

Election Day Voter Registration in Iowa

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Executive Summary

We have analyzed the likely impact of adoption of election day registration (EDR) by the state of Iowa. Consistent with existing research on the impact of EDR in other circumstances, we find that EDR would likely lead to substantial increases in voter turnout. We are able to offer the following estimates of increases in turnout for Iowa, and for specific groups of Iowans under EDR:¹

- Overall turnout could go up by 4.9 percent.
- Turnout among those aged 18 to 25 could increase by 10.7 percent under EDR.
- Turnout for those who have moved in the last six months could increase by 8.8 percent under EDR.
- Turnout for Latinos could increase by 9.5 percent, and for African-Americans turnout could increase by 6.6 percent under EDR.
- Turnout among recently naturalized citizens could increase by as much as 20.2 percent.

Introduction

The purpose of voter registration in the United States is to make sure that only those citizens who are eligible to vote can do so and to insure that individuals who are not eligible to vote in a state cannot cast ballots. Voter registration also provides election officials with convenient lists they can use to contact voter to notify them about upcoming elections, and to provide other information about elections and voting. And of course, when individuals enter a polling place to vote, a voter registration list gives poll workers the information they need to authenticate voters before they cast ballots.

At the same time, the process of voter registration imposes costs on voters, and these costs have been shown in many research studies to serve as barriers to many potential voters.² In Iowa, as in many other states, eligible citizens have to register to vote at least ten days before the election. For some eligible citizens, especially those who have moved recently, requiring registration before election day might make it very difficult for them to cast a ballot in an

election. Given that non-registered, but otherwise eligible citizens are not on the lists that election officials or other political groups use to mobilize voters in elections, some non-registered eligible citizens may not be aware of an upcoming election or about how and when they can register to vote.

In the last few decades, the costs associated with voter registration have been the focus of significant federal legislation. In 1993, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) required that states provide voter registration forms in places where state residents register their motor vehicles, and in other state offices like public assistance offices. Finally, NVRA required that states allow for mail-in voter registration. More recently, in 2002, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) attempted to significantly improve voter registration practices across the states, by requiring that states develop computerized, statewide voter registries, and also requiring that all states adopt provisional or “fail-safe” voting.

Currently, there are seven states that allow eligible citizens to register to vote on election day: Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.³ These other states have shown that election day voter registration (EDR) is an effective way to increase voter participation, in a way that does not complicate election administration, and importantly, that does not lead to increased voter fraud. While Montana’s newly-enacted Election Day Registration has yet to be studied, research conducted on the six other states shows that voter participation is somewhere between 3 and 6 percentage points higher than it would have been had EDR not been enacted. Citizens who have recently moved or are younger in particular find it easier to register and vote; election administration, when EDR is thoughtfully implemented, does not significantly worsen the election day experience of poll workers or voters; and there is no evidence that the prospect for election fraud is increased.⁴

Thus, based on the previous experience of these states, research we have earlier done on these experiences, other academic research on voter participation and election day voter registration, and new research we present below, we believe that if appropriately implemented, Iowa will have a positive experience once election day registration is in place. In particular, we show below that both voter registration and turnout would increase once election day registration is implemented in Iowa: we estimate that registration would go up by 3.1 percent and voter turnout would increase by nearly 5%. Having more voters on the rolls will improve election administration, and give election officials throughout the state better information when they go to contact voters about upcoming elections and provide them with information about those upcoming elections. And increasing voter participation should lead to a stronger democracy and a strengthened civic culture in Iowa.

EDR, Registration and Turnout

Generally speaking, states with EDR have higher rates of voter registration and turnout than do states that do not have EDR. Based on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2004 states with EDR reported registration rates of 86.4 percent, while states without EDR had reported registration rates of only 79.1 percent.⁵ These numbers are consistent with data from previous elections: states with EDR have consistently had higher registration rates.⁶ And EDR states had demonstrably higher levels

of voter turnout in 2004. According to the official voting statistics reported by secretaries of state, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimates of state population, EDR states had a voter turnout rate of 70.3 percent in 2004, while non-EDR states had a turnout rate of only 54.7 percent.⁷

Iowa today, without EDR, has voter registration and turnout figures that are at the higher end of the non-EDR state distribution. Reported registration in 2004 was 81.3 percent, and actual turnout was 66.3 percent of the voting age population.⁸ Were Iowa to implement EDR well, and the state experienced the typical increase in voter turnout that other states have seen once they have implemented EDR, voter participation could increase substantially in a presidential election year like 2004. Furthermore, voter participation might increase strongly among sectors of the population that typically turn out at lower rates, such as newly relocated eligible citizens or young voters, as they are the types of voters that previous research has shown are helped by EDR. In the next section of this report we return to this issue, and provide some precise estimates of the potential impact of EDR on registration and turnout in Iowa.

Another of EDR's potential benefits is that it can yield a process where voter registration is undertaken in ways more directly under the control of election officials. In Table 1 we compare how individuals first come to register, in non-EDR states, states that practice EDR, and in Iowa, using data from the 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS). In non-EDR states, roughly a third of individuals report first registering in a government voter registration office (36.5 percent), and about a quarter report registering in a DMV office. Of the rest, about 15 percent registered by mail, and 11 percent by some sort of registration drive. Thus, most voter registrations in non-EDR states are occurring in situations where the individual is not coming into face-to-face contact with an election official, or someone who has received any training in registering voters. Not surprisingly, the registration data from Iowa show that Iowans typically first registered much as voters from other non-EDR states. Roughly 36 percent first registered in some government registration office, 30 percent in a DMV office, 15 percent by mail, and the rest in a way not directly under the control of election officials.

But in states that practice EDR, the process of voter registration is clearly different. As 44 percent report first registering at a polling place, and 43 percent report registering at a government registration office, this means that nearly nine of every ten voters in EDR states first registered in a location that is somehow under the supervision of an election official. If appropriately implemented, this can mean that EDR in Iowa might yield an efficient and effective administrative process, where voter registration is conducted more under the direct control of election officials.

EDR in Iowa

Of course, we wish to know more precisely what the potential impact of EDR in Iowa might be. To estimate the potential impact of EDR we turn to data from the 2004 CPS, and use a methodology that we have employed in past research on voter turnout – a methodology that is documented in the technical appendix of this report. In summary, we estimate statistical models predicting whether individual respondents in the 2004 CPS report being registered, and whether they voted, in which we control for many factors, including the voter registration process in the state. We control for the respondents' age and level of education, whether or not they have moved recently, their ethnic background, and whether or not they are a native-born citizen or have been recently naturalized. We then used these estimates to simulate the impact of Iowa having used EDR in the 2004 election.⁹

Estimates of the potential effect of Iowa's move to EDR in the 2004 election, for both turnout and registration, are provided in Table 2. First, we see that our analysis predicts that Iowa's registration and turnout would both increase under EDR. Most importantly, our analysis predicts a 4.9 percent increase in voter turnout if Iowa moves to EDR.

We also see other substantial increases in voter turnout for those who might be most affected by EDR:

- Turnout among those aged 18 to 25 could increase by 10.7 percent under EDR.
- Turnout for those who have moved in the last six months could increase by 8.8 percent under EDR.
- Turnout for Latinos could increase by 9.5 percent, and for African-Americans turnout could increase by 6.6 percent under EDR.
- Turnout among recently naturalized citizens could increase by as much as 20.2 percent.

Thus, those eligible citizens who are most typically affected by the being able to register and vote on election day in other states would also be strongly affected in Iowa, were Iowa to adopt EDR.

Conclusion

One of the more robust conclusions in the study of turnout for the last 35 years has been that making the registration and voting process easier will increase turnout among eligible voters.¹⁰ Our analysis of the impact of EDR in Iowa is merely another piece of evidence in favor of this claim. By comparing voter turnout in states with EDR and states without EDR, we have been able to estimate the impact EDR would have in Iowa. Iowa is already a very high turnout state. But adoption of EDR could raise turnout by almost 5 percent according to our estimates. And it could raise turnout substantially more among groups such as young voters, and voters who have moved in the period preceding the election.

The trend in the United States has been to ease the barrier that registration places on voting by moving the deadline closer to election day. Moving to EDR is the logical conclusion of that of that trend.

Technical Appendix

To estimate the impact of EDR in Iowa we analyzed individual survey data collected by the Bureau of the Census. Each month the Census Bureau surveys approximately 50,000 households in the Current Population Survey. In even numbered years, the November survey includes a battery of questions asking respondents whether or not they were registered to vote, how they registered, and if they voted. The CPS is considered to be the “gold standard” of datasets for analyzing individual-level factors affecting turnout, and turnout across states. The Census Bureau has a higher response rate than any other survey, and the sample size is large enough to draw statistically valid samples within a state. Whereas the typical media poll might have 1500 respondents nationwide, the November 2004 CPS included over 1500 respondents from Iowa.

Our model incorporates factors that have been shown in extensive research on voter turnout to be correlated with an individual’s decision on whether or not to vote. We include categorical variables to indicate whether or not the person is in 1 of 5 age groups: 18 to 25, 26 to 35, 36 to 45, 46 to 60, or 61 to 75. We include categorical variables for education placing the respondent as either: less than a high school degree, a high school degree, some college education, or a BA or beyond. For income, we include brackets of less than \$20,000; between \$20,000 and \$40,000; between \$40,000 and \$60,000; and above \$60,000 in annual family income. The respondent’s ethnicity is measured as white, black, or Hispanic. We also included variables indicating whether or not the respondent was a naturalized citizen, and if so, whether they had come to the United States within 10 years of the 2004 election, or within 16 years of the 2004 election

And we include variables at the state level for the number of days before the election that registration closes, and for the presence of a competitive election. We include three categorical variables indicating the presence (or absence) respectively of: a senate, gubernatorial, or presidential race within the state that was decided by a margin of 5% or less.

To be able to determine the impact of EDR on particular groups of the population, and because we expect that EDR will have larger effects on those who have the most difficulty meeting the burden of pre-election registration, we include interaction terms between the availability of EDR, and the respondent’s age, education and income, as well as whether or not the respondent had moved previously and whether the respondent was a native born citizen or a naturalized citizen (and if so, whether recently immigrated or not).

Given this specification, we estimated the model on all respondents in the CPS. Doing this gave us estimates of the model parameters. We could then compute the predicted probability of each respondent in our sample in Iowa voting under the actual conditions they face: which requires registration prior to election day. And we could compute the probability of each respondent in the sample in Iowa voting under the counterfactual condition that Iowa had election day registration available. By aggregating those predicted probabilities over different sub-groups of interest, we are able to estimate the impact of EDR on any sub-group within the population, or we can estimate the impact of EDR on all voting age persons in Iowa.

Table 1: How People Report Registering to Vote in States Without and With EDR, 2004

	Non-EDR	EDR	Iowa
Department of Motor Vehicles	24.7	4.5	29.9
Public Assistance Agency	1.2	0.2	0.3
Mail-in Registration	14.7	2.3	14.3
School, Hospital, or Campus	7.1	3.5	5.4
Government voter registration office	36.5	42.7	35.8
Registration Drive	10.8	2.7	6.3
At polls on primary or election day	5.0	44.2	8.1

Source: Current Population Survey, US Bureau of the Census, November 2004

Table 2: Simulated 2004 Turnout and Registration Increases in Iowa under EDR

Reported Turnout %	
	Increase w/ EDR
Entire State	4.9
Persons who have Moved in the last 6 months	8.8
Persons Age 18-25	10.7
African-Americans	6.6
Latinos	9.5
Naturalized Citizens	5.5
Naturalized, immigrated within 10 years of election	20.2
Naturalized, immigrated within 16 years of election	10.3
Reported Registration %	
	Increase w/ EDR
Entire State	3.1
Persons who have Moved in the last 6 months	3.1
Persons Age 18-25	7.7
African-Americans	3.4
Latinos	4.6
Naturalized Citizens	7.3
Naturalized, immigrated within 10 years of election	19.2
Naturalized, immigrated within 16 years of election	5.9

Source: Computed by authors, based on Current Population Survey, US Bureau of the Census, November, 2004

Endnotes

1 We use a '5% increase' to refer to an increase of 5 *percentage points*, or 5% of voting age population, not 5% of those *already voting*. Thus we will refer to an increase from 50% turnout to 55% turnout as a 5% increase.

2 How voter registration imposes costs on potential voters was originally researched by Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

3 North Dakota does not currently require voter registration.

4 See, for example, R. Michael Alvarez and Stephen Ansolabehere, "California Votes: The Promise of Election Day Registration," *Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action*, 2002; R. Michael Alvarez, Jonathan Nagler and Catherine Wilson, "Making Voting Easier: Election Day Registration in New York," *Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action*, 2004; M.J. Fenster, "The Impact of Allowing Day of Registration Voting on Turnout in U.S. Elections from 1960 to 1992," *American Politics Quarterly* 22(1) (1994): 74-87; B. Highton, "Easy Registration and Voter Turnout," *The Journal of Politics* 59 (2)

(1997), 565-575; S. Knack, "Election-Day Registration: The Second Wave," *American Politics Quarterly* 29(1) (2001), 65-78.

5 These statistics are computed by the authors from the November 2004 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey. We do not use the EAC-provided registration numbers because in some cases the EAC numbers report registration figures higher than the voting age population for the country, thus we do not view them as reliable indicators

6 See, for example, Table 2 in Alvarez and Ansolabehere (2002); there registration in non-EDR states in the 2000 election was 77.3%, in EDR states it was 88.8%; turnout in non-EDR states in the 2000 election was 50.5%, while in EDR states it was 65.8%.

7 Turnout figures are taken from the Bureau of the Census, *2007 Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Table 408. These data are in turn based on reports of secretaries of states on votes cast for president, and on census bureau estimates of state voting age population.

8 Reported registration comes from author's analysis of the November 2004 Current Population Survey; turnout comes from the *2007 Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Table 408.

9 The reported registration and turnout rates in the CPS data differ from those found in the EAC's Election Day Survey. The CPS data are based on surveys of households, and thus are affected by both sampling error and response error.

10 R.E. Wolfinger and S. J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); J.E. Leighley and J. Nagler, "Individual and Systemic Influences on Turnout: Who Votes? 1984," *Journal of Politics*, 54 (1992): 718—740.

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