



## Drivers Wanted: Motor Voter and the Election of 1996

Stephen Knack

*PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 2. (Jun., 1999), pp. 237-243.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1049-0965%28199906%2932%3A2%3C237%3ADWMVAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C>

*PS: Political Science and Politics* is currently published by American Political Science Association.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/apsa.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Drivers Wanted: Motor Voter and the Election of 1996\*

Stephen Knack, University of Maryland

The cartoon below, which I first saw printed on the cover of *PS* in March 1994, has unfortunately proved prophetic. Voter turnout has steadily declined from its 1960 peak of 63%, and the presidential election of 1996 was the first in the lifetime of most Americans in which a minority of the voting-age population cast ballots.<sup>1</sup> Turnout dropped in every state between 1992 and 1996.

That only 49% of eligible voters went to the polls in 1996 was especially disappointing for advocates of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA). The most dramatic liberalization of voter registration procedures in American history coincided with not only the lowest level of turnout since 1924, but with the largest single four-year decline since 1920. The theory that registration barriers are the chief cause of the gap between turnout rates of the U.S. and other developed democracies suffered a devastating blow, as turnout in North Dakota—where voters aren't even required to register—was a mere 56% of the voting-age population in 1996.

Moreover, the turnout decline was heavily concentrated among "electorally disadvantaged" groups, particularly the young and residentially mobile, the very groups that reform activists expected would be the primary beneficiaries of easier registration. In fact, registration of licensed

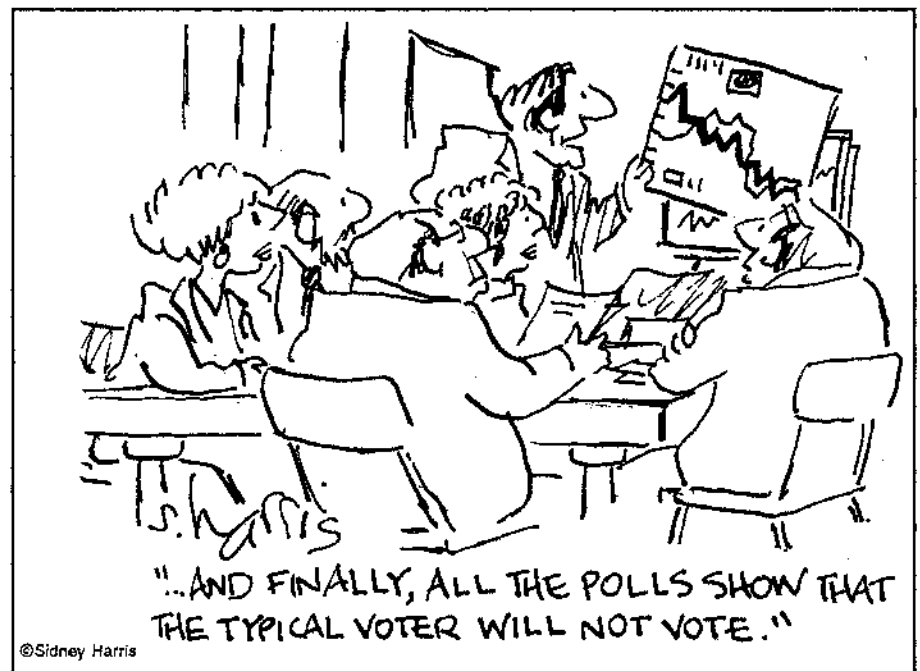
drivers—the key "motor voter" provision of NVRA—was originally conceived in 1975 by Michigan's then-secretary of state, Richard Austin, as a means of facilitating registration for the young and recent movers.

The NVRA has unquestionably been a spectacular success in adding names to the registration rolls (Federal Election Commission 1997; Human SERVE 1996). However, the record low turnout figures for 1996 and 1998 (the midterm turnout of 36.1% was the lowest since 1942) suggest that very few of these added registrants are bothering to go to the polls.

Before concluding that NVRA has had no (or minimal) impact on turnout, however, analysts must wait three to five years, the typical range of driver's license renewal cycles, until everyone has had the opportunity to register through its new pro-

cedures. Analyses of the motor voter programs voluntarily adopted in some states prior to NVRA passage confirm that the effects of motor voter—unlike election-day registration and other reforms—cumulate over several elections (Knack 1995).

The view that the NVRA was too new in 1996 to have had any effect on turnout in that election finds some support in data from the November 1996 Current Population Survey (CPS). Based on that survey, the Census Bureau estimated that only 66% of respondents were registered to vote, the lowest for any presidential election year since 1968 (Casper and Bass 1998). This estimate is based on self-reports, however, and may be an underestimate. When registration required more effort and initiative (as in 1968), everyone who registered would have been likely to remember having done so when queried by Census



**Stephen Knack** is a research associate with the Center for Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector (IRIS) at the University of Maryland. He has published extensively on registration reform and other voting turnout issues, and on the political and social determinants of economic performance across countries. He can be reached via email at [steve@iris.econ.umd.edu](mailto:steve@iris.econ.umd.edu).

**TABLE 1**  
**Turnout Change, 1992–96**

	Turnout 1992	Turnout 1996	Turnout Change
All states (weighted by VAP)	55.1	49.0	-6.1
All states (unweighted)	57.8	51.2	-6.6
No-reform states (5) <sup>a</sup>	69.5	59.9	-9.6
Reform states (46)	56.6	50.3	-6.3
Pre-92 motor voter states (9) <sup>b</sup>	57.6	50.4	-7.2
Extensive reform states (37)	56.3	50.3	-6.0
New EDR states (3) <sup>c</sup>	63.2	57.9	-5.3
New motor voter states (34)	55.7	49.6	-6.1
Challengers (6) <sup>d</sup>	53.8	47.9	-5.9
Nonchallengers (28)	56.1	50.0	-6.1

<sup>a</sup>No reform states are ME, MN, ND, VT, and WI.

<sup>b</sup>Pre-1992 motor voter states are AZ, CO, DC, MI, MT, NC, NV, OR, and WA.

<sup>c</sup>New EDR states are ID, NH, and WY.

<sup>d</sup>Challengers are CA, IL, KS, PA, SC, and VA.

interviewers. In the 1996 survey, many “motor voter” registrants may not have recalled having taken those few extra seconds at the motor vehicle or unemployment office to sign the voter registration form. While differences in the way “deadwood” registrants are handled make it impossible to directly compare registration rates in every state across the two elections (Federal Election Commission 1997; Groarke 1997), a clear picture emerges from the FEC and Human SERVE reports that, nationally, the registration rate for 1996 exceeded that of 1992.

Looking at the 1996 election from a national perspective, the tentative conclusion, pending more elections, is that the NVRA’s impact on turnout, and on the participation of underrepresented groups, may be surprisingly small. More can be learned from the 1996 election, however, by examining state-level variation in reform implementation and turnout. While it’s true that the entire nation (excepting Vermont) had easy registration in 1996, many states already had easy registration in 1992. If registration reforms work, smaller turnout declines should have occurred in states implementing more extensive reforms between the two elections. Similarly, if reforms disproportionately benefit the young, movers, and the poor and less educated, the turnout rates of these demographic

groups relative to those of others (older persons, nonmovers, etc.) should decline less in “reform” states than in “no-reform” states. I examine these two questions, in turn, in the next two sections.

### Turnout in the 1996 Election

Nationally, according to data compiled by Election Data Services, the turnout rate for the voting-age population fell 6.1 percentage points between 1992 and 1996, as shown in the top row of Table 1. Dividing states into groups based on their reform experience between the two elections gives some indication that registration reform does, in fact, work.

The last eight rows of Table 1 compare the unweighted average turnout declines for various state groups.

The first comparison is for five no-reform states and the other 46 (including DC). Vermont is the only

state that took no measures to come into compliance with NVRA until after the 1996 election. North Dakota has long had no registration requirement, so it was NVRA exempt. Minnesota and Wisconsin had universal election-day registration (EDR) at the polls in 1992 and were also exempted.<sup>2</sup> Maine, usually considered an EDR state, was not exempted because it requires election-day registrants in parts of the state to register at a central location before going to vote at a different location. It is classified here as a fifth no-reform state because the measures it took after 1992 to be NVRA-compliant couldn’t possibly have had more than the most minuscule impact: the vast majority of Maine residents can register at the polls on election day, and Maine has had an effective motor-voter program since before the 1990 election.<sup>3</sup> The remaining 46 states, which can be thought of as the “experimental” group, all experienced much more substantial reforms than did the five-state “control” group.

**Turnout fell by somewhat less (6.0 points) in the 37 states with new motor voter or EDR programs. This decline, coupled with the 9.6-point fall in the five no-reform states, suggests that new motor voter or EDR programs have a positive impact of 3.6 points on turnout.**

Turnout fell in the five no-reform states by an average of 9.6 percentage points, and by only 6.3 points in the 46 reform states. This difference suggests that reforms succeeded, by slowing the turnout decline by 3.3 percentage points on average in the reform states.

Most estimates of the turnout impacts of motor voter and EDR exceed 3.3 points (e.g., Fenster 1994; Knack 1995; Rhine 1995). A possible reason for this relatively low estimate is that not all

of the 46 reform states implemented new motor voter or EDR programs. Those implementing more minor reforms would be expected to experience a larger turnout decline than those with new motor voter or EDR programs.

Nine of the 46 reform states had effective motor voter programs in place more than six months prior to the 1992 election (see note b to Table 1).<sup>4</sup> Some of these motor voter programs (e.g., those in Oregon, DC, Montana, and Washington) were not yet "mature" as of November 1992, in the sense of having been in place for a full driver's license cycle. Others among these "old" motor voter states (e.g., Michigan) did not have programs to register applicants for public assistance, did not have mail-in registration, or did not keep nonvoting registrants on the rolls, until after they began implementing NVRA mandates in 1995 or later. The no-reform group is thus heterogeneous.

As shown in Table 1, the nine old motor voter states show an average turnout decline of 7.2 percentage points. As expected, turnout fell by somewhat less (6.0 points) in the 37 states with new motor voter or EDR programs. This decline, coupled with the 9.6-point fall in the five no-reform states, suggests that new motor voter or EDR programs have a positive impact of 3.6 points on turnout. This estimate still falls a little short of those generated by previous studies. The likely reason is that the key reform in 34 of these 37 states was motor voter, and these programs began only in January 1995 or later, too late for the majority of drivers in most states to have had an opportunity, before the 1996 election, to register while renewing their driver's licenses.

One can test this conjecture by dividing these 37 states into two groups: one comprised of the 34 new motor voter states and another of the three that opted out of NVRA mandates by instituting EDR between the 1992 and 1996 elections. Unlike motor voter, the full impact of EDR on turnout should be felt immediately, as confirmed by

**The above-average levels of income and education for residents of the five no-reform states likely help to explain their above-average turnout levels, but cannot explain their turnout changes very easily.**

**TABLE 2**  
**Turnout Change Regressions<sup>a</sup> (N = 51)**

	Basic Regression	Controlling for 1992 Turnout
Intercept	-6.29*	3.01
Senate race	0.70	0.86*
Gubernatorial race	1.53**	0.86*
Change in per capita income	0.01	0.01
Change in % black	0.16	0.14
No-reform	-3.23**	-0.94
Old motor voter	-0.85	-0.61
New EDR	0.81	1.99
Challenger	0.44	0.06
Turnout 1992		-0.17**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.27	0.42
S.E.E.	2.27	2.04

\*p = .05.

\*\*p = .01.

<sup>a</sup>Mean of dependent variable is -6.63%. Standard errors are calculated using White's (1980) correction for possible heteroskedasticity.

Fenster (1994) for states adopting EDR in the 1970s.

As predicted, Table 1 shows that turnout decline in the new EDR states was somewhat more modest (5.3 points) than in the new motor voter states (6.1 points). New EDR programs appear to have attenuated turnout declines in Idaho, New

Hampshire, and Wyoming. Turnout in these states fell, on average, by only 5.3 points, compared to a 9.6-point drop for the five no-reform states. This difference of 4.3 percentage points is close to estimates of EDR's turnout impact generated by Fenster (1994) and others.

Finally, among the 34 new motor voter states, it would be reasonable to expect larger turnout declines in the states with governors and legislatures who

most strongly resisted and delayed implementation of NVRA mandates. The most obvious way of categorizing such resistance is in terms of legal challenges: Six of these 34 states challenged NVRA in the

courts, generally on constitutional grounds.<sup>5</sup>

The prediction concerning challengers is the only one not borne out by the data presented in Table 1. Turnout decline was actually marginally greater among the 28 non-challengers, on average, than in the six challengers.

The before-and-after design of the comparisons in Table 1 minimizes the need for extensive statistical controls that must be included in cross-sectional studies. For example, the above-average levels of income and education for residents of the five no-reform states likely help to explain their above-average turnout levels, but cannot explain their turnout changes very easily. To the extent that the U.S. population in all states is aging, and becoming richer, better educated, and less white over time, these changes also will not influence the results.

However, some relevant variables may not change equally over time in all states. To account for this possibility, Table 2 presents multivariate analyses that control for factors other than registration reform that may influence turnout. These controls include changes in per capita income and in the African-American percentage of the population.<sup>6</sup> Both variables have positive but insignificant effects on turnout change.

Also added are variables repre-

**TABLE 3**  
**Age and Equality of Representation, 1992–96**

	Turnout Ratio 1992 <sup>a</sup>	Turnout Ratio 1996	Ratio Change
51-state unweighted mean	73.8	63.2	-10.6
No-reform states (5)	84.9	66.3	-18.6
Reform states (46)	62.9	72.6	-9.7
Pre-92 motor voter states (9)	73.9	61.8	-12.1
Extensive reform states (37)	72.3	63.1	-9.2
New EDR states (3)	60.9	61.4	+0.5
New motor voter states (34)	73.3	63.3	-10.0
Challengers (6)	73.0	63.9	-9.1
Nonchallengers (28)	73.3	63.1	-10.2

<sup>a</sup>Ratios of under-30 to 30-and-over turnout rates.

senting changes in the presence of other important contests on a state's ballot. For a state with a Senate race on its ballot in both 1992 and 1996, or in neither year, "Senate race" is coded 0. For a state with a race in 1992 but not in 1996, the variable is coded -1; if it had a race in 1996 but not in 1992, the variable is coded +1. A gubernatorial variable is coded similarly. The turnout impact of concurrent races proves to be small, on the order of 1 percentage point.

Four dummy variables are included to test the impact of registration reform: one each to represent the no-reform group, the old motor voter group, the new EDR group, and the challengers. The omitted group is the largest one—the 28 nonchallenger new motor voter states.

The first regression indicates that turnout fell significantly more—by

more than three percentage points—in the no-reform states than in the 28-state reference group. Turnout fell by nearly a point more in the old motor voter group than in the groups with more extensive reforms, but this difference is not statistically significant.

The second regression in Table 2 adds the turnout rates for 1992, to control for any regression-to-the-mean effects.<sup>7</sup> Results confirm the presence of a significant effect: each six-point increment in 1992 turnout is associated with a one-point drop in turnout between 1992 and 1996. The no-reform states had some of the highest turnout rates in 1992, and controlling for this regression-to-the-mean effect reduces the no-reform coefficient by more than two thirds.

While none of the four dummy variables prove significant in the sec-

ond regression, there is still evidence that reform improves turnout. The "new EDR" coefficient more than doubles in the second regression compared to the first one. If the new EDR group is made the reference category, one can test whether each of the groups with less extensive reforms exhibit significantly greater rates of turnout decline. The nearly three-point difference between the new EDR and no-reform groups turns out to be significant at the .05 level, while the 2.6-point difference between the new EDR group and the old motor voter group is significant at .10.<sup>8</sup> Multivariate analyses thus confirm that registration reforms associated with NVRA implementation—especially the new EDR programs adopted to avoid NVRA's array of alternative programs—curtailed the great turnout debacle of 1996.

### Motor Voter and the Composition of the Electorate

Turnout decline in 1996 was greatest among groups that were already underrepresented, particularly the young and recent movers. Before concluding that NVRA was to blame, or, at a minimum, ineffective in equalizing representation, comparisons across groups of states should be conducted. Such comparisons indicate that registration reform substantially slowed the turnout decline. Similarly, survey evidence indicates that reform also

**TABLE 4**  
**Turnout Change: Partisanship 1992–96**

	Democratic ID (exit polls)			Democratic Presidential Vote <sup>a</sup>		
	1992 Share	1996 Share	Change in Share	1992 Share	1996 Share	Change in Share
51-state unweighted mean	52.8	53.0	+0.2	52.5	53.7	+1.2
No-reform states (5)	50.0	52.8	+2.8	53.8	57.4	+3.6
Reform states (46)	53.1	53.0	-0.1	52.4	53.3	+0.9
Pre-92 motor voter states (9)	54.1	55.2	+1.1	56.3	57.1	+0.8
Extensive reform states (37)	52.6	52.8	+0.2	51.2	52.6	+1.4
New EDR states (3)	39.8	38.1	-1.7	45.8	45.8	+0.0
New motor voter states (34)	53.7	54.1	+0.4	51.7	53.2	+1.5
Challengers (6)	48.8	49.1	+0.3	52.0	51.3	-0.7
Nonchallengers (28)	54.8	55.2	+0.4	51.6	53.5	+1.9

<sup>a</sup>Data are from official state reports.

**TABLE 5**  
**Partisan Composition Regressions<sup>a</sup>**

	Democrat Identification	Clinton's Share of the Two-Party Vote
Intercept	1.07	-5.42*
Change in per capita income	0.85*	1.02
Change in % black	-0.78	1.36*
Democratic ID share, 1992	-0.05	
Dem. pres. vote share, 1992		0.07
No reform	2.08	2.05
Old motor voter	-2.06	-2.62*
New EDRE	-2.69*	-0.37
Challenger	-0.62	-2.36*
R <sup>2</sup>	0.17	0.36
mean, dependent variable	0.24	1.18

\*p = .05.

\*\*p = .01.

<sup>a</sup>Regressions weight each state equally. Because the exit polls take much larger samples in some states than in others, some states' estimates are likely to be more accurate than others. Results differ only trivially, however, when states are weighted by the sample size. Standard errors are calculated using White's (1980) method to adjust for possible heteroskedasticity.

prevented inequality of representation among age groups from worsening even more than it did in 1996. The relative turnout of the young compared to older persons fell by less in states with more extensive reforms, as detailed below.

#### Age

Table 3 reports the turnout rate for respondents in the CPS who are under 30 years of age as a percentage of the turnout rate for over-30 respondents. This measure of equality of representation would equal 100% if the turnout rates for the two age categories were the same, and 50% if the young voted at half the rate of older persons (e.g., a 40% turnout rate by the young and 80% by older persons).

In the average state in 1992, the young voted at nearly three-quarters of the rate of people over 30. This ratio fell by more than 10 percentage points in 1996 (see the top row of Table 3). In the five no-reform states, the ratio fell by a stunning 18.6 percentage points. In the 46 reform states, voting rates for the young fell by slightly less than 10 points. The decline in the no-reform group was significantly greater ( $p = .009$ ) than in the reform group.

As expected, equality of representation declined more in the nine old motor voter states (12.1 points) than in the 37 states with more extensive reforms (9.2 points), although the difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Among the 37 states with extensive reforms, the three new EDR states actually experienced a slight increase in equality of representation, in contrast to the 10-point decline in the 34 new motor voter states. This large, and statistically significant ( $p = .01$ ), difference is somewhat surprising in light of the fact that the NVRA's key motor voter provision was designed originally to reach young persons (and movers).

Among the 34 new motor voter states, the erosion in equality of representation by age was about equal for the challenger (9.1 points) and nonchallenger (10.2 point) groups. The difference between the two declines is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

The implication from Table 3 is that, in the absence of registration reform, representation of the young relative to over-30 voters would have worsened even more than it did. Somewhat surprisingly, EDR appears to have more favorable effects

than motor voter for equality of participation for young persons.

#### Other Demographic Variables

According to CPS data, turnout rates fell more for recent movers than for nonmovers between 1992 and 1996. This decline was fairly uniform among the different reform groups of states. Similarly, turnout among people without a high school diploma declined more than turnout among high school graduates, with the decline being about as large in states implementing major reforms as in those implementing no reforms. Turnout of lower-income earners actually rose relative to higher-income earners (using a household income of \$30,000 to separate the two categories). Again, this increase was no larger or smaller in groups of states implementing more extensive reforms.

#### Partisanship

The CPS includes no questions on party identification or on voting choices, so that data source is not useful for analyzing whether registration reform provided an edge to either major party in the 1996 election. However, exit polls done by Voter News Services (1997) in 1992 and 1996 included items asking for the party identification and presidential vote choices of respondents. Since only a sample of actual voters are interviewed in exit polls, turnout rates cannot be computed directly from such polls. What can be computed, however, is the share of the electorate accounted for by a particular group, such as Democratic identifiers.

Table 4 summarizes the changes in the Democratic Party's share of voters who profess loyalty to either major party (independents and others are excluded). Many reform advocates (and opponents) expected that new registrants would be disproportionately Democratic. The strongly partisan votes on NVRA in Congress also suggested that Democrats expected to benefit from reform while Republicans feared it.

The data in Table 4 provides absolutely no support for these projections. Nationally, the percentage of Democratic identifiers among voters

rose marginally, from 52.8 to 53.0, between 1992 and 1996. Most groups of states also experienced little change in the partisan distribution of voters. Unsurprisingly, deviations from this pattern can be observed at the two extremes: the five no-reform states and the three new EDR states. More surprisingly, the states enacting the most extensive reforms (the new EDR states) between 1992 and 1996 saw the largest drop in Democratic identifiers, from 39.8% to 38.1%. The states with no reforms, counterintuitively, had the largest increase in Democratic identifiers, from 50% to 52.8%.

Analysis of presidential voting yields a similar story. Clinton's average share of the two-party presidential vote in all the states was 52.5% in 1992, and rose by 1.2 points to 53.7% in 1996.<sup>9</sup> Again, the largest increase (3.6 points) is observed in the five states with the least registration reform. By contrast, those with the most extensive reform—the new EDR states—saw no change in voters' support for Clinton. The six states that challenged NVRA in court also bucked the national trend, witnessing a 0.7-point decline in support for Clinton, compared to a 1.9-point rise in the other 28 new motor voter states.

Knack and White (1998) examined the relationship between NVRA-type registration programs and the partisan distribution of registrants during the 1976–96 period in states which register voters by party. They found that mail-in registration, a program mandated by the NVRA, had no influence on the two-party balance or the proportion of independent registrations. However, programs to register applicants for public assistance (also mandated by the NVRA) adopted prior to NVRA passage were associated with a significant increase in Democratic registrations. The third and strongest finding by Knack and White was that the adoption of motor voter programs brought no change in the two-party balance of registrants, but substantially increased independent registrations.

The exit poll data for 1992 and 1996 fail to replicate this last finding on independent registrations. The extent of registration reform by states between the last two presiden-

tial elections turns out to be unrelated to changes in the share of the electorate accounted for by independents.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible that changes in the partisanship of states between the two elections could have been driven by demographic changes. For example, states experiencing the largest increases in incomes might become more Republican, while states with the largest increases in minority population might become more Democratic.

Table 5 presents the results of regression analyses in which changes in the two partisanship variables from Table 4 are the dependent variables. Independent variables include changes in per capita incomes and in the percentage of black residents, as in Table 2, and a set of dummy variables representing the extent of registration reform.

The first regression in Table 5 indicates that each \$1000 rise in a state's per capita income is associated with a rise of nearly one percentage point in Democratic identification. In the second regression, each \$1000 rise in income increases Clinton's share of the two-party vote by one percentage point (although income is not statistically significant in this case). These results may seem paradoxical: as people become richer, they might be expected to become more Republican. However, a Democrat was in the White House between 1992 and 1996, and voters tend to reward or punish incumbents for changes in economic performance occurring during their tenure in office. Therefore, the relative popularity of Democrats could understandably have risen in states with the most rapidly rising incomes, and fallen in states with more stagnant incomes.

Increased identification with the Democratic party is negatively but insignificantly associated with increases in a state's percentage of black residents. As shown in the second regression, increases in the Clinton vote were positively and significantly associated with increases in the African-American percentage. No significant regression-to-the-mean effects are observed in either regression: changes in Democratic partisanship between 1992 and 1996

are not significantly correlated with their 1992 levels.

Findings from Table 4 on the impact of registration reform on partisanship hold up strongly with the inclusion of the control variables in Table 5. Democratic identification fell significantly, by nearly three percentage points in the states with the most extensive reform—the new EDR states—relative to the reference group—the 28 nonchallenger new motor voter states. The no-reform states showed the largest increase, with an edge of more than two points over the reference group. Although the no-reform coefficient does not indicate a significant difference from the reference group, the change in Democratic ID for the no-reform states is significantly different from the change in the old motor voter and new EDR groups (as confirmed by a regression in which the “no-reform” states constitute the reference group). Thus, in all three pairwise comparisons of groups in which a significant difference is found, the change in Democratic identification is inversely related to the extent of registration reform.

Evidence on the Clinton vote is more mixed. The Democratic presidential vote share, like its party identification share, increased the most in the no-reform states. It rose significantly more, however, in the nonchallenger new motor voter states (the reference category) than in the old motor voter states, as conventional wisdom on the impact of reform would predict. The observed difference between challenger and nonchallenger new motor voter states is also consistent with expectations: the Clinton share falls by a significant two-plus percentage points more in the former group than in the latter group.

## Summary

The first presidential election following NVRA implementation was also the first in the lifetimes of most Americans in which only a minority of the voting-age population bothered to vote. While that outcome must be a source of embarrassment to many reform advocates, this study has shown that the turnout decline was in fact substantially slowed by

registration reform. Moreover, the full effects of the key motor voter innovation have yet to be felt in at least two-thirds of the states, states whose populations comprise more than three-quarters of the voting-age population. Similarly, the disproportionately large turnout decline among the young would have been

even more extreme in the absence of reform, based on evidence obtained for this study. Little evidence of other progressive effects—by education, income, or mobility status—can be found however.

Finally, although partisan identification and presidential voting moved in the Democrats' direction between

1992 and 1996, registration reform appears to have slightly favored the Republicans. The shifts toward Democratic identification and voting for Clinton were largest in the states with the least reform, while the largest shift away from Democratic identification occurred in the states enacting the most extensive reforms.

## Notes

\* Valuable comments were provided by Michael Martinez, Jan Leighley, and other participants at the 1998 APSA meetings. Jim White provided assistance with Current Population Survey data. Jo-Anne Chasnow of Human SERVE was a key source of information on pre-NVRA motor voter implementation in the states. Any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the author.

1. Ideally, one would adjust the voting-age population by subtracting resident aliens, and convicted felons in states where they are ineligible, and adding eligible citizens living overseas (who count as voters if they vote, but don't enter the voting-age population whether or not they vote). These adjustments would likely produce a small majority of voters among the eligible population.

2. Minnesota has also had motor voter since before the 1988 election.

3. In recent years, Maine often has been the only state with more registered voters than voting-age residents; obviously some of these were "deadwood" registrants who have moved or died.

4. Hawaii (in May) and Texas (September) implemented motor voter so soon before the 1992 election that they are classified here as "new" rather than "old" motor voter states for the 1996 election. "Passive" motor voter programs that simply made forms available on countertops or upon specific request were ineffective (Knack 1995) and are not classified here as motor voter programs. See Knack (1995) for more on the distinction between passive programs and active ones, which better approximated the later NVRA mandates. On paper, Ohio, New Jersey, and West Virginia were also motor voter states prior to the 1992 election. Because reform advocates at Human SERVE found indications that the programs in these states were administered inconsistently at best, they are not classified as old motor voter states in this study. However, results presented below are not sensitive to how those three states are classified.

5. Michigan, which invented motor voter and is included among the nine old motor voter states, was nevertheless a seventh challenger. It sought to overturn provisions re-

quiring registration of applicants for public assistance.

6. Other demographic variables correlated with turnout, such as the age distribution and residential mobility, are not available at the state level for non-Census years.

7. If extreme values in any given election tend to represent deviations from the norms for those states, then high (low) levels for 1992 will tend to be associated with declines (increases) between 1992 and 1996.

8. Unless otherwise specified, all significance values reported are for 2-tailed tests.

9. Presidential voting data presented in Table 4 are the official state figures. The exit poll data produce nearly identical values to those reported in Table 4, however, suggesting that the exit polls likely measure other characteristics of the electorate—such as party ID—very accurately, despite their limited sample sizes.

10. These results are not shown in tables but are available on request from the author at [steve@iris.econ.umd.edu](mailto:steve@iris.econ.umd.edu).

## References

- Casper, Lynne, and Loretta Bass. 1998. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996*. Current Population Reports, P20-504. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- Federal Election Commission. 1997. "The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 on the Administration of Federal Elections." Washington, DC: Federal Election Commission.
- Fenster, Mark J. 1994. "The Impact of Allowing Day of Registration Voting on Turnout in U.S. Elections from 1960 to 1992." *American Politics Quarterly* 22(January): 74–87.
- Groarke, Margaret. 1997. "An Early Assessment of the National Voter Registration Act." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC.
- Human SERVE. 1996. "The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act, January 1995–June 1996: The First Eighteen Months." New York: Human SERVE.
- Knack, Stephen. 1995. "Does Motor Voter Work? Evidence from State Level Data." *Journal of Politics* 57(August): 796–811.
- , and James White. 1998. "Did States' Motor Voter Programs Help the Democrats?" *American Politics Quarterly* 26(July): 344–65.
- Rhine, Staci L. 1995. "Registration Reform and Turnout Change in the American States." *American Politics Quarterly* 23(October): 409–26.
- Voter News Service. 1997. *Voter News Service General Election Exit Polls, 1996* [computer file]. ICPSR version. New York, NY: Voter News Service [producer]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].
- White, Hal. 1980. "A Heteroskedasticity-Consistent Covariance Matrix Estimator and a Direct Test for Heteroskedasticity." *Econometrica* 48(May): 817–38.