. Instead, Oliver suggests that state-by-state levels of absentee voting reflect not only state voting laws, but also voter mobilization efforts (or lack thereof) within each state. Using data from the Voter Supplement of the 1992 Current Population Survey, Oliver developed a logistic regression model with key variables measuring the relative permissiveness of state absentee voting restrictions and intrastate party activity. His findings are summarized as follows:

Liberalized eligibility to cast an absentee ballot increases levels of absentee voting. Absentee liberalization does not, by itself, however, increase overall turnout. It only stimulates overall turnout when it is combined with state party activity. . . .

In those states with restrictive laws, absentee voting is a relatively minor phenomenon limited to students and the elderly. In states where senior citizens are given automatic eligibility and partisan lists are available, parties are mobilizing them to vote by mail in higher numbers. Their disproportionate voting drives up both levels of absentee voting and turnout in general. In states where anyone can vote absentee, overall levels of turnout increase when parties get absentee ballot applications into the hands of their supporters.4

The following analysis will reapply Oliver’s methodology using data from the Voting and Registration Supplement of the November 2004 Current Population Survey. It seems appropriate to revisit Oliver’s model using data from another presidential election year. This approach allows for the comparison of two elections in which voter turnout was relatively high vis-à-vis recent midterm elections. As such, the primary focus of the following analysis will be to determine whether the conclusions reached by Oliver can be considered legitimate reflections of voting behavior. In general, this study will endeavor to replicate Oliver’s work as closely as possible, while controlling for relevant variations in these key measures. By revisiting Oliver’s methodology with more recent data, the following research should offer additional insights regarding the utility of liberalized absentee eligibility standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While a comprehensive and detailed body of literature addressing voter motivation and mobilization in general is readily available, comparatively little research has been conducted on the phenomenon of absentee voting. Because the widespread

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4 J. Eric Oliver, 510-511.
availability of absentee ballots represents a relatively recent development in the United States’ electoral apparatus, an overwhelming majority of research relating to voter turnout offers only negligible analysis of voting in absentia. However, a common thread of previous scholarship has been the focus upon the determinants of individual voting behavior. Since the primary assumption underlying the recent liberalization of absentee voting restrictions is that many individuals are unable or unwilling to visit polling locations on Election Day, past efforts to assess voting behavior shall be outlined here. Whether the following research sheds light upon the relationship between absentee voting and voter turnout is particularly relevant to the present inquiry.

The history of absentee voting in the United States can be traced to the Civil War, when many Union soldiers were permitted to vote while in active duty. Vermont became the first state to approve absentee voting legislation in 1896, and similar statutes became commonplace in the first two decades of the 20th century. Although servicemen were the initial targets of absentee voting, many states extended the privilege to civilians who would be unable to visit designated polling sites. In a very early appraisal of absentee voting, Paul G. Steinbicker commented as follows:

(It) (the absentee ballot) is designed to permit voting by qualified individuals who are, or who expect to be, absent from their home districts on election day, regardless of whether they are in their own states. It aims, or it should aim, at making the task of the qualified absentee as simple, as convenient, and as inexpensive as is consistent with the prevention of fraud or abuse.  

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Steinbicker’s emphasis upon the convenience associated with absentee voting is key; hence, recent efforts to delineate political participation have attempted to identify the ‘benefits’ and ‘costs’ that are associated with the act of voting. In their classic examination of voting behavior, Wolfinger and Rosenstone assert that individuals employ a sort of informal cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether to participate in an election. This decision calculus is responsive to both internal and external pressures, but naturally varies from person to person. Using data from the 1972 Current Population Survey, Wolfinger and Rosenstone identified several socioeconomic and institutional variables that influenced voter turnout. Both education and income were highly significant correlates of voting, and state registration laws also played a vital role. Using a multivariate probit model, Wolfinger and Rosenstone determined that early closing dates for registration, irregular office hours, and the lack of absentee registration were all associated with declines in voter turnout.

Among their conclusions:

*Depending on the probability that one would otherwise vote, a thirty-day closing date decreased the likelihood of voting by 3 to 9 percentage points.*

*Irregular registration office hours (fewer than forty hours a week) lowered by 2 to 4 percentage points the probability that a person would vote.*

*. . . In states that did not allow any form of absentee registration, the chances of voting were 2 percent to 4 percent lower. . . .

*. . . It is not surprising, then, that apparently trivial additions to the burden of registering raise the cost of voting above the threshold of many people. We see that threshold as set by two factors: the individual’s interest in the election and his ability to manage the procedural steps required to cast a ballot.*

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8 Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 129.
9 Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 71-79.
The cost-benefit approach advanced by Wolfinger and Rosenstone coincided with
the dramatic liberalization of absentee voting in California in 1978, when changes to that
state’s election code resulted in the universal availability of absentee ballots.\textsuperscript{10} Shortly
thereafter, an analysis of voter turnout conducted by Katosh and Traugott reexamined the
perceived ‘costs’ associated with specific registration and voting constraints. Whereas
Wolfinger and Rosenstone limited their analysis of state-imposed voting ‘costs’ to voter
registration requirements, Katosh and Traugott attempted to control for the effect of
Election Day procedures and several social-psychological variables on voter turnout. In
particular, key variables measuring the number of hours that polls were open in each
state, whether a state had adopted a time-off-to-vote law, and a measure of citizen duty
were included in a logistic regression model using data from the 1976 American National
Election Study.\textsuperscript{11} In keeping with Wolfinger and Rosenstone’s analysis, Katosh and
Traugott obtained coefficient estimates suggesting that voter turnout was impacted by
both absentee registration and mandated closing dates for registration (both variables
were significant at the 0.05 level). Moreover, their study indicates that the number of
hours during which the polls were open was also associated with significant variation in
electoral participation.\textsuperscript{12} Although their research seems to distinguish an explicit link
between the ‘costs’ of voting and voter turnout, Katosh and Traugott advocate a relatively
narrow interpretation of these findings:

\textsuperscript{10} Samuel C. Patterson and Gregory A. Caldeira, “Mailing in the Vote: Correlates and
Consequences of Absentee Voting,” \textit{American Journal of Political Science} 29, no. 4 (November 1985):
766-767.
\textsuperscript{11} John P. Katosh and Michael W. Traugott, “Costs and Values in the Calculus of Voting,”
\textit{American Journal of Political Science} 26, no. 2 (May 1982): 363.
\textsuperscript{12} Katosh and Traugott, 370-372.
... (I)t is clear that participation costs are not borne equally by all members of the electorate. When administrative practices are made more convenient, we would expect the relative effects of value and convenience on political participation to be greatest for “disadvantaged” groups of voters—the young, nonwhites, and the least educated—increasing their relative rates of participation even more. Because these voters represent relatively small groups in the total population, and their assessments of the value of political participation are frequently low as well, the consequences of this action as reflected in changing national rates of participation may be quite hard to detect.13

In analyzing data from the 1978 National Election Study, Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko utilized a single measure of legal restrictions to voting in their probit model of voter turnout. In addition to socioeconomic, socio-psychological, and voter mobilization variables, they controlled for the effect of the closing date for registration on potential voters.14 Since this measure of state permissiveness carried substantial weight in the analysis of Wolfinger and Rosenstone, it would seem a logical choice for inclusion in any predictive model of voting behavior. The coefficient estimates obtained by Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko reinforced previous findings regarding the influence of state restrictions to voting; the closing date for voter registration was again determined to have a measurable effect on voting behavior:

The further the closing date is from the election, the less likely that people will vote. If the state sets the date fifty days prior to the election, an individual who lives there has a .41 probability of voting; if individuals happen to reside in a more lenient jurisdiction that requires registration, let us say, seven days before the election, then they will have a probability of .52. Since the difference between these two probabilities comes close to the 9 percent Wolfinger and Rosenstone take from a huge sample, we have all the more confidence in the result.15

13 Katosh and Traugott, 374.
15 Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko, 506-507.
While the preceding efforts to explain voter turnout in terms of administrative restrictions to voting do not directly address the availability of absentee ballots, they do provide reasonable estimates of the perceived inconvenience associated with casting a ballot on Election Day. Given these estimates, we may expect that reforms aimed at mitigating the costs of voting will result in higher turnout. In particular, some have hypothesized that many (if not most) individuals would find voting by mail to be more convenient than voting in person. One test of this premise, conducted by David B. Magleby, focused on mail ballot elections held in five cities between 1980 and 1984. In his analysis, Magleby examined data regarding municipal referendums in which mail ballots were the single medium for the casting of votes. Ordinary least squares and logit regressions obtained using data from elections in Berkeley and San Diego, California; Albany and Portland, Oregon; and Vancouver, Washington, revealed that voter participation was significantly higher in mail ballot elections than in traditional municipal elections.  

While there was variation in the particular experiences of the cities in question, Magleby’s general conclusions are quite compelling:

Jurisdictions which have used a mail ballot election have had a turnout rate of 19 percent over that which we would expect for a polling place election, holding all other variables constant. . . .

. . . (I)n mail ballot elections with high turnout there is higher turnout across most all voting precincts. This fact, when combined with the analysis of demographics, leads to the conclusion that in most mail ballot elections the participants will closely resemble participants in municipal polling place elections.  

17 Magleby, 88-89.
Admittedly, we can conjecture that participation in local referendums may not accurately reflect voting patterns in candidate-based elections. But even so, Magleby’s findings reinforce the notion that voter turnout is influenced by institutional restrictions (or lack thereof) on voting. Because the trend toward liberalized absentee voting has emerged only in the last twenty-five years, few researchers have attempted to determine what effects, if any, have been associated with these changes in policy. In response to the liberalization of California’s absentee voting requirements, Patterson and Caldeira examined absentee voting in that state using data from the 1978 and 1982 gubernatorial elections and the 1980 U.S. Senate election in California. Furthermore, these researchers compared California’s 1982 gubernatorial election data with corresponding data from the 1982 gubernatorial election in Iowa, a state with more typical restrictions to absentee voting. In comparing county-by-county data from both California and Iowa using an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, Patterson and Caldeira make the following inferences:

*Straightforwardly, the permissiveness of California’s law encourages greater participation in absentia. Moreover, rates of absentee voting, along with political participation generally, vary to a considerable extent across the social gradient. Yet, unlike participation at the polls, rates of absentee voting do not vary in the same fashion across jurisdictions. Thus, although absentee voting possesses some of the properties of the more familiar sorts of participation, we now have some reason to believe that it is in certain senses peculiar and in consequence a particularly attractive target for future research.*

While Patterson and Caldeira emphasize the progressive nature of California’s absentee voting statute, their comparative analysis does not adequately address the

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18 Patterson and Caldeira, 769-771.
19 Patterson and Caldeira, 786.
association between legal restrictions to absentee voting and voter turnout in general. The only study to date which has attempted to uncover a link between state restrictions on absentee voting and electoral participation represents the impetus for the current inquiry. Using data from the Voter Supplement of the 1992 Current Population Survey (CPS), J. Eric Oliver analyzed data from all fifty U.S. states and the District of Columbia. In constructing a research model, Oliver measured the relative permissiveness of each state’s absentee voting statues, as well as the intrastate activity of political parties. To estimate intrastate party activity, he controlled for the nature of a state’s primary elections. That is, Oliver suggests that the presence of a closed primary is noteworthy because it represents the ability of state party organizations to contact supporters. In addition, Oliver surveyed state party organizations regarding their efforts to distribute absentee ballot applications to potential voters. Finally, interaction terms between the primary indicator and the measures of state restrictions on absentee voting were included in an effort to measure the effects of party activity among states with similar absentee voting statutes. The results of Oliver’s logistic regression analysis revealed the following:

Controlling for the interaction between state law and closed primary status, voters in states with “universal” eligibility and open primaries were 3.1% more likely to report voting absentee. In states with “expanded” eligibility and open primaries, there is no statistically significant increased likelihood of voting absentee. . . .

The coefficients for the interaction terms between eligibility requirements and states with closed primaries demonstrate that liberal eligibility and availability of partisan lists increase absentee voting. People in states with expanded eligibility and closed primaries were 4.2% more likely to vote absentee

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20 Oliver, 498-506.
While their counterparts in states with universal eligibility are 3.2% more likely to mail in their ballots.\(^{21}\)

Because the estimated coefficients on universal eligibility, party activity, and the interaction terms were all significant (p<0.01), Oliver’s analysis provides strong evidence for a direct relationship between liberal absentee voting statutes and absentee voting, as well as a strong link between voter mobilization efforts and absentee voting.\(^{22}\) During the past decade, the trend toward more permissive absentee voting standards has continued as more and more states have mandated the universal availability of absentee ballots. Accordingly, a reexamination of Oliver’s methodology would seem to be both timely and appropriate.

**Theoretical Model and Research Design**

In an effort to determine whether the trend toward more permissive absentee voting statutes has been associated with discernible increases in absentee voting and overall turnout, the present inquiry will endeavor to replicate the research conducted by J. Eric Oliver a decade ago. Because his methodology incorporates not only the relative restrictiveness of state voting statutes, but also proxy measures for the ‘costs’ associated with absentee voting, Oliver provides an analytical model that is worth revisiting. Due to both the availability of more recent data and relevant changes in state absentee voting statutes, the timeliness of the following investigation should be evident. Moreover, the

\(^{21}\) Oliver, 506.

\(^{22}\) Oliver, 505.
extraordinarily small margins of victory in the last two presidential elections should convince us of the need for a more precise portrait of American voting behavior.

In his analysis, Oliver conducted two distinct logit analyses: one model measured the effects of state law, intrastate party activity, and other socioeconomic variables on the likelihood of voting in absentia; the other model included similar independent variables in an effort to measure the impact of state law and party activity on overall turnout.\textsuperscript{23} By controlling for the effects of a closed primary system and the ballot distribution efforts of state party organizations, Oliver implies that active parties can effectively reduce the costs associated with absentee voting. When parties can contact supporters and mail absentee ballots directly to potential voters, voters themselves face fewer obstacles to voting in absentia. Accordingly, Oliver’s inclusion of these activities in his regression analyses seemingly enhances the explanatory power of the models in question. The complete theoretical models utilized by Oliver are as follows:

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<th>Explanatory Variables</th>
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<tr>
<td>Absentee Voting ( (=1) if individual voted absentee, (=0) if voted in person)</td>
<td>Universal Eligibility, Expanded Eligibility, Closed Primary, Universal/Closed Primary Interaction, Expanded/Closed Primary Interaction, Active Party, Education, Senior Citizen, Age, Age Squared, Family Income, Married, Home Ownership, Student, Black, Rural, Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting ( (=1) if individual voted, (=0) otherwise)</td>
<td>Universal Eligibility, Expanded Eligibility, Closed Primary, Universal/Closed Primary Interaction, Expanded/Closed Primary Interaction, Registration Deadline, Active Party, Education, Age, Age Squared, Income, Married, Home Ownership, Student, Black, Rural, Suburban</td>
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\textsuperscript{23} Oliver, 504-510.
The present inquiry will revisit and revise Oliver’s methodology while attempting to preserve the integrity of his approach. Since the previous regression models will remain largely intact, the integration of more recent data is the primary mechanism by which I will amend Oliver’s research. Just as Oliver relied upon Current Population Survey data from a presidential election year (1992), data for this analysis are derived from the Voting and Registration Supplement of the November 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS). The 1992 and 2004 general elections had similar levels of turnout (61.3% and 58.3%, respectively)\textsuperscript{24} and the period between these elections was distinguished by increased partisan polarization and controversy regarding the integrity of elections in the United States. \textit{(See table 1 for descriptive statistics)}

Relevant shifts in the U.S. electoral apparatus will also be incorporated in the regression models in an effort to accurately characterize the interstate variation in absentee voting. Over the past decade, a number of states have adopted more liberal absentee voting statutes; for example, Oliver categorized Wisconsin, Kansas, and Florida as having traditional restrictions on absentee voting, but these three states now allow any registered voter to vote by mail. In the general election of 1992, 10 states permitted no-excuse absentee voting; by 2004, the number of states offering universal access to absentee ballots had risen to twenty-four.\textsuperscript{25} Because the trend toward liberalization has been rather striking, Oliver’s categorical variables measuring the relative permissiveness

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of state restrictions to absentee voting are likely in need of revision. Accordingly, the following analysis will assign states to one of only two groups -- those having 'universal' eligibility or 'standard' eligibility -- rather than retaining Oliver’s three categories ('universal', 'expanded', and 'standard').

In addition, changes to restrictions on participation in state primary elections that have occurred since Oliver’s research was conducted will be included the updated model. In 1992, for example, both the democratic and republican primaries in the state of Wyoming were open to all registered voters; as of 2004, both Wyoming’s Democratic and Republican Parties had transitioned to using ‘closed’ caucuses in which voters were required to declare an allegiance to the party as a condition for casting a ballot.26

The indicator variable for ‘party activity’ was based upon responses to a survey of state party organizations conducted by Oliver in an endeavor to gauge the ballot distribution efforts of those organizations.27 While this indicator represents a relatively ingenious method by which to measure the ‘costs’ incurred by absentee voters, it is beyond the scope of the present inquiry to replicate this survey. As such, the coding of this variable will be transferred directly from Oliver’s appendix as though no changes in the measure have occurred. Although the failure to update this aspect of the original model undoubtedly mitigates the reliability of the following analysis, we may surmise that the promulgation of information technologies, such as the internet, has increased the general awareness of the voting population with regards to the availability of absentee

27 Oliver, 506.
It is difficult to imagine that this increased flow of information can effectively substitute for the direct mailing of absentee ballots to potential voters, but the trend toward alternative methods of voter mobilization may increasingly substitute for direct mail approaches.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Upon initial inspection, Oliver’s affirmation of a positive relationship between liberal absentee voting statutes and voter turnout appears both intuitive and instructive. It is not at all unreasonable to suspect that easy access to mail ballots may encourage voting among individuals who would not otherwise cast a ballot; indeed, the dramatic increase in the number of states permitting universal absentee voting over the past two decades suggests that many state legislatures find this apparent link compelling. Oliver’s quantitative analysis also suggests a strong association between intrastate party activity and voting behavior.\(^2\)\(^{28}\) If his results can be corroborated, then states which have not already done so would be well advised to consider amending relevant voting statutes. If, on the other hand, a reapplication of Oliver’s methodology results in disparate inference, a number of concerns emerge.

**Universal Access and Absentee Voting.** Table 2 summarizes the results of a logistic regression of the pertinent variables on the likelihood of voting absentee versus voting in-person. As expected, the coefficient expressing the impact of universal access

\(^{28}\) Oliver, 506-507.
to absentee ballots on the incidence of absentee voting is positive and highly significant. A detailed scrutiny of this relationship suggests that voters living in states where absentee ballots are universally available are 8.3% more likely to vote by mail than their counterparts in states with traditional restrictions on absentee voting. In the time since Oliver’s analysis, the magnitude of this relationship has increased markedly – perhaps this increase can be attributed to greater public cognizance of available voting options.

In an effort to further distinguish the correlates of absentee voting, this analysis re-evaluates Oliver’s hypotheses regarding intrastate party activities. He suggests that a closed primary system may affect voting behavior, since it “represents the abilities of party organizations to send applications to supporters.”29 The coefficients which measure the impact of a closed primary on absentee voting suggest that this premise may be valid. While I find that the interaction between a closed primary system and universal access has no significant effect on the incidence of absentee voting, the presence of closed primaries does seem to encourage voting in absentia. For voters living in states with traditional barriers to absentee voting, closed primary elections increase the likelihood of absentee voting by 0.5%. In states offering universal access to absentee ballots, closed primaries are associated with a 0.8% increase in the likelihood of voting by mail. Although Oliver found that the effects of closed primaries carried greater magnitude, the current analysis cannot reject his fundamental hypothesis.

With respect to Oliver’s alternate indicator of party activity, the coefficient is positive and highly significant. However, recall that the present analysis does not

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29 Oliver, 506.
replicate Oliver’s survey of state party chairs – the indicator was transferred directly from the original study as if no changes to this measure have occurred. As such, the reliability of the estimated effects of the direct mailing of absentee ballots to potential voters is highly suspect and should not be considered accurate. Oliver found this measure to be a highly significant correlate of absentee voting, and it is beyond the scope of my own analysis to critique his findings in this regard.  

Turning to the socioeconomic variables, my findings resemble Oliver’s, yet several key discrepancies are noteworthy. For one, Oliver found a strong correlation between age and the incidence of absentee voting; his findings suggest that senior citizens in particular are more likely than younger voters to cast an absentee ballot. I, however, find no significant relationship between an individual’s age and the likelihood of voting by mail. If anything, the statistics in Table 2 suggest that senior citizens are less likely to vote absentee when compared to their younger counterparts. Additionally, Oliver finds evidence to suggest that relatively wealthy individuals are more likely to vote absentee than less affluent citizens. Here again, my analysis fails to corroborate Oliver’s findings. While the income gap among absentee voters may be closing, there are still significant racial disparities in the incidence of absentee voting. Hispanics are 3.5% less likely and African Americans 4.2% less likely to vote absentee than other members of the voting population. And of course, full-time students are far more likely to utilize mail ballots than other voters.

\[^{30}\text{Oliver, 507.}\]
**Universal Access and Voter Turnout.** If the relationship between universal access to absentee ballots and the incidence of absentee voting coincides with our expectations, the apparent link between universal access and overall voter turnout is far more ambiguous. Oliver suggests that universal access does increase turnout, but only when combined with voter mobilization efforts.\textsuperscript{31} In other words, Oliver’s regression analysis produced an insignificant coefficient estimate for universal access, paired with significant positive coefficients for both indicators of party activity. However, the present inquiry casts considerable doubt upon the specific conclusions at which Oliver arrives.

Paradoxically, the logistic regression results provided in Table 3 actually imply a negative association between universal access to absentee ballots and voter turnout. Based upon this model, voter turnout in states with universal access is 2.1\% lower than in states with more traditional restrictions on absentee voting. Even if this result is not exactly in harmony with conventional intuition, a number of possible explanations can be conjectured. For example, many of the states which have transitioned to no-excuse absentee voting over the past decade may have been seeking to improve upon historically low turnout levels, relative to other states. If this is the case, then the results in question may not offer a true reflection of the link between universal access and voter turnout. With imperfect information, however, we must conclude that universal access to absentee ballots, in and of itself, has not stimulated voter turnout in any meaningful fashion.

\textsuperscript{31} Oliver, 510.
A brief examination of the relevant indicator variables further undermines Oliver’s suggestion that turnout is driven by the combination of liberalized absentee eligibility and voter mobilization efforts. I find that there is no significant difference in turnout rates between states with closed primary elections and those holding open primaries. Moreover, the interaction term measuring the additional effects of both offering universal access to absentee ballots and conducting closed primary elections is not a significant predictor of voter turnout. The indicator measuring party ballot distribution efforts is positive and significant; but again, limitations in the present research inhibit any broad interpretation of this finding. If this measure were reliable, we could conclude that states in which political parties mail absentee ballots to supporters *en masse* have levels of voter turnout nearly 4% higher than states without such organized outreach efforts. Absent this confidence, however, my analysis suggests that universal access to absentee ballots and the availability of partisan lists have only a negligible impact on voter turnout.

The socioeconomic variables, while not necessarily central to this analysis, provide a more comprehensive portrait of voting behavior and may offer clues to defining an appropriate response to the issue of low voter turnout. In keeping with existing research, closing dates for voter registration have a strong negative correlation with voter turnout. Individuals are 4.9% more likely to cast a ballot in states that allow Election Day registration than in states with the mean deadline for voter registration (approximately 22 days prior to the election). While only five states currently allow
Election Day registration, this policy prescription likely merits further analysis. In addition, this analysis confirms previous scholarship linking voting behavior to levels of income and education. Relatively wealthy Americans are significantly more likely to vote than other citizens, as are well-educated individuals. The coefficient on age indicates that older Americans are more likely to vote than their younger counterparts. Simultaneously, full-time students report voting at levels 10.5% higher than other members of the voting-age population.

CONCLUSION

Between 1978 and 2004, twenty-four state legislatures approved measures providing for the universal availability of absentee ballots. The increasing prevalence of no-excuse absentee voting statutes suggests that many state governments have been persuaded to believe that such policies will stimulate voter turnout. And yet, so far as can be discerned, available research has failed to confirm this confidence; while mail ballots have been shown to increase turnout in municipal referendums, their utility in candidate-based general elections remains ambiguous. It seems logical to suspect that no-excuse absentee voting will increase turnout, but ultimately, the decision calculus of many nonvoters may not be easily influenced.

The analysis conducted herein attests that the prevailing trend toward no-excuse absentee voting has failed to stimulate voter turnout. But even in light of this conclusion, 

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33 Magleby, 88.
it seems premature to decry recent efforts aimed at making the act of suffrage as convenient as is consistent with maintaining the integrity of popular elections. Given that the trend toward liberalized absentee voting represents a very recent phenomenon, relevant policy changes may not yet have permeated public perceptions of elections and voting behavior. One wonders whether states have been diligent in advertising the range of options available to potential voters in the weeks and months that precede November elections.

Moreover, this analysis suggests that universal access to absentee ballots has influenced the voting behavior of individuals who are already very likely to cast a ballot, while not necessarily impacting those outside the traditional voting population. Accordingly, future efforts to stimulate voter turnout must be tailored to reach members of society who have not yet been convinced of the import of basic civic participation. To this end, a logical first step should include an effort by states to educate all potential voters as regards available voting options. Because political parties are often the primary administrators of voter mobilization efforts, only certain subsets of the population are typically targeted. This process necessarily relegates many individuals, often those already less likely to vote, to a position of disadvantage. While the act of voting will always require a degree of self initiative, it seems increasingly apparent that the success or failure of voter mobilization efforts will hinge upon the ability of activists to effectively empower those individuals and groups who have not previously been inclined to participate in the electoral process.
VARIABLE DESCRIPTIONS

Voted = 1 if respondent voted, = 0 otherwise
Absentee = 1 if respondent voted absentee, = 0 otherwise
Universal = 1 if respondent’s home state allows universal absentee voting,
= 0 otherwise
Closedprmy = 1 if respondent’s home state uses closed primaries, = 0 otherwise
Uniclosed = universal*closedprmy, interaction variable
Regdeadline = number of days between state registration deadline and general election
Ptyactivity = 1 if respondent’s state has ‘active’ political parties, = 0 otherwise
Education = 1 if respondent has 8 years of formal education or less, = 2 if 9 to 11 years,
= 3 if high school graduate, = 4 if some college, = 5 if college degree,
= 6 if graduate study
Snrcitizen = 1 if respondent is age 65 or older, = 0 otherwise
Age = exact age of respondent
Agesq = exact age of respondent squared
Agesqroot = square root of respondent’s age
Income = 0 if household income of respondent is less than $5,000,
= 1 if $5,000 to $7,499, = 2 if $7,500 to $9,999, = 3 if $10,000 to $12,499,
= 4 if $12,500 to $14,999, = 5 if $15,000 to $19,999, = 6 if $20,000 to $24,999,
= 7 if $25,000 to $29,999, = 8 if $30,000 to $34,999, = 9 if $35,000 to $39,999,
= 10 if $40,000 to $49,999, = 11 if $50,000 to $59,999,
= 12 if $60,000 to $74,999, = 13 if $75,000 or more
Married = 1 if respondent married, = 0 otherwise
Ownhome = 1 if respondent owns residence, = 0 otherwise
Student = 1 if respondent is a student, = 0 otherwise
Black = 1 if respondent is black, = 0 otherwise
Hispanic = 1 if respondent is hispanic, = 0 otherwise
Rural = 1 if respondent lives in a rural area, = 0 otherwise
Suburban = 1 if respondent lives in a suburban area, = 0 otherwise
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voted</td>
<td>86782</td>
<td>0.7265562</td>
<td>0.4457293</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absentee</td>
<td>62919</td>
<td>0.1235398</td>
<td>0.3290584</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>156519</td>
<td>0.4496579</td>
<td>0.4974608</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closedprmy</td>
<td>156519</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uniclosed</td>
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<td>0.3177761</td>
<td>0.4656134</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Regdeadline</td>
<td>156519</td>
<td>21.89369</td>
<td>9.98035</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td>Ptyactivity</td>
<td>156519</td>
<td>0.3657128</td>
<td>0.481631</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>3.660755</td>
<td>1.342094</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>0.1123697</td>
<td>0.3158218</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>32.72536</td>
<td>24.04638</td>
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<td>7225</td>
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<td>2.114351</td>
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<td>9.219544</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>118744</td>
<td>9.164118</td>
<td>3.743736</td>
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<td>156519</td>
<td>0.3895757</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Ownhome</td>
<td>142873</td>
<td>0.7362413</td>
<td>0.4406716</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>0.5688804</td>
<td>0.495248</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>0.0892543</td>
<td>0.2851114</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>0.1036743</td>
<td>0.3048386</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>155234</td>
<td>0.2439929</td>
<td>0.4294899</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Suburban</td>
<td>156519</td>
<td>0.3574646</td>
<td>0.4792548</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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**Source:** 2004 Current Population Survey, Voting and Registration Supplement
**Table 2: Logistic Regression Estimates of the Effects of Universal Access and Other Variables on Voting Absentee versus Voting In-Person**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>1.267**</td>
<td>0.0463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed Primary</td>
<td>0.188**</td>
<td>0.0580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal/Closed Primary</td>
<td>-0.121</td>
<td>0.0682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Activity</td>
<td>1.271**</td>
<td>0.0323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.074**</td>
<td>0.0130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Citizen</td>
<td>-0.180*</td>
<td>0.0700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>0.0760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Squared</td>
<td>0.001*</td>
<td>0.0003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Square Root</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>0.7000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.006</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-0.160**</td>
<td>0.0337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Ownership</td>
<td>-0.081</td>
<td>0.0416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>0.984**</td>
<td>0.0931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-0.688**</td>
<td>0.0722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>-0.546**</td>
<td>0.0705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-0.201**</td>
<td>0.0386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>0.0327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.413**</td>
<td>1.7543</td>
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**p<.01, *p<.05**

Model Chi-Square: 6,413.5
Number of Observations: 54,084
### Table 3: Logistic Regression Estimates of the Effects of Universal Access and Other Variables on Voting versus Not Voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
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<td>0.0330</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closed Primary</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0.0264</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universal/Closed Primary</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.0408</td>
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<tr>
<td>Registration Deadline</td>
<td>-0.013**</td>
<td>0.0010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party Activity</td>
<td>0.194**</td>
<td>0.0213</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.595**</td>
<td>0.0088</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age Squared</td>
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<td>0.0002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age Square Root</td>
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<td>Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>0.0209</td>
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<td>Home Ownership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>0.661**</td>
<td>0.0494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.595**</td>
<td>0.0338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>-0.183**</td>
<td>0.0356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>0.0238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>-0.115**</td>
<td>0.0220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.360*</td>
<td>0.9730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01, *p<.05
Model Chi-Square: 13,625.26
Number of Observations: 74,416
REFERENCES


