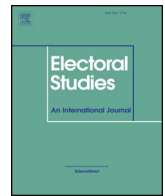




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## Timing the habit: Voter registration and turnout

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## ABSTRACT

Does registration timing impact whether an individual becomes a habitual voter? We argue that those registering in near proximity to a presidential election are more likely to vote in the upcoming election compared to those who register at other times during an election cycle because they seek an immediate return on their investment, but they are less likely to become habituated to vote in subsequent mid-term and primary elections. We suggest that this is because last-minute registrants, many of whom were registered through voter registration drives, were not focused on long-term electoral payoffs. Leveraging Florida's statewide voter files, we use logistic regression and propensity score weighting with county fixed-effects to evaluate if the timing of voter registration has significant short- and long-term turnout effects in high- and low-salience elections, controlling for party registration and an array of demographic factors. We find that the timing of registration does affect turnout, as last-minute registrants are not equally likely to vote in ensuing elections.

An old saw of American political behavior is that voting begets voting. A half-century ago, Milbrath (1965: 31) theorized about the significant role of reinforcement learning in the development of political participation habits, arguing that the “habit strength of voting should be consistent across cohorts of newly registered voters. Voting in one election is a strong predictor of an individual casting a ballot in future elections (Brody and Sniderman, 1977), as the “consuetude” of voting is persistent (Gerber et al., 2003), especially in subsequent presidential contests (Green and Shachar, 2000: 566). The conversion of nonvoters into voters may not be immediate, but “there is a longstanding agreement,” Plutzer (2001, 42) summarizes, “that voting behavior is habitual.” Electoral habituation is understood to be longstanding: once the transition to voting occurs, the habit is likely to persist over long periods of time (Meredith, 2009; Coppock and Green, 2015).

To be sure, myriad factors condition turnout—from psychological and socio-economic conditions, to electoral rules and political competition, to voter registration and mobilization efforts (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Rolfe, 2012). With regard to electoral rules, scholars have repeatedly shown that a state's registration laws and rules can impact voter turnout. Examining how registration deadlines vary across the states, scholars have examined how changes in states' registration laws over time, even the arbitrariness of registration cutoff dates, can promote or dampen turnout at both the individual and aggregate levels.<sup>1</sup> Scholars, though, have yet to consider whether the *timing* of when

a voter registers during an election cycle might affect the likelihood of a new registrant voting in subsequent elections. By timing, we do not mean whether a voter misses a state's voter registration deadline and is thereby not eligible for an upcoming election, or if a person is eligible to sequentially register and vote, either on Election Day or during an early in-person voting window. Rather, we are interested in whether voter turnout in a proximate election, and then in subsequent elections, is contingent upon something as simple as the how many days prior to a general election an individual registers to vote.

Specifically, we argue that the timing of registering to vote may affect turnout well beyond the General Election immediately following when an individual registers. Not all new registrants are equally likely to be electorally habituated. We posit that the turnout of voters who register immediately before a General Election, in contrast to those registering at other times during a typical two-year election cycle, may not be stable over time or across election types.

For now, we leave aside important considerations about why or how eligible citizens register to vote, or for that matter, whether electoral stimuli mobilize some voters to turn out more than others (Gimpel et al., 2007; Davenport, 2010). To be sure, there are numerous resource-based and motivational factors conditioning why, as well as how a voter may become registered. It is certainly possible that an individual's reason for and method of registering may affect her or his turnout, but we leave these questions to others to investigate. Rather, irrespective of the underlying motive or particular mechanism, we

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suggest that the *timing* of a voter's registration—specifically, whether or not it takes place during the immediate run-up of a presidential election—might have both short- and long-term conditioning effects on the likelihood a registrant casts a ballot in succeeding elections. In short, we argue that both short- and long-term turnout is conditioned by when a voter becomes registered to vote.

Leveraging the size and comprehensiveness of Florida's statewide voter registration and voter history file, we use logistic regression as well as propensity score weighting with county fixed-effects to estimate the effects of the timing of an individual's successful voter registration on subsequent turnout patterns in high- and low-salience elections. Drawing on the universe of registered voters in Florida—not survey data used in other studies of voter habituation—we control for a variety of covariates, including an array of socio-demographic, partisan, and geographic factors. Of the more than 1 million registered voters in our analysis, we find that those who registered immediately prior to the 2008 and 2012 November general elections were more likely to vote in those two proximate presidential elections, but were less likely to turn out in subsequent general and primary elections, when compared to eligible citizens who registered at other times during the 2007–2008 and 2011–2012 election cycles. Of those who registered immediately prior to Florida's book closing date—set 29 days prior to Election Day—the failure to turn out in non-presidential elections was particularly acute for Democrats and No Party Affiliates (NPAs) and those registered with third parties, younger registrants, and racial and ethnic minorities.

### 1. The costs of voter registration and habitual voting

Why do some registered voters become habitual voters? Scholars have long found voting behavior to be persistent over time and correlated with past voting behavior, with the U.S. population largely partitioned into “regular voters” and “persistent non-voters” (Miller and Shanks 1996: 17). Drawing on survey data (which typically relies on the self-reporting of whether a respondent is registered and voted), these studies consistently find that “voting in one election itself enhances the likelihood of going to the polls in subsequent elections” (Schlozman et al., 2012: 173), even after controlling for individual characteristics and psychological involvement in politics (Brody and Sniderman, 1977). Beyond the psychological and sociological reasons for turning out, these studies suggest that voting itself may be habit forming. “Habit occurs,” Denny and Doyle (2009: 17) summarize, “when the decision to vote is dependent on whether the individual did so in the previous election.” Individuals who overcome the initial challenge of registering to vote and become first-time voters tend to become reliable voters. Plutzer (2001: 42) argues that among younger, newly registered voters, not turning out to vote is to be expected, as these individuals “lack many of the resources that can promote participation,” such as homeownership, disposable income, or meaningful community engagement. Offering a “developmental framework” to explain turnout in U.S. ele, he draws on panel survey data to examine evolving voting patterns of young citizens over time, beginning in the 1960s. Gradually, many nonvoters are able to overcome the hurdles associated with first-time voting. What is notable, Plutzer finds, is that disparate populations within cohorts exhibit remarkably similar long-term turnout patterns once initial socio-economic and cognitive differences dissipate over time. Initially conditioned by “parental, socioeconomic and political resources,” Plutzer (2001: 54) argues, voting eventually becomes a form of “path-dependency.” Parental resources become less important over time, as life events, such as educational achievement, mobility, marriage, and homeownership gain in importance.

Of course, registering to vote is a near universal precondition of casting a ballot in all the American states.<sup>2</sup> Rosenstone and Wolfinger

(1978) pointed out four decades ago that registering to vote is often much more difficult than voting itself. From early closing dates, to limited registration office hours/days of operation, to bureaucratic hassles, many people are likely discouraged from registering to vote as they face costs trying to negotiate a state's registration protocol (Squire et al., 1987; McDonald, 2008). And registration laws do not fall equally on all segments of the population, as they “fall disproportionately on citizens who are poorer, less educated, and in other respects less well-off—the same people who are already less likely to vote” (Thompson, 2002: 28). No doubt, “[r]egistration raises the costs of voting,” note Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 61), especially voluntary registration, as it places the responsibility on the individual. Indeed, a complete relaxation of registration requirements, according to calculations conducted by Mitchell and Wlezien (1995), could increase the population of registered voters in the U.S. by roughly nine percent. Ironically, then, “the prospective voter who undergoes the cost of registration may be more likely to vote than if registration were free,” Erikson (1981: 273–74) reasons, as the registrant wants “to ‘protect’ the sunk cost of the registration investment.”

Is it possible that the timing of when someone registers to vote might affect the likelihood of that voter turning out? Quoting Tocqueville, who observed that “as the election draws near, intrigues grow more active and agitation is more lively and wider spread,” Timpono (1998: 146) found that “[t]he temporal span between the tasks of registering and voting has been found to be the strongest deterrent associated with registration.” States requiring “people to register long before campaigns have reached their climax and mobilization efforts have entered high gear,” Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 208) reason, might “depress voter participation in American elections.” On the other hand, given the surge of voter registration drives immediately prior to an election, late registrants are more likely to be registered by outside groups (rather than at the Department of Motor Vehicles or other state agencies) than those who register at other times of the year. Since the “type of voter for whom mobilization is effective is contingent on the electoral context” (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009: 3), it is certainly conceivable that late-registrants will be more likely to be contacted in GOTV campaigns, at least in the run-up to the upcoming election. Although some early studies found that individuals who registered during late registration drives did not turn out at as high of a rate as those who registered on their own (Cain and McCue, 1985; Vedlitz, 1985), a more recent study by Gimpel et al. (2007: 368) finds that those who register late in the game are more likely to turn out in a proximate election, as “election-related stimuli are critical to informing and motivating the ‘peripheral’ electorate.” In addition, Burden et al. (2014) show that states that maintain registration deadlines that end nearer to an election, specifically those that coincide with an early voting period (Same-Day Registration) or Election Day itself (Election Day Registration), have higher turnout. As Sides et al. (2012: 330) reason, that late registering voters are likely to turn out in an upcoming election makes sense, as “[t]he earlier a person must register before an election, the more difficult the process becomes because it is easier to remember to register when Election Day is near.” Last-minute registrants—more so than those who passively register to vote when getting their driver's license at the DMV or online, who register to vote when applying for social services or other government programs, or most recently (in Oregon and California), who are automatically registered when getting or renewing their driver's license—should have the pending election on their minds. And, if for some reason they do not, targeted GOTV efforts will certainly remind these recent registrants to turn out in the pending election.

Given the increasingly sophisticated and extensive Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) drives by candidates, political parties, as well as by a sundry of voting rights organizations and electioneering groups (Green and Gerber, 2004), there is further reason to expect that the timing of registration could increase the likelihood of a new registrant voting in the upcoming election. Partisan and non-partisan entities are frequently

<sup>2</sup> North Dakota, which abolished voter registration in 1951, remains the only state not to require eligible voters to register prior to voting. See <https://vip.sos.nd.gov/pdfs/Portals/votereg.pdf>.

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