

**VOTER PARTICIPATION, ELECTION DAY REGISTRATION, AND THE
PARTISANSHIP OF NEW REGISTRANTS: LUCAS COUNTY, OHIO,
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George L. Willis

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George L. Willis, The University of Toledo
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High levels of voter participation are *desiderata* of democratic theory. Although democracy has many definitions--direct democracy, representative democracy, and democratic centralism being but leading examples--all of them focus in some way on electoral consent through the act of voting. It is well known that in the United States voting is a valued component of the civic culture (Almond and Verba, 1963), albeit one that is too often honored only in the breach. While the literature on non-voting is substantial, this paper focuses on election day registration (EDR) as one legal-institutional factor in the attempt to remedy non-voting. We examine one of the few attempts to use it to reduce the barrier to voting that registration arguably presents. While most studies of non-voting utilize survey-based data, this study is unique in its use of aggregate registration data, at the precinct level, from Lucas County (Toledo) Ohio in 1977.

Democratic Theory and Levels of Voter Participation

There are two classes of reasons for preferring higher levels of voter turnout. One of them focuses on high participation as a resultant variable--as a consequence of "good government." High levels of voting are seen as the result of the relevance of government to people's lives, the viability of political parties in "getting out the vote," or the lack of alienation or feelings of inefficacy in the populace. If elections also raise the information levels of the population, then higher levels of voting also signify a more informed citizenry. Finally, on the stage of international opinion there is a propaganda value that redounds to countries with high levels of voter participation. In all of these arguments, however, the concern with participation is with it as a symbol or symptom, rather than with the effects of voting.

The other class of arguments relates to voting participation as a causal, exogenous variable that effects the governmental process. Indeed, there appear to be two separate points being made here. John Stuart Mill believed that the greater the number of informed electors who participate, the wiser would be the subsequent electoral choice. Unfortunately for EDR, Mill's contention can be used against it, for the most informed may be more likely to have been registered or, conversely, election day registrants may arguably be among the less informed members of the electorate.

The other point seems turnout as cause comes from the simple notion of political advantage. Our political lore is replete with tales of "organizations" and "machines" getting out the vote on election day for political advantage, and political parties always have been involved with voter turnout. The founders of the republic understood the power of numbers very well. Aaron Burr laid the groundwork for the Jeffersonian Republican victory of 1800 by establishing a form of mutual corporation that allowed hundreds of his followers to meet the New York property-ownership test (Chambers, 1963, p. 155). In 1840, the Whigs of

New York succeeded in enacting a strict registration law to keep European immigrants from voting and helping the Democrats. (Ostrogorsky, 1970, p. 300.) Tales still are told of judges swearing in new citizens with an eye on election year politics. And it is the stock in trade of election analysts today to predict success or failure for candidates, parties, issues, and mill levies based upon likely levels of turnout. It is part of the working knowledge of practical politicians that turnout really does make a difference.

Is Non-Voting Really a Problem?

Identifying just how low voter participation is in the United States is not a straightforward exercise. It has long been axiomatic among orthodox, reformist political science that turnout has been declining in America across the twentieth century, and low in comparison to other democratic systems. Interpretations vary with particular offices, and with whether one examines presidential or "off year" elections; but presidential data are indicative: participation levels have fallen from the sixty-five percent range at the beginning of this century to just above fifty percent in the most recent contests. Internationally, the figures show the U.S. near the bottom of average turnout as a percentage of those eligible. (Powell, 1984, p. 35). Reasons for these findings vary. Burnham (1967) and Kleppner and Baker (1980) blame declining ethnic and religious conflict, lower inter-party competition since the realignment of 1896, and the lack of class-based party conflict. Others point to restrictive registration laws that lower the turnout by about nine percent (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Taken together, it is reasonable that "both legal-institutional and party-related factors play a role in determining the level of turnout." (Niemi and Weisberg, 1984, p. 30.)

Recently a revisionist school has contended that turnout in America really is not low, and even if it were, there are no major differences between those who bother to vote and those who do not. Indicative here are the findings of Teixeira that, while non-voters differ with regard to certain socioeconomic characteristics, they closely resemble voters in their political outlooks. (Teixeira, 1988, pp. 42-44.) Internationally, it has been contended that American turnout is calculated as a percentage of the entire voting age population, but that in all other countries it is based upon only the percentage of registered voters. Recast in this way, turnout in the United States ranks eleventh out of twenty-four democracies, at 86.8 percent. (Glass, Squire, and Wolfinger, 1984, p. 52; see also Crewe, 1981, p. 232.)

But there are also political considerations to bear in mind where voter turnout levels are concerned. Politics is about power, about "who gets what, when, and with what effect," and about the "authoritative allocation of values." But it is mostly about winning--and winning always is associated with having more votes than one's opponent.

Whether for reasons more related to democratic theory or partisan advantage, efforts continue today in an attempt to increase voter turnout in the United States by making it easier for citizens to register. Research shows that registration requirements serve as barriers to voter turnout (Squire, Wolfinger and Glass, 1987; Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1978); and in 1988 Congress considered a Universal Voter Registration Act that would have provided for

election day registration and other ways to simplify the registration process. (U.S. Congress, House Committee on Administration, 1988.)

Election Day Registration in Ohio in 1977

EDR was enacted by the Ohio General Assembly in the spring of 1977 by the unanimous vote of the Democratic majorities in each House. The measure was opposed by House and Senate Republicans on a straight party-line vote, and was vetoed by the Republican Governor, James A. Rhodes. In another party-line set of roll-calls, the legislature overrode the veto.

Continuing their opposition to the bill which made registration easier, the Republicans successfully sought review of the new statute by the Ohio Supreme Court. Once again the forces divided along strict party lines. The four Democratic justices voted to sustain the law and the three GOP members voted to nullify it. Thus, EDR became effective in Ohio on May 31, 1977. That was an election off-year in which only municipal, township, and school board candidates were to be elected, and when various issues were to be decided on the ballot.

Determined to stop EDR, the Republicans next mounted a major opposition campaign using the initiative and referendum procedure. They were successful in placing the issue on the statewide ballot; and election day registration was repealed by a large majority in the general election of November 8, 1977. Ironically, this was the first and only general election day in which EDR was in effect.

Precinct-Level Aggregate Data Analysis

Although the new registrants of November 8, 1977, were not registered by party on election day, they were identified by precinct; and the resulting aggregate data are the only known, registration-based, dataset on the location of EDR registrants of its kind.

An analysis of precinct-level data on voter registration by party, and including the numbers of "new registrants," provides striking evidence of the advantage for Democrats, and disability for Republicans, of easier voter registration--at least in this one Democratic county and at that one point in time. The variables used in this analysis are three measures of partisanship (the numbers of Democrats, of Republicans, and of Independents), and the number of "new registrants," for each of the 484 precincts in Lucas County, Ohio.

Since the number of registrants per precinct ranges from a low of 59 to a high of 731, the three *partisan* variables have been transformed to percentage Democratic, percentage Republican, and percentage Independent. And since the number of new registrants will vary with the number of registrants per precinct, the "*registration*" measure also is simply the percentage of new registrants per precinct. The upper half of Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations (S.D.), minimums, and maximums for the numbers of Democrats,

Republicans, and of those not declaring party membership (here called Independents) per precinct, as they were in 1977. The lower half of the table then recasts these figures as percentages, and again reports their means, standard deviations, and minimums and maximums.

TABLE 1
PARTISANSHIP AND NEW REGISTRANTS PER PRECINCT

Frequencies	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum	No. of Cases
Democrats	144.8	45.3	27	282	484
Republicans	83.7	52.2	2	271	484
Independents	225.6	56.6	19	476	484
Total	454.1	92.7	59	731	484
(New Registrants)	32.5	15.4	1	89	484
Percentages					
Democratic	32.0	8.2	11.0	64.0	484
Republican	18.2	10.4	1.0	64.0	484
Independent	49.8	8.0	14.0	72.0	484
Total	100.0				
(New Registrants)	7.2	3.3	0.0	32.0	484

The percentage of new registrants per precinct can be regressed on the percentage of Democrats, of Republicans, and of Independents, with "percentage" being based on the total number of registrants per precinct. No relationship is found between the proportion of Democrats in the 484 precincts and the proportion of new registrants ($b = .003$; $r = .009$); this is simply because new registrants are about seven percent of the precinct, regardless of whether the precinct is twenty percent Democratic or fifty. The case of the GOP, however, is another matter. The higher the proportion of pre-election day, or "standard," registrants who are Republicans, the lower is the proportion of new registrants ($b = -.13$; $r = -.43$). Since there is no relationship between new registrants and the proportion of Democrats, but a strong negative one involving the Republicans, we would expect a strong positive relationship

between new registrants and the proportion of Independents. A third regression bears out this expectation. Those precincts with higher proportions of voters with undeclared party affiliation were prime areas for "new registration activity" in 1975. ($b = .23$; $r = .55$)

A note is in order about levels of party strength at the precinct level. There is a strong inverse relationship between Democratic and Republican strength in Lucas County ($r = -.66$), but also an almost equally strong inverse relationship between Republican and Independent registration ($r = -.63$). The correlation between percent Democratic and percentage Independent was $r = -.17$.)

Table 2 gives a numerical view of this same relationship between the percentage of new registrants and Democratic percentage of the two-party registration total for the 484 Lucas County precincts. And since what really counts in elections is votes, the numbers of actual registrants also appear in the Table. Data are reported by increments of five percent, beginning with precincts that are from 15.1 to 20.0 percent Democratic. Both the percentage and actual frequencies of new registrants increase almost monotonically up through the 80.1-85.0 percent Democratic level. Above that saturation point a region of diminishing returns seems to set in and the level of new registrants declines somewhat.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGES AND NUMBERS OF NEW REGISTRANTS, BY PERCENTAGE
DEMOCRATIC (BASED ON THE TWO-PARTY REGISTRATION TOTALS)

Percent Democrats per Precinct	New Registrants				Number of Precincts
	Percentages		Frequencies		
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
15.1-20.0	2.36	2.17	9.00	8.49	2
20.1-25.0	2.37	1.13	11.00	7.07	2
25.1-30.0	3.73	2.66	16.25	11.70	8
30.1-35.0	4.73	1.87	25.00	12.96	7
35.1-40.0	5.54	2.49	26.50	13.53	20
40.1-45.0	6.38	3.04	28.22	11.19	32
45.1-50.0	6.89	3.85	30.53	19.51	30
50.1-55.0	6.06	2.81	28.85	16.16	48
55.1-60.0	6.10	2.64	27.52	13.53	31
60.1-65.0	7.23	3.27	33.64	17.54	47
65.1-70.0	7.84	3.13	36.16	14.64	58
70.1-75.0	8.50	2.67	40.36	14.33	53
75.1-80.0	8.40	3.01	37.13	13.70	48
80.1-85.0	8.53	2.07	37.61	12.78	28

85.1-90.0	7.58	3.28	32.59	16.73	32
90.1-95.0	7.77	4.65	28.65	10.31	34
95.1-100	7.02	1.47	33.50	9.54	4
TOTAL					484

What about the likely partisanship of those new registrants? In the absence of individual-level data, only an educated guess can be offered; but there seem to be three hypotheses that could be advanced. (1) New registrants could tend to have the opposite party of the neighborhoods around them--could be reacting against their surroundings. Those larger numbers of new registrants in the increasingly Democratic precincts could be Republicans "reacting" to the Democracy around them, and new registrants in Republican precincts would be Democrats. Since there are more Democratic precincts in the county, the Republican Party would be the winner. (2) The proportion of new registrants in each precinct is, *ceteris paribus*, likely to be the same as the partisanship of the neighborhood around them. (3) Easier registration might actually augment the power of the dominant party. Reflecting a winner's confidence, the local majority party may through organizational efforts cause the new registrants to be even more than proportionally Democratic (or Republican in those less numerous areas of GOP strength). Because (1) seems less plausible than (2) or (3), it is no wonder that Republicans would abhor easier voter registration.

A systematic estimate of the partisanship of new registrants can be obtained simply by finding how many of them enrolled in precincts below the 50 percent Democratic level (i.e., in the Republican precincts, and how many reside in "Democratic territory." This is simply the sum of the mean frequencies, multiplied by the number of precincts in that bracket or interval.

In Republican Precincts:	2,694 (17.1%)
In Democratic Precincts:	13,041 (82.9%)

With 15,735 new registrants in all, this means that only 17.1 percent of those newly enrolled were residents of Republican precincts, while fully 82.9 percent of them came from precincts with Democratic majorities.

EDR and Partisan Advantage

For those who believe that voting levels are lower than they ought to be in America, and who see voter registration as a continuing barrier to the vote, election day registration is a natural area for reform. The only justification for registration is to prevent fraudulent voting; and studies have shown that fraud has not been a problem in the few instances where EDR has been used. If the argument about fraud fails, then the two reasons for opposing EDR must be Mill's contention about informedness, and the simple fact of electoral disadvantage to those who oppose the idea.

This paper, using registration data from 1977, demonstrates that the preponderance of new registrants in an urban, Democratic county in Ohio were Democrats. It should be little wonder that the GOP at the state level opposed so doggedly the initiation of EDR, or that it led the fight to abolish it. In a state with relatively stronger Republican party organization, it stands to reason that it would be the GOP that would be more advantaged. One thing is certain from all of this however: just as it always has been, the struggle over easier registration is an important part of who wins and who loses in the political process.

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