# Convenience Voting

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## Key Terms

early voting, absentee voting, turnout, election administration, elections, vote by mail

## Abstract

Forms of convenience voting—early in-person voting, voting by mail, absentee voting, electronic voting, and voting by fax—have become the mode of choice for >30% of Americans in recent elections. Despite this, and although nearly every state in the United States has adopted at least one form of convenience voting, the academic research on these practices is unequally distributed across important questions. A great deal of literature on turnout is counterbalanced by a dearth of research on campaign effects, election costs, ballot quality, and the risk of fraud. This article introduces the theory of convenience voting, reviews the current literature, and suggests areas for future research.

## INTRODUCTION

Convenience voting is typically understood to mean any mode of balloting other than precinct-place voting. Examples include casting a ballot early at a local elections office, at a satellite location, or at a voting center; filling out an absentee ballot and dropping it in the mail; phoning into a special system; or logging into a secure website and casting a ballot on the web. Convenience voting goes by various names, but they all capture one essential idea: making voting more convenient (less costly) by allowing voters to cast a ballot at a place and time other than the precinct polling place on Election Day. According to the most commonly applied model of turnout, lowering the costs of voting will increase voter participation; therefore, more convenient forms of voting should be associated with higher turnout (Riker & Ordeshook 1968, Aldrich 1993). Even though some scholars critique the rational choice framework for understanding political behavior and voting turnout (Green & Shapiro 1994), few argue that we should make voting less convenient.

Virtually unknown two decades ago, convenience voting methods have become commonplace throughout the United States, where they include liberalized absentee balloting, early in-person voting, limited use of the telephone and fax (mainly for disabled access), and some experimentation with internet voting. Convenience voting is not just an American phenomenon—it is expanding worldwide.[1] Some nations, such as Estonia, are far ahead of the United States in experimentation with methods such as internet voting.[2] Every convenience voting method aims to give potential voters easier access to the ballot, even if, in some cases, it might mean getting rid of the traditional polling place altogether.

It should be noted that although "convenience voting" does not necessarily mean "voting other than at the precinct polling place," this is how the reforms have been implemented up to now. However, some commentators worry about the disappearance of the precinct place and how this will affect democratic norms and values. It is also important to note what is not being considered in this review: changes in laws to make voting more convenient by facilitating voter registration. Registering to vote is a separate act from that of voting, although the emergence of election-day registration has begun to blur this distinction (Demos 2006, Knack 2001). For a review of registration laws and their impact on voter turnout, see Highton (2004, 1997).

Convenience voting represents a fundamental change in the way citizens cast their ballots and has necessarily sparked important questions, theoretical and practical, which are examined at both the individual and aggregate levels. This review begins by briefly describing the major types of convenience voting and how these methods have increasingly been used. Next, we turn to research that examines how convenience voting has affected voting behavior. The main focus for proponents of convenience voting has always been on turnout, and the vast bulk of political science research in the field has also concentrated on voter participation. Scholars have also asked whether new balloting methods change the composition of the electorate by encouraging some segments of the population while leaving participation among other sectors of society unaffected, or even discouraged.

[1]Non–precinct place voting methods are increasingly being adopted in other democratic nations. According to the EPIC Project database (**http://www.aceproject.org**), 46% of the democratic nations listed allow electors to cast ballots before the designated national election day. Of these nations, 34% allow early voting for everyone, whereas the remaining 66% place some restriction on non–precinct place voting, such as limiting it to citizens who are in hospitals, living abroad, or serving in the military.

[2]The March 2007 Estonian experiment with internet voting attracted substantial media interest but no academic studies to date (see OSCE 2007, Trechsel 2007).

During the discussion of individual voters, we consider the literature on campaigns. If voters are greatly affected by the shift toward convenience voting, then one would predict that campaigns would similarly be affected. Convenience methods hold the potential to transform Election Day into an "election month," a period of several days to several weeks during which voters cast their ballots. How have campaigns responded to this change? Does it increase or decrease campaign costs? Do convenience voting options advantage one party over another? Our review finds that scholars have not yet examined these obviously important questions. There is some evidence that campaigns have altered their strategies in order to mobilize early and non–precinct place voters, but the evidence is mainly indirect (drawn from studies of the individual voter). We are aware of no studies that specifically examine the impact of convenience voting on political campaigning. This is an important avenue for future research.

Second, we explore the literature on election administration. Election administrators and policy makers are responsible for the legalization and implementation of any convenience voting method. In the public sphere, advocates argue that introducing this kind of voting reduces the overall cost and improves the overall quality of election administration. Convenience voting reduces the need to staff polling places on election days, provides more time to process ballots, and may give election administrators more time to respond to voter problems (such as an invalid or incorrect registration). Others raise concerns that convenience voting may increase fraud and allow for coercion. Some scattered, non-peer-reviewed research has examined the question of fraud directly (Fund 2004), while other scholars have pioneered methodological research for detecting election fraud (Mebane et al. 2003). Such a substantial policy innovation ought to attract notice among scholars of public policy decision making and policy implementation, but so far it has received little attention from the political science community, although interest is growing rapidly.

Finally, we step back and look globally at elections as part of a broad set of citizenship activities. Elections are about much more than just winning and losing, or even expressing a set of preferences about candidates and parties. Elections, some scholars argue, are a ritual that is woven into the fabric of our civic life. Thus, scholars ask whether the decline of precinct voting will change the function of elections and Election Day in the way that democracies operate. Some have addressed the issue narrowly, asking, for example, whether voters like mail or early in-person voting more than precinct place voting. Others have turned to a much larger set of normative concerns, arguing that convenience has come at the expense of the civic ritual provided by the polling place. When nearly 30% of US voters do not appear at the precinct polling place on Election Day to mingle with their neighbors and take their turn behind the curtain, what impact—if any—does this have on the way Americans think about politics, about democracy, and about society? After all, these scholars ask, why should convenience be a concern when citizens are engaging in the most fundamental act of democratic citizenship?

The ordering of topics in this review is not intended to make any statement about their relative importance. The reasons why political science has focused on questions of individual-level political behavior, such as turnout, and has been relatively uninterested in questions of policy choice and policy implementation are outside the scope of this review. The academic approach to election reform mirrors many of the criticisms of political science as a discipline: that it is too behavioral; that its theoretical models are too atomistic and individualistic; that it ignores the larger social context; and that questions of public administration and public policy are of little interest. We argue in our final section that many of the most important and intellectually challenging

questions surrounding convenience voting lie outside individual-level voting behavior. As the review makes clear, these questions are now being asked, not only by political scientists but also by scholars of election law, public administration, and even computer science. We conclude by discussing why an interdisciplinary approach will form the core of the future research agenda for convenience voting and for voting technology more generally.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONVENIENCE VOTING

**Table 1** lays out most of the convenience voting methods, with a brief description of each.[3] It is important to remember that *how* a ballot is cast (absentee by paper, early in person by machine, etc.) is independent of *when* it is cast and may even be independent of *where* it is cast. In most election jurisdictions, it is possible to track voters across modes of balloting but not over time. An absentee ballot may be cast as early as 40 days before the election in Iowa, Wyoming, and Maine; at the other extreme, in many jurisdictions (e.g., California) the absentee ballot can be hand delivered to the elections office on Election Day. Some states provide for as many as 45 days of early in-person voting, whereas others allocate just a week.

The legal requirements for voting outside of the precinct place vary between states, mainly between "no-excuse" systems and those requiring voters to prove a "special" status (physical disability, absence on Election Day, medical condition or hospitalization, etc.). One of the major shifts that has occurred over the past few decades—and particularly in the past ten years—has been the movement from "excuse required" to "no-excuse" laws, which expands the early voting system immensely. For a more extensive review of the history of non–precinct place voting, see Gronke & Galanes-Rosenbaum (2008) and Fortier (2006).

Not surprisingly, as convenience voting became more widely available, voters responded. Historical figures are difficult to come by because many states did not discriminate between non–precinct place and precinct place voters until after the 2000 election (and some still do not), and exit polls and pre-election surveys failed to ask respondents about their early voting behavior until well into this decade. The most reliable estimates are that 14% of the electorate voted prior to Election Day in 2000 (Gronke 2004, Kenski 2005). Data from mass sample surveys and from the Election Assistance Commission's Election Day survey (available at **http://www.eac.gov**) since then indicate that 20% cast non–precinct place ballots in 2004, and 25%—more than 25 million voters—did so in 2006 (Gronke et al. 2007).

These nationwide figures disguise substantial variation across the states, as we would expect given the varied legal regimes. What is evident from state-to-state comparisons is that non–precinct place voting is most common in the western and southwestern states (Gronke & Galanes-Rosenbaum 2008), and is perhaps more common in states where voters in some cities face both long drives to county offices and long commutes (Highton 2000, Gimpel & Schuknecht 2003, Gimpel et al. 2004, Gronke 2004). There are a few marked exceptions, however. Citizens of Iowa and Tennessee have long shown a tendency to vote early, even though this balloting method is not particularly common in the Midwest and South. Also note the example of Illinois, which significantly relaxed its early voting laws in 2005, allowing in-person early voting. In most states, 10%–20% of the citizenry adopts early voting when it is first made available (e.g., Florida and Georgia in 2004), but in Illinois, <6% of ballots were cast early

[3]The most up-to-date listing of convenience voting laws in the United States is maintained at electionline.org's "Pre-Election Day and Absentee Voting By Mail Rules" page, **http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/electionline_info.aspx?category=admin.**

**Table 1 Convenience voting systems**

| Voting system | Other names | Mechanics | Where used |
|---|---|---|---|
| vote-by-mail | postal voting[a] | Voters receive a ballot in the mail, approximately two weeks before the election. Ballots can be returned via mail or dropped off at satellite locations or at the county elections office. | Oregon, Washington, United Kingdom, some local elections in Canada |
| in-person early voting | in-person absentee balloting | Voters have the option of casting a vote early at a satellite location or at the county elections office. In most localities, the voter simply shows up; no prior notification is required. In most jurisdictions, the same voting machinery is used for early in-person and Election Day balloting. | Rapidly expanding list; Texas for the longest, Georgia, Tennessee, Iowa. Many states adopted after the 2000 election |
| in-person early voting with voting centers[b] | | In practice, identical to in-person early voting, but voting centers are created that are not linked to a particular precinct (centers are often referred to as "super precincts"). | Colorado |
| no-excuse absentee | vote by mail, absentee voting by mail | Voters have to apply for an absentee ballot, but no excuse is required. Voters receive the ballot as early as 45 days before the election and must return it by Election Day. In some localities, only a ballot postmarked on or before Election Day counts as valid. A few states allow permanent absentee status, but in most states, a voter must apply for an absentee ballot at each election. | Many states and localities |
| traditional absentee[c] | | Voters have to apply for an absentee ballot, but a limited number of reasons are allowed, such as being physically unable to get to a polling station, being in the military (domestic or overseas), living abroad, or being away at college. | Every democracy |
| internet voting | e-voting[d] | Voters are provided a method of signing into a secure website, including a unique form of identification, and cast their votes using a web browser. | Estonia (2005, 2007), Netherlands (2007), United Kingdom, and Switzerland (multiple elections). Some limited experimentation in American party primaries |
| other methods | voting by phone, voting by fax | Primarily designed for voters who otherwise cannot get to polling places (disabled voters), some states have implemented systems whereby a voter can choose candidates over the phone. Some jurisdictions allow voters to fax a copy of a completed ballot into a local elections office if they will have difficulty getting to the polling place (e.g., military and overseas voters). | Voting by phone: Vermont, Maine. Voting by fax: Alaska, Montana |

[a]In Sweden, "postal voting" is used to describe in-person voting at the post office.

[b]In-person voting at a county office, while different from the "super precincts" established in Colorado, does share some of the same administrative challenges.

[c]In an increasing number of localities, absentee balloting can be done in person (and is often referred to as early voting) or via mail (sometimes referred to as vote by mail). Many localities are not distinguishing between the two when reporting absentee ballot figures.

[d]In Oregon, some disabled voters are provided a special computer program to fill out the ballot (hence "e-voting"), but still have to print the ballot and mail it in.

in-person.[4] On a state-by-state basis, 10%–20% of the ballots end up being cast by convenience methods once a reform or package of reforms is adopted, and the figures can climb rapidly (Gronke & Galanes-Rosenbaum 2008, Kam & Keller 2004). In some cases, such as Washington state, there seems to be no upper limit on the numbers of early voters, while in others, such as Tennessee and Texas, early voting seems to top out at 40% of the electorate.

## CONVENIENCE VOTING AND TURNOUT

Not surprisingly, the public response has led many politicians to claim that convenience voting increases turnout. Political science research is substantially more skeptical. Voters decide whether to vote before they decide how to vote (Dubin & Kaslow 1996). This finding corresponds to much of the classic literature on participation and voting turnout, which places the burden for turnout not on the legal and administrative environment (Highton 1997, 2004; Nagler 1991) but instead on an individual's interest in and information about politics (Teixeira 1987), his place in the social environment (Verba et al. 1995), the competitiveness of the race (Campbell 1960), the campaign environment (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995, Brader 2005), and the activities of mobilization organizations (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993).[5]

A central question in the study of convenience voting has been whether the reforms increase voter participation. The empirical literature has so far led to many different interpretations of the effect of convenience voting. Studies of this effect often describe the context of an election and refer to some measure of convenience in voting, or analyze a set of time-series data to uncover a statistical relationship between a reform or set of reforms and voter turnout. Some suggestive evidence, but not many empirical results, shows that voters use convenience voting procedures differently across election contexts—in particular, that the impact of convenience reforms is greater in lower-intensity contests. In general, the research concludes that convenience voting has a small but statistically significant impact on turnout, with most estimates of the increase in the 2%–4% range.

For much of this review, the concept of convenience is used to describe reforms that aim to get the ballot into and out of a voter's hand more easily. However, it is important to remember that convenience in the act of voting implies many things beyond the statutory environment. Distance to polling places, for example, is negatively correlated with turnout (Dyck & Gimpel 2005, Haspel & Knotts 2005). Friedman (2005) finds increased rates of disenfranchisement in jurisdictions with high population density, large populations of African-Americans, and high Democratic Party identification, and in contests with close results. Even the weather on Election Day can depress turnout; Gomez et al. (2007) find that rain decreases turnout by 1% and one inch of snow decreases turnout by 0.5%. Some of these factors, such as polling place location, can be controlled by election officials (e.g., by using voting centers; see Stein & Vonnahme 2008). Others are less easy to adjust; we can only hope that politicians do not schedule elections to coincide with good or bad weather! It may be that particular configurations of partisan districts created via the redistricting process can increase or decrease turnout by modifying the partisan or demographic composition of districts, but that is outside the scope of this review.

A number of studies, relying on different time periods and different sets of cases, find that convenience voting has a positive effect on turnout. One early study of voting

[4] Source: 2006 EAC Election Administration and Election Day Survey.

[5] See also Leighley (1995) for a review of the main theories, assumptions, and approaches used in the literature on political participation.

by mail, conducted in the early 1980s, estimated a 19% increase in turnout, using data drawn from elections in five municipalities in California, Oregon, and Washington (Magleby 1987). Southwell & Burchett (2000) report a 10% boost in turnout associated with voting by mail in Oregon. Gronke & Miller (2007) challenge the generalizability of these results, arguing that there was an immediate "novelty effect" of the legal change that declined significantly over time. The authors did find a positive impact of voting by mail in Washington state of approximately 5%. A natural experiment in Switzerland compared turnout across cantons as each jurisdiction adopted no-excuse absentee balloting and found a smaller turnout effect of 4.1% over the period 1970–2005 (Luechinger et al. 2007).

Other convenience voting reforms fare less well. Early in-person voting was found to have an insignificant impact on turnout in two studies using data from Texas (Stein 1998, Stein & García-Monet 1997). Analyzing US turnout data from 1980–2004, Gronke et al. (2007) find that no-excuse absentee balloting, permanent absentee balloting, and early in-person voting have no effect on turnout; only voting by mail has a statistically significant positive impact of 4.7% on turnout. A meta-analysis of voting reform research reports that the overall impact on turnout is statistically significant but small—generally between 2% and 5% (Gronke & Toffey 2007).

One study stands apart from the bulk of this research. Contrary to most theoretical expectations, one study of voting-by-mail trends in California has also shown a negative turnout effect (Kousser & Mullin 2008). This study examines a sample of counties that voted by mail in the 2000 and 2002 general elections. The authors find a decrease of 2.6%–2.9% when comparing mail ballot precincts with polling place locations in each election. However, mail voting is also found to increase turnout in local special elections by an average of 7.6%.

## Compositional Effects of Convenience Voting Reforms

There is a growing literature that takes a more nuanced approach to examining the relationship between convenience voting and turnout, conjecturing that although reforms may not increase overall participation, they may alter turnout among some groups in the population, or perhaps have an impact only when combined with party mobilization efforts. Berinsky (2005) provides a telling summary of this literature. He describes the compositional effects of voting reforms as "perverse" because they "increase, rather than reduce, socio-economic biases in the composition of the voting public" (Berinsky 2005, p. 2). We discuss demographic differences here, then treat the impact of mobilization efforts in a later section.

Early research on the demographic profile of individual voters who took advantage of convenience voting painted a portrait of a voter who is "conservative, middle- to upper-class, generally interested in politics, and Republican" (Jeffe & Jeffe 1990). More recent studies have not found such clear-cut differences; studies comparing non–precinct place voters to Election Day voters suggest the two groups are largely similar in composition. In Tennessee, few differences were found (Neeley & Richardson 2001). In California, voters who cast absentee ballots tend to be older and more educated (Barreto et al. 2006). Although early voters may be demographically similar to polling place voters, Dyck & Gimpel (2005) find that greater distance to traditional voting sites is associated with higher rates of voting by mail, which reinvigorates a theory of a rural-urban cleavage in early voting behavior (see also Haspel & Knotts 2005).

## The Partisan Impact of Convenience Voting

These demographic differences raise an important question for politicians who have

to vote on legislation mandating new convenience voting methods: Do they help or hurt my political party and my own chances at reelection? Political science research has examined the partisan consequences of convenience voting reforms and found that political leaders have little to be concerned about.

Patterson & Caldeira (1985) examine elections in California and Iowa, concluding that partisan candidates can often collect absentee votes from particular jurisdictions where their party is strong. High rates of early voting among already committed supporters provide a measure of support already given to the candidate and may allow the candidate to recruit volunteers, both critical factors in the last stages of a campaign. Stein and colleagues find that early in-person voters in Texas demonstrate greater interest in politics, have stronger partisan ties, and rely more on a candidate's ideological orientation and partisanship than the candidate's particular issue positions or personal characteristics (Stein 1998, Stein & García-Monet 1997). Stein et al. (2004) corroborate the link between partisanship and in-person early voting, and show that party identification and ideological affiliation are increasingly salient markers for early voters as liberal absentee laws spread. Fournier et al. (2004) and Box-Steffensmeier & Kimball (1999) demonstrate that more partisan and ideological voters decide earlier in an election cycle which candidate to support and are insulated from the short-term occurrences inherent in the campaign process. These studies all suggest the same pattern: Voters who use convenience voting are more politically aware, more partisan, and more ideologically extreme.

A wide body of research focuses on campaigns' roles in turning out voters. Early research (Oliver 1996) found that early voting laws coupled with strong mobilization efforts increased turnout, but most subsequent research has found that early voting does not expand the electorate by drawing in new voters (Berinsky 2005, Gronke 2004, Karp & Banducci 2001, Kropf 2006, Patterson & Caldeira 1985, Smith & Comer 2005). How, then, do we account for increases in turnout? The general explanation is that turnout is increased by encouraging party loyalists to vote more regularly (that is, to vote in low-profile elections that they traditionally would not have) (Harris 1999, Hillygus 2005, Holbrook & McClurg 2005). This has raised two questions in the academic literature. First, do these laws—and subsequent rises in turnout—benefit one party more than the other? And second, are there particular demographics that tend to be mobilized at higher rates by campaigns?

Regarding partisan advantage, a popular conjecture is that early voting benefits Republicans, owing primarily to their more advanced "get out the vote" programs and their typical financial edge. Research has failed to substantiate this belief. Some research found early Republican turnout to be slightly higher but qualified the finding by downplaying the role of party mobilization in favor of voter self-selection (Karp & Banducci 2000). More recent studies have found no partisan advantage whatsoever (Berinsky 2005); the party that benefits is the party that is better organized and better funded (Stein et al. 2004).

The beneficiaries of party mobilization are also of concern to scholars, since equitable representation is a primary function of elections. We have already seen that non–precinct place voters are typically individuals already actively engaged in the political process. Because regular voters are already wealthier, better educated, and better off socioeconomically (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, Verba et al. 1995), there is reason to suspect that mobilization efforts widen the divide between those who do and do not participate in elections. Evidence in support of this suspicion includes the previously mentioned increase in turnout and the results of studies that show campaigns are responsible for that increase (Hillygus 2005, Holbrook & McClurg 2005).

In terms of the partisan composition of the electorate, convenience voting reforms seem

neither to help nor to hurt political parties. As we show in the next section, these reforms do make the political environment more complicated and more uncertain, and probably increase campaign costs. This may translate into a partisan effect if one party or candidate type (such as incumbents) has a consistent advantage in fundraising. More worrisome, perhaps, is that convenience voting reforms do not draw in new citizens and do not seem to appeal to disempowered segments of the population. Convenience voting laws thus seem to offer campaigns little incentive to expand their efforts beyond their base to disengaged citizens.

## A Brief Digression into Campaign Effects

The preceding section on partisan effects concentrated mainly on individual voters. Voting does not occur in a vacuum, however. Many of the advances in research on voting turnout over the past two decades have considered how the larger social and political context affects the information received by the voter and the likelihood of turning out to vote. The impact of these significant legal changes on how candidates conduct their campaigns and on how GOTV organizations target voters has been largely ignored by the literature. Thus, this brief digression into campaign effects is necessarily speculative, linking results obtained primarily at the individual-voter level to hypothesized effects at the campaign level.

Convenience voting reforms disrupt the timing and flow of elections. Campaigns must adjust to new laws and create strategies that maximize the new opportunities that early voting creates. From these changes flow several interrelated questions that have only begun to receive attention by election scholars. The first question is how convenience voting affects campaign spending. Campaigns play a significant role in informing the electorate, and campaigns will be forced to change their allocation of resources in order to adapt to the new legal regime. The second question thus concerns how early voting affects campaign strategy and whether certain political parties benefit more than others. The third question draws on the first two. Since convenience voting does not seem to expand the electorate and is used by a distinct segment of the population, will campaigns' reallocations of campaign resources exacerbate the socioeconomic biases that already exist in the American political system?

There are a number of reasons why convenience voting reforms could affect the cost of running a campaign. At the most basic level, allowing voters to cast ballots before Election Day extends the "final push" of mobilization back several weeks, raising the costs of campaigns' "get out the vote" efforts (Gronke 2004, Harris 1999). Discussions with political consultants suggest that early voting often increases the cost of a campaign by as much as 25% (Hill 2006, Nordlinger 2003). The same research suggests that an extended voting period is even more difficult for low-information, down-ballot races, since voters who take advantage of convenience voting often vote early, when they may be less likely to have made up their minds on lower-profile races.

On the other hand, it is possible that convenience voting may actually result in more efficient campaigning. Convenience voting provides campaigns with the opportunity to direct their resources and efforts in a more strategic manner. Many states with significant numbers of absentee ballots publish which voters have turned in their ballots prior to Election Day, creating a real-time public record of who has and who has not voted. This could enable campaigns to mobilize core supporters early by calling those who have not already voted and then turning their efforts to undecided swing voters. Because early voting opens the door to both increased and decreased campaign costs, further research is needed to uncover its true effect. Nonetheless,

there is no extant literature on the strategies that campaigns employ to exploit early voting reforms.

Liberalized absentee voting laws provide candidates with new opportunities to reach voters even before the start of the campaign. Lowering the cost of voting can begin with registration as an absentee voter. In many states with permissive laws, candidates and parties take an active role in signing up their faithful supporters as absentee voters (Gronke & Galanes-Rosenbaum 2008, Oliver 1996). Some, though not all, no-excuse absentee voting states also provide the option to be permanently placed on the list of absentee voters, ensuring that whenever there is an election, a ballot will be mailed directly to the individual's home. This maximizes the likelihood that faithful party voters will vote in each and every election. This is why some studies have found such a large turnout effect of voting-by-mail options (both fully vote-by-mail and relaxed absentee balloting) in lower-level contests (e.g., Barreto et al. 2006)

Candidates, prior to the onset of voting, must run strong campaigns to get out their message early. This is especially so for lower-intensity races (Nordlinger 2003). If an early voter submits her ballot two weeks prior to Election Day, candidates lower on the ballot must make sure she is informed about their respective positions; otherwise she will pick a candidate randomly, or skip lower-level elections altogether. Campaigns are forced to increase expenditures on advertising and mobilization by beginning their campaign sooner and sustaining it longer.

In states that provide access to voter databases and keep track of votes as they are counted, parties and candidates are well positioned to target mobilization and increase turnout in their favor. Phone banking, door-to-door canvassing, and direct mail can all be utilized with precision to get out the party faithful while minimizing wasteful spending. Well-financed and high-profile campaigns can run a two-tiered approach by contacting party regulars individually, and focusing on independent and swing voters separately. This approach is necessary because, although voter rolls do provide names and party affiliations, they do not indicate which way a person has voted. Thus, independents are unlikely to be contacted directly. Unsurprisingly, in states that do not publish the names or voter ID numbers of early voters as their votes are cast, campaigns are much more limited in their direct mobilization capabilities.

In summary, we believe that convenience voting will have a large effect on the way campaigns are conducted in the United States. It has already changed the way political organizations register voters, as organizations in some states are increasingly trying to convince citizens to register for permanent absentee status. Convenience voting breaks up the traditional rhythm of the campaign season; campaigns cannot time their campaign messages to peak on Election Day, and on that day they may be uncertain about whom to appeal to and where to target their mobilization efforts. A commonly shared anecdote is this: On the Friday before the 2003 California gubernatorial recall election, more than three million out of ten million voters had already cast their ballots. We can never know what the impact of the last-minute accusations of sexual harassment would have been on these voters, but we do know that three million Californians voted without access to this information.

## Convenience Voting and the Heavenly Choir

Nearly a half-century ago, Schattschneider (1960, p. 35) famously wrote that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly choir sings with a strong upper-class accent." Delli Carpini & Keeter add that the singers are "decidedly older, white, and male as well" (1996 p. 177). Most scholars who have studied convenience voting to date reach a similar conclusion, although methodological constraints do not allow clear interpretation of effects. Convenience voting maintains turnout, especially by retaining habitual voters in lower-profile

contests, but it does not *increase* turnout or expand the electorate. Berinsky et al. (2001) use a duration model to argue that those most likely to vote after a convenience voting reform are those already interested and engaged in the political process. With regard to voting by mail, their statement of the dilemma facing reformers previews much of the subsequent research: "Thus, VBM increases turnout over the long run, but it does that more by retaining existing voters rather than by mobilizing new voters." Karp & Banducci (2000) find a positive turnout effect in Oregon's vote-by-mail system, primarily among college graduates and older voters. An increase of 10% in college graduates is associated with an increase in turnout of 1.3% to 3.6% depending on particular characteristics of the election. An increase of 10 years in median age is associated with a turnout increase of 0.2% to 0.6%. An increase of 10% in nonwhite population is associated with a turnout decrease of 3.2% to 6.9%. The effect of changes in Hispanic population ranges from −10.5% to 4.0% depending on electoral context. Median income and percentage of renters only have an effect in certain cases. This finding is supported in a nation-wide study (Karp & Banducci 2001). Using a logistic regression, the authors argue that older and more educated voters and politically active voters are more likely to vote absentee. The authors also find that absentee laws contribute to higher turnout among those inconvenienced by travel to the polls, such as disabled voters and students. Qvortrup (2005) analyzes data from Australia, New Zealand, Oregon, and the United Kingdom and concludes that turnout has increased and does not appear to have a diminishing effect over time, but cautions that voting by mail should not be used as a remedy for the "democratic malaise of declining political legitimacy" (p. 419) because it increases turnout differentially across demographic groups. Hanmer & Traugott (2004) argue that the Oregon transition from polling place to postal voting did not disrupt patterns of voting behavior previously established. The most skeptical of these studies is by Fitzgerald (2005), who finds that early voting reforms increase convenience for the voter, but that early in-person voting or unrestricted absentee voting did not have significant effects on turnout during the years 1972–2003.

In summary, convenience voting lowers the cost of turnout, but unequally across different groups in the population. Contrary to expectations that convenience voting reforms would dramatically increase turnout, most estimates are that these reforms have, at best, a marginal, though statistically significant, impact on voter participation (Traugott 2004). As Berinsky writes (2005, p. 486):

> [A] focus on the tangible costs of voting has dominated the academic and popular discussion of voting reform for more than 30 years. . . . Rather than focus on the concrete costs of voting, we must focus on the less perceptible costs of becoming engaged with the political world.

The same sentiments apply to the state of the discipline with respect to convenience voting, at least up until the 2000 election. The literature was overwhelmingly concerned with voter turnout, and the electorate was conceptualized as an aggregation of atomized individuals, with little attention paid to the larger social and political context.

## CONVENIENCE VOTING AND ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The controversy surrounding the 2000 election, and especially the administration errors that were exposed, drew the immediate attention of the political science discipline. In response, a virtually new subfield has emerged in political science, dedicated to election administration. In some ways, this new subfield hearkens back to a decades-old concern with the "applied" side of the discipline—public administration. Work on election administration has also shown a strong interdisciplinary focus, drawing on, collaborating with, and publishing in the journals of other disciplines

such as law, computer science, and public administration.[6]

The literature on convenience voting and election administration has emerged as a subset of studies that examine the overall quality of election administration, including such diverse topics as the accuracy of ballot counts (Alvarez et al. 2008b, Hansen 2001, Voting Technology Project 2001), optimal design of ballots and voting machines (Kimball & Kropf 2005, Kimball et al. 2006), residual voting (Alvarez et al. 2005, Ansolabehere & Stewart 2005, Stewart 2006), voter confidence (Alvarez et al. 2008a), internet voting (Alvarez & Hall 2004), and electronic voting (Alvarez & Hall 2008). Another developing field of inquiry examines ballot quality: How many ballots are spoiled, uncounted, or unmarked in a given race? Do convenience voting methods affect ballot quality? Ansolabehere & Stewart (2005) compare over- and undervotes in different forms of voting technology (paper ballots, optical scan, punchcards, direct register electronic machines, etc.). Although they do not explicitly separate ballots cast by convenience methods from those cast in the traditional way, nor differentiate ballots based on when they were cast, Ansolabehere & Stewart (2005 p. 366) do conclude that "traditional paper ballots produce the lowest average rates of uncounted votes (i.e., 'residual votes'), followed by optically scanned ballots, mechanical level machines, direct register electronic machines (DREs), and punch cards." Since most mail ballots are manually counted (paper) or optically scanned, it seems likely that these methods maintain the same ballot quality. However, early in-person votes are generally cast using whatever voting technology the county uses on Election Day. It therefore remains unknown whether ballots that are cast earlier are generally of higher quality (that is, have lower levels of residual votes).

Each of these studies has implications for convenience voting reforms. Liberalized absentee balloting laws, for example, necessitate vastly expanded use of paper ballots that are read by optical scanning systems. Early voting centers set up in "super precincts" rely on the use of electronic voting machines. And if overseas and military voters are to be able to cast a timely ballot, it is likely that they will have to rely on telephone, fax, or internet voting methods. Still, surprisingly few studies have examined convenience voting methods directly.

## Convenience Voting and Costs

The question of how convenience voting methods affect the administrative costs of elections has been addressed almost exclusively by election administrators and policy makers. Those studies that have taken up this question have done so in the context of evaluating a convenience voting system for a state committee or within an article focused on other questions (such as turnout). Harris's (1999) report on voting by mail for the California Research Bureau is one such example. It examines the history of voting by mail (in Oregon and elsewhere), turnout, costs, fraud, and public sentiment. In her section on administrative costs, she cites anecdotal evidence of significant savings from Oregon, Washington counties, and San Diego, California. The current Washington secretary of state, Sam Reed, has been a strong advocate of voting by mail in his state, in part because a study that he authored while auditor of Thurston County indicated both higher turnout and lower cost ($2.87 per mailed ballot versus $8.10 per precinct place voter).[7] No

[6] For example, many scholars have turned to the *The Election Law Journal* as an academic outlet. *The Election Law Handbook*, published by the American Bar Association, contains several chapters by political scientists. Articles by political scientists have also appeared in law reviews, policy review journals, public administration journals, and even engineering and design journals.

[7] The state of Oregon claims 30% cost savings after adopting its vote-by-mail system (Bradbury 2005), but we are

academic studies that we are aware of have taken up the question of the costs of elections with convenience voting. The costs of elections has been referred to as the "holy grail" of election administration research because so little is known about the subject (T. Hall, personal communication).

## Fraud and Coercion

The most common concern among critics of convenience voting methods is an increased risk of fraud and coercion (Fund 2004, Gumbel 2005, Steinbicker 1938). These problems are of concern mainly where voters are voting "remotely," that is, not in an official polling place under the security measures of the Australian ballot (privacy, secrecy, secure location, etc.). Voting by mail, absentee voting, and voting via the internet, telephone, and fax machine all fall into this category, but we focus primarily on ballots sent by post, as this is where most of the concern lies (see especially Commission on Federal Election Reform 2005, Fund 2004).

Harris (1999, p. 7) ranks fraud by third parties as "probably the largest concern in vote-by-mail elections across the country," with the "loss of secrecy" as the second. Voting by mail (including absentee balloting) is theoretically open to fraud because there are fewer identity-checking provisions included in the process: Voters need not present themselves in person to an official or poll worker and need not show identification of any kind, and signatures can be forged. In many states, the voter rolls are not updated in a timely or efficient way, leaving many people who have moved out of the county or are deceased still "on the books." This allows fraudulent absentee ballots to be cast in ways that appear to be legitimate, as in the 1997 Miami mayoral election (Harris 1999), a 1996 contest in Orange County, California, and the 2000 results in St. Louis, Missouri (Demos 2006). Fortunately, the Miami case appears to be one of the only examples of such rampant fraud involving absentee ballots. Harris, like Jeffe & Jeffe (1990), concludes that serious precautionary measures should be taken against such risks, but that the overall level of risk is quite low.

A report commissioned by the federal Election Assistance Commission, authored by Tova Wang and Jed Seberov, concluded, on the basis of interviews with experts in the area, that there was little evidence of voter fraud.[8] Still, the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project (2001, p. 41) recommends the following reform:

> Restrict or abolish on-demand absentee voting in favor of in-person early voting. The convenience that on-demand absentees produce is bought at a significant cost to the real and perceived integrity of the voting process. On the face of it, early voting can provide nearly equal convenience with significantly greater controls against fraud and coercion. Traditional absentee procedures for cause are still valuable for the limited situations they were originally intended for. States should return to those practices.

The Century Foundation (2005), in contrast, argues for additional absentee balloting in the interests of ballot access.

Similarly, the risk of "undue influence" over mail ballots is raised by Harris (1999), Fortier (2006) and others, but it has not been studied in the literature. Coercion of votes is possible without the secrecy ensured by the polling place environment—by a spouse, a neighbor, a campaign worker, a church, or an employer, for example. However, whether such influence is occurring on a large scale is unknown.

The debate over election fraud is certainly not over. The final contribution of political science is methodological. Mebane (2007;

unable to find any documentation for this claim. See also Kuttner (2006) and Hamilton (2006).

[8]The Seberov/Wang report was the focus of heated political controversy. The text of the report must be requested from the EAC, but Wang (2007) provides commentary on it.

Mebane et al. 2003) has pioneered a statistical methodology that he terms election forensics, which can be used to detect election irregularities. Though not specifically directed at absentee balloting, this methodology could presumably help address the debate over voting by mail and fraud.

## NORMATIVE CONCERNS

Finally, we turn to a small but growing literature that expresses concern about how new voting technologies, particularly methods of voting that allow voters to avoid the polling place, may harm civic culture in the United States. Elections are at the core of most theories of democratic representation, accountability, and legitimacy (Shklar 1991). Elections are about much more than just political victories and policy outcomes. Elections are a civic ritual and enhance our sense of "social capital" (Thompson 2008, p. 2). Elections are the core element in American citizenship (Thompson 2002). Thus, scholars ask whether the decline of the precinct place will change the position of elections and of Election Day in the way that democracies operate.

There is strong evidence that voters appreciate convenience voting. The few surveys that have been conducted show strong approval for these methods (Alvarez et al. 2008b, Southwell 2004). It is the larger normative issues that concern us here, however. When one fifth to one third of the voters have already cast their ballots by Election Day, what impact—if any—does this have on the way Americans think about politics and about democracy?

Thompson (2004) has addressed this concern. He argues that elections have important "temporal" properties, and that these are not just a procedural convenience: "[A]s far as possible the electoral verdict should express the popular will as it exists at a particular time, and . . . the electoral experience . . . should be the same for everyone" (Thompson 2008). Obviously, systems that allow or encourage many voters to cast their ballots early undermine this feature of elections. Thompson also expresses worry about "unequal political information," as some voters cast their ballots days or weeks before others, when some political news, such as pre-election polls, has not been released, or other political events have not yet occurred. For Thompson, convenience voting seriously undermines the principle of equality, a core principle of democratic society and a value that should be embedded, as much as possible, in our election system (Gronke & Galanes-Rosenbaum 2008). Unfortunately, other than Thompson's work, there has been little interest in convenience voting reforms among democratic theorists.

## CONCLUSION

The literature on convenience voting has focused primarily on its impact on individual-level voting behavior, relying on the conventional rational choice framework. The empirical results to date have been relatively consistent: Convenience voting increases turnout but only modestly. The effects may be greater in lower-level contests, but these have not been examined by political scientists. More importantly, perhaps, convenience voting appears to exacerbate existing inequalities in the American political system, encouraging participation among those segments of the population who are already most likely to vote. These reforms retain voters who might otherwise not choose to vote in a lower-level contest, but they do not draw new voters into the system.

The literature on convenience voting and campaign activity is almost nonexistent. Anecdotal evidence indicates that candidates have had to make major adjustments to a changed electoral environment, but these changes have escaped the scrutiny of empirical researchers. Election administration has attracted greater attention among scholars, although most research has focused on issues of ballot and machine design and ballot integrity, without much work specifically focused on convenience voting. The administration literature

has also been marked by its interdisciplinary nature, bringing together scholars from disparate fields and with different interests. We are not the first to notice this; Alvarez & Antonsson (2007), in an engineering publication, write that

> analyses of each function of a voting system require multidisciplinary research. For example, voter authentication, a procedural issue, is a matter of state law and local practice. It may influence the behavior of voters and the strategies of candidates, and it will increasingly be a subject for the development of new technologies. To fully understand voter authentication, then, requires that researchers break out of traditional academic disciplines and collaborate with researchers in other disciplines.

We expect that this field will continue to be marked by interdisciplinary collaborations, not just at the level of administration, but at the levels of campaigns, voter learning and choice, and voter turnout.

Convenience voting is rapidly expanding in the United States and worldwide. Although the extant literature is relatively small, this situation will certainly change in the next five to ten years. Legal scholars and voting rights advocates cannot help but notice what happens as states continue to change their registration provisions, require various forms of identification at the polling place or on the absentee ballot, modify their early voting laws, and provide more avenues by which a citizen can cast a ballot. Scholars interested in issues of federalism can monitor ongoing tensions between a locally administered elections system and new federal laws and mandates intended to guarantee the integrity of the voting system. Campaign scholars will notice GOTV organization, parties, and candidates paying more and more attention to getting out the *early* and *non–precinct place* vote. And anyone who models vote choice using a mass sample survey will have to figure out whether and how to discriminate between respondents who report casting their ballot at different times and using different voting technologies.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Daniel Toffey worked for the reelection campaign of US Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA). The work on this article was done before he joined the campaign.

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## RELATED RESOURCES

Because the field of election reform is rapidly changing, many of the up-to-date resources are available on the Internet. Below, we provide a brief list of the web sites where scholars can find information on convenience voting laws or can find research reports and working papers.

US Election Assistance Commission, a federal agency designed to aid states in updating voting technology: **http://www.eac.gov/**.

The National Association of State Election Directors, a state-level advisory body that aims to spread ideas and best practices among the states: **http://www.nased.org/**. State election laws can also be found at the National Association of Secretary of State website: **http://www.nass.org**.

The CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project, a broad, interdisciplinary academic research group dedicated to the study, assessment, and adoption of reliable voting systems: **http://www.vote.caltech.edu/**.

The Ace Electoral Knowledge Network, an international clearinghouse of electoral data, research, and advice: **http://aceproject.org/**.

Electionline.org, a project of the Pew Center on the States, which provides nonpartisan data and analysis on election reforms across the United States: **http://electionline.org/**.

The Early Voting Information Center, which studies early and non–precinct place voting: **http://earlyvoting.net**.