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*The Effects of Eligibility Restrictions and Party Activity on Absentee Voting and Overall Turnout**

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Theory: The effects of party activity and permissive absentee eligibility on levels of absentee voting and overall turnout are explored.
Hypotheses: Liberalizing absentee eligibility reduces the ''costs'' of voting while giving political interests a new way of mobilizing supporters and stimulating overall turnout.
Methods: Data from the 1992 Current Population Survey and from the author's survey of state party organizations are analyzed using a logistic regression.
Results: A state-by-state comparison demonstrates that levels of absentee voting are not solely a function of restrictive state laws but reflect other influences, including the efforts of state parties to send out absentee ballot applications. Controlling for the influences of state registration laws, the data indicate that overall turnout is increased only when liberalization of absentee voter eligibility is combined with party mobilization efforts. The implications of this change for American electoral politics are discussed.

Over the past 20 years, many states have liberalized eligibility requirements for absentee voting, or voting by mail, in an attempt to stimulate voter turnout. These reforms have quietly transformed the nature of electoral politics in the United States. In the 1992 presidential election, over 7% of American voters cast their ballots without going to the polls, more than twice the level in 1972.[1] In California, absentee voting has grown from 4.4% of all votes cast in 1978, the election after liberalization, to 22.1% in 1994 (Field and Dicamillo 1994). Voting by mail also has become decisive in

*The data used in this paper were made available by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research and obtained through UC DATA (University of California Data Archive and Technical Assistance). The data for CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY: VOTER SUPPLEMENT FILE, 1992, were originally collected by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Neither the collectors of the original data nor the Consortium bears any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here. Data from the survey of state party organizations are available from the author. I would like to thank Raymond E. Wolfinger and Benjamin Highton and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 1995 Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

[1]This figure was derived from my analysis of the Voter Supplement of the 1992 Current Population Survey.

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the electoral arena. Absentee ballots have overturned victories in many elections including the 1982 and 1990 California gubernatorial races and the 1988 Florida Senate race. In many local elections, where turnout is traditionally low, absentee ballots have become **the sole** venue of electoral competition (Hamilton 1988).

Despite this growing importance, little research has been conducted on absentee voting and the effects of state reforms are still unexplored.[2] For example, why states with identical absentee voting provisions have different rates of turnout or what determines absentee voting levels in general is unknown. Most importantly, whether liberalizing absentee voting restrictions has had the intended effect of increasing overall voter turnout is still unclear. Does the ability to vote by mail stimulate turnout or has it simply evolved into another specialized venue of party competition?

I explore the impact of absentee eligibility requirements and state party activity on levels of absentee voting and overall turnout with data from the Voter Supplement of the 1992 Current Population Survey and a survey of state party organizations. Levels of absentee voting are not solely a function of state law but also depend on the efforts of state parties to encourage their partisans to vote by mail. Lowering legal hurdles may be necessary for expanding the absentee electorate, but party mobilization efforts are also important for enlarging the absentee voter pool. In later logistic regressions, I find overall turnout increases in states where liberalized absentee eligibility is combined with party activity, controlling for the effects of other state registration laws. This is the consequence of parties getting higher turnout among the registered and those groups more likely to vote, such as students or the elderly. I conclude that this is shifting the balance of electoral politics in America. Given their party's greater mobilization efforts, Republican candidates are benefiting disproportionately from absentee voting, especially in electoral situations where turnout is otherwise low, such as in midterm or local elections.

Determining the Effects of Liberalized Absentee Eligibility

From a theoretical standpoint, the effects of absentee eligibility liberalization on both levels of absentee voting and overall turnout are difficult to determine. At first glance, the potential impact of liberalization on levels of absentee voting appears straightforward: rates of absentee voting must be at or below the percentages of the eligible groups in the electorate; states

[2]A review of the literature revealed only three academic studies of absentee voting over the past ten years: Magleby (1986), Patterson and Caldeira (1985), and Gilens and Wolfinger (1991). None of these studies provide both individual and interstate analysis. Given the recent increases in absentee voting, it is unlikely their findings are still generalizable.

that allow anyone to vote absentee could potentially have 100% of their citizens voting by mail. A comparison of absentee voting rates and state eligibility requirements seems to confirm this self-evident conclusion.

Table 1 depicts the rates of absentee voting across 50 states and the District of Columbia. States are grouped into three categories: those with "standard" restrictions on absentee voting, i.e., absentee voting is allowed for anyone physically prevented from getting to a polling place; "expanded" states that have automatic eligibility for citizens of a certain age or distance from the polls; and "universal" states that allow anyone to vote absentee.

Since no official record exists on the number of absentee voters in all 50 states, the estimates in Table 1 were calculated from the 1992 Voter Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is the best source of data on this subject because of its large sample size (over 170,000 cases) and comprehensive scope (at least 800 respondents from every state and the District of Columbia). The sample is initially weighted to represent the civilian, noninstitutional population.[3] Because the number of respondents who reported voting in the CPS (70%) was significantly higher than the official turnout for the 1992 elections (55.1%) and because this overreporting tends to depress the number of reported absentee voters, I reweighted the voting subsample to calculate the levels of absentee voting for each state.[4]

Table 1 indicates that rates of absentee voting are related to state eligibility requirements. In states with "standard" eligibility 4.3% of all ballots were cast by mail, compared to 10.8% of all ballots in states with "expanded" eligibility, and 14.8% in states with "universal" eligibility. The mean rate of absentee voting for "universal" eligibility states is over three times that in the most restrictive states.

[3]Citizen respondents were asked several questions on behavior in the November election, including questions on registration, voting, the time of the vote, and whether it was in-person or absentee.

[4]Part of the difference between official and CPS estimates of turnout are due to differences in population. Official turnout statistics are derived from the number of votes as a percent of total population over 17, while CPS estimates are a percent of citizens over 17. The weight to compensate for misreporting was calculated from the question on the time of voting. When asked about this, respondents are given the choice of four times during the day, the option of voting absentee, or the option of don't know. The assumption behind the weighting is that misreporters of voting would be much less likely to report voting absentee than giving a time. In the unweighted sample this would tend to depress the levels of absentee voting in each state. For example, in California, a state for which official data on absentee voting exist, mailed in ballots accounted for 17.1% of all ballots according to official figures but only 14.3% in the unweighted CPS estimate. Giving all non-absentee voters a weight of .84 generates an estimated level of absentee voting in California at 16.9%.

Table 1. Differences in Absentee Ballot Eligibility and Rates of Absentee Voting in 1992

	Persons Eligible to Vote Absentee[a]	Percentage of all Votes from Absentee Ballots[b]
Group One—States with "Standard" Restrictions on Eligibility		
Alabama	B,D,S,T	2.0
Arkansas	B,D,S,T	5.9
Connecticut	B,D,E,R,S,T	5.4
Delaware	B,D,E,R,S,T	3.9
Florida	B,D,E,R,S,T	6.4
Georgia	D,E,R, (75)	3.7
Idaho	B,D,E,R,S,T	6.4
Illinois	B,D,R,S,T	3.4
Indiana	B,D,E,S,T	6.3
Kansas	D,R,T	4.4
Kentucky	B,D,S,T	1.9
Louisiana	B,D,E,R,S,T	4.2
Maryland	B,D,E,R,S,T	4.4
Massachusetts	B,D,R,S,T	3.7
Minnesota	B,D,R,S,T	4.8
Mississippi	B,D,S	2.9
Missouri	B,D,E,R,S,T	3.8
Nebraska	B,D,E,R,S,T	5.7
New Hampshire	B,D,R,S,T	6.3
New Jersey	B,D,E,R,S,T	3.9
New York	D,T	2.9
North Carolina	D,T	3.7
North Dakota	D,T	6.0
Pennsylvania	D,R,T	3.1
Rhode Island	B,D,R,S,T	2.5
South Carolina	B,D,E,S,T	4.6
South Dakota	B,D,E,R,S,T	7.4
Tennessee	B,D,R,S,T	5.2
Utah	D,T	3.1
Virginia	B,D,E,R,S,T	5.6
West Virginia	B,D,R,S,T	4.3
Wisconsin	B,D,R,S,T	5.4
Overall Mean for Restrictive States		4.3
Group Two—States with "Expanded" Eligibility		
Alaska	D,I,T	8.6
Colorado	B,D,E,R,S,T, (65)	13.9
Dist. of Columbia	B,D,E,R,S,T, (65)	8.6
Maine	B,D,E,R,S,T, (60)	8.3
Michigan	R,T, (60)	15.4
New Mexico	B,D,E,R,S,T, (65)	11.9
Ohio	B,D,R,S,T (62)	7.1
Mean for States with Moderate Restrictions		10.8

Table 1 (*continued*)

	Persons Eligible to Vote Absentee[a]	Percentage of all Votes from Absentee Ballots[b]
Group Three—States with "Universal" Eligibility		
Arizona	*	11.2
California	*	16.8
Hawaii	*	11.6
Iowa	*	8.6
Montana	*	9.2
Nevada	*	7.8
Oklahoma	*,**	5.9
Oregon	*	14.0
Texas	**	21.9
Washington	*	18.3
Wyoming	*	9.3
Mean for States with Liberal Restrictions		14.8

B—absent on Business; D—disabled persons; E—prevented by employment; I—long distance to polling place; R—religious absence; S—students; T—temporarily out of jurisdiction; *—universal absentee voting; **—early voting; () Number in parentheses designates minimum age for absentee voting eligibility on grounds of age.

[a]—Source: League of Women Voters (1992) and independent verification.

[b]—Source: estimates from 1992 Current Population Survey, November Supplement.

Unfortunately these findings also inhibit drawing direct connections between state laws and absentee voter rates. A close examination of rates within the same categories of eligibility reveals significant variations in absentee voting rates. For instance, Arkansas and Alabama have identical eligibility requirements yet differ by almost four percentage points in their mail ballot rates. Similarly, California and Iowa both allow anyone to vote by mail yet California's absentee rates are nearly twice as high.

What can account for differences in levels of absentee voting among states with identical eligibility? The perplexing nature of this question highlights the problem in deriving theories on why people vote absentee. In particular, it is hard to make predictions about the impact of liberalizing absentee eligibility when the incentives or benefits for voting by mail are unclear. For example, the classic participation literature (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) emphasizes institutional constraints as determining turnout levels. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) characterize the institutional effects in terms of a cost analysis. According to this framework, the costs of voting (e.g., difficulty in registration, getting to the polls, etc.) are directly responsible for varying turnout levels: the higher the

costs, the lower the turnout. Unfortunately, from this model, it is difficult to specify hypotheses about rates of absentee voting within categories of states with identical eligibility. One might try to explain intra-category differences in terms of county level peculiarities in absentee procedures: the administration of absentee balloting varies significantly across counties. The additional costs of these are probably too small, however, to account for interstate differences. One might also speculate that the varying absentee rates are due to differing state populations. After all, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) suggest that the "costs" of registration are felt more acutely by the mobile or uneducated. Yet it seems unlikely that differences in rates of absentee voting between states like California and Iowa are due to differing population characteristics either.

Furthermore, it is unclear from this model how liberalizing absentee eligibility might increase overall turnout. If voting by mail is easier or less costly than voting in-person, then overall turnout rates should increase. For voters with busy schedules, in rural areas, or who face long ballots, this may be the case. On the other hand, some voters may enjoy the public atmosphere of the polling place. Many voters may also find the initial "costs" of learning to vote absentee higher than their habitual in-person voting behavior. Given idiosyncracies in individual preference and in the administration of absentee elections, generalizations about the comparative costs of voting in-person versus absentee are tenuous at best. If we hypothesize that liberalized absentee eligibility will increase turnout, we must *assume,* therefore, that voting absentee is easier or more attractive than voting in-person.

More recent works on participation and mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994) may offer stronger hypotheses on this topic. For example, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) find that variations in participation are partially attributable to the efforts of political "mobilizers." People are more likely to participate in a wide range of political activities when they are contacted by parties, campaigns, or interest groups. These findings are applicable to absentee voting. Many state, local party, and campaign organizations have used the liberalization of absentee voter eligibility as an opportunity to mobilize their supporters (Donovan 1989). Twenty-eight of 62 state party organizations surveyed in 1993 reported having engaged in some type of absentee mobilization campaign.[5] Typically, they reported sending out preprinted absentee ballot application

[5]In the spring of 1993, I mailed questionnaires to state party chairs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia; 40 responded. Follow-up calls were made to an additional 22 party organizations during the summer and fall of 1993.

forms to lists of registered partisans or doing blanket mailings in precincts where they were traditionally strong. Fourteen organizations reported sending out at least 100,000 applications.

From this "mobilization" perspective, levels of absentee voting should respond to party activity, ceteris paribus. As party activity increases, the "costs" of voting absentee diminish. For example, when parties send out preprinted absentee ballot applications, all the recipient need do is sign the form and put it in the mail (usually even without paying postage). Once the ballot arrives, the voter simply has to fill it out and remail it. In this way parties lower the initial hurdle of learning to vote absentee. Differences in states with identical eligibility provisions could thus be explained by the activity of absentee mobilizers. Although it is impossible to determine whether this makes absentee voting less "costly" than voting in-person, it clearly makes voting by mail easier.

In sum, two hypotheses can be derived regarding absentee voting. The first is that absentee voting is a function of state eligibility requirements. As eligibility expands, levels of absentee voting should increase. If we assume that voting absentee is less costly than voting in-person, then overall levels of turnout should increase as well. The second hypothesis is agnostic on the effects of state law, but focuses instead on absentee voting as a function of voter mobilization. Levels of absentee voting increase as a result of mobilizers, usually parties, getting applications in the hands of their supporters. These mobilizing efforts reduce the cost of voting absentee by assisting in the acquisition of the absentee ballots. If we assume this lowers the cost of voting absentee relative to voting in-person, then we should expect higher overall turnout as a consequence of absentee mobilization drives. Beyond these calculations, the cumulative effects of eligibility liberalization and party activity may stimulate turnout if only because sending out absentee ballot applications reminds individuals to vote.

Levels of Absentee Voting

According to our hypotheses, both state laws and party activity should be important for increasing levels of absentee voting. As Table 1 demonstrates, levels of absentee voting seem directly related to eligibility requirements. Is removing restrictions enough, however, to increase absentee voting or do citizens only begin voting by mail *en masse* when encouraged to do so by political organizations? This question is difficult to answer because the two issues are so interrelated. Presumably parties will be more active in states with liberalized eligibility as the potential rewards for their efforts are greater. In my survey of state party chairs, 10 of the 14 active organizations, those that distributed at least 100,000 applications, were from states with universal or expanded eligibility. On the other hand, many

Table 2. Logistic Regression Estimates of the Effects of Eligibility Requirements, Party Activity, and Demographic Variables on Voting Absentee versus Voting in-person

Universal Eligibility	.942**	(.0656)
Expanded Eligibility	−.212	(.0800)
Closed Primary	−.101*	(.0429)
Universal/Closed Primary Interaction	.298**	(.0675)
Expanded/Closed Primary Interaction	.979**	(.0822)
Active Party	.418**	(.0507)
Education	.130**	(.0121)
Senior Citizen	.203**	(.0609)
Age	−.054**	(.0050)
Age Squared	.001**	(.0005)
Family Income	.065**	(.0047)
Married	−.182**	(.0323)
Home Ownership	−.185**	(.0362)
Student	1.701**	(.0560)
Black	−.366**	(.0610)
Rural	.088*	(.0390)
Suburban	.149**	(.0307)
Constant	−3.835**	(.1258)
−2 times the log likelihood ratio	42,419.7	
Model Chi-Square	5,928.9	
Percent correctly predicted	93.5	
n of cases	99,920	

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.
Standard Error of the Estimates in Parentheses.
Source: 1992 Current Population Survey, Voter Supplement.

state parties and local campaigns may engage in mobilization campaigns in spite of restrictive laws simply to gain whatever slight advantage such activity might confer. For example, in Florida, both state parties reported engaging in large scale absentee mobilization drives despite the tight eligibility restrictions on absentee voting.

In order to distinguish between the effects of state law and party activity, I employ a logistic regression using data from the CPS. Table 2 presents coefficients from a logistic regression of voting absentee (scored 1) versus voting in-person (scored 0) on several indicators of state law and party activity while controlling for demographic characteristics usually associated with turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).[6] To capture the effects

[6]Codings of the variables are in Appendix One. Although the correlations between education, family income, and homeownership are between .3 and .49, the large number of

of legal or institutional requirements, dummy variables were created for states with "expanded" and "universal" eligibility. Dummy variables were also created for states with active parties and for states with closed primaries.[7] In order to determine the effects of party activity between states with similar eligibility, interaction terms were created between closed primary states and the two eligibility dummies. The closed primary is used as the indicator of party activity because it best represents the *abilities* of party organizations to send applications to supporters. Surveys of political organizations may represent the general intent and focus of state party organizations, but the indicators of ability to contact supporters through partisan lists are essential for measuring the wider scope of mobilizing activities.

The data indicate that liberalized state absentee requirements do not uniformly correlate with an increased likelihood of voting absentee; rather absentee voting is partially dependent upon the involvement of political mobilizers. Controlling for the interaction between state law and closed primary status, voters in states with "universal" eligibility and open primaries were 3.1% more likely to report voting absentee.[8] In states with "expanded" eligibility and open primaries there is no statistically significant increased likelihood of voting absentee. Thus, in states where political mobilizers have limited abilities, expansion of eligibility must be universal to increase levels of absentee voting.

The coefficients for the interaction terms between eligibility requirements and states with closed primaries demonstrate that liberal eligibility and availability of partisan lists increase absentee voting. People in states with expanded eligibility and closed primaries are 4.2% more likely to vote absentee while their counterparts in states with universal eligibility are 3.2% more likely to mail in their ballots. This suggests that the ability of parties to contact supporters is important for increasing levels of absentee voting. In these states, individual campaigns and local political organizations are using lists of registered supporters and getting them to vote absentee.

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cases in the sample allows for precise estimates of the coefficients that would otherwise be undermined by multi-collinearity.

[7]The indicator of party activity was derived from my survey of state party organizations. States in which at least one party organization reported having sent out applications to over 100,000 persons were counted as active. These states are listed in the Appendix.

[8]Following a procedure outlined in Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), probability estimates were derived from evaluations of the logit coefficients on the cumulative standard distribution. For those respondents in which the dummy variable equals one, a zero was substituted for the dummy value and the two probabilities were subtracted. These individual probabilities were then aggregated across the entire sample and the overall probability estimate for the incremental increase in the dummy variable was derived.

In states with standard eligibility requirements, primary status has no significant effect on absentee voting. In other words, closed primaries do not increase the likelihood of voting absentee in states with standard restrictions on eligibility. The indicator of party activity does have a positive relationship to absentee voting however. The coefficient for party activity translates into a 1.6% increased likelihood of voting absentee. Assuming that the closed primary/eligibility interaction term is controlling for party activity in liberalized eligibility states, then we can conclude that the party activity coefficient is capturing mobilization efforts primarily in states with standard eligibility. Where the pool of absentee voters is limited, mobilizing agents are finding ways other than registration lists for getting eligible voters to mail in their ballots.

Both liberalized eligibility requirements and party activity are mutually dependent for increasing levels of absentee voting. Removing restrictions is a necessary requirement for enlarging the pool of absentee voters. In states with universal eligibility, absentee voting is higher than in states with standard eligibility. Liberalization is not, however, the sole force behind the increasing rates of absentee voting. As demonstrated in the expanded eligibility states, party activity and the availability of lists of partisans are important factors for increasing absentee voting. This is because most voters are either unfamiliar with their ability to vote absentee once restrictions are lifted or do not know how to apply for an absentee ballot. Sending large numbers of absentee ballot applications informs residents about the process of voting by mail.

The effects of party mobilization and state law are also evident in the demographic differences between absentee and in-person voters. Although these coefficients are not sensitive to variations across categories of eligibility, they do allow for some crude generalizations. As expected, students and senior citizens are much more likely to vote absentee as are singles and renters. Income, education, and suburban residence are all positively related to voting absentee as well. These demographic characteristics reflect the nature of eligibility restrictions as well as the efforts of the mobilizers. The positive coefficients for senior citizens and students illustrate the effects of limited eligibility for defining the absentee electorate. Yet the positive coefficients for education, income, and suburban status reveal that absentee voting is defined by more than just state law. Following Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), it may be that the costs of learning to vote absentee are felt less acutely among these populations. Another explanation is that these demographics represent Republican party efforts. All but one of the 14 party organizations who reported large-scale mobilization campaigns in my survey were Republican. Absentee voters appear more Republican in

their demographics (i.e., wealthier and more suburban) because the Republican party is doing more to get their partisans to vote by mail.

Does Absentee Liberalization Stimulate Turnout?

I now turn to the second question: does liberalizing absentee eligibility increase overall turnout? Given the wide range of factors that influence electoral turnout, this proposition is somewhat difficult to test. For instance, increased rates of turnout that correspond to "liberalized" absentee eligibility requirements might actually represent unmodeled effects, such as easier procedures for voting in general. The states that liberalized their absentee eligibility requirements did so with the express purpose of stimulating electoral turnout. It would be logical to assume that these same states would also be pursuing other measures to facilitate electoral participation such as allowing registration by mail and shortening the time period between closing dates and dates of elections. In addition, other factors such as competitiveness of elections may be increasing turnout as well.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to control for all of these effects, the impact of absentee liberalization and party mobilization can be measured in light of the most important state registration procedures. Table 3 presents the coefficients of a logistic regression of voting (scored 1) versus not voting (scored 0) on several variables associated with turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) dummy variables for "expanded" and "universal" state eligibility requirements, a dummy variable for closed primary, and interaction terms between the two eligibility dummies and the closed primary dummy. To control for the ease of voting in a state, a variable was also included that measured the number of days between the date of election and the registration closing date.[9]

Controlling for the closing date, electoral turnout is stimulated not simply by liberalized absentee eligibility, but by the combination of liberalized eligibility and the availability of lists of registered partisans. Translating the estimates into probabilities, citizens in states with open primaries and "expanded" eligibility are 1.6% more likely to vote and in states with "universal" eligibility are no more likely to vote. Thus, the liberalization of state law alone appears to contribute little increase to rates of turnout. The abilities of parties to contact partisans is the driving force behind higher turnout: citizens in states with "expanded" eligibility and closed primaries are 2.2% more likely to vote; in states with "universal" eligibility and closed primaries, citizens are 2.1% more likely to vote.

Although these estimates may be capturing some unmodeled effects

[9]Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) found this to be the most significant state registration procedure that influenced levels of electoral turnout.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Coefficients for Voting versus Not Voting

Universal Eligibility	.005	(.037)
Expanded Eligibility	.089**	(.041)
Closed Primary Dummy	−.078**	(.016)
Universal/Closed Primary	.116**	(.038)
Expanded/Closed Primary	.124**	(.041)
Registration Deadline	−.021**	(.001)
Active Party	.105**	(.028)
Education	.599**	(.026)
Age	.076**	(.002)
Age Squared	−.000**	(.000)
Income	.075**	(.007)
Married	.181**	(.015)
Home Ownership	.453**	(.015)
Student	.481**	(.031)
Black	.293**	(.021)
Rural	−.118**	(.017)
Suburban	−.059**	(.015)
Constant	−3.517**	(.067)
−2 times the log likelihood ratio	148,862.3	
Model Chi-Square	27,028.9	
Percent of cases correctly predicted	74.3	
n of cases	143,374	

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.
Standard Error of the Estimates in Parentheses.
Source: 1992 Current Population Survey, Voter Supplement.

such as aggregate levels of voter registration, the item measuring closing dates should control for some of the differences in the rates of registration between the open and closed primary states. In addition, the difference in rates of voter registration between open and closed primary states with "universal" eligibility is less than 1%,[10] yet the estimate from the corresponding interaction term is statistically significant and generates a probability estimate of 2.3%. Although "universal" eligibility states have almost identical rates of registration, the states where parties have the ability to mobilize their partisans to vote by mail have higher turnout rates.

In sum, absentee eligibility that automatically includes the elderly corresponds to higher overall turnout. Universal eligibility alone does not,

[10]According to the CPS, states with universal absentee eligibility and open primaries had 71.7% of adult citizens claiming to be registered while universal states with closed primaries had 72.3% registered.

however. It is only the combination of universal eligibility and the ability of parties to mobilize supporters that drives turnout up. The CPS data indicate that rates of turnout among the registered are 2% higher in universal eligibility states than standard eligibility states. This suggests that the consequences of absentee liberalization and party activity are not uniform across the electorate; specifically, turnout is highest among groups that are already more likely to vote, such as senior citizens and students. Removing absentee restrictions and mobilization activity greatly reduces the "costs" of voting for those individuals who are more likely to vote, thus enlarging their representation in the electorate.

Liberalizing absentee eligibility has produced its intended effect of increasing turnout, but not by encouraging turnout among those groups less likely to vote like the young or uneducated. Higher turnout is the consequence of political parties targeting and reaching those individuals more likely to vote anyway, i.e., registered voters. Where lists of registered voters are available, absentee voter mobilization is increasing overall turnout. Although the increase in turnout may seem relatively small, the political impact may be great, especially if the additional voters are mostly supporters of one party. Since the Republican party is doing more to mobilize its supporters, greater proportions of its partisans will vote in states with liberalized eligibility. The increased turnout that results from absentee liberalization is thus taking a politicized tinge that holds deeper ramifications for electoral politics. Specifically, the Republican party will gain an advantage in low turnout elections by using absentee voting to mobilize its partisans.

Conclusion

This analysis provides new findings for a topic of growing importance to American electoral politics, absentee voting. Liberalized eligibility to cast an absentee ballot increases levels of absentee voting. Absentee liberalization does not, by itself, however, increase overall turnout. It only stimulates overall turnout when it is combined with state party activity. This suggests that absentee voting in itself is only less "costly" for those persons who find going to the polls difficult, such as the elderly. Given the individual initiative required to apply for an absentee ballot application, this conclusion makes sense. When parties or other mobilizers send out pre-filled applications to their supporters, the costs of voting absentee drop. This may not diminish the cost of voting for everyone, but it makes voting much easier for those who are already registered, thus increasing their rates of turnout.

The impact of party mobilization on the "costs" of voting are evi-

dent in patterns of absentee voting across the country. In those states with restrictive laws, absentee voting is a relatively minor phenomenon limited to students and the elderly. In states where senior citizens are given automatic eligibility and partisan lists are available, parties are mobilizing them to vote by mail in higher numbers. Their disproportionate voting drives up both levels of absentee voting and turnout in general. In states where anyone can vote absentee, overall levels of turnout increase when parties get absentee ballot applications into the hands of their supporters.

The most important by-product of liberalized absentee eligibility has come from the greater mobilizing campaigns of the Republican party. Judging from my survey, state Republican party organizations are pursuing absentee mobilization campaigns with far more vigor than their Democratic counterparts. Consequently, the absentee electorate has become more upscale and Republican than the general electorate. The greater Republican absentee mobilization campaigns are likely to redefine American electoral politics, especially on the local level. Specifically, if liberalized absentee voting eligibility combined with party activity significantly lowers the "costs" of voting, then those individuals who are registered Republicans will be increasing their presence in the overall electorate. This potential has already been demonstrated in well publicized come-from-behind Republican victories in some national and statewide races. The biggest impact of absentee voting, however, may be in both congressional and local elections.[11] As turnout in off-year and special elections is often less than 20% of eligible citizens, the ability to consistently mobilize a core group of partisans to vote by mail could provide a decisive advantage to a political party. Since Republican organizations and candidates are mobilizing their supporters on a much larger scale, their candidates in both congressional and local elections should have a distinct advantage in those liberalized states. To what extent absentee voters contributed to the Republican victories in the 1994 elections remains to be explored; however the data presented thus far suggests a shifting tide in electoral politics to the Republican advantage.

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[11] Data from the 1992 National Election Study show that 46% of absentee voters reported voting in a primary while only 41% of in-person voters did. This finding may be an artifact of the higher age and partisanship of absentee voters, but it also shows they are more likely to vote in less salient elections.

APPENDIX

Absentee Voting:	Voted in-person = 0, Voted Absentee = 1.
Party Activity:	Non active party states = 0, Active party states (AZ, CA, CO, DC, FL, IA, IL, MI, MN, ND, NV, OH, OR, VT, WA) = 1.
Closed Primary:	States with open primaries (AL, AR, GA, HI, IA, ID, IL, IN, LA, MN, MS, MO, MT, ND, OH, SC, TN, TX, UT, VA, VT, WA, WI, WY) = 0, States with closed primaries = 1.
Age:	Coded by exact age 18–90.
Senior Citizen:	Coded Age 18–64 = 0, 65–90 = 1.
Education:	8 years or less = 1, 9 to 11 years = 2, high school diploma = 3, some college = 4, college degree = 5, graduate study = 6.
Own Home:	Own Home = 1, Rent = 0.
Married:	Not Married = 0, Married = 1.
Student:	NonStudent = 0, Student = 1.
Black:	NonBlack = 0, Black = 1.
Rural:	Live in Metropolitan Area = 0, Rural residence = 1.
Suburban:	Live either in rural area or central city = 0, Suburban residence = 1.
Mobility:	Live in residence 2 years or less = 0, live in residence more than 2 years = 1.
Income:	Yearly household income: less than $5,000 = 0, $5,000 to $7,499 = 1, $7,500 to $9,999 = 2, $10,000 to $12,499 = 3, $12,500 to $14,999 = 4, $15,000 to $19,999 = 5, $20,000 to $24,999 = 6, $25,000 to $29,999 = 7, $30,000 to $34,999 = 8, $35,000 to $39,999 = 9, $40,000 to $49,999 = 10, $50,000 to $59,999 = 11, $60,000 to $74,999 = 12, $75,000 or more = 13.

Source of information on primary laws: League of Women Voters, 1992.

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