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Public Attitudes on State Election Administration, Goals, and Reforms*

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Introduction

While few would disagree that elections serve a fundamental role in democracy, there is considerable debate regarding the rules by which elections should be conducted. State and local officials responsible for carrying out elections face difficult challenges, and often must work to achieve what many view are two competing aims: increasing voter turnout and minimizing voter fraud.

In recent years, election officials, politicians, and scholars alike have given considerable attention to a variety of election reforms intended to either improve voter participation or reduce voter fraud (real or perceived). Many of these reforms have now been adopted, some widely, at the state level. For example, in part to boost voter turnout, thirty-two states allow early voting, nine states permit election day registration (EDR), and 6 states allow vote by mail (VBM) or permanent absentee voting. To address concerns about voter fraud, 7 states have put in place some form of photo identification requirement.¹

As more states around the country consider adopting these election reforms, it is an opportune time to evaluate public attitudes on these measures. Researchers at the University

of Missouri recently completed a national survey as part of the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The 2008 CCES is a nationally-representative survey of 32,800 respondents conducted through the collaborative efforts of a consortium of universities.² The 2008 CCES was administered in two waves during the fall of 2008 by Polimetrix.³ Here, we discuss the responses to two sets of questions asked of a subset of the 2008 CCES participants (n = 780). First, we asked respondents two questions about the potentially competing goals of increasing turnout and minimizing fraud. Second, we examined four types of election reforms: EDR, VBM, early voting, and photo identification. The survey asked respondents to characterize their approval of each reform and their beliefs about its effect on turnout, fraud, and partisan advantage.

General Attitudes about State Elections

We asked respondents two questions about the general role of government in increasing turnout and reducing voter fraud. The first question asked: "Should your state government do more to increase the number of people that vote, or is it already easy for people to vote if they really want to do so?" Respondents were asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale. The top panel of

* For a more detailed analysis of the survey responses discussed in this report, please see, Jeffrey Milyo, David M. Konisky, and Lilliard E. Richardson, Jr. "On the Determinants of Public Approval for State Voting Reforms: The Importance of Beliefs about Voter Turnout and Voter Fraud," Working Paper.

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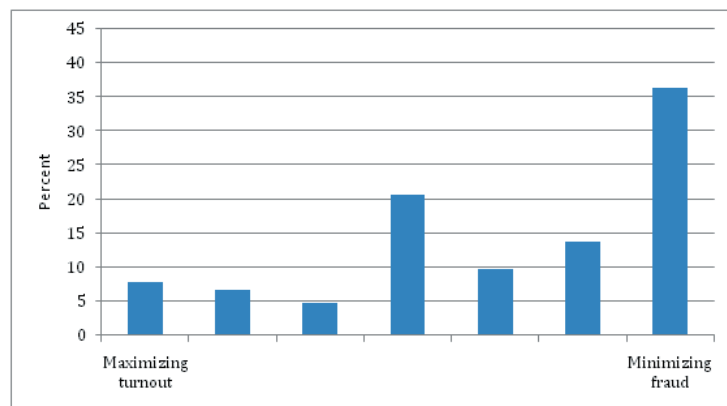
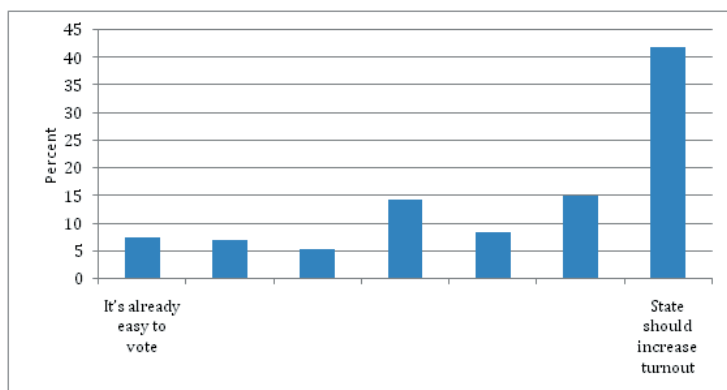
¹ These data are from the Pew Center on the States (<http://electionline.org>) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (<http://www.ncsl.org>).

² More information about the CCES project can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>.

³ The first wave of the survey was administered in October 2008, timed for before the November 4, 2008 general election. The second wave of the survey consists of re-interviews of participants to the first wave, and was administered two weeks after the November election. The questions reported in this report were all included in the second wave of the survey.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of responses. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents thought that state government should do more to increase voter participation, while about 20% did not think that the state needed to do more. The balance of the public placed themselves at the midpoint on the scale, suggesting an opinion that existing state efforts are sufficient.

FIGURE 1 ATTITUDES ABOUT VOTER TURNOUT AND FRAUD



The second question asked a more direct question about the dual aims of increasing turnout and reducing fraud: “In your opinion, what is a more important priority for your state government in conducting elections, maximizing turnout even if some voter fraud occurs, or minimizing voter fraud even if it reduces turnout?” Respondents were again asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale. The bottom panel of Figure 1 presents the responses. A strong majority of the U.S. public (60%) indicated that limiting fraud was the more important goal, with 36% of the respondents placing themselves at the far end of the scale. Less than 20% indicated that maximizing turnout was preferable, with another 20% placing themselves at the midpoint of the scale.

In sum, while the U.S. public clearly expresses a desire for state election administrators to take actions to increase voter turnout, they also want state officials to minimize fraud. This is a challenging task, since many election reforms

commonly thought to make voting easier, are also commonly perceived to increase the possibility of voter fraud. To better understand how citizens think about this potential tradeoff, we asked them to consider these issues in the context of four specific election reforms. We turn to these results in the next section.

Attitudes about State Election Reforms

The 2008 CCES asked respondents about their attitudes toward four election reforms: EDR, VBM, early voting, and photo identification. The first three reforms are all conventionally thought to facilitate voter turnout by reducing the inconvenience of voting, while photo identification requirements are thought to reduce voter fraud by providing an assurance that voters are who they say they are. With regard to each reform, respondents were asked to indicate their level of approval, whether the reform increased turnout, whether the reform led to more fraud, and whether the reform benefitted one of the major political parties more than the other.

Election Day Registration

EDR, or same day registration, allows people to register to vote and cast a regular ballot at the polls on election day. The public’s approval for EDR is split. As presented in Table 1, about 40% of the respondents expressed approval for this reform while 44% expressed disapproval; about 16% were undecided. The perceived effects displayed a much greater consensus, with 64% agreeing that it would increase turnout. About 47% also agreed that EDR would increase fraud, with 21% disagreeing, and 32% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The public did not display strong views on the partisan effect, with 34% believing it would help Democrats more than Republicans, 19% believing it would not, and 48% indicating that EDR would not advantage Democratic candidates more than Republican candidates.

TABLE 1 ATTITUDES ABOUT ELECTION DAY REGISTRATION

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I approve of EDR	22%	18%	16%	16%	28%
EDR probably increases turnout	24%	40%	25%	6%	4%
EDR probably leads to more fraud	27%	20%	32%	15%	6%
EDR probably helps Democratic candidates more than Republicans	20%	14%	48%	11%	8%

Vote by Mail

Some states have VBM which permits voters to cast their ballot through the mail before Election Day. Public approval

of VBM is also split relatively evenly among the public (see Table 2). Approximately 43% of respondents approve, 33% do not, and 23% are undecided. A strong majority of the public (58%) believe that such a policy would increase turnout, with only 14% disagreeing, and 27% unsure. Slightly less than half of the respondents (47%) agreed that it would increase fraud, while 22% disagreed and 32% neither agreed nor disagreed. Finally, 55% of responses were undecided as to whether vote by mail would benefit Democrats, with 18% agreeing and 27% disagreeing.

TABLE 2 ATTITUDES ABOUT VOTE BY MAIL

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I approve of VBM	21%	22%	23%	15%	18%
VBM probably increases turnout	20%	38%	27%	9%	5%
VBM probably leads to more fraud	24%	23%	32%	15%	7%
VBM probably helps Democratic candidates more than Republicans	10%	8%	55%	18%	9%

Early Voting

Many states also have early voting, which allows registered voters to cast a regular ballot at a designated polling place at anytime during several days leading up to election day. As shown in Table 3, the responses to the 2008 CCES indicated that early voting has more support than either EDR or vote by mail, with 68% of the public expressing approval of this reform. Only 17% disapproved of early voting, while the remaining 15% were undecided. About three-fourths of the public agreed that it would increase voter turnout, while 19% were undecided, and only 6% disagreed. Only 20% believe that early voting would increase voter fraud, with 38% undecided and 42% disagreeing. A majority of the public (53%) was unsure as to its partisan effects, with 19% agreeing that it would aid Democrats and 27% disagreeing.

TABLE 3 ATTITUDES ABOUT EARLY VOTING

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I approve of early voting	42%	26%	15%	8%	9%
Early voting probably increases turnout	40%	36%	19%	4%	2%
Early voting probably leads to more fraud	11%	9%	38%	27%	15%
Early voting probably helps Democratic candidates more than Republicans	10%	9%	53%	14%	13%

Photo Identification

Several states require voters to show a photographic identification before casting their ballot at the election polls. Of the four election reforms asked about in the survey,

photo identification requirements had the highest approval rating. As presented in Table 4, 77% of the public expresses approval with only 9% disapproving. Beliefs regarding the effects of photo identification requirements on turnout were evenly distributed across the respondents, with a slight tilt toward reducing turnout. Respondents felt much more strongly that it would reduce fraud, with 78% agreeing, only 6% disagreeing, and 16% undecided, but were mostly undecided on its partisan effects, with 53% neither agreeing nor disagreeing that a photo identification requirement would advantage one party over the other.

TABLE 4 ATTITUDES ABOUT PHOTO IDENTIFICATION

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I approve of photo ID	55%	22%	14%	7%	2%
Photo ID probably lowers turnout	10%	25%	33%	24%	8%
Photo ID probably leads to less fraud	42%	36%	16%	4%	2%
Photo ID probably helps Republicans candidates more than Democrats	10%	10%	53%	15%	12%

Discussion and Conclusion

As states around the country continue to consider state election reforms to make voting easier and minimize the incidence of fraud, it is useful to take stock of public opinion. The responses to the survey questions reported here indicate that the public views increasing turnout as a laudable goal, but they do not support efforts to increase voter participation if they also will increase fraud.

As for specific reforms, the public expresses strong approval for early voting and photo identification requirements, and somewhat weaker support for EDR and VBM. While strong majorities of the public believe that EDR, VBM, and early voting will increase levels of voter participation, there is a notable difference in perceptions about the implications for fraud across the reforms. While only about 20% of the U.S. public believes that early voting probably leads to more fraud, 47% of citizens believe that EDR and VBM will lead to more fraud. There is also one important commonality in opinion across the four reforms – a majority of the public does not believe that any of them advantage one party over the other in elections. This is a noteworthy finding, given that debates over state election reforms tend to be particularly politicized. Analysis at the individual-level is necessary to understand the determinants of these attitudes, but at the aggregate level, it appears that many in the public view these reforms less politically than some serving in office.

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