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Did States' Motor Voter Programs Help the Democrats?

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Abstract

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 required all states to establish "motor voter," mail-in and agency registration procedures prior to the 1996 Presidential election. Using state-level data for the 1976-94 period on party registration, we analyze the party registration impacts of state programs that were precursors to the NVRA. "Active" motor voter programs roughly similar to those mandated by the NVRA are found to significantly increase the proportion of registrants on the rolls who are unaffiliated with either major party. Mail-in registration shows no impact on party registration, while agency registration significantly increases the Democratic share of the two-party registration total -- despite the fact that most agency programs in our sample period were far weaker than NVRA mandates.

Congress enacted The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 in order "to establish procedures that will increase the number of eligible citizens who register to vote in elections for Federal office."¹ The NVRA mandates simultaneous voter registration and registration updates with driver's license applications and renewals; use of mail registration forms; the establishment of agency-based registration forms at state offices, including public assistance and unemployment compensation offices; and restrictions on purging of voter registration rolls². States without voter registration requirements (ND) and states which permit election-day registration at the polling place (ID, MN, NH, WI, and WY) are exempted from the requirements of NVRA³.

Because ninety percent of voting age citizens have driver's licenses or personal identification cards issued by motor vehicle bureaus (Moss, 1993, p. 27), the motor voter provisions of NVRA are generally presumed to have the greatest potential impact on registration and turnout. Several studies have explored the potential of the NVRA for increasing registration and turnout, by analyzing the experience of states which voluntarily adopted one or more provisions of the NVRA prior to implementation of the federal act. Using time-series cross-sectional data from 1976-92, Knack (1995) showed that motor voter has large effects on registration rates, and small but significant turnout effects. Using similar data and methodology, Rhine (1995) obtained similar results for turnout. Franklin and Grier (1997) compare participation rates in 1992 for groups of states with and without motor voter, controlling for past registration and turnout rates. They find that motor voter increases both registration and turnout by about two percentage points, similar to the turnout effects obtained by Knack (1995) and Rhine (1995), but far smaller than the registration effects in Knack (1995). The large turnout decline in 1996 relative to 1992 is consistent with the very modest turnout effects estimated by these three

studies.

The current paper addresses the issue of whether motor voter, mail-in and agency programs benefit the Democrats at the expense of the Republicans. Demographic disparities between voters and non-voters lead to the conventional wisdom that motor voter programs -- or any other program to increase turnout -- will benefit Democrats relative to Republicans. Petrocik and Shaw (1991) report that nonvoters are younger, less-educated, poorer, and disproportionately black, characteristics associated with support for the Democratic party. Because blacks and the poor tend to be over-represented among the population that does not register and does not vote, and because these groups overwhelmingly identify with Democrats and not Republicans, liberalizing registration will disproportionately increase votes for Democratic candidates, by this reasoning ⁴.

Congressional voting on NVRA is consistent with this view that Democrats have more to gain than Republicans from motor voter. In both 1992 and 1993, more than 80 percent of House Republicans voted against the NVRA; in contrast, in both years more than 90 percent of House Democrats voted for the measure. A Republican President vetoed the 1992 bill, while a Democratic President signed it into law in 1993. Republicans held the Governor's office in all seven states that refused to implement NVRA until early 1996, following unsuccessful challenges in the courts. While ideological differences regarding the appropriate role of the federal government likely account in part for the partisan split over NVRA, perceptions that new voters will tend to be Democratic undoubtedly heavily influenced the debate:

My colleagues on the left-hand side of this Chamber say they are trying to help the process...maybe I am cynical, I think they are trying to help themselves... (Remarks of Senator Phil Gramm [R-Texas], Congressional Record, 5/19/92, p. S 6870).

Rep. John Linder (R-GA), who introduced a bill to end implementation of NVRA until federal money is appropriated to pay for it, charged that the Democrats' passage of NVRA indicates "they

will bend public policy to help them no matter what it takes" (Greenblatt, 1996). From the other side of the aisle, Ronald Coleman (D-Texas) argued:

...it is a fact of political life in the United States that Republicans and the Republican party in general benefit from low voter turnout....let us not be persuaded by the self-serving objections of Republicans who have traditionally prospered by depressed voter turnout, particularly in black and Hispanic communities, and who see no profit in changing that situation. It smacks of fear...

Piven and Cloward, the founders of the 100% Vote project of Human SERVE, predicted in a New York Times editorial (June 17, 1992) that with passage of the bill "registration would rise dramatically among the poor and minorities, who tend to vote Democratic." Based on reports from states newly implementing NVRA's provisions in 1995, Earle (1995, p. 26) agreed with Senator Gramm and with Piven and Cloward, at least with respect to the agency-registration provisions of NVRA:

There is one clear area of potential Democratic advantage: About 8 percent of new registrations are taking place in public assistance agencies. In a handful of states, more people are being registered through these agencies than in motor vehicle departments (although these numbers may be inflated due to duplicate registrations)...

"Possible increased registration of low-income and minority people," predicts Frank Parker, a law professor at the District of Columbia School of Law, "could help the Democrats gain one or both houses in Congress, or President Clinton's reelection".

Occasional challenges have arisen to this conventional wisdom regarding the benefit to Democrats of easing registration. In supporting an earlier version of NVRA, then-Minority Whip Newt Gingrich cited polling data indicating motor voter registration would benefit Republicans, because unregistered voters with driver's licenses tended to be disproportionately young, white, suburban persons who move frequently. Then-House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt concurred with Gingrich, saying the bill "is most likely to register Republicans" (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 5, 1990). Similarly, George Will (Atlanta Constitution, June 18, 1992)

criticized President Bush for his 1992 veto, writing that "Mr. Bush may be mired in old notions that suggest Republicans would be hurt by increased voting." A recent non-statistical analysis of registration trends, titled "Motor Trouble for Democrats," also questions the conventional wisdom:

It is becoming clear that [Republicans] are fighting a law that promises, in many regions of the country, to do their party more good than harm...

Registration is rising fastest in the South, where Republican momentum was greatest last fall. And it is producing a new crop of independents--many of them in areas where Democrats might have expected to reap motor voter dividends (Earle, 1995, p. 25).

PREVIOUS EVIDENCE ON PARTISAN EFFECTS OF REGISTRATION REFORM

The empirical literature within political science provides little support for the conventional wisdom that registration reform will help the Democrats. Gaps in party identification between voters and non-voters, or, more to the point, between registrants and nonregistrants, are not as wide as popularly believed. Table 1 details the modest differences in partisan identification and ideology between self-reported registrants and nonregistrants in the 1992 American National Election Study (NES). There is a statistically significant relationship between the partisanship scale and registration status ($\chi^2 = 62.5$, $\rho = .001$ for 2-tailed test), but the registration increases associated with stronger Republican identification are very small. The most notable difference is not that nonregistrants tend to be more Democratic, but that they are more independent. Among nonregistrants, 18 percent indicated no party preference, compared to only 10.3 percent of registrants. Strong Democrats outnumbered strong Republicans nearly two to one among nonregistrants (9.4 percent to 5.1 percent), but the edge was nearly as great among registrants (19.9 percent to 12.7 percent). The relationship between ideology and registration status is even weaker and statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 = 6.3$, $\rho = .39$ for 2-tailed test).

Even where differences do exist between participants and nonparticipants, very large increases in turnout would be necessary to change electoral outcomes. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, pp. 82-83) conclude that an expanded voting population produced by relaxing registration requirements would look very much like the current pool of voters: they would be “marginally less educated, poorer, blacker, and younger” but with a virtually unchanged partisan breakdown.

Teixeira's (1992) analysis of more recent data leads him to conclude that "changing the result of an election by expanding the voting pool is far more difficult than is generally believed." He shows that the pool of nonvoters, "while not a faithful representation of the entire population, is hardly a monolith of the disadvantaged" and that "partisan skews by demographic group...are not overwhelming." He also finds that nonvoters are particularly likely to disregard partisan and other preferences and tend to prefer the candidate who appears to be winning. Cavanagh (1990) demonstrates using simple arithmetic illustrations, and historical evidence from U.S. elections, how the effect on electoral outcomes of mobilizing new voters is usually dwarfed by shifts in the preferences of "habitual" or previous voters.

Several studies (e.g., Radcliff, 1995; Erikson, 1995) have addressed this issue by analyzing past elections to determine whether higher turnouts -- however generated -- tend to be associated with greater success by Democratic candidates. Conclusions from these analyses are sharply contradictory, however. Moreover, the particular mechanisms by which higher turnouts are generated should influence which, if either, party benefits, a point largely ignored in that literature.

This paper examines whether state programs which NVRA provisions are modeled after disproportionately registered Democrats, Republicans, or “independents” (defined here as all registrants who decline to affiliate with either of the two major parties). Few empirical studies of the partisan impact of these provisions have been attempted. Controlling for historical voting

patterns and using state-level data for 1992, Franklin and Grier (1997) find that motor voter was not associated with increased support for the Democratic presidential candidate. Highton and Wolfinger (1995) compare turnout among various demographic groups in Colorado in 1984 (before the July 1985 implementation of motor voter) and 1988, controlling for nationwide changes in turnout among these groups across the two elections. They find motor voter had the greatest effect on turnout among the young, and, more surprisingly, had the least effect among Coloradans without high school diplomas. They find turnout increased slightly more for whites than for black and Latinos. They acknowledge, however, that reliance on a single state makes their conclusions highly tentative.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study uses states in each election year over the period 1976-94 as the unit of analysis⁵. Pooled time-series cross-section models with state and year dummy variables are employed, as in Rhine (1995) and Knack (1995). These "least-squares dummy variables" (LSDV) or "fixed effects" models eliminate the omitted-variables bias inherent in models which employ either cross-sectional analyses of single years, or in pooled models without dummy variables. Including state and year dummies also eliminates the most important potential sources of heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation, as explained in Stimson (1985) and Knack (1995).

A disadvantage of LSDV is the reduction in degrees of freedom from the inclusion of state and year dummies, making it somewhat more difficult to reject null hypotheses. A second disadvantage is attenuation of variance in the independent and dependent variables, as between-state variance is captured by the state dummies. This effect will make it more difficult to reject null hypotheses for independent variables which change very little over time during our

sample period⁶. Similarly, if the dependent variable changes little over time, it will be difficult to reject null hypotheses for any of the independent variables. In our analysis, these disadvantages are not severe: we have a large number of degrees of freedom remaining even with the state and year dummies, and there is quite a bit of variation over time in the independent variables of interest (motor voter, in particular) as well as in the dependent variables⁷.

Year dummies included in the models capture both nationwide trends in partisan affiliation, and election-specific factors (e.g., an anti-incumbency mood) that may influence partisanship similarly in all states. Results for these year dummies confirm a time trend toward greater Republican registration relative to Democratic registration. Motor voter programs of course also show an upward time trend, becoming more widespread over the 1976-94 period. Thus, in the absence of year dummies, motor voter laws could be spuriously associated with higher Republican registration.

State dummy variables capture time-invariant state-specific influences on the dependent variables. As an example, suppose that the states that were already more Democratic are the ones more likely to adopt motor voter programs during the 1976-94 period, before they were federally mandated. Motor voter, in the absence of state dummies, then would be spuriously associated with higher Democratic registration. State dummies will net out this effect, as well as any other state-specific influences that are unchanging over time, drastically reducing the potential for an upward bias in coefficient estimates for the motor voter variables. With state and year dummies, the regression coefficients reported here depend only on within-state variation over time, and only on the within-state variation over time that is uncorrelated with nationwide time trends. These regressions thus in effect test whether the shares of Democratic, Republican, or unaffiliated registrants changed significantly when motor voter (and mail-in and agency) programs are

implemented, controlling for nationwide trends in the relative strength of parties.

In addition to the state and year dummies, we control for two demographic variables which may influence party registration: per capita state income (in 1994 dollars), and blacks as a percentage of the state's population. If we were working with individual-level data, we would expect that the likelihood of Democratic affiliation or voting would decline with income, and would be higher for blacks than for members of other races. Given the level of aggregation here, it is less clear what sign to expect for coefficients on per capita income and percent black.

Other demographic variables, such as educational measures, are not provided between census years and cannot be included in our regressions. To the extent that they are correlated with income or race, their effects will be captured by those variables. If they change similarly across states over our sample period (e.g., if educational attainment increases much the same across the country), their effects will be captured by year dummies.

Our first dependent variable is Democratic registrants as a percentage of all registrants on the rolls who registered as a Democrat or Republican. Only 27 states and the District of Columbia register voters by partisan affiliation. Twenty-six of those 28 jurisdictions have supplied registration data by party. Michigan and Rhode Island do not collect this data at the state level, and, along with the 23 states which do not register voters by party, could not be included in our tests⁸.

A second dependent variable is registrants not affiliated with either major party, as a percentage of all registrants in a state. Motor voter should be positively associated with percent unaffiliated, if it leads to disproportionately large increases in registration among the young, who tend to be nonpartisan, and among relatively apathetic citizens. This variable can be constructed for the same 26 states (including DC) as the Democratic percentage variable described above.

If states that register by party differ systematically from those that do not, results from our sample may not be generalizable to other states. However, we find no indication that these groups of states differ from each other in important ways. Bivariate and multivariate tests show that states which register voters by party are not significantly different from other states in terms of region, income levels, educational attainment, racial distribution, or voter turnout. Neither do the two groups differ significantly in their “political cultures”, using Elazar’s (1973) classification of states as moralistic, traditionalistic, or individualistic, or in organizational strength of the local parties, as measured by Gibson et al. (1985).⁹ We thus have no reason to doubt that the findings results we report below for the states registering voters by party are generalizable to the states which do not record party registration.

Our dependent variables are based on party registration data, not party identification. The latter may be more directly related to political behavior, including voting decisions. However, party registration and party identification appear to be very highly correlated across the states. For the 1992 election, we constructed state-level estimates of party identification (for voters) from exit polling data collected by Voter News Services. For Democrats as a percentage of the total of Democrats and Republicans, the correlation of party registration with party identification of voters was .949 (significant at .0001 for 2-tailed test). Similarly, the percentage of independent registrants was strongly correlated (.84, significant at .0001) with the percentage of exit-poll voters who did not identify with either major party.

For coding the motor voter, mail-in, and agency registration programs¹⁰ of states for each year, various sources were consulted (see Appendix A), particularly Human SERVE, which has long monitored progress in the adoption and implementation of motor voter, mail-in, and agency registration among the states. Appendix B lists the first elections following implementation of

motor voter, mail-in, or agency programs for each state in our sample. We create two dichotomous variables to operationalize motor voter programs, with states having no such programs coded 0 for each variable. Following previous studies (e.g., Rhine, 1995; Knack, 1995), "active" motor voter programs, which more closely approximate the requirements of NVRA, are distinguished from "passive" versions, which are much weaker. Active programs are defined as those in which applicants for driver's licenses are asked, either orally by motor vehicle bureau personnel or via a question on the license application form, if they wish to register to vote. "Passive" programs typically merely make forms available on countertops, or upon requests initiated by driver's license applicants.

In principle, mail-in programs in effect in various states in the 1976-94 period can also be divided into two groups, those that broadly conformed to the NVRA requirements and those that did not. The most common distinction is in programs that require witnessing or formal authentication of some kind, which Highton and Wolfinger (1995) call "hard mail-in" programs, and those that -- as mandated by the NVRA -- do not ("easy mail-in"). Unlike "active" vs. "passive" motor voter, there is little evidence that easy mail-in programs are more effective than hard mail-in programs in registering new voters (e.g., Highton and Wolfinger, 1995; Knack, 1995). Probably the more important distinction among these programs is how widely the mail-in forms were distributed, for which little information is available. We therefore do not make a distinction between the two here, and code all observations with a mail-in program of either type as mail-in states.

Agency-registration programs in the states can also be classified according to whether they approximate in effectiveness the NVRA provision pertaining to such programs. Only a few agency-registration programs in effect during our 1976-94 sample period offered all applicants for

public assistance in the relevant offices the chance to register to vote, as is required by NVRA. Most programs merely consisted of placing forms on countertops. Given the very small number of “active” agency-registration programs that existed prior to NVRA implementation, we do not attempt to separately test the effects of those that conformed and those that did not.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Equation 1 of Table 2 reports results of tests of the impact of motor voter, mail-in, and agency programs on Democratic registration as a percentage of the total two-party registration in the 26 states with data. The key NVRA provision, "active" motor voter programs, has no significant impact on this percentage. The "passive" versions of motor voter in effect in many states over the period are associated with a small (1.6 percentage points) but statistically significant reduction in the Democratic percentage. Mail-in programs have no significant effect. Agency programs are associated with a statistically significant increase of about 3.5 percentage points in the Democratic percentage -- a sizeable but not overwhelming impact relative to the sample mean of about 61 percent for the Democratic share of the two-party registration totals. This result is consistent with Earle's post-1994 data on agency registration described above, and is particularly impressive given that most of these programs in our sample period were weaker than the version of agency registration mandated by NVRA. Perhaps Republicans' fear of agency registration is well-founded, at least if the additional registrants bother to show up at the polls on election day.

Each \$1,000 increase in per capita income significantly increases the Democratic share by nearly one-half of a percentage point. Each percentage-point rise in the African-American share of the state population is associated with a drop in the Democratic registration share of about one

half of a percentage point, although this effect is not quite statistically significant at the .05 level for a two-tailed test. These results on income and race seem counterintuitive. However, given the level of aggregation here, the results on per capita income and percent black do not necessarily imply that poor and black people register Republican more than rich and white people. For example, in states with higher black populations, whites may be more motivated to register Republican than in states with low black populations. Giles and Hertz (1994) document such effects at the parish level in Louisiana. Franklin and Grier (1997) obtained results consistent with those in Table 2: they found support for the Democratic presidential candidate was significantly stronger in states with more college graduates, a variable strongly correlated with income.

Equation 4 of Table 2 reports regression results for the percentage of registrants not affiliated with either major party. Active motor voter programs have a significant, positive impact on unaffiliated registrants, of about 2.5 percentage points -- a very substantial effect considering that the mean value of unaffiliated registrants in our sample is just under 18 percent. Passive motor voter programs are associated with an increase of about 1.5 percentage points, although this result is of marginal statistical significance. Mail-in programs and agency registration are both insignificant. Neither income nor race is significantly related to independent registrations.

The positive impact of motor voter programs on unaffiliated registrations is consistent with its origin as a program designed to register young and mobile persons, most of whom acquire driver's licenses, but traditionally have low rates of voter registration. Data from the 1992 NES show that younger Americans have far weaker partisan identifications on average than their elders: among respondents 30 years old or younger, 49.3 percent did not consider themselves either a Democrat or Republican, compared to only 35.7 percent of those over 30 (difference significant at

.001). The positive relationship between motor voter and unaffiliated registrations is also consistent with the view that easier procedures for registration will augment the rolls with many people who have little knowledge or interest in politics and elections, who tend to have weak partisan identifications. Table 1 reveals enormous differences between registrants and nonregistrants among respondents in the 1992 NES, in interest in the campaign ($\chi^2 = 257.9$, $\rho = .001$) and in concern over which candidate won the presidential election ($\chi^2 = 186$, $\rho = .001$). However, we caution that our data do not provide direct tests of whether the young or apathetic are disproportionately advantaged by motor voter programs.

Coefficients for state and year dummy variables are not shown in the table for space reasons. Year dummy coefficients show that the Democratic registration share exhibits a strong downward trend over time: of registrants choosing to affiliate with a major party, the proportion choosing Republican grew steadily over the 1976-94 period -- by about 8 percentage points in total. Independent registrations, on the other hand, show no large or significant time trend.

Knack (1995) found that the registration and turnout effects of motor voter are cumulative over time and do not all show up in the first election following implementation. This pattern is produced by the fact that a complete driver's license renewal cycle takes up to five years in many states. With each succeeding election, the additional effects diminish, as more and more drivers have had the opportunity to register via motor voter. Equations 2 and 5 of Table 2 test for similar nonlinear effects in partisan registrations, by substituting duration measures for the active motor voter dummy. Duration is measured as the number of elections (including the current one) since implementation of active motor voter. To capture the diminishing marginal effect over time of increasing duration, we use the log of duration in equations 2 and 5 (adding one to each value for duration, so that the log is defined for all observations). As with the dummy variable measure, the

duration measure is not significant for the Democratic registration share (equation 2). It is significant in the unaffiliated registrants regression (equation 5), but the empirical fit is slightly better with the dummy variable measure.

Our results indicate that motor voter disproportionately registers independents, while agency registration disproportionately registers Democrats. These basic findings are robust to various alternative specifications for our tests ¹¹. For example, results differ only trivially if we re-code as “passive” motor voter programs in two states (AZ and WV) that are classified in our tests as “active” but which Human SERVE notes have experienced problems in implementation ¹².

Motor voter may have little impact on participation rates in a state in which registration is already extremely easy. Maine is an active motor voter state which had election-day registration in effect in most election districts, and which often has more names on the registration rolls than there are residents of voting age. Including Maine in our tests therefore could bias the coefficient of motor voter downward. When Maine is deleted, however, results again change very little. Similarly, a dummy for election-day registration proves insignificant and has virtually no impact on coefficients of the other registration-law or demographic variables.¹³

Registration rates are higher in presidential-election years, and may for similar reasons also be higher in states with Senate or gubernatorial races on the ballot. Such surges in registration are sometimes thought to increase the percentage of registrants who are Democratic, or independent. Dummy variables for presidential years, for Senate races, and for gubernatorial contests were all found to be insignificant when added to our regressions, and did not affect results for the registration-law or demographic variables.

Each of our dependent variables -- the percentage of registrants who are Democratic, or independent -- is bounded by the values 0% and 100%. We therefore re-ran all regressions using

the logistic transformation of each dependent variables (after dividing them by 100), to confine predicted values to the 0-1 interval. Again, results are nearly identical to those reported in Table 2.

Our basic specification measures only average trends nationwide, and does not allow for differences in time trends across states or regions. For example, the entire secular decline in the Democratic share of registrations could conceivably be attributable entirely to large changes in the South. We accordingly tested for interaction between a time trend variable and a dummy for southern (former Confederate) states. These interaction effects proved to be large and statistically significant. The downward trend in Democratic registrations in the South was more than double that of the rest of the country. The South also exhibited a significant upward trend in independent registrations, while the rest of the country showed no trend. While evidence of differences in trends in party support in the South and non-South is interesting in its own right, the important result for present purposes is that inclusion of these interaction terms had no substantial impact on the coefficients of the registration law variables. Thus, taking into account regional differences in time trends in party registrations does not alter the measured impacts of motor voter, mail-in and agency registration reported in Table 2.

INCORPORATING DATA FROM 1996

All states had implemented active motor voter, mailin, and agency programs prior to the 1996 elections. Based on the results of the analysis for the 1976-94 period, we would expect to observe increases in the Democratic share of two-party registrations in states with new agency programs, and increases in the unaffiliated share of registrations in states with new motor voter programs.

In equations 3 and 6 of Table 2, we add observations for 1996 to the sample and re-run the specifications of equations 1 and 4. For 1996, all states are coded as having active motor voter, mail-in, and agency programs (except for New Hampshire, which as an election-day registration state could, and did, choose not to institute such programs). The negative association of passive motor voter programs with the Democratic registration share found in equations 1 and 2 weakens with the addition of 1996 observations in equation 3. The positive coefficient on agency registration declines by nearly a percentage point, but remains significant. The addition of 1996 leaves active motor voter's impact on unaffiliated registrations largely unchanged (equation 6), while the effects of percent black (positive), mail-in (positive) and agency (negative) all rise and attain statistical significance.

These results incorporating 1996 data in the time-series cross-sectional dataset are for the most part consistent with those reported for the 1976-94 period: active motor voter remains positively associated with independent registrations, while agency registration remains positively associated with Democratic registrations. These results should be regarded with caution, however. Most of the agency and some of the mail-in and active motor voter programs in effect in 1994 and earlier elections were strengthened prior to the 1996 election to comply with the NVRA. Our codings do not reflect these program upgradings, so our tests do not measure the effects of these program improvements.

Simpler tests less subject to this problem analyze the change in party registrations between 1994 and 1996, comparing states with brand-new active motor voter programs to those which already had them prior to the 1994 election. If motor voter influences party registration, differences observed between 1994 and 1996 should be greater in the 17 new motor voter states than in the other 8 states -- where much of the impact of motor voter will have already shown up in

1994 party registrations, making them a useful control group. Results are highly consistent with those reported above for the 1976-94 data. The decline in the Democratic share of registrations between 1994 and 1996 (averaging 1 percentage point in the control group, and 1.4 percentage points in the 17 states with new active programs) is not significantly different across the two groups. Unaffiliated registrations rose by a statistically significant 2.5 percentage points in the new motor voter states, and actually fell by one half of a percentage point in the states which had motor voter before the 1994 election. This 3 percentage point difference is remarkably similar to the regression coefficient representing active motor voter's impact on unaffiliated registrations in Table 2.

A final, similar test using the 1994 and 1996 data examines the hypothesis that administrative discretion in implementing motor voter may influence the balance in party registrations. Specifically, the effects on the Democratic share of two-party registration of new motor voter, mail-in, and agency programs mandated by NVRA may differ depending on which party controls the executive branch of state government. For example, Republican-governed Pennsylvania is under investigation by the Justice Department for allegedly failing to fully implement agency registration, which is believed to be the most favorable component of the NVRA in registering new Democrats.

A difference-of-means test shows no evidence that administrative discretion has influenced the overall party balance in registrations. Among the 17 states in our sample with new motor voter programs, the Democratic share of registrations fell by more in the 7 Democratic-governed states (average drop of 1.8 percentage points) than in the 10 Republican-governed states (1.0 percentage points) between 1994 and 1996, although the difference is not statistically significant.

CONCLUSIONS

This is to our knowledge the most rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the partisan impacts of motor voter, mail-in, and agency registration. Unlike the few existing studies of this issue, it controls for state-specific time-invariant influences on partisanship, and for national and regional time trends in partisan affiliation.

We find that the balance of registrants affiliating with the two major parties does not change significantly when motor voter or mail-in programs are adopted. These findings, while consistent with most related research by political scientists, contradict the belief of most politicians that Democrats would be helped, as well as a spate of media reports (e.g., Earle, 1995) claiming that new motor voter registrants were disproportionately Republican.

Agency registration increases by about 3 percentage points the Democratic share of the two-party registration totals, in the states which register voters by party. This effect is especially notable considering that most of the agency programs in place prior to the 1994 election were much weaker than NVRA requirements. Based on this evidence, Republicans' resistance to NVRA -- which has been especially fierce with respect to the agency registration provisions of the legislation -- was consistent with their electoral self-interest.

We find strong evidence that motor voter programs disproportionately register citizens who indicate no preference for either major party, consistent with the origin of motor voter as a program aimed at registering young people. Anecdotal evidence for states implementing motor voter (and other NVRA provisions) since 1994 points in the same direction: in Kentucky, 25% of all new registrants are listing themselves as independents, compared to about 4% over the 1980-94 period. Oklahoma and Florida reported similarly dramatic increases in independent registrations in 1995 (Greenblatt, 1996; Earle, 1995).

If motor voter, as anticipated, proves to be the most effective among the NVRA provisions

in registering new voters -- and if a sizeable portion of these new registrants actually turn out to vote -- political candidates may in the future alter their campaign strategies in efforts to attract this new and larger pool of independent voters. Candidates may find it advantageous to distance themselves even more from their parties than many of them already do, perhaps in turn weakening the parties even further. If primary elections continue to be determined by partisans, but both partisans and independents participate in general elections, candidates who find it necessary to take conservative or liberal positions to win primaries may be quicker than ever to abandon those positions in attempts to win over an ever-larger pool of independents in the general election campaign. The increase in unaffiliated voters could thereby further undermine trust in politicians.

All of this presumes, however, that candidates expect new registrants to show up at the polls on election day. The failure of the NVRA to prevent a drastic fall in turnout in the 1996 election, coupled with previous research on the participation effects of motor voter (Knack, 1995), suggests that the turnout effects of motor voter, mail-in, and agency registration may be far more modest than the registration effects. If so, campaign strategies and electoral outcomes are likely to change very little.

NOTES

1. P.L. 103-31, Sec. 2, (b)(1), 107 Stat. 77.
2. For details on these restrictions, see House Conference Report, pp.111-123.
3. Maine is not exempt because election-day registration at the polls is not universal in that state.
4. While motor voter was conceived originally (by Michigan's Secretary of State in 1975) as a means of reaching primarily the young and mobile (Moss, 1995), who have relatively weak partisan tendencies, the only target group specifically cited in the federal act is "racial minorities" who allegedly continue to be harmed by "discriminatory and unfair registration laws and procedures" (Public Law 103-31).
5. The sample period begins in 1976 -- the first election after Michigan adopted the first motor voter program -- primarily because many states did not collect registration by party data prior to then.
6. The use of independent variables that are unchanging over time, such as the Gibson et. al. (1985) measures of Democratic and Republican party organization strength), is precluded by the use of state dummies. Other available measures of underlying partisanship that do change over time (e.g., voting outcomes) are endogenous to party registration rates and therefore inappropriate.
7. Stimson (1985) provides an excellent (and readable) discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of LSDV models.
8. Five of the reporting states did not have data for one or more of the election years in the 1976-94 period: CO (missing 1976), DC (missing 1976-78), KY (1978), NH (1976-82), and WV (1990). Registration figures used are those compiled as near as possible to election day.
9. These results are available from the authors on request.

10. We do not test the effects of a fourth major provision of motor voter: limiting purging of nonvoters from registration rolls. Our tests depend on within-state variations over time, and relatively few states implemented provisions at all similar to NVRA purging provisions during our sample period.

11. Results reported in the remainder of this section are available on request from the authors.

12. The effectiveness of programs in OH and NJ were also disputed, but they do not register by party and are not included in our sample. Highton and Wolfinger (1995) point out that even under the NVRA there is a possibility of "inept or deliberately awkward implementation" in some states. Implementation and enforcement was arguably stronger, on average, for the programs tested here -- since they were all voluntarily adopted by states -- than in similar programs that are adopted solely because of federal mandates.

13. Minnesota is the only election-day registration state other than Maine which simultaneously had an active motor voter program. It is not included in our sample as it does not register voters by party. The only other election-day registration states in our sample include New Hampshire (from 1994) and Oregon (1976-84). These two states provide the only within-state variation in the election-day dummy in our sample, so it is unsurprising that this variable proves insignificant in our tests.

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