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SCIENCE DIRECT
Electoral Studies 25 (2006) 35–58
Electoral Studies
www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

Location, knowledge and time pressures in the spatial structure of convenience voting

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the geography of convenience voting. We theorize that convenience voting is likely to be most common in neighborhoods where civic skills meet time pressures—generating a demand for early and no-excuse absentee balloting. For harried but politically sophisticated voters, these devices should be particularly valuable because they permit them to *buy* time. More specifically, we expect that those living within one mile of an early voting site are more likely to cast an early ballot than those who live further away. Using voter list data from Las Vegas and Albuquerque, we find evidence that voters living in neighborhoods full of time-pressured commuters are not only voting early, but may be spreading the word, generating a spatial effect that includes those who are nearby but may not face a high opportunity cost of time. We conclude by pointing out that the distinct geography of early voting has important implications for political campaigning: the geographic concentration of early voting in some locations but not others could narrow the playing field in the final days of the campaign to those locations comprised chiefly of precinct voters and non-voters.

Keywords: Early voting; Absentee voting; Political participation; Turnout; Election reform; Political geography; Presidential elections; New Mexico; Nevada

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doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2005.02.002

The recent wave of election reform in the United States has generated an explosive increase in the use of alternative voting methods. Chiefly, early in-person voting and no-excuse absentee voting have become enormously popular in several locales. These developments have been accompanied by questions about who uses these methods, the effect they have on overall turnout, and the nature and timing of campaign outreach.

The import of these questions is no longer strictly theoretical. It is common knowledge that absentee voters now comprise roughly one-quarter of the California electorate. Less well known is that in states such as Nevada and New Mexico—where convenience voting has been widely encouraged—traditional precinct voters are now a *minority* of the total electorate.

From the perspective of campaign politics, the geography of vote method is relevant to candidates and parties whose strategies must take territory seriously both in advertising and in grassroots mobilization. For instance, the traditional neighborhood canvass in the week prior to Election Day is likely to be far less efficacious if one-third or more of the voters have cast early or absentee votes. Get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts will require greater surgical precision, and an extensive knowledge base of who is most likely to vote early, and who will wait. In fact, candidates and parties may have a strong incentive to avoid entire neighborhoods, counties, or even *states*, in the final days of a campaign in which large shares of the local population have already cast their ballots. The broader implications for public policy are equally evident. If the new voting options are used unevenly, the result may be a systematic skewing of election outcomes, and subsequent policy outputs.

In this paper we investigate the spatial distribution of early, mail, and precinct voters, along with non-voters, in two politically consequential counties where convenience voting is now commonplace: Bernalillo, New Mexico and Clark, Nevada. Our theoretical perspective draws heavily on both the rational actor framework posited by Downs (1957) and the civic skills conception articulated by Verba et al. (1995). We posit that voters are most likely to vote when the costs are relatively low and the benefits are perceived to be relatively high. Put simply, convenience voting ought to lower the cost side of this classic equation. We also believe voters without a requisite set of civic skills will be largely unmoved by convenience voting opportunities because these do nothing to offset information costs. A slightly less obvious, but nonetheless intriguing theoretical possibility is that convenience voting, once utilized by some subset of time-challenged voters, will become "contagious" (Huckfeldt, 1979; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Johnston, 1986a,b) That is, voters in these neighborhoods will communicate with one another and the practice of convenience voting will spread.

Our study proceeds in a straightforward manner. In Sections 1 and 2, we review the literature on convenience voting from the perspective of who uses it and where it is located, respectively. Section 3 outlines the key elements of our data and design, including a delineation of the voter lists and our underlying models. The results are presented in Section 4, where we demonstrate that convenience voting increases overall turnout while also facilitating certain biases. Finally, we conclude with Section 5 and a brief discussion of the key findings and implications.