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The Effect of the Mail-In Voter Registration Form on Voter Turnout in the
Commonwealth of Virginia
Leroy O. Pfeiffer, Jr.
Master of Arts in Political Science
University of Richmond
1998
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ABSTRACT

Over the years, many states have undertaken different approaches to increase voter registration and stimulate voter participation in the electoral process. One such approach was the Commonwealth of Virginia's Voter Registration Extension Form, which was instituted in 1989. Using statewide voter registration statistics and a survey of state voter registrars, this paper attempts to measure the impact that this form had on voter registration and turnout in the electoral process from 1989 to 1994. This thesis finds that the registration extension form was reasonably successful in terms of increasing registration. Yet, easing registration requirements does not significantly increase voter turnout.

**THE EFFECT OF THE MAIL-IN VOTER REGISTRATION FORM ON VOTER
TURNOUT IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**

By

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B.A., University of Richmond, 1984

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INTRODUCTION

Declining voter turnout has been a major focus of contemporary political study. Various authors have sought explanations as to why people choose not to exercise their right to vote. One strain of this literature deals with the effect that liberalizing registration rules has on voter turnout (See, for example, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1992). The decline of voter turnout coupled with increased measures by federal and state governments to stimulate the registration and turnout of voters has produced, what Ruy Teixeira terms "a puzzle of participation" (1992, 29). This contradiction finds governments attempting to relax registration requirements despite the rising tide of voters who choose not to participate in the electoral process.

This study evaluates part of Teixeira's "puzzle of participation" by assessing the effects of a procedural change in Virginia's voting law. In 1989, Virginia implemented a voter registration extension procedure that was combined with an "intent to purge" notice that made renewing voter registration easier for individuals who did not vote in previous elections. Using statewide statistical data on voter registration and a survey of voter registrars, this study assesses the extent to which the voter registration extension form mailing stimulates otherwise inactive registrants to register and vote.

The study finds that while this rule change had a minimal effect on increasing statewide voter participation, the extension form was generally effective

compared with alternative reforms to liberalize registration. When viewed in the context of a single rule modification measured against the predictive models developed by Teixeira to gauge the effect of various registration rule changes on voter turnout, the Virginia Voter Registration Extension Form was reasonably successful.

The thesis begins with a background section that examines related studies dealing with registration rules and their effect on voter participation as well as an explanation of the Virginia Voter Registration Extension Law. Then, I analyze Virginia voter registration data and data collected from a stratified sample of voters who extended their registration by mail to measure the effect that this unique rule change had on voter turnout in Virginia from 1989 to 1994. Finally, I use the results of a survey of individual voter registrars to gauge their professional opinion on the effect of this rule change.

BACKGROUND

The effect of registration rules on voter turnout is a controversial topic among political scientists. Many scholars agree that registration laws can suppress citizen participation in the electoral process (Conway, 1991; Piven and Cloward, 1989; Teixeira, 1992). Relaxing registration rules, they say, induces more citizens to register, leading to higher levels of voter turnout (Piven and Cloward 1989, 261; Squire 1987, 57). Others argue that, today, the specific changes in registration rules have at best a marginal effect on voting behavior. Cox and

Thacker concluded "that dropping barriers to registration, per se, is not a sufficient strategy for increasing voter registration rates in the states" (1994, 5). They argue that most states have already eliminated the major legal obstacles to registration. The question now is whether the costs of registering to vote can be lowered further to induce individuals to participate in the electoral process. C. Margaret Conway argues that "For many citizens, the value derived from voting participation is less than the costs imposed by the voter-registration system and as a consequence many citizens are not registered and do not vote " (1991, 112).

Teixeira equates registration rules to "costs of voting". He suggests that if states liberalized their registration laws, it would make registering more convenient and yield a higher voter participation rate (Teixeira 1994, 106). He qualifies this theory, however, by suggesting that some registration rules matter more than others. Teixeira notes that voter turnout could be increased by 7.8% if states would eliminate the closing dates for registration, require voter registration offices to be open on Saturdays or evenings, require consistent registration office hours, and increase the number of years before a voter could be purged (Teixeira 1992, 110). The estimated effect of each component in Teixeira's study varied greatly. His 7.8% figure was based on the following: an increase of 4.8% for eliminating closing dates; 1.5% for changing the number of years before purging; .8% for consistent office hours; and .7% for requiring Saturday or evening hours (Teixeira 1992, 122). Thus, his study found that some registration rules can have a substantially greater effect on turnout than others. The key is to measure the

impact or effect of a rule change in increasing voter participation either in voter registration or actual turnout. Table 1 illustrates the predicted impact each registration rule reform would have in increasing voter turnout. His model is based on all four reforms being enacted simultaneously. Thus, for every 100 people that are enticed to the polls because of these four reforms, election day registration would bring sixty-one of those new voters to the polls; the elimination of purging for nonvoting would bring twenty-six new voters to the polls; universal evening and Saturday registration hours would account for nine of these new voters; and universal regular registration office hours would account for four of these new voters coming to the polls.

**TABLE 1:
ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE OF TURNOUT INCREASE FROM
REGISTRATION REFORM, BY TYPE OF REFORM**

=====

<u>REFORM</u>	<u>% OF PREDICTED INCREASE</u>
Election day registration	4.8%
Eliminating purging for nonvoting	1.5%
Universal evening and Saturday registration	.8%
Universal regular registration office hours	.7%
Total	7.8%

=====

Source: The Disappearing American Voter by Ruy Teixeira, 1992 (p. 113).

Since this study will look at the impact of a single registration rule change, the effect, if compared to Teixeira's study, will need to be adjusted to help determine a standard of comparison for this study. In this case, I use the estimated percentage increase for the reform of "eliminating purging for nonvoting" as found in Table 1 (1.5%). The 1.5% increase in turnout predicted in Teixeira's model is still a high estimate to compare to Virginia's rule change because Teixeira's proposed rule change was to eliminate all purging and, as I point out below, the Virginia mail-in voter registration extension form is a modification of purging, not an elimination of it. But for purposes of comparison, I use the 1.5% from Teixeira's model as the baseline for comparing a rule change involving purging (i.e., intent to purge notices, elimination of purging).

A different study of voter registration and turnout found that state efforts to increase voter participation through policy changes does not necessarily lead to positive results. A 1990 U.S. General Accounting Office report showed a negative correlation in voter turnout in states that mailed intent-to-purge notices to people who were about to be dropped from registration rolls (1990, 44). In an analysis of 1988 turnout results, they found that in twenty-nine states which mailed an intent to purge notice the effect of this action on voter registration was -.18% and the effect on voter turnout was -.22%. Even though the authors of the GAO Report cautioned readers to be careful in interpreting these results because of the various differences in state election laws, they also argued that voter information activities (including the intent to purge notice) do not generally increase voter turnout (1990, 57).

The two studies indicate that there is no clear standard set of expectations for judging the effects of the Virginia Mail-in Extension procedure on turnout. A simple approach would be to use Teixeira's estimate of a 1.5% increase in voter turnout as a benchmark in gauging the effect Virginia's mail-in registration procedure. It should be noted that Teixeira's estimate is probably a high estimate for my study due to the fact that his prediction is based on the total elimination of purging and not simply a modification like the Virginia Voter Registration Form.

Demographic Factors

Most studies of voter participation examine the demographic characteristics of non-voters. Variables such as age, income, and residential mobility can indicate whether a person is likely to vote. Teixeira maintains that registration reform would most likely increase turnout in the least educated, low income groups rather than in demographic groups with college degrees or in those earning in the mid-to-high income range (1992, 114).

Education seems to have the most pronounced affect on turnout regardless of the registration requirements. Benjamin Highton found that:

... the greatest aggregate effects of more difficult registration laws are on those with the least amount of formal education. Where registration requirements are minimal or nonexistent, the effect of education is reduced because less educated citizens vote at higher rates while the the turnout of the better educated is nearly unchanged (570).

Therefore we can argue that changes in registration rules, while universally helping all citizens, tend to have more effect in increasing voter participation among those demographic groups that have low turnout rates compared to the general population.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal found similar voting patterns among these groups. From 1990 to 1994, turnout among voters with incomes under \$9600 dropped from 32% to 22% and turnout of those in the \$9600 to \$14,399 income range also dropped from 36% to 32%. At the same time, voter turnout among those in the income range of \$36,000 to \$47,000 rose to 58% from 50% (Georges 1998, A20).

Taking into account the effects of education and income on turnout, we should assume that most voters who receive the voter registration extension form are less likely to vote than the "normal" voter in any case. Thus I suspect that even those who take advantage of a rule that encourages easier registration will be less likely to vote for other reasons.

One shortcoming of my data and analysis is that I am not able to test the effect of demographic variables on turnout at the individual level. In the aggregate, though, I certainly do not expect individuals who extend their registration by mail to vote at the same rate as those who are already registered and have a history of voting regularly.

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In 1974, Virginia law began requiring voter registrars to purge from the list of

registered voters those people who had not voted in any election in the preceding four calendar years. This annual process was designed to remove from registration rolls voters who had died, moved to another locality without notifying the local voter registrar, or had not simply chosen to stop voting. It was also aimed at reducing the incidence of fraud (Piatt 1995).

In the mid-1980s, electoral officials began to notice that a small percentage of those voters who were purged for not voting re-registered for the next election. According to Audrey S. Piatt, Deputy Secretary of the State Board of Elections, Title 24.1 of the Code of Virginia¹ "was amended to permit them to continue to be registered provided they still lived at their registration address and signed and returned an application for the extension of their registration " (Piatt 1995). This registration extension form had to be returned within fifteen days of the date it was mailed. If a voter chose to extend his/her registration by mail, he/she could renew his/her registration for another four year period before being subject to purging. This is an example of the government trying to alleviate the citizen's personal cost of re-registering by utilizing state resources to allow him/her to extend his/her registration by mail.

The voter registration extension form, attached to the intent-to-purge notice, reduced the costs of registering in two ways. First, it notified voters, who may not have known the state registration rules, that they were about to be purged from the rolls. The two-part form was mailed by the State Board of Elections to voters

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about to be purged from the list of registered voters because they had failed to vote for four consecutive calendar years. The form advised the addressee that he/she was about to be purged and gave the person the option of extending. The mailing informed registrants that if they failed to vote in a four year period, they would be removed from the voter registration rolls. The second way this form reduced the costs of re-registering was by allowing a person the opportunity to extend his/her registration by mail without having to re-register in person.

To gauge the effectiveness of the voter registration extension form, I used three indicators. The first is an analysis of state-wide registration data since 1977. The second indicator is a survey of county/city voter registrars to obtain a professional appraisal of the extension form and the third indicator was a stratified sample of voters who extended their registration by mail to see if they voted in the next election. These three indicators are used to test the relationship between the implementation of the voter registration extension form and a voter's decision to re-register and vote. If the registration extension mailing is effective, there should be a decrease in the percentage of voters purged from the rolls and an increase in turnout among registered voters.

ANALYSIS OF STATE-WIDE REGISTRATION DATA

The process of purging voters from the voter lists after four years of inactivity began in 1974. The State of Virginia implemented the mail-in voter registration form beginning in 1989. To see if a pattern can be discerned from the use of the

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mail-in extension form, I looked at the statistical data for the number of voters, the number of extensions processed, and the number of voters purged.

Table 2 shows the statistics on registered voters purged since 1974. Two trends can be seen here, one more clearly than the other. The first is that the number of registered voters has increased over the years. In 1994 the number of registered voters stood at 3,004,169. Since 1973, the total number of registered voters statewide has ranged from a low of 1,882,495 in 1975 to a high of 3,054,662 in 1992.

The second trend which can be discerned from these statistics, although not as distinctly, is that during the years in which the mail-in extension process was used (1989 - 1994) the number of voters purged as a percentage of the total registered voters decreased slightly. This trend can be identified from two perspectives. First, a comparison of the percentage purged for only the presidential election years shows that 1992 was the lowest year for voter purges. The second perspective is that since 1974, when voter rolls began to be purged, the two lowest years were in 1994 and 1990. This fact coupled with the steady overall increase in the number of registered voters statewide shows a trend of declining purges (as a percentage of registered voters) since the institution of mail-in voter registration extensions. One might assume that with more people registered, more people would be purged. In the early 1990's the data show the opposite to be true.

**Table 2:
REGISTERED VOTERS vs. REGISTERED VOTERS PURGED OR
EXTENDED**

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>TOTAL REGISTERED</u>	<u>TOTAL PURGED</u>	<u>PERCENT PURGED</u>	<u>TOTAL EXTENDED</u>
1973	2,031,765	NO PURGE	0	
1974	2,050,469	269,680	13.27	
1975	1,882,495	81,455	4.33	
1976	2,123,849	142,943	6.73	
1977	2,022,619	48,758	2.41	
1978	2,026,515	59,646	2.94	
1979	2,050,499	52,644	2.57	
1980	2,309,181	145,101	6.28	
1981	2,214,926	62,354	2.82	
1982	2,232,665	61,203	2.74	
1983	2,329,708	60,630	2.60	
1984	2,667,726	131,768	4.94	
1985	2,598,754	58,152	2.24	
1986	2,612,060	82,911	3.17	
1987	2,659,227	79,143	2.98	
1988	2,878,718	216,227	7.51	
1989	2,747,322	65,713	2.39	6,654
1990	2,738,029	55,410	2.02	7,299
1991	2,793,918	72,956	2.61	11,696
1992	3,054,662	132,890	4.35	14,904
1993	2,976,997	80,258	2.70	9,119
1994	3,004,169	47,979	1.60	5,015

Source: Commonwealth of Virginia, State Board Of Elections

Another way of identifying the effect of the mail-in extension program in helping to keep voters on the rolls is to put the data into four year groups in order to compare the period after the extension form was implemented with previous periods. Table 3 compares the purge rates of four periods from 1977 to 1992. The final group, containing the years 1989-1992, is the first four year time period that the voter registration extension form was used by the State of Virginia. The other three groups are comprised of the three preceding four year time periods in which the notice-to-purge mailing was not used and voter rolls were purged automatically on an annual basis. The three groups cover the years 1977-80, 1981-84, and 1985-88.

The purpose of grouping the years in such as manner is two-fold. The first reason is to isolate the years in which the mail-in extension program has been in effect. Thus the first three groups represent voter registration data in which the

Table 3:
Average Percentage of Registrants Purged, by Four Year Groups

<u>PERIOD</u>	<u>% PURGED</u>
1977-80	3.64%
1981-84	3.35%
1985-88	4.06%
1989-92	2.88%

Source: Commonwealth of Virginia, State Board of Elections

purges were done without the use of the notice to purge mailing by the State Board of Elections. The last group (1989-92) represents the first four years in which the notice to purge mailing was used. The second reason for grouping the years in such a fashion is to include one group of purged voters for every four year election cycle. This manner of grouping insures that each period will contain only one presidential election year. Because presidential election years tend to draw voters in greater numbers, they also are the years in which the highest number of voters are purged for not voting. For example, Table 2 shows that the number of voters purged in 1988 was over three times larger than in 1989. Having a group with more than one presidential election year would distort this analysis.

Another variable to be examined is the percent of registered voters purged. For the period 1989-94, the years in which the mail-in voter registration form was being used in Virginia, the percent of registered voters who were purged ranged from a high of 4.35% in 1992 to a low of 1.6% in 1994. The four year group of 1989-92 in Table 3 had an average voter purge percentage of 2.88%. The preceding four year period (1985-88) had the highest average percentage of voters purged of the four groups (4.06%). The largest number of voters purged in a single year in this grouping occurred in 1988, when 216,227 voters were removed from voter rolls in the State of Virginia. It is also interesting to note that the 1985 voter purge percentage was the third lowest on record since 1974. The only other years with a lower percentage were 1990 and 1994 (years in which the mail-in extension form was being used).

The other two year groups, 1977-80 and 1981-84, had average voter purge percentages of 3.64% and 3.35% respectively. Voter purge percentages were the highest during presidential election years. In 1980 the percentage of voters purged was 6.28% and four years later the percentage was 4.94%. The lowest percentage of voters purged in either of the first two year groups was in 1977, when 48,758 voters were purged out of a total of 2,022,619, or 2.41%.

The comparison of the voter purge percentages for the year groups in Table 3 shows a relationship between the intent-to-purge notices sent to voters and the number of voters purged from the rolls. The first three periods in Table 3 encompass the years voters were purged without benefit of the mail-in extension form being sent. The fourth period in Table 3, covering the years 1989-92, is the period in which the mail-in extension form was first used. A comparison of the purge percentage of each of the first three periods to the final one shows a decrease in the number of voters purged after the mail-in extension was utilized.

It is also instructive to look at the effect it had on registration during the election cycle of 1989-92 (an election cycle meaning a four year period that includes a Presidential election, a Governor's race, and a U.S. Senate contest). During this four year period, a total of 40,553 voters used the mail-in voter registration extension form to remain as registered voters (see Table 4). This represents, in percentage terms, .35% of all registered voters during this period. The four year election cycle is also used as a benchmark because voter purging, although conducted annually, was done on those people who had not voted in four consecutive election years.

**TABLE 4:
Voter Purge and Extensions 1989-1994**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Eligible For Purge</u>	<u>Total Purged</u>	<u>Percent Eligible Purged</u>	<u>Total Extended</u>	<u>Percent Eligible Extended</u>
1989	73,187	65,713	89.8%	6,654	9.1%
1990	62,727	55,410	88.3%	7,299	11.6%
1991	85,983	72,956	84.8%	11,696	13.6%
1992	150,861	132,890	88.1%	14,904	9.9%
1993	90,322	80,258	88.9%	9,119	10.1%
1994	52,994	47,979	90.5%	5,015	9.5%

Note: Percent eligible purged and percent eligible extended will rarely add to 100%. A period of approximately six weeks elapses after the notice of intent-to-purge is mailed during which extension applications are returned and entry is effected to extend those registrants for another four years. Also, during this period, registrars continue to receive notices (death, registration in another jurisdiction, or other disqualifying event) which results in the earlier removal of some who would otherwise be removed for failure to vote.

Source: Commonwealth of Virginia, State Board of Elections

The factor that we are attempting to isolate is the warning sent by mail to registrants advising them that they would be purged for not voting in four consecutive elections. Examination of the statewide voter registration statistics has shown that the intent-to-purge notices did make a difference. Although the

people who extended their registration through the mail comprise a very small percentage of the total number of registered voters for the state, the positive results show that easier registration rules can facilitate dormant participants to re-register. The question is whether the low cost of registering carries over into voting behavior. Did this new law, which helped increase the number of registered voters, affect voter turnout?

Survey of County/City Voter Registrars

In July 1996, I conducted a state-wide mail survey of all county and city voter registrars (see Figure 2 in Appendix). This was a simple one page survey with two objectives. First, I wanted to see how the individual voter registrars viewed the mail-in voter registration extension form. This question relied on their professional judgment rather than data on overall turnout. I believed that in offices located in the smaller jurisdictions, registrars would be more acquainted with a larger percentage of the population and might have a personal recollection of someone on the list to be purged who chose to extend his registration by mail. This question provides the professional appraisal of the effectiveness of mail-in voter registration form.

The second and primary objective of this survey was to see if there was a relationship between an extension of registration by mail (using the form mailed to them by the State Board of Elections in December 1994), and the likelihood of voting later that year. Survey question #4 asked each registrar to randomly

select three voters who had extended their registration by mail in January 1995. Using the election data at their disposal, each registrar was asked if any of these three voters voted in the next general election. I did not ask for voters' names to be listed.

This survey of mail-in registration extensions was performed in this manner for a number of reasons. First, it was not feasible for me to visit each locality to gather the data for this survey. Second, on a couple of visits that I had made to registrars' offices, I was not allowed to view the list of people who had extended their registration by mail. The list I needed to view contained the voter's Social Security number, which by law is not public information. Therefore, this survey allowed me to avoid problems of confidentiality and expedite the collection of data. This canvass of registrars also allowed me to get a more complete state-wide assessment of data compared to what I would have been able to collect on personal visits to voter registrars throughout the state.

It is pertinent to note that the survey is brief by design. Since I wanted to a high response rate from the registrars, I decided to limit the survey to one page. Not only did the registrar have to take the time to read the cover letter and questionnaire, but answering question #4 required that he/she do about five to ten minutes of research. I did not want the survey to seem so complicated or time consuming that it got tossed into the trash, or got lost in an inbound stack of paperwork.

Survey Response

Eighty-three localities sent in completed surveys (see Table 5 in Appendix). This represented a 61% response rate. The localities responding represent 2,186,883 registered voters (72%) out of the 1995 total of 3,038,394. This response covered nearly two-thirds of the localities and nearly three-fourths of the registered voters in 1995 and gave an insight into voter turnout among those registered voters who had extended their registration by mail earlier that same year. In addition to the 83 completed surveys, four registrars returned the survey without completing it. They commented that they did not have the staff and/or the time to complete the questionnaire. Two registrars misunderstood the directions and gave incomplete responses on their survey and were not able to be used in the compilation of the survey results.

Survey Results

As I noted earlier, I would expect the number of voters who extended using the mail-in registration form to be small compared with the entire population of registered voters. For almost all the localities surveyed, the number of people affected by this program was minimal. In most cases the number of people extending their registration by mail represented one or two tenths of one percent of the total number of registered voters for that locality. Out of 2,186,883 registered voters in these localities only 3,264, (or about .15%) had extended their registration using the mail-in voter registration form. There were two notable

exceptions to this statistic: Floyd County, with 6,566 registered voters, had 100 people who extended their registration by mail. This represented the highest percentage of the counties surveyed (1.5%). The next highest was Rappahannock County, which had 46 people re-register by mail for a percentage of 1.2%. These two counties led the rest by a substantial margin. The next highest was Southampton where 30 out of 8,173 extended by mail for a percentage of .36%, more than double the total survey average.

Except for the three localities noted above, one can conclude that the mail-in registration program affects a very small percentage of people. On the other hand, it can be argued that this program does help the local voter registrars in two ways. First it saves time for both the registrars and the voter in that the in-person registration does not have to be completed, and all non-respondents are still purged from the list of registered voters, thereby removing the "deadwood" from the lists.

The main thrust of the survey was to measure the impact of shifting the burden of registration from the individual to the government. As noted above, some studies have indicated that reducing the costs that citizens incur when registering would significantly increase voter participation (Conway 1991, 112), or shifting the burden of registration from the individual to the government would help to increase voter turnout (Piven & Cloward 1989, 98).

The number of voters in our study who extended their registration by mail was 3,264. In the next general election 15% of the voters who extended their registration voted. The state-wide turn-out among registered voters in the 1995

General Assembly elections was 52.2% (Whitley 1995, B1). Although this was slightly higher than 49.1% turnout rate in the preceding General Assembly election year (1991), it paled in comparison to the 1994 election which featured a contested U.S. Senate race. That election saw almost 500,000 (31%) more people vote than in 1995 (Sabato 1996, 5).

Two registrars, on their own initiative, researched every voter in their locality who had extended their registration in January of 1995 to see if they had voted the following November. York County reported that "of the 44 extended voter registrations, 8 voted in 1995; 1 died and 2 moved to another Virginia locality". Thus, for York County, 18 percent of those who chose to keep their registration status active went to the polls in November. Hanover County reported that only 7 out of 53 had voted, a 13 percent participation rate. By combining the figures supplied by the York and Hanover County registrars for their counties, the resulting percentage of voter participation from this group of voters equals 15 percent. This is the exact percentage shown by the state-wide totals of the voter registration survey.

What then is the effect of the extension form on turnout? In this case study, the effect on turnout can be calculated by multiplying the turnout rate among extenders (15%) by the percentage of registered voters who extended by mail (.15%), which results in a percentage increase of .00025%. Even though this percentage does not approach Teixeira's estimate of 1.5%, it still demonstrates a positive marginal increase in voter turnout.

Conclusion

Various studies by numerous authors have been done to examine what motivates individuals to vote. Other studies have been done to try and find out why people do not vote. In either case, there is simply no clear cut answer. While this study does not seek a reason or explanation for why people vote or don't vote, it does attempt to examine the effectiveness of a proactive governmental approach to increasing voter turnout. Specifically, the Commonwealth of Virginia, in order to have a more selective purge of registrants, annually sent notices of the intent to purge. The notice included a registration extension form that allowed registered voters to extend their registration by mail by filling out the form, signing it and returning it to the State Board of Elections within an allotted time period. This action, by the government, sought to decrease the "costs" of registering (or in these cases re-registering) for citizens.

The statistical data provided by the State Board of Elections showed that approximately 10% of those people who were going to be purged took advantage of this program and extended their registration (see Table 4). The rest were assumed to have either chosen not to re-register or moved to another locality or to have died, and therefore needed to have their names removed from the list of registered voters. This process had a somewhat significant impact in that the government attempted to notify people who might not otherwise have been aware of the consequences of not voting for four years. That is, they could lose their eligibility to vote. A significant number responded in order to retain their eligibility.

A different result was found in the state-wide survey on voter turnout. In the analysis of citizens who had extended their registration by mail, only 15% went to the polls and voted in the next general election. Thus the turnout rate for the survey year of 1995 showed that the voter turnout percentage for extenders failed to keep pace with the statewide turnout rate of 52%.

However, if one takes into account the fact that "extenders" probably represent demographic sections of the electorate that do not normally turnout at the same level as the total electorate, then the impact of the mail-in voter registration extension form is more significant. As noted earlier in the paper, this program helped retain 10% of those who would otherwise have been automatically dropped from the voter registration list. To determine the effect of this form on turnout and registration means one must decide which group of voters makes the most appropriate comparison. Compared to the entire pool of registered voters, it has a minimal positive effect. Compared to a narrower group of voters, such as those less educated or in lower income brackets, the effect is amplified.

The type of election to which this test is being applied also plays a role in determining the effect. As noted earlier, the 1995 general election turnout among registered voters was not as great as in presidential election years when voter turnout usually peaks. It can perhaps be assumed that had we conducted this examination of voters in only a presidential election year, the results would have yielded higher percentages.

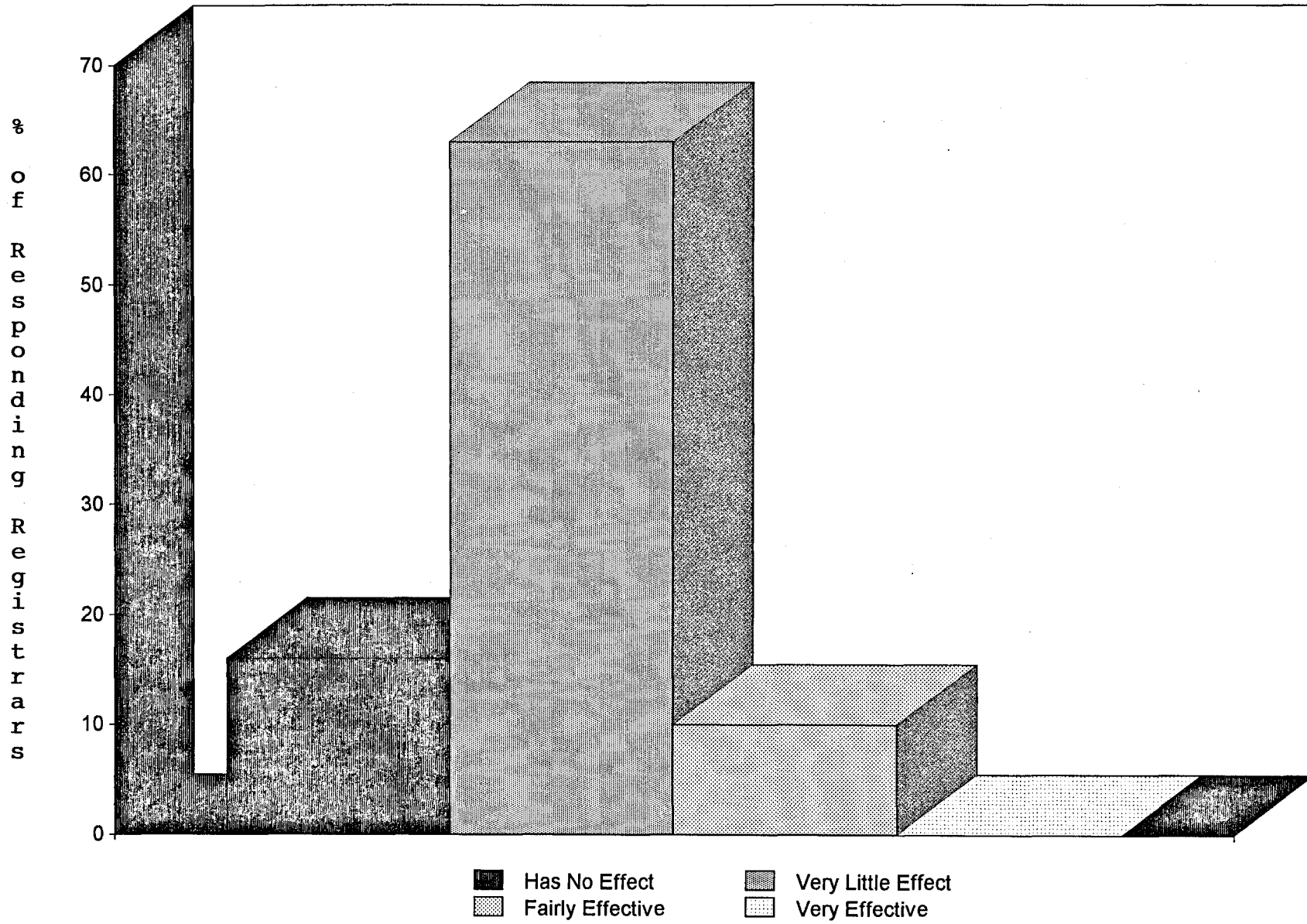
The final question on the survey asked the registrars to rate the effect of this program in encouraging people to vote. Their responses to this question showed that this program did not really affect a substantial number of voters. Most registrars said the program had "very little effect" in prompting people to vote (see Figure 1).

It should be noted that 1995 was the last year that the intent-to-purge notices were used. In 1996, Virginia fell under the National Voter Registration Act in which citizens could register to vote at offices for government agencies such as DMV or the local Department of Social Services. The program stipulated that inactive voters would no longer be purged from the list of registered voters after four consecutive years of not voting. A number of registrars have indicated that eliminating the annual purge of inactive voters is going to adversely affect voter rolls because so much "deadwood" is going to be included on voter rolls, thereby artificially inflating the number of registered voters in a locality. Voter registrars will only be allowed to purge voters who are deceased and those who have registered to vote in another Virginia locality. This problem is likely to compound over time and might need to be addressed by legislation in the future.

In the meantime, as the study of voters and voting habits goes on, so does the search for the causes of not voting. As mentioned earlier, the diagnosis of this problem is not simple and neither is the answer. This research sheds light on voter participation in the electoral process by showing the limitations of easing registration rules as a means of increasing turnout.

Figure 1.

Registrar Evaluations of the Ext. Form



APPENDIX**TABLE 5****Virginia Voter Registrar Survey Response**

<u>LOCALITY</u>	<u>#REG. VOTERS</u>	<u>#EXT. VOTERS</u>	<u>VOTED IN 1995</u>		
			<u>#1</u>	<u>#2</u>	<u>#3</u>
Accomack	15716	39	No	No	No
Albemarle	38209	15	No	No	Yes
Alexandria	61577	76	Yes	No	No
Alleghany	6227	6	No	No	No
Amherst	13187	26	Yes	No	No
Arlington	93897	113	No	No	No
Bland	3404	9	Yes	No	Yes
Botetourt	15246	18	No	No	No
Bristol	8318	14	No	No	No
Buchanan	14804	36	No	No	No
Buckingham	6232	6	No	No	No
Buena Vista	2657	2	No	No	N/A
Caroline	9449	26	No	Yes	No
Carroll	12947	28	No	No	No
Charles City	3661	3	No	No	Yes
Chesterfield	120315	205	No	No	No
Clarke	5462	7	No	No	No
Colonial Hghts	9403	15	No	No	No
Craig	2756	10	No	No	No
Culpepper	12436	15	Yes	No	Yes
Cumberland	4219	5	No	Yes	Yes
Danville	22048	28	No	No	No
Dickenson	10350	4	No	No	No
Dinwiddie	10594	17	No	No	No
Emporia	2697	3	No	No	No
Fairfax	454210	687	No	No	No
Fauquier	23022	10	No	No	No
Floyd	6566	100	No	Yes	No
Fluvanna	7598	15	No	No	Yes
Franklin	18879	23	No	No	No
Frederick	22512	23	No	No	No
Giles	9391	15	No	Yes	No

Virginia Voter Registrar Survey Response (cont'd)

<u>LOCALITY</u>	<u>#REG. VOTERS</u>	<u>#EXT. VOTERS</u>	<u>VOTED IN 1995</u>		
			<u>#1</u>	<u>#2</u>	<u>#3</u>
Greene	5617	20	No	No	No
Greensville	4995	2	No	No	No
Halifax	16748	33	No	No	No
Hampton	56657	62	No	Yes	No
Hanover	39571	53	No	No	No
Harrisonburg	11476	26	No	No	No
Henrico	126239	105	No	No	No
Highland	1560	5	No	No	No
Hopewell	9315	16	No	No	No
Isle of Wight	13719	13	No	No	No
James City	21854	22	No	No	No
King & Queen	3431	4	No	No	No
King George	6457	18	No	No	No
King William	6299	14	No	No	No
Lancaster	6436	17	No	No	No
Loudoun	52306	48	No	No	Yes
Madison	5569	4	Yes	No	No
Mathews	5315	7	No	No	No
Mecklenburg	13810	39	No	No	No
Montgomery	30075	47	No	No	No
Nelson	6645	11	Yes	Yes	No
New Kent	6779	6	No	No	No
Northampton	6966	19	No	No	No
Northumberland	6220	6	No	Yes	N/A
Nottoway	6685	17	No	No	No
Page	10288	17	Yes	No	No
Patrick	8582	17	No	No	No
Petersburg	14395	32	No	No	No
Pittsylvania	26150	41	No	No	No
Poquoson	6455	7	No	No	No
Prince Edward	7471	13	Yes	No	No
Prince George	11700	19	No	No	Yes
Prince William	92806	172	No	No	No
Pulaski	16576	32	No	No	No
Radford	5530	3	No	No	No
Rappahannock	3816	46	Yes	No	Yes

Virginia Voter Registrar Survey Response (cont'd)

<u>LOCALITY</u>	<u>#REG. VOTERS</u>	<u>#EXT. VOTERS</u>	<u>VOTED IN 1995</u>		
			<u>#1</u>	<u>#2</u>	<u>#3</u>
Richmond City	86900	111	No	Yes	Yes
Richmond Co.	3444	4	No	No	No
Roanoke Co.	45941	90	No	No	No
Rockingham	25806	49	No	No	No
Salem	12206	14	No	No	No
Shenandoah	15746	26	No	No	No
Southampton	8173	30	No	No	No
Staunton	10467	11	No	No	No
Suffolk	24491	48	No	No	No
Virginia Beach	157209	153	Yes	No	No
Warren	11694	19	No	No	No
Washington	22431	24	No	Yes	No
Waynesboro	7549	10	No	No	No
Westmoreland	7716	19	No	No	No
York	24608	44	No	No	No
<u>TOTALS</u>	2,186,883	3264	<u>TOTAL FOR ENTIRE DATABASE</u>		

YES = 30
NO = 217
N/A = 2

Source: Voter Registrar responses to a July 1996 survey mailed to all County and City Voter Registrars in Virginia.

Figure 2.
Questionnaire of City/County Voter Registrars

=====

- 1) I serve as registrar for the city/county of _____
- 2) The number of registered voters in 1995 was _____
- 3) The number of people who extended their voter registration by mail in this locality in 1995 was _____
- 4) Please select three voter who extended their registration by mail in January 1995 and note below whether or not they voted in the November 1995 general election. Please start your search for these three voters beginning with the first letter of your locality. For example, if you are the registrar for Hanover County, begin your search with the letter H, then I and so on. If you are the registrar for Wythe County, start your search with the letter W, then Y, and so on. Circle yes if they voted in Nov 1995 or no if they did not.

VOTER #1 Yes No

VOTER #2 Yes No

VOTER #3 Yes No

- 5) How much effect do you attribute to the Mail-In Voter Registration Extension Form in prompting previously inactive voter registrants to actually voting? Base your answer on your professional opinion. Check one.

Has no effect

Very little effect

Fairly effective

Very effective

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Biographical Information

Leroy Pfeiffer Jr. was raised in Cumberland, Virginia. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from the University of Richmond in 1984. For ten years he was employed in private industry. In November 1995 he was elected Treasurer of Cumberland County, and currently serves in that position.