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Early Voting in Tennessee: Removing Barriers to Participation

Grant W. Neeley and Lilliard Richardson

In 1994 the Tennessee General Assembly mandated a new early voting system that allowed voters to cast a ballot in a two-week period prior to any election. Unlike absentee balloting, which requires registrants to justify why they cannot participate on election day, early voting is available to any registered voter who chooses to do so.

By enacting early voting in Tennessee, the state legislature hoped to achieve increased turnout and easier access for citizens unable to vote at a regular polling site on election day. The purpose of this chapter is to ascertain whether the program was able to increase access for senior citizens and other citizens disadvantaged by a single election day voting period. Using county level-census data and voting returns from the 1996 election in Tennessee, we examine early voting participation by different socioeconomic groups.

Turnout Trends in Tennessee

Tennessee, like much of the South, has consistently experienced lower voting turnout than the rest of the country. Tennessee has averaged about 50 percent turnout (as a percent of the eligible populace) for the presidential elections since 1960. In recent elections, however, turnout in Tennessee, as well as much of the South, has improved due to several factors. First, the Republican Party has been increasingly active and successful. This success has extended beyond the presidential contest as Republicans have increased their membership in the Congressional ranks.

Second, almost all Southern states have dramatically reduced the barriers to voting. In addition, income and education levels have dramatically increased in the region, and generally wealthier and more educated citizens are more likely to vote. Also, many areas have experienced an increase in urban-

ization. Because of improved transportation systems, greater mass media exposure, and the expansion of suburban areas, citizens now have greater choices in where and how they live as well as more information with which to make choices. Further, the migration of non-Southerners has changed the region so that it is more like the rest of the nation in its political culture. Overall, the region is less dominated by a rural, clannish, traditional society that stifled meaningful participation for many in the past.

Voting Reforms

Much of the research on the factors that reduce voting participation has focused on the detrimental effect of registration laws (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Erikson 1981; Piven and Cloward 1988; Gans 1990; Fenster 1994). In Tennessee, a citizen must register with the county government 30 days prior to an election in order to vote. Because many citizens are not aware of the requirement, do not know where to go to register, or may even be afraid that registration will make them eligible for jury duty, many never register to vote.

Although scholars have focused on the effects of registration laws, less attention has been devoted to postregistration reforms that may reduce the cost of voting for registered citizens (Patterson and Caldeira 1985; Magleby 1987; Garcia, Stein, and Ward 1993; Dubin and Kalsow 1996). One such postregistration reform that has just begun to receive attention is early voting (Garcia, Stein, and Ward 1993; Richardson and Neeley 1996). Started in Texas in 1991 and since adopted in various forms by several other states, early voting allows voters a "no hassle" method of voting several weeks prior to the election. Because early voting may include weekend and evening hours of operation as well as satellite voting sites, it greatly reduces the structural impediments for a voter. In addition, voting sites at shopping centers and community centers open after working hours may also reduce some of the effects of social factors on turnout by making voting more accessible for those with inflexible job or childcare situations.

Despite the fact that legislators and election officials in many states have moved to enact early voting statutes in the belief that such a system will increase turnout, very little research has been conducted on the turnout effects of either liberalized absentee balloting or early voting. In their study of absentee voting in California and Iowa, Patterson and Caldeira (1985) argue that "rates of absentee voting, along with political participation generally, vary to a considerable extent across the social gradient . . . [but] rates do not vary in the same fashion across jurisdictions" (p. 786). Magleby (1987) shows that elections handled by mail ballot in California enjoyed higher than normal participation rates, and he demonstrates that education levels had an even greater

effect on participation in mail ballot elections than normal elections. Dubin and Kalsow (1996), in their study of California's absentee balloting system, show that liberalized absentee voting may have increased turnout in primary elections but not in general elections. They also found significant demographic differences between absentee voters and other voters. Garcia, Stein, and Ward (1993), in their research on the Texas early voting system, demonstrate that ethnicity, the presence of a nongovernmental voting location, and the operating hours of nongovernmental voting sites significantly affect early voting participation. Overall, little is known about whether early voting meets the needs of the disadvantaged groups it aims to serve.

Early Voting

While early voting is a relatively new voting phenomenon, absentee balloting has existed for decades. Distinguishing between these two electoral programs is a necessary first step to assessing the impact of early voting. As Rosenfield (1994) points out, early voting differs from absentee voting systems by six factors: who can vote early, whether or not an application to vote is necessary, whether the early voted ballot is individually identifiable, when the voting takes place, where the voting takes place, and the publicity about the early voting opportunity. Early voting does not require any special qualification for voters to cast their ballot, whereas many absentee systems require voters to be unable to participate on election day for some approved reason. In addition, absentee voters must often complete a special form to vote, whereas early voting does not require such a special procedure. Early voting ballots are not subject to the individual level scrutiny that can often accompany in-person absentee ballots, where a voter's eligibility could be challenged. Early voting programs provide extended hours for voting, whereas absentee voting takes place during the normal business hours of the election office. Early voting programs also use other voting sites in addition to the election office where absentee balloting takes place. Early voting is also distinguished from absentee voting by increased publicity about the availability of casting one's ballot prior to election day.

In 1994, the Tennessee General Assembly mandated that all state and county elections would allow an early voting period of two weeks that begins 20 days before any election (State of Tennessee 1994). The law set minimal constraints on the hours of operation and the location of early voting sites. Some weekend and evening hours were required, but county officials had considerable latitude in setting hours of operation, choosing voting sites, and selecting ballot types.

All counties must use the county election commission office (usually lo-

cated in the courthouse) as an early voting site, but a number of counties also decided to open additional polling places for the early voting period. Satellite locations included churches, community centers, fire stations, schools, libraries, and shopping centers. In many cases, the early voting sites were not regular polling places. While the number of counties using satellite locations increased in the 1996 election, the Tennessee experience with this component of early voting has been fairly limited. The lack of satellite locations may be due to several factors: the lack of computerized voting records, the rural nature of most counties, and the increased budget necessary for staffing extra voting sites.

The county election officials also had to make a choice between electronic voting machines, punch card machines, paper ballots, or even a combination of ballot types. This decision was affected by a number of factors: whether the county owned voting machines, the number of offices and candidates on the ballot, the cost of renting the equipment, and the personnel and training costs for the election workers staffing the early voting sites. In county and municipal elections, paper ballots were more prevalent, even in counties with the mechanized equipment, but machines were more likely to be used in national and statewide elections.

Early Voting in the 1996 Presidential Election

Early voting turnout can be measured in two ways: as a percent of all registered voters and as a percent of all votes cast in the election. Eleven percent of registered voters used early voting in 1994, and about 20 percent of the ballots were cast during the early voting period. Likewise, in the 1996 election 13 percent of registrants voted early, accounting for 21 percent of all ballots cast. Although these participation rates are similar, the greater turnout in presidential elections means that almost 400,000 citizens cast early ballots in 1996, a 60 percent increase over the 1994 number of 250,503.

Generally, does the early voting rate relate to the overall turnout rate in a county? A simple correlation between early voting as a percent of registered voters and the overall turnout rate as a percent of registered voters indicates a positive value for both the 1994 and 1996 elections (.51 and .52, respectively). The association suggests that early voting has a statistically significant and positive impact on turnout at the county level.

A second important question to address is: How well does early voting meet the needs of the targeted population for the program? One of the major goals of the Tennessee early voting reform was to expand participation opportunities for segments of the population who had historically experienced lower turnout rates. Restricting elections to one day may pose a greater barrier to

participation by certain groups. These groups may be identified by four socioeconomic characteristics: age, poverty, education, and minority status.

Generally, age has been suggested as an important determinant of participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Boyd 1981). Age may be especially important in explaining early voting. One of the major arguments for the early voting process is that it may increase participation by senior citizens, who may find it difficult to participate on election day. Dubin and Kalsow (1996) show that the percent of population over 64 was a significant factor in predicting absentee voting in California. We expect a positive relationship between early voting and age, with age defined as the percentage of the county population 65 and over.

We expect that poor people are more likely to be early voters. One justification for early voting is the potential expansion of the electorate to include those who find it difficult to participate on election day due to work or family demands. This argument makes two assumptions: 1) that lower income citizens are most likely to face constraints such as low-paying hourly jobs, fewer transportation options, and restrictive childcare arrangements; and 2) that these citizens would have a greater opportunity to participate given an extended election period. To operationalize this concept we use the poverty rate, measured as the percent of households in the county with an annual income below \$12,500.

Many scholars have noted the positive effect education has on political participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1992). We expect that early voting should be more positively related to education than it is to election day turnout. Education is measured as the percent of a county's residents with a high school degree or less. A county with a higher percentage of these residents would be expected to have more of the socioeconomic groups that are disadvantaged by election day barriers.

Minorities have also been shown to participate at lower rates (Teixeira 1992). We expect a positive relationship between a larger minority population and early voting participation. The minority measure is the percent of county residents who are not white.

Early Voting and Country Characteristics

In this section, we examine the relationship between voting participation and socioeconomic characteristics by using correlation analysis. We examine three different kinds of participation, measured at the county level: overall turnout as a percent of registered voters, early voting turnout as a percent of registered voters, and early voting as a percent of all votes cast. The correlation analysis informs us about the association between two variables. A corre-

lation provides a measure of the direction of a relationship with a range from negative one to positive one, with a zero indicating no association.

As table 12.1 shows, three of the four characteristics have the expected relationship with overall turnout as a percent of registered voters. Counties with a greater percentage of poor, senior citizens, and the lower-educated tend to have lower levels of participation. However, the percent of minority residents in a county has virtually no impact on participation.

If early voting helps those groups who are currently disadvantaged by election day barriers, then the correlations between early voting participation and socioeconomic characteristics should move in a positive direction. Because a negative value indicates that counties with a higher percentage of the disadvantaged groups have lower levels of participation, a move toward zero would indicate that the group is not disadvantaged by the early voting system. If early voting could entirely remove the barriers these groups face, the resulting correlation would be zero. The zero value indicates that there is no difference in participation rates among the different socioeconomic categories. However, if the correlation is greater than zero, early voting has not only removed the barriers for these groups, but has also created a process that encourages and enables greater participation by previously disadvantaged groups.

Examining table 12.1, one can see that early voting as a percent of registered voters impacts the overall participation rates of senior citizens, the poor, the lower educated, and minorities. Each of the correlations for these groups moves in a positive direction from the *overall turnout* column to the *early voting as a percentage of registered voting* column. Indeed, early voting reduces the barriers associated with age to such an extent that the correlation approaches zero, indicating that seniors citizens are just as likely to vote early as are younger citizens. Early voting also dramatically impacts the rate of partic-

Table 12.1
Factors Correlated with Turnout and Early Voting
in the 1996 Election

County Characteristics	Overall Turnout among Registered Voters	Early Voting as a Percent of Registered Voters	Early Voting as a Percent of Vote Cast
Senior Citizens	-.32**	-.07	.07
Poverty Rate	-.71**	-.42**	-.22*
Lower Education	-.57**	-.41**	-.24**
Minority Rate	.001	.07	.09

* $p = .05$.

** $p = .01$.

ipation for the poor, lower-educated, and minorities. In fact, the positive correlation on the minority variable indicates that early voting appears to have slightly advantaged minorities. Overall, early voting has mobilized the target socioeconomic groups.

The results for early voting as a percentage of total votes cast are similar. The correlations for each group also move in a positive direction. Counties with a higher percentage of senior citizens and a higher percentage of minorities exhibit a higher degree of early voting. Similarly, this measure indicates that early voting decreases the barriers to participation in counties with a poorer and lower-educated citizenry.

Conclusions

Early voting was created with two major goals: provide greater convenience for all voters, and more importantly, increase participation among those groups who are disadvantaged most by election day barriers. While more data from future elections will further illuminate the effects of early voting on turnout, the evidence from 1996 suggests that early voting was used by a substantial component of the electorate and appears to reduce the turnout barriers for disadvantaged socioeconomic groups. At the overall level, counties with higher voting participation rates enjoyed higher overall turnout. Further, senior citizens, minorities, the poor, and those with lower education levels appear to have taken advantage of the early voting opportunity to overcome participation obstacles. Though early voting did not have a major impact on the overall state turnout rate in 1996, it appears to have reduced the electoral disadvantage often faced by these citizens. As McLeod, Eveland, and Horowitz (chapter 15 in this volume) point out, reducing the barriers to participation for disadvantaged groups is arguably a more important goal than increasing turnout among the most advantaged in society.

What other lessons can be drawn from the early voting experience in Tennessee? First, the program is popular with voters. While the percentage difference is not large, more people, in fact, took advantage of early voting in 1996 than in 1994. As counties increase their use of satellite voting locations, early voting's popularity is bound to grow even more. Moreover, what kinds of reforms could enhance the program's success?

- First, the increasing use of computerized voting records would facilitate the growth in alternative voting sites that are more convenient to where people live and work.
- Second, while the county election commission office may be mandated by law as an early voting site, it may not be in the population center of a county. Clearly, the popularity of the voting sites in shopping centers in the more

populous counties suggests that all counties should look for high-traffic locations for voting sites. Rather than just picking a convenient site, counties should consider a more thorough planning process in which the early voting sites are coordinated with the offices that are used for voter registration. Since the passage of the National Voter Registration Act, a number of new registrants (284,000 in Tennessee from 1995 to 1996) have become familiar with alternative registration sites, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, libraries, and health and human services offices. The information costs associated with voting would be reduced by providing early voting sites at these same locations.

- Finally, any state considering such a program must consider the costs this imposes on the county election offices and assist counties with funding for such programs. In Tennessee, early voting is an unfunded mandate in which the state requires the counties to provide this service but provides no funding, training, or assistance. In smaller counties, most of the burden of the additional costs have been carried by the election office itself through overtime and a stressful schedule. In more populous counties, the additional personnel costs required to staff satellite locations constitutes a large expenditure for the county. Clearly, the full implementation of an early voting program, complete with numerous satellite locations and extended hours, would place a heavy financial burden on a county. Early voting has great potential to mobilize citizens previously disadvantaged by the electoral system if states are willing to assist counties by devoting adequate resources to implement the program to its fullest extent.